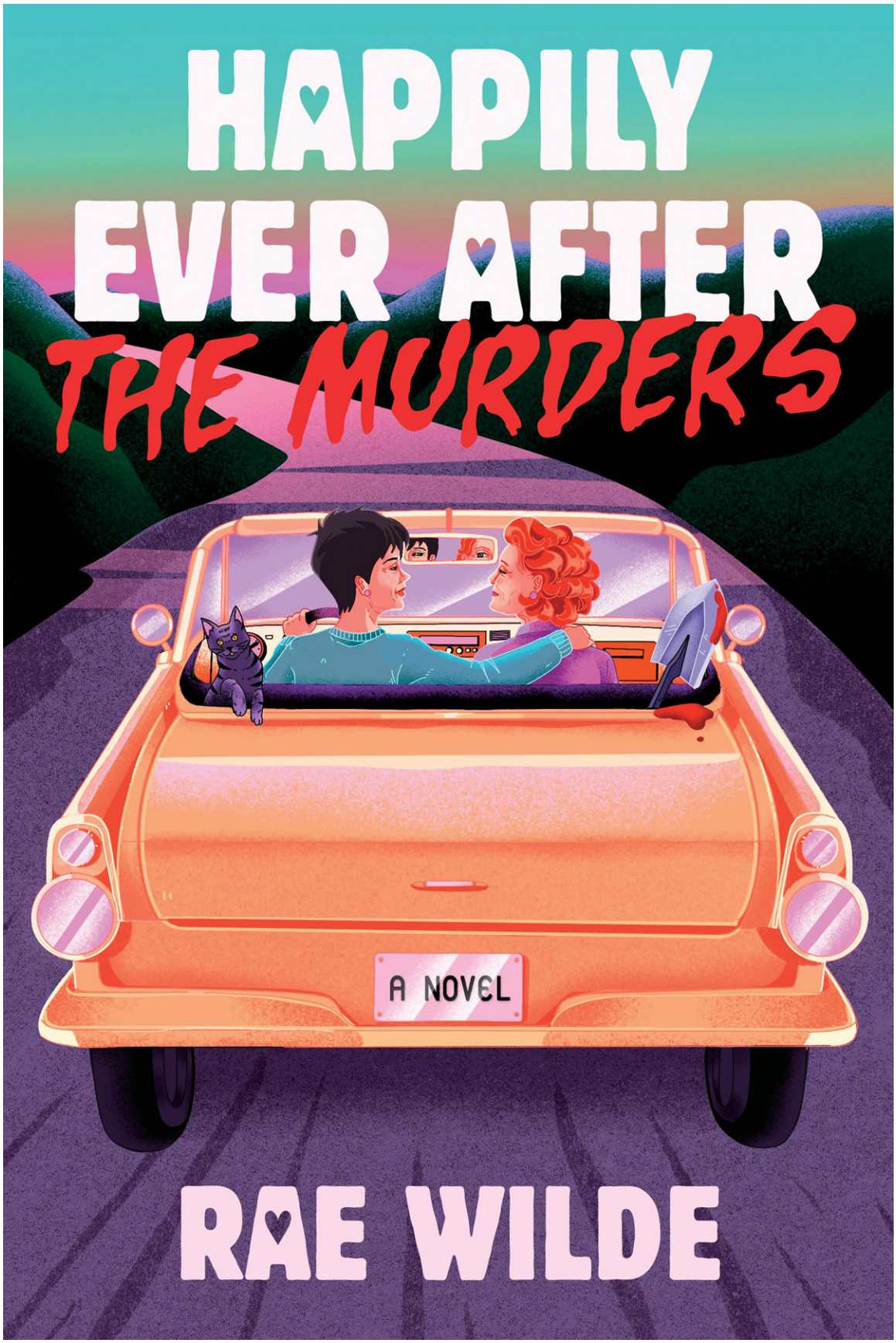
HAPPILY EVER AFTER

THE MURDERS



RAE WILDE


HAPPILY
EVER AFTER
THE MURDERS
A NOVEL
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LEGACY LIT

New York Boston

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Legacy Lit
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10104
HachetteBookGroup.com
X.com/LegacyLitBooks
Instagram.com/LegacyLitBooks

First Edition: November 2026

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Print book interior design by Marie Mundaca.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2026948372

ISBNs: 978-1-5387-8454-9 (trade paperback); 978-1-5387-8456-3 (ebook)

E3-20260909-JV-NF-ORI

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Advance Praise for *Happily Ever After the Murders*

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For my grandmother, Minnie, whose husband died young and unexpectedly; and for Ev, who moved in shortly thereafter and lived with Minnie for the rest of her life and is buried beside her in New York state—and whose husband also died young and unexpectedly.

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CHAPTER ONE

Ida cracked arthritic knuckles, her lower back stiff against the hard plastic of the folding chair. She rolled one fist inside the other in the space between her knees, and the folds of her dress creased in divots where her body had grown soft and spongy. A musty chill lay over the room, but Jean, sitting at Ida's side, always ran hot. Though Ida's partner and companion was steadily losing a battle to stay awake, Jean still functioned as a human radiator of sorts, and her warmth landed the HOA meeting on just this side of tolerable.

"New business," Jim Friedman said. He was a slick thirty-something whose hair gel had hardened into a cap over his head. "The fence on 35th Avenue has three rotted slats on the eastern side. A section is missing from the northeast bend. Per the treasurer's report, thank you, Emily." He took a moment to give Emily, the woman seated at the long table's far end, a nod. "We have thirty-two thousand dollars in the CD. The renovation committee convened last quarter and sought estimates from three contractors, the lowest of which came in at…"

"How'd he get to be president?" Ida asked under her breath.

Jean jolted from her dozing. "What?"

"This *Jim*. I don't remember voting for him."

Jean cleared her throat, a sound somehow both wet and chafing.

Jim paused the recitation of estimates, his shrewd gaze passing over the women, before continuing.

"You didn't vote last election, remember?" asked Jean.

Ida scoffed. "I always vote," she said, her voice climbing from a whisper. "Don't be ridiculous, I always—"

"You threw the ballot down the garbage disposal," said Jean, her spottily penciled brow quirking into a thin arch. "You said if someone like Rose Garland could run for the compliance committee, the entire organization had lost its way, and you couldn't be expected to vote for a failing

committee.”

Ida crossed her arms, leaning close to Jean. “Rose Garland screwed around with the butcher and half the deli.”

“I know, dear,” said Jean.

“Even the meat slicer, Sam Tinsley.”

“I remember.” Jean tapped three times, slow and steady on Ida’s thigh, as if to quiet her, but Ida was not one to be quieted.

“Have you seen Sam since winter?” Ida asked, undaunted. “Big as a house.”

“Ladies!” Jim Friedman said sharply. Ida shot him a daggered look in reply, and with an apologetic twist of the mouth, Jim said, “We’re nearly through.” Jim unfurled a legal-size piece of paper, pointing at text too small for anyone but Jim to read. “All in favor of Rudy’s Roofing and Maintenance, say aye.”

*Aye*s washed over the room, most lazy and lacking enthusiasm. The neighborhood had aged in time with Ida and Jean. There had been families back when the women had youngsters of their own, but when the kids grew up and moved away, their parents hunkered down like it was a real estate siege. Home prices weren’t what they once were, and nobody around here liked the idea of having worked all their lives just to go into a *home*. For Sale signs went up when the last of a couple got put in the ground; in fact, the neighborhood sales were one way to keep tabs on who was still living. So the odd young person would move in every couple of years, but for the most part, Ida and Jean could rely on seeing the same faces up and down the street, day after day, whether they liked those faces or not.

And it was easy for Ida to dislike one face in particular. She picked out the chipper inflection of Rose Garland’s *aye*, and as quickly as the sound of Rose’s voice died, Ida piped in with a shrill “Opposed!” to counter her enemy’s vote.

Jean chuckled, sitting up straighter and cracking a smile wide enough to reveal the missing molar behind her canine. “You’re really something, Ida Holloway.”

Stirred by Ida’s opposition, Barbara Banks turned around in her seat to glare, but Ida met her glare and doubled it. “Voting is my right as an association member,” Ida said, leaning close enough to Barbara’s face that the coiffed woman with the overprocessed, purple-stained hair turned back

around.

Jean leaned close and spoke softly, just for Ida. “My girl,” she said, delivering a quick squeeze to Ida’s thigh.

“Any abstaining?” Jim asked.

A single hand rose; it belonged to Michael Thompson, at the back of the room. He wore a white baseball cap, and the evening sun slanted in through the blinds and cast a shadow down the bridge of his crooked nose. Michael Thompson looked like the sort of man who could build things. He had the sternness of expression, the permanent tan line around his shirt collar, and the slight limp to suggest a life of hard labor. Maybe a railroad man. Maybe a roofer. Either way he was a calm, private man who attended every HOA meeting and always abstained from the vote; Jean and Ida didn’t know for sure about the details of Michael Thompson’s life, but they knew the look and they knew the type.

“Fifteen for, one opposed, one abstaining. The motion passes,” Jim said. “If the renovation committee would please be so kind as to contact Rudy’s Roofing and Maintenance to let them know they won the bid. When might we expect the project to begin?”

Barbara Banks nudged her husband with an elbow.

“Rudy said demo can start before Easter,” Nicolas Banks reported.

“Any more new business?” Jim asked.

There was quiet for a moment, but for the sporadic creaking of chairs. Jim looked to Sonora Bailey, a slim woman seated at the long table in the room’s center.

“Just a moment,” she said, leafing through a stack of papers. Sonora wore a breezy white sundress despite the chilly weather, paired with a wide-brimmed hat better suited for gardening than an indoor HOA meeting. Ida supposed that Sonora was more interested in the fashion of her outfits than their practicality or comfort. It was a privilege of younger women, the ability to ignore a chill here and an ache there, and just go on with their day. In some ways, Ida envied it. But mostly she resented Jim and his wife, Sonora. They had all this energy and all these ideas, eager to change things that had been working just fine for years, and were generally, displeasingly, hot to trot.

Jean yawned, letting the deep groan from her lower throat fill the air over the restless group.

“Here,” Sonora said, yanking a paper from the pile. “After last month’s reports about spotty electrical service, we contacted PSE&G on February the eleventh. They got back to us on the…” She squinted, drawing the paper closer to her face. Jean began to doze as she continued, and Ida focused all her attention on the distasteful Rose Garland, eyes narrowed to pinpricks and dialed in on the woman as Sonora lilted on. “… they’ll be coming out to replace the older lines. They will need access to some of the yards. Property owners will be notified ahead of time with a date and time window in which to expect their visit.” Sonora placed the paper atop her pile, nodding with a smile that said she was pleased with herself, and looked out to the crowd, expecting questions.

When there were none, Jim asked, “Any more new business?”

Quiet.

“Motion to close,” Michael Thompson said from the back of the room, already standing.

This snapped Ida out of her judgy preoccupation. “Second!” she said.

The homeowners responded in unison to the cue. Chairs slid against the laminate flooring, clinking into each other with the sudden flurry of movement toward the door. Michael Thompson batted a chair out of his way with his cane. Barbara Banks shouldered past her slower husband, and the man in the row in front of her became the battering victim of her oversized purse.

“Meeting adjourned,” Jim said over the slow commotion.

Ida and Jean made their way out of the brick building. The twenty-some-odd homeowners and HOA board trickled off in different directions, one by one becoming black outlines backlit by the setting sun. Ida and Jean walked side by side over the pavers that surrounded the old community building and toward a grassy knoll, which led to a path around the lake. The women never showed affection in public. To do so in their heyday would’ve had them labeled as perverts or accused of being communist spies or fired from their jobs or ousted by their families or all of it or worse. Over the years, Jean had noticed the changing of the times, a gentle push toward acceptance in society’s mind. She had brought up the possibility of she and Ida coming out, declaring their love to family and friends, living openly as other couples do. But Ida had never warmed to the idea. *Risky, and for what?* she would say. While the prospect of kissing Jean’s cheek, of smoothing her

hair, of staring into her brown eyes without minding the time or whoever happened to be around made Ida's heart swell, the fear of reprisal was too great.

So, though Jean didn't take Ida's hand, they walked in lockstep, palms dangling close enough to one another that their knuckles often brushed. It was something unspoken, a small habit that carved its way deep through repetition, in the way moving water might, over time, furrow into rock. They took the long way home, the rock-and-sand path that skirted the lakefront property lines and curved around the dark mirror surface of their human-made lake.

Ida stopped at the lip of the Thompson property. Although he no longer cared for the thing, the boughs of the mango tree that had been planted there some decades back twisted over the lakeshore as if the tree might be longing for an early-season swim. She pulled a low-hanging branch toward her face, examining the alien-looking bloom that had begun to flower there.

"They're so strange, aren't they?" Ida asked, pinching at one of the nubby yellow fingers of a budding flower. "Strikes me every year."

"Don't start this again," Jean said, turning her back, looking defiantly out at the water.

"We could've had fruit," said Ida, "every summer. I told you back in… When was it?"

"Seventy-six."

"I told you back in seventy-six, but you—"

"Fruit means rats."

"And you know how I love mangoes."

"I won't have a yard full of rats," said Jean.

Ida let go of the thin branch, and it snapped back up into position. "The Thompsons don't have rats. I don't see any rats over there, do you?"

"Just Mr. Thompson," said Jean. "Agnes passed last summer."

"Well, then *Mr. Thompson* makes it work. Every July we're paying for mangoes at the supermarket when we could've had baskets full for free."

Jean smirked, and Ida knew she was about to lose the argument. "And then people could come into our yard to help themselves!"

Ida grimaced at the idea.

"Think of the money we saved on exterminators," Jean said. She glanced from side to side before gazing deeply into Ida's eyes. "The flowers

are strange. Our garden is much more beautiful."

Ida grinned. The blush in Jean's cheeks and the breadth of her smile made Ida feel as if it wasn't the garden Jean was calling beautiful, but her. She forgot all about those hypothetical mangoes, and Jean said, "Let's get you home."

She offered a bent arm, and Ida took it. "It was a big day." The pair walked a step, then another, and although the HOA meeting was all that the women had accomplished outside their usual household routine, it had been a big day. Especially for Jean, who, lately, found her energy waning faster and more easily than she'd like to admit. "Big day," she said again, a resigned declaration.

The loop around the lake took them through the limits of the Thompson yard, then the Garland property with its overmanicured bougainvillea hedges and limp hydrangeas. A rusty trampoline sagged in the center, a circle of dead grass beneath it.

"Haven't seen them visit," Ida said, implying Rose Garland's grandchildren.

"They're older now," said Jean.

"Must know about her… behavior."

"Got to be fourteen and sixteen, if I have my math right."

"So they're old enough to know…" Ida said.

And Jean, talking over her, replied, "Don't think they're the age for trampolines."

"… the truth about their grandmother."

The pair continued, still arm in arm, slowing where they had to step down onto the lake's rocky shore to dip around the Bankses' fence line. Cold water lapped onto the brims of Ida's shoes, seeped into the cotton fibers of her socks.

When they were back up safely on the grass, Jean asked, "Have you returned Laura's call?"

Ida stared at the Bankses' old rope swing. "It's rotted," she said.

Jean said nothing.

Ida added, "A hazard. They should take it down."

"Laura's call?" Jean tried again.

"I'll call her back," Ida said, thinking of how long it had been since her daughter visited, and how much her grandchildren, Chelsea and Jill, must

have changed in that time. “I’ll call.”

“It’s no small undertaking, traveling with little ones.”

Resentment flared in Ida’s center as she thought about how quickly Laura and Charlie had grown, how long the days had felt while raising them, and how short the years. It was selfish of Laura to keep Chelsea and Jill away so long, letting the swell of their youth slip away like water through Ida’s fingers. “I don’t think it’s too much to ask to see my grandchildren,” said Ida.

“It’s hard for her, with Harvey always traveling for work. She’s alone out there.”

“I could help!”

“It’s the getting here,” said Jean, with a light touch to the small of Ida’s back. “You know that.”

Ida knew it was true. Even with her poor memory and the decades that had ambled by, she remembered the bitter exhaustion of late nights and early mornings, getting kids bathed and fed and shuffling them into cars for school and appointments and birthday parties. She’d had Jean’s help after Eddie passed, but still, it was difficult. “She should’ve never moved away,” Ida said finally. “And Indiana of all places.”

The rest of the walk was filled with the sound of birds. Those that had flown south for the winter now returned at the promise of warmer weather. Two pairs of Canada geese honked and made uneasy landings onto the lake’s center, sending ripples across its surface. A warbler flew close enough to startle Jean, then settled onto the brim of the Friedman birdbath.

All of winter, it seemed, Rockaway had held its breath. The cold and the stillness of January and the frequent dustings of February snow kept gatherings and visitors at bay. But now began Rockaway’s shallow inhale, the slow waking of wildlife before the big gulp of spring.

When Jean and Ida reached the Foldger property, they cut up through their path, past the 1950s Craftsman, and crossed the sleepy one-lane street. Lamps flickered down Peachtree Way, then illuminated to their fullest brightness. The women trudged on under their fallow glare to the stepping-stones that led up the incline of their lawn, their feet easily finding each irregular slate piece driven flush with the earth over forty years of walking. Up the rain-softened steps to their porch, twin rocking chairs, originally pine but painted white, wobbled in the breeze, as did the indigo and butter-

yellow faces of potted pansies that sat on the railing.

Jean’s hand hesitated on the knob.

“I’ll call Laura,” Ida said. “Tonight.”

Jean nodded knowingly and swung wide the unlocked door. The two entered the home Ida’s late husband had purchased in 1955, and that the two women had shared together since 1957—the only place they felt free enough to love one another in a way that felt right and real. Ida shut the door behind them.

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CHAPTER TWO

Ida sifted two cups of flour into a broad ceramic bowl, glancing down at the recipe book flipped open to the yellowed page with a picture of scones. After all these years, she still hadn't memorized the measurements of the ingredients. It was a source of embarrassment for her, so she tried her best to get everything measured before Jean could see her cheating off the book. Beside Ida was a double-basin sink of green porcelain, and above that stood a double-paned window with a black metal frame. Cobwebs collected in its top corners, behind doily-white macramé curtains. Through the window's lower pane and past the dusty screen, Jean could be seen, if Ida were to look, wearing pastel-pink garden gloves and a cotton housedress in faded teal. In one hand she held a pair of shears. Cut daisies and dahlias were collected in the other, a bouquet of white and yellow and white and fuchsia and white and strawberry blond.

As it was, Ida was focused on a stubborn lump of flour rolling around her sieve. So focused, in fact, that her wrist whipped into a waiting colander of blueberries, tipping it into the sink and sending half of the fruits bouncing down the drain.

"Dammit," Ida rasped, scooping and salvaging what she could. She was rinsing them again when Jean came through the back door.

Hands full of wet blueberries, Ida used her elbow to slap the recipe book closed, then her forearm to slide it deeper onto the counter. She spun around, using her body to block sight of it, and stood in that spot as naturally as she could with two palms dripping with sink water and piled high with salvaged blueberries.

Jean's hair, though weighted down with beads of sweat, was as jet black as the day they'd met. She'd worn it longer then, but with the passing years the curls crept higher to her chin, dangled at the uppermost point of her jaw, then reached their current and final form in a pixie-length tousle. Her hairdresser, Elouise Carlson, had done an admirable job matching Jean's

natural color when her grays came in; and when Elouise retired, her daughter, Heather Carlson, had done just as well.

Jean was breathing hard from her quick jaunt in the garden, and her hand trembled a bit in retrieving the thin vase from the high cabinet. She slipped the flowers inside the tubular glass, their stems turning from green to brown against the peach-tinted vase.

“I’m making your favorite,” Ida said, giving up her position and dumping the berries back into the colander as Jean ran the vase under the faucet. “Was thinking we’d have scones for lunch.”

Nine in the morning would seem an unusual time, to most, to begin planning for lunch. But Jean had become an early riser in her later years, fleeing bed as the last brushstrokes of darkness faded from the sky, and Ida, unable to sleep without Jean by her side, had followed suit.

“Scones for lunch,” Jean said, placing the vase in the center of the kitchen table. “What would our mothers think?”

Ida croaked a laugh. “Good thing they’re dead. Half the fun of getting old is having nobody alive to tell you not to do what you want.”

“Oh, Ida, please.” Jean placed her soiled gardening gloves on the entryway table, then slumped into an oak kitchen chair. “I don’t think there’s ever been a time you didn’t do what you want.”

Ida thought back to the previous evening, when she’d wanted to take Jean’s hand as they approached the lake but hadn’t, afraid in the moment that Michael Thompson might see. She would have mentioned it, but to do so might bring up the whole back-and-forth about the two of them coming out again, and it was too early for this sticky argument. Instead, Ida took the opportunity to wrap her arms around Jean’s shoulders from behind and plant a kiss on the top of her head. “Well, that’s true,” Ida said, feeling the dampness of Jean’s sweat on her lips but not minding one bit.

Ida returned to her task, whisking together egg and flour, dumping the remaining blueberries into the mix. She added sugar, salt, and cinnamon, cold butter and heavy cream. While she combined the ingredients, Ida thought about their kids. There were the children she’d birthed, Laura and Charlie, and the children she’d raised, Barbara and George. With the boys and girls close in age, the families had blended when Jean moved into the house, and were raised up together as a single, sweeter thing. “Laura said she may visit for Christmas.” Ida sprinkled in a dash of baking powder and

a few drops of vanilla extract—then a few more snuck out that she didn't intend.

"That would be nice," said Jean, stretching out in her chair. The kitchen table was small enough to allow Jean to lay her head back on the chair's frame and extend her legs around the table's base. From here, she could watch Ida bake over her right shoulder, catch sight of the odd bird through the pane in the back door, and look across the house into the carpeted living room. At this time of day, natural light coming in through the windows was enough to keep the house well lit, but Ida insisted on using the kitchen's overhead fluorescents anyway. Jean hadn't nagged her about it for years. Savings on the energy bill were negligible, and Jean was happiest when Ida was happy. "George is planning a trip with Lisbeth around that time, and Barbara will be here, of course."

"Of course," Ida said mindlessly. Then, dubiously, "George's wife is planning to come?"

"That's what I hear."

"I don't think she cares for us," said Ida.

Jean raised her eyebrows, conceding the point. "I don't think she cares much for George either, to be fair."

"Do you think she knows? Do you think that's why?" Ida asked.

"Knows about what? About us?"

Despite preferring to never broach the topic, Ida was driven by her paranoia to bring up her fear that her children—and more broadly, everyone else—had discovered the true nature of her relationship with Jean. And secretly hated them. With a batter-coated whisk, she pointed at herself and then Jean, leaving a splatter across the floor between them. Her anxiety acted like an itch, and she hoped some validation that the two of them had fooled the world would soothe it. "That we're more than just *friends*." She said the final word with a sneer, as if the taste of it were off, then swiped the batter off the floor with her finger and rinsed it under the sink.

"Oh, I doubt it's that," Jean said. "We've always been careful."

Ida shook her head, washing and then drying the whisk with a hand towel. "You say that all you want, but there was the time with that valet. Caught your hand on my thigh."

"That was twenty years ago."

"And the time with the grocer, when we shopped together and paid with

the same card."

Jean sighed.

"He gave us a funny look!"

Jean's hands folded atop the kitchen table. "Ida, George?" she said. "Laura or Barbara would have sooner picked up on a thing like that. Even Charlie after having been gone so long. Who are we fooling? I'm sure they have. But George?"

Ida set the whisk into their drawer and paused. She thought about Laura, Barbara, and Charlie knowing with a wince. Then she thought about George, the boy who didn't even notice the big hailstorm the night of his junior prom because he was trying to get his hair to look like Clint Eastwood's. "I suppose he's not the most observant of the bunch."

"Right," said Jean. "And if George doesn't suspect, then Lisbeth doesn't know."

"You're right. Well, maybe Lisbeth just has a certain disposition." Ida grabbed an electric mixer from the counter, but she couldn't take her mind off the possibility that the other children had seen through her ruse. "You really think the others know?"

Jean leaned her head to one side, then the other, stretching her neck. "Barbara and Laura? They must. Times are different now. Two women being together isn't so strange. Two women living together as friends is much more unusual, old as we are."

"Hmm," said Ida. She searched her memory for any time she might have given something away in front of the girls, any time the girls might have indicated that they knew. Coming up blank, she wondered what it would mean if they did know about her and Jean. Could that be why Laura had moved way away to Indiana? "When was the last time we had the kids all here together?" she asked. "Ninety-two?"

"Ninety-two," Jean said, raising her voice over the steady drumming of the mixer against the bowl.

"My retirement party."

"That's right."

Ida folded the dough and pressed it into a pie pan. While she didn't remember much about the party, she did remember that Clinton's campaign promise to let lesbians and gay people serve in the military had been a topic of discussion at the soiree, one spoken too loudly for her taste in the

otherwise quiet Italian restaurant. She had been so afraid that night, staring down into her penne alla vodka, that her soon-to-be-former coworkers had brought up the politics because they secretly knew about her and Jean. She'd been relieved when the party ended and nobody said anything to her directly, and Ida decided now that if Laura and Barbara knew the truth about her romance with Jean, she was glad they were keeping their mouths shut about it. It was easier to believe they didn't, to go on as normal. Ida wiped excess flour onto the skirt of her apron, then filled a glass with ice and water and set it on the table in front of Jean. Jean nodded a thank-you, draining half the glass in an open-throated swallow.

"It's hot out there with the sun beating down," Jean said.

"It's not hot. The weather this morning said it's forty-six. I swear, you're lucky the traveling circus never got a hold of you." Ida flourished a hand, framing an imaginary marquee. "'Come one, come all to see the world's warmest woman!'"

Jean grunted.

"Cut the slivers for me, would ya?"

Jean finished her glass of water, washed her hands, and retrieved the big knife from the drawer. Years back, Ida would shape the scones by hand, but the arthritis made it painful to clench her fingers, so these days she just pressed the dough into a pie pan and let Jean cut them into shape. Ida stepped back and watched as Jean drove the blade's tip into the pie pan's center.

"Make them even," Ida said, crumpling a sheet of wax paper onto a baking tray.

Jean had sliced eight mostly even triangles when the phone rang. It hung on the sliver of wall between the fridge and the hallway, sunset pink. Ida answered.

"Bleaker and Holloway residence."

Jean mouthed, *Who is it?*

Ida swatted the air. "Hello, Barbara."

My Barbara? Or Barbara Banks? Jean mouthed.

"She's right here," Ida said, passing the receiver to Jean.

"Hi, Ma," Ida overheard Barbara saying. Ida had gotten used to Barbara's interruptions. Jean's adult daughter never married or had any children of her own. While she'd always had a job, Barbara never fell in

love with any one thing, so her career never took her away from Rockaway. She lived just five minutes away, visited almost daily, and called about twice as much, but it was rare she had a piece of news as intriguing as this.

"He what?" Jean asked.

Ida no longer cared about the scones. *Who?* she mouthed. A slice of pastry dough hovered atop her spatula, midway between pie pan and baking tray.

"A divorce?"

A divorce! Scone slice still precariously balanced, Ida was unable to maintain her silence. "Who's getting divorced?" she asked.

"George," Jean said to Ida, then to Barbara, "But why? Are you sure?"

Ida dropped the scone slice, which barely landed within the confines of the baking tray, then wriggled her way close enough to Jean that she could press her ear against the receiver's hard plastic.

"I think he should tell you," they both heard Barbara say.

"You tell me," Jean said. Ida gave a tight little nod.

"I just… I don't want to get in the middle," Barbara said.

"You're in the middle now," said Jean. "By calling, you put yourself square in the middle."

"Yes, she did," said Ida, nearly foaming at the mouth for every sparse detail. "Square in the middle."

"Well, shit, Ma."

"Go on," Jean said. "Out with it."

"Just give him a call, okay? And don't be angry. Don't yell."

"I never yell!" Jean yelled.

Ida patted her shoulder. "Don't let her go without telling you why."

A big breath from Barbara crackled over the line. "Look, I probably shoulda waited for him to tell you. But the other day, you were so excited about Christmas, and now I'm afraid… I don't know. I'm sorry, Ma."

"How long has this been going on?" Jean asked.

"Few weeks," said Barbara.

"And he couldn't call his mother," Jean said.

"You know how he is. Anyway, I'm sorry. Give him a call, okay?"

Jean said, "Yeah, yeah," but not until she hung up the line.

"An affair," said Ida as Jean dialed George's cell phone number. "Got to be an affair."

Jean waited with a slouch and Ida listened to the phone ring and ring. She left a voicemail that simply said, “George, call your mother.”

There was no choice but to wait for the salacious details of George’s divorce. Ida got the scones in the oven. Set the timer. By the time Ida had put the bowls and the spatula in the sink, Jean was back sitting at the kitchen table, plucking at one of the pink embroidered roses on the tablecloth. Ida took her usual seat beside her.

“The dahlias bloomed nicely this year,” Ida said, admiring the flowers Jean had brought in from the garden earlier and touching the softness of their petals.

Jean nodded, but her gaze remained on the tablecloth.

“You were right about the banana peels. Seems to have given them a little extra moxie.”

When Jean still said nothing, Ida got up and turned the record player on, setting the needle on their favorite tune. Sinatra sang from the circular speakers, luring Frankie, a black-and-gray cat, from his hiding place beneath the sofa.

“There he is, the little charmer,” Ida said, stooping down to scratch under his chin. Frankie brushed against her shins, weaving in and out of Ida’s legs before butting his head against Jean’s knee.

“You love to listen to yourself, now don’t you,” Jean said. It was an old reincarnation joke. At least it had started as a joke, when Frankie was a kitten and terrified of everywhere but the hallway linen closet. Ida and Jean had tried everything to tempt him out of the dark corner he found there: canned tuna, deli meats, bells, balls of string. Frankie held his ground. Week after week, he remained in the closet, using the litter box Jean and Ida had outfitted there and sneaking out in the night for sips of water and scraps of wet food. Until one afternoon, Sinatra came on the radio, and the kitten walked out of the linen closet never to return.

“He’s an egoist,” Ida said. “Never could resist the sound of his own voice.”

Jean scratched the cat behind the ears. He squeezed his eyes shut, and with his toothy, feline smile, a measure of Jean’s disappointment in her son melted away. “Time for our trip to the mailbox?” she asked him. “What do you think?” Frankie purred, and when Jean stood up and walked to the front door, Frankie was hot on her heels.

Ida watched through the glass panel as Frankie bounded down the hill of the lawn, pouncing and missing a dragonfly on his way. Jean followed the stepping-stone path to where it met the blacktop at the foot of the driveway. She stopped at the mailbox to give Frankie a scratch before removing some magazines and envelopes from inside.

The cat bounded inside first. Jean followed neatly behind, her finger already sliding beneath an envelope's seal.

"What is it?" Ida asked.

Jean handed off the magazines, which Ida tucked beneath the crook of her arm.

"Someone we know?" Ida pressed.

"PSE&G," Jean said, "probably a bill."

This piqued Ida's interest. "I already paid them this month. On the third. I paid them, Jean. Didn't I?"

"You paid them," Jean said, freeing the letter and smoothing down the trifold on her knee.

"I pay them every month on the third," said Ida. "So what's this, then?"

Jean was squinting. She needed readers, and Ida had bought her a pair at the pharmacy, but Jean refused to wear them. Still, there was more to the lines in Jean's face than just blurry vision. She looked worried.

"Well?"

"They want to dig," Jean said, eyes narrowed.

Ida was confused at first, smacking her tongue against her molars.

"They want to dig," Jean said again, "in our backyard."

Fear came then. As the women came to understand what they'd missed in the HOA meeting, fear widened Ida's eyes and made her take a silent breath in. Fear sat her down at the kitchen table and sent a chill through the back of her shoulders. And Jean was afraid too; Ida saw it in the tremor of her hand, in the way her jaw held just a measure too still, in the slight crease she allowed in the skin between her brows before flattening her expression.

"We can't let them," Ida said.

Jean dropped the letter in the trash.

"When?" asked Ida.

"Tuesday. Next week, Tuesday." Jean sank into her kitchen chair.

"We can't let them, Jean," Ida said again. "We can't let them."

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CHAPTER THREE

Ida's auburn hair, already thin in places, looked blond in the afternoon light. She stood in the garden, head tipped down toward the Osiria roses as if peering past their crimson outer petals into the white ones beneath.

Heel to toe, toe to heel, Jean walked a line from a rusted lawn flag in the neighbor's yard. An onlooker might've thought she was the subject of a field sobriety test, but no one was watching, not even Ida, who had locked her gaze on a paper wasp climbing between the folds of a bloom before disappearing inside.

"Should be about here," Jean said, stopping at the perimeter of the bush and tracing the air just left of its center. "All along here."

"No, farther back, I think," said Ida. "We had the rock garden in fifty-seven. We wouldn't have dug here."

Jean stretched her neck to one side, then the other. "The rock garden wasn't until seventy-two. Kids were all out of the house. Remember?"

"Oh." Ida wrung one hand into the other. "That's why George didn't help with the stones."

"He was off at college. Michael Thompson helped us lug the rocks back in his wheelbarrow."

"I remember."

"It was here," Jean said, eyes passing over the rosebushes. "We must've missed the electrical line by inches."

Ida grunted an acknowledgment. She bent, tore a petal from the nearest bloom, rolled the satin of it between her forefinger and thumb. "The Osirias bloomed early this year. And now PSE&G wants to dig them up."

"That's the least of our worries, I'd say."

Heat gathered in Ida's cheeks, a tickle at the back of her sinuses. She thought of her late husband Eddie, her nights alone with an infant Charlie, waking every hour to soothe him in his colicky year. Her body remembered fatigue so bone deep it was painful, and the quaking fear on the mornings

Eddie would return, penniless and determined to make Ida pay as much as he had. A nasty name, a clutched collar, a strike across the cheek depending on how many bets he'd lost. And that was before she got pregnant again. Before things got really bad.

When a rogue tear blurred her vision, she stiffened her spine and swallowed hard. Ida remembered that night in '57, the night when everything changed. Sitting close at the theater, tickets to *Funny Face* crumpled in her pocket. Jean's mint-green halter top and the sweetness of strawberry ice cream. Driving to relieve the sitter with the top down and the wind kicking up. A deep kiss on the living room sofa. The patter of rain on the windows, how it covered the sound of Eddie's engine, how the beam of the headlights didn't break through the curtains until it was too late to stop what was coming. The world reduced to the iron scent of blood. Hers. Jean's. Then Eddie's and Richard's. She remembered the damp soil and how it clung to the toes of her shoes, the thud of her husband's body as it struck the bottom of the hole and the smack of Richard's corpse against Eddie's when Jean pushed him in after. "We should've planted something uglier on top. They don't deserve to look up at roses." Ida flicked the crushed petal away, sniffing. "Bastards."

"I'll talk with Jim. They're laying a new line, doesn't need to be in the same spot as the old one. He knows about our garden. I'm sure the HOA wouldn't want to reimburse us for the plants and labor. I'll make a case."

The women returned to the kitchen to the tune of a timer beeping and the smell of burnt sugar and dough. Ida mumbled curses under her breath, whipping open the sink-side drawer and fumbling with the oven mitt. She drew down the oven door, and from its belly lunged a beastly heat. It tightened the skin on her neck and made her squint against it. She slid the baking tray off the metal grate, shut the door, and looked for somewhere to set it down. But around the stovetop sat the bag of flour, the green foam container slick with berry juice, a can of baking powder, shakers of salt and cinnamon, cracked eggshells and an empty carton of heavy cream, the uncapped bottle of vanilla. Ida had left a mess. The metal baking tray, cooked to four hundred degrees, pressed its warmth through the mitt, a threat against her palm. Her blue eyes bounced across the litter of ingredients while warmth turned to a sting in the bend of her pointer finger, a place where the overused oven mitt was threadbare. She nearly dropped

the tray. Let it crash to the linoleum, scones be damned. But Jean stepped between her and the kitchen counter, clearing away just enough of the mess at precisely the perfect moment so Ida could set the tray down without suffering a major burn.

“My hero,” Ida said gruffly, slipping off the mitt and nestling it back in the drawer. Jean only smiled.

“I’ll call Jim,” Jean said.

After a brief phone call in the living room, Jim agreed to have Ida and Jean over at four o’clock that afternoon, with the strict parameter that he only had half an hour because he and Sonora had tickets to the theater.

“It’s *Annie Get Your Gun*!” he said again and again in variations. “Have you seen *Annie Get Your Gun*? It’s a wonderful play, *Annie Get Your Gun*. An off-Broadway cast. We saw their rendition of *Cats* and it was just wonderful! You and Ida should really see *Annie Get Your Gun*.”

Jean and Ida had seen *Annie Get Your Gun* in ’68, when Barbara’s high school class put on a performance. Even if the singers hadn’t been flat, the costuming reminiscent of discount Halloween crafts, and the sets recycled from their run of *Bye Bye Birdie*, it still would have been awful. Jean didn’t say this to Jim, as it would have invited further discussion, and she knew she needed a measure of the younger man’s good grace, considering she had an ask to make. She said, “Lovely. See you at four.”

When Jean returned to the kitchen, Ida had set the table using the small plates. Scones were piled atop a serving dish, their bottoms carved away, though speckles of char still dotted the blue of the patterned china. Jean’s glass of ice water waited on a napkin, along with her pills: a pink one, a white one, and an oblong vitamin.

“Well?” Ida asked. She ran a bread knife through a hand towel, then returned it to the block.

“He said to come over at four.” Jean plopped the pills on her tongue, swallowing them down with a big gulp. “It’s gonna be fine,” she said. “They won’t dig, and they won’t find them.”

“*It’s gonna be fine*,” said Ida. Jean had told her that same thing many times between 1952 and 1957, the years between their becoming friends and getting caught as much more than just that. “You remember how it went the last time you made that claim.”

Jean ran her tongue over the space of her missing tooth. She snatched

the top scone from the pile and took a bite, squishing a blueberry between her molars to forget the feeling of the gap against her cheek. “I tri—I didn’t think…” Flavor drained from the bit of pastry in Jean’s mouth. Her tongue went dry. Crumbs tickled the back of her throat, and she took a sip of water to keep from choking.

“What’s done is done,” Ida said. “We survived it.” Beneath the table, she laid a couple of reassuring taps on Jean’s thigh. “And anyway, they had it coming.”

“Bastards,” Jean whispered. She reached across the table, cupping Ida’s chin and tipping her face up to the light. Forty years on and Ida still got that same fiery look when Jean did this. Her skin had thinned over the years, but only in the literal sense. In spirit, Ida remained tough as a sailor and had a slicker mouth. Through Ida’s pale blue eyes, Jean saw the same indomitable woman living inside as when they were twenty. She loved her, just as viciously as she had when Ida’s hair was thick and her waist was slim and her life sprawled out in front of her like something that could never guess what she might do next. Loved her, this woman who once smoked Lucky Strikes in the morning, never cowered, never caved, never looked away from a challenge. “You remember what else I said that night?” Jean asked.

Ida smiled. “*Never again.*”

Jean squeezed Ida’s jaw before releasing it. “And did I lie?”

Ida, croaking out a laugh, said, “So far, so good.”

Jean grinned, then wandered back into the living room. She eased herself into the tufted, straight-backed chair, her favorite place to think. Ornery springs whined beneath her rump, and the concave slope of the seat made her elbows touch the armrests at awkward angles. Despite Ida’s sarcastic tone, Jean reflected warmly on the words she’d said earlier: *My hero.* It was Ida’s way to wrap up a delicate sentiment in something tough and bitter. Jean suspected that having to publicly swallow down the words *I love you* left a sourness in Ida that lingered even when the two were alone, and while she couldn’t convince her stubborn paramour that the world would still turn if they were transparent about their relationship, she could certainly find the sweetness in moments like these.

As Jean’s swollen belly touched the edge of the corner desk, she found herself tightening her abdominal muscles, sucking in the reach of her body like she hadn’t done since Richard died. The living room telephone had a

shorter cord than the one in the kitchen, was the color of unbleached bone. Jean lifted the receiver, thinking she might try George again, heard the dial tone, then set it down, deciding against being a bother. She braced it with her hand as she raised the desktop it rested on, finding the unopened envelope she'd stowed away earlier that morning. Jean studied the name of the sender. She cut her finger as it slid through the paper, but not deep enough to bleed. The letter was folded in three. She read it twice. And though Jean had never before kept a secret from Ida, she knew she would keep this one.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Jim Friedman owned the hulking colonial in the heart of the cul-de-sac on Apple Blossom Circle. He bought it with his parents' money, Jean suspected, and had covered it in olive clapboard siding upon taking residence. An offensive color choice, Ida had said once, as she found the entire color palette of the '70s offensive, but less offensive than the state of his lawn, which was patchy and overrun with clover. Ida had submitted three complaints to the board about it, seemingly taking a sour delight in knowing he, as board president, would have to review each grievance personally.

Clearly, no action was ever taken, but Jean watched as Ida took it upon herself to yank out a clump of clover at the root on her way up the path, tossing the weed behind her with a smug pout. Jim opened the door before they could knock.

In lieu of greeting him, Ida showed Jim her dirt-smeared palm. "Do you have a sink?" she asked.

With a befuddled wrinkle of his forehead, the younger man said, "Yes?"

"Wonderful. I got a little dirty helping you with your lawn." Ida pushed past him while Jean lingered on the welcome mat. A less perceptive woman would have been confused by Ida's rudeness, but Jean understood that Jim, in Ida's mind, represented a threat. Everyone did. Each relative, neighbor, and passing stranger had the potential to discover their romance, and Ida was convinced that discovery would be the unraveling of all they'd built together. Jean felt differently, of course, but also saw how carrying around that kind of fear could make a person resentful, prone to lashing out.

"May I?" Jean asked, and Jim motioned her inside. He indicated the living room sofa as the place to sit, and over the sound of Ida washing her hands, Jean heard chatter she knew to be from Jim's wife, Sonora, and the neighborhood gossip, Rose Garland, coming from the dining room. Jean sat down on the squeaky leather sofa, nervous about whether Ida would seize

the opportunity to antagonize Rose.

As Ida dried her hands on a torn sheet of paper towel, Jim hesitated beside the matching leather love seat, as if waiting for both women to be seated before taking his place. Still, Ida took her time looking for the waste bin. When she found it, she placed the paper towel gingerly inside. Jean knew she was eavesdropping on the chatter, her speculations confirmed when Ida paused in the hallway, peering through to the dining room.

Jim cleared his throat. “Jean, *Ida*”—he said the second name more loudly than the first—“what can I do for you this evening?”

Ida joined them in the living room, sitting on the couch, on the opposite end from Jean.

“We received a letter,” Jean started, “from PSE&G.”

“Ah, yes,” said Jim, “the electrical lines.”

“Exactly,” said Jean. “They want to dig up our yard, and I’m afraid that won’t be possible. You know how much pride we take in our garden, and I’m sure you can guess at the money we’ve invested over the years. Replacing it would come at a tremendous cost, one I’m sure the board doesn’t want to cover.” Jean displayed her pride over what she considered to be a very solid argument, sitting up straighter and lifting her shoulders.

As a peal of Rose Garland’s laughter intruded on the room, Ida’s lips tightened over her teeth.

“I’m sure this is very inconvenient,” Jim said. “On behalf of the board, I truly apologize.” He shifted back in his love seat, leather creaking beneath him. “Unfortunately, however, our hands are tied. The line is old. It’s been there since the fifties and—”

“So have we,” Ida said, cocking a penciled brow in challenge.

“Well,” Jim sighed, “the electrical hasn’t weathered the years as well as you fine ladies.”

The compliment fell flat over a beat of quiet.

“It would cost thousands to replace the garden,” Jean said, worried that the argument wasn’t as strong as she’d thought. “Just the roses are worth several thousand. Then there’s the trellis supporting them, two hundred, and paying a landscaper to redo the borders would be hundreds at least. Is the board prepared to reimburse us for the cost?”

“I…” Jim’s gaze bounced over the tchotchkes on the entertainment center. “No. We are not in a position to reimburse you. You’d have to cover

the cost of a new garden on your own, should you choose to replace it."

"*Should we choose to replace it?*" Ida gawked, the mere suggestion that they wouldn't an insult.

Jean spoke before Ida could say more. "You know how much pride we take in the garden, Jim," she said again, this time making a point to smile. She would appeal to his pity. "Our children are grown and Ida's grandkids live far away."

"The Midwest," Ida said with a sneer.

"I'm sure you understand our need to watch something grow. Indulge a couple of old ladies, will you?"

"Old," Ida muttered. "Speak for yourself."

Jean shot her a sharp look and Ida swallowed the words bubbling up in her throat, rolled one hand into the other.

"I understand this is a huge inconvenience," Jim tried again. "But it's out of my hands, really. A county thing more than a board thing. The HOA is merely facilitating the–"

"There must be some way to work this out, another lawn they could dig in," Ida said, the words coming out quick and hurried. Jean knew what was coming. Although it had never worked in her favor, Ida's last resort was always to offer a bribe. "Another lawn they could dig in." Ida lowered her voice to a hoarse whisper. "We have some money left over from our pensions, you know. I'm sure we could—"

"Mrs. Holloway, I'm going to stop you there." And there it was, another failed attempt at greasing a palm added to Ida's ledger. "As I said to you before, my hands are tied in the matter. The workers need access to a certain number of yards to make the needed repairs, and your home happens to sit on one of them." He looked at Jean. "I am sorry about the garden. Truly, I am."

Another laugh from Rose Garland, this one a snicker, and Ida's eyes widened as she took a rattling breath through her nose.

"Let's go," Jean said, knowing well the signs of Ida's temper. The stress of their failed appeal to Jim mixed with the temptation to dull Rose's laughter would be too much for Ida to bear silently. "Come on," she said, but it was too late. The fire inside Ida was already stoked to blazing.

"Why don't you come out and join us, Rosie!" she bellowed. "You seem interested in what we have to say. Come on closer! You could hear us much

better in here."

Rose's snicker was snuffed out, and there was a moment of tense quiet, then a murmur, what Jean thought to be Sonora coaching Rose on what to do next.

"What happened?" Ida asked, standing. "I thought we were having fun."

Jean got to her feet, and Jim scrambled up to meet them, putting his body in the pass-through between the couch and the hallway that led to Rose and Sonora.

Jim cast a cursory glance at his wristwatch, too briefly to actually read the time. "I should be getting ready for the show," he said, seeming desperate to deescalate by changing the subject. He tilted his body, creating a shape that, should Ida move through it, would point her in the direction of the door. "We're seeing *Annie Get Your Gun* tonight."

"I wasn't laughing at you," Rose said meekly from the dining room.

"Yeah," Ida said, shuffling past Jim and heading for the door. "I didn't think so." Under her breath she added, "You hussy."

Jean winced an apology toward Jim, who nodded.

"Careful, Sonora!" Ida called as she tossed open the front door. "Watch your husband around that one."

"Thank you for having us," Jean said, and offered Jim an awkward handshake as she followed Ida's trail out the door. Jean hoped that Jim and Sonora would laugh about it on their way to the theater, that the outburst might lose its sharp edges, and she might have another opportunity to plead their case to him. It was a foolish hope, she knew.

Ida struck a feverish walking pace, and Jean struggled to keep up. It wasn't until they turned out of Apple Blossom Circle that she slowed and Jean was able to catch her.

"You shouldn't have done that," Jean said, winded.

"I know," said Ida, her jaw clenched. "Dammit, I know."

Barbara and Nicolas Banks passed on the opposite sidewalk, their white terrier leading them on a leash pulled taut. The couple waved, and Jean and Ida limply waved back. When the Bankses were out of earshot, Jean said, "I'll try again in a day or two. Maybe just let me go this time, in case we run into Rose again."

Ida huffed. "Who's to say they'd find them? Even if they dig. Can't be more than bones by now. And if they did, so what? We could say we buried

a dog back there."

"We've never owned a dog," Jean said.

"Who would know that?"

"Michael Thompson, for one. He's been here as long as us."

"Maybe we kept it inside," said Ida.

"A dog we never walked?"

"We walked it in the backyard."

"And nobody ever saw?" asked Jean.

Ida huffed again.

"Anyway, they've got that DNA testing now. They could do the test and know it wasn't a dog," said Jean.

"Oh." Ida swatted that away. "That's just on the television. They're not doing DNA in Rockaway."

"They might be!"

"You watch too many of those shows."

Jean snatched up Ida by the sweater, just in time to stop her from walking into a speeding sedan. "HEY!" Jean yelled after the car. "SLOW DOWN!"

Stunned, Ida froze on the curb.

"You're as dangerous a pedestrian as you are a driver," Jean said, a stale attempt at breaking the tension.

"He was speeding," said Ida, still stuck in her spot, "and I'm a fine driver."

Jean released her grip on Ida's sweater. "If you say so." And the two crossed the street together, this time looking both ways before they did.

"Even if there's no DNA," Jean said. She checked their surroundings once more. "What if they found a skull?"

Ida made a face like she'd bitten a lemon. "Guess you have a point." The two continued down Peachtree Way, past the Craftsman at 1140 with petunias in its window boxes, past the Victorian at 1120 with its horrid dolphin statue, and past 1100, another colonial with original brick. "Try again in a couple days," Ida said when they reached their property line. "I'll stay home."

The women ordered pizza from Johnny G's and ate it on the front porch, Ida drinking lemonade and Jean drinking water. They talked about grandchildren—not their own, but Rose Garland's and Michael

Thompson's, why they didn't visit anymore.

"George hasn't called," Ida said when she ran out of gossip.

"No," said Jean.

"Divorce," said Ida, shaking her head and wiping grease from her cheek with her forearm. "Terrible."

"I just want to know what happened."

"We know what happened," Ida said. "Someone younger showed up. Somebody that told him she likes everything Lisbeth doesn't. Someone who seems easier."

Jean sighed. For all the things she loved about George, she knew he wasn't a man with long vision. As a child, he talked about rockets. Spent hours assembling Tinkertoys into bridges and miniature buildings. He'd shown an audacious early interest in politics, and Jean watched early coverage of the conflict in Vietnam with George by her side, sharing her worry in whispers when Richard was out of the house. Back then it had seemed like George would go on to chase big boyhood dreams, but the dreamer in George died the day Richard struck Jean over an argument at breakfast. It was the first time George had seen him be violent, and the boy's little mouth had hung open over his cereal bowl, a ring of milk lining the space between his bottom lip and teeth.

She had done her best, as she believed all mothers do. Tried to shield him from the realities of Richard's abuse. But in hindsight she realized that what George really needed was an upright man to show him how to become one, to show him it was possible to triumph in the face of hardship and maybe even that triumph was only really achieved in overcoming those hardships.

"He's a runner," Ida said. "Always has been."

Feeling struck, but knowing it was true, Jean said without thinking, "He's like Charlie in that way," then tensed. Despite Ida's temper, there were very few topics Jean approached with caution. Ida's son Charlie was one of them.

Ida tore a chunk off her slice, took a long time chewing. "Yeah," she said, and that was all.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Surrounded by scrapbooks, alone and sitting cross-legged on the living room floor, Jean thought about regret. Whether it was a wound that could be mended or a limb that needed cutting off, how deep it was and how infectious. Between cardstock and clingy clear sheets were the smiling juvenile faces of George and Barbara, Laura and Charlie, clad in bathing suits and dripping water in front of the above ground pool. The pool only lasted until ’69, and George and Laura, the youngest of the children, hadn’t lasted in the house much longer. They’d gone off to SUNY in ’71, George in pursuit of a girl and Laura in pursuit of Charlie. Charlie was two years Laura’s senior, stationed in the dorms across campus, but an adolescence filled with suspicion and resentment over Ida and Jean’s secrecy had left him well beyond the family’s reach in his heart and mind. Laura, who had been closest to him, tracked him down at a showing of *The Exorcist*. She’d begged him to tell her what was wrong, to come home for the holidays, to just call every once in a while, but after a polite refusal he promptly transferred to the West Coast, leaving the family no return address and no path to reconciliation.

There were photos of Richard and Eddie, Jean’s and Ida’s late husbands, but only a few, sepia with nicotine stains and blurred with age. Ida and Jean had met at a gathering for local military wives while their husbands were on active duty. They’d grown close quickly. Concerned their husbands might take issue with their friendship, the women had introduced the two men to one another. It had all started innocently enough.

Richard returned from Korea even more stoic than when he’d left. He’d been part of the Air Force’s first combat mission, a point he recited with pride but refused to elaborate on. Eddie had also been part of the war effort, in the Army, but had never seen combat. Still, the war stripped him of his previous charms, Ida told her. Each man had been fond of pipe tobacco and neither smiled when he posed. The men were just men. The *bastards* had

been no more naturally inclined toward good or evil than any other man of the time; inside each was threaded a capacity for kindness and reason, knotted up with shame and the potential for violence. The worst of the problems came when Eddie introduced his new friend to gambling, and Richard, in return, let Eddie into his whiskey cabinet. In those ways, the two fed the weakest parts of themselves.

And it ended as it did.

It was a blessing, in a way. Richard's and Eddie's respective reputations for drinking and gambling meant nobody questioned their disappearance. *They were in deep with a bookie*, Jean and Ida had said. *Wouldn't surprise me if we've seen the last of them.* The women rehearsed their story, and it was always met with sad, sweet, knowing nods. All kinds of terrible things happened to men prone to degeneracy, and it wasn't unheard of for cowardly men in trouble to pick up and start over elsewhere. Neighbors and friends offered sympathy. It was Ida's boss who suggested the women move in together to save on costs, and that had been just the nudge they'd been waiting for.

Jean flipped past the photos of their late husbands, feeling a twinge of ache. It was not the night in '57 that gnawed at her. Not the beating they took or the killing she did after. It wasn't the digging or the filling of the hole. All of that was done in the dark. Regrettable, but not something Jean regretted. It was the memory of the following morning that still drew bile into her throat. The decision to ditch Eddie's car in Lake Ronkonkoma and bring the children along rather than leave them home alone. It was that she had tailgated Ida as she drove the yellow Chrysler to Islip, the translucent shade of dark at five a.m., and how a Cheshire moon smiled too bright. Tires chewed up the rocky dirt road, then sagged into the loamy lakeshore. The young ones and Barbara had listened when she'd turned them around in the back seat, when she'd told them not to look. But Charlie, well within the precocious start of boyhood, was not so quick to comply. He'd looked out the window and he'd seen the shiny bumper catch a glimmer of that glowering moon, and the image of the yellow Chrysler sinking off the shore of Lake Ronkonkoma was seared into his brain. A boy can accept a story, and Charlie seemed to, initially. But a teenager's job is to question things, especially a teenage boy whose daddy never came home. Ida stuck to her story, that the car wasn't Eddie's, but a similar one that had belonged to a

friend from her pottery class who didn't want to pay the disposal fees at the junkyard. Charlie might have grown to believe the story as his memory of the night faded, if not for recurring nightmares that kept the image of that sinking Chrysler front and center in his adolescent mind. If the other children shared his suspicion, they never mentioned it. And Ida's persistent denial when he raised his theories over the years in times of heated arguments had been sharp enough to cut a boy away from his mother. An amputation that left in its wake a phantom pain that, for Ida, remained very real.

Between the photos were other things. Ticket stubs from *The Sound of Music*, an entry bracelet to Coney Island, pressed snowdrops, azaleas, forget-me-nots, and the *Time* magazine cover from 1967, *The Hippies: Philosophy of a Subculture*. It was the magazine that taught Ida about Haight-Ashbury, a neighborhood in San Francisco that captured her fascination in the same way young girls are captivated by mermaids and unicorns. *Maybe there, Jean. Maybe there we could be you and me*, Ida had said, magazine in her lap. *Not care about who's looking.* From then on, San Francisco was the singular context in which Ida ever mentioned the two of them coming out. The women must have planned six vacations there over the years but never did actually visit. There was always some reason not to —either money or time. Jean wondered, with an ache in the pit of her stomach, whether that dream of Haight-Ashbury, of loving her lover freely and out in the open, was amputated too, cut away from them by the scalpels of fear and opportunity and age.

"It's time for bed," Ida said, standing in the living room doorway in her pilled pink nightgown.

Before Jean's time on this earth was spent, she was determined to reunite her family. If she could get Barbara and George to see Ida as more than just a woman who lived with them growing up, if she could entice Laura to make more time for her mom, and, most importantly, if she could help Charlie forgive his mother, then Jean would know Ida could be okay without her.

Jean shut the scrapbooks one by one, stacking them into a pile but leaving them on the rug. As she did, Ida turned off the desk lamp and the overhead fan. The pair split ways, Ida checking the lock on the back door, Jean taking the front, and when they came back together in the hallway, in

the dark, Jean thought to apologize—for Haight-Ashbury, for Charlie, for that night in ’57 and the early morning after—but didn’t. Instead, she decided she would fix it. Jean would fix everything.



Jean missed Jim Friedman by moments at Friday’s fish fry at the country club. “You must’ve crossed paths on your way in,” the hostess said. “Two ships passing in the night!” On Saturday, Jean caught wind that he was going to the farmer’s market, but her vision wasn’t what it once was, so she drove slowly on the road, and by the time she parked and worked her way through the crowd, she could hardly catch her breath. She sweated through her blouse despite the breeze and moderate weather, and though she asked the salesman at the homemade candle stand, the herbalist selling potted herbs, and the nice security guard in the Yankees cap, nobody had seen Jim. Jean passed by his house on Sunday afternoon, found his driveway empty. She passed by again in the evening, but Rose Garland was walking her poodle just down the street and he seemed to have company anyway, so she didn’t knock.

On Monday she managed to catch him on his trip to the mailbox. “Jim, it’s good I ran into you—” she started, but Jim raised a palm.

“Jean, I’m sorry. I know what you’re going to ask, and there’s nothing I can do.” He went back inside without getting his mail, and Jean knew that was that.

The walk back to Peachtree was longer than usual. Tomorrow the workers would come dig. They’d scatter the roses and find bones buried beneath. She wondered whether she and Ida would share a cell or if they’d be separated as additional punishment. Ida couldn’t sleep without her, she knew, and the thought of her sleepless in a prison jumpsuit, staring up at the ceiling for all her remaining days, was too much to bear.

She paused at the junction of Peachtree and Apple Blossom, recalling an episode of *Forensic Files* she’d seen. A suspected killer couple, she remembered, but only one of them was imprisoned—the one who confessed and took full responsibility for the crimes. The police had known the

husband was involved. The wife was too weak to have moved the bodies on her own. But there'd been no way to prove it, not beyond a reasonable doubt, anyway.

Jean decided she could do the same. She could shoulder the blame for what had happened, make sure Ida got to live out her days in her own home. The home she had welcomed Jean into. Had raised her kids in. The home where she had taught Jean what it was to love and had made Jean believe that there wasn't something wrong with her, but something wrong with the world that couldn't accept her. Didn't Jean owe Ida that, at least?

Jean saw Ida watching through the window as she came up the stepping-stone path. With a grim shake of her head, Jean answered the pressing question of how it had gone with Jim.

"That prick," Ida said. When Jean settled next to her on the sofa, Ida asked, "What are we going to do?"

Jean took stock of the plan in her mind.

"When the first worker gets here, we can offer him some of my pension. That should be enough, don't you think?" Ida asked, falling back on her evergreen bribery schemes. "All they have to do is dig somewhere else."

Jean let out a heavy sigh. "They can't dig somewhere else."

"Well, sure they can, one of the neighbors or—"

"The line runs through our yard. They're digging up the whole thing. There's nowhere else to—"

"I'm not just gonna roll over and—"

"Ida," Jean said in a tone she used sparingly. "When they find those bodies, the police are going to want somebody to blame."

Though Ida's knuckles were bent and puffy at the joints, she turned the gold ring on her middle finger all the way around. "I know."

Jean circled an arm around Ida's shoulders. "But it doesn't have to be the both of us."

The realization came upon Ida like a splash of cold water. "Absolutely not," she said. "I know what you're thinking, and the answer is no."

"If I confess to all of it, they won't be able to prove you were involved."

"Eddie's down there too! You don't think they'll know I had something to do with it?"

"Knowing and proving are two different things."

"Say you're right. What then?" A gravity fell over Ida's expression.

“You might think you’d be doing me a favor by confessing, making me look innocent, but you’d be leaving me here all alone.” In the sheen of Ida’s eyes, Jean saw real desperation—not at the notion of being caught, but at the notion of being without Jean. It left Jean breathless. “You can’t do that. You can’t leave me.”

Jean took a moment to steel herself, glancing away to clear from her mind the image of Ida’s pain. “What else can we do?” she asked in earnest.

“We’ve been fixing our problems together since Eisenhower,” she said. “You try leaving me now and you’ll really be a martyr—because I’ll kill you myself before they come to take you away.”

In that moment, Jean saw a flash of a younger Ida. The one who jumped across a table to smack Becky Heinz for calling her a bitch, the one who smoked Lucky Strikes and hustled regulars at the Billiard Club, who drank gin with a Lucky Strike in the same hand, could spit six feet, and never stopped trying to bribe people, despite the fact it never worked. “We’re going to figure it out,” Ida said. “Together.”

Ida might have been older, but she was still Ida. Jean was still Jean. And she knew that tomorrow would come, PSE&G with it, but they wouldn’t lift a sprinkle of soil, not while Jean Bleaker and Ida Holloway still had breath in their lungs and a pistol in their closet.

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CHAPTER SIX

The first truck arrived shortly after seven in the morning. The driver parked on the swale between 1030 and 1050 Peachtree, then sat inside for a long while, drinking coffee from a disposable cup and talking into a two-way radio. When he finally emerged, he did so in a powder-blue polo shirt, holding a long yellow stick in one hand and a can of spray paint in the other. Ida and Jean watched from their living room window as he crossed the street to knock on their neighbor's door at 1040 Peachtree.

From her angle, Jean could only see the tips of his fingers mid-wave and the way his body arched back as if engaged in enthusiastic pleasantries.

"We'll invite him inside," Ida said as he rounded the neighbor's property and disappeared into their backyard. "Tell him about our garden, the kids, our memories out there."

"With any luck, one of us will remind him of his mother," said Jean.

Ida's expression drew down with cynicism. "Let's hope he likes his mother."

"We've got the scrapbooks," Jean said, blowing past the comment.

"The one with Richard and Eddie?"

"That's the one on top."

"Good," said Ida. "The usual story?"

"I think we go with widows this time. It's sadder than if they both just up and left us."

"War widows," Ida said. "The big one? Nam?"

"We should go with World War II. Kids his age have romantic notions about that one. It'll feel heroic, make him want to do us a favor."

Ida craned her neck around, eyes narrowed. "We're too young."

"He doesn't know that," Jean said.

"You saying I could pass for mid-eighties?"

"No, I'm just—"

"I *just* turned seventy-two and you're seventy yourself, not exactly a

spring chicken. But sure, tack on a decade because *old Ida* could pass for mid-eighties. Is that what you're saying, Jean?"

"No! I…" Jean took a measured breath. "You're right. We're not old enough for World War II. We'll go with Nam."

Ida nodded. "POWs?"

"POWs," said Jean. "You start. I'll watch from the den."

Story settled, the women returned to the kitchen. The kettle was prepped in anticipation of tea, but having seen the disposable coffee cup, Ida dumped it, instead retrieving coffee grounds from the cabinet and dusting off their coffee maker. Jean had run to the donut shop when it opened at five thirty a.m., and a box of glazed—a mix of regular and chocolate—sat on the counter. The scrapbooks were stacked, just inconspicuously enough, on the side table, and Ida had placed a doily and a vanilla-scented candle on top of them, which Jean said was a nice touch.

In the lowest drawer of the china cabinet was a duffle bag containing one thousand dollars in cash. They'd gone back and forth on the amount the night before but decided in the end it was the most they could spare. Ida's pension from the bank paid for necessities, but it didn't afford them the luxury of big bribe money.

The getaway bag that had collected forty years' worth of dust in the attic only contained fifteen thousand dollars. It had seemed, in 1957, like an incredible sum. Enough to start over, and start over well, should the need arise. However, fifteen thousand dollars in '99 didn't hold the same purchasing power as it had back then, even in cash. The women prostrated themselves over not squirreling away more money over the years, Jean worse than Ida. But that was milk spilt. Water under the inflation bridge. A ship sailed.

Jean and Ida had spent the early-morning hours cleaning, making the old house look its best. They selected outfits that were neither sloppy nor too new with the express purpose of evoking the correct amount of sympathy. Once it was cleaned, oiled, and loaded, Jean slipped the .22-caliber pistol into the umbrella stand. "We won't have to use it," she said as she did.

"It won't come to that," Ida agreed. "He'll take the money and dig around our garden. Not through." She dumped a hundred puzzle pieces onto the coffee table, then separated out the corner pieces into a little pile. "We want to look busy," she said. "Sharp."

“Like we haven’t been prepping all morning,” said Jean.

Ida smiled. “Exactly.”

Jean joined her at the table. They needed to pass the minutes somehow anyway. The photo on the box was of poppy flowers, and Jean had collected all the pieces with red on them, was becoming fully engrossed in the activity, and had nearly forgotten they’d been waiting at all when three middling knocks fell upon the front door.

Ida cleared her throat, feeling a stab of anxiety. “Just a minute.”

The man in the powder-blue polo shirt stood on the porch, still holding his yellow stick. Orange paint adhered to his pointer finger around the nail, but he managed to cram the can into his back pocket to free up a hand.

“You’ve got this,” Jean whispered. “I’ll be just in the den. We don’t want to overwhelm him first thing.”

Ida nodded. “Come in, come in,” she said, sweeping to the door as sweet as strawberry ice cream.

As Jean crossed the room, she saw the man hesitate on the porch.

“It’s a hot one,” Ida added, now standing at the threshold. “Let me get you some water.” Jean watched from behind the den’s French doors as Ida turned and walked into the kitchen, leaving the front door swung open wide. And there he was, the man.

“That’s kind of you,” he said, stepping inside and wiping his boots on the mat. He pointed to his name tag, adding, “I’m Ellis. Here with PSE&G.”

“Shut that if you don’t mind,” said Ida, her back turned. She was just a trusting, elderly lady, concerned for the well-being of a laborer, bound by the social mores of another generation—so they wanted him to believe.

He caught sight of the box of donuts, which Ida had flipped open. “Sure thing,” he said, eyes on a glazed one.

Ida, glass of ice water in hand, faced the man and found him staring. “Take one,” she said. “Please! Spare me from myself.”

Not a single donut of the dozen had been taken from the box, but Ellis helped himself to the one in the corner. “Thank you,” he said, receiving the water. “Even with the morning chill, it does get hot out there in the sun. Most people don’t realize.”

Ida took the opening. “Oh, well, Eddie was a worker, back when he was young. Roofing mostly, but a bit of plumbing too. So I know about that.”

She let her focus drift left for a moment, as if remembering.

“Is Eddie your husband?” he asked.

“Late husband,” she said with a lilt.

“I’m sorry.” Ellis stared at his donut as if he wanted nothing more than to take a big bite but felt doing so now might be inappropriate.

“Come in,” Ida said again, gesturing to the sofa. “Sit. I’ve got a photo of him here, let me show you.”

His head tilted toward the door, lips parting to gracefully decline, but Ida added, “Indulge an old woman, would ya?”

With an awkward smile, Ellis circled the love seat and sat on the sofa’s corner. Ida lifted the scented candle and the doily, cracking open the scrapbook to the very first page and pointing to a photo of Eddie in a structured peacoat.

“A roofer and a plumber,” said Ellis, munching two bites of donut in quick succession. “You know, I’ve done a bit of plumbing. Didn’t get much past the apprenticeship, though. Toilets weren’t my calling.” He chuckled.

Ida didn’t. “Only until the war,” she said, seeming to muster up a lifetime of pain for the performance of the phrase.

Ellis paused mid-chew. “The war?”

“Mmm.” Ida let her fingernail graze the plastic sheet over the photo. “While the hippie-dippies were protesting, my Eddie was fighting for this country in the jungle.” Ida must have judged Ellis, a blue-collar worker in Long Island, to be a patriot in his own mind, and took a calculated risk.

It was working. Ellis’s enraptured expression told Jean he’d grown up on *Apocalypse Now* and the Rambo franchise. “Vietnam?”

“The very same.” A somber silence passed between them.

“Jean!” Ida called across the house. “Jean’s husband died in the war too.” She tapped his knee three times. “We lost so many of our boys over there. Jean!”

On cue, Jean entered the living room from the den.

“We have company!” Ida said. “I was just telling this young man about Eddie and Richard. Eddie mostly, but I thought you could fill in the blanks.”

“Oh, yes,” Jean said, placing a hand on the cabinet and letting her expression fall. “He was a POW,” she said. “Didn’t make it home.”

“That’s terrible,” said Ellis, then drained the glass of water in four deep

pulls. “I’m so sorry, and thank you for the water. And the donut. See the reason I’m here is I’ll need access to your yard. The electrical line is failing, so we need to replace it. Should only take a few days. We’ll be as quiet as we can, but just wanted to let the homeowners—”

“It was horrendous in the POW camps,” Jean continued. “Starvation. Torture. Random killings.” Thrown by the dark shift in tone, Ellis was silent a moment, long enough for Jean to feel encouraged to go on. “Of course, I’ll never know for sure what my Richard went through. There’s no way to know, is there? Most times, the officers don’t give you any details, just show up one day and tell you he’s gone.”

“I—” Ellis started. “That’s terrible—”

“Unless,” Jean said. “They do. In which case, it can be much worse. Ida, tell this young man what happened to your Eddie. Can I get you some coffee?”

“No, thanks,” said Ellis.

“Oh,” Ida said darkly. “That’s a terrible story. No, I’m sure our guest doesn’t want to hear that.”

“I actually…” Ellis started. “I really should be getting back to—”

“He won’t believe it,” Jean continued, ignoring the protest. “You won’t believe it,” she said, turning to Ellis.

“He was torn apart, you see,” Ida said. “By jungle cats.”

“What?” the man asked.

Jean shot Ida a look. She was going off script.

“Most people don’t know this,” Ida continued, “but it wasn’t entirely uncommon. Our troops were out in those jungles for weeks at a time, often in small numbers. All kinds of predators lurking in those trees. Leopards. Tigers. Not just enemy soldiers.”

The man went wide-eyed, seemingly playing out the scenario in his mind—strong jaws around a soft neck. “I had no idea,” he said.

“I was shocked too…” said Jean with a twisted grin, both impressed by Ida’s creativity and nervous about the boldness of her swing. “The first time I heard, that is.”

Ellis swallowed the last piece of his donut, sucking a bit of glaze off his thumb. “So as I was saying, I’m just gonna spray some paint in your yard. That’ll show us where the lines are located. Digging should take about a day. The backhoe can be noisy. We won’t be insulted if you want to get

away for the afternoon."

"This afternoon?" Jean asked.

"Yup."

This was moving too fast. The distraction wasn't distracting Ellis as much as she'd intended, but Jean needed to keep calm. Keep trying. "No trouble at all," she said. "Just steer clear of the garden. It's our pride and joy these days, ever since the kids went off to college."

"Hmm." The tanned skin on Ellis's brow furrowed. "Tell you what: We gotta dig wherever the lines are, but let me get out there and check. I'll pop back in and let you know if we can avoid your garden. Sound good?"

"Sounds good," Jean said.

The women didn't interfere when Ellis stood up, crossed the room, set his empty glass on the countertop, and walked out the front door, though Jean's gaze did drift to the umbrella stand, where her gun was stashed.

When the back door shut behind him, Ida asked, "What now?"

"Now we wait."



Jean peered through the panes in the back door, while Ida took the window in the main bedroom. Ellis started at the limit of their property, following his yellow stick and spraying orange paint behind him.

"He's coming up on the roses," Ida called across the house.

"I see it," Jean called back.

When the tip of the man's stick reached the Osiria rosebush, he paused, scratching the back of his neck. Orange paint led straight to the patch where Eddie and Richard were buried, a final indication that Lady Luck had decided not to visit their home on Peachtree that day.

Ellis put down his can of paint and the yellow stick and was preparing to come back around to the front door when Jean threw open the back one. "How's it looking?" Jean asked, raising her voice to reach the man.

Ida scurried from the bedroom, quick on Jean's heels.

"Oh," he said, looking a little upset about disappointing the kindly widows. "Not too bad, looks like it'll be just this bush here. Sorry about

that. They are beautiful roses."

"Osirias," Jean said. "They bloomed early this year. See, we tried something new. Banana peels in the soil. I thought it was foolishness, but it turned out it worked. Look at them! Have you ever seen a blossom so beautiful?"

"They're nice," he said. "Sorry to have to, uh… Maybe you can replant them after. Put them in water for a couple of days?"

"Oh no," Jean said. "No, no. That won't do at all. These roses are old. Ten years or more, isn't that right, Ida?"

"That's right."

"The roots are deep and…" Jean tossed up her hands, indicating her own frame. "Well, that's more manual labor than Ida or I can manage."

"Sorry, ladies," Ellis said. "Best case, that edge of the bush gets spared by the backhoe, but I'm afraid most of it is gonna have to go."

"No, you can't." Ida shifted her weight, rubbed her fingers against her thumbs. "Aren't you listening?" Jean shot Ida a look that said *Calm down*. "There must be a way we can settle this," Ida said, changing her tone. "That bush over there, it's worth a lot to me. Maybe worth about a thousand dollars to you too, if you catch my meaning."

Ellis looked from one woman to the other. "Ma'am," he said to Ida, "are you trying to bribe me?"

"Oh!" Jean jumped in and shook her head. "Of course not. Of course not! It's just a valuable rosebush, and a thousand dollars, what's that, a week's worth of pay for you?"

Ellis frowned, looking insulted. "I'm here to do my job. That's all. I don't need your money, and frankly, I don't need your permission. Okay?"

Ida's lips curled into something like a snarl.

Jean said, "You wouldn't destroy an old lady's garden. I'm sure your mother taught you better than that."

Ida estimated that Ellis's patience was wearing thin. He stooped down and grabbed the paint and his yellow stick. "I'm sorry, ladies," he said again, then sprayed a strip of orange onto the Osiria roses.

"You twit," Ida said, squeezing her palms into fists.

"I'll call the board," Jean said, moving toward the back door. "They'll straighten you right out, Ellis… Ellis…"

"Gable."

“They’re going to give you a piece of their mind, Ellis Gable.” Jean hurried through the yard and into the house, but Ida never faltered, never took her gaze off the man painting those beautiful petals, ruining their white and crimson with ugly neon splashes.

“Maybe you should head inside,” he said without looking at her.

Rage emboldened Ida. All her life men had tried to control her. Her father had wielded his silence and absence like an ice pick, chipping away at Ida’s youthful exuberance by withdrawing his love when her behavior didn’t suit him. She had thought she’d found the opposite sort of man in Eddie—a man full of color and passion—but she’d quickly learned that the same fiery gift of gab that Eddie used to charm her in the early days burned to a blister when pointed against her, just another tool in the hands of another man to command her this way and that. Eddie and Richard had learned the hard way that Ida and Jean were not to be pushed around.

“Go on,” Ellis said. “Go have some of those donuts with your friend.”

Even after the men were gone, Ida’d had to keep her love, the truth of who she was tucked away behind locked doors and drawn curtains. The secret of the murders had interwoven itself with the secret of her love story. To admit the latter would implicate her and Jean in the former, and though Jean sometimes voiced that she felt differently, Ida was sure that the moment their relationship was made public, the life they’d built would come crashing down around them. And still, after years of hiding, pretending Jean was just a friend outside the privacy of their home, here was another man with another tool, ready to dig and crack the foundation of the happy ending she’d hard won. All the heartbreak and disappointment of her lonely girlhood, the fear and resentment of her abusive marriage, and the frustration and exhaustion of publicly living a lie culminated on this Tuesday morning, with this man in her yard. And for a split second, Ida was too angry to be afraid. “She’s not my friend,” she said.

“Your sister, then.”

A shovel rested against the birdbath, just six feet from the Osiria roses. It was already rusted, the wood worn to splintering. Jean and Ida had used it to pick up a dead sparrow that had fallen atop the dahlias and hadn’t bothered to put it away. “Not my sister either,” Ida said. She turned from Ellis and moved away, but only far enough to grip the shovel’s handle. When she grasped it with both hands, Ellis looked up.

“Hey, get back inside,” he said, equal measures of nerves and mockery in his tone.

Ida tightened her grip, stepped forward.

“Get back inside, you crazy old bitch.”

It was the same name Becky Heinz had once called her, thinking she was safe in her spot across that sticky table at Shorty’s Pub. Ellis must’ve thought Ida was harmless, just an excitable woman too attached to her roses. But Becky was wrong then, and Ellis was wrong now. In a single, fluid motion, Ida swung. The spade connected with Ellis’s head, ringing out a ding like a church bell. He staggered back, touched the white meat exposed at his temple before blood rushed to fill the chasm.

“Oh,” he said, over a breathy laugh. “You’ve done it now.” Ellis threw down his can of orange paint and his long yellow stick. His elbows came up and his shoulders squared. Ida knew the look of a man ready to strike, a glaze over his eyes both wild and absent. She braced for the impact, heartbeat slowing. Each second stretched an eternity as she waited for the blow to fall. Ida didn’t realize she’d squeezed her eyes shut until they snapped back open—as the bellow of a single shot pinged through the morning.

Ellis dropped, his body hitting the ground with a wet thud.

Ida spun. Behind her, the back door was open. Jean stood in front of it, pistol shaking in her hand, her right eye closed and the sight leveled.

“Shit,” Ida said.

Jean’s arm and the pistol dropped to her side. “Shit.”

The pair crossed the yard and peered down at the fallen worker.

“Ellis?” Ida whispered, to no effect. She crouched, nudging his head with her hand so it rolled. The left side of his face was stained red from the head wound, but more concerning was the small hole in his chest, where darker blood seeped out and stained the blue polo burgundy. Ida placed the back of her palm in front of his nose and mouth. There was nothing. No breath. “I think he’s gone.”

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CHAPTER SEVEN

"We can't bury him," said Jean, glancing at motionless Ellis and then to the Osiria rosebush.

Another truck pulled onto Peachtree Way. Though Ida and Jean couldn't see it from the yard, they heard its diesel engine, the hiss of air from the brakes, and Jean estimated it was even larger than the first.

"That's probably the one with the backhoe," Ida said. "They're getting ready to dig."

"We have to move him," said Jean, stooping down beside the body. "If you just lift a bit…" Her voice grew gruff from the effort of lifting Ellis's arms. "We should be able to move him."

Ida lifted the ankles. Jean lurched backward, but when a seam of pain stretched down her lower back, she released her grip and the body dropped. Ellis's wristwatch came down on her toe, and she winced, throwing her head to the side and causing a hot flare to rip through the nerves in her neck. It hadn't been this difficult in '57, she thought. When she'd dragged Richard and Eddie into the yard, she'd already dug the grave-deep hole. Her hands had blistered, sure, and it had been hard work, but her muscles felt thready forty-two years on, her bones more brittle. At age seventy, in her current state of health, Jean's whole body threatened to break under the prospect of carrying just half of Ellis's weight. "Let's try again," she said, reaching for the man's right arm and motioning for Ida to take the left.

If they couldn't lift him, they would drag him.

"On three," she said. "One"—deep breath in—"two"—deep breath out—"three." With Jean taking the right arm and Ida the left, the women walked backward, dragging Ellis's body across the lawn and stopping with just enough space to open the back door.

Once they got him through the hallway and into the living room, Jean drew the curtains. "How long do we have?" Ida asked. "Do you think anyone heard the shot?"

Jean re-created the sound in her mind, the firecracker snap that had sent birds from the trees and Ellis to the ground. “Yes,” she said. “But it’s a small caliber. Could be mistaken for lightning or a firework—”

“In March?” Ida asked.

“Or an engine backfiring,” said Jean, thinking that option most plausible. “But the other workers will know he’s missing right away.” Ida scratched the back of her neck, and from the way she stared at the pale face of the man on the floor, Jean knew they had to get moving before the shock wore off. “Cover him up,” she said, tossing Ida a throw blanket from the back of the love seat.

“We can’t leave him here,” said Ida.

“We have to.”

Ida’s fists shook around the blanket. “We can’t just…”

“We don’t have a choice,” said Jean.

Ida threw the blanket’s end into the air, shaking it as if she were going to smooth it onto the foot of a bed, not drape it over a body. “Get the bag,” she said grimly as a tasseled corner covered Ellis’s face. “And we’ll need a suitcase.”

Jean opened the china cabinet’s lowest drawer, retrieving the thousand dollars from there and throwing it onto the couch. “We need the ladder,” she said.

“Get the suitcase!”

“I can’t get into the attic without the ladder.”

“It’s in the shed,” said Ida.

Jean blew through the hallway and the back door. On her way to the shed, she threw Ellis’s spray paint and yellow stick into the compost bin. The shovel she tucked under her arm. Jean returned with the ladder, which she braced against the wall while she set the pistol and shovel down beside the front door. “Put everything here. Everything that needs to go.”

Ida had located their suitcase, the one they’d bought for the trip to Niagara Falls and hadn’t used since. In the bedroom, the dresser drawers were all pulled open, and she tossed articles of clothing from her side and Jean’s into the open suitcase.

Frankie emerged from under the bed, meowing in confusion over the ruckus. “Where’s the carrier?” Ida called across the house.

“The what?” Jean called back.

“The carrier! For Frankie!”

Jean sidestepped awkwardly with her arm hooked under a ladder rung, aligning it with the access point to the attic. “Jesus, Ida, we can’t take the cat.”

“Jean!” Ida came through the house like a gale.

Jean set the ladder down, bracing the legs. She took one brief moment of pause to look Ida squarely in the eye. “We’re going on the run. We cannot take a cat. People do not take cats on the run.”

Ida steeled her gaze. “Where is the carrier, Jean?”

With a deep sigh, Jean said, “Linen closet, top shelf.”

Frankie’s meows turned to yowls the moment his carrier zipped closed. “It’ll be all right,” Ida said. “You’re all right, my little prince.” She tucked half a dozen cans of cat food into the mesh pocket on the carrier, then covered it with a towel.

Jean peeked through the curtain at the bay window, the one overlooking the street. She counted four men, all in powder-blue polo shirts. Two leaned against their truck while the other two seemed to be looking for Ellis, weaving in and out of yards down Peachtree Way. “I’ll load up the trunk. The hedges should cover us, for the most part.”

Ida nodded, her gaze fixed on the unmoving body sprawled out beside the coffee table. “And him? We really just leave him there?”

“Make sure he’s totally covered. Turn down the AC. Low as it will go.” Jean grabbed the car keys, then the gun and shovel. It took four trips to haul the gun, the shovel, the suitcase, and the other bags of necessities she’d grabbed to the car, and once she had, the trunk was so full, she used every bit of strength she had left to shut it.

Jean met Ida in the living room, beside the body, now draped with two blankets, teal and yellow, and paused for a moment under the blowing AC vent.

“Where will we go?” Ida asked, slinging her purse over her shoulder.

Jean wiped at the sweat beading on her forehead. “Let’s just get as far as we can.”

As Frankie continued to yowl, Ida’s eyes passed over the home they had shared together, all those long, many years. “You get your pills?”

“Yeah,” said Jean, lowering her eyelids as the rush of air cooled her.

“All of them? Even the vitamins?”

The smallest smile curled the corner of Jean's lips, as she knew this was one of the many ways Ida said *I love you*. "Even the vitamins," Jean said.

Ida stepped over the corpse in her living room. "Okay," Jean said, planting a reassuring kiss on Ida's lips, "let's go." From her purse she fished out a pair of oversized sunglasses. They fit snugly over the bridge of her nose, and the shape of them made Ida look like an older Audrey Hepburn.

Jean grasped Frankie's carrier by the handle, did one last sweep around the house to ensure that everything was locked, then followed Ida outside. Their cream-colored Pontiac sat in the driveway, trunk heavy with forty years of life together—or at least the pieces they could carry.



Jean drove and Ida sat low in the passenger seat. Frankie mewled from his carrier, tucked in the floor space between the front and back seats on the driver's side. They rolled past the trucks on Peachtree, half expecting to hear sirens and for a barrage of police vehicles to box them in. Jean tried to recall if she had been this nervous tailgating Ida to Lake Ronkonkoma to sink Eddie's car, but the memories of that night had taken on a grain like old film reels, and seemed just as distant and drained of color.

"How far to Canada?" Ida asked as they rounded the corner at Apple Blossom.

"I don't know," Jean whispered. "It wasn't far from Niagara Falls."

"So how far to get there?"

"I'm not sure. Five hours? Six? With the traffic now…" Jean gripped the wheel as a black Dodge Charger slipped through the intersection. "We need a map."

"It's north."

"I know it's north," said Jean.

"So drive north."

"I will drive north but I need to know the roads—"

"We'll get a map closer. Let's just get the hell out of here."

Jean nodded. As she left the neighborhood, she couldn't help but think about Ellis Gable. He must've been about George's age, and part of her

hoped his mother had already passed on, that she wouldn't have to receive *that* call from the police. Though she hadn't noticed a wedding ring, she hoped there wasn't a Mrs. Gable somewhere waiting for him, Gable children who wouldn't be picked up after school. She hoped he was alone in this world, terrible as that was. That he was miserable, dangerous, like Richard and Eddie had been. Jean wished with all of herself that by pulling that trigger, she'd spared somebody, somewhere, something really awful at some future moment in time.

Then she glanced over at Ida. Ida with her wily red curls, her oversized sunglasses, and that nervous habit of palming one hand with the other. Within the grainy film reel of that night in '57 was a Technicolor frame: her Ida, her girl, with a right eye swollen shut and eggplant purple.

Ida reached across the console to rest a hand on Jean's leg, and Jean realized that she *had* saved somebody from something really awful. She'd saved Ida from being hit by Ellis. And beyond that, she'd kept the promise she'd made so many years ago. "Never again," she said.

Ida, drawing back her hand, said, "My hero," and looked out the window. For all the woman's coarse edges, Ida had a tender way of knowing when Jean needed gentle words. She turned her head as if to spare Jean the indecency of having a witness to her relief.

The women drove past Belle Harbor, then over the bridge on Flatbush Avenue. They hit some traffic on Belt Parkway, but it cleared up when they got into Brooklyn. Frankie settled after making a few hacking noises and fell asleep curled into a tight ball. When they saw the sign for Dyker Beach Park, Ida said, "Dyker, huh? I guess they knew we were coming," and Jean laughed for the first time in what felt like a long time. It was a silly pun, but the levity mixed with this tiny glint of acceptance in Ida energized Jean and kept her driving forward.

Less than an hour into their getaway, and before Belt Parkway turned into Interstate 278, Jean pulled off the highway. She stopped at pump number seven of the Gas-n-Go and popped open the fuel door.

"We've got half a tank," Ida said.

"Better to gas up while we're here. Most likely nobody's looking for us yet and we need a map anyhow."

Ida nodded, cueing Jean to kill the engine and head inside. As she rounded the car, Ida wound down the window and said, "A lemonade.

Please.”

A man in a suit and in a hurry held the mini-mart door for Jean with his fingertips, and she slipped inside, Ida’s view of her obscured by advertisements slapped on the door. There was a special on hot dogs, a flyer boasting about a lady who bought the winning lotto numbers at the location a few towns over, and some new, lower-calorie beer. The dampness of morning still clung to the air, but it was cut through with acrid gas fumes and smog blowing in from the freeway.

Ida peeked around the driver’s-side seat and spotted through the mesh of the cat carrier that Frankie had thrown up. “Dammit,” she said to herself. She opened the glove box looking for napkins, but it was empty save the owner’s manual that had been there since Jean purchased the vehicle in ’73. Ida wound the window back up, irritated by the effort, and snatched the keys from where Jean had left them in the console. Then she crossed the narrow lane from the pump to the store.

Jean was next in line when she got inside and eyed her with worry.

“Napkins,” Ida said. “Frankie threw up.”

“There should’ve been some by the pump,” said Jean.

“Should be some in here,” Ida countered.

Jean sighed, pointing toward the hot food case where hot dogs rolled on metal bars. Ida found a napkin dispenser beneath the trays of mustard and relish and yanked away a generous stack.

“Twenty dollars on seven,” Jean said, “and this.” She pulled a map of the eastern United States from a rack on the wall.

“$24.37,” said the clerk, a boy fresh out of high school judging from his lingering acne and greasy forehead. He didn’t look away from the small television set he had hidden behind the counter, except to pop open the register, then shut it again. Ida thought Jean could’ve had a gun pointed right at him and the boy wouldn’t have noticed. That was the thing about a woman getting older. The skin got thinner, and the vision less sharp, but with aging also came a certain kind of invisibility. Men didn’t leer at her anymore. They hardly noticed her at all.

Ida caught up to Jean and the two walked out together, both pairs of eyes flicking up toward the camera angled at the door as they moved through it. People might not notice them much. That was good. But cameras would remember them, and they had to be careful.

When they got to the car, Ida said, “We should get disguises.”

Jean unscrewed the gas cap, settled the nozzle into the tank. “Take a look at this, would you?” she asked, handing the map over to Ida.

Ida sucked her teeth but sat down in the passenger seat and unfolded the map across her lap. She traced a line from their spot to the Canadian border, then retrieved a golf pencil from her purse and marked it. They needed to take 278 through Staten Island, over the bridge into Jersey, 95 to 280 to 80 cutting northwest through Pennsylvania, 380 to 81 until they were back in New York, then west on 90 through Buffalo. From there, Toronto was close. It would take seven hours, Ida guessed, maybe eight, depending on traffic.

The gas pump clicked with $8.65 still on the meter. Jean returned the handle to its resting place and said, “I’ll get the change.”

“Leave it,” Ida said through the closed windows and doors, but Jean was already shuffling back into the store.

“Shit,” said Ida, remembering the mess in the carrier. She got out and scooted into the back seat, wad of napkins in hand. Through the carrier’s mesh, Frankie looked nauseated, opening his eyes just a crack to observe her as she unzipped the canvas. Ida captured the wad of vomit in a single swipe, closing Frankie back in before the cat even considered making a break from his confines. Ida tossed the soiled napkins in the garbage can between the gas pumps, returning to her seat just as Jean emerged from the store with their change.

“Hope it’ll be worth it,” Ida said as the women fastened their seat belts.

“What?”

“Us going to prison over $8.65.”

Jean pulled a whistling breath through her nostrils, turned the key in the ignition, and the engine roared back to life. “Where are we headed?” asked Jean.

Ida looked again at the map. “Take 278,” she said.

On the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge, Ida felt a nagging need to fill the heavy silence. “This is the longest one in the world, isn’t it?” She recalled that she had read about the bridge when it opened.

“It was, I think,” Jean said, seemingly focused on maintaining a safe distance between the nose of the Pontiac and the bumper of the Sprinter van

in front of them. “Probably not anymore.”

“Bigger than the Golden Gate, I remember that much.” Ida was terrified of driving on bridges, but she found it fascinating how they managed to stay up, even with the weight of all those cars. Beneath the lanes of traffic, speedboats and cargo vessels cut white lines of chop through the bay. “You think it’s really orange like that? Wish I could’ve seen it,” Ida said. “The pictures are nice, anyway.”

“Me too,” said Jean, picking at the steering wheel with her fingernail. “Me too.”

“You never cared much for California.”

“That’s not true.”

“Why’d we never go, then?” Ida asked.

Jean eased off the gas as brake lights illuminated ahead and the traffic slowed. “We tried. We saved up, but there was always something.”

“Laura’s braces,” Ida said with a scowl.

“George’s travel baseball,” said Jean.

“Barbara’s cosmetology school.”

“And she dropped out!”

“That she did,” Ida said, rolling her eyes. “And Charlie and his troubles.”

“Mm-hmm,” said Jean. “We tried.”

Ida caught a shiver, ran her palms over the goosed flesh of her shoulders, then slanted the AC vents away.

Jean sat up straighter, the way she did when she had a plan. “We should go,” she said.

“Go where?”

“California. Haight-Ashbury, like you always wanted.”

“Oh.” Ida drew out the word, swatting the notion away. “Too late for that.”

“No,” Jean protested. “No, it’s not. We should go, Ida. Now. What else do we have to worry about? What’s holding us back?”

Ida scoffed. “I’d say we’ve got quite a bit to worry about, wouldn’t you?”

“I just mean, we have to go somewhere. Why not go where you—where *we’ve* always wanted to go.”

Ida smoothed the map across her lap, unfolding the edges to their limit.

“We’d need another map,” she reasoned, still not believing it was a real possibility. “This one stops at Indiana. And what would we do when we got there? We don’t have enough money to buy a place, and say we did. Then they’d come looking for us. Nah,” she decided. “Best we get to Canada. I don’t think they’ll…” Ida trailed off, searching for the word.

“Extradite.”

“They won’t extradite us from there.”

Frankie let out a mewl from his carrier, this one soft, resigned.

“You’re gonna like it there, little prince,” Ida said to the cat. “Wide-open spaces to hunt mice. At least, I think it has wide-open spaces.” She looked to Jean.

“Don’t look at me,” Jean said. “I’ve never been to Canada.”

“Me either.”

“I know.”

“I’ve never been out of the country,” Ida said. She sat up straighter. “Neither have you.”

“Yes, I know.”

“So!” Ida’s chin jutted forward, punctuating her unspoken point.

“So what?”

“We don’t have passports, Jean! You need a passport to leave the country, don’t you?”

Jean sank. “Shit, yes. But not for Canada. I don’t think?”

Ida shook her head, tossing her palms in the air.

“I think Canada is fine,” Jean said. “Just the other countries need passports.”

“You think Canada is fine. You think Canada is fine, just *all the other countries* need passports?”

“Well, dammit, Ida. I told you, I don’t know!”

“And what do you suggest? We call them? Find a pay phone and ring the border and say, *’Scuse me, border patrol, just hypothetically, if two women were on the run for* murder, *do they need passports to come on in to your country?*”

“Goddammit,” Jean said. “Let’s just get to Niagara Falls. Plenty of tourists there we can ask.”

“Even if we don’t need passports, they’re going to want some kind of ID. Say the police are already looking for us. We might as well drive

straight to the station.”

“They’re not looking for us,” said Jean.

“And seven hours from now?”

“They’re not looking for us.”

“We need to know,” Ida said. “We need to know for sure.”

Jean ran her tongue over her front teeth, conceding it was true. “You’re right.”

“Of course I am.”

“Let’s get into Jersey. Look for a place to buy one of those scanner things.”

“And disguises.”

Jean sighed. She drew out the words. “And disguises.”

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CHAPTER EIGHT

They got all the way to Hackettstown, New Jersey, before they spotted a Wal-mart from the interstate. In a low-traffic parking lot, the odd person carried loaded bags to their car, swerving around puddles on their way. Nobody paid attention to the elderly women as they stepped out of the Pontiac.

As Ida placed Frankie's carrier in a shopping cart outside the front of the store, she said, "We need to look different." Jean was usually the planner in the relationship, but Ida had locked onto the disguise idea as a way she could help, and she wasn't letting it go anytime soon.

Jean slung the straps of her purse over her forearm. "Different how?"

Frankie hissed as Ida pushed the cart over a dip in the asphalt. She had a clear vision of the three of them moving freely in the open, looking nothing like their former selves. The public and, more importantly, the police would be none the wiser. "Not like our usual selves."

"I gathered that," said Jean. "But I don't think we're going to find anything at Walmart that will make us look like anything other than a couple of old—"

"We'll dye our hair, for starters."

"I'm not dyeing my hair. Only Heather touches my hair."

"We can get you some men's clothes. Baggy, maybe a pair of work boots."

"I'm not dressing like a man," said Jean.

"If you had a hat, I think you could—"

"I'm not dressing like a man!"

"Jean," Ida said crisply, "this isn't the time for vanity."

"Why don't *you* dress like a man."

"Don't be preposterous." Ida tossed back her thin red curls, pushed her sunglasses up the bridge of her nose. "I could never be mistaken for a man."

"Hah!" Jean croaked. "Of course not, dear."

Ida sneered, fast-walking two steps to get ahead of Jean. Storm clouds pushed together overhead, veiling the sky, and a tinsel of rain sprinkled over the women's shoulders. Frankie whined as water droplets seeped through the mesh, and Ida broke into a plodding jog.

"Careful of the lines!" Jean said, keeping pace while avoiding the slick yellow strips in the road. "They get slippery."

Automatic doors heralded their entrance. A blue-vested security guard with fuchsia hair noticed the yowling cat in Ida's cart. She turned her nose up at the feline, but said nothing, and the women pushed right on past her, Jean looking to the labeled aisles for the one marked *Electronics*. A choice crowd frequented the big-box store at ten a.m. on a Tuesday: worn-out mothers with newborns in tow, retirees bearing coupons trying to beat the lunch-hour rush, and unemployed former prom kings and queens with far fewer teeth than they had in their high school heydays.

"There," Jean said, indicating the back left corner. "I'll do a lap for the other stuff. Meet you at the checkout in ten?" From the way she focused on the clothing, Jean knew Ida's attention had wandered deep into the disguise mission. But while Jean figured the costuming was Ida's way of coping with the shock, she couldn't have her partner get too lost in the on-the-run fantasy. They had an on-the-run reality to deal with. "Make it five."

"Five to ten," Ida said, already wheeling Frankie away.

Ida watched from the corner of her eye as Jean beelined to the back of the store. When she disappeared behind a tower of DVDs, Ida resumed her task, cruising through the men's section and whisking items into her cart, never fully breaking her stride. A brown coat, size XL, two button-down flannels, also XL, and a pair of thick-rimmed readers found their way into the cart beside Frankie. As the clothes piled up, Frankie crouched farther down. Fur rose along his spine, and his ears perked forward. Some combination of the stress of the carrier, the nausea from the car, and the items to hide behind made Frankie remember his feral roots.

He seemed wild and ready to pounce on any moving thing in striking distance, a housecat with the soul of a lion, but his delusion of grandeur cracked when Ida tossed three boxes of hair dye from the beauty aisle into the cart without looking, and one of them smacked the top of the carrier.

"Oops," Ida said when Frankie spun a tight circle. "Sorry."

By the time Ida had collected the last of her purchases, she found Jean

tapping her foot between the registers and aisle six. “I suppose we should use cash,” she said.

Ida grunted an acknowledgment, averting her gaze as Jean looked down her nose at the heap of accessories Ida had collected.

“All set?” asked the bouncy cashier. She was a young thing, blond, with butterfly clips in her hair and square stains on her teeth where braces had been recently removed.

Jean pushed forward and began loading the belt with the contents of the cart, the lines of her face deepening as she identified the men’s clothing. “I told you, I won’t,” she said under her breath.

Ida pretended not to hear.

The cashier paused while ringing up the police scanner. “That’s a fun hobby,” she said.

“Too much *Murder, She Wrote*,” said Ida, a tip of her head indicating Jean. This much was true. Jean loved all things mystery, both fiction and true crime, and Ida had poked fun at her over the years, calling her an armchair Nancy Drew.

“My grandma loves that show,” said the girl.

Ida winced, feeling older than she had before the girl’s association.

“Your grandma has good taste,” said Jean.

“Shopping for your husbands?” the girl asked, bagging the clothing.

Jean stiffened, but Ida didn’t miss a beat. “Oh yes,” she said, slyly. “They’re certainly to blame for all this.”

The cashier forced a laugh. Jean held hers back.

“That’ll be $67.58,” she said. “Cash or card?”

“Cash,” said Jean, fishing her wallet from her purse. She withdrew three twenties, then cocked her chin toward Ida.

“Oh,” the other woman said, recognizing the request for money. Ida found a ten-dollar bill, passing it to Jean rather than the cashier.

Total paid and change rendered, Ida and Jean headed toward the exit. It was only then that the young cashier spotted Frankie. “Oh my gosh!” she said excitedly. “Is that a—”

But the rest of her question was blocked by a whoosh of air as Ida and Jean cleared the automatic doors, escaping the young cashier and the fluorescent lights of the New Jersey big-box store.

“Hope those clothes are your size,” Jean said as they moved through the

rainy parking lot. “I already told you, I’m not dressing like a man.”



The storm made for slow driving. Cars whipped by Ida and Jean’s Pontiac, a semi moving past with such speed and force that it rattled their windows. Ida figured out how to work the police scanner in Scranton, Pennsylvania, a drive that should’ve taken a little over an hour from Hackettstown, but took two with the traffic. Between garbled sentence fragments and numbered codes, the women heard something about a motor vehicle accident.

“I don’t see any accidents,” Ida said. “How do we know we’ve got the right area?”

“It’s just a radio,” said Jean, the wipers creaking as they ushered rivers of water off the windshield. “So it picks up stuff nearby. Just keep listening.”

A disabled vehicle flashed hazards on the left-hand shoulder, and though the women didn’t see any damage, all the passing cars slowed to look.

“Could be anywhere around here,” Jean said. “Doesn’t mean we’ll see it. Important thing is, it’s working.”

Ida set the scanner into the cup holder, doing her best to ignore the frequent beeps and staticky one-to-two-word back-and-forths. “I don’t know what use it’ll be. They’re talking in code.”

“If we hear our names,” said Jean, “we’ll know to worry.”

The highway arched up into an overpass, concrete barricades cupping three lanes of road. A pickup truck collected water in its open bed, and when it hit the gas, buckets streamed out through cracks between the panels. “What will we tell the kids?” Ida asked. “We will have to tell them something.”

“We’ll figure it out when we settle somewhere,” said Jean. She was hunched over the steering wheel, squinting to see through the sheets of rain. Ida felt a twitch of resentment over Jean refusing, yet again, to wear her glasses, but now was not the time or place.

“Not like they visited much anyway,” said Ida. A passing van sprayed a puddle of water over the passenger-side window, and for a moment, it

looked to Ida as if the car were fully submerged. “I was looking forward to Christmas,” she said.

The Pontiac crawled up, and up, and up, reaching the height of the overpass. The city of Scranton sprawled out beneath them, boxy in beige and gray. “Do you remember what it was like,” Jean asked, hoping to distract Ida from her fear of driving at a height, “when we had to come home to visit our parents? When they were older, I mean.”

Ida chuckled. “I hated it. The smell of the house, stale, musty. I never noticed it growing up, but coming back it was all I could think about. Gave me headaches.”

“My mom’s place felt smaller,” Jean said. “Lonely.”

“My mother’s house smelled like her rat terrier,” Ida replied. “Poor thing didn’t have enough of God’s good grace to die. Had about everything wrong with it.”

Jean shifted back in her seat. “Guess the kids feel the same way about visiting us. Something they have to do, not something they want. They’ll be relieved about Christmas, most likely.”

“Yeah,” Ida said, feeling all the bittersweet truth of it.

Jean eased on the brakes as the overpass curved into its downhill slope.

“You think I’ll see Charlie?” Ida asked, and as she did, her heart lurched in her chest. It wasn’t a question about Christmas. It was a question about ever.

“I hope so.” Jean gave Ida’s kneecap a squeeze. “I really do hope so.”

“They go off,” Ida said, “we raise them up, give them everything and they take it and make their own lives. That’s the way of things.” Rivulets traveled down the windshield, too quick for the wipers to catch them. “They dry us up.”

“You’re not dried up.” Jean flashed Ida a quick smile. “We’ve got some living in us yet.” As she refocused on the road, Jean’s face turned to stone. She seemed to be thinking of something, but Ida assumed it was the circumstances: leaving their home behind, fear of getting caught, driving through this damn storm with her vision shot half to hell.

Without mentioning Ellis or the .22-caliber pistol, Ida said, “I’m sorry you had to do that. To that man.” The talk of living made her think about what she knew of dying, and she remembered the last night with Eddie and Richard, and the anxious nights that followed. Jean would toss and turn,

take two a.m. showers. She'd be restless, making trips to the kitchen for water when a full glass sat on her nightstand. Both women had gone sleepless the better part of a year after the deaths of their husbands. Ida couldn't sleep without Jean beside her, and Jean couldn't sleep at all. They had joked about it, like the ordeal with the *bastards* was tantamount to having a newborn, a child they shared, one they had birthed together. But neither ever laughed at the jokes. They were something spoken to fill the air, something to offer to the too-still room in the darkest stretch of night. And now it was happening all over again.

"I didn't have a choice," Jean said, strong at first. Then, more weakly, "I had no choice, right?"

"He had the look," said Ida. Her fingers curled into her palms as she thought about the faraway gaze Eddie would get just before he struck her. She buried her hands in her lap. It only happened the one time in front of Jean, but back when Ida had thought they were nothing more than very close friends, Jean had been the one to press frozen peas to Ida's split lips and bandage the bridge of her nose. She knew all the tricks. For bruises, foundation tinted green. For black eyes, sunglasses and concealer. For broken bones… well, Ida knew Jean knew how to deal with those too, but Ida was damn grateful Eddie never made her learn that one for herself. For all the bigness of Eddie's mouth, and the considerable violence of which he was capable, he'd never caused the physical damage that Jean's late husband had.

Richard never yelled. Instead, he bottled up his rage. Jean had told her it amassed like pressure inside him, waiting for the tiniest relief valve to escape. Around '55, she'd come to Ida's one morning for breakfast with bags under her eyes and her arm in a cast, and after some pressing she revealed that the evening before, Jean had asked Richard to move his car. It had been blocking the basement entrance, and Jean wanted to move a few things from the attic down there. Richard, drunk, had accused her of wanting to sell them and run away. They'd argued on the icy basement steps. "How 'bout you go down there," he'd said. "Sell yourself too, if you think anybody would pay." When he'd turned, Richard threw his shoulder into Jean, sending her forward through the space between the car and the railing and down the basement steps. They'd spent the night in the ER together, where he'd told the doctors she had slipped on black ice. He didn't

let Jean go to any of the follow-up appointments, so she'd removed the cast herself ten weeks later with a handheld saw.

"I saw him," Jean said, gripping the steering wheel. "He was going to hurt you. I had to do it."

Eager to shake the memories of the past, Ida peered around the driver's-side seat to find Frankie's wide eyes staring back at her. "He's hungry," she said.

"It's not even lunchtime."

"Did we feed him this morning?"

"Shit."

Ida reached, the tips of her fingers pointed at the can of cat food in the side pocket of the carrier, but Jean stopped her.

"Not in here. It'll stink," Jean said.

"He's hungry!"

Jean squeezed the wheel. "He can wait until we get to Canada."

"Five more hours?"

"More like six."

"We can't expect him to starve all day. Or me either. I won't last that long without something to eat," Ida said. The police scanner droned on, a mash-up of numbers and streets the women had never driven down. *10-20a 11:40. 10-46. 10-7. 10-5 Brandy.* Ida pulled the discarded packaging off the floorboards, drawing the label out from between sheets of clear plastic. "You'd think it would come with a guide or something so we could understand this drivel."

Need a 10-14 on Schooner Ave.

10-9.

Requesting 10-14 on Schooner Ave.

"Just ignore it," Jean said. "Unless you hear our names."

Ida turned down the volume on the scanner and turned on the radio.

"How are you gonna hear it with the radio on?"

"You said ignore it."

"Unless you hear our names! How are you going to hear them if you're singing along to Dean Martin?"

"It's Frankie Lymon."

"What?"

"Dean doesn't sing this one. It's Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers."

“Ida, I swear. You save all your memory for music.”

Ida hummed along to the verse, then sang the chorus. She kept her voice low, beeps from the scanner blaring over the harmony.

“Turn it down,” Jean said.

“I have to distract myself! My stomach is growling.” On the refrain, Ida sang louder, closing her eyes and opening her throat to give the off-key notes their full due.

“Turn it down!”

The bass line thumped, and Ida’s shoulders wiggled in time. “This is the best part,” she said. On the final chorus, Ida gave it her all, opening her chest and throwing back her head. Her fingers danced through the blowing air from the AC vents, and Jean laughed despite herself. When the song was finished, Ida turned the radio down. “Did you know the original title was ‘Why Do Birds Sing So Gay’*?*”

Jean’s missing tooth peeked out of her smile. “No,” she said, though Ida knew she had told her already, many times over the years. “Remember when you sang at the office party? When was that? Sixty-two?”

“‘Come Rain or Come Shine,’” Ida said. “Judy Garland.”

“You were wonderful,” said Jean. “In your blue sequined dress. Twirling across the stage.”

“I was terrible.” Ida remembered how her heels were a bit too large, the way her waist didn’t quite fill out the outfit’s silhouette, and how she couldn’t see Jean in the crowd through the stage lights.

“You were perfect,” Jean said, and from her smile, Ida could almost believe it was true. “We’ll stop before we pass back into New York. Get you something to eat. Feed Frankie.”

The rain slowed. Frankie kneaded the mesh of his carrier, claws poking through, and the highway leveled out, the city of Scranton giving way to the nature preserves surrounding it. The steady hum of the tires mingled with the patter of rain about to quit. Voices sang low from the radio. Even the beeps of the police scanner coalesced into the white noise of the road, until the chatter gave way to the clearest message they’d heard thus far.

10-62, 10-62. This is an all-points bulletin from Rockaway PD. Subjects are Jean Bleaker and Ida Holloway. Vehicle is a beige Pontiac Grand Am. License plate: C986HGN. Repeat. APB 10-62. Jean Bleaker, age seventy, black hair, five feet six inches. Ida Holloway, age seventy-two, red hair, five

feet four inches. Beige Pontiac Grand Am. License plate: C986HGN.

"Well, shit," Ida said.

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CHAPTER NINE

Jean took the next exit: Scott, Pennsylvania. A sign on the ramp told her there was a gas station in 1.7 miles and a McDonald's in 0.4. She spun the steering wheel right, taking the turn for the gas station.

"That's us, Jean," Ida said, hands hovering just above her thighs. "That's us." A tremor ran through her palms, and when Jean hit the brakes to avoid the tractor in front of them, Ida swung forward, her seat belt locking against her collarbone. "Ouch! Jean!"

"Just sit tight," Jean said. "It'll be all right." She flipped on the turn signal and passed the tractor, glancing up to the rearview mirror.

"What are we gonna do?" Ida asked again.

Jean drove five miles per hour above the speed limit of fifteen. "It'll be all right," she said again, but her eyes went wide and glassy like a spooked horse, and she checked her mirrors again and again, gaze moving in a cylindrical pattern from mirror to road to mirror to mirror to road. The gas station was a local chain, Subs and Suds. In the parking lot sat a red pickup and a white van. "We've got to get rid of the car."

"What?"

Jean pulled around the back of the store, creeping up slowly toward the dumpster.

Ida gripped the map so tight it creased in her hand. "We can't get to Canada without a car."

"We can't go to Canada." She threw the car in park. "Grab everything you can carry."

"Jean!" Ida called after her as she got out of her seat and popped the trunk.

Jean stooped to meet Ida's gaze through the rear windshield. Through gritted teeth she said, "Keep it down," punctuating every word. She snatched a bag out of the trunk, then the suitcase. When she was done there, she returned to the driver's-side window and took an unsteady breath in.

“Honey, I love you, but this is serious. We can’t cross the border. They’re looking for us. They’re looking for this car. Now, I’m not leaving you, but we sure as hell are leaving the Pontiac.”

Ida scrambled out of the seat, circling the open trunk to meet Jean in the slim space between the car and the dumpster. “We can’t walk. We’re in the middle of nowhere!”

“We’ll figure this out.” Jean eyed the gun and the shovel, still in the trunk. The shovel was too unwieldy to carry, so she plucked the gun from its spot and jammed it into one of the bags. “We always do. Get Frankie.”

Ida snatched the police scanner from the cupholder and tucked it into her purse. Frankie cried complaints as she slipped her arm through the carrier handle and lifted him, unevenly, from the floor of the back seat.

“We’re going inside,” Jean said. “We’re going to tell the man at the counter that we broke down, but we’re not far from the kids, and we just need a ride to the bus station.”

“And the car?”

“Lock it up. We’ll tell them we’re coming back for it this evening, that my son can tow it.”

“It can’t be *my* son that’s coming to tow it?”

“Ida!” Jean’s hand shot into the air to silence her. Struggling under the weight of the bags, Jean stiffened for a moment, then made her way back around the building. Ida followed.

The rain had stopped except for an errant drizzle, and stubborn clouds cast the roadside stop in pale shades of blue. Subs and Suds was unremarkable in every way it needed to be: chipped paint on the glass windows suggested the owners either didn’t have much money or didn’t care much for appearances; the store’s interior held a thick breath of greasy, stale air, suggesting they didn’t see much business; and the kid at the register couldn’t have been more than sixteen, the loaded keychain hanging from his belt loop suggesting he’d borrowed that red truck from his dad. Jean noticed all of it, her senses sharpened by threat and necessity. She knew immediately the kid wouldn’t be much help, but he wouldn’t be much hindrance either; still, she asked him where the nearest bus line stopped while assessing the working condition of the security camera pointed toward the door.

He only shrugged and offered her a “Sorry, ma’am” and two-for-one hot

dogs as consolation. Jean figured as much. What she didn't expect was the way her heart swelled with pride over taking command of the situation. There existed in Jean a desperate need to be useful. She had forgotten how it felt to be relied upon when the stakes were high, and despite the dire circumstances, keeping Ida safe satisfied a deep need inside her. As she stood in that roadside store, heart thumping against her ribs, attuned to even the tiny sound of wrappers crinkling under the weight of shelf stacks, Jean remembered how it felt to truly be Ida's hero.

"Who else is here?" she asked, with a confidence that struck the boy at the register, making him stand a little straighter.

"Just Rufus," he said. "He's the manager, but he's off today, just stopped in to fix some…" He trailed off, as if to say *toilets* to the older women might be some kind of disrespect. His vision moved to the Restroom sign. "Plumbing."

"I see," said Jean. "I'd like to speak to Rufus, please, if it's not too much trouble."

"Well, he's—"

"If it's not too much trouble," Jean said.

The boy nodded, then circled around the counter, disappearing into a walled-in space where Jean and Ida couldn't see.

"You sure this is a good idea?" Ida whispered. "What if they recognize us?"

"From where?"

"We could be on the news."

Jean's look was half-loving, half-pained. "Not yet."

"It's possible," Ida said, dragging the toe of her shoe across the floor and glancing down at it.

In a conciliatory tone, Jean said, "They won't recognize us, dear."

Ida reached for Jean's hand, brushing her fingertips. "Okay."

A sedan, forest green, rolled past on the street, tires kicking up puddle water. A squirrel bounded across the sidewalk, tail curled into a question mark, and snatched some discarded bit of something from a crack in the curb. Ida tapped her foot, still watching the toe.

Rufus emerged from the back room, all five feet five inches of him looking like a *Rufus*. His sandy-brown hair was hacked into a mullet, and cigarette smoke hung on his clothes so thick it left Jean with a heady

feeling. His cutoff shirt was more pink than red, faded and grease-stained and splotched with water of untoward origin.

"'an I help you?" he asked in an Appalachian drawl. He must've been just shy of fifty, but sun-damaged skin added an extra decade that his yellow teeth didn't make up for.

Jean took the measure of him. He had the look of somebody about to spit. "I'm so sorry to bother you," Jean started, noticing when the tension in the corners of his eyes eased a bit. "We were on the way to my son's house, and the damn car, well…" She sighed. "Brandon keeps telling me it's time for a new one. I've been saying, *No, no*. I'm attached to the old thing. Nostalgic about it, I guess. But what I'm getting at is, it finally quit on me, right down the street from your store. It's a miracle we were able to roll it in, especially in this weather."

Ida nudged an elbow into her back.

"Oh," Jean chuckled. "Here I go talking your ear off. I'm sorry. The long and short of it is, my son Brandon and I can come back tomorrow for the car. He's not far off, but a bit too far for us to walk. So if you could let us know where the bus station is, that would be very kind of you."

"Bus station's 'bout seven miles that way." Rufus pointed in the direction the squirrel had run off in.

Jean plastered on a smile. "Thank you so very much." She turned and took two steps toward the door. Ida hesitated. Seven miles might have been manageable once upon a time, but they hadn't walked that much in—

"OH!" Jean snapped a hand to her lower back, catching herself on the door handle.

"Oh no," Ida said, her eyes meeting Jean's, instantly knowing the ruse. "Oh, it's her back!" Ida's fake southern accent was convincing enough, a blend of Georgia and South Carolina, not quite right for either on its own, but not quite wrong enough to raise eyebrows. "Oh, Kathy!" Ida flitted to Jean's side, making distressed little sounds, until Rufus took a breath so big it puffed his cheeks when he blew it out.

"All right, all right," he said. "I'll take ya." He tossed a ring of keys onto the counter, sliding them in the direction of the boy. "Lock up," he said to him. "Not a minute early either."

"There's no need," Jean said. "It's very kind of you, but—" She feigned another step, then a squeal.

“No, no. What kinda man would I be if I let two old ladies walk miles in the rain?”

The sharpness of Ida’s smile could’ve cut the man’s throat. *Old ladies*, Jean heard Ida say in her mind. *I’ll show you old…* But to Jean’s great relief, Ida said nothing.

Rufus came through the Staff Only door, noticing the cat carrier without the counter between them.

“Hope you don’t mind,” Ida said, dropping the accent but then recovering it with “he’s just my whole heart and soul.” She made goo-goo eyes at the cat, and the display was enough for Rufus to decide it wasn’t worth an argument.

“The van’s mine,” Rufus said. He wove his way around Ida and Jean, and the women followed him out of the store, lugging Frankie and the bags.

The windowless van gave Jean pause. She remembered what her mother had told her as a little girl, about strange men and especially strange men offering free rides in vans. Ida plopped Frankie onto the floorboards as soon as Rufus slid open the side door, displaying no such reservations about hitching the ride, and Jean began to think that her kidnapping fears were unfounded. The two of them probably wouldn’t fetch much of a price on the black market anyway. She climbed into the back seat beside Ida, resisting the urge to pinch her nose shut against the reek of nicotine and ground-in muck on the upholstery.

Rufus had had a dog once, long ago from the condition of the picture taped to the dash. It was a mutt of some kind with kind eyes and chestnut fur that swirled into ringlets. To assuage her nerves, Jean allowed herself to wonder what the dog’s name had been. She’d always thought it was funny when an animal had a decidedly human name. Carl, for example. And she wondered further whether when “Rufus and Carl” announced themselves to a room, people were confused about which was which.

“Who’s that?” Ida asked, pointing at the picture and once again dropping the accent.

Rufus cleared his throat. “Oh. That’s Big Red.” For the first time, Ida and Jean watched a timid smile dimple his unshaved face. The van hummed down the road, and he threw on his wipers for a few swishes to clear the droplets from the windshield. “Bird dog.”

With how faded the picture was, it raised the question of how old the

dog would be. Jean hoped hard that Ida wouldn't ask the rude question, but the words tumbled out nonetheless.

"Still alive?" Ida asked. "Picture looks old."

Rufus dropped his grin. "Yeah. And no. Died a few years back."

"I'm sorry," Jean said before Ida could say anything at all. "So tough losing pets."

"Mm-hmm," Rufus said, accelerating five and then ten miles over the posted limit.

Ida took a breath to say more, but Jean elbowed her into silence. The firecracker woman made a face, crossed her arms, and looked out the window. There, untamed lots rolled by, one by one, signs posted For Sale or Under Development or City Council Meeting with dates and details too small to read. The highway was just fifty feet away, up an incline and elevated above them. Billboards smiled down on it. They boasted the merits of guns and pornography and Jesus Christ.

"Thanks again for driving us," Jean said. "You didn't have to."

Rufus made a noise but didn't take his eyes off the road. They passed over a little bridge with just the sound of tires on asphalt and Frankie shuffling in his carrier. When the van pulled into the bus station, the ladies got out and Rufus cracked a window to say, "Hope y'all make it safe to your son's place. And tell 'im to pick up your car by tomorrow morning. After twenty-four hours, we'll have to tow her." Then he pulled away without saying goodbye.

Jean and Ida stood in the oversized parking lot, weighed down by bags and tossed off course by circumstance. "What are we doing here, Jean?" Ida asked.

"Getting a bus ticket."

"To where?"

Jean hadn't been sure the pair could pull it off, not until that moment. But she knew now, and she didn't miss a beat when she said, "Haight-Ashbury. California."

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CHAPTER TEN

Detective Finley Rollins had the day off when he got the call. Seated in his study, he connected a corner piece of his puzzle to a straight-edged side piece, recognizing the continuation in the pattern of the wallpaper. The light was low in the room. Blackout curtains covered the window, and only the green-tinted light of a single-bulb desk lamp offered him any ability to see. The ringer on his office phone was shrill, so he answered before the first ring had time to scream its entire song.

"Detective Rollins," he said.

"You lucky son of a bitch." The detective recognized the voice on the other end of the line. It was Clay Stenson, the newest addition to Homicide.

"And why's that, Stenson?"

"They're assigning you as lead."

Detective Rollins spotted the third puzzle piece in the chain he was forming and secured it to the first two. "On anything in particular?"

"The old-lady killer case," Stenson said. "Bonnie and Bonnie. Golden Girls Gone Haywire." He paused, but when Rollins didn't laugh, he said, "We're still working on a good name, but it's the two old-lady friends who killed the guy from the electric company."

"And how's that make me lucky?" Detective Rollins asked.

"Get your head out of your ass, Fin, guys have made chief for less."

It was likely to make the local news, maybe even national. Fame had never appealed to the detective. Money, sure. That meant security. But fame brought all sorts of problems. He had a theory that only unintelligent people would get famous on purpose, so it made sense that Stenson aspired to such a thing. Detective Rollins sighed. He held the phone between his ear and right shoulder, then picked up his coffee cup and swirled it around. He took a sip. Lukewarm. "I'll come in, then."

"Fill your tank on the way," said Stenson. "Get some road trip snacks. The old biddies are on the run."

After disconnecting the call, Detective Rollins swallowed down the last of his coffee. He stood up, checking out his appearance in the mirror beside his study door. “Always on my day off,” he muttered to himself, but he was grinning as he did, thinking about the type of elderly woman who—instead of getting together for a game of bridge—would kill a man with a friend of hers.

Detective Rollins was glad to have the case. Not for the TV interviews. He wouldn’t turn down a promotion, but that wasn’t the reason either. He was glad because he was intrigued. What kind of older woman would kill a man? Have a friend who would go along with it? And why? Rollins might have studied the human mind in another life, and would’ve made a damn good psychologist in this one based on his experience alone. He was curious about people, especially people who didn’t act the way you might expect them to. Rollins didn’t particularly care for putting people in prison; he had become a detective because when somebody did something strange, he needed to understand what made them do what they did.

He had to know.

“Bonnie and Bonnie,” he said, shaking his head. “They can do better than that.”



“This is nuts,” said Ida. She placed Frankie down on a bench and, crossing her arms, planted herself beside him. “We can’t just go to California.”

Jean’s strength faltered under the weight of their bags. She thought of the difficult road ahead. It would be a days-long trip, nights of fractured sleep and kinked muscles, always checking twice over their shoulders, never sure if the next stop would be the one where police caught up to them. She thought about Barbara and George, Laura and Charlie, whether they had tried to call the house or if a detective had called them already. Most saliently, she thought about Ida, this bundle of kindling she’d chosen for a partner, how delicately that bundle was woven and how easily it could splinter or ignite under the right conditions.

“Let’s just see if there’s a bus to Toronto,” said Ida. “We could still do

that, right? Maybe take somebody's IDs just to cross over and…"

After a lifetime of hiding and pretending, Jean wanted to get Ida somewhere she could look around and see the red trolley line and blue waters running beneath a bridge the color of sunset. Somewhere Ida could tell the truth about who she was and who she loved, even if Jean wasn't around anymore to hear it. "We can get to California," said Jean, "and we will."

"And what do you think we'll do when we get there? Go on a damn tourist tram?"

"It doesn't matter what we do," Jean said, sliding the bags up the length of her arms for a better hold. "We just have to get there."

"Jean, I know I always said I wanted to visit, but this is not the time."

"I'll get the tickets. You wait here, if you'd like."

"Jean!"

The sound of Jean's name grew more distant and the repetitions farther apart as she made her way across the lot. A misstep into a puddle splashed water up her ankle, and despite the muck that splashed up with it, the coolness was a welcome relief. Her body was burning up. She felt tired, bone tired, but Jean knew that tired was not an option. Not until they got far away from here, far away from anywhere they could hear their names on the police scanner.

The ticket counter was encased in clear plastic, a little hole cut out at the bottom to pass money through and a round speaker to amplify the voice of a man so old that even Jean looked at him and thought he was ancient. His back curled between his shoulder blades, diminishing his height, and liver spots speckled the pale skin of his thin arms. On his head was a tuft of stark white hair, and behind rectangular spectacles sat kindly eyes, blue as the Pacific coast.

"What's the best route to California?" Jean asked.

"North or south?" asked the man.

"San Francisco."

"North, then." He opened a drawer beneath his register, retrieving from it a Rolodex, and began to flip through, card by card. "Don't get many people traveling that far," he said, still flipping.

"We're going on vacation."

"You know, an airline would be faster." Flip. Flip. Flip.

“Scared of heights,” said Jean, flashing a timid smile he didn’t see.

“Well…” Three slow flips later, he stopped. “We’ve got a bus heading out this evening that’ll take you as far as St. Louis. There, you’ll have to change.”

Jean leaned closer to the clear plastic, trying to read from the Rolodex card, but it was angled away from her. “What time does it leave?”

“Just before six.”

“And that’s the earliest?”

“If you want to get to San Francisco, yeah.” The man flipped and stopped then flipped some more. “It’ll be three changeovers. St. Louis, I told you about, that’s the first one. Then you’ll head to Las Vegas, change over in Los Angeles, and that will get you to the San Francisco station.”

Jean spied the time from the clock on the wall behind him. It was just about one p.m. “How long, all in?”

“Oh,” he said, gently tossing his head back and forth as he calculated, “something like eighty hours, I’d say.”

“Three and a half days,” she said.

“Just about, counting transfer times. You want to go with that? It’ll set you back…” He punched numbers into a handheld calculator. “$585.84 with tax.”

Jean set the luggage down at her feet. She checked right and left and, when she saw no one watching, unzipped the canvas duffle and pulled out a banded stack of cash before zipping it shut again. The stack she grabbed was twenties mostly, but something drew her attention away from the money. Beside the zipper, Jean noticed a small tear in the canvas duffle, not wide enough for a stack of bills to fall out, but if the fabric folded just right, it was sizable enough to spy the green of the bills inside.

“Cash, huh?” the man said.

Jean began counting it out in stacks of a hundred dollars, telling herself she would keep the duffle closed, and that everything would work out fine. “Don’t like banks,” she said, still counting.

“Mm-hmm,” the man said, drawing his lips tight and bowing into a somber nod. “I understand.”

Jean slid the money through the hole. “That’s six hundred there.”

The man poked a button on his register and the cash door popped open. “One ticket to San Francisco,” he said.

“Oh, wait,” said Jean. “Two, I need two tickets.”

The man paused. “Okay, well, see, I’ve got my register open already, so we’ll do this one and then a separate transaction.”

“And we have a cat.”

“Has to be in a carrier,” he said. “And it’s a fifty-dollar fee.”

Jean stooped back down to her canvas bag, pulling out another stack of cash. “Carrier is no problem,” she said, and thumbed through the bills. “This will cover the fee. The other ticket too.”

“Okay,” he said. “You know, I just remembered. There’s a senior discount for sixty-five and older. Fifteen percent, which would be quite a chunk of change.”

“I already paid.”

“Sorry, sorry,” he said. “I’ll apply the difference. Just need to see your ID to verify.”

“No,” Jean said, recoiling. “It’s all right, never mind about the discount.”

The man’s blue eyes widened, then narrowed.

“Mine expired years ago,” Jean said. “Don’t like dealing with the government.”

“Mmm,” said the man.

Jean resisted the urge to clutch at her chest. The man’s blue eyes flashed with recognition, and for a split moment, Jean considered running.

But then he winked and said, “I understand,” punched a few more register buttons, sorted the cash, and handed over two tickets and a printed pet tag. “Attach that to the carrier,” he said, “and have a wonderful vacation.”



Jean and Ida, having already had the argument about the lack of earlier buses, sat on chairs facing one another, their bags piled between them and Frankie balanced on top like a king. The station felt open and impersonal, the ceilings too tall, the floors too shiny, the windows too wide and too high on the walls. The entire building was cold and impersonal. A place to be

passed through and forgotten.

Still, despite the chill, a drop of sweat rolled behind Jean's ear and down the crook of her neck. She had always run hot, and it had only gotten worse over the years and with her health. "Still hungry?" she asked.

"Unless you're planning to offer me floor polish, I don't think it makes one lick of a difference how hungry I am. We're stuck here, and I don't see a restaurant."

"Ida."

"Should've gotten some snacks at that gas station store. I'll be lucky if I eat for… What did you say? Eighty hours?"

"Ida."

"I told you I was hungry way back. Before we ever heard our names on the scanner. You were in such a rush to get rid of the car and now what? We're stranded here. Starving. Sitting ducks while—"

Her blood sugar was crashing. Ida not only liked the taste of lemonade, but her frequent sugary drinks kept her from getting grouchy and lightheaded. "There's a little coffee stand in the back over there. How about I go see if they have lemonade and sandwiches?"

Ida let out a frustrated sigh, rolling one hand into the palm of the other. "Okay." The chair squeaked as Jean rose, and Ida added, "A large lemonade. And tuna, if they have it."

"Anything for my girl," Jean said quietly, touching her shoulder while passing Ida's seat.

As Jean walked away, she heard the shuffle of mesh, then the crack of a metal can. Over her shoulder, she watched Ida slip the open tin of cat food into Frankie's carrier, mouthing praise to him as she did. *She has Frankie, at least*, Jean thought. But that mild sweetness soured as soon as she turned away.

The sound of her footsteps doubled on the echoey tile floor. When she reached the coffee stand, she pushed clear-wrapped sandwiches around—turkey and lettuce on whole wheat, chicken salad on white, tuna on multigrain—and she wondered how to tell a person that the promise you made, the promise to spend your life with them, was just about to reach its natural conclusion.

Jean didn't want to. God, she didn't want to. When the first test came back, she'd said, *No, test again*. And then the second one said the same and

she'd told the prim front desk lady at the oncologist's office, *Don't you dare call the house*. And then she'd left and felt guilty about talking to the poor woman that way.

It was such an indignity. Being poked and prodded. Having to see a gynecological oncologist. The fact that her ovaries hadn't just dried up but had metastasized into something deadly. By the time she knew, it had spread to her liver, her spleen, even crawled its way up to the fluid around her lungs. It made her belly swollen, and she ran hotter than she ever had before, even during the hell of menopause. It caused back pain, exhaustion, and gave her indigestion when she had sugar. She wouldn't speak the *cancer* word out loud. Couldn't. And certainly couldn't have Ida answering the phone and finding out by accident if the doctor called.

The office sent letters after that. Treatment options that offered to ruin the little time she had left. Bills. Mostly bills. Those she paid in cash that she pilfered from their getaway stash. It had seemed harmless, at the time. But the last letter, the one with instructions on *Hospice Care*, that one she tucked in the desk drawer. It had felt like a final warning.

"Can I help you?" asked a dark-skinned woman with tight magenta curls.

"Wish you could," said Jean, and she laughed at herself, handing the wrapped tuna sandwich to the woman, whose name tag read *Sandra*. "This and a large bottle of lemonade, if you have it."

Sandra pointed to the corner of the ice chest, where, sure enough, Jean found a bottle of Nature's Delight lemonade after digging away some cubes.

"Thank you," Jean said, handing that over too.

She paid, stuffing the change into Sandra's tip cup, and as she walked back to Ida, tuna sandwich in one hand, lemonade in the other, she tried to figure out what kind of life they could start in California with just the money and time they had left.

Jean had previously thought it would be easier, moneywise, once she was gone. Supporting one person's daily needs is a smaller undertaking than two. But she realized now that was no longer true. Funerals weren't cheap, and while Jean had enough life insurance to cover the cost, Ida wouldn't be able to receive the payout if she was wanted by police. There wouldn't be any more pension payments. No social security. No Medicare.

Laura and Harvey made enough to help Ida get by, assuming she had a place of her own and nobody was looking for her, but Ida's well-being hinged on that—that nobody would be looking for her.

As she handed Ida her sandwich and lemonade, Jean settled back on her seat, still warm from her sitting there before. Ida peeled back the clear wrap, took a bite, and chewed; Frankie smacked his lips around some foul-smelling paste; Jean tallied promises: *I'll never lie to you. I'll take care of you always. It'll all be okay. I'll make sure of it.*

She had broken one promise in keeping the cancer diagnosis from Ida, and would have to continue breaking it, but Jean would spend what life she had left making sure she kept the others. She would tell her lifelong love about the cancer. She had to. But not until they had finally won. Not until they had gotten somewhere Jean could make sure it would all be okay. Jean would not die leaving Ida a wanted woman.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

From the time Ida balled up the remnants of her lunch until the overhead speakers announced boarding, every passing face wore a sneer and belonged to a cop. She and Jean kept a wary eye on a weary janitor, studied a group of law school students, and met with an elevated skepticism any adult traveling alone. Frankie had messed inside the carrier hours ago, and despite frantic cleaning attempts, the mesh still stank of liver paté and urine. She considered asking Jean if the pair should dye their hair in the bathroom and change into the clothes she'd picked up in New Jersey, but the ammonia smell from the dye would attract more attention to them, and the clothing alone wouldn't be enough of a disguise. It was five forty-five p.m. when Ida sprang up, eager to get out of the chair wreaking havoc on her back and out of this bus station, where she felt like a sitting duck.

"You ready?" Jean asked, grabbing the suitcase and slinging bag handles over her forearms.

"I'd take just about anything over this bus station right about now."

"Yeah," Jean said, stretching her neck from one side to the other. "Me too."

The bus was long and silver, its front end speckled with the carcasses of flying insects. The mud-caked tires nearly reached Ida's hip and its engine grumbled like it hungered for the road. Jean passed off their suitcase and bags to the courier, then tightened her grip when he reached for the canvas duffle containing the money.

"I'll hold on to this one, thank you," she said.

The courier, slight inside his pressed shirt, washed out by its garish orange color, brought an unexpected firmness to his retort. "Too long. I gotta take it." He flipped over a calloused palm, motioning for Jean to hand over the canvas duffle. The woman looked over her shoulder at Ida, who twisted her mouth into a lemonade-pucker.

"It can fit beneath my feet," Ida said. "My legs aren't long."

“I’m afraid I can’t let you do that,” said the courier, motioning again.

Ida slipped into a false but convincing smile. “Bet they don’t pay you nearly enough for your hard work, young man. Lugging bags all day, it’s got to be murder on your back.”

Jean flashed the whites of her eyes. Ida understood she didn’t appreciate the bribery attempt or the mention of *murder*, but Jean forced the expression away with a swallow, and Ida still thought she had a good shot at getting her way.

“Lady, just pass me the bag,” the courier said to Jean.

“What would you say to twenty…” Ida reached for her purse. “No, fifty dollars?”

“I’d say you got a whole line behind you, lady. Give me the bag or don’t. But you’re not getting on this bus with a pet *and* an oversized bag, and I’m not about to lose my job taking bribes.”

“Bribes?” Ida huffed in a quiet gasp, but the courier remained unmoved.

A woman with a stroller looked on, smacking gum between her molars and rocking her baby with an impatient look. Jean handed over the canvas duffle.

“It’ll be right here when you get to St. Louis,” the courier said before tossing the canvas duffle into the baggage compartment, along with all their money in the world and all their hope of escape. It landed lopsided on the heap, and Ida watched with a burgeoning sense of failure as the courier moved on to collect a rolling suitcase from the impatient mother with the chewing gum.

“They’re gonna let her on with that huge thing,” Ida said, indicating the mother’s stroller, “but not us with a bag?”

“Let it go,” Jean said, filing into the line forming in front of the bus’s open door.

But Ida held still. She looked from the stroller to the tip of the canvas duffle, all that was now visible of it between a forest-green roller bag and a black guitar case. “That stroller won’t even fit up the stairs,” she said, barely thicker than a whisper.

Jean stepped one foot toward her, holding their place in line with the other.

“It’s not fair,” said Ida.

A college student in a baseball cap stepped onto the bus, followed by an

elderly couple in matching sequined hats. The line pushed forward, widening a gap between Jean and the person in front of her.

Behind Ida's eyes, she felt the burn of tears forming. She took a breath in to speak, but her chest contracted around it. *It's not fair*, she thought, still staring at the mother and her stroller, and the bus jostled on its tires with the shifting weight of boarding. Her hands squeezed into fists, a tingling numbness flaring in her joints.

"Ida," Jean said, but it sounded so far away to Ida. She could straighten out that courier. She could sting him, she could say, *How dare you? How dare you take this canvas duffle from me, and let this younger woman bring an entire stroller on board? What kind of policy is that? I ask for very little, you know!*

The courier lobbed a golf bag, and it landed hard enough to make the luggage beneath it squeak. The line pressed on. A middle-aged man with an inexplicable sunburn tapped Jean on the shoulder, asking, "Ma'am?"

Jean let him pass, then his wife behind him, and then Jean stepped out of line entirely as tears filled Ida's trembling eyes, cornflower blue, shot through with red.

I have fought for every inch, Ida thought. *Every damn thing that ever came my way.*

The gum-chewing mother lifted her baby from the stroller, rolled it to the courier to fold up and place above the mother's seat, and when the baby looked at Ida and cooed, all the words Ida might've said to its mother, to the courier, folded in on themselves. It was not the bag, or the money, or the matter-of-fact slant in the courier's tone that brought Ida to tears. It was the realization—held off first by adrenaline and next by the need to pass long hours of invisible waiting—that she had to leave it all behind. The garden. The home she'd built with blood and love and sleeplessness. Her family, the peaceful future she'd imagined, and the slow crawl toward the end of her days on Peachtree Way. It was over.

And now it's gone, she thought as a pink backpack covered up the last corner of the canvas duffle.

"Come on, dear," Jean said, looping an arm around Ida's shoulder. "We've got to get on the bus now."

Ida stared into the baggage compartment and the patchwork of luggage inside.

“It’s going to be okay,” Jean said, and she pulled her in with the slightest pressure. “It’s all going to be okay.”

Ida felt one foot lighten, then the other. She allowed herself to be turned toward the bus’s door. Jean stooped down to shoulder Frankie’s carrier, and the two women walked side by side through the bus line until the narrow steps forced them upward and apart.

Frankie was none too pleased with the conditions of the bus, and Ida even less so. Although the ceiling was tall enough for passengers to walk straight-backed down the aisle, it reached a high point at the top, then arched down on either side like a church window, creating an optical illusion of narrowness that made Ida crouch down to be sure she wouldn’t hit her head. Jean led the way, step by careful step around protruding bags and wayward sneakers. The cat took to yowling again, spinning tight circles inside the smelly carrier. Ida feared he might vomit, and then she feared *she* might vomit. The line in front of her was as long as the line behind, and the seats would be full to bursting. At her left, another crying child, this one a toddler, reached for her mom with shiny hands and a piece of cereal stuck to her lip. At her right, two young men sat with fingers interlaced, one wearing a hoop in his nose and the other a ripped-up Grateful Dead T-shirt.

Ida stared at the pair a moment too long, struck by the boldness of putting their queer love on display, worried for them. The young man with the nose ring noticed her looking. The almond cut of his eyes brought with it the sense that he recognized something about Ida. For a moment, she thought he might say something crazy, something like *What? You’re just like us too*, airing out the secret she’d long held so close to the chest. Or did he recognize her? Were she and Jean on the news already? But then the man’s mouth curled gently into an easy smile. One that, if it said *I see you*, did so without threat.

Jean slid into the window seat about three quarters of the way down the length of the bus. Ida took the aisle. With the carrier nestled in the gap between their legs, Frankie slumped down into a sprawl and quieted.

“Did you see them?” Ida asked, voice low.

Jean fastened her seat belt. “See who?”

Ida, with an expression that read *Don’t make me say it*, said, “Those

boys?”

Jean’s neck stretched to see over the tops of the seats in front of them.

“On the other side,” said Ida, gesturing from behind the seat. “There.”

“What about them?”

Ida rolled one hand inside the other, then fastened her seat belt with a click. “They’re *together*.”

Jean looked again, squinting through her need for eyeglasses. “So they are.”

Ducking down so the headrest covered any onlooker’s view of her mouth, Ida said, “They were holding hands.”

Jean made a considering sound.

“Five minutes till departure,” called the driver from the front.

“Times are changing,” Jean said. “I’ve told you that.” And suddenly the armrest between them was far too thin. Ida was all elbows. She positioned and repositioned and checked front and back and sideways for glowering stares. If Jean noticed her awkwardness, she said nothing, just let her eyelids ease shut and the air-conditioning blow on her brow.

When the brakes hissed and the bus was put in gear, Ida said, “We need to get somewhere we can change. Dye our hair. It’ll look better if you can pass as a man.”

Not even their children knew for sure that Jean and Ida were *together*. Even if Jean thought they assumed, that was different from knowing. The pair had discussed it a handful of times over the years, Jean leaning toward transparency and Ida the opposite. Plenty of widows teamed up together in their time. It was easier financially, and an extra pair of hands and eyes was a big help when it came to raising children. But things were different now. There were far fewer women living together as friends and, according to Jean, far more living together as couples.

Ida had come to accept that Jean was likely right. Still, the notion unsettled her. Ida worried that Laura, with her prim and proper nature, wouldn’t understand. Whereas most girls played with their dolls, acting out scenes of domestic life, Laura had used her dollhouse as an exercise in organization. She scoured design magazines and came up with ideal placements for the miniature furniture. The dolls, she said, only made the dollhouse look cluttered. She put them away in a shoebox under her bed. And Charlie, who knows how he would react? He’d been an island unto

himself during adolescence. He wrote in journals with locks and hid the keys. He borrowed library books that he kept in his backpack and returned before Ida could read the titles and discover his interests. At dinner, he barely spoke, and then he moved away before the younger ones were even out of the house. She'd never really had a chance to get to know who he was on the inside.

Of Jean's kids, Ida felt fairly confident that George was too self-absorbed to give anything outside of his own interests much thought. Barbara would be most likely to know, being closest to Jean, but Jean never talked about it, at least not in front of Ida. *Better to leave it be*, Ida had said the last time the women discussed it. Jean had nodded. *Whatever you think, dear.*

The bus reached its cruising speed, and after several hours, Jean gave in to her fatigue. She was softly snoring as Ida looked past her. Out the window, the city of Pittsburgh carved a jagged line in the dark horizon, all steel and pavement and busyness. There were bridges too, so many more bridges than Ida would've expected, each connecting one city street to its corresponding other. Some of the buildings were old and historic, and Ida couldn't help but imagine what it would've been like to be a tourist in that town, reading dates off placards and mispronouncing names and stopping into shops. She remembered the teddy bear Jean had purchased as a souvenir from Niagara Falls. Their only vacation all those years together, and because waterfalls don't make for good toys, plush or otherwise, the gift shop offered all manner of forest-dwelling creatures as recompense.

Ida thought it was foolish, at the time. Though she couldn't recall the price, she recalled perfectly that she'd complained it was too expensive for the quality; but now she wished she had it with her, something to hold and something that would bend and stay soft under the strength of her nervous grip. And she felt silly for wishing that.

She thought about the boy with the hoop in his nose, his partner in the Grateful Dead T-shirt. If Richard and Eddie had seen those men holding hands like that, what might they have said? Eddie was vocal about his views on *queers*. Richard never mentioned anything on the topic explicitly, but he had railed against the Liberal Party of New York, and his opinion on Ida and Jean's relationship became quite clear that night in '57.

That being what it was, Ida afforded that forty years and a changing

world might have changed them too. It was no longer common practice to accuse her ilk of being communist spies. It was rare in 1999 to read news articles about hate-fueled violence, though not unheard of. The idea of men keeping their wives *in line* had gone out of vogue with the women's movement, but a chill ran down Ida's shoulder as she remembered when it was nothing for a husband to beat his wife, and all the trembling mornings she'd suffered as a result. Ida rubbed at the goose bumps with her palm, thinking that though it might have been selfish, she was glad Richard and Eddie were dead.

How might her life have been different, she wondered, if she and Jean could've been together from the start? What if her father had been a man who would've been proud to give his daughter away to another woman? If she could've taken Jean's last name and if their garden hadn't needed to be designed around the location of buried corpses?

Across the aisle sat a twentysomething girl engrossed in a book and a figure beside her who was more hoodie than person, seemingly joining in on Jean's idea of sleeping the ride away. Ida leaned into the aisle, getting a sense of what could be seen from the seats behind her—not much. Then she turned toward the front of the bus and checked for heads turned and spying—none. Carefully, slowly, and only because Jean was sleeping, she pressed her arm against the woman who was her world. When the indecipherable chatter continued all around her and none seemed the wiser about her gesture of affection, she tested more of her weight against Jean's arm. Ida didn't know what she expected. There was no screaming, of course. No swift rebuke from the driver or chiding call from her mother, and no closed-fist blow from Eddie or Richard, each long dead. All was as it had been. So she let her ear lie upon the top of Jean's shoulder, then a bit more of her weight, then a little bit more, until she rested at the side of her longtime lover, longer-time secret love.

And the bus rolled on.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Jean woke in the dark, startled and all at once. Cold spidered down her cheek where it pressed against the window glass. She was disoriented, couldn't make sense of where she was or why she wasn't in her bed at home, and a sharp inhalation followed a sharper stab of panic between her ribs. Vision blurred, she made out only hulking shapes, backlit into climbing shadows by streaks of light screaming past. Her stomach and calves felt swollen enough to bind her down to that spot, and when she tried to move, the belt around her waist snapped her back into place. Jean couldn't breathe. She was breathing and yet the oxygen stayed shallow, refusing to sink in her lungs. Upholstery, floor to ceiling, stole the air. She thought she would die, penned in by the window on one side, and a heaviness on the other that—when she checked it—was a sight that eased her back into a state of calm.

The heaviness was Ida sleeping against her, lips parted above a little circle of darkness where she'd drooled on Jean's sleeve. Jean scanned the surrounding seats for onlookers. It was a habit built up over years of making sure their secret was safe, for Ida's sake. Jean found the passengers absorbed by various means of killing time: the soft glow of a book light, the tinny bass line of someone's CD that escaped through their headphones, a pair of teen girls balancing cards on their laps for a precarious game of rummy. Nobody was looking. So Jean allowed herself to enjoy the moment. Ida sleeping on her shoulder was such a simple thing, not grand in any aspect, and not novel except for the setting.

Since they met in '52, Jean and Ida had taken measures to conceal their affection. At first, it was from one another. Although Jean's feelings for Ida were far more than friendly, she'd been afraid to damage the friendship and had hidden how she'd felt for several years. It was in 1955, when Eddie purchased the home on Peachtree Way and Ida was giving Jean a tour of the still-empty rooms, that Jean's clumsy confession came tumbling out. Ida,

wearing a sundress and a faux pearl clip in her wavy red hair, had shown Jean the kitchen and unfurnished living room with a single sweep of her arm. *That will be Eddie's office*, she said, pointing at the French doors in the living room's corner.

And what does a plumber do in his home office? Jean asked.

Ida removed her kitten heels at the base of the stairs. *I couldn't tell you, but I also don't object to his having some space away from me.*

Jean had followed Ida up to the landing, making a point to turn away from where Ida's hemline billowed with her climbing.

That'll be Charlie's room, Ida said, *and this one Laura's.* She hesitated at the open entrance to the main suite. *It's standard. Bathroom attached.*

Gets good light.

It does. Too bad it'll be shining on Eddie's ugly mug. Ida cast her gaze down toward the beige carpet.

A thin lock of hair had slipped from behind Ida's ear and framed her delicate jawline. Overwhelmed with the urge to brush her thumb where Ida's mauve lipstick had smeared, Jean said, *I wish it were me*. A heart-stopping pause. *Sharing this room with you.*

Ida inhaled sharply, looking at Jean between sets of curled lashes. *Me too*, she said, and Jean was so shocked and overjoyed, she kissed Ida so hard their teeth clinked. Jean pulled back, embarrassed.

I'm sorry, I rushed in—

Don't be sorry, Ida said, leaning in for another kiss. *You did good.*

In the come-down from those first kisses, the women had shared a conversation that would shape the rest of their lives. Though Ida was more receptive than Jean had ever dreamed, both acknowledged that the world would not be. They were both married. They were both women. Should the truth come out, Ida would be fired from work, disowned by her family. Jean had lost touch with her parents and siblings years before. They had been passionately opposed to the Vietnam War, which turned into a general mistrust of the government and its military actions. Richard, raised Catholic, active duty, and a self-proclaimed patriot, had waited until the pair were married to demand that Jean choose between himself and her family of origin. It hadn't felt like she'd been given a choice at all. So, though Jean didn't stand to lose the family she'd already lost to the ultimatum, she feared Richard enough to sustain the guise that she and Ida were merely

close friends.

They made a rule: no affection in public. Nothing beyond what any other woman might express for any other. It worked until 1957. After that, although the men were dead, the rule remained. Both had seen firsthand just how awful it could be if they were discovered. Their *friendship* was a lie that became rote, and the marriage of their hearts existed only within the walls of 1080 Peachtree Way. So while Jean woke most mornings with Ida cleaving close, this was a first, in a way.

As she gazed down on this old, new thing, her heart swelled, but her bladder ached. The path to the restroom behind her was narrow, illuminated by a green-lettered sign, and Jean was loath to wake Ida. She lingered in this delicate moment, smelling the lavender of Ida's shampoo and watching a twitch in the woman's middle finger as she dozed.

"We're experiencing some mechanical difficulties," the driver said over the intercom. "Nothing to be concerned about, but we'll need to make a stop at the Indianapolis station and have a mechanic take a look."

Ida's eyes shot open at the crackle at the end of the intercom line. "What?" She glanced left and right, pulling away and wiping her cheek. "What was that?"

"Something is wrong with the bus," Jean said.

Ida used both hands to straighten her collar.

"They said not to worry."

"What's wrong with the bus?" Ida asked, then more carefully, eyeing Jean's dampened sleeve, "Sorry."

"It's okay." Jean squeezed her thigh as if to say *Nobody saw you*. "I don't know what's wrong with the bus. They didn't say. Hopefully a quick fix."

Jean managed to step carefully over Frankie and across Ida to make it to the restroom. The tight, hexagonal space made it difficult to close the door. Jean had to lean back as far as she could to get the thing to latch over her swollen stomach. She tried to line the seat with paper, but most of the squares slipped into the bowl as the bus jounced over a rough spot in the road. Business done, she ran the faucet, splashing cool water up to her elbows and dabbing it along the back of her neck. Through the closed door, from the back row of bus seats, came the techno sounds of a Game Boy. Though Jean hadn't seen the player on her way in, she assumed it was a

school-age child and thought again for a moment of Ellis Gable. With a flash of regret, she hoped against hope he'd left no children behind. She really hadn't wanted to hurt him.

The breath that found its way to the depth of her lungs inched back out, shaking. Her choice had always been between her safety and another's, her comfort and another's, and the same rang true for protecting Ida. Had there been a kinder path, a cleaner path, she would've chosen it, and she wondered—were there any good choices for women in this world, or did they only ever have to choose who got harmed and to what degree?



The Northeast plateaued out into the Midwest. It is hard to know a place by feel, but if the lack of hills and valleys was any indication, Indiana was as flat as that silkscreen night. Jean knew that Laura was here, somewhere in this state, and knew even better that they couldn't contact her. To do so would put them in danger. Detectives might have called Laura already, and Jean and Ida had raised the children with all the same warnings: Work hard, keep your head down, and above all, avoid risk. If the detectives had called, Laura would've told them what she knew—which was nothing. And that was the way it had to stay.

As the bus whined into the Indianapolis station, there was only one permutation of events within the allowable margin of error: The mechanical issue was minor. It was repaired quickly. They got back on the road to St. Louis in time to catch the next bus.

Instead, "Mechanic will be here within the hour," the driver said over the intercom. "If you choose to deboard, you are responsible for your personal items."

"An hour?" Ida said. "He won't even be here for an hour?"

Jean wrangled her frustration. "Hopefully it's quicker than that."

"And then he'll have to figure out what's wrong. And then fix it."

"Yeah." The tally of time wasn't adding up in their favor. Jean checked the tickets. Without this delay, they had a two-and-a-half-hour grace period between this bus and the next one. Almost half that window would be

closed by the time the mechanic arrived.

The bus doors opened on a station lit by orange halogen bulbs, and passengers meandered off by ones and twos. Where the lamplight touched their skin, it left an orange tint, and where it couldn't reach, it painted lilting shadows that distorted their features. Jean watched from her seat through the windows.

This was all going wrong. Jean saw the odds sliding toward a loss, saw the hazard-colored glint of fear in the whites of Ida's eyes.

"I'll talk to the driver," she said. "I'm sure we're not the only ones with another bus to catch."

Jean pressed past Ida and gestured for her to remain in the seat. She made her way through the aisle, more blinded by the glare of the little runner lights than helped by them. Ida was probably right about her needing to wear glasses. Her sneaker snagged on a rogue bag handle, but she caught herself on an empty headrest before she went down to her knee. Recovering herself, she continued.

"Sir," she said when she reached the front. The driver was a Black man, about a decade younger than her from the white hairs scattered through his mustache and the clusters of tiny moles on his cheeks. "I know this is all out of your hands, but my friend and I have another bus to catch in St. Louis. I'm sure we're not the only ones."

The driver read notes from a clipboard. "I apologize for the inconvenience," he said without looking up.

"Oh, it's no trouble," said Jean. "I know you're doing the best you can. I just—is there any way you could assure me… assure all of us that we'll make it to St. Louis on time for the connection?"

The driver slipped his pen into the clipboard prong, placed it on his lap, and looked up at Jean as if to repeat a phrase he'd said a hundred times before. "Ma'am, I can't operate a bus that's having mechanical issues. We'll do everything we can to get you to St. Louis on time, but I can't make any guarantees."

"Is there another bus?"

"Headed to St. Louis?"

Jean nodded.

"Right now?" The driver's bushy eyebrows crept up toward his hairline to highlight the unlikelihood of it.

Jean hesitated.

“From here?”

She pulled her arms around herself. “I suppose not.”

The driver clicked his tongue in confirmation. “I apologize for the inconvenience, ma’am. You’re free to deboard, stretch your legs. Just don’t go too far. Wouldn’t want to miss you when we get everything squared away here.”

The walk back to Ida was longer than the walk before, more difficult under the burden of disappointing news and an ache in her knee from having to catch her earlier stumble. After a brief back-and-forth, the pair decided to get out and stretch their legs, taking Frankie and all their belongings they’d been permitted to board the bus with.

Ida checked the carrier for messes while Jean stretched her neck from side to side. Wind swept fast across the flat plain of the station. It was fiercer here than in Rockaway. March in Indianapolis carried a bite, and Jean’s eyes traced a shiver along the stretch of Ida’s shoulders. She wished she had brought a heavy coat.

“You okay?” she asked.

Ida bent up slowly from where she stooped over the carrier, eyes focusing first on Jean’s chin, then nose, then lashes. With a squint and a sarcastic grin, she put on a southern accent and said, “Why, Jean Bleaker, I’ve never been better! Can’t imagine why you’d ask.”

Jean chuckled. “My girl.”

“You know, Laura’s not far from here,” Ida said. “Shame we can’t see her place.”

“You know we can’t,” said Jean.

As Ida nodded, shadows pooled in the depths of her features. “She wouldn’t want any part of this.” Ida seemed to be saying it more to herself than to Jean, and it took every ounce of Jean’s restraint not to reach for her, to pull her into a hug and warm the gooseflesh that had popped up over the skin of her arms.

“What do you say we head inside? See if there’s coffee.”

“Coffee?” Ida asked. “At this hour? We’d be up until San Francisco.”

Jean picked their bags back up, Frankie’s carrier last. “I don’t mind being up with you,” she said. As she wove through the smattering of passengers, she didn’t look back, but she listened for the steady plod of

Ida's tennis shoes all the way to the glass double doors.

An hour passed. Then two. Ida declined the first cup of coffee but agreed to the second, and as the two women watched the clock hands angle away from any shot of making it to their bus in St. Louis, Jean tried her best to assuage Ida's worst fears.

"Could be worse," said Jean. "They don't seem to know who we are, and I'm sure there will be another bus from St. Louis, another bunch of tickets they'll exchange ours for."

"We haven't even gotten on our disguises. You think we're far enough that nobody cares?" Ida asked.

"For the moment," said Jean. "Not the long haul."

"You think we should check the police scanner?"

Jean looked around at the other passengers milling and weaving through the station. "We can't."

Ida nodded.

It was nearing three a.m., and though Jean checked intermittently through the glass double doors to confirm that the mechanic was working, there had been no update and no promise of departure. From the tapping of her foot and the fidgeting of her hands, Jean knew Ida had been anxious since deboarding the bus. The coffee hadn't helped. The station was a pressure cooker of disgruntled passengers, and Ida strummed the fingers of her right hand against the armrest with an impressive if not concerning rigor.

"I'll go ask," Jean said. "See if they'll tell us anything." She made her way past other travelers stranded in the station; some were alert for news on their changeover to the St. Louis bus, some hunkered down in the folds of a jacket for the night. The station was quiet, eerie in a way. The only conversations were had in hushed voices, and the orange halogen light seeped in through the doors. When Jean got outside, she was once again surprised by the chill and was surprised further to find the baggage compartment wide open. In the farthest reach of her hazy vision, her heart stopped as she noticed the figure of a man walking too quickly from the bus, both arms stretched tight from the weight of the heavy bags he carried.

Jean knew.

"No," she said aloud, and broke into a half jog. Even the modest speed

aggravated the pain from stumbling earlier, but she pushed through the groups of three and four gathered around the benches, gaze fixed on the tails of the man's coat, whipping in the wind.

"Hey, wait!" she called, but the man moved swiftly and steadily through the lot, gaining distance with every step Jean took to close it. He crossed beneath a streetlight, illuminating the bags he carried, and the sight of an army-green canvas duffle, lumpy and stuffed, made Jean yell again. "Stop! Hey, stop!"

The man flung open the door of a silver sedan, threw the bags inside and then himself. There was a red flash of taillights and a squeal of tires hitting a curb in reverse. Jean considered pulling the gun she had stashed in her purse, but she would probably miss the tires, and a gunshot would split the Indiana night, and definitely get them dragged into a police station.

"Stop him!" Jean's voice cracked in the cold air. "He's got my bag!" But she had quit jogging, quit moving entirely as the tissue burned behind her kneecaps and the utter shock of the unthinkable halted her where she stood.

A man's voice, about five feet behind, said, "Ma'am, you okay?"

"I think…" Jean stared into the spot where she'd last seen the taillights of the sedan. "He stole my bag."

"Oh no," said the man. "I'm sure you're mistaken, come, let's look." The man, who turned out to be the mechanic, ushered Jean, limping, back to the baggage compartment. He shifted around the luggage on top. "What's it look like?"

"It's gone," Jean said, eyes unfocused, jaw slightly ajar.

"No, no, it's gotta be here. Is it this one?" He held up the end of a roller in eggplant purple.

"Green canvas," said Jean, but she wasn't looking; she was thinking about how she was going to tell Ida they'd lost all the money they'd saved. Thinking about how important things were stolen away from her. The money, yes, and all the years she thought she had left with Ida. She was wondering what the hell they were going to do.

"Green canvas," said the mechanic, "green canvas…"

He sorted and shifted and held things to the light, and Jean said, "No, no, no."

The money was gone. She cursed herself for not insisting she take it with her onto the bus. She cursed herself for not trying to mend the tear in

the canvas before giving up the bag. And she cursed herself for going inside, for letting the bus out of her sight. Their other bags and suitcase were there, at least, but what help would that be? Clothes and toiletries would keep them clean until San Francisco but wouldn’t get them fed or housed there. Wouldn’t build Ida a life.

A gust ripped through the lot as the mechanic made apologies and the driver recited policies; and with that early spring wind, all of Jean’s hope was scattered across the plains as if it were nothing.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ida refused to cry in Indiana. She stared so intently into Frankie's carrier that her vision lost focus between tiny black circles of mesh, and though she heard what Jean was saying—that they could still get as far as St. Louis, figure it out from there, that they'd gotten out of worse scrapes before, the apologies and the rest—Ida knew with crystalline clarity the only possible path forward.

"I'll call Laura," she said.

Frankie's yellow eyes slitted with fatigue, Ida's exhaustion looking back at her.

"She won't come," said Jean.

"She'll come."

"It's not a good idea."

Ida clicked her tongue at Frankie. "It's all right, little prince. You'll get to stretch your legs soon."

"And what would we tell her? What kind of position would that put her in?" Jean barked a humorless laugh. "Remember when she cheated on that math test? Sixth grade? Broke down walking home from the bus and left a message on the school's answering machine the minute she got home. That girl can't live with a secret. She's—"

"She'll have to learn to," Ida said with finality. "Harvey's doing well for them, got that promotion. They can lend us enough money to get wherever we need to go."

"It's not right," said Jean, shaking her head and pulling her lips between her teeth. "It's too risky. It's not fair to—"

"Do you think any of this is fair?" Ida's chest rose and fell with the depth of her breathing. Why was it always her who had to suffer to make fairness for other people? Nobody had ever given her and Jean the same consideration. She checked around them for eavesdroppers, and when she didn't see any, she let loose the slew of wrongdoings that had been levied

against them to prove her point. “Was it fair when Richard broke your arm? When Eddie returned my red dress to Macy’s and then blew the money at the craps table?” Her fists clenched. “*Only whores wear red*. That’s what he said! And what about hiding away all these years, pretending to be *best friends*. Even with family, Jean, our own *kids*!”

“Listen, dear, the kids probably know. We’ve talked about this.”

“Oh yes,” said Ida, seething. “You have your big bright idea to just come out with it. Open discussion! And when the questions start about Richard and Eddie? What then? Your plan only goes as far as telling the love secret, but what about the other?”

“I don’t know,” said Jean, struck.

“Once we admit we’re together, they’re gonna want to know *Since when?* And what would we tell them? The *truth*?”

“I don’t know.”

“You do know,” said Ida. “Finding each other was the best and worst thing to ever happen to us.”

Both women were stilled by the breadth of the statement. It hurt sweetly. Like candy chewed over enough time to bore holes in bone, leaving a saccharine taste and a deep ache. *Best* because of who they were, and *worst* because of the time they were living in.

Ida unclenched her hands, taking a deep breath in. “I’m calling Laura. I’ll find a pay phone.”

Ida left Jean with Frankie and the heap of bags. A pay phone was nestled in the corner beside an out-of-order vending machine; Ida retrieved coins from her purse and dialed Laura’s home number.

She answered on the fourth ring, voice raspy. “Hello?”

“Laura, it’s your ma. I’m at the Indianapolis Greyhound station and you need to come get me. Now.”

Laura disconnected the line before any questions could be asked, and a shudder ran vertically up Ida’s breastbone. Ida remembered the incident when Laura cheated on that grade school test, the dramatic confession afterward. She remembered other things too. The time Laura walked Sara Paley home from school every day for a month when she heard some boys were picking on her. That summer a dove flew into her bike and hurt its wing, so her daughter volunteered at the animal shelter for two months straight. The fact that she’d saved herself for marriage, despite never being

taught she should. Laura was fastidious, but she was also virtuous, something that sprang unbidden in her DNA, certainly not passed down from Ida or her bastard of a father, but something innate, a deep need for justice and rightness and impeccability.

Would Laura come? Ida had felt so sure when she told Jean that she would, but as she stepped away from the pay phone, it felt far less certain. Doubt circled Ida's mind, doubt about whether the daughter she'd raised would go against all she'd taught her, against the fabric of her own integrity when Ida needed her most. And if she did come, Ida didn't know what that would mean. She could drive them straight to the police station, turn them in after they'd left, or maybe, worst of all, help them. Give them the money, learn what it means to live with a secret, and become just like her mother.

Despite the blowing wind, Ida and Jean carried their bags to an empty bench in front of the near-empty bus station. The exertion left a sheen of sweat across Jean's collarbone, and Ida was about to make a joke about Jean running hot even in this frigid weather, until Jean shivered. Ida watched the twitch of her shoulders roll down the length of her arms, saw the muscles in Jean's neck tighten, and when that didn't stop the quake, noticed with concern how Jean's forearms clenched and wrapped around her midsection.

"You okay?" Ida asked. She had so rarely seen Jean struggle, couldn't recall a time the woman had faltered, so even this shiver, this tremble, cracked open the bedrock of the woman she knew to reveal a new kind of worry.

"Fine," said Jean. Her hand shook as she unzipped the suitcase and rifled through to find a jacket. "Just cold."

"You look…" Ida placed the back of her palm on Jean's forehead as the woman sat down on the bench beside her. "Clammy," she said, taking her hand away.

"I'll be a new woman after a hot shower and a good night's sleep." Jean faced forward, toward the empty parking lot and the median line planted with pine trees and the two-lane road beyond.

Ida didn't believe her. "You coming down with something?" she asked, watching the V-shaped wrinkles at the corner of Jean's right eye.

"Just exhausted," said Jean. "Hot. And cold." The woman remained unmoving, apart from her pupils, which traced the horizontal lines of

headlights in the distance. “You really think she’ll come?”

“She’ll come,” Ida said, running her fingers over Jean’s in the divot of space between their legs. She almost said, *Because she has to*. “She’ll come.”

Ida didn’t know how far Laura’s house was from the bus station. She had never visited her in Indianapolis, but she figured half an hour would be a reasonable time to expect her, if she was coming.

“What kind of car does she drive?” Jean asked.

“She had a Honda,” said Ida.

“That was years back. I bet Harvey bought her something new. Just wish I knew what to look out for.”

Ida joined Jean in watching cars. She caught the gist of an announcement from inside the bus station saying their bus was repaired, calling the passengers to reboard.

“You’re sure about this?” Jean asked. “We could still get to St. Louis. It’s farther away than here and we wouldn’t have to drag Laura into all this, if she even shows.”

“We need her to lend us some money. She’ll show.”

“Ida,” Jean said over another shiver, drawing her jacket tighter across her shoulders, “if she doesn’t come, we’re stuck here. We’ve got no cash. Enough in our wallets to put us up at a cheap motel maybe three, four nights tops. But then what?”

“It’d be the same in St. Louis. At least here we’ve got somebody. We’ve got a shot.”

Jean nodded, still holding herself in a bear hug. “You’re right,” she said. “I just wish we didn’t have to.”

Ida watched a tractor-trailer glide past. “Me too.”

After ten minutes, the Greyhound they’d arrived on was finally moving. It circled the bus station and pulled out onto the main road, and Jean and Ida watched it roll away with an unspoken worry that they’d made a mistake.

Fifteen minutes slipped by and then twenty, feeling instead like hours, and as Ida glanced over her shoulder to make out the hands on the clock on the wall inside the bus station, Jean stared more intently at the passing traffic.

“She wouldn’t call the cops on us, would she?” Jean asked.

Ida's head whipped around as quick as her age would allow, scanning the road for low, mean headlights. Police drove Crown Victorias. Ida didn't need to watch crime shows to know that, and they had a distinct look to them, glowering, crouched, even in the dark. "I don't think so," she said, but suddenly every oncoming pair of headlights seemed to creep by too slowly, maliciously, ready to pounce.

Ida followed a yellowed set from the farthest corner of her vision, only breathed when it passed beneath a streetlight, revealing itself to be a minivan.

Jean rubbed at her arms, even as a new line of sweat broke out across her upper lip. "She wouldn't," but Jean and Ida both froze as a black sedan crept down the side road leading to the bus station lot.

"Is that…?" Ida asked.

"I—"

Its engine purred low, something expensive, built to fly. But the black car refused its power, inching forward as if rolling in neutral. Ida's skin tingled with the distinct sense of being watched. Out of instinct, she reached for Frankie's carrier, folding her fingers around the handle. "Maybe we should go inside."

The black sedan snuck closer, gliding through the left to bring it into the lot.

"We can't run," Jean said, terror raising the pitch of the words.

Ida gripped the carrier ever tighter as the car moved close enough to make out a set of police lights on its top. The cage between the back seat and front became visible under orange parking lot lights, and Ida felt those steel bars close around her, penning her in, though she still sat on that bench in the open air. This was it. It was over. She reached for Jean's hand. Found it warm, and as blue and red lights illuminated the lot, she said, "I love you, Jean. There's not a moment I would take back."

"Even if you tried," Jean said. "I wouldn't let you have it. I love you, my sweet girl." Tears filled her eyes, reflecting back the flashes of red and blue.

The cop car pulled broadside along the curb where Jean and Ida sat, their fingers intertwined. They weren't ready. Ida still felt too young in that moment, too green for it all to come to an end.

Jean squeezed.

Ida squeezed back.

The police car flipped on its siren, and just as Ida braced for the worst to happen, she heard a call come through the car's cracked window. There was a radio crackle.

"10-4, unit 780 responding," she heard.

And by some miracle, a perfect slip of the finger of fate, the police car swung a hard right and sped out of the Greyhound station parking lot.

Ida was still trembling when a silver SUV pulled into the lot, adrenaline blazing through her veins, making mincemeat of her muscles. A tinted window rolled down, and there was Laura, a windbreaker pulled over her pajama set and a single finger pressed to her lips. Four doors unlocked, and the driver's-side door clicked open.

"Not a word," whispered Laura. "Don't wake them."

In the back seat, Chelsea slept with an arm tossed over the side of her seat and her neck stretched long. Jill, two years her junior, slumped onto her older sister from her car seat, dirty-blond curls frizzing over her face. The girls left a space large enough for Jean to squeeze into, if she didn't breathe too hard. Ida would be expected to take the front.

After stacking their bags and suitcase into the trunk, the women took their positions, Ida placing Frankie's smelly carrier on her lap and fastening the seat belt over them both.

Not one word, Laura mouthed as she put the car into drive, and the twenty-minute ride was silent but for the gentle, loping snores of the children. Ida's daughter pulled into a paver driveway shaped like a key. The house was, like all in the neighborhood, grand. Motion-sensor lights flicked on to illuminate the two-story embellished with stacked stone and embracing a two-and-a-half-car garage. Warm light filtered through sheer curtained windows, which were framed by white window boxes, which were planted with magenta annuals too high for Laura to reach.

As the SUV rolled to a full stop, Ida turned around to gaze at her grandchildren, longing to reach out a hand and smooth the frizz from Jill's face, but she glanced back to the driver's seat to find her daughter's warning look, and instead Ida opened the door carefully, quietly, stepping out of the car with Frankie in hand.

The car stayed running as the women unloaded the luggage from the trunk, still not even a pleasantry exchanged, and when the car was empty and Jean was loaded down, Laura said, "Guest room, upstairs. I'll meet you

up there.”

Ida, in no position to make a fuss, simply nodded. Jean followed her up to the front door and through it, into the foyer with the double spiral staircase, beneath the chandelier of what Ida first thought to be faux crystal but could have been real. Each woman stepped carefully on the wooden stairs, although Chelsea and Jill were still outside, hesitant to disturb the home they had forced themselves upon. They passed a lilac room with a unicorn picture in a gilded frame, then a peach room with a Spice Girls poster. At the end of the hall, they found a room painted the color of sand. A perfectly agreeable comforter of a nondescript floral design and the white matching nightstands free of clutter let them know they’d found the guest room. Jean unloaded the bags with a heavy sigh. “It’s good to see the girls,” she said. “They’ve gotten so big.”

Ida nodded, pushing back the strangle of sadness at not being able to hug them, to see their looks of surprise and toothy little smiles. Already she was thinking of what the girls might want for Christmas at this age, and just as quickly realized the folly in wondering that. However this went, she doubted she’d be watching them open anything on Christmas morning. That thought was enough to break her resolve to keep going, so instead she looked down at Frankie.

“You ready, little prince?” Her voice fractured over the last words, just a bit, but she turned the full force of her mind toward setting up everything he’d need for the night, drawing out food and bowls and creating a makeshift litterbox out of a shoebox from the closet and some magazines Laura had placed on the nightstand. Meanwhile, Jean sorted their belongings and retrieved must-haves.

Through the window, the headlights of the SUV still beamed, and from here, Ida could tell the magenta flowers in the window boxes were pansies. There was a creak up the stairs, and Ida couldn’t help but lean into the doorway and watch Laura carry Jill, still asleep, down the hall to her room.

There was an empty moment, thirty seconds or less, before Laura reemerged from the lilac room, shutting the door behind her. She gestured Ida away with an angry flick of the wrist, and Ida found herself stepping backward until she could no longer see down the hall. It surprised her, cowing to her own daughter, but Ida knew what she had asked of Laura, and the shame of it made her mild.

When the staircase creaked again, Ida didn't look. Instead, she imagined Chelsea being tucked into those frilly bedsheets, beneath the Spice Girls poster and surrounded by Beanie Babies. She envisioned Laura's kiss at the top of her head, and Chelsea's shallow, steady breathing deepening again to a snore.

Jean and Ida waited, sitting side by side on the bed and touching only what they had to. There were footsteps, then a pause in the hall. When Laura appeared in the doorframe, she shut the door behind her. Her windbreaker had fallen open, revealing Laura's red silk pajama set with the buttons looped wrong. Ida felt Laura planning what to say as she rolled one hand inside the other, a gesture she'd picked up from her mom.

"The police called me," she said with a wrinkled upper lip, brows pinched in heavy consternation. "This afternoon." Laura raised a hand to stop Jean and Ida from speaking. "I've been worried sick."

Ida started, "We—"

But Laura's fingers splayed out. "But then you called me."

"It wasn't—" Ida said, but her daughter turned her back.

"I do not want to know," said Laura.

"Laura," said Jean, and Laura winced as if struck.

"I don't want to know a single thing." Laura grabbed the hem of her windbreaker, and her grip slipped three times before she was able to fasten one end of the zipper into the other. "Whatever you did," she said, drawing the jacket closed, "whatever happened, keep me and my family out of it."

Ida's molars pressed together at the back of her jaw. "I am your family," she said. "I am your mother."

Laura looked up, eyes wide, revealing the whites. "You can stay the night," she said. "Bathroom's down the hall."

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ida and Jean lay beside one another on the creaky queen bed, both staring at the popcorn ceiling, neither saying a word. Exhaustion won its battle with Ida first, and when it did, Jean rolled onto her side, looking over the placid face of the woman she'd loved more than half her life. Despite the circumstances, Jean appreciated the opportunity to see Laura and the grandkids. While she never experienced the anguish other parents did at becoming empty-nesters, there was a distinct joy in seeing the people she'd raised become successful and independent. It made her miss her own children, Barbara and George, all the more, and it made her wonder about Ida's son Charlie. What kind of life had he built for himself over the decades since they last spoke? Was he married? Respected at work? Was he happy? He was healthy and stable, that much Barbara would share, but nothing else, not even the city he settled in.

Jean sank into sleep eventually, and when she did, she dreamed of the back end of a yellow Chrysler slipping beneath the mirrored surface of Lake Ronkonkoma, taking so much with it.

Dawn came, waking Jean, who opened her eyes just in time to see Laura slip a note under the door.

Jean listened as Laura got Jill and Chelsea ready for school, a sheet of drywall and a world away. She didn't wake Ida, figuring she needed the sleep. Instead, Jean kissed Ida's forehead lightly and took care to dampen her footsteps as she crossed the room to retrieve the note.

Stay in there until I drop the girls at school.

Jean folded the note into halves and halves again and threw it in the waste bin before her lover ever saw. Through the white-paned window, she watched Laura's SUV pull out of the driveway, and only then did she feed Frankie and ready herself for the day.

Between dressing and teeth brushing, Ida woke.

"Go back to sleep," Jean said, wintergreen foam on her lip. "It's barely

dawn. You need it.”

The woman didn’t argue, just rolled over with a grumble and drifted off.



Jean had brewed a pot of coffee and was halfway through her cup at the pinewood kitchen table when Laura returned. She tossed her keys into her purse and hung it on the corner coat rack.

“Have a seat,” said Jean, setting the mug on a stone coaster. “You’re going to listen to me.” She gestured at the empty chair beside her, and though Laura chewed her bottom lip, she did as she was asked. Steam curled off the lip of the mug, and Jean wove four fingers inside the handle. “You’re right to be angry. We dragged you into something. You’ve got a beautiful life set up here, and nobody in your position would want to ruin that.”

Laura shook her head, eyes drifting from kitchen to living room to table. “Don’t tell me—”

“Hush.” Jean rose from her chair, grabbed another mug from where they hung neatly in a row beside the stove, and poured Laura a cup of her own. “I know I’m not your mom, but I raised you, and that’s something.” She added creamer and two sugars, stirred with the same spoon she’d used for hers. “I’m dying, Laura.” Jean looked into Laura’s hazel eyes. Found them disbelieving. “I’m dying soon.” She tried to pass the cup, but Laura didn’t seem to even see it, quivering eyelids still fixed on Jean. So Jean set the cup on a coaster beside her. “Ida doesn’t know, and you’re not going to tell her. But you are going to help us, because… Dammit, we raised you! And we need you now.”

Laura placed her fingertips on the mug’s handle, her expression glazed. “If you’re sick, we can find you a doctor. We can—”

“Stop.” Jean placed her palm over Laura’s. “Stop with that, please. What we need is money. From the looks of this house, you’ve got plenty of it. And I’ve never asked you for anything before, so—”

“Just wait,” Laura said, grabbing her chin as if to rouse herself from a daze. “Your Medicare should cover—”

“Please stop.”

The kitchen phone rang. Laura and Jean looked at it from their spots at the table. It rang again.

Jean said, “You should get that.”

Laura jumped up, crossed the room in three paces. “Hello?” She closed her eyes as she released a deep sigh. “Oh, Charlie. Yes, they’re fine. They’re here.” Jean tensed and Laura, realizing the precariousness of the situation, turned toward the wall. “It’s not a good time,” she said. “I’ll fill you in later.” With that, she disconnected the line.

“You’re in touch,” said Jean, picturing Charlie as he was when she’d seen him last, eighteen and equal parts resentment and promise. It was a relief that Ida’s kids were still talking. But it hurt too.

“Yeah,” Laura said, walking hesitantly back to the table. “He’s my brother,” she said, the hazel of her eyes covered by her lashes as her gaze drifted down to the floor.

“Of course.” Jean glanced into the warm brown of her coffee. “Of course he is.” She swirled caramel-colored liquid at the bottom of her mug. Laura and Charlie had a way of highlighting the biological relationships in their blended family, never adopting a nickname for Jean outside of her given one and placing a special emphasis on their sibling relationship with one another. It wasn’t that Laura was cold to Barbara, George, and Jean, but there always seemed to be a warmer place inside her reserved for the Holloways. “How is he?”

The word was strangled. “Good.” And then a beat.

“Good.”

“How long do you have?” asked Laura, now facing Jean but with the look Jean had dreaded since she’d gotten the news. It was why she hadn’t told anyone. Not even Barbara. There was pity in the dips of Laura’s cheeks, a sense that she wasn’t looking at Jean but looking right through her, like Jean was already dead. Already a ghost.

“Long enough.” Jean’s stomach turned when she looked back at the coffee. She grabbed her mug and dumped the contents into the kitchen sink. “I need to get your mother set up somewhere new. But I need a way to get there. A car.”

“I have money,” said Laura, standing and snatching her purse from the coat hook. “There’s”—she counted—“I don’t know, a hundred here. But

there’s more in the bedroom. Maybe a thousand or two.”

“A thousand *or two*?”

“Harvey travels a lot.” A self-consciousness about the state of her financial affairs, perhaps a guilt, was present in the shift of her weight across her hips. “It’s in case something happens.”

“I see,” said Jean, and in a somber tone she added, “Something happened.”

“I don’t—”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Right.” Laura’s hand grasped the banister of the stairs. “I’ll get the money.”

Of all the children, Laura had most deeply internalized the household’s version of a *Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell* policy. Were Ida and Jean more than just friends? Probably, but don’t ask. Did Eddie and Richard really just run off one night because of a gambling debt? The answer was calcified in a careful, rehearsed silence, forty years thick. The only child of the four who seemed to have pieced the full truth together was Charlie, and only because of what he saw at Lake Ronkonkoma. Even without the closure of having his suspicions confirmed, the hunch of who his mother was and what she’d done had sent him to the opposite end of the country. So Jean was perfectly content sparing Laura the details. “You’ll keep this between us, right?” asked Jean.

Laura climbed three stairs, then four, nodding, but not turning back.

“I have your word?”

She paused on the landing. “I won’t tell Mom you’re sick. It’s not my place.” Then, under her breath, she added, “But you should, Jean.”

Jean watched Laura reach the height of the staircase and disappear down the hall. She took it upon herself to clear Laura’s untouched coffee cup, then listened for movement upstairs. Hearing some shuffling, low and distant, she grabbed the address book beside the phone, committed Charlie’s phone number to memory, and put it back in its spot.



Ida readied herself in the bathroom, which made it easy for Jean to tuck the money away, avoiding an explanation of how she came to get it, at least for that moment. She could tell Ida that she'd stored away a bit of the pension money before it was stolen, she thought, or that there had been more of it than Ida was aware of, but that would make it seem like Jean had been lying to her. And because Jean *had* been lying to her, she couldn't be raising undue suspicion.

She settled on telling Ida an edited version of the truth, that she'd spoken to Laura, made her see the reason in helping them. That is what had happened, after all, absent one specific detail, a detail Ida would come to learn when the time was right. That time was not now.

Ida popped her head into the guest room, her curls still pinned on her head. "This is the perfect place to get in our disguises."

"I don't think Laura will appreciate—"

"I'll go ask her."

Jean heard Ida's footsteps down the hall and the stairway. She clicked on the police scanner and shuffled through some channels. Men spat bits of code back and forth. From their tone, Jean didn't get the sense that any of it was terribly urgent, and she didn't hear the names Bleaker or Holloway or any descriptions that would match theirs. She listened until she heard Ida's raised voice saying, "Fine!" and then the sound of her ascending the staircase. Jean flipped off the scanner and put it away in one of their bags.

"She said no," Ida said, entering the room while pulling out her hairpins with a sour expression. "Thinks the dye will mess up her bathroom."

When Ida was as dressed and polished as one could be while on the road, the pair went downstairs. Ida fetched a coffee mug and sat at the kitchen table. Jean joined her there, taking the seat beside her as she would've at home, pouring them both a cup although the smell was still making her nauseated. The absence of flowers on the pinewood table seemed a glaring omission, a phantom reminder that they were not at home, that everything had changed.

With Laura closed in her den after mentioning something about an online shopping site called eBay, Jean said, "We should check the answering machine."

Ida huffed an acknowledgment, seemingly more concerned about her daughter's lack of interest in spending time with her. "She's avoiding us,"

Ida said.

“She’s upset,” said Jean. “Scared.” In truth, Jean was relieved that Laura had made herself scarce. The girl wasn’t a good enough liar to hold on to Jean’s secret for long, and the less conversation they had, the more likely Jean got Ida out of there before the truth was spilled. “She gave us some money. I talked with her this morning.”

At that, Ida’s grimace softened.

To avoid probing questions on the talk she’d had with Laura, Jean grabbed the phone on the kitchen wall. “Come on,” she said to Ida. “Let’s see what we’ve missed.”

Jean’s finger hovered over the phone’s soft buttons, but Ida remained seated. Jean mapped out the number for Charlie in her mind but called their own voice mailbox instead.

“You’ve reached the Bleaker and Holloway residence,” said the recording. It felt painfully nostalgic hearing Ida’s voice unburdened by all that had happened over the past twenty-four hours.

“We’re not able to come to the phone right now,” said a recording of Jean’s.

“But if you leave your name and number, we will get back to you.”

Jean punched in numbers.

Five unheard messages.

First message.

“Mrs. Bleaker,” said a woman’s voice. It was kind, formal. “This is Angela from Dr. Greenblatt’s office. Apologies for calling, as I see it’s indicated in your file that you prefer mail, however, we haven’t heard from you since your most recent test results…”

Jean stepped backward toward the wall, studying Ida’s expression for any sign that she could hear.

“It’s important that we get paperwork in order to ensure you have coverage for the hospice services indicated on the letter we sent you. Please give us a call back at your earliest convenience. The number is 347-555-9944. That number again is 347-555-9944.”

Ida’s face remained neutral, flexing only when she seemingly got a bitter swallow of coffee. Jean pressed a button.

Message deleted.

Second message.

“Ma, it’s George. Calling you back, and guessing Barbara told you about the divorce. Listen, I’d rather not talk about it so just give me some space __”

Message deleted. She didn’t have time to sort through this now.

Third message.

“Jean, this is Jim Friedman. There’s quite a bit of commotion around your house. Seems like maybe one of the workers was hurt on your property. Call me back as soon as you get this, it’s a potential liability issue. Thanks.”

Press 7 to delete this message. Press 3 to save it for later and skip to the next message. The recording repeated as guilt thrummed in Jean’s belly.

Message deleted.

Fourth message.

“This is Detective Rollins with the Rockaway Police Department. We need to speak with Ida Holloway and Jean Bleaker concerning an incident which occurred today. Call me back at 347-555-1346.”

There it was. The message she’d feared was coming. Jean’s thoughts raced over the robotic voice in her ear. Was Ellis a missing person? Or had they found his body? What if he had somehow survived and told the police everything Jean and Ida had done? *Press 7 to delete this message. Press 3 to save it for later and skip to the next message.* Her face must have betrayed her panic, because worry bloomed in the lines at the center of Ida’s forehead. Jean thought back to the APB that had come over the scanner. *10-62, 10-62.* She didn’t know what it meant and hadn’t had the means to look it up. *Press 7 to delete this message. Press 3 to save it for later and skip to the next message.* She could ignore the detective. The police were already looking for her, but if she called the detective back, played it as if they’d been out of town, had no idea what was going on at 1080 Peachtree Way and were willing to come in to answer questions, that might buy them some time. *Press 7 to delete this message. Press 3 to save it for later and skip to the next message.* What if they tracked the call? No, it was too risky. Too dangerous. Plus, there was still a good chance Laura would call in their visit the moment they left. She had to get Ida out of this.

Press 7 to delete this message. Press 3 to save it for later and skip to the next message.

Message saved.

Fifth message.

"Ma, this is Barbara. The police just called and I—I don't know what's going on. What's happening, Ma? Are you okay? Please… please call me. God, I hope you're okay—"

"What is it?" Ida asked.

Jean let her teeth graze over her bottom lip, catching a bit of dead skin and dragging it free. She heard the pain in Barbara's lilting tone of voice as the message went on, and wished deeply she could call her. Just let her know her ma was all right.

"What is it?" Ida asked again.

Message deleted.

"The police called," Jean said, hanging up the phone. "We need to get as far as we can as quick as we can."

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

As far as we can turned out to be Crawfordsville, Indiana. It took a little over an hour in the morning traffic, a period over which Laura, driving, asked no questions, and only turned her head away from the road to cast the occasional incredulous look toward Jean. Ida figured Laura must have blamed Jean for their situation, and had half a mind to tell her daughter to show a bit more respect toward the woman who helped raise her. Ultimately, however, Ida knew Jean would be embarrassed if she did, so Ida kept quiet.

When the silver SUV turned into a diner's parking lot and parked in the far corner, Laura's lips formed into a question, but she closed them again before any sound came out.

"Thank you," said Jean as the car idled and the silence became increasingly tense.

Ida's hand curled around the door handle, and she considered departing with the usual rote pleasantries. *I'll let you know when we get there. I'll see you soon.* But, finding none of them honest and none of them true, she simply said, "I love you, Laura," and leaned across the center console to grip her daughter in a hug. Laura's body was stiff, but Ida felt Laura's fingertips find their way to her back and then the press of her arms, and then the softening of her posture as her daughter surrendered resentment to all the love inside her. "I'm sorry for this."

Laura sniffed and nodded.

Jean collected their bags and suitcase from the trunk, stacking them in a heap on the swale, then circled around to the driver's-side window. She said something to Laura through the glass, something Ida couldn't quite make out as she gathered Frankie's carrier from the back seat, but whatever it was, it left a smile over the sadness in Laura's watery eyes.

"You'll be okay," Laura said as Ida prepared to shut the passenger door. "If you need…" Laura's eyes fluttered away from Ida, her gaze passing

through the windshield, then down to the base of the steering wheel before they met Ida's again. "I love you, Mom."

"Kiss the grandbabies for me," said Ida.

"And also for me," said Jean.

The women watched as Laura rolled backward out of the parking space, checking blind spots and using blinkers and driving the speed limit back onto the main road.

Ida considered Laura's parting words, the half offer of help before it was rescinded and the expression of love that felt also like forgiveness. "Do you think she's going to call the police?" she asked.

"She could," said Jean. "But I don't think she will." Palm placed on Ida's shoulder, Jean turned toward the diner. "We can do this. Come on, let's get inside."

"How are we getting a car?" Ida asked before moving.

"Every town's got a shady car dealer. But dealerships mean paperwork so…"

Ida lifted Frankie's carrier, a knowing grin curling her lips as an idea struck her. "I've got a way. Follow me."

The pair strode into Sweetie's, a typical small-town diner with its chrome-edged bar top and brightly colored booths. On a bulletin board by the hostess stand was a flyer for the upcoming Strawberry Festival and a handmade sign asking for donations to the Chadwick "Crazies" basketball team. Ida asked, sweet as the pies in their display case, for a table for two.

They were seated at a red booth by a window overlooking the street. "Nikki will be right by to help you," the hostess said, then turned, sneakers catching on the sticky floor, and went back to her stand.

As Jean's gaze followed passing cars in the two-lane road outside, Ida glanced around at the other tables. A family of four sat at the booth across the room, the mother using napkins to absorb milk from an overturned cup. Catty-corner, two teenagers wearing black clothes that shone with silver safety pins looked to be skipping school. Sitting on a stool at the bar top was where Ida found what she was looking for: a man alone, mid-forties, a buffalo button-down hanging over his beer belly, and reading a newspaper.

"Be right back," she said. Ida approached the man and sat on the stool beside him. He was entirely engrossed, leaning close to read fine print under a headline that read *Stock Skyrocketing in the Eastern Markets*.

“Excuse me.”

He looked up, revealing broken blood vessels in his left eye and a recently trimmed mustache.

“Would you mind if I borrowed a section?” She indicated not the newspaper section in his hands, but the pieces folded and placed neatly out of range of the condensation leaking off his soda.

“I reckon so,” he said with a happy gesture. “You keep it.”

“Oh, well, that’s nice.” Ida plucked the folded newspaper off the bar top and tucked it under her arm, thrown by the man’s friendliness. “You have a good day.”

“You take care,” he said.

She carried it back to the table, Jean watching her the whole way.

“You can bet your bottom every diner in America has a man inside reading a newspaper,” Ida said, delivering the paper with a smack of triumph. “Classifieds.”

From the brightness in her eyes, Jean seemed to realize what Ida had minutes earlier. The classifieds had loads of cars for sale; they could look through them without making any calls, showing their faces, or, God forbid, trying to operate a computer. “My girl,” said Jean. The gap of her missing tooth showed in the corner of her smile, and Ida beamed.

“See? I can plan stuff too,” she said.

Over a table steaming with bacon and eggs, toast and waffles, the two scoured the classifieds section, circling in pen any cheap cars for sale.

Ida vetoed a green Volkswagen and Jean a Buick in tan, but when the former found a ’92 Lincoln Town Car, black paint, cloth seats, and seventy thousand miles for the price of $2,500, both were in agreement.

“We’ll make the offer in cash,” Jean said.

“What else would we offer?”

“I just mean maybe it’ll help him come down on price.”

“Cash is all we got,” said Ida.

“I know that.”

“I doubt he would take a credit card anyhow.”

“I know.”

“Or check.”

“I know, Ida.” Jean took a long sip of water through her straw. “I meant for negotiating—”

“I know what you meant.”

Ida and Jean regarded one another across the table, a mischievous glint in their eyes. It was Jean who looked away first, copying the phone number onto a napkin. “I’ll ask the hostess to use the phone.”

“Great.” Ida couldn’t help but continue to smile.

“Be right—”

“You going to say it?” Ida asked, feeling smug.

Jean paused, midway to standing. Still facing the hostess stand, she muttered, “You did good.”

“What?” Ida asked, leaning in an ear.

“You did good, dear,” Jean said more clearly.

Ida folded her arms across her chest, sitting deeper into the booth. “Damn right.”

Jean was back in five with more writing on the napkin. “Earliest he can see us is noon.”

“Did you ask about price?”

“Better to wait, I think. Ask in person.”

Ida considered opening a bag of cash at the home of a stranger. What was to stop him from keeping the car and taking the money? Every woman knew better than to trust a strange man, Ida chief among them. “You still have the, uh…” Ida held her hand low, formed her fingers into the shape of a gun.

“Yup.”

“Okay,” she said. “Okay.”

Frankie pawed at the mesh of his carrier, slitted eyes tracking a lizard as it crawled across the window.

“What do we do until noon?”

Jean flicked her fingers at the waitress, indicating they’d like the check. “Think I saw a movie theater a ways back. We could catch that Meg Ryan __”

“God, no. Wait…” Ida paused as the waitress dropped the check and made her way through the tables in the dining room. “I saw a motel a few plazas down.”

“Okay?”

“Well, Mrs. Crime Shows, wouldn’t you agree it’s time for a disguise?”

Jean made the face of a woman reluctant to admit her partner was right.

“Fine,” she said. “But I’m not dressing as a man.”



An hour later, in the nicotine-stained walls of a pay-by-the-hour motel room, Jean dressed as a man. “It’s awful,” she said, turning up a lip at her reflection in the scuzzy bathroom mirror. “Nobody will believe it.” The blue-and-green flannel drew tight across her chest and waterfalled over her swollen belly.

“Put on the glasses,” said Ida.

“No, thank you.” Jean extended both arms fully, straining the seams until Ida thought they’d rip.

“Come on, it’s not that bad.”

Readers sat folded on the bed, tag still affixed. Jean scraped at the adhesive tag with her fingernail until it tore, then slid the pair over the bridge of her nose. “It’s not better,” she said, taking in her appearance again.

Ida poured a sharp-smelling solution from one bottle into another. As dye and developer mixed, vermilion and white combined to form a deep mauve. Shaking the bottle with a fingertip pressed over the opening, she said, “We could at least try the bleach.”

Mattress coils heaved under Jean’s rump as she plopped down onto it. “They’re looking for two old ladies. Red hair and black. If you go darker, I go lighter, that’s still what they’re going to get.”

“I’m going *cherry cola*,” Ida said, repeating what she’d read on the box.

“Darker.”

“Not black.”

“You think a cop knows the difference?”

“Between black and cherry cola?”

“Well, I don’t think they’re carrying a L’Oréal shade guide in their cruisers. Dark is dark.”

Ida scooted on a pair of disposable gloves. “Let’s hope for both of our sakes you’re right. Anybody who mistakes black and deep red isn’t smart enough to find us.”

“We should check the scanner again,” Jean said, lying flat on the top sheet and thinking back to the detective’s message.

“We will,” said Ida, drawing a line down her center part with her pinky finger and squeezing out the solution. She blended it out with her fingers, going section by section and doing her best to swipe up the globs of rogue dye from her forehead. The dye was quick, leaving pinkish stains around her temple that she hoped the shower would wash off. “What is it you said to Laura?” she asked, reaching the hair behind the back of her ear.

“Not much,” said Jean, still lying flat on the top sheet. “Just that she had plenty of money and we needed her help.”

“I don’t mean about the money,” said Ida. “I mean when she dropped us off.”

“Oh,” Jean said, a note higher than Ida might have expected. The mattress springs groaned as Jean flipped onto her side, facing away from where Ida stood in the bathroom. “Just saying goodbye.”

Ida stared at the taut fabric under Jean’s shoulder, imagined the beads of sweat beneath her hairline, and felt again that she was lying. Rather than leap to an accusation, she finished applying the dye, first at the roots and then massaging it outward, part by part, section by section. Ida had never known Jean to lie, yet a nagging feeling tugged inside her chest. Could she have told Laura what happened?

Ida slicked back her hair, coated root to tip in a paste of vivid violet, stripped off her gloves, and used a dampened length of toilet paper to wipe away the spots on her ears and neck. Frankie brushed against her calf, then wove between her ankles, making soft cat sounds all the while.

Ida looked at her lover where she lay atop the bedspread. Jean seemed different somehow. “Jean?” she asked.

Jean didn’t move as she replied, “Yes, dear?”

“Jean.”

Jean turned, facing up again at the ceiling and then flopping onto her other side. “Yeah?”

Are you hiding something from me?

Ida almost asked it, just like that, but backed off the question at the last moment. “Promise me something,” she said instead. “Whatever happens, it’s you and me.” Ida swallowed, the enormous weight of everything they’d done threatening to break her calm exterior. “Until the end. Right?”

Jean rocked her body into a sitting position, dark eyes locked on Ida's cornflower blues. It was rare for Ida to ask for something as sacred as a promise. "Come here," she said, reaching out and motioning Ida forward.

Ida padded across the carpet, placing her hips between Jean's outstretched hands and allowing herself to be pulled into an embrace.

"It's you and me," Jean said, face pressed hard against Ida's sternum. "My every thought is about you and me."

Ida let the hug outlast her strength. Fumes from the hair dye stung at her eyes and she told herself that was the reason she was blinking back tears. "At least Laura's doing well for herself," Ida said, breaking the hold and the somber gravity between them. "Harvey must've gotten one hell of a promotion."

"Beautiful house," said Jean. "Great for Chelsea and Jill."

"Could use a pool." Ida shuffled back to the bathroom, collecting the empty box and empty bottle and discarding them in the trash before shutting off the light. *Me and Jean*, she thought. *Forever and always.* "What time is it?"

"Eleven eighteen."

"Eleven thirty-eight, eleven thirty-eight," Ida repeated for her memory's sake.

"Only twenty minutes?"

"I always do twenty for hair dye."

"Think it's supposed to be twenty-five."

Ida tugged at her collar and looked, confirming that the dampness she felt was an oblong spot of cotton fibers soaked in violet. "So much for this top."

"We'll get you a new one," Jean said.

"I liked it."

"Well…" Jean let out an exasperated sigh. "Sorry for your loss."

Ida flipped the collar to find that the dye had bled through and left a stain on her collarbone. "Feed Frankie, would you?" As she did, Ida rifled through their bags for another outfit. At the top was the third bottle of dye, temporary black. "Then close him in the bathroom."

Jean sat up straighter. "What?" she asked. "Why?"

Ida read the back of the box. *Gentle, Deposit only.* "They're looking for two ladies, right? Red hair, black hair, and a gray-and-black cat."

“They don’t know we have Frankie.”

“You don’t know that,” said Ida.

“I do.”

“You haven’t even checked the scanner!”

“I did at Laura’s, and besides that, why would they—”

“I’ve had about enough of you thinking you’re the only one who knows how to get us out of this jam,” Ida said, the cardboard box folding in on itself under the pressure of her grip. “Watching shows doesn’t make you an expert. I found us the car. I got us disguises. Let me help!”

Jean’s fingertips slid from the center of her forehead to her temples. “You want to dye the cat,” she said, voice low and riddled with exhaustion.

“Temporarily.”

She shook her head, eyes closed. “You want to dye Frankie black.”

“Temporarily!”

“How are you going to dye a cat, Ida?”

“In the bathtub.”

“And you think he’s just going to sit patiently during the twenty-five-minute processing time?”

“Twenty minutes.”

“Ida.”

“Jean!” Ida’s tone was sharp, falling upon the other woman like a thunderclap.

“This is a bad idea,” Jean said under her breath. Ida knew Jean knew the battle was lost, so after Frankie ate and the room smelled like tuna gone bad, she gathered him up in her arms and planted him in the bathroom, shutting the door behind her.



Thirty-two minutes later, the shower curtain was soaked, Ida’s arms were raked raw, and Frankie was still gray and black, just with some additional patchy black splotches. He was howling something awful.

“I told you,” said Jean, shaking her head and applying a wet compress to Ida’s forearm. “I told you.”

Ida's lips curled over her teeth. The scratches stung but her pride stung worse. "We should call a cab," she said, wincing as Jean blotted an area of skin, raised and angry.

"This is going to get infected."

Ida placed a hand over the rag, stopping Jean mid-blot. "It's almost noon."

"You need disinfectant," said Jean, refusing to release her grip on the washcloth. "Bandages."

Ida pressed the rag tight to her skin and pulled back, slipping her arm and the washcloth from Jean's fingers. "We need a car."

"Stubborn," Jean said. "Ida Holloway, you are stubborn as a mule."

"And twice as mean." Ida turned her back on Jean, signaling her to make the call to the taxi company while she ran the washcloth under the faucet. She heard the faint beeps of buttons being pushed as she wrung out the excess water, the warbling voice of someone on the line as she hung the cloth over the sink's edge.

Trying to dye Frankie had inadvertently destroyed the entire bathroom. Murky puddles had formed in sagging places on the bathroom's tile floor. One at the center, two in adjacent corners. Ida tugged the extra towels off the rack, tossed them down to absorb what she could. She hated leaving the room a mess, any room, really, had always hated it. So she mopped with her foot, dragging the towels from corner to center to corner until the pools had diminished to a wet sheen and the white towels had turned smoky gray.

The shower curtain was ruined. Streaks of dye interrupted the faded peach, permanent from the moment it touched the polyester. Nothing to be done about that.

"It's done," Jean said from the bedroom. "Fifteen minutes."

Ida stacked trash in the waste bin, finally eyeing her own dye job. Under the fluorescent bulbs and still dripping, the curls of her hair were like a deep Bordeaux. Her already scant makeup had worn off in the battle with Frankie, exposing the mature texture of her face, accentuating the way the corners of her eyes turned downward, deepening the shadows in the wrinkles of her cheeks and forehead. *I'm old*, she thought.

"Let's get our shit together and get out of here," called Jean.

It was the same thing Jean had said one night a couple years after the husbands were gone, when the pair played billiards in a crowded hall and a

fight broke out at the bar. Ida smiled. “Okay,” she said. She wiped the dampness from her forearms. With one last glance in the mirror, Ida remembered scurrying from the pool hall, raucous voices filling the smoky air behind them, the nip of the winter night and the still-warm flush in her cheeks as they hailed a cab. Ida and Jean had escaped more than one scuffle, and Ida felt sure they could escape this one too.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jean was already self-conscious about her ill-fitting clothes when Roger Fields, present owner of the ’92 Lincoln Town Car, paused before shaking her hand. He didn’t seem to recognize her from what had happened back in Rockaway, but the man seemed genuinely confused by her choice of outfit. This whole disguise thing was a silly idea.

“Garland,” Jean said, and almost said *Rose Garland*. It was the first full name that sprung to her mind. She thought about using a male name, James or Michael, but feeling the quick squeeze of Roger’s handshake followed by the immediate release of pressure, she knew for sure that he knew for sure that she was a woman. A confused one in his mind, perhaps. One that dressed strangely. But a woman, nonetheless.

“Roger Fields,” he said. Roger appeared to be in his sixties from his salt-and-pepper hair. He seemed, to Jean, to be kindly enough. Blue collar once, from the thick skin on his hands, but retired, from the lack of blisters. He wore a slim-fitting T-shirt, not cotton, rather an athletic material, in stark white, and blue jeans. “Well”—he indicated the car in the gravel driveway—“here she is. Lemme sneak by ya!” The man scooted around Jean, beaming as if introducing a grandchild, which, if Jean had to guess, he also had.

The tour of the car went on far longer than necessary. Jean was ready to buy once the doors popped open and he started the engine, but Roger had a boast for every bit of interior not peeling, every warning light safely unilluminated, every millimeter of depth in the tire tread.

“Some salt corrosion around the wheel wells, but that’s typical,” he said. “You a Crazies fan?”

“I’m sorry, a what?” Jean asked.

“Ope! Didn’t catch your accent at first. You from New York City?”

Jean swallowed hard. It was a mistake to let this man place what state she was from.

“Brooklyn,” Jean lied, recognizing that Roger wouldn’t be able to tell the difference between a Brooklyn accent and a Long Island accent.

“Well, now that you made it to Crawfordsville, you’ve got to check out a Crazies game. Chadwick Crazies,” he said. “Everybody shows out for the games. They’re down there in Wabash.”

Jean nodded, not wanting to offend the man. “I will. Thank you.”

Roger turned his attention back to the Lincoln Town Car. “I’m gonna let you get in,” he said, ushering Jean into the driver’s seat while Ida watched from a few feet back. As Jean hunched to avoid hitting her head on the doorframe, he told her about the big storm the summer of ’89, when three cars hydroplaned around him on the way home from Meijer, but the Town Car held firm to the road. “She’s gone seventy thousand miles and will go seventy thousand more.” He swore his life on it while Jean curled her fingers around the steering wheel, squeezing the conditioned leather cover. Roger’s legs were longer than hers, so from the position of the seat, she couldn’t get a comfortable feel of driving the thing. “Right there,” the man said, pointing at a lever toward the seat’s bottom. “Feel free. You fixin’ to take her around the block?”

Ida shot Jean a look that said, *Don’t leave me*.

“You too,” he said to Ida. He opened the passenger-side door. “Here.”

Ida didn’t move.

“You’ve got all your baggage here in the driveway,” Roger said. “I trust you won’t run off with her.” He let his hand fall on top of the Town Car and pushed out an uncomfortable laugh. “Maybe you’d leave those bags,” he added, eyeing the cat carrier, “but not your cat.”

After the theft at the Indiana bus station, Jean figured Ida was nervous about leaving their things, but a usual car sale would involve a test drive, and Jean thought it would look strange if they refused to take it around the block. “Come on, dear,” she said through the open door, waving Ida in. The term of endearment was a common one between friends of their generation, so it didn’t flag to Roger as anything but caring, but Ida caught the romance in it, and it softened the edges of her anxious expression.

The baggage stacked in Roger’s freshly mowed yard, Frankie sounding intermittent meows from his spot beside it, Ida slid into the passenger seat. The women backed out of the driveway, Roger smiling and waving at them all the while.

Jean put the car into reverse and let it roll away from Roger's yard. "Well?" she asked Ida, "What do you think?"

Ida pulled the seat belt across her chest, tested that it clicked into the latch, then unfastened it again, letting it return to its position. "Seat belt works," she said.

Jean put it in drive and pressed her foot on the gas, letting the Lincoln purr as it charged down the road. "What do you think of how it drives?"

Ida smiled, running her fingertips over the gearshift. "I think if it moves, we should buy it," she said, her voice low. "Take it around the block."

The neighborhood was suburban. Jean slowed as they passed housewives out tending to fallen branches and bringing up the waste bins from the curb. Jean noticed a couple of Chadwick Crazies bumper stickers and another flyer for the Strawberry Festival, taped to a light post. "It handles nicely," she said.

Ida rolled her eyes. "As if you know anything about cars."

"I do all our driving."

"Oh yeah"—Ida swatted a hand—"all three miles a week. A real professional driver, you are."

"Comparatively speaking," said Jean.

"I had one accident!" said Ida. "Fifteen years ago!" Ida huffed, folding her arms across her chest with indignation. "You let a woman drive you around a bit and all of a sudden she's ready to join the NASCAR."

"You're really something, you know that?" Jean's tone started out sharp, but when she glanced over at her partner of forty years, saw her wine-colored hair and the truest blue of her eyes, she landed on an earnestness of intention she hadn't started out with. "Something special, Ida Holloway."

The rest of the ride was smooth and steady. The Lincoln accelerated and turned and braked just fine. Roger was yanking out a weed when they rolled back into his driveway. Ida got out first, followed by Jean, and that was when he hit them with the hard sell.

"My wife loves this car," he said, looking at it mournfully. "Took both our kids to baseball in it, soccer, market visits, and most recently, graduation down at the senior high. A lot of memories in this car."

Jean figured there was more coming, so she waited.

"Only ever been in the shop for an oil change. Detailed her once a month, every month. Yeah," he said, pausing for a breathy sigh, "it's a real

shame to part with her. But I promised the wife a cruise, and we only need one car these days, so, sand and sun over nostalgia, I reckon."

"It's not about the sand and sun," Ida muttered, directing the words at Frankie, though Roger turned to listen.

"Not a fan of the beach?" he asked.

Ida looked squarely into his eyes. "It's about the promise," she said.

"Hmm, promises." Roger's lips drew taut. "You're right."

It took everything in Jean not to clutch at her chest, the knife-sharp pain that shot through it at the thought she'd broken a promise to Ida by keeping a secret from her. "So," Jean said, steeling herself against the wistful mood. "I can do eighteen hundred dollars." Negotiating made Jean uncomfortable, so she imagined how a confident man might stand and speak. "Cash." From the corner of her eye, she caught Ida reaching into her purse.

"Eighteen hundred," Roger repeated, sucking his teeth and letting his eyes roll over the body of the Town Car like it was a lover promised to someone else.

"All cash," Ida said from a few feet away, muscles tensing in her forearm, hand hidden inside the purse where Jean had placed the gun, just in case. "And you'll get this wrapped up this afternoon."

There wasn't eighteen hundred dollars in Ida's wallet, but there was certainly a weapon in there, and whether she was grasping her wallet or tracing the line of the gun, Jean couldn't be sure. But given her knowledge of her lover, if Roger did have any ideas about keeping the car and the money, he'd be a fool to act on them.

"I'm sure your wife will be pleased," Jean said. "About the cruise."

Roger considered, his cheek dimpling as he clenched his jaw inside it. "Twenty-two hundred. That's the lowest I can go."

Jean caught a ripple of frustration rolling through Ida's expression, a twitch of her eye. "I'm afraid eighteen hundred is the best we can do, but I understand if you can't go that low. If we could just use your telephone to call the taxi company—"

"No, no." Roger painted the Town Car with one last sorrowful look. "Nineteen fifty cash. That's the year I got married. A lucky number. What do you say?"

The three stood awkwardly in the yard a moment, Roger seemingly wanting to move their business inside while Ida and Jean communicated

wordlessly about staying out in the open.

“I’ve got the pink slip in my study,” he said.

Jean was about to tell him to bring it outside when a woman in jogging attire, sweaty and returning from a run, broke her stride and said, “Finally selling that thing, thank God.”

“Honey, this is… Garland?” Roger hesitated in his introduction. “Sorry, didn’t get your first names.”

“Clara,” Ida offered the woman, along with her hand. “And that’s Pat.”

“Miriam,” the woman said, shaking Ida’s hand with a grin in her bright brown eyes, “Pat,” she said, extending the manicured hand to Jean. “Why don’t you both come inside. I could use some iced tea, and if I know my Roger, he’s talked you both hoarse by now, so you could probably use some too.”

Ida and Jean, carrying Frankie and their baggage, followed the woman’s springy steps up the lawn toward the Fields residence. Roger dawdled just behind, and as Jean angled her body to fit through the open front door, she caught him sneaking last glances at the black Lincoln Town Car, twirling the key ring around his pointer finger.

“It’s a gas guzzler,” Miriam said, walking straight to the kitchen. The whole room was checkered red and white: tablecloths, curtains, and an impressive if not slightly concerning collection of rooster figurines peering down from the high cabinetry. She laughed. “Roger would hate that I’m telling you that,” and then, realizing he hadn’t yet come through the door, she called, “Roger!”

His answer was hurried, four quick steps up the landing, then two swipes of his feet across the welcome mat. “I’ll just be a moment.” He crossed the living room carpet and disappeared behind French doors that appeared to hold within their stained oak frames a study.

Jean watched him through the glass rectangles, opening a desk drawer, rifling through it, then ducking down to open another. With a sharp pang, she remembered their desk at home, the secret it contained, the fact that she was lying to the only person she’d ever really loved, the fact that she was dying. It took everything in Jean to keep a straight face.

“Pat?”

When Jean turned, she found Miriam’s hand extended with an offering of iced tea and Ida already sipping from her glass. “Thank you.”

“It’s sweetened,” Miriam said.

Jean smiled politely. The sugar would be too much for her. She preferred water, easier on her stomach; but still she took it.

“Did Roger tell you about the cruise?” Miriam asked, perching herself on a pine barstool and setting her drink atop the checkerboard tablecloth.

“He mentioned it,” Jean said.

“Where are you going?” Ida asked.

“Well,” Miriam said, stretching the word over several notes, “I’ve always wanted to go to the Bahamas. Get a nice suntan, drink piña coladas on the beach.”

“That sounds nice,” Ida said, seemingly more to end the conversation than to encourage the woman.

Miriam didn’t seem to notice. “So we found one going out of Florida. Planning to spend two days there first. Like a double vacation!”

“Flah-rida,” Ida said, leaning all her New York sarcasm into the word. Ida’s eyelids flickered as she stared flatly into a middle space, and Jean thanked God Miriam didn’t see it. “How lovely, dear.”

“Yes, we’re very—”

“Got it!” Roger said, coming back through the French doors with a sheet of paper in his hand. The pink slip was indeed pink, with a little bit of blue, and Jean hoped Roger knew how to sign over a title, because she hadn’t bought a car in years. And then another problem struck her. She’d given the name Pat Garland. If he wrote that name on the title, she couldn’t prove it belonged to her. Equally troubling, if she gave him her real name, and a police officer pulled her over, asked for the papers, and looked her up, that would be good night, Irene.

Jean decided on the best of bad choices: Pat Garland would own a car. She separated the bag with Laura’s money from the bags with everything else, settled on the couch, unzipped, and began counting stacks of one hundred dollars.

“Is it Patricia?” Roger asked, a pen cap lodged in a grip between his teeth. He set the title document on the coffee table, stooping down to sign it.

“Yes,” Jean said without thinking. “P-a-t-r-i-c-i-a. Garland, spelled the floral way.”

Title signed, keys surrendered, and money counted and then counted again, Ida thanked Roger and Miriam, and Jean wished them a lovely

double vacation. Roger helped to carry the bags to the Lincoln Town Car, refusing Jean's offer to take them herself. He eased each one down as if the trunk's interior were upholstered with spun gold and not frazzled dark gray fibers. Ida set Frankie in his carrier on the floorboards and tucked herself into the passenger seat, then Jean adjusted mirrors and let her palms slide down then up the curve of the steering wheel cover. As she turned the engine over and brought the Town Car back to life, rolled away from the cruising couple in the checkerboard house in the Indiana suburb with a polite wave, a flutter in her heart said, *Goddammit we've done it*.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

There was a feeling of triumph in their first few miles. They cruised past unsuspecting pedestrians and a Crawfordsville police cruiser that didn't give the new getaway car a second look. More relaxed, Ida rolled down the window and let the breeze roll through her newly vibrant hair. She positioned her sunglasses tight against the bridge of her nose, leaning out into the rushing breeze. Jean was headed west in search of a highway. They passed through rural towns and stretches of road with nothing but barns and pastures on either side. The roads were still flooded at their edges from the storm the night before, and when the tires hit a deep puddle, they kicked up a vertical spray, wetting Ida's freshly dyed hair and face.

"Sorry, dear," Jean said, glancing over. Ida retreated into the center of the passenger seat, rolled the window back up, and had to remove her sunglasses to wipe water droplets from the lenses.

She rubbed and rubbed, but the water just smeared, and the lenses stayed smudged. Ida tossed them on the dash in frustration. The AC vent on Ida's side blew in her face at full capacity, and when she tried to angle the direction away from her, she found that it was stuck. As the air chilled her wet face and dried out her eyes, Ida's mood soured. Wet and irritated, she began to ruminate on her petty frustrations and cashed them in on a little detail that had bothered her earlier in the day.

"Garland?" she asked as the women cruised through an intersection. "Why Garland?"

Jean's brows pulled into one another, but she didn't take her eyes off the road. "I don't know, first name I thought of."

"Hmm," Ida said, a little loud and not a little displeased.

"What?"

"Nothing," she said, though the sharp rise of her brow said the opposite. There was a click of the blinker and another splash of water as the car changed lanes to get ahead of a slow-moving combine. Ida had never

needed a reason to hate Rose Garland, but she found plenty of reasons anyway, so the idea that the wretched woman's name was the first on Jean's tongue made her so angry she—

"Don't do this," Jean said as she merged back into her lane.

"I didn't–"

"I know where this is going, and just"—Jean shook her head as a pickup screamed by on the left, throwing water against the driver's-side window—"I don't want to argue."

Ida heard the warning in Jean's tone. Still, the heat of the perceived slight burned in her chest, and Ida rarely heeded warnings anyway. "Well," she said, dismissively, "I'm just surprised is all. I knew Rose caught the attention of the boys down at the deli, but never realized she made that sort of impression on you."

Jean's knuckles clenched around the wheel. "Don't be ridiculous."

"I can see how she might be"—Ida paused to grimace—"appealing to *some people*."

"Ida." Jean slapped a hand over Ida's thigh, dropping back to put some distance between the Town Car and the pickup driving wildly in front of them. She met Ida's sullen gaze. "I couldn't give a damn about Rose Garland, or any other woman for that matter. No matter how *appealing* you think they are to *some people*." She glanced at the road, then returned the fullness of her stare to Ida. "Let me tell you something," she said, squeezing Ida's thigh. "And I want you to put your stubbornness to the side and hear me." Jean paused. She grabbed Ida's sunglasses from the dashboard where she'd left them, wiped off the remaining smudges on the hem of her shirt, and slipped them over the bridge of Ida's nose, one-handed. Jean turned down the AC fan without looking, and in moments, Ida was warmer. "Day I met you, everyone else went out of focus. I thought I'd loved Richard, and I'd thought I'd loved boys before him. Hell, I really thought I loved Amelia Surdin back in sixth-grade gym class. But that's just because I didn't know what it was really like to…" She trailed off, scanning the road ahead as if she might find the right words on the pickup's bumper stickers. "There's just you, Ida. You're it for me."

Ida placed her hand atop Jean's, lacing her fingers into the spaces where they had always fit and always would. "Me too," she said. "It's you and me."

Five miles on, Ida tuned the radio to the only station she could find between rap music and preachers preaching. Eighties rock jangled through the speakers by the time Jean found a highway. If the pair were going to stay together, it was important to get gone. Ida knew that. Jean knew that. Neither had to say it.

The sun burned its glory through the afternoon sky, chasing away the remnants of clouds and revealing a blue so bright and fierce it hurt to look right at it. Somehow, it didn't feel like running. Instead of fear, Ida found herself engulfed in a swell of possibility as thick as the cornfields on every side. Sliding her heart-shaped sunglasses back up the bridge of her nose, she rolled down the window halfway, dipping her hand into the air as it rushed by.

"Had George called?" Ida asked. "When you checked the messages?"

"He had. Didn't want to talk about it."

"No surprise there," Ida said. "Who else?"

"Jim Friedman, something about a commotion on our property, liability for the board."

Ida scoffed. "For the board!"

"And Barbara," Jean said softly. "She sounded worried sick."

Ida rolled one hand inside the other, running her thumb over her knuckles. She knew how close Jean was with her daughter, and how hard it must be on her to miss out on their daily calls. "What about that detective?" Ida asked, changing the subject.

Jean, one hand on the wheel, the other balanced on the automatic gearshift, looked as relaxed as Ida had seen her since all this started. Her mouth rested in an easy smile and her shoulders dipped in time with the song. "I told you. He wanted to speak with us. Left his number."

"And did you save it?" Ida asked. As much as she didn't figure Jean a liar, Ida could see Jean thinking she might be some kind of hero by sparing Ida from the severity of their situation.

"I did," said Jean.

"But why?"

Jean stiffened. Ida stared at her hard, willing Jean to look back. She wanted to read Jean's face when she said whatever she'd say next. "I told you," Jean said again, not taking her eyes from the road, "if the worst happens, I won't let you go to prison."

“Jean!”

If Jean felt relaxed before, there was no trace of it now. The woman’s shoulders strung tighter than a wound string, and she turned down the radio as if the crooning power ballad was one beat per minute more than she could handle. “I know,” Jean said, shaking her head. “I knew you’d be upset.”

“You know what that detective’s job is, right?” Ida asked.

“Obviously,” said Jean. “Of course I know what his—”

“To solve crimes.” Ida folded her hands in her lap. “You know what we are, Jean?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “Criminals.”

“I mean…” Jean chuckled out an uncomfortable sound. “I wouldn’t say that.”

“I would.” Ida stared intently at her lover, who refused to take her eyes off the road. “Murderers.” Although the women had talked around it over the years, many times and in many ways in many different moods and contexts, it was the first time either had put it so bluntly. “Three times over.” Ida clicked the radio off, matching Jean’s meditative gaze into the road ahead. “You think a detective would believe for a second that you did all that on your own? That I was living with you and had no idea?

“Well—”

“Catching two ladies who killed three men… wait. What do they call it? A collar! A collar like that would be in the papers. It would make Detective —what was his name?”

“Rollins.”

“It would make Detective Rollins’s career. He’d get interviewed on the local news, right? A story in the *Rockaway Gazette*. A promotion. Hell, they might make a goddamn *60 Minutes* episode out of a story like that. And what would we get?”

Jean sank. “Locked up.”

“That’s right, Jean. So, help me understand, since you’re the crime show expert, why would you think calling up that detective and confessing would be the end of it?”

Without the radio, there was only the sound of wind pushing past closed windows, tires hungry for asphalt, the whoosh of a speeding semi headed back east.

“Lesbian Black Widows,” Ida said, imagining a headline, a commercial,

a movie trailer. “The Lady Lover Killers.”

“Black Widow Wives,” said Jean.

“The Homicide Hussies.”

Jean laughed. “A Tale of Two Grannies, and the Three Bodies They Left Behind.”

“I like that.” Ida nodded, tapping a finger in the air. “That’s good.”

“Better title than some I’ve seen. They should hire me,” Jean said.

“Oh, they might, but not as a writer. You’ll be in those jail cell interviews when Hollywood decides to cash in on us.”

Jean surrendered with a deep sigh and a wave of her hand in the air. “You’re right. I don’t know what I was thinking.” But there was something off in the slope of Jean’s shoulders, a curve of defeat that arched deeper than one from just losing the argument.

“Is there something else?” Ida asked.

Jean’s whole body tensed, then relaxed. “I’m just worried,” she said.

Ida’s eyes wandered toward the back seat as she remembered the police scanner in the trunk. “Think we should check that scanner again?”

“We can grab it when we stop.”

“No,” said Ida, unfastening her seat belt. “I’ll grab it now.” She braced on the armrest, turning her body to hold up her weight.

“Careful, Ida.”

With a knee on the passenger seat, she pushed forward and reached for the back seat as Frankie watched from his carrier.

“Ida, stop,” Jean said. “You’ll hurt yourself.”

Ida’s muscles remembered this climb from the years tending to crying kids in their car seats, but with a quick movement that could only be described as a fumbling scurry, she landed longways across the back seat to the tune of Frankie’s startled hiss.

“Jesus,” Jean said, looking at Ida through the rearview mirror.

Despite the pain in her wrists and kneecaps, the fall was a jolt to Ida’s nervous system. She laughed, letting herself rock back and forth over the well-worn upholstery. “There’s a pass-through,” she said, sitting up and pulling out the cushioned rectangle. “Right here.”

“I know, but Christ!” Jean clutched her chest. “We could’ve waited until __”

“Why wait?” Ida popped open the hard plastic behind the cushion,

revealing a window to the trunk. With her arm extended all the way through, she couldn't see what she was grasping for, but she and Jean had owned those bags for decades, and Ida knew them well enough by sight to know them by feel. "Ah," she said, feeling the moth-eaten patch that belonged to the royal-blue bag containing her clothes from the day before along with the scanner. "Here it is."

"Would you just…" Jean's eyes flicked between the rearview and the road. "Be careful!"

Ida grabbed and tugged. The bag was wider than the opening, but mostly full of soft things that could bend and squeeze. She used her other hand to narrow the width and yanked. The bag popped through halfway, pushing the bulk of its contents to the back, then refused to be tugged any farther. A quarter length of the zipper exposed, Ida made do with what opportunity she had, opening the bag and searching by feel. The hard scanner stuck out among the blouses and trousers, and though she couldn't see it, she retrieved it all the same. "Got it," said Ida with a wicked grin.

The climb back to the front seat proved harder, but Ida managed it, less than gracefully and not without nudging the gearshift. "Here we are," she said, holding the scanner in both hands. "And I won't be hearing anything further about me being *old*." Jean chuckled and Ida looked around. Front to back stretched miles of highway, speckled with trucks, and on either side tall trees shot up in the pastures, reaching toward the sun with limbs still bare from winter. "You know where we're going?"

"Not really," Jean said. "West. We'll need to pick up another map somewhere."

"How much cash we got left?"

"A couple hundred from Laura. Whatever we started out with in our wallets."

"Not much."

"We will figure it out," said Jean.

Ida switched on the scanner, then reached across the center console, pushing up the hem of Jean's sleeve and massaging her arm. "We always do."

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Detective Rollins spent ten minutes in the area where the body had lain, and the rest of the afternoon in the other rooms of the Bleaker and Holloway residence. He stood on their ladder and peered into the attic, where he found a drag path in the dust. “They pulled something out of here,” he said, noting the width of the area that had been disturbed.

“Putting back Christmas decorations, maybe,” said Detective Stenson.

“A little late in the year for that.” Rollins eased himself back down the ladder. “Any leads on the cat?”

“I put Fines on it.”

“I asked you to do it.”

The greener detective rolled his eyes.

“You’re new to this squad,” said Rollins. “And if you can’t find a housecat, I’ll have some serious concerns about your ability to find a killer.”

Stenson shook his head, but he moved around the corner toward the back door. “I’ll check the yard.”

With overzealous Clay Stenson out of the way, Rollins crossed the living room and sat down at the desk in its corner. He lifted up the phone that sat on the desktop, then raised the top to find old birthday cards and stationery and a single piece of mail underneath. He fished the letter out from inside the envelope and read the notice from the doctor’s office that Jean had stashed away there. “Hospice care,” he said to himself. “You’re sick, Mrs. Bleaker.” Looking around the room, his eyes traced the outline where the body had been and came to rest on the bloodstained carpet. “So why all this? Why now?”

Taking the notice with him, Rollins moved to the couch, where a stack of photo albums lay on the coffee table. He thumbed through them, noting the old photographs of the women with their husbands and the children playing in an inflatable pool that was no longer on the property. They

seemed like normal families. So how did they go from wives and doting mothers to killers on the run?

Stenson blew through the back door, letting it shut hard behind him.

“Easy on our crime scene,” Rollins said.

“Cat’s not out there,” said Stenson. “It’s probably hiding somewhere in the house. My mother’s cat always does that when new people come in.”

“So does mine.”

“You have a *cat*?” Stenson asked incredulously, as if there were something inherently unmanly about feline ownership.

“I have a cat,” said Rollins. “And I love my cat. I bet they took it with them.”

“That’s insane,” said Stenson. “Who would take a cat on the run? It’s obviously just hiding around here somewhere—”

“They are eccentric. Not insane. Where are we with the husbands?”

Stenson sighed and pulled out a notebook from his back pocket. “I interviewed a neighbor, Michael Thompson, lived here since the dawn of time. He says the Holloway woman lived here with her husband originally. He remembered Bleaker’s husband too, guess he and the Holloway guy liked to kick up the shit together.”

“Names?”

Stenson flipped some pages in his notebook. “Eddie was the homeowner. No name on Bleaker.”

“Track down the marriage record, then let’s find out what happened to Mr. Holloway and Mr. Bleaker, and how these ladies came to live together.”

“Well, part of that I’ve got,” said Stenson. “According to Jim Friedman, another neighbor, rumor is the husbands left town over a big gambling debt.”

“Way to bury the lede. Anything else you forgot to mention? The location of Jean Bleaker and Ida Holloway? You found the murder weapon? Anything like that?”

“No, sir.”

Detective Rollins thumbed back through the photo album, landing on a picture of the two men. “Chase up that story. Let’s find the old men, wherever they are. Confirm they really did make themselves disappear.”

Stenson sucked his teeth. “Don’t you think I ought to follow up with the adult kids? Contact some other departments to try to find the ladies?”

“I think I’d advise you to do what you’re asked, Stenson.”

Clay Stenson, disgruntled, left the Bleaker and Holloway residence in an indignant huff. He didn’t bother to ask why Rollins would want to know about the missing husbands, and that was exactly why Rollins knew Stenson would never make a great detective. There was more to the story of these women, and it would take a curious man to uncover it all.



While the Greyhound would’ve taken them through St. Louis, the odd woman at the Quick Stop off I-74 suggested a route farther north. “You can do a full day’s drive through Kansas City, maybe a bit more depending on traffic.” A beaded chain dangled from her silver-rimmed spectacles as she studied the map. “But don’t do that.” The woman took a pencil from a souvenir mug, drawing an X over where they were, and Jean fought back a feeling of overwhelm as the white-haired woman’s line traced through Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, and finally landed with another X in Northern California. “Now, this’ll take you a longer day to get to Omaha and spend the night. But it’s a quieter trip with less traffic. Take plenty of breaks. You know, my first husband, Gerald, worked as a long-haul trucker. Fell asleep at the wheel, God rest his soul.”

“How terrible,” said Ida.

“I’m so sorry,” said Jean.

“Oh, that’s not how he died,” the woman said, stepping off a stool behind the counter and revealing her true height, about four foot ten by Jean’s guess. “He lived years after that. Ran off with my sister’s best friend, if you can believe it. He blew his fingers off Fourth of July, eighty-seven.”

Neither Ida nor Jean dared a word, each watching the woman meticulously refold the map and punch the price into her register.

“Yeah,” the woman went on. “Roman candle. The stubs never healed right. Festered. He died of infection. Left a stink like almonds in the carpet before he did,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” Jean said again.

The woman gave a warm smile, big as a Cheshire moon. “Oh, sweetie,

don’t be.” With one more punch of a register key, she added, “Biggest shame is the almonds. Used to love Mary’s puppy chow. She made it with almonds, ya see, but now…” She shook her head. “That’ll be it?”

Ida nodded.

“$2.49.”

Jean offered up three crumpled bills from her wallet and, refusing the change, thanked the woman and escorted Ida from the gas station.

“I like her,” Ida said as they made their way to their parking spot.

“Me too. You think she…”

“Killed him?” Ida asked, a bit too pertly.

“Quiet down.”

Ida raised her brows, two pops in quick succession. “Well, I don’t think she saved him.”

“I don’t blame her,” Jean said.

“Me either.” Ida stopped beside the passenger-side door. “You sure we shouldn’t fill up?”

“No,” Jean said, squatting into the driver’s seat. “We still got three quarters of a tank.”

“But we’re here,” said Ida.

“We’ve got nothing but road ahead.” Jean handed the map to her paramour, hoping Ida didn’t notice when it fluttered with the tremble of her hand. The urgency of needing the car and needing to get on the road and needing to find a map had kept her going through most of the afternoon, but now she felt heavy. Her stomach ached so deeply the pain reached her hips and spine, and even the thought of pumping gas seemed an overwhelming prospect. But she knew it was all symptoms of the cancer, so she didn’t tell Ida. Just kept it to herself. “Plenty of gas stations along the way.”

Ida shrugged, unfolding the map and laying it flat across her lap. Jean’s gaze drifted up from her and, through the passenger-side window, she spied a pay phone. The day since they’d left Rockaway had felt like an eternity, and Jean had grown used to her daughter’s daily calls. Even when there wasn’t much to say, Barbara and Jean could fill an hour with updates and easy back-and-forth talk. She thought about the message Barbara had left on their machine, how panicked her daughter must be, and she hated the thought of leaving her in that state, especially when Jean had such little time left. She was tired. Scared. Hearing a familiar voice might help, she

thought, give her a boost and lift her spirits enough to clear another couple hundred miles.

"I'd like to call Barbara," she said. "Let her know we're all right."

Ida frowned. "Bad idea."

"She's probably worried sick."

"And you think calling her will make her less worried?"

"She'll know we're alive."

Ida mimed a phone with her pinky and thumb. "*Hey, Babs, it's your Ma here. Oh, I'm fine, just on the run and wanted to check in.*"

"You called Laura," said Jean.

"We had to."

"It worked out. Got us this far."

"Oh, and she was *thrilled* to hear from us," said Ida, as if to emphasize her point. "And I wouldn't say it worked out. A little early to call it."

Jean put the keys on the dash and rifled through the bottom of her purse. From its bottom, she drew out three pennies and a couple of nickels. "You got change?"

"We should not call Barbara."

Jean dug deeper, fishing out a bobby pin and a ball of lint for her trouble. "Could you at least look?"

"I will not," Ida said, tucking her purse between her feet. "This is a stupid idea."

"Ida," Jean said, letting out a frustrated sigh, "you know as well as I do there's no such thing as a favorite child. That said, of all the children we raised, Barbara is the closest to us. If anybody's safe to call, it's her."

"Nobody is safe to call, Jean!" Ida's words came pressed and hurried, and the whites of her eyes showed a different type of fear than Jean had seen in her thus far, a fear that maybe Jean couldn't get them through this, that Ida thought her judgment was faltering.

"Fine." Jean grabbed the keys and started the engine. "Fine, you're probably right."

Through the mesh of his carrier, Frankie spotted a grackle by one of the pumps and chattered. "It's just I-74," Ida said unfolding the map, "for a good long way."

Jean hadn't even pulled out of the gas station before she felt a sandpaper thirst in her throat and regretted not getting a bottle of water. But to turn

around might confirm Ida's fears, show she was scattered and not in a good place to make decisions, liable to get them caught. It wasn't terribly far from the truth. The Quick Stop woman's unceremonious mention of death and seeing the long shape of the precarious road ahead rattled Jean in a way she didn't expect. Everything in her wanted to hole up somewhere safe and draw close to her family. But she couldn't break. Not now. Jean had to be implacable for the woman she loved, because while the end of her life was certain, the end of Ida's still hung in the balance. Her legs were like jelly, quaking as she eased on the gas, but she decided to push forward.

To her right, the sign for I-74 sat slanted on a rusty pole. It had faded from years of weather, cruel, cold winters and blazing summer sun.

"Right here," Ida said.

"I know!" Jean snapped, then released her grip on the wheel and said more calmly, "I'm sorry. I know." When a twitch of her leg made the car jump into acceleration, Jean pulled up onto the shoulder. "Sorry, sorry," she said. "You think you're up for some driving?"

Her lover's forehead drew up. "Me?"

"I'm just a little tired."

"Hmm." Ida folded the map, longways then broadways then half and half again. "Okay." Extending it toward Jean like a flat, pointed finger, she punctuated, "But I won't hear a word about my speed, or how close I am to the other cars, or any of it. And if there's any bridges or overpasses coming up, you take over. Deal?"

Jean unfastened her seat belt. "Deal."

The shoulder of the road dipped down into a culvert, and overgrown grass and weeds hid mucky puddles beneath that sucked at the bottoms of Jean's shoes as she made her way around to the passenger side. Ida scraped her rubber soles across the asphalt before getting back into the car, but Jean had to make do with a rocky outcropping while fighting for her balance on shaky legs.

She released a big breath when her rump landed in the cradle of the seat.

"The big one's the gas, right?" Ida asked with a mischievous grin.

Jean swatted the air in response, and her sarcastic paramour put the Town Car in drive and pulled them off the shoulder and back onto the road.



Signs for Iowa appeared on the right-hand side about the same time Ida announced she was hungry. “And Frankie must be starved,” she added, as if the latter might be more compelling.

“Was thinking we could make it a couple more hours and then stop for the night,” said Jean, a finger sliding across the map and stopping mid-Iowa.

“I got us most of the way through Illinois,” Ida said. “But if you think I’m doing another state before dinner, you’ve lost your goddamn mind.”

“It’s only five fifteen!”

Ida frowned at the numbers on the car clock.

Jean sighed. “Fine.”

A stony silence and a Jimmy Buffett song later, I-74 revealed its intention to lead the women to the bucking white arches of the Rock Island Centennial Bridge. The Mississippi flowed a couple hundred feet beneath, her muddy waters cruising on a current quick enough to throw up bronze glimmers in evening daylight.

“I’m not crossing that,” Ida said, flicking on her blinker. “Roads are one thing, but bridges—” She shook her head, her mouth and nose scrunching to the center of her face like she’d smelled something awful. Taking the exit for downtown Moline, Ida guided the Town Car into a stocky city of brick and slowed to a roll through the town’s center.

They just needed a place to eat and a place to sleep. Should be simple. Ida slowed the car and turned onto a quaint, city side street lined with small businesses. When a short-haired woman, stocky as the boxes of buildings, smiled and waved at her, Ida figured it must be a mistake. That the woman knew somebody else who dyed her hair this deep red shade, or otherwise just drove a black Lincoln Town Car. But then it happened again. A man this time, walking a pair of Maltese dogs on strappy leashes, much to Ida’s dismay. The third smiler and waver, a boy around ten, put her over the edge.

“What the hell is going on here?” she asked.

Jean peeked through her window at a group of college-age kids waiting to cross the street. She raised her hand, fluttered her fingers, testing a

theory. Three of the group waved back, the other two not paying attention. “I think they’re just…” Jean trailed off, shaking her head like she’d startled awake from a heavy afternoon nap. “Friendly.”

“Hmm.” Ida pulled into an open spot and put the car in park. “Why?”

“You know, I’ve heard this about the Midwest.” Jean had also heard about New Yorkers being unduly mean and aggressive, but despite being on the run for murder, she’d always thought it was an unfair stereotype.

“They weren’t this weird in Indiana.” Ida unclicked her seat belt. “Let’s not stay here long. It’s creepy, right? It’s weird.”

Even with the night’s cold, the downtown sidewalks of Moline were lined with parking meters and double-bulbed streetlamps and families and friends exchanging animated chatter between bites of heaping, sprinkled ice cream cones. Levity wafted through the spring air on the scent of spun sugar, punctuated by variants of laughter—the soprano giggles of a pair of sisters, the alto chuckle of a middle-aged man in a flannel feeding a cake cone to his Labrador, and the tinny, raspy snickering of an elderly woman bundled in knit scarves as she grasped her husband’s hand. To Jean’s surprise, she found that many of the Midwestern women her age and younger dressed in the same men’s clothing Ida had forced her to wear. She took comfort in the fact that she blended in here and reflected that maybe Ida had been right about the disguises.

However, still chafed by Ida’s pushback around calling Barbara, Jean was unwilling to admit she’d been wrong. She stood at the meter, palming the same misfit collection of coins she’d gathered at the gas station. “I suppose you have change now.”

“I might,” Ida said, taking the strap of her purse off her shoulder. “What will we do with Frankie?”

“We can roll down the windows,” Jean said. “He should be fine if we’re quick about dinner.” She eyed the cat, who was in the process of viciously attacking a corner of his carrier. “He keeps himself busy.”

Ida located and unclasped her change purse, squinting at the meter to get the price per hour.

“No need for that.” A man’s voice carried through the surrounding others. “That’s only for the weekends.” He was young, about Charlie’s age,

with a reddish beard to match the reddish tufts of hair escaping his cap. In a clean T-shirt and khaki pants, he struck Ida as ordinary, down to the plain gold wedding band on his finger. “You ladies here for John Deere?”

“What?” asked Jean.

“The factory,” he said, pointing vaguely down the road.

Ida followed his finger to a behemoth building. “What’s that?”

The man chuckled and nodded toward the Town Car’s Indiana license plate. “Oh, never mind. Most out-of-towners stop by to see John Deere headquarters. They’re really something! They give tours and everything. See how the tractors are made and…” He seemed to realize he was losing his audience. “Seems like you’re just passing through, though. You from Indiana, then?”

Although he looked harmless enough, Ida hesitated to answer the stranger’s question.

“On the way to visit family in Iowa,” Jean said.

“Oh? Whereabouts?” asked the man.

“Des Moines.”

Ida was sure that was the only city Jean remembered in Iowa, but appreciated her quick thinking nonetheless.

“Well,” the man continued, “I’ll give you the same recommendation I give everybody, aside from John Deere. Pop’s Sweets & Creamery. Best ice cream in the country and I’d stake my reputation on it.”

He got all puffed up in the way men do when they’re proud of something. Ida had a passing thought to ask the man why he and his ilk carried around this misconception about the importance and impeccability of their reputations, but she kept that to herself.

“It’s a bit chilly for ice cream,” Jean said.

“You’re from New York, right? Originally?” the man asked with a smile.

Ida felt a jolt of panic. The women let the question hang.

“Don’t mean to press. It’s the accents,” he said, stepping back on his heel. “I just meant, you must be used to the cold.”

“Thank you for the recommendations,” said Jean. “Maybe after dinner.”

“Enjoy Moline,” said the man, starting a slow walk past them. “And safe travels.”

When he was out of earshot, Ida dropped a few coins in the meter and said, “These people are too much. We’re not leaving Frankie in the car.”

By scooting the table tight to a corner, blocking sightlines with an arrangement of chairs, and with strategic placement of the carrier, Ida managed to create a closed-in spot for Frankie in the corner of the restaurant. The place, simply called Marty's, bragged with its painted sign that it was a *Restaurant, serving Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner*. Worn down from the long drive and hunger souring her attitude, the sign's vague promise was enough to make Ida want to try the place out.

The booth's hard synthetic frame curved slightly toward the back wall, so both Frankie's carrier and Ida's rear end sloped at an awkward angle, but she managed to balance a ramekin refashioned into a water dish on the incline.

"He's going to get loose," Jean said, holding the laminated menu but staring at the makeshift cat room Ida had created.

"He is not."

"Okay," Jean said, brow raised with skepticism.

Ida caught a glimpse of the whites of Jean's eyes as they rolled. She ignored it. Frankie stooped low, ears laid back on his skull, and sniffed the air above. "It's all right, little prince." Ida offered a curled finger, which Frankie withdrew from. "It's all right." The cat, sniffing still, recognized Ida as a friend. His body slanted forward, eyes shut and muzzle first, rubbing against the offered finger and bringing Ida a welcome sense of relief. "That's right," she said. "It's me."

"I'll do the turkey dinner, I think," said Jean.

Ida scratched under Frankie's chin. He didn't purr like he might at home, but he leaned his weight into her affection. She combed her fingers through the black splotches on his fur, thinking Jean had been right. It had been a stupid idea trying to dye him black. But she wouldn't give Jean the satisfaction of telling her. In her mind, she said, *I'm sorry I didn't listen to you. I was just so afraid.*

Ultimately, the cat refused to drink. When Ida told Jean, her partner mumbled something about leading horses to water. After securing him once again in his carrier, Ida lifted the menu and began to read dinner specials.

"Can I get you ladies something to drink?" A waitress wearing twin braids and thick freckles across her nose stood at the head of the table holding a notepad and bouncing on the balls of her feet. Then her face fell. "Oh. You have a cat."

Ida moved unconsciously closer to Frankie. “He’s sick,” she lied. “Needs lots of care.”

The waitress made a face like she wasn’t sure she believed Ida.

Jean changed the subject. “Just water,” she said.

“Lemonade,” said Ida.

The waitress scribbled something. “Okay… Special today is fried cod with french fries. I’ll be right back with your drinks.”

“That was a close one,” Ida said, and then, looking at Frankie, she added, “But nobody can get mad at this face.” She turned back to the menu, reading the selection. “Fried, fried, fried. Everything here is fried.”

Jean’s head swiveled toward the waitress, who was looping around a corner just behind them.

“It’s fine,” Ida said. “She didn’t hear me.”

“She might have.”

“She didn’t,” said Ida, not caring one way or the other.

“Look at the platters section. They have turkey and meat loaf.”

“Meat loaf,” Ida said with a scowl.

“You love meat loaf.”

“Not Iowa meat loaf.”

“We’re still in Illinois.”

Ida glanced up, found Jean’s expression flat. “I’ll get the roast chicken, I guess.”

“You’re picky about chicken,” said Jean. “You’re not going to like it.”

“I’ll have the roast chicken,” Ida called to the waitress.

The waitress, Mindy according to her name tag, whipped her attention away from the screen where she’d been punching in orders. “Roast chicken dinner?” she asked.

Ida nodded, feeling Jean’s stern gaze on her. A self-satisfied smirk crept over Ida’s lips.

“What side?”

“You have mashed potatoes?”

“Mm-hmm.” The woman punched keys. “With gravy?”

“Yes, please.”

“And for you?” the waitress asked, looking at Jean.

Jean grasped Ida’s menu from the table and laid it neatly over her own. “I’ll have the meat loaf. With whatever it usually comes with.”

“Great!” the waitress said. “Be right over with those drinks.”

When the food arrived, Jean took a first bite of her order. Ida cut into the chicken breast and, seeing the grease and fat, placed down her knife and fork.

“I knew you wouldn’t like it,” Jean said, managing not to gloat.

The women traded plates. What was only a brief time later, but long enough for the sun to sink and the double-bulbed streetlamps to illuminate along the sidewalk outside, Ida finished the last slice of Jean’s meat loaf. Frankie had fallen asleep by the time the waitress arrived with the check and a half-hearted offer of dessert.

“We have pie,” she said, “cherry and apple. But I’ll tell you the truth. Best dessert in town is over at Pop’s.”

“The ice cream place?” Ida asked.

“The one and only.” Mindy placed the check face down on the table, midway between the women. She stacked the empty plates along the length of her forearm. “They have other treats too. Caramel apples, all kinds of chocolate. They make cotton candy, got a machine right there so you can watch.”

Jean got her wallet, read the check, and flattened bills on top of it, enough to cover the total and tip by Ida’s estimation.

“Pop’s Sweets & Creamery. It’s just down this block,” she pointed, “on your left. You’ll smell the sugar before you see it.” Tucking the bills into her apron without counting them, Mindy thanked the women and was on her way.

“Let’s stay the night here,” Ida said, scooting right on the booth and dragging Frankie’s carrier with her. “Be fresh for the road tomorrow. We haven’t heard anything on the police scanner. I think we deserve a night of decent rest.” Though she knew Jean would prefer to keep driving into Iowa, she also knew her lover wouldn’t argue.

“Okay,” said Jean. She extended an arm, and Ida happily handed over the carrier. As they wove through tables and chairs, Jean asked, “How was my meat loaf?”

Ida, despite being embarrassed about having been wrong about the chicken, responded earnestly. “It was decent. How was my chicken?”

Jean’s mouth flattened into a begrudging smile. “It was greasy. I knew you wouldn’t eat it, but it was fine.” Her eyes found Ida’s and held them for a beat by the door. The chicken had been bland and stringy and the oil it was cooked in was already making Jean’s sensitive stomach clench. But it was worth it to keep Ida happy. “It was just fine.”

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

The pair passed by a quaint, family-run inn, preferring to stay at an anonymous motel instead. After checking in without incident and getting Frankie situated, Jean perused a brochure provided by the motel on the corner desk. She looked over Moline's local amenities, doing everything she could not to pick up the hotel phone and call Barbara. Barbara had to be beside herself. Jean could picture her calling the home phone again and again, then driving the short distance to Peachtree Way only to find police cars outside. She must have called George and Laura by now, maybe even Charlie. Jean took some solace in the idea that Laura would have told Barbara she'd seen their mothers. At least Barbara would know they were alive. The phone rested just inches from her elbow, but she forced herself to keep staring at the little brochure of nearby parks and eateries.

"Here it is again," she said, in another attempt to distract herself. "Pop's Sweets & Creamery."

"A horrible name," said Ida, legs over the side of the bed. "Creamery," she said, drawing out the vowels in such a way that their only possible effect was disgust. "Makes me think of…" Ida mimed a vulgarity that shared the shape of tossing dice away.

"Ida!"

"What?" She shrugged. "It's true."

"Still."

"Oh, come on. Tell me you don't feel sick when you remember Richard unleashing himself."

"Ida!"

"What?"

"I don't think of Richard…" Jean's jaw hung open. "Doing *that* at all!"

Ida smirked. "But you are now. Aren't you?"

Jean's head shook as she let loose two exasperated gasps.

"Make you want ice cream?" Ida asked.

“No!”

“So you get what I’m saying, then.”

What started as Jean’s sigh bled into a low belly laugh. “Where did you come from?” Jean asked with all the love in her heart. In a whisper she added, “My perfect girl.”

Ida stood, padding across the carpet in her white sneakers. “Queens, originally,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone. “A basement apartment they tore down.”

“To build a high-rise,” Jean said. “I remember it. We visited once in the fifties, before it was gone.”

“That’s right,” Ida said with a smile.

“And by the time we went back, after Charlie graduated, we circled the block three times before we realized it wasn’t there anymore. Cabbie could’ve killed us, he was so ticked.”

Ida placed her palms on Jean’s shoulders. “That’s right,” she said. Then again, more softly, “That’s right.” An extra sparkle lit up Ida’s pale blue eyes. “What would I do without you, Jean?” Her thumb traced the curve of Jean’s temple. “Always being my memory.”

As Ida’s hands fell, Jean grasped them in hers. Looking around at the drab emerald curtains, the Christmas-colored carpet beaten flat, the soulless art print hanging crooked over the headboard, Jean said, “This place is a dump. It’s early. Would you keep me company on a walk to Pop’s? It’s got to be better than this.”

Ida’s head shook slowly, brows pulling close together in quiet objection. “I told you, the cream—”

“For me?” Jean asked.

Her lover’s shoulders dropped. “For you,” she said. “Always for you.”

Lumpy and nearly doubled in size from wearing her jacket over her sweater, Ida huddled beside Jean who, as usual and especially lately, was running hot. Together they ventured into the Midwestern night. Once they’d gotten clear of the motel parking lot, sidewalks lined with bare, archway trees hugged a sleepy road where cars eased by. The streetlamps emitted a frosty glow and high above them, stars smiled down from a cloudless sky.

Neither woman spoke as they meandered down streets and across avenues. There was the occasional whoosh of a car, their steady inhales and foggy exhales, and waiting at each intersection, and sometimes just around

the bend of a corner, were the warm conversations of families. As they walked, Jean sensed electricity in the air, a cold-weather hope that lives only in a crisp breeze and the scent of early wild blossoms. Ida must've sensed it too, because for the second time on this trip, she took Jean's hand in public. Though her skin had grown delicate and her joints had swollen with age, Jean marveled at how Ida's palm still fit perfectly in hers. For the first time since all of this started, nothing felt urgent. It was a near-magic moment, and Jean wanted to take her time.

From Ida's happy silence and her hand's relaxed posture, Jean thought she must've felt it too. There was no fear of being recognized, and an urge to appreciate every detail of this brick city where nobody noticed them except just to smile and wave. Only so many moments in a lifetime happen deliberately, unfolding in a way that touches every one of the senses, and making a person liable to believe that the simple art of living is, in its way, miraculous.

The waitress had been right. Jean smelled Pop's before she saw it. Spun sugar like she smelled when they first parked in downtown Moline, but stronger. Thick enough to call forth a memory of the time she'd had a cumulus cloud of blue cotton candy at a baseball game, when the tufts of sugar were wider than her face and the world was a story that was only just beginning. Fairy lights draped loosely over potted trees in the shop's courtyard, and as Jean drew closer, she caught the scent of caramel, hot and sticky.

On a stone bench out front, a young girl sat cross-legged in ballet shoes. A candy apple sat upright on the stick in her fist and the red coating left pink kisses on each of her cheeks. Brow furrowed, she looked serious as she moved in to take a bite, as if consuming the treat was the great labor of her night, and she would not be found lacking in the face of the task.

Jean smiled, remembering Barbara at that age. Then frowned, remembering Barbara as she must be now. Worried. Wondering.

"Smells good," Ida said, just in time to save Jean from the sadness inching forward.

"It does."

Jean held the door for Ida, a dangling bell greeting them. On the left sat rows of fudge and chocolates shaped like alligators, frogs, and snakes. On the right, gift baskets, seemingly hand-packed with pastel tissue paper

coordinated to the themes of birthdays, babies, anniversaries, retirements. All the milestones that make up a life could be celebrated here with tissue and tinsel of blue or pink or green or silver.

“Welcome to Pop’s!” said a woman behind the counter. She looked to be in her thirties, the faint wrinkles at the corners of her eyes only sharpening the effect of the bright green irises behind her glasses. Mussed hair suggested she’d had a long, busy day, but the kindness in her expression suggested she was glad for it.

Jean nodded her *hello* and the woman returned to sorting confections. Ida, meanwhile, had crept up to the ice cream display. Both of her palms lay flat on the glass as she peered inside, wordlessly mouthing the names of flavors, one to the next. When Jean approached, she placed a gentle hand on the small of Ida’s back so as not to startle her.

“They have peppermint,” Ida said. “Peppermint ice cream. Have you ever heard of such a thing?”

Jean had seen peppermint ice cream in the store plenty of times, but she kept that to herself, unwilling to diminish Ida’s excitement. The green-eyed woman swept in as if summoned, and in a single, fluid movement, filled a tasting spoon to heaping with the flavor. “We make it all here,” she said, handing the spoon to Ida. “Dad came up with the peppermint recipe.” Quickly as she’d arrived, the woman went back to her work, and Ida looked at the spoon, at the white cream speckled with candies in green and red, then at Jean.

“Well, don’t insult the woman!” Jean said.

Ida popped the whole of the scoop in her mouth, wincing at first, Jean supposed from the cold, before her eyes grew wide. “It’s good!” she said, dabbing a bit at the corner of her lips. “I’ll have a scoop of that.”

“Cup or a cone?” asked the woman.

“Cup,” said Ida. “No, cone.”

“And for you?” the woman asked Jean.

Jean looked at the ice-crystaled display, then thought of her sensitive stomach. “Do you have anything sugar-free?”

“Sugar-free?” Ida asked.

“We have a sugar-free chocolate, a strawberry sorbet, and rocky road.”

“Rocky road,” said Jean. “In a cup.”

“You got it.”

“Rocky road,” Ida said with a sideways glance. “How appropriate.”

“Hush,” said Jean.

Jean paid for the ice cream with some of the cash they had left. It wasn’t much, but for the happiness beaming from Ida, she would’ve paid far more. By the time the women reached the stone bench outside, the little ballerina girl was gone. Ida took her spot, and all the childlike elation one might attribute to a girl of six in ballet shoes could be found instead in the expression of a seventy-two-year-old woman who, in all those years, had never found an ice cream as delicious as this one.

“Illinois ice cream,” she said, licking a drip before it could drop. “Who would’ve thought?”

Jean dug a plastic spoon into her cup and freed a marshmallow. The bench was short enough to require her to press her hip against Ida’s, but as she popped the marshmallow into her mouth, she decided downtown Moline wouldn’t mind, and if they did, that it didn’t matter. “Mine is good too.”

“Doubt it,” Ida said with a crunch of her cone. “Sugar-free.”

“This late, it would keep me up.”

“Oh, live a little.”

Jean would have. If not for the way her cancer had compromised her stomach and left her wondering if the dairy would send her system into a spiral even without the sugar. She would’ve traded the sleep for this full-sugar moment with Ida. She picked at an almond, nursing a worry that the one scoop would keep her from driving the next day or from traveling at all, then imagined trying to explain her illness to Ida.

Jean put the cup down.

“You don’t like it,” Ida said.

“I do.”

“Have mine, then. The peppermint is—”

“I like it,” Jean said, carving out a large spoonful and guiding it to her mouth with an exaggerated smile. In making a show of her feigned lack of concern, Jean noticed a distinct lack of sound in the once-bustling downtown area. At the stop sign at the end of the street, the last passerby disappeared around the corner of a tailor’s shop.

“Where’d everybody go?” Ida asked.

Jean looked for Pop’s posted hours but didn’t need to read the sign for

her answer. The green-eyed woman, apron dusted in white powder, was turning the Open sign to Closed. “It’s a weeknight. I guess they shut down early.”

“Glad we got here when we did.”

Jean watched as Ida took a savage bite from the side of her cone. “Me too,” she said, and Jean meant it. The single traffic light blinked from green to yellow to red, though there weren’t any cars to be directed. One by one, shops along the strip dimmed their lights, employees leaving, and the green-eyed woman was no exception, asking Ida and Jean whether there was anything else they needed before she did. Each declined, but when the street was empty Jean dared her luck with a few more swallows of rocky road, and Ida finished her peppermint cone in its entirety.

Without the chatter of the crowd or the hum of engines, faint music could be heard drifting down from a window over the ice cream shop.

“Someone must live up there,” Ida said.

Jean listened closely, though she didn’t recognize the song. The pair were alone. Whether it was the briskness in the air or the rush of faux sugar in her bloodstream, she realized they were in a town where nobody knew them, on a night when every ordinary thing was alive with possibility, and that no matter the outcome of their misadventure, she was running out of opportunities. Jean took a chance, seizing this brief window in which she could love Ida out loud and in the open. Emboldened by Ida’s displays of affection on the bus and earlier in their walk that evening, she stood up, extending her hand.

Ida looked incredulous. “What are you doing?”

“Come on,” Jean said, motioning as such, and Ida placed her hand in Jean’s and rose with the slightest tug. It was piano she heard, mostly, and enough of a melody to catch the timing. Jean placed a palm on Ida’s shoulder, then outstretched both their arms with the other.

“What are you *doing*?” Ida asked again, delight flashing in her eyes.

“Stop asking questions, woman.”

Ida’s grip settled on Jean’s waist, her forehead on Jean’s chest.

“Just dance with me.”

Under a double-bulbed streetlamp on a deserted downtown strip in middle-of-nowhere Illinois, to music they could hardly hear and with steps each had learned decades before but neither knew well, Jean and Ida danced

a slow dance despite the resolute marching of time—or perhaps because of it.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

The *New York Times* was provided free of charge to guests at this particular chain motel, a fact that Ida had not found impressive when she was told at check-in and remained unimpressed by when she found a copy sitting outside their door. However, impressed or not, Jean slept soundly in spite of the relatively late hour, seven thirty a.m. Sweat beaded across Jean's upper lip and darkened the collar of her nightdress. Her breaths came labored and heavy, as if a weight bore down on her body. Ida thought it best to let the woman sleep.

Ida had already fed and scratched Frankie. So, having little else to do, she sat in the upholstered desk chair, unfolded the paper, and began reading.

Joe DiMaggio had died a few days prior. His picture occupied a quarter of the front page, and though Ida didn't care for baseball, she felt an obligation as a New Yorker to at least read the copy. Ida learned that in 1941, when she was just fourteen years old and couldn't have given a lick less, a fifty-six-game hitting streak rocketed Joe to stardom and inscribed his name on the hearts of every American sports fan.

Jean rolled over in bed, flicking open a single eye to look at the nightstand clock.

"It's late," Ida said, newspaper crinkling in her grip.

Her voice dropped an octave lower from fatigue, Jean said, "I overslept." She pushed the pillowy comforter aside, flailed an arm behind her, and used it as leverage to sit up.

"Relax," said Ida.

Jean squinted at her. "I never sleep this—"

"I keep telling you, I think you're coming down with something. Your body needs the rest, so just rest."

Jean sighed, then leaned backward onto the mound of pillows against the headboard.

To encourage Jean to keep resting, Ida kept reading. She learned that Joe

died around midnight, at the age of eighty-four and not long after he'd undergone surgery for lung cancer.

"DiMaggio died?" Jean asked.

"Surprised you can read it from there without your glasses," said Ida without looking up.

"I see his picture. They never print the picture of anybody our age unless they died."

"Oh," said Ida.

"What a shame."

"Is it?" Ida asked. "Never seen you watch baseball."

"Well, no," said Jean, clearing her throat, "but he was… he was…"

"A hero?" Ida looked up, feeling the ne'er-do-well grin deepen in her cheeks.

Jean pulled the comforter up over her lap. "Some people thought so."

Ida's gaze traveled back to the article. "So it would seem."

"What got him?"

"Cancer."

The heater kicked on, filling the room with ambient noise and brushing warmth onto the apples of Ida's cheeks.

"Well?" Ida asked.

The question caused Jean to look up sharply from where she'd been staring before.

"Breakfast?"

"Oh," Jean said, sliding both legs over the side of the bed as Ida turned the page. "Yes. Give me just a few minutes to—"

"Shit." Ida stared at the photographs, unable to read and unable to explain and unable to comprehend. "Oh shit."

"What?"

Ida placed her fingertip beneath the bold headline as if doing so might help her understand what she was seeing.

Murder in Rockaway: Grandmothers Sought for Questioning

"Ida, what is it?"

Ida could only look, words blurring and coming back into focus and blurring again. Her chest thumped, heartbeats strong but slow as if a great countdown had begun some time ago and only now could she hear it blaring.

“Ida?”

The photos she recognized from their driver’s licenses—Jean’s missing-tooth grin and her own sour-mouthed pout from a heated back-and-forth with a DMV worker that day. “Jean,” she managed as tears rushed unbidden and gathered in her lashes.

Jean circled around behind Ida in the space of one long heartbeat. “We have to go.”

Ida was aware of a flurry of movement, Frankie’s flustered meow as he was lifted, clothes landing softly in bags, hurried footfalls on the carpet, and wiping… *Why is Jean wiping the nightstands?* she wondered. The headline went fuzzy again.

“Ida, we have to go.”

Ida stood, newspaper gripped in both hands.

“I need help,” Jean said, so many bags slung over her shoulders they toppled onto one another, dragging her right side halfway to the floor.

“Oh,” Ida said, looking down at the paper in her hands and folding it up and stashing it under one elbow. “Of course.” She picked up the suitcase that had fallen along with Frankie’s carrier from where it waited on the unmade bed. “Should we leave a tip for—”

“*Now*,” Jean said, already flinging open the door.

Ida followed. Down the hall, where floral-patterned carpet seemed to warp just right to catch the toes of her shoes. The walls themselves seemed to stretch and narrow, like the building was a hungry monster at the end of her life’s long labyrinth, like it had found her at last, and would make her its meal.

At the front desk, Jean tossed a small stack of bills on the counter while the attendant sat reading the paper. The double doors were in sight when Ida heard “Hey!” from behind her. She turned to look. The attendant glanced at them, then down at the paper. “Hey, wait!”

The women blew through the doors and into a Midwestern gust that chilled Ida but also seemed very far away. It felt surreal, like Ida was watching herself chase Jean across the parking lot and throw open the trunk. Hearing footsteps behind her, and the attendant yelling, “Stop!” she stumbled over a dip in the asphalt and Frankie’s carrier fell, the sudden shift in his weight tearing the half-done zipper wide.

As Jean threw bags into the trunk, the attendant caught up to Ida.

Frankie froze, crouched low, the hair on his back standing straight up, and hissed at the short, uniformed man who now stood over Ida.

"You're those ladies from the paper," he said. "I'm calling the cops."

Ida scooped up a terrified Frankie and got to her feet.

"You stay right there," said the man, his palm outstretched. "I—I got your license plate number."

"Get in the car, Ida," said Jean.

Frankie's claws dug into her shoulder. Halfway between the attendant and the car, Ida didn't dare to move.

"Get in the car!"

Ida took a step and felt a hand grab the tail of her shirt.

"Back off," Jean said, and when Ida looked up, Jean held Ida's purse in one trembling hand and the pistol in the other. "Back off!"

The pressure on Ida's shirt released, and Ida, with Frankie in her arms, climbed into the passenger seat. Through the closed door, Ida heard Jean faintly.

"Stay right there. Don't move."

When she looked at the man through the rearview window, both hands were up in surrender. Two more uniformed staff stood at the lobby doors, but neither moved as Jean got back into the car and started the engine. The Town Car was already rolling when the newspaper dropped from her elbow's grip, and Ida hadn't even remembered she'd been holding it.

"They're really going to chase us now," Ida said. "Aren't they, Jean?"

The engine growled and the pavement streaked by. "Yes," Jean said.

"What are we going to do?"

Jean's lips curled tightly into her teeth. It was a rare expression, one Ida hadn't seen on Jean since that night in '57, when after the shock of discovering the pair making love had settled, Richard's drunken rage had been all that remained. It was a rage that had taken the shape of a ball-fisted strike across Jean's jaw, knocking out her tooth, and then another one to Ida's nose. That strike had taken the shape of a multicolored bruise, and that bruise had inspired the silhouette of Jean's simple promise: *Never again.*

"We're going to make them run," Jean said. "We're going to make them work for it."

Ida's tears ran hot down her cheeks, some falling off her chin as she nodded. "Yeah," she said, knowing that even at her sharpest and most fit,

she wouldn’t have been able to escape what was coming for her. “Let’s make them earn it.”

Over the center console, the women smiled at one another through tears and came to a silent agreement—that they would be caught, that it was inevitable, but until that time, they would continue as they always had: together and blazing.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

There was a possible sighting of the grandma killers in Illinois today by a hotel clerk who was held at gunpoint. Jean drove five hours through Iowa with the radio off after hearing that. Ida spent more time tuning and retuning the police scanner to pick up local channels than either did listening to the coded messages. Both knew it was useless anyway. There was no doubt the police were looking for them. Their pictures had made a national paper. Their story was on the radio. They couldn't best the police in a car chase, wouldn't survive a shoot-out, and no bribe would be big enough to make all the world look the other way. So they decided to shut off the scanner when they reached the Nebraska state line.

The women pulled over at a truck stop right between the states, and Jean used the edge of a quarter to unscrew the license plate of a passenger van and switch it with their own. They got back on the road, Ida still rattled, but Jean did her best to reassure her that Town Cars are common, that they had put a lot of distance between themselves and where they were last seen, and that the plate wouldn't flag any alarms with police. Hopefully.

"We're low on gas," Jean said, passing a faded billboard for Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium. She'd been in such a rush at the truck stop, she hadn't checked the gauge.

"Shouldn't we get somewhere quieter? Isn't Omaha big? I don't think we should stop here."

"We need the gas. And you must be hungry."

"I can wait," Ida said.

Jean read the signs for Lauritzen Gardens, Deer Park, the Omaha Zoo Railroad. Half-heartedly, and only to reassure Ida, she said, "I doubt many people read the *Times* out here."

But Ida was done being nonchalant about their getaway. It was too real to her now. "They have radio, Jean. And it only takes one," said Ida. She studied the map, finger sliding down a southbound line. "If we get off at

US-75, it looks like it’s not far to Bellevue.”

“What makes you think it’s safer there?”

“All the green.” Ida held up the map, showing large areas of illustrated forest. “Cornhusker Road.”

“Takes us out of the way,” Jean said.

“Yeah,” said Ida. “That’s the point.”

Jean said nothing more on the subject but took the ramp for US-75 South. She thought darkly and often about the headline picture of Joe DiMaggio. The *New York Times* had chosen one of him young and swinging a bat, at once announcing his death and calling upon readers to remember him at his best. She wondered how she’d be memorialized, whether all the challenge and triumph of her life would be reduced to its very lowest moments. Where DiMaggio was branded *hero*, despite his history of domestic violence, would Jean be branded *killer*, despite how fiercely she’d loved Ida and her children?

After a time, she exited US-75 in favor of a one-lane, one-way road. It meandered west in no particular hurry, shoulder crumbling in places and surrounded by evergreens older than the asphalt. When the trees broke, the horizon laid bare the flat expanse of Bellevue.

In the lingering cold of early March, it was blanketed in brown grass. Cautious green tried its luck in patches across a cemetery to the south, where reaching headstones spilled crescent moon shadows around their base. Rows and rows of graves stretched on as far as Jean’s dim vision could see. Even on this back road of this country town, she couldn’t escape the pall of her swiftly approaching death.

As the women passed a six-foot hole in the earth, backhoe still sitting beside the plot, the scent of freshly churned soil stuck in Jean’s nose. She and Ida had side-by-side plots in Rockaway. Nothing nearly so grand as these ornate limestone carvings, and something they had only discussed the one day when they purchased them on impulse and then never again.

It occurred to Jean that she might never be buried there, that, if she surrendered, the state would likely inter her body in an unmarked grave where Ida couldn’t visit. And that even if her family intervened, laid her to rest in the paid-for plot, Ida would risk the public shame of mourning a confessed killer should she try to lay flowers or the scrutiny and surveillance of police if she visited just to talk.

Jean didn’t care much for her own sake. She would be dead, and she had never believed in ghosts or an afterlife. But to think of herself gone and her legacy villainized, Ida alone and without a home for her grieving, it cut Jean in a way only the deepest love can. The prospect of that failure felt like metal teeth clawing through her gut.

Popping up from the roadside, a printed sign sat atop a wooden stake. “Fast Gas,” Ida read aloud.

Jean’s eye followed the sign’s white arrow to a red-roofed building and four unmanned gas pumps.

“Told you,” Ida said.

The Town Car glided into a spot beside the first pump.

“You get the gas. I’ll get us some food so we don’t have to stop again.”

Before Ida could get out of the car, Jean said, “We can find a place to eat. There’s nobody around here, it will be fine.”

“You tired of driving or something?” Ida asked. Her sunken brows told Jean that something wasn’t adding up to her lover.

“No,” Jean said quickly.

Ida tossed open the door. “Okay,” she said without looking back.

As Jean filled the Town Car’s tank, she watched Frankie through the back window and the mesh of his carrier. He was cleaning the spots Ida had dyed, raking his tongue over the fur and biting at it with rapid, shallow clenches of his jaw.

Ida returned just as Jean set the pump back into place. She carried two heavy-looking plastic bags packed with vacuum-sealed snacks and cold canned beverages. “I got jerky,” Ida said. “They had Jim’s, the teriyaki kind you like. And a banana and some chips. Best I could do.”

Jean slid into the driver’s seat. “Let’s just find a little restaurant. Something mom-and-pop.”

“What’s with you?” Ida asked, placing a bottle of water into Jean’s cupholder and a bottle of lemonade into her own. “You’re the one who said we have to run. Visiting a mom-and-pop wasn’t in any of those crime shows.”

“Yeah,” Jean said, not quite understanding it herself.

“But you wanted to stop in Omaha? You want to hang out here? We should keep moving, right? I mean…” Ida shook her head. “I’m no criminal expert, but I’m pretty sure we should keep moving when our faces are in the

New York Times."

"Yeah," Jean said.

Ida focused all her attention on unscrewing the top of her bottle of lemonade. Carefully, with a timidity the woman rarely expressed, Ida finally worked up the courage to ask, "Is there something you're not telling me?"

Jean froze. The graves, their pictures in the paper, the night sweats. Accepting that they would be caught, the running felt less like running and more like falling, falling toward the end of the long season of Ida and Jean. Jean knew she wanted to linger in Bellevue, and came to understand that lingering was the best she could do to slow her momentum before she went all the way down. Gravity was persistent. So was the marching of time, and Jean didn't want to spend the very little of it she had left keeping up a lie to the person she loved most in the world.

"I'm sick," Jean said, and set the key in the ignition. She didn't start the engine.

Ida took a breath and held it. She looked at Jean, eyelids trembling, white cap quivering in her unsteady hand.

"I'm really sick, Ida." Tears broke through Jean's bottom lashes, streaking vertical lines down her cheeks and dropping on either side of her chin.

"What do you mean, *sick*?" Ida asked, head tipping to one side. Her voice was shaky with a childlike disbelief, and Jean felt all the bricks of deception she'd built around Ida come tumbling down on top of her.

Cancer. The word sat at the back of Jean's throat. In her mind flashed Joe DiMaggio, and even after all the doctor visits and test results, she could not believe that life now required her to say the word out loud to her lover. It was worse, in a way, than the diagnosis itself. *Cancer* had remained a diagnosis on a piece of paper until now, something that could be kept at a distance, sealed in an envelope, hidden in a drawer. But Ida's distress was real. It was right in front of her. And it was a pestilence more painful than any abnormal cell in any failing organ.

"What do you mean, sick?" Ida asked again, this time insistent.

Jean read the agony her hesitation was inflicting in the deep lines in the center of Ida's forehead. "Ovarian cancer," Jean said, sharp as a scalpel, a quick incision.

An exhale stuttered out of Ida in a series of contractions that bent her forward.

Placing a hand on Ida's back, Jean said, "I found out too late."

Ida's ribs shuddered around moving breath. "How could you keep this from me?" she asked, squeezing her eyes shut. She looked so small to Jean. Hunched over, curled up, too slight even for her own skin. Her jaw clenched, and her eyes snapped back open as she asked, "How long have you known?"

"Not long," Jean said quickly. "A month, maybe two—"

"A month!" Ida shook Jean's hand off her. "I knew," said Ida through gritted teeth. "I knew something was wrong, and you lied to me." She was pointing, her finger rigid and trembling. "You were sick at the bus station! Why would… why wouldn't you…" Ida dropped her head into her hands, and tears dripped from the space between her fingers.

Jean reached for her, wanting so badly to take Ida's pain into herself, but as she grasped Ida's shoulder, Ida jolted up, threw open the passenger-side door, and fled the vehicle like it was on fire.

She crossed the asphalt, and when she reached the limit of the gas station property, she strode into a field of scrub so high it reached her knees. Jean yanked the keys from the ignition, shut both car doors, and chased her.

Ida sobbed openly as she crossed through the patch of weeds and onto the cemetery grounds. Her hair was a cherry-cola spot between the careless blue sky and the endless expanse of brown and gray beneath it. Dead grass and granite headstones, marble memorial statues and white wisps of cloud, and Ida, stark and bright and so alive, wailing like an animal caught in a trap in the middle of it all.

Jean closed the distance at a plot marked *Daines*. "I'm sorry," she said, and Ida answered with a strangled sound. "I wanted to get you somewhere safe before I told you. I'm so, so sorry."

Ida slumped to the dry earth of early spring, embracing her knees in a full-body hug. She swiped at her cheeks with her shoulders, dragging tears into her hair and plastering it down in slick swirls beside ear and temple.

"How could you do this?" Ida asked.

Jean wondered whether she was asking how Jean could've lied to her or how Jean could possibly betray her by dying. "I'm sorry," Jean said again, and she was. For both.

Ida stared at the fabric of her blouse when she asked, “How long until…?”

Jean lowered herself down and sat beside her. “I don’t know,” she said. “Not long.”

At that, Ida buried her face in her hands once more, stifling the sounds that her body pushed out of her.

“I love you,” Jean said, and lunged forward, no longer able to restrain the urge to hold the woman she’d devoted her life to. When Ida hitched with a fresh sob, Jean tightened her grip. A flock of oily-feathered birds formed a V overhead, squawking as Jean whispered, “I love you, I love you, I love you,” over and over again until Ida’s crying softened, and the woman relaxed in her arms. “I wish…” Jean thought of the many things a person might wish for: wealth, health, freedom.

Ida’s eyes, bloodshot, traveled up to meet Jean’s. Water beaded on her top and bottom lashes. Smudged mascara left a smoky hue, and the pink irritation from crying made the cornflower blue of her irises striking enough to rival the sky overhead. After all her secrets, looking into Ida’s eyes, Jean knew her truth. Knew her wish. “I wish I had forty more years,” she said, “so I could give them all to you.”

Ida leaned her weight into Jean’s embrace, resting her head in the crook of Jean’s neck like they did in bed back home. For all their rushing and racing against time, this tender moment happened slowly. In front of the headstone marked *Daines*, Ida took Jean’s face into her hands and kissed her, right there in public, for any and all to see. She was warm against the front of Jean’s body, and by the time the kiss was broken, a fresh sweat had slicked Jean’s skin. Then, cold lanced at Jean’s hips where her shirt rode up. A chill started at the base of her spine, wrapping around her pelvis and then traveling down her arms in a shiver that shook loose a curl of Ida’s hair.

“Are you okay?” Ida asked, sitting up.

Jean drew down on her shirt, but her shoulders racked.

With open palms, Ida rubbed up and down, creating heat with the friction. “Why don’t we find a restaurant,” Ida said. “I’m sure we’ll be fine here for an hour.”

Jean nodded, thinking what a relief it would be to just take a moment, a beat. She moved to stand, but Ida beat her to it, springing up first and offering her hand. Jean took it, pushing up off the ground and getting to her

feet more quickly than she expected with Ida's added boost.

"You know what I would wish?" Ida asked as the women made their way back through the cemetery, toward the patch of scrub with their car just on the other side.

"What's that?" Jean asked.

Ida paused in a spot where the brush reached her knees, long enough for Jean to meet her eyes. "I wish I could've been as good as you." She wiped her knuckles beneath each of her eyes, clearing away the bulk of the mascara that had bled there. "I wish I could've kissed you like that years ago. I wish I could've been brave." Fresh tears shone over Ida's blue eyes, but she blinked them back.

"I wasn't brave," said Jean. "I lied. I didn't tell you I was sick and—"

"I forgive you," Ida said before Jean could finish. "Can you forgive me?"

Jean thought back to all the difficult conversations, the ones where she was sure they could tell the kids, could tell Michael Thompson, could tell Jim Friedman that they loved one another like a man and woman might and everything would be just fine. There had been nights on the porch when, though the air was brisk, it hung so thick with tension that their chairs wouldn't rock. A Christmas Eve when they'd left their gifts wrapped until morning because Jean was sure and ready, but Ida refused to believe and turned her back on the twinkling string lights with hands balled into frustrated fists. There had been long, silent afternoons. Maybe things would've been different, better, easier if Ida had been courageous enough to claim their relationship out loud. But the time for what-ifs was over. There was so little time for anything now. Jean wasn't willing to spend a minute of it on anything but love. "A million times over," she said.

Ida grinned. The two walked quietly back to the car, and Ida said, "Why don't you let me drive."

Jean hesitated, considering Ida's lack of confidence while driving and the possibility they could be chased by police, but Jean felt entirely drained. Her thoughts, usually sharp, came foggy and disjointed, and she slouched under the exhaustion of her body and mind. Ida, by contrast, seemed imbued with fresh strength, a kind of grit born out of necessity. She stood with back straight, chin tipped up, seemingly in defiance of illness, the law, and anything else that might seek to tear the couple away from one another.

Yes, Ida had always been stubborn, Jean thought. And that stubbornness had its advantages.

The women traded places. Jean found her feet crowded with gas station lunch options and Ida clutched the wheel in her hands.

“There’s got to be something nearby,” Ida said. Turning the key in the ignition, Ida looked left and right, Jean following her gaze and finding only the flat plains and cemetery around them. If they went back the way they came, they’d hit highway before anything else. The opposite direction offered no signs along its sloping, one-lane road.

“Let’s try it,” Jean said. “At least a few miles. See if we run into anything.”

Without a word, Ida pulled the Town Car in a loop around the gas pumps and made a left onto the road marked Memorial Way.

A speed limit of twenty-five miles per hour made for slow progress, and Ida hovered around five miles per hour below that, but Jean never asked her to speed up. Where the cemetery ended sat a feed store. Roosters ran free across the lot, circling chickens that darted into weather-worn coops to avoid them. A handwritten sign read *10 acres for sale*, and a preteen girl pedaled past on a blue bike too small for her lanky legs.

The rural stretch gave way to a suburb, home to a soaring brick theater and a sprawling Presbyterian church complete with white steeple.

“Here?” Ida asked, rolling toward a drive-up burger joint called Cal’s.

A black truck and a gray minivan sat in the parking lot. Beside the restaurant’s staff door, a man with black hair and a crew cut leaned against the stucco while he smoked. From his red-and-yellow uniform, Jean assumed he worked there. “Why not?” she said.

The women ordered burgers and fries from their car through the speaker, and Ida added milkshakes because, “Might as well, right?” which she asked with a wink.

As they waited for their food, Jean pulled the *New York Times* from the floor where it had fallen after their escape from Illinois. She scanned the article about the two of them, stopping at the author’s brief bio.

“Linda Kahan,” she read aloud. “Native New Yorker, Yankees fan, writer and associate editor.”

“Figures she’d be a Linda,” Ida said.

“Why’s that?”

“Linda Kroll. Linda… what was her name? The one who swiped the last turkey that one Thanksgiving?”

“Linda Chambers, I think.”

“Mm-hmm,” Ida said. “I’ve never liked a Linda.”

Jean slipped the paper between the seats just as their food was delivered. Milkshakes stationed in the cupholders, their knees converted to makeshift tables beneath napkin tablecloths, she took a big bite of her double-beef-patty burger, squelching ketchup onto each of her cheeks.

“How much farther do you think we can make it today?” Ida asked.

Jean held the burger in one hand, fanning out the map on the dashboard with the other. She estimated distance and miles per hour, following west the squiggle of I-80 and pushing down the sinking feeling burrowing further into her gut. “As far as Cheyenne, if we drive into the evening.”

“Wyoming?” Ida asked through the crunch of a french fry.

“Cheyenne is in Wyoming, yes,” Jean said.

“Thank you, Einstein.” Ida pulled a pickle slice from her burger and tossed it out the window. “Let’s get out of Nebraska, find some small town just shy of Cheyenne to spend the night. How are we on cash?”

“Just shy of Cheyenne,” Jean repeated, drawing out the sounds. “Sounds like poetry.”

“Yeah, I’ve always been clever.”

“Smart as a whip.”

“I know it. Cash, Jean.”

Jean checked her wallet, counted the bills. Her heart sank. “About a hundred.”

“So one night and a couple meals.” Ida cleared her throat and raised her chin. “Double that if we slum it.”

“Right.”

Ida made short work of her remaining fries, eagerly delivering them to her mouth two and three at a time. “And then what?”

Jean, once again, thought of calling Barbara. Though her daughter didn’t have much, she was sure she would help. But then again, how would Barbara get the money to them? “We rob a bank?”

“I don’t think that pistol would be enough to impress out here,” Ida said without missing a beat. “Pretty sure these people hunt. But I love your gusto, Clyde.”

Jean cracked a grin. “And I love you, Bonnie.”

Ida laughed. Her laugh had climbed higher in octave over the years, shrill in places when she really meant it, and rolling into a light snort as it resolved.

“My girl,” Jean said on an exhale, though Ida didn’t hear. Ida was eyeing the map with a brow raised like an idea had struck her.

“How far are we from Kansas City?” she asked.

Jean knew there was only one thing of relevance in Kansas City. “George?”

“He’s still there, right?”

“Think so,” said Jean. “But with the divorce, he could be staying with a friend or—”

“How far?” Ida crumbled up the remaining bits of her burger in the wrapper and deposited it in the greasy bag.

“I don’t know,” she said. “About two hours. Three?”

“That’s the plan,” Ida said. Her confidence reached its height as she balled up the burger bag and lobbed it toward a nearby trash can. It bounced off the rim but landed inside.

“It’s risky,” said Jean. “I don’t know if George will help.”

“All that’s left for us is risks,” Ida said, sipping her strawberry milkshake through a wide red straw. “We only get to choose which ones to take and when.”

The woman was right again. For all her shortcomings—a quick temper, a brashness of expression, a fear of vulnerability—there was no question that Ida was sharp. “We’ll have to turn around,” Jean said, glancing at the intersection. “I think. And I’ll have to call ahead.”

“No,” Ida said.

“Shouldn’t he be expecting us?”

“If he’s expecting us, the cops might be too.”

“What if he’s not even there?”

Ida sighed.

“We don’t even have the address,” Jean said. “Let me just call Barbara. I can get his address from her and a read on whether she thinks he’ll help us or—”

The Town Car grumbled as Ida put it in gear. “I don’t think now is the time. While we’re on the run from the cops…”

“It’s the only time!” Jean yelled. The outburst took her by surprise, and she saw it register in the widening of Ida’s eyes, immediately wishing she could take it back. But she needed to talk to Barbara. Jean had spoken to her every day for a decade and couldn’t ignore the incessant feeling that she was almost out of chances to say goodbye. She needed Barbara to understand, needed all the children to understand, they had to be there for Ida once Jean was gone—but it was beginning to feel like an impossible task.

Ida was stunned into silence, knuckles clenched around the steering wheel as she idled at the red light.

“I’m sorry,” said Jean. “I shouldn’t have yelled. I just don’t know…” As she trailed off, Jean looked out through the window. Her shoulders rocked back against the seat as Ida pulled forward, and she let the momentum of a right-hand turn onto the highway rest her head against the glass.

“You don’t know how much time you have left,” Jean heard Ida say.

She nodded. Jean didn’t want to leave this world. Even the chewed-up asphalt and the white lines painted on it, even the dull brown trees beyond the highway and the common grackles landing in their branches, even the optometry billboard and the plane cutting a line in the clouds above it seemed precious, worth holding on to. But if she had to leave, if she had to go, she couldn’t do it with things unfinished.

Ida found the radio dial and clicked it on to relieve the quiet.

So, more on this story coming out of Long Island, the radio DJ said. *If grandmas on the run wasn’t wild enough, it’s coming out that the victim, Ellis Gable, had a restraining order filed against him earlier this year and —get this—by none other than the police chief’s daughter!*

Another DJ chimed in, this one’s voice deeper. *Ho, ho!* he laughed. *I’m guessing Rockaway police won’t be tripping over themselves to get justice for this guy.*

No! said the first. *I’m wondering if they might’ve set the old biddies up, taken care of this problem themselves.*

Wouldn’t be the first time. The radio DJs moved on to a call-in show where spouses could try to catch each other cheating through a fake phone call from a florist offering to deliver free flowers.

Jean sat up. She glanced over at Ida and said, “This is good.” Finally, things might be moving in their favor, she thought. “If the police chief

hated Ellis, I doubt he'll be falling over himself to put resources into catching us. This could be really good for us." The relief was massive. Ellis hadn't been some doting father. He had been a bad guy.

"You think?" Ida asked tentatively, waffling between skepticism and daring to believe.

"There's a chance." Jean placed a hand on Ida's thigh, squeezing, and a smile overtook her face.

Ida zipped along with a newfound vigor. She passed a vintage VW Bug and came up on a sleek silver horse trailer cruising in the center lane. "Look," she said, and Jean peered into one of the windows to find a big bay gnawing on his feed.

"He's pretty," said Jean.

"And look at this one!" Ida pointed toward an Appaloosa with a fly mask over his eyes.

"Looks like he's sleeping," said Jean.

"Might be," Ida said. "They can sleep standing up, you know."

"Yes, dear, I know."

"Maybe wherever we end up, we could ride some horses."

Jean took on a skeptical look. "At our age?"

Ida shrugged. "Maybe just a trail ride or something."

Shaking her head, Jean proposed, "How about we try to find a barn somewhere that lets us visit and pet them."

Ida looked out in the distance as if picturing it. She nodded. "Okay. That's a good compromise."

The Lincoln Town Car settled into a speed that placed it directly beside the truck pulling the horse trailer. Jean looked into the driver's-side window, wanting to get a glimpse of the person who owned those beautiful horses. It was a woman, mid-forties, her curly hair pulled back into a ponytail under a baseball cap. Jean wondered whether a woman like that would let her and Ida visit her barn, and glanced around at what she could see in the truck looking for clues about what horse-owning people might be like. An air freshener shaped like a sandal hung from the rearview mirror, which didn't tell Jean much, and some window shades were folded up on the dash next to… Jean squinted to make out the title on the newspaper rolled up there and jammed where the window met the windshield.

Ida changed lanes, and Jean looked away from the truck to find that the

highway was merging, narrowing from four lanes to two as they approached a bridge ahead. She glanced at Ida, anxious to warn her about what they were approaching.

"There's a—"

"I know," Ida snapped, obviously nervous. "I see the bridge."

Ida had never been comfortable driving over bridges. Or overpasses. Or anything that raised them up off the ground, for that matter. Her head turned left and right, looking for a place to pull over, but the highway's shoulder was narrow. If she stopped the car, she'd block a lane.

"Are you going to be okay?" Jean asked.

Ida's knuckles were white around the steering wheel. "I guess I'll have to—"

"HEY!" Jean's head whipped to her right, where the woman towing the horse trailer had rolled down her window. It was a copy of the *New York Times* rolled up on her dash. It had to be. "You're those grandma killers!" she yelled.

Ida punched down on the gas, pulling the Town Car ahead of the woman in the truck.

"Shit," she said. "Shit, Jean. She recognized us!"

The highway lanes merged again, and Ida swerved to avoid the VW Bug. The bridge was approaching fast. "Just stay calm," Jean said.

She felt a pounding in her chest, and Jean could only imagine how much Ida must be panicking. In an attempt to reassure her lover, Jean placed her hand over Ida's on the steering wheel. Then the woman towing the horse trailer charged forward in the lane beside them. She yelled something into the wind that neither Ida nor Jean could make out.

And Ida, for a moment, took her eyes off the road.

In the space of a fractured second, the world—which had barely made room for a stippling of hope—shattered into the sound of glass and metal and women screaming. Jean's body lifted from the passenger seat, her skull bounced off the window, and her face struck the dash before the Town Car slammed to a stop against a concrete barricade.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Detective Rollins sat across from Chief Hutton, an ornate mahogany desk between them. When the phone rang, Hutton answered just to say, “Hold my calls,” then hung up without waiting for a response.

“I’m in a real position here,” said Hutton. He picked up a wood inlay pen from his desk and slowly twisted the brass cap. “We’ve got reporters calling all damn day. It was bad enough we got old-lady suspects, but now that news has leaked about the order of protection…” Hutton slid the cap off the pen just to pop it back down with his thumb. “It’s a media circus.”

“I’ll bring them in,” said Detective Rollins.

“Oh, I know you will.” Hutton leaned back in his green leather chair. “It’s a shame we have to arrest them. Personally, I’d like to shake their hands.”

“I understand.”

“You know the prick kidnapped her dog? The little teacup thing I got her for her birthday last year. Kidnapped the damn dog!”

Detective Rollins shook his head, treading lightly over the chief’s family matters.

“Jackie’s finally sleeping through the night again. Even with a uniform posted on her block, she wasn’t sleepin’, didn’t eat. I’d be lying if I said it didn’t cross my mind to shoot the guy myself.” Hutton slid a hand over his midsection and tapped the bulge of his holster. Then he leaned forward and grinned. “But I guess that problem—” The phone rang before the chief could say *solved itself*. Hutton answered. “I said, hold my calls.” He slammed down the receiver. “This new assistant, I swear, it’s like talking to a brick wall. In any case, the sooner we get this wrapped up—”

Three raps fell upon the glass of the office door, and then a voice said, “Chief Hutton?”

“Goddammit,” Hutton said.

The door opened to reveal Hutton’s new assistant, a young woman just

out of college with thick-framed glasses and a mousy demeanor. “I’m sorry to disturb your meeting,” she said, “but there’s a call for Detective Rollins,” and looking at the detective, she added, “You’re going to want to take it.”

Hutton dragged a whistling inhale through his nose. “Better be important.”

“It is,” said the assistant. “Jean Bleaker and Ida Holloway are at Bellevue Medical Center in Nebraska. It’s a nurse on the phone, looking for their next of kin.”



Ida woke alone to beeping machines and recycled air and the cloying scent of disinfectant and pain and harsh fluorescent light.

“Can you hear me?” a blurry figure asked, obstructing the brightness overhead.

Ida remembered the sleek silver horse trailer, just a flash of it advancing in the right lane; she remembered looking at the curly-haired woman and the moment of impact with the vintage VW Bug in front of them, that meteoric smash and the spray of fragmented glass and the sharp burn in her eye—

Ida reached up, her breath shuddering as she felt the bandage swollen over cotton beneath. “My eye.”

“You were lucky,” the figure said, in a warm feminine tone. “Scratched the cornea. The doctor was able to remove the glass without much damage. You should make a full recovery.”

“Where…” The word tumbled out of her throat as if it were falling down stairs.

“You’re at Bellevue Medical Center. Room 307. Just take a breath, honey, we’re reaching out to your family. Everything’s okay.”

“What? My family?”

“Your friend is in rough shape, but Dr. Farlene has done an amazing job of patching her up. We contacted…” The woman moved away from the hospital bed, pulling a clipboard from a container on the wall. “Oh. You’re from New York, right? That was the address on your ID. It was lucky the

paramedics brought your purse in with you. It looks like they reached out to Rockaway police to get your next of kin. But that won't be necessary now, seeing as you're up. Who should we call for you, honey?"

"Wait," Ida said, her head pounding and struggling to grasp all the details. "The police?"

"Standard." The nurse came into focus, wearing lilac scrubs and high-top sneakers and a braid in her hair. "That's how we get your emergency contact when we can't ask you directly. Nothing to worry about."

"You already called them?" Ida asked, hands trembling beneath the thin white sheet.

"Believe so, but who can I call for you? Family member? A friend?"

"Where is Jean?" Ida asked.

The nurse filed the clipboard back into the wall shelf. "She's down the hall, in intensive care, but as I mentioned, Dr. Farlene—"

"What happened?" Ida said, voice shrill. "What happened to her?"

The nurse shifted, drawing open the plastic curtain around Ida's hospital bed. "I can't disclose the details of health information except to next of kin."

Ida sat up, the room spinning and the IV line drawing taut as she did.

"Miss Holloway, please," said the nurse, stepping quickly to Ida's side and placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Just relax, she's going to be fine, you're going to be fine, but I need you to lie down."

"Take me to Jean," Ida said, tugging at the strip of adhesive over the IV line in her arm. "Take me to her." She ripped up the tape, then the cotton ball beneath it before the nurse could grab her hand.

"Ma'am!"

Ida's fingers strained beneath the stronger woman's, gripping the needle and yanking it out. "Take me to Jean!" she cried as a rivulet of blood rolled down the crook of her arm to her elbow. "Now!"

"Miss Holloway, please," said the nurse, pushing Ida onto the bed by her shoulders, "I don't want to restrain you, but I will if I have to." She pressed a button behind the bed, prompting a ding. "Please calm down, you've been through an ordeal but everything is okay. Everything's fine, just lie down."

Another nurse appeared in the doorway, a heavyset man with a stern look and wrinkled peach scrubs. Ida pushed back on the weight pressing down on her, twisting her body and kicking the sheets. The first nurse

nodded, and the second approached the bedside, drawing from beneath it a pair of padded cuffs.

“We’re going to put these on,” the female nurse said, “just until the doctor can order something to help you stay calm.”

Velcro teeth closed around Ida’s wrists, and although she cried and flailed, there was nothing she could do to stop the restraints from being securely fastened. Ida tested them. She yanked both hands hard, and when the cuffs held fast, her wrists snapped back and struck the bars they were tied to.

“To hell with you!” Spit gathered in the corners of Ida’s mouth. Staring into the faces of the nurses, who now stood two steps away from her bedside, she yanked at the restraints again and again. Ida knew they would hold, but she kept fighting just to fight, just to show them exactly who they’d strapped to that hospital bed, and the dull ache in her wrists where they repeatedly struck the rail was a happy sacrifice for the clanging sound they gave to her rage. “You take me to Jean! Take me to my *wife*!”

It was something Ida had never said aloud, not outside pillowed whispers in the bedroom. Though they couldn’t get married in the legal sense, Ida and Jean were married in every way that mattered. They decorated for holidays together, raised their children together, spoke to one another about politics, taxes, religion, all their hopes and fears. Loving each other fiercely, they gloried in their triumphs, savored every mundane habit, every rote routine, and were willing to weather the darkest secrets. Jean and Ida were married in every way that meant something. Every way that mattered. The eruption of the word *wife* was an outburst so true it startled Ida into stillness and cast onto the nurses’ faces a new shade of concern.

The woman in the lilac scrubs grabbed the clipboard from the wall, scanning it and flipping pages. “You are Miss Bleaker’s *wife*?”

“For forty years we’ve lived together. Might as well be,” Ida said. “Ask her yourself.”

The nurse returned the clipboard to its place, taking a quiet breath in. “Miss Holloway, I’m Jennifer, and I’m sorry we got off on the wrong foot.” She motioned the male nurse away with a tilt of her head, and as his footsteps faded down the hallway, she said, “I have a brother who…” Her brows pulled together, but she offered a little smile. “He and his partner are very happy.” She nodded. “I understand your situation. Dr. Farlene believes

Miss Bl—”

“Jean.”

“Believes Jean will make a recovery, but I’m sorry to tell you she’s in no shape to answer questions right now.”

“Tell me what happened.”

Jennifer pulled up a chair and sat in it, hands folded in her lap. “You were in a motor vehicle accident. You sustained an abrasion to your cornea, which is why you have that bandage on your eye.”

“What happened to Jean?”

“Jean suffered a blunt force trauma to the head, likely from striking the window in the crash. She broke her nose, fractured her skull. She had some bleeding in the brain, which Dr. Farlene was able to get under control in surgery—”

“Jean was in surgery?”

“Yes, earlier tonight—”

“Jesus,” said Ida, forgetting for a moment she was tied to the bed when she pulled at her arm to cover her face. It stopped short with a dull thud. “What time is it?”

The nurse pointed at the analog wall clock. “Just after one a.m.”

“And when did you call?” Ida asked, knowing that if she did not get out of the hospital with Jean soon, they could both be in handcuffs by daybreak.

“I’m sorry?”

“When did you call Rockaway?”

The nurse’s face pinched together with confusion. “Hours ago,” she said. “When Miss—when Jean went into surgery.”

Ida tried to look calm on the outside while she panicked. Rockaway Police Department wouldn’t send a next of kin. They would show up themselves, with handcuffs. She had to get to Jean. They had to get out of this hospital. “If she’s hurt, I should be with her,” she said.

Ida watched Jennifer’s gaze pass over her slowly, lingering on her bound wrists with a sheen of pity. “If I undo those, do you promise to stay calm?”

“Yes,” Ida said.

The nurse did not move.

“I was upset before,” Ida continued, recognizing the need to stay focused. To get to Jean. To get out of here. “I was confused. But I’m not upset with you. You’re being very kind.”

At this angle and under the fluorescent light, Jennifer's eyes were a shade of honey. They flitted from Ida's good eye to the bandage and back again as if she was considering but not convinced.

"I was scared," Ida said with a hard swallow. "I'm sorry."

Jennifer nodded. She reached for Ida's right wrist and unstuck the Velcro. Then the nurse paused. Ida suspected Jennifer was waiting to see if she'd lash out, so Ida lay perfectly still, drawing in a long, slow breath. And though her impatience bubbled under the surface, she was grateful for the breath, the deepest one she'd taken in two days. "I can get a wheelchair and bring you down the hall to visit her," the nurse said. "Stay right here."

Much as she wanted to make a dash toward wherever Jean was, Ida had to be the picture of a perfect patient. She could've undone the other cuff with her right hand free, but she didn't. She thought instead of what Jean might do. In their forty years together, Ida had wielded her temper and bribes to get her way, whereas Jean had chosen congeniality and smarts. Most often, Jean succeeded, so Ida would use Jean's way now, when it mattered most.

The wheelchair came through the door first, followed by Jennifer, who gave a pleasant smile upon seeing Ida so seemingly calm. She parked the chair at Ida's left side, locking the wheels before unfastening Ida's other cuff. "Slow and steady," Jennifer said, placing an arm behind Ida's back to lift her into a sitting position. "This leg first," she said, "now this one. Lean on me."

Ida felt unsteady on her feet, and was glad the nurse was there to brace her until she could get the bulk of her weight into the chair.

"There you go," Jennifer said. Before wheeling her anywhere, the nurse used cotton and antiseptic to clean the blood off Ida's arm. "We'll get that IV back in after you visit. Deal?"

Ida choked back the first words that snapped to mind, replaced them with what she thought might be Jean's. "That's a deal."

Across the floor they went, through the sleepless hospital that, like all others, carried in its walls the harsh light and bare, unending hallways, relentless mechanical beeps and the human-made stench of bleach atop the natural stink of rot and the sense that hope was both living and dying within its cramped, partitioned rooms.

A stab of dread went through Ida as she spotted the sign reading

Intensive Care Unit, but Jennifer rolled her forward all the same without a break in pace. Jean's room lay across from the elevators, and Jennifer pulled Ida and the chair in backward as she held the door open with her foot.

"She's here," Jennifer said, turning the chair. "Dr. Farlene has her sedated so she can rest and her brain can heal with less stress on her system."

What Ida saw in the hospital bed ripped the air from her lungs. Jean's head bulged on the right side, swollen to an unnatural shape. Bandages wrapped her head and face, stained brown where seeping blood had dried and red where fresh blood seeped anew. Tubes snaked out of the back of her hand, and her naked foot peeked out at the end of the bed where the sheet folded back. A catheter guided dark urine into a bag dangling from the bed, and any notion of the two of them fleeing the hospital together disappeared. "Does it hurt?" Ida asked. Though she couldn't take her eyes from the misshapen aspect of her lover, she felt Jennifer's hand rest on her shoulder.

"No," the nurse said. "Not now. She's resting."

Ida's fingers found their place atop Jean's. She wove them together with delicate care, finding the tips cold. Her lover's chest rose with a gurgling effort, fell with a wheeze. Without meaning to, Ida matched her breathing in time. Long, strangled breaths in, sagging, hissing breaths out. Over and over, until stars dotted Ida's vision.

Behind her, the door opened with a click.

"Dr. Farlene," Jennifer said, "this is Ida Holloway, Miss Bleaker's…" The nurse shot Ida a look of care before saying, "friend."

Ida, mid-inhale, did not turn to greet the doctor.

"Nice to meet you, Miss Holloway. How is your eye?"

Ida gave no answer.

Paper rustled, pages flipped. "Jean did well in surgery. A few more days here for observation and then she should be just fine recovering at home."

"At home," Ida said back, angry at the doctor for suggesting it, though the woman couldn't possibly know just how desperately home was out of reach.

"Yes," said Dr. Farlene, rounding Jean's bed to stand beside Jennifer. "Fractures to the skull and nose will heal in time, but the trauma to the body carries a risk of stroke, so we'd like to keep a close eye on her for the next

few days.”

“Of course.” The words tiptoed out, thin as spun sugar. Even if the Rockaway police chief hated the man Ida and Jean had murdered, they had still murdered him. Ida didn’t think they had a few days, not with what the nurse had said about contacting police to find next of kin. She looked back at Jean, eyes tracing the shape of her swelling.

“We should really get you back to your room,” the doctor said.

Ida gripped tighter around Jean’s hand. “She has cancer, you know.”

Dr. Farlene glanced down at her chart, reading something, then flipping pages.

“I’ll stay with her.”

Dr. Farlene cleared her throat, directing a stern look at Jennifer. “I need you to return to your room, Miss Holloway.” She grasped the handles of Ida’s wheelchair, adding, “I’ll see you there myself, make sure you have everything you need.”

“No,” Ida said, head shaking with a tight, pained smile. “I’ll stay with Jean.”

The wheelchair was rolling back, Jean’s fingers slipping from Ida’s when—

“Dr. Farlene.” Ida’s head whipped around to find another nurse standing in the doorway beside Jennifer, close, as if she’d just whispered something in her ear. “There’s someone on the phone.” The nurse held the words too low in her throat, overpunctuated each. “Someone you should speak with.”

A lock of the doctor’s strawberry-blond hair came loose from her bun as she made a probing gesture. Jennifer mouthed *Police*.

“Take Miss Holloway back to her room, please,” the doctor said.

“No,” said Ida. “I’m staying with Jean.”

Dr. Farlene strode to the door in a manner suggesting it was not open to discussion, saying only, “Nurse?” before disappearing into the hallway.

Jennifer tugged the wheelchair backward, breaking the grip Ida had on Jean’s hand. “Time to get your IV back in,” she said as Jean faded from Ida’s view. “Remember our deal?”

As Ida passed the nurses’ station, she spotted Dr. Farlene, phone pressed to her ear. “Yes?” she asked, then introduced herself. Ida watched the doctor listen and then respond, “Could be, yes.” Then listen again and say, “It’s them.”

The waiting room with its glass walls on the right-hand side was patroned by a man and three children. The kids stared vacantly at toys meant for toddlers, pushing blocks over metal wires. The man held a bundled tissue in his fist, and Ida wondered if their world was collapsing too.

Jean was dying. Dying. *Dying.* The police were on the way and Jean was dying. Jean. Her Jean. Ida thought if a kinder God dwelled in heaven, she would've never woken up in that hospital bed. She would've never woken up at all.

Soon she'd be arrested. Jean couldn't run and the gun was in the car with—

"Where is our car?" Ida asked Jennifer as they neared room 307.

"I'm not sure." Jennifer wheeled Ida back to her bed. "A tow yard, most likely. If I had to guess."

Ida let herself be guided into the bed. The needle prick brought a bubble of blood but little pain, and when the IV line was set, Ida had worked up the courage to ask, "Did they find a cat?"

"A cat?" Jennifer adjusted the bag of fluids. "I don't think so, honey."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Ida couldn’t sleep without Jean.

Her hospital bed was as hard and as cold as a grave, and the dangling Velcro handcuffs never moved out of view. She wanted Jean. Needed Jean. And the wild woman living inside Ida had always been a selfish creature, fierce in her desire and reckless in her means of snatching it. When her toes first met the tile floor, a chill almost spooked her back into bed, but she remembered the warmth of her lover. Her *wife*. She had said that, out loud, finally. Ida had been brave then and she could be brave now. Still, only Jean’s particular warmth would ease Ida’s particular suffering.

Narrow hallways were a kindness to her wobbly legs. There was always a patch of stucco within fumbling reach, and her rolling IV made for a decent cane. As she moved back down the hall, following the way Jennifer had led her, a janitor’s stare tracked her and a nurse on the phone took notice. She watched them, worried, but neither stopped her. Ida found the intensive care unit and the room across from the elevators and Jean still lying in her bed. It was slightly larger than hers, the ICU bed, Ida noticed, so she stationed her IV next to Jean’s, picked up one of Jean’s legs and moved it over, then the other, until she’d created a small strip of space to squeeze into.

She pulled back the sheet, eased her weight onto the shallow mattress, and found the valley in Jean’s chest where her face fit perfectly. Ida covered them both in the polyester sheet, her tight gooseflesh already softening. When she closed her eyes, it didn’t feel so different from being back home. It came naturally to whisper her thoughts, a habit formed over decades and kicked into gear by the smell of Jean’s skin and the closeness of their bodies.

“I told them you’re my wife,” Ida said. “Can you believe that?”

Ida knew Jean well enough to know she’d say, *You did not. You’re screwing with me*.

So Ida responded, “I did.”

And what did they say? Jean would continue.

“Not much. They brought me to you.”

Ida thought about the night Richard and Eddie discovered them, and the beastly fear it had left caged inside the pit of her stomach for all the years after, trapping both of them in a knot of secrets tighter than anybody should have to bear. “I guess I always thought saying it would be a bigger deal than that.”

Jean would say, *I told you it would be okay*.

Ida thought about all their trips to the movies, to the grocery store, to the garden center, and how each moment might’ve felt a little bit easier if she’d held Jean’s hand. “Maybe I should’ve said it sooner.”

Nah, Jean would say, to reassure her. *We were being safe.*

“We did the best we could.” Ida entwined both arms around her lover’s left one. They had sorted through a pile of bad options and picked the ones they were most likely to survive. Most people wouldn’t understand the love shared by Jean and Ida. Even Ellen DeGeneres got blacklisted for coming out on TV, and everybody loved her. But Ida did not need anyone to understand, because she knew it was real. “I think the police are coming,” Ida said. Jean’s breaths still rattled as they came, so Ida broke one hand free and rubbed her chest. “I love you. But it’s over, dear,” she said, feeling the raised freckle just beneath Jean’s collarbone. “And I don’t regret any of it.”

Jean coughed, startling Ida into a sitting position. She coughed again and panic shot through Ida’s midsection, until Jean’s eyes snapped open between the bandages.

“Jean,” Ida said. “Jean, you’re in the hospital. We were in a wreck.” In a desperate grab at normalcy, she jostled Jean with an elbow and said, “While I was driving,” and barked a humorless laugh. “You’re never going to let me live this down. I know it.”

Jean’s eyes rolled back before coming to center again. She moaned.

“What is it?” Ida checked her bandages for fresh blood, her own body position to see if she’d leaned on Jean wrong—

“Police?” Jean’s voice was hoarse and strained. Her eyes moved in and out of focus.

“I think so,” said Ida. “I think they’re coming now.”

In a tone dropped an octave lower, Jean’s next word came out clear as a

command. “Run,” Jean said.

“I’ll call the nurse. You’ll be okay, don’t worry—”

“Run,” Jean said. It was the same tone she’d used that night in ’57, and a few days before, when they’d fled Rockaway, and again yesterday when they’d seen their pictures in the paper.

“I’m not leaving you,” Ida said, wondering if Jean understood how hurt she was.

Jean’s jaw clenched and a fresh splotch of red blood soaked through the bandage on her head. “I’m in no shape for an argument.” Her eyes steadied on Ida’s. “You can’t help me if we’re both in jail. Listen to me now, for both our sakes.”

Ida knew Jean was right. As much as she wanted to stay, to cling to every moment with her wife, especially knowing they had so few left, she wouldn’t be able to help Jean if she was locked up next to her. “I love you,” she said, ripping the adhesive from her arm and tugging out the IV line. The needle *ting*ed against its metal stand when she dropped it. Ida spotted a pair of shoes under the fabric room divider and a jacket folded on a corner chair. She slipped both on.

“My girl,” Jean said. “Call Barbara. She’ll help.”

“I’ll get you out,” said Ida. “We’ll be back together real soon.”

“Of course we will,” said Jean. “But go. Get far from here and call Barbara.”

A masculine snore spurted from the curtain-enclosed bed beside Jean’s, followed by a male voice calling for a nurse.

Ida got to the door and stood there, looking across that cold room and into Jean’s swollen eyes. “I’ll come back for you,” she said.

“Call Barbara,” said Jean. “I’m so proud of you, dear. Go. Now.”

Ida knew if she didn’t leave then, she wouldn’t leave at all, so she kissed Jean as fiercely and as gently as she could, clenched her jaw, nodded, and crossed the hallway into an open elevator.



Jean willed her eyes to remain open, latching onto her sight as a drowning

woman might cling to an elevated ledge. Unconsciousness rose around her like a churning tide, and whether its dark waters would lead to sleep or death, Jean couldn't be sure. Reaching the phone on the wall required every ounce of strength and determination she could muster. It nearly caused her to faint, but Jean knew Barbara's number from memory, and she dialed it, though she thought the effort might kill her, for the purpose of saving Ida's life and, just maybe, saying goodbye.

"Hello?" Barbara's voice was ragged with exhaustion.

"It's me," Jean said.

"Ma?"

Inky spots winked across Jean's vision, but she forced her eyelids to remain open. "Yeah."

"Jesus, Ma!" Barbara's tone came to life with fear and surprise. "Where have you been? Where are you? I've been calling you. The police have been calling me. They say you—"

"We were in an accident," said Jean.

"An accident?" There was a crackle over the line like Barbara was getting up from bed. "Let me just put my shoes on. Are you hurt, Ma? Where are you?"

"Nebraska. Bellevue, I think." That ocean of unconsciousness swelled around Jean, almost sucked her down into it.

Barbara asked, "Nebraska?"

Jean didn't have time. "Ida's going to call you. You help her. Promise me that, whatever she needs, you'll do it."

A puff of breath hissed over the receiver. "What?"

"Promise me," Jean said, feeling her eyes roll and a blunt pain thrum deep in her skull.

Barbara huffed. "I can't just sit around here by the phone. I've got to figure out a way to get to Nebraska."

"Barbara Lynn Bleaker, you promise me right now."

Seconds ticked by, one and two. "All right, Ma," Barbara said.

"Thank you," said Jean, the thrum of pain whirling. "I love you." Jean disconnected the call just before she lost her grip on the phone and a rip current of blackness stole her grip on the waking world.



On the way out, Ida snatched a purse from an empty emergency room chair. The hospital parking lot stretched wide, rows and rows of increasing darkness that culminated in a wooded area of leafless trees. She found a spot behind a black SUV where the streetlights couldn't reach and crouched there to dig through the purse, looking for a lifeline. The inside was packed with all the various items a typical woman might carry: sanitary napkins, lipstick, a change purse and wallet, a compact, a rolled magazine, two pens, a small notepad, and a handful of individually wrapped, alcohol-based hand wipes.

Luckily for Ida, this woman had a love of technology, so among the contents was also a CD player and a Nokia cellular phone. Having never used a cell phone, Ida panicked when she pressed a button and the small rectangular screen glowed green. She dropped it back in the purse, afraid a passerby might notice the light. Instead, she opened the wallet, fingered through bills, and estimated it contained about one hundred fifty dollars, a mix of twenties, fives, and singles.

"About damn time something went my way," Ida said.

She read the name on the credit card, Lydia Briggs-Garland, and wondered if she was related to her wanton neighbor, Rose. Curiosity made her draw out the driver's license and study the picture. If they were related, Lydia was blessed in getting none of Rose's features. That tart might have been attractive to butchers and bakery workers, but Ida always thought her beauty to be glaringly skin deep. Lydia, on the other hand, had a kind face: rounded cheeks and deep-set eyes that almost made Ida feel sorry about stealing from her. Almost.

Knowing that the phone numbers for cab companies were usually just a single digit repeated seven times, she started with the number 2, and succeeded after four tries. Mark, the cabdriver, must have been close, because he appeared in the lot just minutes after the call, circling spaces until Ida's waving arm caught his attention.

"Where to?" he asked. Mark wore a thick mustache and a subtle confidence that made him handsome despite the raised moles that dotted

most of his face. The cab was old. Cigarette burns pocked the seats and center console, and it smelled musky, like Mark had recently left the windows open in the rain.

Ida clutched the purse in her lap as if it were her own. “The nearest hotel,” she said. “Nothing too fancy.”

“Don’t have to worry about that,” said Mark. “We’d have to drive miles for fancy.” The driver used his turn signals, only ever passed the speed limit by three or four miles per hour, and was mostly silent, which suited Ida just fine.

When they pulled beneath the overhang of the Candlewood Suites, Ida recognized the chain from locations in New York, though she’d never stayed there. Brass-trimmed luggage carts waited beside automatic doors, and Ida worried that it would look strange for her to check in without any bags.

Mark put the cab in park, read the amount due from his meter, and came around to open the back door on the passenger side. From the dismayed creases that formed across his forehead, which she could now see up close, Ida figured he noticed her hospital gown beneath the jacket. His gaze fell, landing on the disposable slippers on her feet.

“Thank you,” she said, brusquely handing him the cash she owed and slinging the purse strap over her shoulder.

He turned away, bills in hand as if embarrassed for her. “Have a great night, ma’am,” he said without counting the money.

Ida pulled the jacket tight across her midsection. No baggage. No real clothes. A stolen purse. But her only choice was to step forward through the automatic doors, so she shuffled across the lobby, using the chest-height desk to block the attendant’s view of her body.

“I’d like a room, please,” she said.

The attendant spun around in her chair, abandoning a stack of brochures she’d been sorting. “Of course.” The woman had to be in her early twenties, pale, sporting a big gem in her nose and a green streak in her blond hair.

Perhaps she was a criminal herself, Ida thought, and it was a comfort.

“We’ve got a king bed or double queens.”

“What’s cheaper?”

“Same price.” The attendant blew her gum into a pink bubble, then snapped it between her molars.

“The king, please,” Ida said.

“That’s smoking,” said the woman. “That all right?”

Ida remembered the thick curls of fragrant smoke that once spiraled from her morning Lucky Strike. She’d hated giving it up, only did so at her kids’ insistence. “That’s fine.”

With a wink, the woman tapped a square shape that must have been a cigarette pack in her shirt pocket.

“Okay.” She punched a few computer keys. “Just need ID and a card we can put on file for incidentals.”

Jean had always handled these things, so Ida didn’t know they’d ask for cards and ID. Her naivety turned to embarrassment turned to anger, but in the space of a single deep breath, she thought about what Jean might do. “Oh,” she said, followed by a heavy sigh. “I was hoping to pay cash. My grandson is in the hospital across the way and I was in such a hurry to drive from Kentucky, I left my wallet at home. Borrowed cash from my brother Louis, more than enough to cover the room, I just—”

The green-haired attendant stopped her with a raised palm. “Don’t worry about it. It’s eighty-nine dollars for the night. Checkout is at eleven a.m.”

Ida fished five twenties from her newly acquired purse. “You’re a dear,” she said. “Keep the extra for yourself.”

The woman slid a key across the countertop labeled 430. “That’s on the fourth floor. Elevators are down the hall to the right.”

Ida nodded. “Say,” she said before leaving, “do you think I could have one of those?”

With a smile the woman reached into her pocket and produced the pack of cigarettes. “You can have two.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The hotel room was standard: a bed, a desk, a love seat, a phone. After flipping the door's top lock, Ida went straight for the phone, Jean's instruction to call Barbara the only thing moving Ida forward. But Ida relied on Jean to remember things, and Laura's number was the only one she knew by heart, so she called Laura from the hotel phone despite the early-morning hour. Harvey answered.

"Put Laura on," Ida said.

"What? Who is this?" Harvey's voice upturned with a feminine lilt when he was exhausted, which made Ida deepen hers.

"It's your mother-in-law."

"Babe," Ida heard Harvey say. "Wake up. It's your mom."

Before Laura could utter a word, Ida said, "I need Barbara's number."

"Mom, it's… the middle of the night," said Laura.

Ida sucked her teeth. "You know, I said that to you, when you were an infant screaming all hours of the night. You didn't care then, so—"

"All right, all right." Bedsprings creaked in the background. Laura said to Harvey, "I'll pick this up in the kitchen." To Ida she said, "Just a minute."

Ida waited, and knowing Harvey listened on the other end, she couldn't help but say, "Thought you were out of town, on a work trip."

"Got back tonight," said Laura's husband. "A few hours ago. So, you can imagine, I'm tired."

A click on the line. "I've got it," said Laura.

"Get your beauty sleep, Harvey," Ida said before he hung up his end.

"Mom," Laura said over a frustrated sigh.

Ida huffed. "He's an asshole. Barbara's number, please."

"You know, maybe he wouldn't be if you…" Laura abandoned the attempt midway. "I've got my book here. Let me find it."

"Under *B*," Ida said, "for *Bleaker*." Laura must've rested the receiver on the kitchen counter, because each flip of the page sent a whoosh of air over

the speaker. “And if it’s not there, check *B*, for *Barbara*.”

“Jesus, Mom, what’s gotten into you tonight?”

“Maybe horrible car accidents don’t agree with me,” Ida said, resentment building in her tone. “Or maybe it was the fact we lost Frankie, or maybe it’s because I just found out Jean is dying. I don’t know, sweetheart, but I could really use that number.”

“Oh, Mom.”

Silence hung between them, wider than the miles and the years.

“I don’t know what to say,” said Laura. “A car wreck?”

“The number,” Ida said. “Please.” Her daughter pulled in a shaky breath and recited the number, taking short pauses as Ida scribbled it down. “Thank you.”

“Are you okay?” Laura asked, keeping her voice low. Ida touched the bandage over her eye, thought about Frankie, about Jean’s head swollen twice its size. “Are you going to be okay?”

She cleared her throat. “You’re going to worry yourself sick.”

The red numbers of the standard hotel clock ticked up a minute. “I love you, Mom.”

“I love you too,” Ida said, and hung up the phone.



When Jean awoke, sunlight slanted in the window through horizontal blinds and Dr. Farlene and a uniformed police officer stood shoulder to shoulder at the foot of her bed.

“Good morning, Miss Bleaker,” the doctor said.

“Is it?” asked Jean. Pain bloomed behind her eyes, so severe it blurred the glint off the officer’s badge.

“Officer Bailey would like to ask you some questions. Do you feel up to that?”

The local cop slouched backward, thumbs hooked in his belt loops.

“What’s your first name, dear?” Jean asked the cop.

“Christopher,” said the man.

“Do you go by Chris?”

The police officer's eyes darted sideways and back again, and there was a flash of the little boy buried inside him before he could hide it away. "Sure."

"I'll be honest with you, Chris," said Jean, pushing up off the bed into a sitting position and fluffing the pillows behind her to prop up her back, "I feel how I must look."

"How's that?" asked Chris.

"Not so hot."

The cop nodded at the doctor, whose stare locked on him as he took deliberate steps closer to Jean. "It won't take long," he said.

Jean grasped a glass of water sitting on her bedside table. Took a sip. "Good." She cleared her throat. "Because I don't have long."

Brows raised in a manner that suggested he felt his authority had been challenged, Chris asked, "Planning on going somewhere?"

With another deep swallow, Jean placed the glass back onto the table. "Actually, I was planning on dying. If that's all right with you."

The cop looked back to the doctor, who returned his nod.

"I'll come back in fifteen minutes," Dr. Farlene said, "check in on you two."

"Thank you, Doctor," said Jean. "Now," she said, addressing Christopher Bailey, "what can I do for you, sir?"

The officer took a small notepad from his chest pocket, drew a pencil from the spiral binding. "Got a call from your local precinct in Rockaway. A Detective"—he read from the paper—"Rollins has been looking for you and your friend Ida for the past couple of days."

"I got his voicemail," Jean said.

"So what are you two doing in Nebraska?" the officer asked.

Jean smiled, though most of it was hidden by her bandages. "I'd like you to pass on a message to Detective Rollins."

"Oh?"

"And I'd like you to write it down, to make sure you get it right."

The policeman let out a patronizing chuckle.

"Would you humor an old woman in her last days?" Jean hissed the final word, and Officer Bailey pressed the pencil's tip to the page. "Tell Detective Rollins he will have my full confession."

The officer looked up, as if suddenly interested in what the older woman

had to say. “I can talk to you, if there’s something you’d like to get off your chest.”

“Chris, I’m saying this in the kindest way possible: Just write my message.” Chris’s tongue clicked in the back of his mouth, but Jean ignored the rudeness. “Please let Detective Rollins know that I’m sure he would’ve liked to resolve this more quickly, but it’s taken forty-five years to live this story, and I trust he can be patient for just a bit longer to hear it in full.”

“I can—”

“I believe that’s my whole message for Detective Rollins,” Jean said. “I appreciate your time, Chris.”

“Are you dismissing me, Miss Bleaker?” The officer stepped back on his heel. “I am a sworn officer of the Bellevue Police Department.”

“That’s wonderful, dear. You should be very proud.” Jean picked her water glass back up, closing her eyes as she took small, slow sips, feeling the coolness travel down her throat until she heard the officer’s shoes moving across the tile.

“One more thing,” she said, just before he passed out of sight.

The officer paused, equal parts ambition and consternation sparkling in his eyes as he held the door.

“Close that behind you.”



Ida wasn’t sleeping so much as her body had simply given up on being awake. Three knocks jolted her from the dreamless slumber, and when she went to the door, she was still wearing the hospital gown along with the slippers and jacket she’d stolen. Nerves put her on high alert. Ida peered through the peephole, expecting the worst, but when she saw George standing in the hallway, she unlatched the top lock and shuffled backward so she could open the hotel room door.

In the years since she’d seen him last, the black hair on George’s head had thinned while the hair growing from his ears and nose and neck had thickened. Yellow craters beneath his eyes gave him a sickly look, and the fabric of his T-shirt stretched thin around the neck as if he’d worn it a few

times without washing.

Ida stepped back, holding the door. “George,” she said.

“My sister sent me.” He sounded tired. Slung around his shoulder was a stuffed backpack. He unloaded it onto a love seat in the room’s corner, and Ida took a seat in the rolling desk chair. “Brought you a few things.” With a zip, he revealed folded clothing inside, placing one item and the next onto the ottoman.

“These belong to Lisbeth?” Ida asked, recognizing the billowy boho style from the few times she’d met George’s wife.

A twitch raised the top of George’s cheek. “Yeah,” he said. “She won’t miss them.”

Ida raised a blouse by the sleeves, holding it up to her frame. “You sure about that?”

“They were in a box to donate.”

On the desk was a crystal ashtray. George eyed it, then pulled a pack of Marlboros from the back pocket of his blue jeans. “Do you mind?”

“You smoke?” Ida asked, not without judgment in her tone. “After all those years you begged me to quit?”

George drew a single cigarette from the pack, pulled it beneath his nose, and took a whiff. “The divorce,” he said. He produced a lighter that was hidden among the cigarettes. “Started casual but…”

Ida gave a permissive wave, and the man who had once been a boy she raised sucked the flame into the circle of tobacco at the cigarette’s tip, igniting an ember. In the cloud of smoke that followed, Ida rose and retrieved one of the attendant’s gifted cigarettes from her desk drawer. She extended an empty palm, and though George hesitated, he placed the lighter into it. “When in Rome,” she said.

Ida took a deep pull, sucking in a breath that drew smoke to the base of her lungs and sent a giddy feeling racing up her spine. “It’s good,” she said, exhaling.

“Damn good,” said George.

Ida sat back down. The pair took turns tapping off ash into the ashtray, neither apparently wanting to ask the other about their recent misfortune. “Lucky we crashed so close to Kansas City,” she said.

“The drive was almost three hours.”

“Oh heavens,” said Ida. “I’ll try to crash closer next time.”

George shifted with discomfort. “How’s Ma?”

Ida said nothing.

“I’d like to see her.”

“Me too,” Ida replied, though it felt impossible.

George held the cigarette up, staring at the ember and squinting against the smoke as it curled around the tip of his brow. “Barbara told me she’s sick.”

Ida took a drag and held it. “Yeah,” Ida said, exhaling. “How’d she hear?”

“Laura told her,” George said.

“Laura knows?” Ida thought back to their visit to Indiana, the time Jean had alone with Laura while she slept. Laura’s willingness to help them once she’d woken, the secret words they exchanged before her daughter left them at the Sweetie’s diner. Resentment coiled up with the smoke in Ida’s chest. Laura had known before she did. But just as quickly as the anger struck her, it dissipated. It didn’t matter who knew what and when. The enormous fact remained the same. Jean was dying. It was not a time to allow petty slights to wedge the family, it was a time to cleave close to one another. “I’m glad you kids are talking,” she said. “That’s good, at least.”

George mumbled, “Yeah,” stamping out his smoke. He shifted in his seat, as if the weight of aiding a fugitive had started to press on the tips of his shoulders. “What were you and Ma planning to do?”

Ida sighed deep from her belly. “Jean thought we could make it to San Francisco, start over there.”

“Because of Charlie?”

Ida’s neck turned so quick it caused a painful twinge. “What?”

George pressed his cigarette butt into the glass, smearing ash. “You wanted to be near him?”

“Charlie’s in San Francisco?” Ida asked, and George’s cheeks sucked into the space between his molars as if he were trying to snatch back information he shouldn’t have shared. A flash of her son flared bright in Ida’s mind, a vision of him smiling at high school graduation, not at her, but at someone behind her, then the square shape of his shoulders as he’d turned away. “Charlie’s in San Francisco,” Ida said.

“Shit,” said George. “Sorry, I thought—I’m an idiot. Sorry.”

Ida shook her head, looked back out the window, planning how she

would tell Jean, though she wasn't sure she'd ever have the opportunity. When she looked back at him, George was sitting with his legs crossed, pinching the hem of his inseam the way he did when he was a boy and was about to ask for something. "Why'd Charlie leave?"

The very question was a kick in Ida's gut. "He never told you?" She looked away, unsure how to face the shame of having hurt her own son so deeply. "I thought you were in touch."

"Not much," George said. "He sends cards at Christmas. Talks to Laura more than Barbara or me."

"What happened in Rockaway?" he asked, as if the first big question had dislodged a stone and let the others come tumbling free. "Did you shoot that man?"

Ida's fingers warmed where the ember edged down near her first knuckle. Heat seared her flesh, and she dropped the spent cigarette, still burning, into a pile of ash in the crystal ashtray. With discussion of Charlie, the questions that had defined the shape of their lives burned closer and harder to ignore. George was grown. All the kids were. The time had come to let go of the fear that had kept her quiet all these years. Secrets had done their own kind of damage. It was time to tell the truth, to let it cut cleanly into something in hopes it might one day heal.

"I need to tell you something," Ida said.

"What?" George asked, sitting straight up.

She could start with the PSE&G worker or the car wreck or how the whole ordeal had changed her, had helped her admit, out loud, her love for Jean, but her mind went straight to the night in 1957 when all their lives were irrevocably changed. Forty-two years to plan this conversation, and still she was entirely unprepared. Ida's tongue went dry. "We killed that worker," she said, "but only because we had to."

"Had to?"

"He forced us… He—He was going to hurt me. He was going to dig." Ida pictured Osiria roses, red and white with a garish streak of neon orange paint.

George's head shook, his eyes narrowing. "What are you talking about? Dig?"

"He would've found them, Eddie and your dad." That moment carved a meridian in the atlas of Ida's life. There had been the time of silence, a long

wash of quiet holding, and now she stepped into the unknown after. “They didn’t run off all those years back,” she said. “They’re dead.”

“They’re not…”

“They’re buried in the yard.”

George’s face drained of color. He sank in his chair, taking on the aspect of a boy. “No,” he said, bringing his palms up over his shoulders. “That can’t be true. You’re shaken up. Confused.”

“They found out about me and your mom,” Ida went on. “That we’re *together*. They went crazy, and they would’ve killed us. You don’t know what it was like back then. Eddie and your dad were all right in some ways, but in others…” Ida remembered Jean, young, bandana tied in her hair, grinning with a full front row of teeth. “I don’t expect you to understand.” Ida’s gaze drifted toward the shine in George’s right eye, vision growing unfocused.

“You killed them?” George asked, voice small and disbelieving. “Because of some lesbian love affair—”

“Now you stop right there,” said Ida, rising, finger pointed. “By the looks of things, seems *you* had an affair. Tawdry.” She sucked her teeth. “Cheap. I won’t have you degrading me and Jean by—”

“You murdered two people over it,” said George, palms flailing on either side. He shook his head, lip curled in disgust. “*Three.*”

“We did what we had to do.” Ida spoke through bared teeth, each word punctuated, and a drop of her spit landed on George’s cheek.

He wiped it away. “Why didn’t you just leave?”

“And go where? Your mom and I with four kids in tow? They had the credit cards. It was their names on the deeds to houses—”

George made a sound equal parts exasperation and disdain.

“There was no way. There was no time. They were gonna kill us, George. That night, they were gonna fucking kill us!” Ida cried.

The muscles in George’s neck clenched along with his fists; he took a quick breath in through his nose as if he was about to stand, but on the exhale, his head dropped into his hands, a sign that his anger was distilling to hurt. Voice muffled through his palms, he said, “I don’t remember him. My own dad.” His voice caught in his throat. “That’s your fault.”

Struck by the earnestness, Ida slumped back. She took a moment, digesting the accusation in her mind, and finally said, “Yes, it is.” Ida

looked at George, settling into the reality of the revelation. No matter her justification, she was the reason his dad was gone. Her hand fell over the threadbare denim on his knee. “I’m sorry for that. I really am. I wish it could’ve been different.”

George sniffed and swallowed, head still bowed in his palms. “I’m leaving,” he said. Posture hunched as he crossed the room, he opened the door. With a half glance back, he said, “I hope they catch you.” His figure moved through the opening, the strike of his departing words leaving Ida stuck in her spot as the latch caught in its frame.

“He’s just angry,” Ida said to herself, doing her best to believe it. Still, she stood. Ida realized then that she must’ve always believed deep down that if the children knew, they would forgive her. Love her despite it. Certainly not wish her ill. Ida watched through the window as George pulled his Pontiac Firebird out of the parking lot. Painted cherry red, it stuck out in the Nebraska gray, and his tires squealed as he made a show of getting out of there in a hurry.

When she could stand no longer, she dressed in Lisbeth’s harem pants and an embroidered floral top. Ida lit the second cigarette of the two the woman at the desk had given her. The rush of nicotine now made her dizzy, so she lay on her back, limbs sprawled across the mattress. Water stains shaded the popcorn ceiling. Smoke curled up and up and up, spreading out and thinning until nothing remained of it but the stench. She reached for the purse she’d stolen and set the wallet above her belly button. Thumbing through the bills, cigarette still burning, she confirmed what she already knew—she didn’t have enough money for another night.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Repetition was the trick to Jean's memory. When she had a piece of information she wanted to stow away for later, she recited it again and again in her mind. She'd performed the trick at Laura's house when she memorized Charlie's phone number, so when it came time to dial it from the hospital phone, the sequence of digits came easily.

"It's Jean," Jean said into the receiver. "I know you don't want to talk to me, but you're going to listen."

In a voice Jean hardly recognized, Charlie said, "I'm listening."

Jean clenched her fist beneath the thin white sheets, gathering strength to deliver the speech she'd been planning for this moment, though she'd always thought she would have a chance much sooner and when there was much more time to set things right. "I don't have much time, so I'll cut right to the chase. You were older than the others," she said, remembering the cotton pajamas he wore that night, with their printed dinosaurs in yellow and red and blue. "You saw what they didn't, you remember more than they do. I understand why you left and why you're angry."

Jean heard a whine in the background on Charlie's end, wondering with sadness whether it was a dog or a grandchild. But she was out of time for mourning her own relationship with Charlie. She had to set it right for Ida. That was all that mattered now. "I'm not angry anymore," he said. "I just want to know what happened. Why you both did what you did."

"What I need you to know, the reason I called," said Jean, "is your mom didn't do anything."

"I saw you," Charlie said. "I watched you push the car into the lake."

"She helped me with the car," said Jean. It had been decades of implications and outright lies. Jean had tiptoed around the truth for so long, she had surpassed the point at which keeping her secrets gained more than they cost. Jean and Ida were a couple, always had been, and they murdered Richard Bleaker and Eddie Holloway on a night in 1957 while the kids

were asleep upstairs. They buried their bodies in the backyard garden and sank Eddie's car in Lake Ronkonkoma and they made up a story about runaways and gambling debts. There was no more maneuvering around the truth. To pretend otherwise would ruin any shot Ida had at a relationship with Charlie for the rest of her life, and Ida needed family after Jean was gone. "I killed Richard and your dad. I buried them. I shot that worker for the electrical company."

There was a space of several breaths, a time in which something had been released and could not be drawn back again. Her confession lingered in the air like poisoned gas, and Jean waited to see which way the wind would blow. "And I'd do it all again to keep your mom safe," she added.

Charlie said, "Tell me what happened."

Jean closed her eyes, rested back on the pillows with the phone pressed to her ear. She told Charlie the story of how they fell in love when they were military wives, how introducing their husbands started out as a wonderful thing but spiraled as the drinking and gambling got out of control. She spared the details of their date that night, but let him know the men had come home early, that they'd been drunk and under pressure from a bookie, that they'd seen enough to turn them violent. There had been a gun in the desk. Jean told Charlie how she'd bought it after Richard broke her arm and always kept it close by in case the worst should happen. A big breath in, and the next words came measured and slow. "Richard had already hit me, knocked out my tooth. I got the gun when he hit Ida. I shot them."

Charlie said nothing, was a phantom on the other end of the line.

"She was bleeding and crying and you and George were asleep in your room upstairs. Laura and Barbara in her room. The four of you slept through anything back then." Jean laughed out her sorrow as tears soaked into the bandages on her face. She blotted her eyes with a knuckle. "Just before dawn, we decided to sink the car. We should've just gone the two of us, but Barbara had been sleepwalking. We were afraid she'd fall down the stairs and we were so scared and you had that awful flu and we didn't want to leave you alone." Jean's voice broke over a sob. "We thought we were doing the right thing by taking you, but we should have let you sleep. It was the mistake of my life, because then you saw the car going down. You knew the runaway story was a lie, and you were never the same. You were never

her little boy again after that. It broke her heart."

There was a small sound of consideration, reassurance enough that Charlie was still there, still listening.

"I'm sorry it happened," Jean said. "I'm sorry I took your dad, and I'm sorry that I had to, but I'm telling you the truth when I say I'd do it again. I don't know if you're married or not, and even if you are, I don't know if it's a love that's worth more to you than your own life, but that's what I found with your mom. There's nothing I wouldn't do for her, and I'm telling you this because I won't be able to do much for much longer. She loves you." Jean dragged out the last word. "She loves you something fierce, Charlie. So"—Jean cleared her throat—"if by telling you this, there's some chance you'd be in her life again, even in some small way, well, then I had to."

For a while, the line went quiet, their silence interrupted only with a change of position or a pensive murmur. It had been nearly three decades since Jean had seen Charlie. She'd spotted a photo of a man she thought was him on a holiday card at Barbara's house one year, but by then she could no longer be sure she'd know Charlie by sight, and she didn't have the heart to ask her daughter whether it was him. In the lingering quiet between confession and either forgiveness or rejection, Jean wondered whether he'd inherited the vertical lines between Ida's brows, and whether they deepened when he was working through a problem the way hers did.

An alarm went off on one of Jean's machines, and she realized she had kinked a wire with the way she was leaning. The beeping stopped but the reminder of her circumstances forced her to face the reality that she'd likely never know the wrinkles Charlie inherited or didn't.

"How do I know you're telling the truth?" he asked.

"What more do I have to lose?" Jean asked back.

"That's my point. You've got nothing to lose by lying either."

Jean pulled the receiver away from her ear, feeling a stab of worry that Ida and her son would never reconcile. Through the window, a commercial jet cut through a sky so blue that staring at it hurt Jean's eyes. Sunlight glinted off its tiny windows, and Jean so badly wished she and Ida were among the passengers inside, baggage cramped under their feet, Frankie meowing, and hands clasped beneath a shared armrest. The plane soared on. In its wake rolled thick tufts of cloud that lost their shape and dissipated in an unseen wind. "I guess there's no way for you to know," she said. "I

could be lying about what happened to Richard and your dad and that PSE&G worker, but I think we both know I'm not lying about Ida loving you. And I think we also both know she's going to be really lonely when I'm gone." Jean paused, hearing the nurse let herself into the room. "I'm sure Laura told you I'm sick. You're a man now. You decide what to do with that."

"It's too late for me to do much of anything," Charlie said. "She's going to jail, right? Laura told me you were on the run, and, yeah, she said you weren't doing well. Since the caller ID says Bellevue Medical Center, I don't think there's much running left for either of you."

"I'm taking care of that," said Jean. "Confessing everything."

"And my mom?"

"I'll take full responsibility, tell them Ida had nothing to do with it."

Charlie scoffed. "Jean, you're no criminal mastermind. They're still going to arrest my mom."

"They can't prove she did anything! Not beyond a reasonable doubt," Jean said, her tone growing indignant.

"And how can you be sure?" Charlie paused, long enough for Jean to feel the embarrassment of being unable to answer. "You can't. Because they might. My mother was there that night. She helped you cover it up. She knew about the bodies. She ran with you. This is over your head, Jean. You're in way over your head." Instead of reticent or punitive, Charlie sounded concerned, invested. "I'll send someone. Don't tell the police anything. Not yet."

"What?"

"I'm sending a lawyer to review your options. I don't know if there's a way out of this, or if I want a relationship with my mom, but I don't want the police making that decision for me. Whatever happened to Richard and my dad and that worker on your property, locking my mom up won't change it."

The nurse rolled a medication cart alongside Jean's bed. Pills clattered inside bottles inside locked drawers. "What room are we in?" Jean asked.

"I-318," said the nurse.

"I'll send them to I-318," Charlie said. "Not a word to the police until they get there."

Jean turned, shielding her face from the nurse with her shoulder, and

spoke softly. “Thank you, Charlie. And I’m sorry. And I love you.”

“Me too,” he said. “Me too,” and he disconnected the line.



Ida checked out at eleven. She had hoped to find the kind front desk clerk from the night before, but a young man sat behind the desk, a natural redhead with large brown eyes who seemed exceptionally timid. He received her room key and printed her a receipt. “Anything else I can do for you?” he asked.

“No,” said Ida, turning away. She took two steps toward the revolving door, then stopped. She wore borrowed clothes and a stolen purse, knew nobody but Jean in the whole of the state, and police might already be at the hospital. Forty-three dollars was the sum of her worth, and as a gust of wind bent the branches of a tree outside, she didn’t even know a place to wait and be warm. And wait for what? She didn’t know that either. “Do you know,” she asked, turning back toward the boy’s nervous smile, “of somewhere I could go?”

His expression fell at a slant. “You mean for lunch?”

The man’s confusion and burgeoning pity made Ida agree, although that hadn’t been what she’d meant.

“There’s The Beast, right down the road. Good burgers.”

Ida quickly nodded. “About how far?”

“Oh.” He was thinking, head bobbing side to side. “Well, you pass the Quickie Mart and take a right at Bob’s Firework Stand, then it’s a few minutes down the road on the left. Few miles, I guess.”

A few miles in the wind chill without a proper jacket and on an empty stomach. Unlikely she’d make it. “Anything closer?” she asked.

“Quickie Mart if you want something quick.”

Ida thought of indoor spaces open to the public. She needed somewhere she could linger unnoticed, without being bothered. “What about a mall? Or a museum?”

The man shook his head. “You’ll have to get up to Omaha if you want a museum. We’ve got Bellevue Mall a few exits south, but I wouldn’t

recommend it. Half the stores are shuttered."

"I see." Ida pulled the purse strap higher on her shoulder.

"It's too bad you missed our continental breakfast," the man said, returning to his cheery tone. "We packed it up at ten. Just a bit too late."

Ida plastered on a congenial grin. "Story of my life. Would you call me a cab? Think I'd like to visit that mall."

"Sure thing, ma'am."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

When Percy Jeffers arrived in a tan suit after twelve p.m., holding a leather briefcase and a sharp look in his eyes, Jean thought it must be nice to have an hourly rate worth working with a tailor. She felt a fleeting sense of pride that Charlie had done well enough for himself to afford someone like Percy Jeffers, someone who glided into a room with the slickness of oil and regarded the space as if it were his personal office. But that pride was darkened by the long shadow of the lawyer's reason for the visit.

After a swift and formal introduction, he adopted a food tray as his workspace, opening the briefcase and explaining pieces of paperwork Jean would need to sign for him to act as her representation. "Charlie Holloway has taken care of my retainer," he said.

"And how much was that?" asked Jean.

"Enough to go over your options and to reach out to Detective Rollins on your behalf, should the need arise."

"I believe I asked the amount of your retainer."

Percy Jeffers's expression never changed. His lips and chin remained perfectly level, pleasant enough that he might be friendly, poised enough that he might not be. "Mr. Holloway has asked that I keep the financial part of the arrangement confidential."

Jean cocked her head, would've narrowed her eyes if not for the swelling. "Are you his attorney or mine?"

Percy tapped the bottom of the papers on the tray, leveling them. "Neither, strictly speaking. You haven't signed the paperwork, Miss Bleaker, but assuming you do, I would be your attorney, bound by the Nebraska bar association to protect your legal interests in this matter. That said, I have a habit of respecting the wishes of the person who pays me."

"I understand," said Jean. "And how do you know the name of the detective investigating me?"

“Three reasons: I looked into your situation as soon as the wire cleared. Your son did his research. I am a very good attorney.”

An amused huff escaped Jean’s lips. “I hope so, for my sake and Ida’s. But Charlie’s not my son, he’s hers.”

“Oh.” The slightest fracture pierced Percy’s even countenance. “He said you and your partner had raised him together. In fact, he was quite insistent that I respect the wholeness of your relationship with Miss Holloway in my representation of you, but I apologize if my choice of words has made you feel uncomfortable.”

A twist of emotions moved from Jean’s chest to the pit of her stomach. She hadn’t expected Charlie would describe her that way, especially to a stranger, especially after all these years and what he knew, and especially when none of the children nor Jean nor Ida had ever described them that way. But it was beautiful, moving, and a salve to a wound Jean never realized she suffered.

“Here,” Percy said, tapping the tip of his pen on the first page’s signature line, “then initial here, here, and here.” He flipped through pages Jean was too injured and exhausted to read. She signed in blue ink, the contract almost a full arm’s length away, and Percy collected each page when she was through, stacking them neatly back into his briefcase, then securing them with a paper clip. “Excellent. Mr. Holloway provided a brief explanation of your situation; however, it would be most helpful to hear it from you.”

Jean took a sip of water, then provided a dry accounting of the relevant facts for Percy. She told him of her plan to take full responsibility for the crimes, and asked whether, in his legal opinion, he thought Ida would be prosecuted.

“It’s very possible,” Percy Jeffers said.

“What if I asked for a deal?”

“Immunity for Miss Holloway?” asked the lawyer. “No.”

“Why not?”

The lawyer, in his matter-of-fact way, explained that immunity could not be granted on behalf of someone else. “You’re not an informant, Miss Bleaker. Immunity might be given when an individual can provide information that leads to the conviction of another person. It is used to aid the prosecutor and help the individual to save themself. It does not work the

other way around, and even if it did, it would need to be granted by a judge, and you would need to provide your information ahead of time for review. Unfortunately, the legal process for immunity is quite different from what we see in the movies. It is not something that can be worked out on a hospital bed. Excuse my insensitivity."

Jean deflated. Charlie had been right. She was way out of her depth. Watching crime shows didn't make her a detective any more than it made her a criminal mastermind. She'd been a fool to think otherwise. "What can I do?"

From his briefcase, Percy Jeffers removed a section of newspaper. "You have garnered some attention from the media," he said, opening the page to reveal her and Ida's photos.

"I know," Jean said, shaking her head as she thought about how hopeless her situation had become.

"This is not something I have ever recommended to a client before, as there aren't many celebrities in Nebraska, even those of the notorious variety," said Percy, his fingertip tracing the article to the name of its author, "but the media is a powerful tool. Your situation, legally, is dire, Miss Bleaker. I will not pretend you have any recourse within the justice system that would have a positive outcome either for you or for Miss Holloway."

Jean nodded, acknowledging her fears confirmed.

"However," the lawyer continued, "as frustrating as it is to both sides of the legal system, juries do not exist in a vacuum. Police know this, lawyers know this, judges know this. I want to be very clear that my legal advice is for you to take a plea deal and reduce your possible sentence."

"I won't be doing that," said Jean. "That doesn't help Ida at all."

Percy Jeffers cleared his throat and placed the newspaper on Jean's lap. "Well then, I'll relay to you the advice of a colleague of mine, working out of Los Angeles. If you are determined to make your best effort at protecting Ida Holloway, you might tell your story to Linda Kahan. Albeit more sympathetically than you told it to me."

Jean grasped the newspaper, staring at the author's name and short bio. "You think it would matter? If people knew our story?"

"You might tug at some heartstrings." Percy buckled his briefcase. "Make the public believe it was you and only you, but more importantly,

make them believe in you and Ida. Trial by media, if you will."

"And if I do that," Jean said, talking faster, "you think the police will leave Ida alone?"

"No," said Percy Jeffers. "But it is the last option available to you."

Jean rolled the corner of the thin paper between her forefinger and thumb. "It doesn't guarantee she'll be okay."

Straightening his collar, Percy Jeffers said, "If you want a guarantee, I will work with you on a plea deal. If you want a shot at protecting Miss Holloway, write a letter to the editor." The buckles snapped shut on his briefcase, and suddenly this all felt very official. There was a finality in the lawyer's upright posture and the directness of his suggestion, and the shine off his shoes seemed garishly bright in the evening light. "The police will come back to speak with you. It is possible Detective Rollins will make the trip down himself, with such a high-profile case. Call me when they do." He placed his business card on the bedside table. "Do not speak to anyone until you make a decision. Not the police, not the nice nurse who gets you an extra cup of pudding, not your family, and do not under any circumstance attempt to contact Ida Holloway."

"What if she calls me?" Jean asked.

Percy stood up, slid the bedside table away from the wall, and pulled the phone cord out of its outlet. "She won't."



Ida wandered the mall, dipped in and out of the candle shop with no interest in buying things, and took no pleasure in the clash of floral and sugary smells. She wound through aisles of clothes, let herself touch the fabrics of hundreds of sleeves. The department store, with its overly lit perfume displays and pushy makeup saleswoman, drove her out before she made it to the second floor. When she got hungry, she did loops around the food court, accepting samples from the teens who handed them out until she caught a blond girl in a visor sneering at her, at which point she found a bench beside a kiosk and sat.

As a family passed pushing twins in a stroller, Ida counted the bills left

in the stolen wallet. She thought, *What do I do now?* And then, *What am I doing here?* And then, *I am just wasting time.* There was money enough for one more cab ride, but not two and not too far. *Jean is dying.* Ida had thought that often, looking at a three-wick vanilla candle, feeling the snag of woven cotton sleeves on her fingernail, while being nonconsensually sprayed with a puff of Versace. *Jean is dying* repeated each time her molars closed around a lump of teriyaki chicken and drowned out the details of the sales pitch from the slick man selling Nokia phones behind her. Jean had asked her to leave, to try to save herself, but in all the wandering around that mall, Ida realized that if she stayed away, she might have a better chance at being free from the law, but she would never be free from the guilt of abandoning Jean as she lay dying.

Behind her, a cage of metal bars slid down over the entrance of a jewelry shop. In the food court, janitors emerged from the corner hallway wearing gloves and pushing carts loaded up with cleaning supplies. Ida stood up, slinging the strap of the stolen purse over her shoulder.

“Ma’am,” said the Nokia salesman.

Ida noticed the eagerness in his eyes, the wrinkles in the man’s collared shirt, and the indent on his finger where a wedding band used to sit.

“We’re running an excellent deal right now. You won’t beat it anywhere. Here, here,” he said, pointing to a plexiglass display, “let me show you.”

“I don’t have time,” Ida said, knowing full well he’d likely noticed her sitting beside his stand for hours. From the stolen purse she drew the stolen cellular phone. “And I already have one.” As she walked away, she felt sorry for the man selling Nokia phones. He’d lost his family, if the ring indent was any indication, and Ida was well on her way to losing what was left of hers. Charlie had started a new life without her, George would probably never speak to her again, Frankie was probably dead, and Jean. Tears rushed into the corners of her eyes, and she quickened her pace as if she could outwalk them. Cold air shocked her body as the mall’s automatic doors opened, but not enough to erase the pain of *Jean, Jean, Jean, Jean*.

Ida fumbled with the phone, tears coming hot and fast and blurring her vision. She had to call the cab company, but a sob hitched her chest, and her trembling made her drop it.

“Dammit!” she cried, casting her face up at the clear night sky, and when a loud engine roared alongside the curb close enough to startle her,

she was well prepared to cuss out its reckless driver.

"Ida?" she heard through the rolled-down window.

Ida blinked. The red splotch of car took shape as a Pontiac Firebird.

"Jesus," said George, throwing open his door and running behind the car to pick up the cell phone. "I was so worried." He opened up the passenger side and slung an arm around her shoulders. "Get in, please. It's freezing."

Ida ducked and folded herself to fit into the low front seat. As George rounded the car again, she wiped the remaining tears onto her sleeve. When his door shut, the two sat staring straight ahead, heat blowing through the vents.

"I'm sorry," said George. "I shouldn't have left you."

After a slow, deep breath through her nose, Ida felt steady enough to speak. "I understand why you did."

"Doesn't make it right."

Ida curled one fist inside the other. "How did you find me?"

"I went back to the hotel." George sighed. "They said you took a cab to the mall."

"I see."

"I'll take you with me. I've been staying at a friend's place, but they're out of town for a couple more days so it will just be—"

"No," said Ida. "Thank you but no. I want to go back to the hospital."

George's brow wrinkled with worry. "You can't," he said, "the police."

Settling the purse in her lap, Ida said, "I don't care. I've hidden a lot for a lot of long years. Hiding has its perks. But the price is too high. I want to be with Jean."

George scratched at his scalp, revealing the thinness of his hair behind the ear. "She wants you to stay away—"

"If she dies in the hospital without me…" Ida shook her head, a cherry-cola curl falling over the bridge of her nose. "I won't bear it. I want more time with Jean, and if that means jail after, it's a price I'm willing to pay."

"Are you sure?" he asked, flexing his hands around the wheel.

Ida smiled. She placed a palm on George's shoulder. "Thank you for coming back for me. Let's go see your ma."

George glanced at the time. "Okay. Okay, if you're sure, but we've got to make a stop real quick."

"A stop?"

“The airport. Barbara took the first flight she could.”

“Of course she did,” Ida said, with a sour expression she didn’t mean. In truth, she was touched. “Good. Airport, then hospital.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Barbara waited at the curb, skin painted red by a seemingly endless stream of brake lights. Her hair, fried blond, puffed around a worried expression—drawn eyes and frown lines and lips slightly parted around an achy loss for words. Ida watched from behind the window as George hopped out, popped the trunk, and took from Barbara her single duffle bag.

Horns blared. Doors slammed shut. Policemen shouted instructions. Ida counted the few minutes too long when Barbara and George stood beside the open trunk, and, without hearing, she knew they were exchanging what each knew so far.

Meanwhile, the terminal was alive with greetings. A young man dodged a taxi to embrace a woman in a sun hat. He grabbed her luggage by the handle and wheeled it past a silver minivan where, in the back seat, lovers shared an urgent kiss. A group of children huddled around an oversized stuffed animal being delivered by their father. His bag rolled toward the traffic, but he didn't notice, and the wheels snagged in a crack before it could slide into the closest lane of cars. To her right were the sights and sounds of a hundred reunions; to her left, the streaking headlights of erratic drivers eager to find the face of the one they waited for.

Barbara slid first into the back seat, then George into the driver's.

"I'm glad you're here," Ida said, breaking her gaze to turn and look at Barbara.

The woman looked older than Ida remembered, though it had only been a week since she'd seen her last. Barbara's front teeth closed around a strip of peeling skin on her bottom lip. When her hands came up to cradle her cheeks, Ida noticed her fingernails were bitten down to the quick.

"How was your flight?" George asked, seemingly trying to bring a shade of normalcy to the conversation. He flipped on a turn signal and looked in the rearview.

Barbara said nothing. Her hazel eyes didn't leave Ida's. They were

glassy, rimmed with irritation.

“He told you, I suppose,” said Ida.

The strip of skin on Barbara’s lip tore, leaving a pink streak, and still she said nothing.

Ida glanced at George, who, with his wide eyes, confirmed he’d told Barbara what he knew.

“Do you hate me?” Ida asked, trying to look beneath Barbara’s frazzled exhaustion for an answer.

The car lurched forward as George merged left, slipping them into a tight slot between a shuttle and a pickup truck.

“No,” Barbara said. Then a long exhale. “But I wish I knew you better.”

Ida turned back, looking past the squashed bugs on the windshield and ahead to where five lanes merged to three. “Me too,” she said, remembering all the afternoons Barbara had come for lunch or coffee with Jean. Ida had always made herself busy in the garden rather than taking part. She’d told herself she’d been doing Barbara and Jean a favor, getting out of their way, but now it felt like a missed opportunity, a shying away from closeness. Under the prospect of losing Jean, Ida realized there’d be no one left who really knew her. Some who loved her, sure, but it was the obligatory kind of love that families bear for members who are strange or strangers to them. Ida had built a wall of protection around herself and her secrets. It had been a good wall. It had kept everyone out.

It had kept *everyone* out.

“Laura can’t make it,” Barbara said as they drove. “Harvey’s got another trip coming up and Chelsea’s dance recital is Sunday.”

“I thought she quit ballet,” said Ida.

“She did. It’s a hip-hop class. She’s all about the Spice Girls now.”

Ida nodded, remembering the poster.

George peeked at Barbara through the rearview. “That explains the platforms Laura had them in at the birthday party.”

“Platform shoes?” Ida asked. “They’re six and eight, for Christ’s sake.”

“Just sandals,” Barbara said with a conciliatory tone. “Doesn’t hurt anything.”

For a few miles, it was as if they were like any other family. Shallow tension over petty gripes and *Have you heard* and *I always knew she was that kind of girl*.

But when they arrived at the hospital, George parked farther away from the entrance than he needed to. The lot was mostly open spaces, and even when the engine was shut off, all three kept their seat belts on.

“Can you just walk in there?” George asked Ida.

Ida watched a nurse help a woman in a wheelchair into the back of a passenger van beneath the white glow of security lights. “Why don’t you two go in first. In case there’s somebody waiting for me.”

“This is crazy,” Barbara said, her voice catching in her throat. “This can’t be real. You and Ma, you can’t go to jail, it’s…” The frazzled woman tossed her hands into the air, teeth showing through a manic smile.

“Why don’t we go in,” George said to Barbara, unclicking his seat belt. “Get some time with Ma.”

Barbara’s fingers raked through the mess of her hair before she unfastened herself. “Okay,” she said. “Okay.”

“Give us fifteen minutes,” George said. “If the cops are in there, I’ll come back down and let you know.”

Ida agreed, feeling a swell of pride at the way George took ownership of their situation, being strong for his sister. Maybe there was some hope for him yet, she thought with a dim smile.

Jean was twining the disconnected phone cord around her pointer finger, watching the fingertip turn purple when the hinges on the door creaked open. She’d been thinking of what a betrayal it would be for her to contact that journalist, to tell the love story Ida had been so firm in keeping hidden. Nurses had been in and out, checking vitals, offering nameless pills of blue and white in tiny paper cups that she took with matching sips of water, going back and forth in her mind about whether it was more important to keep Ida out of jail or to keep her secret.

She offered her arm without looking, expecting to feel the blood pressure cuff encircle it and seal with Velcro teeth. Instead, she heard the voice of her daughter.

“Hi, Ma.”

Jean whipped around at the sound, trapping Barbara in a reckless hug before she could be cognizant of the wires snaking out from her body at every angle. “Barbara! George,” she said as she saw him over Barbara’s

shoulder. “You came.” Gripping tighter, she exclaimed, “You both came.”

George placed a hand on his mother’s back, and with the touch of her children, Jean felt as if one heavy burden had been set down.

“Of course,” Barbara said. “I took the first flight out of Islip. Are you okay?” she asked, breaking the hug, her gaze taking inventory of Jean’s bandages. “Do you feel okay?”

“I can’t believe you’re here,” said Jean, forgetting the pounding in her head and the gash on her shoulder. *I didn’t think I’d ever get to see you again*, she thought, taking in the details of their faces. But then her chest sank. “George, you’re supposed to be with Ida. Where is Ida? Did something—”

“She’s fine, Ma,” George said, glancing at the window.

“Where is she?” Jean asked, fighting the panic that fluttered up from her gut.

“She’s…” George looked back into the hallway. “Is there any… Are there any…” *Cops.* He mouthed the word.

Jean understood at once. The hesitation. The vigilance. “George,” Jean said, her voice dropping an octave. “You brought her here?”

“It was her idea!” said the man in the voice of the boy he once was.

Jean had a flash of a memory of grabbing George by the lobe of his ear and had half a mind to do the same thing now when Ida stepped through the door.

“Jean,” Ida said. “I’m here.” Ida padded across the space between them. “Don’t be angry at George. I made him bring me back.”

“But why?” Jean asked, overwhelmed by a rush of gratitude and relief. “You should be—”

“I should be here with you.” Ida rolled one fist inside another at the center of her hips.

“For what it’s worth,” George added, “I told her to wait fifteen minutes in the car.”

Jean’s mouth screwed up into a scowl, but her arms opened to accept Ida, and Ida stepped into them, placing the soft skin of her cheek on Jean’s. “Stubborn,” Jean whispered.

Behind the women, Barbara poured a glass of water and set it on Jean’s bedside table. She took the chair in the corner and George dragged one over from the side of the neighboring bed. Ida fashioned a spot to sit at the foot

of Jean's hospital bed and took her by the hand.

"It's all in the open now," Ida said.

Jean never thought this day would truly come. She'd imagined it, under more comfortable circumstances, of course. Sitting in a room with Ida and her kids, the facts of her life laid plain. But even in those imaginings, she could never envision a scenario in which Ida was agreeable. So, as Ida looked from Barbara to George and sighed, it felt surreal to Jean. A dream she had never been audacious enough to believe would come true.

"Maybe they'll let us share a cell," said Ida with a wink.

"Think there's probably rules against that," said George, sucking his teeth.

Barbara shook her head at him. "As if half the women in prison aren't in love with the other half," she said.

"You think?" George asked.

The two continued, exchanging sibling jabs while Ida gave Jean a knowing look. "I couldn't leave you here," Ida said. "Damn the torpedoes."

"Just like in *The More the Merrier*," Jean said, remembering the film and how the two had watched it together on the living room sofa. "Full speed ahead," she quoted.

In time, Barbara's stomach got to grumbling and George agreed to take her to the cafeteria and bring something back for Ida, leaving the two women alone.

"I spoke to Charlie," Jean said, estimating when the other kids were out of earshot.

Ida's eyes widened. She didn't dare to speak.

"I told him everything… and that I planned to confess. Don't be angry at me for it, okay? Consider it a dying wish," she said wryly.

Ida huffed. "And?"

"He sent me a lawyer. A polished-looking guy. Percy Jeffers."

Disbelief smoothed the lines of Ida's cheeks and deepened them in her forehead. "And?"

"Jeffers thought confessing was a bad idea."

"No shit. I like him already."

"He thought there might be another way, though." Jean explained and

Ida listened. She was honest that it was a long shot, far from guaranteed to keep Ida out of prison. But their story would be everywhere, for everyone to see. The power was in the national media attention, Jean assured her, and Ida's thin and only hope relied on capturing the hearts of the same Americans she'd always feared would judge and harm her. Jean told the truth when she said, "I just don't know how else to help you now."

Ida rolled the knuckle of her forefinger between pointer and thumb, her gaze moving back and forth as it did whenever she was thinking deeply about something.

"We don't have to," Jean said. "I can have George get you out of here, and maybe Laura can send some more money, help you get set up somewhere with a new name."

Ida turned a ring around her finger. "Did Charlie say anything else?"

Jean pictured what she knew to be front and center in Ida's mind: *Could Charlie ever forgive me?* She answered the question Ida was too afraid to ask. "I think there's a chance," Jean said. "He sent the lawyer because he doesn't want you in jail. So… I think there's a real chance."

"Okay," Ida said, with gusto and all at once. "We'll do it. We'll try."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Long after Barbara and George left to spend the night at a hotel, the women were working on writing their story. Ida and Jean had discussed it at length, deciding that mailing a letter would take too long, but that calling the editor and speaking off-the-cuff held too high a risk. Ida told her version of the events of their lives to Jean, and Jean, in turn, told Ida hers. They reminisced until after midnight, sat shoulders touching all the while. Nurses darted in and out without bothering them much. When the two had agreed upon the major points—their meeting, their husbands' flaws, their falling in love, the murders—Jean talked Ida through what she'd learned from watching her crime shows.

"It's all about empathy," she said. "We have to come off as the victims of this story rather than the villains."

"I'm nobody's victim," Ida said back.

"I know, dear." The tip of Jean's pen hovered over a notepad, a bit of stationery secreted away to them by a generous nurse. "It's important that it reads as if we had no choice."

Ida huffed. "Well, that's true enough."

"Should be easy, then." For most of their lives, Jean's highest hope had been for Ida to claim their love story out loud to friends and family. The idea that Ida would one day shout it from the rooftops, letting all of America see who she truly was and who Jean and Ida were together, was a notion so grand it had never even occurred to her. And they were doing it together. Jean wasn't dragging Ida kicking and screaming. They sat beside one another, revisiting the past and present as a pair, and this very act might just be miraculous enough to grant Ida a real future.

"Get to writing," Ida said, snapping Jean out of her emotional train of thought and gesturing at the blank page.

Jean glanced at the first line, then back at Ida. "We have to make it seem like you didn't know about Richard and Eddie. Like I did it on my own.

Ellis Gable is one thing. We can claim self-defense—”

“Which it was,” Ida said pointedly.

“Which it was,” said Jean. “But anybody hearing that we buried those bastards in our yard, that you knew about it, that you planted roses on top of them, *and* never told anyone in forty years’ time.” Jean’s head shook as she sighed. “Average person won’t understand that.”

“I do not need them to understand.” Ida’s arms crossed over her chest as she puffed up.

“You do, dear. If you want a shot at living free, you need everybody who reads this article to think you’re—”

“Some victim?”

“A survivor,” Jean said. “A hero.”

Ida’s expression turned down, and Jean knew she hated the idea of being painted as ignorant or naïve. It was time to talk brass tacks.

“You want to save face, Ida? Or you want to save your ass?”

Ida’s tongue passed over her pointed canine. “Fine.” She watched as Jean wrote, spelling out mostly the truth, which, as any good liar will tell you, is the best way to lie.

An hour later, the letter was drafted and the same nurse who got them notepad and pen looked up the phone number for Linda Kahan, associate editor at the *New York Times*.

“I think we should have that lawyer look at it first,” Ida said in the thin hours of dawn. She was getting the hang of this *caution* thing. “See if there’s anything we’re missing or something we shouldn’t say.”

“Smart,” Jean said, folding the papers and tucking them behind her pillow. “We’ll call him in the morning.”

“Call him now,” said Ida.

Percy Jeffers arrived fifteen minutes before eight. He greeted Ida, trying and failing to conceal his displeasure that his client had ignored his advice to remain out of contact with family, and now sat in the corner chair. Percy watched as Jean used her reflection in the medical monitors to try and tame her hair. The nurses had changed her bandages, and her fingernails snagged on matted pieces of cotton stuck to her skin with dried blood. When she plucked out a few strands of hair she was trying to untangle, she gave up.

“Guess this will have to be good enough,” she said.

Percy’s briefcase rested evenly across his knees. “Good enough for government work.” His thin lips quirked on one side, and Jean understood he was making a joke. “That’s something a mentor of mine from law school used to say.”

“I see,” said Ida.

“In any case,” the lawyer said, realizing the joke was lost, “I understand you’ve made a decision about how you’d like to move forward.” The tip of his nose upturned in a way that suggested he was perturbed. “I am not the sort of man to get mixed up in people’s personal affairs,” he said, “and I am also not the sort of attorney to create more work for myself. But having said that, you two are not my usual clientele.” His expression softened, and Jean felt his gaze pass through her, as if he were looking not at her but at a matronly figure from his own life, his own grandmother perhaps. “I feel compelled to ask you, Miss Bleaker, Miss Holloway, are you sure you want to do this?”

Jean found a loose thread at the corner of her sheet. Tugging at it, she said, “I don’t have many choices anymore.”

“I’m aware your diagnosis is terminal. Forgive me for knowing details about your health, your son offered the information. Even still, the state of New York will not take pity on you. Three homicides, fleeing the state, making the paper, you made them look incompetent. Add that to the victim’s involvement with the police chief’s daughter and any sign of weakness on their part will mean they’ve got the makings of a scandal on their hands. Detective Rollins, who is leading your case, is likely already on his way here. Even if you become a media darling, I expect your confession will earn you a life term.”

“Doesn’t matter,” said Jean. “A few years, a few months, it’s all a life sentence to me.”

Percy wrinkled his nose again. “You and Ida could fight the charges. You have a case for self-defense in the murder of Ellis Gable. It would be difficult for the state to prove otherwise, and as it stands now, it doesn’t seem the other bodies have been discovered. I imagine your family might be willing to help you with a lawyer in New York.”

“No.” Jean dropped the sheet, smoothing it tight across her thighs. If she had loved Ida less, she might have considered going to trial. If she had

loved Ida less, she might have entertained the possibility of living the brief spring of her remaining days out on bail, free to wander her garden at home, visit the children or have them come visit her, hug the little ones—Chelsea and Jill—one more time. Maybe they would stand a chance in a trial. Maybe the bodies of Richard and Eddie would never be dug up. But there was a very real risk they would be, that going to trial would mean the two would be found guilty.

It was a risk Jean wasn't willing to take. As it was, only one path lay before Jean, a path so short the end was well in sight. "They could find the bodies. I could die before the trial and then Ida would face this alone. I won't allow it." Looking at Ida, how the morning sun lit her cherry-cola hair on fire, Jean thought that telling their story to the world might just be recompense for having to hide from it for so many years. Saying it out loud dissipated the shocks of fear that had riddled Jean's body since dawn. Her reasoning was sound. Her decision was firm. She had helped to bridge the gaps between George, Barbara, and Ida. She had shown Ida that Laura loved her, even though she'd moved to Indiana and didn't visit much. She had created a pathway for reconciliation between Ida and her lost son Charlie. Maybe she couldn't get Ida to San Francisco, but she could give her the chance to get there on her own. And San Francisco was never really about the place, Jean knew. It was about freedom. The freedom to live and love freely. The place represented a life without secrets. Jean was giving Ida that, and it would have to be enough.

"And you, Miss Holloway?" Percy Jeffers asked, turning to Ida.

"I've made up my mind," she said. "Jean will tell you, I'm a stubborn woman. Thank you anyway, Mr. Jeffers, for asking."

"Give me a look at this letter, then," the lawyer said. Percy retrieved a pair of reading glasses from a case in his pocket. He sat with his back to the window, scrutinizing page after page, making notes in the margin.

Ida picked at the cuticle around her thumb. While Percy continued to read, Nurse Jennifer entered. She paused halfway inside, seeming to recognize Ida and the bandage on her face.

"Miss Holloway," she said.

Percy Jeffers looked up from the papers, then to Jean.

"Glad to see you back," she continued. "May I take a look at that eye?"

Ida touched her fingertips to the bottom of the bandage. "It hurts," she

said.

Jennifer pulled back the curtain around the empty hospital bed beside Jean. “Your roommate was discharged around six.”

“We were up all night,” said Jean. “But I guess I didn’t notice—”

“You and Miss Holloway looked to have nodded off. We did our best not to disturb you.” Sure enough, the bed beside Jean’s was unoccupied. Fresh sheets were stretched tight across it, and the little whiteboard above the metal bar in back, which once was filled with cryptic instructions inked in red, was now blank. “Take a seat,” Jennifer said to Ida, tapping the white sheet with her palm.

Percy Jeffers went back to reading, and Ida stood up from her chair and sat at the side of the bed so she could still face Jean. Nurse Jennifer removed the bandage, exposing yellow crust beneath that sealed Ida’s lashes shut.

“It looks infected,” Jennifer said, shaking her head. “We’ll need to admit you, get you on IV antibiotics.”

Ida pulled back. “I can’t.”

“Give us a moment, please?” Percy Jeffers said to the nurse. He shuffled the papers he’d been reading, laying them flat in his lap.

The nurse stood, straightening her pastel yellow scrubs. “I’ll come back at the end of my rounds.” Looking to Ida, she said, “I hope to see you then.”

When she was out, and all had heard the door of the next room open and click shut, Percy Jeffers said, “The police will almost definitely be here soon.”

“I won’t leave her again,” said Ida.

“If you’re admitted, you won’t have to,” said the lawyer. “But if you’re sitting in that chair when they arrive, they will place you under arrest here. For evasion, if nothing else.”

“Let the nurse look at your eye, dear,” said Jean.

Ida swung her legs over the side of the thin mattress, fluffing the pillows behind her. “Okay. If it gets us some time.”

Percy Jeffers removed his glasses, folded them, and placed them neatly in their case. “I’ve crossed out a couple of things. Made some suggestions in the margins. I’ll remind you that you do have other options. This is a long shot.”

“We appreciate your due diligence,” said Jean. She opened the drawer of

the bedside table and handed him a strip of paper on which she'd scrawled down the number of Linda Kahan.

"Very well," Percy Jeffers said. After stowing his glasses inside his briefcase, he plugged the phone back into the wall. He dialed the number, one careful punch at a time, while Ida and Jean looked on.

"Percy Jeffers Esquire, for Linda Kahan," he said into the receiver. A pause. "Miss Kahan, I represent Jean Bleaker, the subject of a recent piece of yours." Another pause. "That's correct. She is present with me now, along with Ida Holloway, another name with which I believe you are familiar." A beat, and Jean's heart thumped in her chest. "They would like to offer you a follow-up piece, a companion to your first story. Is that—" Percy sat straighter. "I understand," he said. "I thought that might be the case."

Percy extended the receiver to Jean, who took it. She covered the speaker with her palm, and turning to Ida, she whispered, "Are you sure?"

Ida nodded yes, the curls atop her head bobbing in agreement.

Percy's chin dipped in reassurance.

Jean took in a breath so deep it stretched her lungs to their limit. She let it out slowly, and as the last of its heat left her lips, she smiled. "Good morning, Linda. This is Jean Bleaker, and I can tell you all about what happened in Rockaway." Her gaze drifted to the pale sky outside her window, the wisps of cloud, the glimmer of a far-off airplane. "And I will. But it's a long story, and it's less about murder, much more to do with love."

The voice on the other end was eager, slanting every word with a New York City timbre. "I'd love to hear it," she said. "And I've got all the time you need."

"Good," said Jean. "Then I'll start at the beginning." Jean took one more breath, pressing the phone close to her ear with notepad in hand, and looking at Ida as Ida looked at her. "In 1952, I met my girl. Her name was Ida Holloway, and she was married and I was married, and we both had babies around the same age, but from the moment I saw that woman to this moment now and all the consecutive moments in between, I belonged to her."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Ida was admitted. Nurse Jennifer set her up in the ICU bed beside Jean, citing a lack of available rooms in the general wing, but Ida suspected it was a personal favor from the nurse to her and Jean.

“You wouldn’t lie to me, would you, Jennifer?” Ida asked as she was served a tray of turkey and peaches.

“No, ma’am,” said the nurse. Then a sly smile snaked across her lips and Ida became overwhelmed. She turned her face toward the room’s empty corner, embarrassed by whatever expression tugged at the tops of her cheeks.

“You okay?” Jean asked when Jennifer had left.

Ida wasn’t sure. The nurse’s act of kindness, housing the women together after knowing about her and Jean’s relationship, it felt like confirmation that she’d been wrong all those many years. Ida regretted not coming out sooner and wondered what it might’ve meant if she had. “She’s just been so nice,” Ida said. “She didn’t have to be so nice, you know?”

“Let’s enjoy it,” said Jean.

“She’ll probably get fired over putting me up in here,” Ida said.

“Nah.”

“It’s stupid really,” Ida said.

“We’re together.” Jean pulled her own lunch tray close to her hips. “That’s what counts.”

Ida unwrapped a plastic spoon and dug into the peach cup. The fruit was cold on her tongue, ice crystals crunching between her back teeth as she chewed.

Jean turned on the television, flipping channels until she landed on a daytime court show where a Midwestern woman was suing her landlord over mice. “What should we plant this year?” she asked.

Ida made a jovial, mocking sound. “Don’t think we need to worry about that.”

“I was thinking…” Jean speared a strip of turkey with her plastic fork. “Astilbe.”

“You’re serious?” Ida asked, watching Jean chew and finding no humor in the lines of her face.

“A row of astilbe and some clematis. You always have good luck with that.”

Ida knew that whatever happened, Jean wouldn’t be around to plant the garden. The yard would be excavated, and Jean would be in jail, if she lived long enough to make it there. Still, Ida said, “I like the purple clematis with some New England aster for a pop of color.”

“Red astilbe, purple clematis, purple New England aster.”

“Different shades,” Ida said.

“Of course,” said Jean. She closed her eyes, and Ida imagined the breeze of a warm spring day jostling the roots of Jean’s hair. Jean’s roots had gone silver, stark against the jet-black dye where her hair had grown out in the weeks since her last appointment with Heather Carlson. Without her penciled-in brows, she looked fragile. “Lighter aster, darker clematis.”

The women finished lunch and had firmly sided with the TV plaintiff when George and Barbara came to visit. Brother and sister busied themselves with a game of rummy, and Ida only half listened to the courtroom drama, preferring to eavesdrop on the hell Barbara gave George about his divorce between hands.

At a commercial break, conversation turned to travel.

“I’m planning a trip to Europe,” George said.

“Oh?” Barbara asked. “When?”

George drew a card. “I’m not sure. The summer, maybe.”

“Lovely,” said Barbara with a cynical tone. “Where in Europe?”

“Maybe Paris. I hear Vienna is nice.”

“From who?” Barbara asked. “Billy Joel?”

Ida chuckled. Jean turned to her. “She gets that wit from you,” Jean said. Then her grin fell away. “I’m sorry we didn’t make it to San Francisco.”

Ida saw guilt in the tremble of Jean’s eyes. An ache bloomed in her chest. “No idea what you mean,” she said, and pointing out the window at nothing in particular, she added, “I can see the Golden Gate Bridge from here.”

Jean’s mouth softened. Ida wished for nothing more than to clasp Jean’s

cheeks in her palms and plant kisses over her frown lines.

“There’s nowhere I’d rather be,” Ida said.

Although the kids were in the room, the two shared a private moment. Jean wore the look of a woman who couldn’t quite believe how lucky she’d gotten, who wanted to hold a snapshot of time in the palms of her hands and to live in its depth.

That moment lasted as long as it could, and then Jean glanced over Ida’s shoulder toward the door. She went pale.

When Ida looked, a man in his forties stood on the threshold of room I-318. With a head of thick black hair and the frame of a boxer, he wore a white button-down shirt beneath a navy jacket and trousers to match. In his arm, he held a manila folder stacked with papers. “Jean Bleaker, Ida Holloway,” he said. His smile convinced Ida he was actually pleased to see them. “I’m Detective Rollins with the Rockaway Police Department. We meet at last.”

As the detective moved farther into the hospital room, both George and Barbara stood. “Should we call the lawyer?” Barbara asked.

“I think that’s a good idea,” said Jean, eyeing Detective Rollins as if he were a predator who might, at any moment, decide to pounce.

“You don’t have to talk to him,” Barbara said, gathering the deck of cards and tucking it away in her purse. “Don’t talk to him.” She glanced at the phone on Jean’s bedside table, then at the detective. “Could you give us some privacy, please?”

Detective Rollins lifted his palms in gentle surrender. “I have to stay with Jean,” he said. “But there’s a pay phone in the waiting room at the end of the hall if you’d like to call your lawyer in private.”

Barbara gave him a nasty look, but Jean waved her away. She and George gave the detective as wide a berth as possible in the narrow walkway. “We’ll be back soon,” Barbara said. “Don’t talk to him!” And then she disappeared down the hall with her brother.

“She’s right,” said Detective Rollins, a glitter of patience and care in his dark eyes. “You don’t have to talk to me.”

Ida pulled her thin white sheet up to her neck, disdain spilled across her features.

Jean considered what Rollins meant when he said he had to stay with her. No mention of Ida at all. “You’re here for me?” she asked against her daughter’s advice.

“That’s right,” said Detective Rollins.

Jean’s heartbeat quickened. Could it be that her plan had worked? “Just me?”

“Just you,” said the detective.

Jean could’ve cried with happiness, but she hid her relief, as a show of emotion might cause Rollins to rethink his decision.

“I drove all night to get here,” the detective went on. “And I was just crossing through Illinois when I got a call.” He set the manila folder on the countertop behind him, looking first at Ida, then at Jean. “Let me be among the first to congratulate you on making the front page of the *New York Times*.”

Jean had expected a stern man. Someone smug and all too happy to slap cuffs around her wrists, someone reeking of having been bullied as a boy who now relished in bullying himself. But something about the detective’s easy way of moving about the room put her at ease.

“An editor there called the department to request a comment on her story. Linda Kahan.” He wetted his lips and settled them into an earnest-looking grin. “Hell of a story. Pardon my language.”

Ida hmphed, raising her brows in a self-satisfied way.

“Is it true?” he asked, still grinning.

“We’re not going to talk to you,” Ida croaked, the outline of her crossed arms showing through the thin white fabric.

Detective Rollins once again raised a relenting hand. “I won’t push,” he said. “Let’s wait for that lawyer.” In the hour that followed, Detective Rollins didn’t speak again. He sat in the chair George had occupied, and at one point he noticed Jean’s empty glass on the bedside table, found the pitcher, and filled it. He set it back down where it was and regarded with kindness the woman he intended to lock away.

Barbara and George paced lines up and down the hallway, taking turns peeking through the window. Jean gestured for them to stay away. She didn’t know what they might say if the detective questioned them, and her nerves were at their limit watching Ida struggle to contain her displeasure.

Percy Jeffers arrived looking unhurried, gripping his briefcase in one

hand and extending the other. “Percy Jeffers, I represent Miss Bleaker,” he said.

Taking Percy’s hand into a firm shake, the detective said, “Mr. Jeffers, nice to meet you.”

“Is my client under arrest?” the lawyer asked.

Detective Rollins tipped his head to Jean, then returned his attention to her lawyer. “Yes.” His voice had an almost apologetic quality, and Jean liked the man, despite his position. What a strange thing, she thought, to finally meet the one who has hunted you and to find him thoughtful, charming, kind. She hoped Death would be so warm, when he, too, arrived to claim her.

“When Jean is discharged from the hospital, I will accompany her back to Rockaway,” Detective Rollins said.

“And what about me?” Ida blurted.

Detective Rollins looked at Ida with a playful annoyance, as one might regard an obstinate child. “I would very much appreciate it if you would come in and answer some questions, but I will not be placing you under arrest at this time, Miss Holloway.”

There it was again. Confirmation that Jean and Ida’s story had achieved the impossible, at least for now.

“What are the charges?” Percy asked.

“Second-degree murder. Felony evasion.”

“How many counts?” asked the lawyer.

“One,” said the detective. “For the time being.”

Jean surmised that they hadn’t found Richard and Eddie yet, but they must be digging up the yard or planning to.

“Miss Bleaker has nothing further to say.”

Detective Rollins nodded. “I understand.” He retrieved a pair of silver handcuffs, and Ida watched with wide eyes as he secured Jean’s wrist to the hospital bed. “Is that too tight?” he asked.

Jean twisted her wrist, testing the limits of the metal. “That’s fine,” she said, and surprised herself in how she meant it. This wasn’t as scary as she thought it’d be. In fact, Jean felt strangely calm with the metal handcuff secured around her wrist.

“I’ll be staying nearby until you’re cleared to leave the hospital,” said Detective Rollins. “There will be a uniformed officer stationed at the door.”

He scribbled the name of a hotel and a room number on a strip of paper he tore from the stack in his folder. Handing it to Percy, he said, “If Jean changes her mind, wants to talk.”

“She won’t,” said the lawyer. “But once she’s secured representation in New York, I’ll reach out to you with that information.”

“Fair enough,” said the detective. He walked slowly toward the door, where, sure enough, a local uniformed cop waited, and before he went said, “It really is a hell of a story.”

Percy advised both Jean and Ida not to speak to any member of the police. He reiterated that their best chances involved staying quiet, and left Jean a business card for a colleague in their home state.

When he’d gone, Ida tossed the sheet away from her legs. She bent over Jean’s bed braced on an elbow, her body folding in on itself and her viselike grip around Jean’s cuffed wrist. Ida sobbed openly, braying out her pain and grief and loss like an animal.

“It’s okay,” whispered Jean. “It’s okay.”

Ida cried over Jean’s bed until the tears wet her hair and cherry-cola dye bled pink into the wrinkles of the white hospital sheets. Over slow minutes, her chest contracted less fiercely, and her breathing grew less ragged. “I just —” she gasped, eyes rolling back as she gathered herself to say what she meant. “I just wish we had gotten away with it.”

Jean rubbed Ida’s knuckles in a circular, soothing motion. She wiped the last of Ida’s tears from her cheeks, then pressed her thumb into Ida’s dimple. With a kind smile, Jean said, “We did! For forty years. That’s so much longer than most people ever get.”

Ida’s gaze locked on Jean’s, settling on the same eyes she’d looked to for all their years spent getting away with it, living their happily-ever-after. In the voice of the vulnerable girl Ida hid from the world, she said, “But I wish it could’ve been forever.”

“It was forever,” said Jean. “For the whole of my life, and now it will be for the whole of yours too.”

Ida pressed her face into Jean’s palm. She shut her eyes. “It’s you and me, Jean. I love you.”

“And I love you, Ida.”

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CHAPTER THIRTY

The *New York Times* article had inspired other papers. Journalists called the hospital along with news stations, both local and nationwide, all wanting a comment, a quote, an exclusive piece of the women Linda Kahan had called *the modern Bonnie and Clyde*. Jean saw the variety of public reactions reflected in the attitudes of the nursing staff. The odd one glared, cast judgment, kept their distance. A few more gaped, almost starstruck, approaching their bedsides as they might a celebrity. But most, Dr. Farlene and Nurse Jennifer included, seemed to connect the story with a love story of their own. They regarded Ida and Jean with a warmth and a sense of knowing that seemed to say *I have loved too. And though I never had to, I have been willing to kill to keep it.*

On the morning of the fourth day, Dr. Farlene declared that Ida's infection could be managed at home with antibiotics, and the risk of stroke had decreased enough to clear Jean for transport back to New York. While awaiting discharge paperwork, Jean called Percy Jeffers, who explained on speakerphone that Jean would be taken by an officer to a hospital in Rockaway for further observation, then released to the custody of the state. He once again recommended that Jean seek representation in her home state of New York, and Jean, once again, thanked him.

Barbara and George arrived in the early afternoon to see them off. Barbara prepared to follow the police car in a rental with Ida while George found his own way to New York in the Pontiac Firebird. Barbara became teary-eyed when she saw the bruising on her mother's face, counted the stitches in her skull, but Jean and Ida, having settled into the strange sort of peace that comes with acceptance of the inevitable, reassured her that everything would be all right.

As she was pushed through the hospital in a wheelchair, Jean set her mind to an easy parting of ways. So much heaviness had surrounded the week prior. Exhaustion and a bone-deep need to see her lover happy made

her determined to lean their parting away from *goodbye* and toward *I'll see you soon*.

The day was breezy and clear and buzzing with birdsong. Spring had arrived in Nebraska. An unmarked police cruiser idled at the curb, Detective Finley Rollins behind the wheel.

"Wish I could say it was good to see you again," Jean said to the detective.

Through the lowered window, Detective Rollins smirked. "I wouldn't want you to lie."

"I feel terribly undressed," said Jean, glancing down at her hospital gown. "Hope you'll forgive me."

The detective gave a friendly wink. "Think nothing of it."

"You moonlight as a taxi driver?" asked Ida. She was dressed, bandage removed, and stood with her left hand balanced on a handle of Jean's wheelchair, wearing a sneer like a camel about to spit.

"Thought I'd see Jean home myself," he said.

"That was very kind of you, Detective." Jean hugged her middle and let her brow cock in playful defiance. "Or were you afraid I might evade a lesser lawman?"

Detective Rollins chuckled as he got out of the car and circled around to the back passenger-side door. "There are no lesser lawmen. Less experienced maybe, less curious. Less well-dressed." He tipped his head to regard Jean's earlier joke about her gown. "But if anyone could leave a hospital with a head injury, get into the back of a cop car in handcuffs after confessing to three homicides, and still somehow manage to escape a jail cell, I suppose it would be you, Jean Bleaker. I'll give you that." He offered his hand and Jean took it, rising out of the wheelchair and ducking her head to slide into the back seat. "And you," he said, turning to Ida, "I look forward to our discussion down at the station. Do I have your word you'll meet me there?"

Ida grunted.

Jean said, "That means yes."

"Excellent," said the detective.

Barbara and Ida waited on the sidewalk with hands at their sides as the detective fitted cuffs over Jean's wrists. "Too tight?" he asked.

"No," she said. *At least he's consistent,* Jean thought.

Without knowing what else to say, Barbara said, “Be safe.”

“I’ll do everything I can,” said Jean. “George?”

“Yeah, Ma,” said the man on the curb with a tear in his eye.

“Call your wife,” Jean said. “Apologize.”

George nodded, his eyes drifting down to the sidewalk.

Jean, looking at Ida, said, “I’ll see you soon, dear.”

Ida, looking at Jean, said, “Before you know it.”

Detective Rollins closed the door, tipped his head to Jean’s family on the sidewalk, and got back into the driver’s seat. As the cruiser pulled away, Jean watched Ida through the window as long as she could, waving with both cuffed hands before she slipped out of view. Ida, in response, placed her hand over her heart and smiled.



The drive from Nebraska to New York was an eighteen-hour stretch, one that Barbara planned to drive in two nine-hour stints, spending a night in Ohio between them. Ida offered to drive, but only weakly, and Barbara was gentle in how she passed up the offer.

The women tried for small talk. Ida listened to Barbara’s recent dating history, suggesting she get another coffee with the veterinary technician but not to call back the plumber from New Jersey. After the first few hours, the women ran out of gossip. It seemed that neither wanted to talk about Jean’s arrest, so they listened to the radio shows together in comfortable silence for the remainder of the drive. When they finally made it to Peachtree Way, Ida insisted on going inside alone.

“I’m just down the road,” Barbara said. “Anything you need, give me a call.”

“Thank you, I will.” Ida heard Barbara’s rental car reverse down the driveway as she located the plastic rock that hid their spare key. She let herself inside, finding the living room in disarray from the police search, a glass pane on the back door shattered and the lock undone. The living room rug was gone, leaving a rectangle of carpet that was cleaner than what surrounded it, and the answering machine flashed a neon number 4.

The first message was an old one from Detective Rollins, and Ida figured it was the same one Jean had listened to back at Laura's house.

Message deleted.

The second was also the detective, his tone more stern.

Message deleted.

The third message was from the Humane Society of Sarpy County. "Hello, this is Natasha. I'm calling because we had a cat brought in and your information was attached to his microchip. If you are the owner of Frankie Holloway, please give us a call back at…" Ida was breathless. She was so quick to dial the callback number, she messed up the digits twice and had to start over. When she finally got through, Natasha told her the cat had been found just down the road from where the car accident happened, entirely unhurt.

"They're exceptionally agile," she said. "Or maybe it's the nine-lives theory in practice."

Ida thought nothing of hiring a private animal courier service to escort Frankie back home, despite the exorbitant price and not being sure where she'd get the money to pay off the credit card when all was said and done. *Frankie*, she thought, picturing his whiskers wet with water from his bowl. Joy flowed from Ida's heart out into the tips of her fingers and toes. Frankie! Hopping over bits of broken glass in the hallways, she got to the record player and set the needle.

Sinatra's voice washed over the room, doing its part to smooth the rough edges of her circumstance while Ida picked up after the police officers' mess. By the third song, glass was swept and dumped in the waste bin, dust motes were wiped away from where they'd gathered at the corners of the coffee table, and duct tape covered the broken glass jutting out of the frame in the back door. She was looking out at the backyard garden when a hard knock fell on the front door. Must be Barbara checking in on her.

As Ol' Blue Eyes sang of Nancy with the laughing face, she opened the door inward and found Detective Finley Rollins standing on her stoop. He removed his hat, a black trilby, letting his hand fall to his side as his expression darkened. Ida's chest sank, but she used all the strength Jean had taught her and stood tall.

"She's gone," Ida said. She didn't know how she knew, faintly believing the words as they left her lips.

The detective swallowed as he nodded. “I am so sorry for your loss, Miss Holloway. Jean suffered a stroke as we were nearing New York, and in her condition, she did not survive it. Her body is at St. John’s Memorial Hospital.” Detective Rollins pulled a business card from his jacket pocket and handed it to Ida. “You can contact them at that number.”

Ida palmed the card without reading it, still looking into the lawman’s dark eyes. He was not her friend, much as he’d charmed Jean in the end. She couldn’t let her sadness overwhelm her, not in front of this man whom she did not trust. They still had business between the two of them. “You can put your hat back on,” she said. As he did, Ida stepped over the threshold. She would not run. She would not hide in her home. She was tired of living in fear, so she stood in open air, close enough for the detective to take her, if taking her was what he planned. “Where does this leave us?”

The man sighed and glanced away, the brim of his hat casting a shadow down the bridge of his nose. “I’ve been thinking through that very thing. Your story is everywhere. Public sympathy runs deep for Jean despite her full confession, and even deeper for you. The average man on the street sees you either as a rescued damsel in distress or a frail grandmother, or a combination of both. The average woman, some of whom work in my department, sees you both as folk heroes. But the cases are open.”

“The cases,” Ida said.

“PSE&G started digging a few hundred feet from your property line. We need our people to excavate your yard, and that would’ve delayed the new lines, so they’re making do how they can.” The detective’s tongue moved across his teeth inside his lower lip. “Thing is, even when we have the bodies…” He shrugged. “Jean gave your alibi to all of America. Your son Charlie confirmed it, said he remembered having the flu that night and you staying up with him to watch his fever.”

Ida’s heart leapt at the mention of Charlie. Jean had saved her, and Charlie, the son she’d thought she’d lost, had made sure Jean was successful in doing so.

“I don’t know if you heard, but Ellis Gable wasn’t the sort of man…” He trailed off, as if he might have too much class to speak ill of the dead. “Nobody claimed his body. We’ll put it that way. The prosecutor doesn’t think the autopsy makes a strong enough case against self-defense to get a conviction.”

Ida searched the man's expression for evidence of what she thought she was hearing, improbable as it was. "Okay," Ida said, not fully daring to hope.

"Anyway, there's been a series of home invasions just north of here, the wealthy part of town. I anticipate that will take up most of my time."

"What are you saying?" Ida asked. "Say it plainly."

This time, it was Detective Rollins rolling one hand inside the other. "Building a case around your late husbands is a nonstarter. And I have priorities beyond arresting a terrified grandmother for running away after her partner defended her from the local piece of shit. Pardon my language."

Ida, the woman least likely to place her trust in a man, assessed him thoroughly and found him sincere. Jean had done it. They had done it together, and all because she was finally willing to tell their story. "Thank you for letting me know." She stepped back into her home, eager to end the conversation before he changed his mind.

Detective Finley Rollins nodded. "Get that glass repaired," he said, pointing through the open front door and down the hallway, to the patch of duct tape at the back one. He turned slowly and walked down the steps. "Take care," he said as he opened the car's driver's-side door.

Ida shut herself in gently and did not look out the window to watch him drive away. He was leaving. Jean was gone, but she had accomplished all she had to set out to do in keeping Ida out of prison, in giving her another chance at a life of freedom.

Ida wandered in a daze back to the answering machine. Excitement over Frankie had pulled her away, but there was a fourth and final message. It was from Laura.

"Hey, Mom, I'm here with Charlie."

A man's voice said, "Hey, Mom, it's me."

"We're driving over together. We're going to make sure you have everything you need."

The machine beeped, and as it rolled through its prerecorded options, Ida looked through the French doors that led to the garden she and Jean had shared. She thought of planting. Astilbe, clematis, and New England aster in tidy, even rows.

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EPILOGUE

Six months later

Frankie wove through Ida's legs, curling his tail around the inside of her knee as she moved through the living room. She placed her hand on the still-packed suitcase, baggage tag dangling from the handle, and reminded herself to unpack that evening as Sinatra sang about having his own way. There was seldom a time anymore that music wasn't filling the home at 1080 Peachtree Way—Sinatra's baritone and Frankie's mews and Ida's off-key humming.

Through the freshly painted French doors, the backyard garden swayed in a late summer gust. Ida slid on her clogs, hands gloved and shears ready. She shimmied past the bearberry bush, startled a handful of moths off the blazing stars, and scratched at a tickle caused by the swaying Christmas ferns. A quick snip of a wilting columbine, a check for pests beneath the five-fingered leaves of the flowering raspberry, and Ida smiled at the monarch caterpillars munching mouthfuls of milkweed, growing fatter by the day.

The blossoms she needed were in the newest bed, a rectangle of pine that, just months before, was filled with nothing but soil, and now overflowed with petals of purple and red. She cut a thick bouquet, astilbe, clematis, and New England aster of varying heights, and flicked away the ants that fell off the blooms and onto the knuckles of her gloves.

Ida took a moment to smell the flowers, to feel the kiss of the wind through her hair, and to remember. It was, all of it, sweet.

Inside, she tied a ribbon around the stems and placed them on the kitchen table. From beneath the sink, she retrieved an insulated lunchbox, filled it with ice, then portioned scoops of ice cream from their containers into Tupperware and fitted them inside.

The Pine Woods Cemetery had stood in its spot for over one hundred

years. Its hills overlooked the sound, and its valleys cradled monuments of granite and marble. White and gray and speckled black with names and dates and duties and familial roles. The cream-colored Pontiac cruised past the first parking lot and stopped at the second. Ida, with her lunchbox and flowers and the blanket and pillow she kept in the car, knew the way by memory.

Through the second row, she took a left at John and Gertrude Maple, past the evergreen with the hardened knob of sap, and made a right at the Cook mausoleum.

Jean Bleaker
1929–1999
Mother, Grandmother, Wife
Protector, Memory, Beloved

Ida laid the flowers at the base of her headstone and set down the lunchbox as she fanned the blanket over the length of the empty plot beside Jean's. She fluffed the pillow where her own headstone would one day be, then opened the Tupperware and set the rocky road on the grass beside the flowers, sticking a spoon in the side.

She took a bite of her peppermint ice cream and lay down. "Tried the organic brand this time. Still not as good."

Ida knew what Jean would say. *Middle-of-nowhere Illinois, best ice cream in the world. Who would've thought?*

"Not me," Ida said, a pink drip landing on her neck as she ate another spoonful. "San Francisco…" She shook her head. "It was busier than I pictured it would be."

Did you like it?

"It was fine. I rode the trolley. Saw Haight-Ashbury. Lots of people, lots of graffiti. They call it street art, but it's not to my taste. Charlie and his husband—did I tell you he has a husband? I think I told you. Charlie and his husband Miguel invited me to stay in their guest house. Live with them." Again, Ida shook her head. "But I can't imagine leaving New York. To visit, sure. Not for good, though. I'd miss our garden." She laughed, scooping out another minty bite. "Plus, then they'd have to dig you up. I

don’t think the airlines would appreciate me checking your body with the luggage.” A big breath in. “So, Rockaway is where we’ll stay.”

Jean wouldn’t have said anything just then. She would’ve listened.

“Rose Garland keeps bringing over food in casserole dishes. Everyone else stopped months ago. I don’t know what her problem is.”

Oh, Ida. She is trying to be nice!

“I’m not interested in her that way, if that’s what she wants.”

Ida!

“Aye.” Ida swatted the air in Jean’s direction. Another bite and she snapped a chunk of one of the peppermint candy bits between her front teeth. “Maybe next week we’ll try the low-fat kind. I don’t have high hopes.”

Maybe they’ll franchise.

“Pop’s Sweets & Creamery? Somehow I doubt it.” Snuggling deeper into her pillow, Ida said, “The kids are all coming for Christmas. A full house.”

That’s wonderful.

“I don’t know how I’ll ever live with the noise. And only two bathrooms…”

It’s what we wanted.

Scraping the bottom of her Tupperware, Ida finished her scoop of ice cream. “I guess you’re right. It’ll be nice to have them all back.” The woman fell quiet. She stared up at the sky, clouds like spun sugar against an endless blue. Ida watched them breathe and fold, trailed a seagull cutting through, then a hawk. Lying still and feeling the warmth of Jean beside her, she couldn’t be sure how much time passed, but after some measure of it, the voice of the groundskeeper reached her from the path.

“Miss Holloway,” he said.

Ida sat up, wiping her sticky lips on her shirtsleeve. He was a kindly man with deep wrinkles and a slight limp.

“Sorry to disturb you. Thought you might like these. Saved them from your last visit.” The groundskeeper handed her an empty Tupperware container and a spoon wiped clean. “I’ll leave you to it.”

“Thank you, Larry,” Ida said.

“No trouble at all,” said the man, already walking away.

Ida stacked the empty container inside the one she’d brought for herself

and eyed Jean's rocky road, nearly melted to soup, but decided, as she always did, to leave it. "I should get going," she said. "It's mahjong tonight with the HOA ladies." She tucked her pillow beneath one arm and slung the blanket over the crook of the other. Grinning, she whispered, "They're awful."

With all her belongings gathered, Ida stood at the foot of Jean's grave. She read over the inscription and admired the flowers one last time.

"I'll see you soon," she said.

As she left the matching plots behind her, Ida swore it was more than just her imagination when she heard Jean reply, *My girl.*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

While the end result is entirely a work of fiction, this book was inspired by the stories and photos generously shared with me by my family. Thank you to my parents, my aunt, my cousins, and second cousins for telling me all your favorite memories of Minnie and Ev. Any woman who would drive around with a shovel in her trunk, spot landscaping she liked, pull over to dig it out and steal it, and bring it home for her own garden truly deserves a tribute in fiction. It is with deep gratitude that I acknowledge our family's long history of queerness and acceptance of that queerness.

Thank you to my agent, Carleen, who took a chance on me. You are always available when I need anything, and I am so appreciative of our shared interests, easy rapport, and how you are willing to go to bat for my work and my career.

Thank you to my editor, Amina, who spotted this story in her submission pile and decided to dive in with enthusiasm. Your keen editorial eye undoubtedly made this story stronger than I could've ever made it on my own. Your willingness to work with my editing preferences and your undeniable discernment in character and story craft have impressed me at every turn and made you an invaluable partner in this process.

Thank you to my writing mentor and critique parter, C.S. Humble. You read so many versions of this book, pushed me to keep moving forward in the challenging moments, and were the first to celebrate every success. Cheers to the work, the reward.

Finally, my warmest thank-you to the reader. You trusted me with your most precious resource: time. And for that I am sincerely grateful.

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"Rae Wilde is a pro and she knows it. Now one of a very small club of books ever to make me cry, I had the best, coziest, most stressful, and lowkey-sobbing-while-holding-my-wife-est time with Ida and Jean. I couldn't help but root for them. Let's go, lesbians!"

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"Happily Ever After the Murders is a high-stakes chase thriller, yes, but at its core, it's a story about love, loyalty, and the courage to live authentically. It's impossible not to fall in love with Ida and Jean. Do yourself a favor and take the ride."

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RAISING READERS

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