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My Bonnie Lies

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Eileen Shields

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University of California, Riverside

My Bonnie Lies

Chapter One

Bonnie

How had they ever managed without her?

Bonnie scanned her checklist one final time: deliveries canceled, refrigerator perishables disposed of, staff notified, packing completed for herself and the baby—drawing a thick black line through the block print of each completed task with a felt tip marker. Satisfied with the now obliterated page, she crumpled it into a garbage bag already brimming with the rest of the household trash and deposited the bag, reeking of soiled diapers, on the kitchen stoop, where it slumped drunkenly in the thin morning light.

Flexing her fingers, red-ringed and cramped from the noose of the plastic twist-tie, she noticed the time on her wristwatch. The car would be here any minute. She took a deep breath, counted to five, and returned to the house to see if Laurel had made any progress.

Life would be simpler if Laurel would leave all of the packing to Bonnie. But organizing Laurel's bags crossed her sister's shifting boundary regarding the status of

Bonnie as member of the family, and the duties of Bonnie as nanny. "Laurel logic," Mark called it, oozing sarcasm. Bonnie's brother-in-law had no such concerns regarding treating her—or anyone else for that matter—like an employee.

Upstairs, in the master bedroom, she found Laurel trying on another flimsy sundress, frowning at her flawless reflection while her set of matching Louis Vuitton luggage lay open, the cashmere wraps and silk lingerie Bonnie had left neatly stacked and folded now scattered as if the suitcases had recently detonated.

"Perfect choice," Bonnie said.

Laurel brightened, like a child praised for doing a good job, "You think?"

"Definitely. That and the Chanel and the yellow," Bonnie plucked the items from the pile, then frowned at her Timex, as if just noticing, "Oops! We'd better get a move on."

At times like this, Bonnie felt like one of those border collies foolish people try to bring into their homes as pets. The dogs slowly go mad, pacing from room to room, nipping at shins, instinctively trying to herd the human inhabitants into a manageable flock.

Miraculously, she wrangled the family out the door without Mark snapping, or Laurel pouting or the baby melting down. It was early; the bustling Los Angeles airport still shrouded in coastal fog as they filed into the security line, shuffling like sleepy cattle, unbuckling and unlacing for the required striptease that was now routine.

As Mark bullied the infant carrier and diaper bag and his briefcase and the rectangular plastic bin brimming with his Italian loafers and Laurel's strappy sandals—

which she'd spent forever unstrapping while the tubby security guard stared at her ass, practically drooling—and Bonnie's sensible black flats into the X-ray scanner, Bonnie and Laurel passed through the metal detector, fire-brigade-bucketing the sleeping infant between them.

Bonnie was gathering their belongings on the other side when the conveyor belt ground to a halt. The guard, taking a break from gawking at Laurel restrapping her sandals, reached into the maw and yanked out the diaper bag. For a moment Bonnie thought he meant to assist her, but instead he tore it open, pawing through the immaculate swaddling blankets, the bleached cotton onesies, and delicate ruffled socks, making a mess of her perfect order, before removing three sterilized bottles brimming with golden juice.

"Sorry," he grunted to no one in particular, tossing the bottles into a bin labeled with a crappy, hand-lettered sign, *No Liquids or Gels*.

Bonnie seethed. She didn’t buy into this “orange level advisory" baloney one bit. The airlines knew if they took away your drink, you’d buy a new one inside the terminal for twice the price. These things always came down to money. She would have said this to the guard, but he was busy frisking an octogenarian who had triggered the metal detector with her artificial hip.

Besides, Bonnie didn't enter battles she couldn't win.

She tucked her niece properly into her baby seat, trailing Mark and Laurel as they dragged their carry-ons across the scuffed linoleum to the departure board. As they

scanned the glowing blue monitor for their gate assignment, the status of their flight flipped from on time to delayed.

Mark, who dealt with every inconvenience as if he alone was the intended victim, lost his shit.

"Of all the Goddamn, incompetent, fucktard..."

Bonnie stepped away, cradling the plastic carrier. She hummed a tuneless song in order to spare her niece the river of filth spilling from her father's mouth. Although it would serve her brother-in-law right if his little angel's first word was,"cocksucker."

Laurel buzzed around her husband, useless as a fly, feebly pleading with him to calm down.

"Screw it," Mark barked, his face purpling above the collar of his white polo, "Let's go to the lounge."

Bonnie loved the first class lounge. The ease of stepping into an elevator that whisked you away from the airport chaos; the doors opening with a soft whoosh as you entered the clean, well-organized, overstuffed chair of a world; the Red-Carpet Room, the Ambassador's Lounge, the President's Club. She admired the efficient women with their expensive haircuts who greeted you at the door, politely asking to see your membership card, checking your credentials in the system, smiling a smile that said, "Welcome. You're one of us. Isn't it a relief and a pleasure to be you?"

Invariably, these agents were in their mid-thirties. Bonnie wondered if some clinical study had shown wealthy business travelers have greatest faith in the consistency

and diligence of a woman that age. Younger, she might be careless; older, she might forget details. Although Bonnie was thirty-eight, and she never forgot details. Laurel was thirty-three. Bonnie imagined if Laurel were put in charge, the lounge would soon be overrun with stray dogs and the homeless.

At a blocky corner-group of purple armchairs, Mark dumped Laurel, Bonnie, and the baby, and joined the other terribly important Alpha males pacing and grunting into their Blackberries, like gorillas. There were only two other Alphas in the sparsely populated club that morning. Unlike Mark, they were dressed for business in dark suits and neckties. Both of them were thinner up top and thicker around the middle than Bonnie's brother-in-law, who liked to boast he still had the same waistline as when he rowed crew for USC. Bonnie watched as the suits checked-out the family Mark was abandoning, their eyes lingering hungrily on Laurel, a wide-eyed doe left alone in the meadow, passing over Bonnie as if she were part of the furniture.

A stack of trade magazines were piled on the glass tabletop in front of them, and as Bonnie arranged the baby carrier and the family's bags, Laurel chose one and began leafing through it absentmindedly. She never actually read anything; her limpid blue gaze flit from page to page without settling. For years Bonnie had wondered whether her sister might be a little 'slow', until she'd realized that Laurel just gave up easily. Anything that required effort or stamina or concentrated thought was beyond her. There was a helpless quality to her sister's beauty that made people—including Bonnie—want to do things for her, and it was as if Laurel's strength of will had simply atrophied from lack of use.

Beneath the occasion bellowing of the businessmen on their phones, the lounge whispered and murmured with the soft chimes of opening laptops, the brush of footsteps and rustle of newspapers. Bonnie relaxed for the first time that day, allowing herself to melt into the deep cushions, slipping off her black flats and rubbing her inflamed bunion with the ball of her other foot.

The baby started to fuss.

Bonnie squelched her instinct to pick the child up and comfort her—which wasn't just her job, it was her nature. She was a born nurturer. Everyone commented on it, "Bonnie is so good with the baby," they all said. And it wasn't just babies—Bonnie had a talent for taking care of people, for problem solving. Since she had uprooted herself five months ago to nanny the tiny being who had driven Mark and Laurel to the brink of despair, her niece had been transformed from a red-faced misery, howling twenty-four hours a day, into a docile little angel.

Still, the previous evening, at dinner, Mark had criticized her.

Midway through their Chinese take-out, faint sounds of distress had drifted into the dining room. As always, Bonnie immediately folded her napkin and pushed her chair back from the table.

"Don't," Mark had said. "You're spoiling her."

Bonnie had paused, looking to Laurel for support. But Laurel was scooching her shrimp fried rice around with her fork, dreamily staring into her plate like it was a porthole to another world.

Mark had continued, "If you keep picking her up every time she cries, she'll never learn."

This was just plain stupid—but there was nothing to be gained in arguing with Mark.

So now, while the baby started sputtering, the way a cold engine does just before it roars to life, Bonnie waited, certain of what would come next. Laurel would reluctantly put the fancy magazine aside. She'd pat and coo, then try the plush toys and knubbly pacifiers. She'd pick her daughter up, bouncing her gently at first, then growing more frantic, as if, perhaps, this time the maternal dance wouldn't end the same way it always did, with the baby changing partners.

Because Bonnie was so good with the baby.

Bonnie snuck a peek at her watch. She would wait another minute, maybe two, before she came to the rescue. Just long enough for Mark to learn he was wrong to second-guess her, to realize that he and Laurel would be lost without her. Aunt Bonnie understood the child's needs. She knew that, right now, her niece needed her bottle.

So she waited, nibbling on a bit of a hangnail, while this familiar thread unspooled.

Until it abruptly snapped.

The bottles she had prepared in anticipation of this moment were now buried beneath dozens of water bottles and candy-colored sports drinks in the bin of confiscated items at the security gate. She had nothing to offer.

The baby whimpered with rising volume, then let out one throaty yelp. Across the room, even as he continued his cell phone rant, Mark's head spun around. His thick brows knitted in a "take care of this—now" expression.

Grabbing a couple empty bottles from the diaper bag, Bonnie tossed them into the enormous battered patchwork tote she never left home without, the one Laurel had dubbed, her "Mary Poppins."

Laurel didn't even look up, desperately soothing her squirming, agitated baby.

Bonnie made a beeline for the club bar. Surely they'd have some sort of juice, something she could to dilute with a bit of water to cut the sugar content. She hoped that would suffice. She wasn't certain she had any of her go-to soothers in her bag.

As a last resort, there was always the Xanax Laurel packed for her anxiety—though that seemed like overkill.

She was already congratulating herself for her quick thinking, when, a few steps inside the bar entrance she stopped.

Ahead of her, on the only occupied stool, sat a lone traveler in a brightly patterned shirt nursing a Chardonnay breakfast. His attention was focused on the football game blaring from the TV, allowing Bonnie a good long look at his profile; the aging hipster ponytail, the beakish nose, the pockmarked cheek. In order to better view mounted flatcreen, his head was tilted back, revealing the waxy, fish-belly silver of a burn scar running down his scrawny neck.

It was impossible. Not today. Not now.

Bonnie reversed her course, pumping her sturdy legs, flying past the first class checker who was too busy beaming at the next guest to notice her. The elevator doors opened as she approached, releasing a pod of Asian businessmen. Plowing through them like a ball through pins, she stepped inside, pounding the button for the ground floor. The doors shut with painful slowness, but no one came running out of the lounge, or yelled, or called security.

She hadn't been discovered.

The more immediate problem was she had maybe five minutes before Laurel's efforts with her child became totally ineffective and the baby exploded.

The elevator opened onto a concourse reeking of perspiration and industrial cleaner and greasy fast food. Bonnie merged into the river of travelers, bumped and jostled by overstuffed duffels and clackity rolly-bags. She was aware of her own bulk, usually prided herself on the graceful navigation of crowds, but now she bulldozed her way into the nearest gift and sundries shop, past the loitering dolts blocking the aisles as they browsed the smutty paperbacks, quickly locating an apple juice in the drink cooler. An off-brand she would otherwise have turned her nose up at, but beggars can't be choosers.

She scoured the pharmaceutical rack, distracted by thoughts of her old acquaintance in the lounge bar. He'd been wearing the sort of loud shirt a jackass like him would wear to Hawaii. Bonnie's family was also going to Hawaii. She considered how much attention a fussy baby might attract on a long flight and plucked a bottle of Benadryl from the display along with some extra strength cough medicine and Nyquil.

At the register, the skinny checkout girl aimed the price scanner at the bottle of juice, squeezed the handle, and frowned. She tried it again, sighing dramatically, glaring at Bonnie as if this was somehow her fault. Bonnie shifted her weight from one foot to the other, her fingers itching to rip the scanner from the nitwit's fingers and club her with it. The checker began entering the barcode manually; her tacky acrylic nails requiring the assistance of the eraser end of a Ticonderoga pencil.

“Excuse me,” an attractive older man, tall and square-jawed, reached in front of Bonnie, his tweedy elbow nearly brushing her nose, and waved a small colorful box in the checker’s face, “Does this stuff work?”

The checker put down the pencil, examining the box. It was some kind of travel vitamin that claimed to offer protection from germs floating in recycled plane air. With the monotone delivery of a third grader she began reading the product information printed on the package.

"...a form-yoo-la to support and strengthen the immune...."

Bonnie was used to being ignored by shopgirls and by men. But she had an emergency on her hands. She’d be damned if she was going to stand by meekly so this boor could question this cretin about the value of a box of magic beans.

She barked. “I’m in a hurry.”

The checker looked up and blinked, as if Bonnie had just materialized out of thin air. Passing the box back to the man, she said with a flirty shrug, “It couldn’t hurt.”

Bonnie resisted the urge to fling her money at the girl, sweeping her purchases into her tote, not even waiting for her change.

#

Screams, like a wild animal being torn limb from limb, assaulted her ears before the elevator doors had completely opened.

Total meltdown.

Bonnie dashed past the lounge agent, whose warm smile was now frozen in a grim rictus. She knew the agent wouldn't remember her face, service workers never did, and although Mark and Laurel were flying first class, in "the interest of economizing" the boarding pass in Bonnie's bag was for coach.

Immediately on her right was the business center, a row of workstation computer cubicles with data ports and clean level desks—one of them would do.

Bonnie shut out all distractions; the savage cries of her niece, her anger at the incompetent salesgirl, the palpable hostility of the premier lounge members, the pathetic helplessness of her sister and brother-in-law. As for the fly-in-her-ointment guzzling his Chardonnay in the bar, he could go to hell and rot there.

That baby needed her help.

She could feel Mark's eyes tracking her like a sniper from across the room as she hurried toward an exhausted and demoralized Laurel.

As Bonnie drew near, the baby twisted away from her mother, its spine arched and rigid, its crimson face pulpy, streaked with tears and snot, eyes squeezed into blind slits, gummy hole of a mouth emitting a sound so terrible, it seemed to charge the atoms in the room. Fingers, like wriggly pink prawns, clawed at the air, reaching for her savior, reaching for the bottle.

The baby quieted the moment Bonnie took her from Laurel, lunging at the rubber nipple, gripping it between her gums. Bonnie held the child to her bosom rocking her gently as the child drank. The fire in the infant's eyes slowly dimmed, replaced with a blue that was cool and placid as a frozen lake. The tension left her tiny body, worn out from its thrashing and rage. Her fingers unclenched, releasing the bottle, one arm dropping away, doll-like.

"Crisis averted," Bonnie whispered as she passed the baby back to Laurel, who accepted her gratefully, her lovely face mottled with misery and awe. Bonnie felt the attention of the room shift away from their little drama in a communal sigh of relief. She had kept her head down, her focus on the child, but even so she caught a sideways glimpse of her old friend who had stepped away from the bar, undoubtedly to see what the ruckus was. She spied that crazy shirt of his from the corner of her eye and wondered if the rusty cogs in his pickled brain were turning, retrieving, collecting.

"I'll be back in a jiffy," she said, grabbing her tote bag.

"Don't be long," Laurel implored, "Please."

Inside the white marble and stainless steel ladies restroom, Bonnie sat and stared into the shiny expanse of the stall door.

Maybe he didn't remember her.

Well that was just stupid. It would take more than the two intervening years for him to forget her; he just hadn't noticed her yet. The lounge provided distractions. But on an airplane…with a noisy, fretful child…

She could keep the baby quiet; after all, she was so good with the baby.

Even with a spare bottle or two for the flight, there was no guarantee. What if he was seated near her when the baby went haywire? The scene that had just taken place in the club had rattled her. The little extra something she'd been adding to her niece's bottle to calm her, had lately turned to a lot of extra something. Mark and Laurel's incompetence as parents, compounded by the ridiculous new TSA rules, had forced Bonnie to possibly overmedicate.

Laurel and Mark would protect her. She was family.

But Mark would let her twist in the wind, and she knew it. Even if she explained how she never meant for things to go that far, how any mistake she might have made was in the best interest of the family, Mark wouldn't care. As far as Mark was concerned, she was just another employee—an employee who could sit in the back of the plane with his child, while he flew first class.

She buried her head in her hands.

And then she heard it. A moan. Soft, but unmistakable.

Bonnie had thought she was alone. All the stall doors had been hanging open when she entered, except...

Except the door to the handicapped stall, which never hung open. The handicapped stall directly to her right.

Poised on the hard edge of the toilet seat, Bonnie shut her eyes, listening closely to the sappy piped-in muzak, the hollow sounds of plumbing, the heavy rhythm of her own breath. She perceived a tiny shifting of weight, followed by a soft scraping sound that faintly echoed across the marble tile. She looked down.

Playfully peeking under the shiny partition she shared with the handicap stall, as if to say "hi," appeared the pointy toe of a shoe.

Although Bonnie didn't believe in spending money frivolously—unlike Laurel, who never checked a price tag—she still recognized quality. This was a quality shoe. A shiny, black leather pump, maybe Prada, maybe Manolo. The foot squeezed into the pump had the doughy look of rising bread, riddled with veins bulging through thick, support-hose.

Bonnie rapped on the stainless steel wall with her knuckle.

"You alright in there?"

No answer.

She nudged the foot with her own. It felt inanimate, like a stuffed toy. Dropping onto all fours, straddling the toilet base, Bonnie pressed her temple against the cool, ammonia-scented tile. Beneath the stall, she could see that both of her neighbor's feet were splayed unnaturally, like a puppet with snipped strings. The gap between the partition and the floor was too narrow for her head, so she reached a hand through, waving her fingers. "Hello?" she said.

No response.

Bonnie dug through her bag, thinking how, just last week, she'd accompanied Laurel and the baby on a visit to a new neighbor in their gated community. The woman was insect-thin—a frosty-blonde with a bad nose job, and, like all of Laurel's 'friends,' she'd been vain, shallow, cruel, and competitive. Laurel was none of those things, and moreover was oblivious to the cruelty of others. Bonnie hadn't decided if this was Laurel's blessing or her curse.

She'd been changing the baby's diaper in a tacky, zillion-frilly-pillowed bedroom when she overheard the neighbor's snarky disbelief over Laurel and Bonnie being sisters, "because they sure didn't look alike," followed by an ugly horse-whinny laugh that had drifted down the hall just as Bonnie's eyes had fallen on the sparkly, jeweled compact on the woman's dresser.

So she took it.

And now here it was when she needed it.

After swiping the loose powder away, Bonnie squirmed around till she was lying on her back, her feet pressed against the toilet tank. Squeezing her meaty arm under the partition as far as it would go she swiveled the mirrored compact in her hand until it reflected her neighbor.

The woman was ancient. She was dressed in a navy blue Chanel suit with white trim and gold buttons. The skirt was bound up with her pantyhose around her knees. Her hair was dyed the orange of pumpkin pie filling and looked so unnatural that at first Bonnie thought it was a hat. Her eyes, magnified by enormous glasses, were open, but cloudy, and from the wrinkly red oval of her mouth dripped a fine thread of saliva.

Bonnie had seen a dead person before and wondered if the moan she'd heard moments ago had been this woman's last. Balanced on the woman's lap, one limp hand pressing it into place, was a large purse.

The woman's ankle yielded beneath Bonnie's fingers like a piece of ripe fruit as she gripped it and gave it a good shake. Looking in the tiny, jeweled mirror again, she caught her breath.

The purse, which had shifted beneath the woman's dead-fish hand, was a Hermes Birkin bag. She recognized its contours, even from this angle. Mark had given Laurel a black patent leather one for Christmas last year, bitching and moaning about having to get on a waitlist in order to be given the honor of parting with thousands of dollars for a fucking handbag. Laurel had dutifully carried the purse for a couple months, enjoying the admiration of her friends, then lost interest in it, as she did everything, tossing it on the pile in her closet.

Here was that same bag, almost within reach. Turning the mirror, Bonnie took another glance at the woman's twisted face. Poor old bird. Maybe if the airlines weren't so busy taking juice away from babies, they'd pay more attention to elderly women having strokes in bathroom stalls. It was degrading. She knew what this woman would say, as surely as if she could still speak.

Come on honey, take it. Don't let those airline bastards get it.

Bonnie gave the foot a solid tug. The bag tipped, sliding to the floor. Grasping the leather—burgundy croc to be more specific—with her fingertips, she pulled it toward

herself. It was just the tiniest bit too wide to get under the stall. She pulled harder, then paused.

It would be a shame to scratch it up.

Deft as a surgeon, Bonnie removed one item after another from the belly of the Birkin—tissues splotchy with blotted lipstick, a tin of fancy mints, a Ziploc bag filled with airline regulation sized bottles of lotions and cosmetics, an orange prescription bottle— dropping the stash into her own massive tote, slimming the Birkin down. A lipstick bobbled through her fingers and went clattering across the marble tile, stopping just outside the stall door. As she reached for it, her spine, planted against the hard floor, felt a subtle vibration.

Someone was entering the ladies room.

Bonnie rose back on her haunches yanking the Birkin bag under the stall with one powerful heave, depositing her weight back onto the toilet seat.

Perspiring from the effort, Bonnie tried to control her breath as it broke from her body in gasps that seemed to expand and echo against the tile and porcelain. The hollow clunk of heels on the floor announced that the visitor was alone, probably wearing boots. She clomped past Bonnie and tried the door of the handicapped stall.

What nerve, thought Bonnie. She hated people who used handicapped stalls when they weren't handicapped. They'd never think of parking in a handicapped-parking place, but with three other stalls available, this woman was still going to try to use the one clearly designated with the wheelchair symbol.

When the door wouldn’t budge, the woman moved on to another stall. The clink of the latch was followed by sounds of rustling and unzipping.

The Birkin bag rested heavy in Bonnie’s lap. There was an unfortunate scar running down the center, for which she blamed the troublemaker peeing in the next stall. She poked around the remaining contents. There were more prescription bottles, a wallet that Bonnie thumbed through (a rainbow of credit cards, all embossed with the name Maude Adler), and a wad of cash, maybe a couple hundred dollars. At the very bottom of the bag, she found a boarding pass.

Bonnie firmly held that when fate closed a door, it opened a window. But most dummies walked right passed that window without noticing it, or worse, jumped through it without checking what floor it was on.

After all, she could probably stall for time. If the baby's crazy behavior escalated, she'd blame it on teething or colick until she could wean her from the medication. As far as her friend with the burn scar—she involuntarily shuddered recalling of the pink shininess of it trickling down his scrawny neck—there was always a chance, a slim one, that she could evade him.

But then what? She'd overheard Mark and Laurel discussing overpriced preschools with their horrible friends. In another year or two, once they no longer needed a nanny, she'd be kicked to the curb, with nothing to show for her devotion.

In the next stall the woman with the boots zipped, flushed, and clomped to the sink.

Bonnie made a wish, and opened the boarding pass envelope.

Maude Adler was going to New York; First class, and she was boarding in thirty minutes. Bonnie would have to decide quickly. She wondered if Maude was traveling alone…

“Excuse me?”

Startled, Bonnie almost dumped the Birkin on the floor. She'd been so deep in thought she hadn’t noticed the boot lady (They were boots after all, she spied the brown suede under the door) standing in front of the handicapped stall, calling to the woman inside. Calling to Maude.

“Excuse me, did you drop this?”

A hand, jangly with beaded bracelets, scooped up the runaway lipstick. There was something persistent in the woman’s voice. Bonnie could tell that Boots wasn’t going to let this go.

Cramming the Birkin into her own enormous tote, Bonnie flushed and pushed open the door of her stall, locking eyes with Boots. The woman was maybe twenty-five, with frizzy dark hair tucked under a newsboy cap.

“That’s mine,” Bonnie said, snatching the silver tube from Miss Helpful Boots, who eyeballed her doubtfully. Bonnie knew what was going through the woman's mind; that Bonnie, with her bare, plain face, didn’t look like the sort of woman who wears pricey lipstick.

Bonnie crossed to the sink, the woman’s gaze trailing her like a heat seeking missile. She placed the tube on the counter as she washed and dried her hands. Boots meandered towards the door, dawdling, pretending to find a snag in her long, ecru,

fisherman's sweater. Bonnie opened the silver tube, twirled up the deep, verdant, red, and artfully painted her mouth. Without pause, she pulled a tissue from her massive tote to blot—a tissue already covered with matching scarlet rosebuds, evidence of previous blotting.

The door closed behind boots with a thunk, while Bonnie smiled at her own, monstrous reflection.

She wondered what the weather was like in New York.

Chapter Two

Mark

Sonofabitch, wasn't that just perfect...first the plane is delayed, then he gets three dicky voicemails from the office bean-counter about "anomalies" in his expense reports, and Sandra, who gets paid very well to deal with that crap, apparently decided to take today off, leaving him some stupid temp. And now, here goes Laurel, blubbering like a baby. As if he hadn't already dealt with enough of a shitstorm this morning.

“Are you sure it can’t wait?” his wife asked, clasping her sister's sausagy little hands in her own fine ones, her pillowy lips quivering, her blue eyes welling and spilling over.

Bonnie shook her droopy head. Mark gave the sisters a moment, even though it set his teeth on edge to watch his gorgeous wife clinging to that dumptruck like she was a life buoy, behaving as though, instead of whisking her away on a luxury holiday in paradise he was pushing her into a live volcano. He'd never understood the complete confidence Laurel placed in her sister, who by all accounts was a little slow on the uptake.

Although he had to admit Bonnie was great with the baby.

Or at least she had been. Now, he wasn’t entirely convinced Bonnie's coddling wasn't part of the problem. That screaming fit the kid just had, right here in the club—that shit had to stop. And maybe he was going to have to step up and stop it. Maybe this little separation was a blessing in disguise.

Mark wrapped a strong arm around his wife's trembling shoulders. Presenting a united front to his sister-in-law. “Don’t worry about Hawaii, I’m sure, somehow, we will manage without you.”

After all, it's not like Bonnie had done so great with her own kid. Although her daughter Roxanne was a looker, maybe even hotter than Laurel, although he hadn't known Laurel when she was a teenager. For a while, Roxanne had even worked as some kind of teen model. Mark still had a magazine with her photo in it. He got semi-hard just thinking about it. Which was gross.

But was it really? I mean they weren't actually related, not by blood anyway...hard to believe she came out of his sister-in-law's vagina. Laurel had told him Bonnie's "husband" had been in the military and died overseas—which Mark figured was bullshit. More likely Roxanne was the result of a one-night-stand. Guy would have to be blind drunk—deaf too, Mark thought as Bonnie rattled on and on and on...

"...If there was any other way... but the administrator of Roxanne's facility said it's an emergency. I have to fly to Seattle to meet with her doctors immediately."

"I'm sorry. I'm being selfish," Laurel said.

"We both do what we must for our girls," Bonnie sniffed.

One more minute of this crap and he'd puke.

"I'll go check with the agent about exchanging your ticket," Mark said. Although he knew Bonnie's ticket was non-refundable. One more thing he was expected to shell out for.

Mark had only met Roxanne twice, years ago when Bonnie had invited them to the set of some commercial the girl was making, and a few months later at his and Laurel's wedding. Back then Bonnie's "job" was managing her daughter's career. Which she still liked to brag about like it was some great sacrifice, like she'd done all she could. But Roxanne ended up on the slagheap with all the other kid actors who washed up, so Bonnie couldn't have been all that great.

From what he remembered Laurel telling him, after a stint in rehab a couple years back, Roxanne had moved into some sober-living halfway house. Mark was pretty sure there was more to that story. He also had a hunch that Bonnie wheedled Laurel for extra money to cover Roxanne's expenses. She wasn't using the money on herself, that's for damn sure. It was embarrassing, the way she dressed, always wearing that raggedy black tracksuit, or the grey one with the stains. Bullshit, considering what they paid her, cash, tax-free. Which was certainly a lot more than she'd pulled in working for the fucking Gas Company or whomever she'd been nine-to-fiving for when they'd hired her.

Not that he begrudged his niece her health. But a little gratitude would be nice, instead of the stink-eye, which was what he was getting from Bonnie right now, as he approached waving her new ticket. Those nasty, brown pellets, like watermelon seeds, squinting out from her flat face. Like she knew what he was thinking.

Not that he would ever. Not with his niece. But to ease his conscience, he opened his wallet and peeled off a wad of twenties and pressed them into his sister-in-law's palm. Which was clammy. In fact Miss Know-It-All seemed anxious.

That was something new.

Bonnie crammed the money into that ridiculous bag she carried everywhere, and from its innards whipped out a couple of baby bottles filled with yellow juice.

“I made these for June, in case she wakes on the plane,” Bonnie said, passing them to Laurel, who accepted them as if they were hand grenades. It infuriated him, the way Bonnie undermined his wife's confidence. He was pretty sure that even Laurel could make a fucking bottle.

Mark watched as the sisters embraced, and then Bonnie reached down into the carrier and tenderly stroked June's fluffy blond curls, some still sticking to her head with sweat from that crazy tantrum, and his heart softened toward his sister-in-law, just a bit. She didn't have much in her life—just them and her crackhead daughter.

“You be sure to send Roxanne our love,” he said, silently adding *and don't hurry back.*

The last thing he needed was for her to mess up his kid the way she'd messed up her own.

Chapter Three

Bonnie

Old Maude must've been blind as a bat, because when Bonnie placed the gigantic designer sunglasses she'd found in the Birkin onto her own face, the world turned dark and murky as a mud puddle. It took two swimmy grabs for her fingers to snag the price tag on the black Gucci baseball cap, tearing it off, pulling the hat over her head, and tucking her limp brown hair beneath it. With its wide flat brim and huge fake gold logo, the cap was likely designed for one of those baggie pants gangster boys, but it had been easy to steal, displayed on a stack near the fringes of the sundries shop, and it more or less coordinated with the simple, black, velour sweats Bonnie always traveled in. She'd had to scrub her mouth clean before making her farewells to the family, so now she took out the lipstick and applied a fresh coat to her raw lips, inspecting the results in the jeweled compact, wiping a smudge of red from her tooth.

Bonnie had flown first-class before. She knew the airline kept a manifest of those VIP passengers so that the flight attendants could call them by name—so much more gracious and personal. She also knew this flight attendant might later be asked to describe Maude Adler and her behavior during the five-hour flight from Los Angeles to New York.

The hazy face reflected back at her, barely visible beneath the cap and dark glasses, certainly wasn't Maude's, but it wasn't Bonnie's either, and that was what mattered.

She wormed her way through the terminal, shadowing tall people, large people, tight groups, keeping her head down in case of security cameras—peeling off behind a pillar across from her gate just as the final boarding announcement for New York blared over the loudspeaker. She scanned the area; there was no one lingering, no one pacing or nervously looking at a watch. Either Maude was traveling alone, or her companion had boarded without her. Doubtful.

The gate attendant slid Maude's boarding pass through the machine. Bonnie held her breath. But there were no alarms or flashing lights. He just pulled the stub from the other end and handed it to her with a peppy, "Have a nice flight."

The stub read 2B.

She walked through the hollow tunnel of the jetway and onto the plane, making a left into the first class cabin. The woozy effect of the dark prescription glasses caused her to nearly collide with the drink cart before a flight attendant, a woman with the firm grip and upper body strength of a prison matron, caught her, and with a tight smile, offered to guide her to her seat.

Around her, polite, tailored people stowed their carry-on bags and sipped complimentary champagne. A pot-bellied businessman folded his sport coat into the overhead bin. A goateed hipster in headphones feverishly texted on his cell. A buxom

actress Bonnie had seen in the tabloids, and her much younger husband, buckled two fair-haired children, glued to the screens of their electronic toys, into their chairs. None of them as much as glanced her way.

The attendant stopped and gestured to 2B.

Bonnie froze. 2A was empty.

“Please, take your seat." The flight attendant delivered the words like a shove.

Mutely stepping into her row, Bonnie crammed her tote bag in the cubby provided. It didn't make sense. First class seats to New York were never empty, not in this day of upgrades and frequent flier miles.

Unless 2A was out there somewhere, looking for Maude. Maybe the old woman’s flying companion was rounding up a posse and scouring every inch of the club. Perhaps, right now, they were ripping the hinges from the handicap stall, screaming for medics.

Nervous sweat prickled inside her armpits and beneath the flop of her breasts. Until now she had felt the hand of fate guiding her, but suddenly she recognized the flaws in leaving so abruptly, without a real plan.

But there was no turning back now.

From the corner of her eye, she spied the matronly flight attendant alternating between looking at her and scribbling something on a clipboard. The woman crossed the cabin to the other first class attendant, a slender young man with artfully groomed eyebrows. They whispered conspiratorially while sneaking looks in Bonnie’s direction.

Bonnie busied herself with the in-flight magazine. Told herself they were probably concerned over the absence of 2A, perhaps that passenger was late or had missed their connection.

But now, the male attendant was on the cabin wallphone, his brows arched so high they threatened to fly right off of his face. Whiplashing around when she caught his eye.

She had to get off the plane.

Just as the thought crossed her mind, she heard the unmistakable skree of the jetway door retracting. The exit was sealed. And the slender male flight attendant was approaching with a grave expression, the first class manifest in his hand. She wasn't intimidated in the least by Princess Sparklepants here, the gays were generally easy to manipulate, but his fellow flight attendant looked like she'd enjoy playing bad cop.

“Ms. Adler?”

Bonnie closed the magazine, and met his gaze.

"Yes?"

The attendant sank down on one knee as if he were going to propose. His face so close that his fancy eyebrows nearly touched the brim of her Gucci cap.

“I’m sorry. We don’t seem to have your meal," he hissed, through lips waxy with Chapstick.

Bonnie was dumbfounded. What was he talking about?

The flight attendant's forehead puckered in concern, "Your kosher meal. There was some kind of mix-up. We can't seem to locate it. I can, however, offer you the fruit plate."

Bonnie took a moment to process, and then cloaked her relief in a long, pained, sigh, placing one hand on her bosom, shaking her head as if the loss of the kosher meal was just the sort of bitter slight her tribe had learned to deal with over the centuries. Giving the attendant a small, brave smile, she said, "The fruit will be fine."

He flashed some perfectly capped teeth at her as he stood, scribbling on the manifest with a flourish.

That was it. She was safe. The matronly attendant had already begun her bored pantomime accompaniment to the video of pre-flight safety instructions. The plane rumbled and pushed away from the gate.

Bonnie gazed over the empty seat beside her and out the window. Lulled by the singsong story of emergency exits and flotation devices she watched the terminal buildings slip away, and along with them, her old life. Although the bond she felt with Laurel had recently become one more of commerce than affection, Bonnie felt a twinge in abandoning her sister so abruptly. Neither Mark nor Laurel had any idea how much they depended on their 'nanny'. Those bottles she'd made for the baby would keep a lid on things for a day or two, but then they'd find out the hard way.

And what would happen to her niece without Bonnie's guidance? If June was lucky she'd inherit her mother's beauty and her father's outsized self-esteem, because there wasn't a lick of good sense between the two of them.

The "Harrumph" of a throat cleared behind her and she turned, expecting to see the shiny flight attendant with an update on her lunch, but hovering in the aisle was a different man entirely.

Her eyes must've adjusted to Maude's swoony glasses, because she saw him clearly. He was pale and delicate as a teacup. The sparseness of the hair on his head only emphasized the thicket of lashes framing his sad brown eyes, reminding Bonnie of a forest creature in a Disney film. The line of his mouth was prim, but his lips were full, almost pouty. His thin arms nervously crossed, then re-crossed over his narrow chest as he glared, not at her, but at the seat next to her. The window seat.

This was 2A. He had been in the lavatory. Nothing about his behavior led Bonnie to believe he knew Maude Adler, but she could see right away that the poor man was an anxious flyer. Everything about him twitched and quivered.

Bonnie unbuckled herself and quickly offered, ”Would you prefer the aisle?”

The man nodded, wordlessly. Bonnie hoisted her patchwork tote, scooted over, and nestled into 2A as he sat himself in 2B. Perfect. In this corner, no one on the plane, beyond the flight attendants and this fellow, could see Bonnie at all. And considering the way his hands shook as he fumbled with the seatbelt, he would spend most of the flight in the restroom.

The voice of the pilot filled the cabin. “Flight attendants, prepare for take-off.”

2A's posture went rigid, eyes squeezed shut, seizing the armrests as if his life depended on them.

The engines fired and boomed, rocketing the jet down the runway, G forces strong-arming the passengers in place as they shot high over the Pacific. The plane banked sharp right, cutting through the gritty, yellow merengue of LA smog, then horseshoeing eastward, up into blue skies so bright Bonnie was glad for Maude's protective eyewear. From the belly of the plane came the punctuating grind and shudder of retracting landing gear.

Bonnie felt exhilarated, the stress of the past couple hours dropping away, as if jettisoned out an airlock. Turning away from the window she saw 2A still had his eyes clamped closed. Lowering Maude's glasses, she peered at him over the top of the frames.

He was probably in his early forties, although his form was as slim as a boy's. He did nothing to conceal his hair loss, no comb-over, no plugs, no production company logo cap, so he couldn't be from Los Angeles. His skin was so fair, his hair so dark, that despite his close shave, she could see the follicles of his beard. His full lips moved, ever so slightly, as if he were silently praying through his clenched jaw.

He wore a spotless white dress-shirt with the top button undone, revealing the tiniest sliver of undershirt. Bonnie wondered if he bought his undershirts in the men's or the boys' department. Something about this thought combined with the fullness of his bottom lip made her feel warm and fluttery.

His hands, fine and translucent as wax, clutched the armrests, as if he were using all of his strength to keep the plane aloft—the fingers curled, the bulging tendons relaxing just slightly as the plane leveled. He wore an old-fashioned wristwatch with a worn leather band on a wrist so slender, Bonnie could've braceleted it with her thumb and

index finger. He didn't wear a wedding band, but along the outer edge and pinkie of his left hand was a sooty smear.

Bonnie raised her eyes to—shockingly—meet those of her seatmate, who was watching her watch him. Startled, she pressed her glasses back into place, wondering how Maude— because as she reminded herself, she was supposed to be Maude—would handle the situation. She pictured the dead woman in her expensive Chanel suit, hosiery down around her knees, faint line of spittle dripping from her mouth, and decided Maude would strike up a conversation, to put this man at ease.

"I couldn't help but notice," Bonnie said, "that you're left handed, and some sort of writer…possibly a teacher."

The man released his death grip on the armrest and looked down at his appendages as if they had somehow betrayed him.

"That stain along the outer ridge of your left hand. It's ink, caused by dragging it over the page as you write. There's even a little on your cuff, see?"

She reached across, taking his hand, which was a soft as a girl's; turning it to reveal the stained cuff of his shirt.

"A little rubbing alcohol will take that right out," she said.

He slipped from her grasp, raising both his hands in a sort of charming shrug that told her, he was utterly defeated by domestic things.

And he blushed.

In this world where all sense of morality and dignity and class had been replaced by a sick fascination with money and youth and tacky celebrities who couldn't remember

to put on underpants before leaving the house, Bonnie marveled, who was this man who could still blush?

She felt the bracing blast of fate opening a window.

Chapter Four

Griffin

Dr. Griffin Sherwood didn't like Los Angeles. It wasn't simply the smog, or the merciless sun that singed his scalp and steamed him limp inside his suit coat. The city had an exhausting protean quality that he felt deeply discomfited by, a consistent inconsistency exacerbated by the laissez-faire attitude of the laid-back locals, grown men dressed in cargo shorts and Mexican sandals, their too white teeth grinning in their too tan faces.

He liked his job as Head of the English department at Webster, a fine, second-tier Liberal Arts College in upstate New York, but didn't like having to explain the location of the campus through its geographical relationship to better-known schools.

Most of all, he didn't like the current movement in academia towards all things global and multicultural and popular. He believed in the elevation of the Western Canon, snidely referred to by many of his collegues as the literature of "dead white men."

His extensive scholarship in the debate over whether university curricula should be revised to reflect ethnic, cultural, and gender diversity—along with frequent requests from schools across the nation to engage in public discourse—kept him firmly ensconced in the hierarchy of academia. In publishing A Common Culture: Fear and Loathing and the Politics of Multiculturalism (a book which made Harold Bloom's seminal work on the same topic appear quaint) when he was just twenty-eight, he had launched himself over the heads of his peers and had become the oft-quoted, vilified, head of a movement that was already losing steam.

This last engagement at a left-leaning public university in Los Angeles had been nothing more than an exercise in abuse. Once again he had been paired with Andrea Siegel, the brilliant if misguided Jewish lesbian head of Gender Studies at Brown. It was always the same. Who was he to judge the value of Dante over Tupac? How did he justify the suppression of female voices?

He would counter with his even, logical arguments for Proust and Joyce, bemoaning the Oprahfication of literature with its hokey magical realism and self-indulgent memoir. Then he'd endure the question and answer session that inevitably turned into a personal attack. He was labeled a sexist, racist, homophobic, anti-Semite -- this last made no sense at all, as he embraced Kafka and, to a lesser degree, Malamud and Bellow.

Griffin was no longer the angry young man with his daring new spin on a classic argument. He was last month's flavor. Still, he agreed to these occasional humiliating dog and pony shows dressed up as debate because he believed his message had merit; and he never knew when the winds of academic opinion might blow his way again.

These days the University system would only pay coach fare, but Griffin had racked up enough frequent flier miles during his heyday to continue to upgrade. It was depressing enough that the four star hotels had given way to three star hotels, and finally budget hotels with breakfast buffets of burnt coffee and stale danish. But as much as he hated to fly, he doubly hated to fly coach, packed like livestock into a metal tube hurtling through space. His delicate constitution also necessitated easy access to a restroom, a restroom he preferred to share with twenty people rather than a hundred and twenty.

Today he had been one of the first to board. He had stowed his briefcase and jacket, then spent the next thirty minutes in the lavatory alternating between dry heaves and hyperventilating. This was his usual pre-flight pattern and he knew the attendants wouldn't harass him to return to his seat until the safety instructions began. He recognized his fear of flying was irrational and he was not a man who would ever surrender to a phobia. He accepted this suffering, just as he accepted his irritable bowel syndrome, chronic insomnia, and ridiculous number of allergies.

Griffin was grateful that the woman on the aisle had offered to take the window, granting him closer proximity for his inevitable return to the restroom. Ignoring the troubling intimacy the warmth of her body left behind, he'd strapped himself into her abandoned seat.

Take-off was the same torture it always was—the agonizing slowness with which the lumbering beast ascended, the disturbing thump of the retracting landing gear, the subtle shimmies and sickening jolts as they rose to cruising altitude. Griffin bore it all with stoicism, silently mouthing the words of William Butler Yeats:

"*Turning and Turning in the widening Gyre*

The falcon cannot hear the falconer

Things fall apart, the center cannot hold

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world"

Griffin had memorized the poem, his first ever, in elementary school—a requirement for the academy's Parent's Night recital. His peers had all selected poems

using sentimentality or brevity as criteria, mostly the latter. Griffin still recalled the hush in the auditorium, parents shifting uncomfortably in their chairs, with the exception of his mother, who hung on every word, as he flawlessly intoned:

"The blood dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned…"

The words still came more easily than prayer, and he found them infinitely more soothing. Maintaining his hold on the armrests, he opened his eyes.

Hovering over him was the woman who, earlier, had graciously traded seats; strings of hair bursting Medusa-like from beneath her baseball cap. She was staring down at his…what? Was she staring at his groin? In his shock he let go the armrests, and she turned, squinting up at him with hard button eyes that she quickly concealed behind enormous dark glasses. Before he could mouth any protest, she reached out and took his hand.

"I couldn't help but notice…" Her voice was drowned out by the roaring of blood in his ears as he felt his color rise in impotent indignation.

Chapter Five

Bonnie

Dr. Griffin Sherwood. A distinguished name. The sort of name usually followed by “The Third”, or “Esquire." He was a professor at a very prestigious university that Bonnie had never heard of. In the past, she'd placed little value on academics, unimpressed by the nincompoops who presented themselves as intellectuals. But she could tell that Dr. Sherwood was the real deal; his voice oozed smarts. Bonnie envied the students who got to listen to him lecture in that voice—probably a pack of spoiled snots who didn't appreciate it.

Taking his hand had been an impulse, she'd quite forgotten herself, forgotten that she needed to maintain her anonymity. There was something irresistible about his delicacy that confused her, made her want to take a bite out of him. Just a tiny one. She was relieved when the flight attendant butted-in, passing them their pre-meal hot towels with little tongs and covering their tray tables in white linen.

Bonnie was stuck with Maude’s fruit plate, some pale watery melon, grayish berries, limp kiwi. Dr. Sherwood passed on his meal altogether, instead ordering a glass of tomato juice. Bonnie had never seen anyone order tomato juice on a plane before, but now it seemed the best possible thing—refreshing, tangy, nutritious. Once the attendant left, the professor pulled a briefcase from the overhead bin, removing a brown folder full of papers. These he began reading, those fine, pale fingers resting on the glass of juice, occasionally removing them to turn a page, then returning them to the glass, tapping a

spot in the condensation. She tried not to stare as he raised the glass, taking a birdlike sip, a tiny drop of red clinging to his mouth.

Gripped by a bottomless hunger, she tore open the brioche that accompanied the fruit plate, slathering it with butter, sinking her teeth into the crusty roll. The tantalizing smell of cooked food—chicken Kiev and fettuccini di mar—filled the cabin, and she cursed Maude Adler's observance of ancient dietary laws.

When the coffee service rattled down the aisle, the professor signaled for the flight attendant to take his half empty glass of juice away. He closed his tray table and placed the papers back into the expandable folder. This he placed into the seat pocket ahead of him, exchanging them for the amenity headphones, removing their hygienic cellophane. As he placed the headset over his ears, he gave Bonnie a polite nod, as if to say, "Excuse me." She could have sworn his glance drifted to her bosom for the tiniest moment.

She picked at the crumbs of brioche on her plate until the flight attendant returned. "We'll be turning down the cabin lights in a moment," the matronly attendant said, hoisting Bonnie's meal tray over the professor's downy head, "Can I get you anything else?"

"A few of those little bottles of vodka," Bonnie said, her voice low so as not to disturb the Professor who, headphones on, eyes closed, seemed to be resting comfortably. The fringe of his eyelashes gave the tiniest flutter when she leaned over him so the attendant could hear her clearly, her bosom grazing his shoulder, "and a can of tomato juice," she added.

Just in case someone wanted one. Later.

She didn’t drink vodka herself, but it was odorless, and those little bottles were so easy to stash in her tote. Plus, it was free. Even though she hadn’t paid for the flight, Bonnie thought Maude should get her money’s worth. It was criminal, the way drunks got more bang for their buck in first class.

The cabin dimmed, windowshades drawn against the sun, individual entertainment systems glowing here and there like scattered porchlights on a country road. First class became so quiet she could hear the buzz of someone snoring a few rows behind her. Beside her, Dr. Sherwood remained perfectly still, his eyes shut tight, the twin doughnuts of the headphones gripping his skull.

Bonnie removed the sunglasses, hooking them in the neck of her shirt by a plastic arm. Reaching into her tote, she grasped the supple croc Birkin, pulling it out, onto her lap. Straining in the lousy light, she counted the cash in Maude's wallet. Twice. $267.00. That, plus what Mark had pressed into her hand, left her with a little less than $400.

New York was expensive. She'd need to pinch her pennies till she figured out her next step.

The teensy print on Maude's prescription bottles was impossible to make-out in the gloom, and after taking a peek to insure the professor was dozing, she scooched open her window shade just a smidge. In the sliver of light she read: Sinemat, Mirapram, Lipitor. Bonnie wasn't familiar with any of them, but the last one she had seen advertised on TV, which meant it was either for high cholesterol, erectile dysfunction, or depression.

She was reading the product information for the MirapexED when the plane jolted. Before she could relocate her place in the fine print, it jolted again, sharply, followed by the bell tone that accompanied the “fasten seat belt” sign.

The Captain’s Huckleberry voice filled the cabin. “Ladies and gentlemen I’ve been advised by air traffic that there’s a little chop up ahead. Please return to your seats and buckle up.”

The Professor's eyes flew open. He didn’t appear to be taking this bit of news well.

Chapter Six

Griffin

The downside of flying first-class was that the two-seat configuration lent itself to an unavoidable intimacy. If you were lucky you'd be seated next to a tired businessman who, after imbibing three cocktails, would sleep the entire trip. If you were unlucky you got an odd duck like this woman, with her aggressive hand-grabbing and clownish lipstick, crumbs from her dinner speckling her black sweater like dandruff along with something green stuck to her breast—a sliver of kiwi, perhaps— that he tried not to look at.

To avoid conversation, Griffin had attempted some pretense of being absorbed in his students' papers, but his flight anxiety made concentration difficult, and these first essays of the semester were hardly riveting. After reading the same paragraph four times and still not making sense of it, he put them aside in favor of his favorite in-flight audio channel, Blue Note jazz.

The long atonal note of a sad horn unwound something in him, lulling him into a meditative state. He was only vaguely aware of the movements of the woman beside him. There was a disturbing moment when he felt her body pressing against him, but then she slid away. Peace.

He was nearly asleep when he felt the first jolt, wide-awake for the bang that followed. An explosion, like they'd lost an engine. The captain's folksy twang interrupting Chick Corea's masterful piano with an ominous warning about "chop."

One flight attendant began strapping down the drink cart while the other hurried through the cabin, checking seatbelts, stumbling as the floundering plane rose and fell like a paper boat on rough sea. Griffin's heart was already in full gallop. He tried to focus on breathing slow and deep. Tried to focus on the music. Tried to focus on anything but the possibility of plummeting to earth from thirty-five thousand feet.

The sharp tang of tomato juice rose hot in his throat. Panicked, he rifled through the seatback pocket in front of him for an airsickness bag, but the plane jerked sideways, pitching him back into his seat. Paralyzed with fear, he found himself incapable of movement or speech, unable to flag down the frantic flight attendants, while the plane groaned rattled. Mere inches beyond his reach, the call button taunted him. But, try as he might, Griffin could not detach the hooks of his hands from the armrests. He stared at his useless appendages, willed them to obey, sweat beading on his forehead with the effort, nearly weeping with frustration.

Miraculously, as if she could read his thoughts, the strange woman next to him reached up and pressed the call button. The attendants ignored her. She pounded it again and again, ascending from her seat like some magnificent beast, bellowing, “Could we get some help over here? This gentleman needs an airsick bag.”

Griffin was both horrified and relieved when an attendant rushed over with a handful of bags, flinging them into his lap. But when he tried to open one, he could not quiet the shaking of his hands and the entire pile tumbled to the floor, skittering away like rats from a sinking ship.

His seatmate leaned over and, unable to reach the fallen bags with her stubby fingers, undid her seatbelt. Angered by her audacity, the airplane bucked and swayed, knocking her to her knees.

Had she lost her mind?

But her calm, deft hands grasped a single bag and placing it over that crimson gash of a mouth, blew in a puff of air. The bag blossomed like a flower, which she held up to him, an offering. Grateful and humiliated, Griffin cupped the receptacle over his mouth, retching in sour spasms until he was empty.

The plane continued to shimmy furiously until he was certain it would tear apart at the seams. Above the deafening rumble rose a rhythmic pounding, as if the fuselage was being slammed by a school bus. The inflight entertainment systems flickered and went black. The Captain's voice came on again, drawling like a drunkard, "Flight attendants, please take your seats."

Then the airplane fell out of the sky—careening steep right before plunging out of control. Overhead compartments burst open. A woman screamed as a shower of jackets and bags spilled into the aisles. The horrid children laughed. Griffin's nostrils filled with the pungent stench of burning rubber.

He was hyperventilating but powerless to stop. Even louder than the agonizing roar of the dying machine, he could hear the erratic pounding of his own heart. His head went light and dizzy. He murmured his mantra:

"*Turning and Turning in the widening Gyre*

The falcon cannot hear the falconer

Things fall apart..."

But terror had erased the next line from his memory.

Anything would be better than this torture. Blindly tearing at his seatbelt, he struggled to stand, to run, to leap into the abyss if need be. But his legs buckled beneath him, weak as porridge.

Powerful arms pulled him down. Griffin gave in to the embrace, vaguely aware of a clammy hand stroking his forehead, of something being forced into his mouth, the caustic fluid burning his throat.

A voice from far away, "Shh…just relax..."

He sputtered and coughed; but he had no fight left.

So, this was the end. And who would mourn him? His collegues? How long would they feign grief before drawing knives over his chair? All this time he'd lived without family or friend, believing that his work would be his legacy.

Such pathetic final thoughts. Griffin drank deeply from the bottle he found in his hand, drowning the mockery of his failure. The heat of the elixir stirred his blood. Draining the vessel, feeling a second pressed into his palm.

There was his mother, of course. She would be devastated. Still, she had her faith to comfort her. How he wished that he could believe in such nonsense. Unbidden tears of self-pity brimmed in his eyes.

"Say your words..." Again, that faraway voice.

Mother?

Courage came rushing back, along with it the words, not of his mantra, but of her favorite Yeats.

How many loved your moments of glad grace,

And loved your beauty with love false or true,

Griffin repeated it back to her, resting his head on her comforting bosom. Staring into the void, licking the last precious drops of potion from his lips.

But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,

And loved the sorrows of your changing face

He recited it perfectly, over the thunder of disintegrating metal. And Death bared her teeth in pleasure, while the plane spiraled downward, end over end over end...

Griffin's thoughts blurred and vanished. Oblivion.

A sliver of green floating in a woozy black ocean.

Fuck the plane. Let it crash.

Chapter Seven

Bonnie

Bonnie hoisted her totebag, stepping as lightly as possible over the slumbering Dr. Sherwood, and around the other passengers busy collecting their belongings. The moment Princess Sparklepants opened the hatch with a heartfelt "buh-bye," she was speedwalking down the jetway.

Head down, she merged into a swarm of travelers, ducking into the first restroom she came to. Inside, women were stacked two-deep along the row of sinks, primping. Bonnie reached between two of them and yanked a wad of papertowels from the dispenser, sopping them with soap and water before entering a stall. The handicap stall.

It felt right, somehow, to finish with Maude the same place she'd started with her.

Bonnie removed the baseball cap, shaking out her hair, even flatter and limper for having been smooshed for six hours. The cap, the sunglasses, and the lipstick all went back into Maude's bag. Using the wet, soapy towels, she scrubbed the red stain from her mouth, followed by a rough swipe under her arms and breasts, which were still tacky with nervous perspiration. She tossed the towels in the toilet, reluctantly cramming the croc Birkin behind the tank before flushing.

Bonnie understood human nature. Even relatively honest people didn't see the harm in occasionally ripping off the rich and careless. A Birkin bag practically shouted, "I've got money to throw away on a purse that costs more than your rent." With a little

luck some fool would take the bag and go on a spree with Maude's credit cards, leaving a long and misleading paper trail.

The face looking back at her from the crowded restroom mirror as she washed her hands, was absolutely ordinary; a slightly overweight, brown-eyed, Caucasian female, with the mule brown hair of approaching middle age. Glancing down the line of women, she counted three more just like her. She was nobody. She was anybody.

But he had seen something special there.

After riding the escalator down to baggage claim, Bonnie shoved her way to the front of the pack at the busiest luggage carousel—a flight from Toronto— and looked for the most non-descript black bag she could find. She let pass the high-end Tumi and Coach, choosing a well-worn, tagless suitcase stamped with a Clairborne label. It sounded off-brand and slightly feminine. Bonnie imagined its owner would find the airline's lost bag compensation a fair exchange. Clickety-clacking along behind her, the luggage completed the persona of the average tourist, and if she was lucky, it might later offer her some wardrobe options.

She strolled with forced casualness through the automatic doors; greeted by exhaust fumes, bleating horns and the sharp New York Indian summer sun. A grizzled old skycap approached, and she asked him how to get to the train station. He directed her to the shuttle bus-stop just beyond the terminal.

Joining the line behind two shaggy, weedy-smelling, young men, Bonnie balanced her tote on her new suitcase, and waited. She counted four NYPD patrol cars easing in and out of the endless stream of taxicabs and limousines, like sharks. She had

to tell herself to remain in line. That the most important thing for her to do at this moment was get away from the airport, cheaply and anonymously. *No one will give you a second glance standing behind these clowns with their gigantic pants.* She shifted her weight from hip to hip, checking her watch, just like a typical traveler.

By now the passengers from her flight would be gathering in the baggage area, their suitcases tumbling down the chute, one by one. Maude's luggage circling endlessly until the airport's crack staff figured out no one was coming to claim it. Eventually they'd contact the airport of origin; one-plus-one would clumsily be added together, and the old Jane Doe discovered in the ladies lavatory in Los Angeles would have a name.

Behind her, the line grew longer, but none of the men or women who joined it made eye contact or attempted conversation. One after the other they parked their bags, peeling off jackets or sweaters, squinting into the sun. They'd take out their cell phones, punch in numbers, shouting over the din of taxis and take-offs that their plane had landed, that they were waiting for the bus.

Bonnie tucked her hand into the pocket of her sweatpants, running her thumb over the roughly rounded corners of the Professor's laminated Webster College Faculty I.D. What did it mean, this rush of feeling? She had never met a man quite like him, so delicate and refined. It was as if the hard core of herself, deeply layered over a lifetime of disappointment, had disintegrated beneath his gaze.

The shuttle pulled up, brakes squealing, belching exhaust. With a snap, the door flipped open, releasing a little burst of air-conditioning. The travelers in line put away their phones and lumbered forward.

The scruffy young men ahead of her were holding things up, attempting to hoist an enormous suitcase onto the luggage rack while keeping their pants from sliding off their skinny backsides. From the terminal rose a hubbub of scuffling and raised voices. These days, any disruption at the airport made folks nervous. The shuttle crowd, Bonnie included, immediately turned to see what the commotion was.

A small mob had gathered around a tiny Asian woman in a floral skirt who was standing just in front of the terminal exit, clutching the sleeve of the skycap. She pointed at Bonnie, her fierce little eyes blazing beneath sharp black bangs.

"My bag, that's my bag!"

Bonnie looked around. There were at least a half-dozen people in the shuttle line with black rolling bags. How the heck could that kook tell this one was hers?

"Thief!" the woman shrieked, attracting the attention of an airport security officer. The officer, as if he'd been training for this moment, left his position waving cars away from the curb and began running. Pants straining at the seams, he hurdled over a pile of curbside luggage, headed straight for Bonnie.

The shuttle line scattered like jacks, but Bonnie stood her ground. She was spinning her excuse in her head. It had been a mix-up, an entirely innocent mistake. surely these things happened all the time. She imagined polite apologies and handshakes all around.

So she was caught entirely off guard when she was tackled from behind and thrown to the ground.

Chapter Eight

Sordoni

She didn't look like a killer.

Detective Sordoni had been LAPD for nearly thirty years, in the Pacific Division for ten, at the LAX substation for most of that. More often than not, despite the never-saw-it-coming reveals on TV cop shows, a killer looked like a killer. And this ordinary woman, with her defeated shoulders and angry dark eyes, did not.

Post 9-11, policing the airports had changed. Those TSA guys while "making America safer," had become a huge pain in Sordoni's ass. Eager, zealous, and generally bored, they welcomed any opportunity to get into the mix. And if there wasn't a mix, sometimes they'd stir one up. Today the hotheads had destroyed the crime scene, or the scene, anyway, at this point the crime part had yet to be determined.

The facts were; an elderly woman had been found dead in one of the airport's premier club restroom stalls, and this witness in front of him had the misfortune of discovering the body. She also had the misfortune of being brown, and those new hires from homeland security didn't know a Guatemalan from a Pakistani.

"Would you like something to drink?" he said.

"I already told those men everything I know," she said. Beneath the defiance in her heavy-lidded eyes, there was a flicker of fear. "I am not a terrorist."

She straightened the baby-blue collar of her custodian uniform with shaky fingers revealing a glimpse of lacy bra-strap, white against her cinnamon skin. Sordoni wondered if the TSA grunts had strip-searched her, and then felt like a pervert for wondering, and directed his attention to shuffling the papers on his desk.

"I apologize for my collegues. I know you are not a terrorist Mrs. Diaz, but we still have to figure out what happened to the dead woman."

"I told them a hundred times. She was like that when I found her."

"Mrs. Diaz, how long you been working for the airport?"

"Four years"

"You see anything today, different from any other day? Anything out of the ordinary, that is, before you found the body?

"There was a clogged toilet near gate 63. Backed up everywhere. Turn out to be a Happy Meal toy somebody throw in there. You know, from McDonalds."

"Hmmm," said Sordoni, rubbing his chin, stubble beneath his fingers reminding him he'd neglected to shave. He could go for some McDonald's right now. Maybe a Big Mac. Although he wasn't allowed fatty foods. Fucking doctors. "Tell you what, why don't you walk me through your shift as it relates to the restroom where the body was found."

"I clean the first class twice a day. Once around 9 in the morning and then again around noon. I take ten minutes to clean, that's the rule."

She held up ten fingers to emphasize her point. "The airline don't want the first class customers inconvenienced."

She drew out the long e sounds, EEE-con-VEEEnienced. Sordoni wondered if she was being sarcastic.

"On my first pass I do light clean: wipe down sinks and counters, pick up paper towels, empty trash. My second clean, at noon, I put the yellow sign up, use the bucket off my trolley and mop the floors. That stall, where the woman was found. It was locked my first pass."

"Was it the only stall in use?"

"Yes. But that is normal. The rich ladies, I think maybe they need a lot of space."

Sordoni smiled at that, and Mrs. Diaz smiled back. Her shoulders relaxed a little.

"I was running late for my second pass..."

"Because of the Happy Meal toy..."

"Yes. But I have to mop, and the handicap stall, again it is locked. And so I wait. I go next door and clean the men's room. I come back and I tap on the door. Then I take a peek. The feet, they are like this."

Mrs. Diaz held her hands up to her shoulders, flipping them out sideway at the wrist, like a seal.

"I say, hey lady, you okay? She say nothing. So I call security. Now, can I go?"

"Yes, Mrs. Diaz. We have your information if we need you further."

Mrs. Diaz stood and straightened her uniform, Sordoni noticed her narrow waist, her plump ass. He wondered when it was he became such a lonely sack of shit.

"They showed me the old woman. Her skirt was down around her knees. Shameful," Mrs. Diaz leveled her eyes at his, accusatory, "Her family, they are coming to get her?"

"We still don't know who she is."

Mrs. Diaz's voice dripped with disdain. "Because now she is just some woman, not a problem for national security."

"What does that mean?"

"Old woman, poor woman, just a woman. It makes no difference."

Chapter Nine

Griffin

Griffin awoke in hell. His head encased in cement, his body twisted unnaturally inside some terrible steel contraption. With tremendous effort he opened his eyes; cheap grey carpet, empty rows of black vinyl and aluminum seats, industrial lighting. He was reminded of a line from Dante: *things innocuous need not be feared*.

Shutting his eyes against the painful florescent glare, he grasped at thoughts amorphous as cobwebs.

There had been an airplane—that much he recalled with some clarity. Like in a dream, he saw himself boarding, buckling a seatbelt, making dreary chitchat with the passenger next to him.

He recalled the wild agitation of the plane mid-flight, fear rising in his throat like bile. Shifting his body position, his foot snagged on something. Griffin looked down. Blinked.

He was in a wheelchair. How? He followed a slippery memory down the rabbit hole of consciousness. Strong arms, lifting him, dragging him away. From what? The wreckage? Was he in some way-station set up for survivors? How long had he been here and—his heart stutter-stepped—how badly was he hurt?

He began assessing his muscles and limbs, which all felt heavy and slack. There was a dampness around his groin and the lingering odor of urine. The shame of it! Still, the fact he could feel the clamminess meant he blessedly still had sensation there.

He stared at his right hand, nearly weeping with gratitude as first one finger, then another, wriggled under his command. He groaned audibly at the tingling of blood flowing into the digits.

"How we doin?"

Griffin struggled to lift his head toward the voice. He found himself looking at a middle-aged, African-American man dressed in the creased black slacks and starched white shirt of airport personnel.

He must be in charge of survivors.

Accompanying this thought was the painful realization that except for the hum of the florescent lights overhead, the room was frighteningly silent.

"Am I the only one?" he rasped.

"Yes sir, you are," the man said with bizarre nonchalance. He held out two white tablets and a paper cone filled with water. Griffin discovered that, through great force of will he could reach and grasp and swallow.

"And the others…?" Griffin asked hopelessly. He recalled there being children on the flight, and though Griffin didn't generally enjoy children, he still felt human sympathy at the loss of innocent life.

"Went home hours ago. There's a chance your bags will still be on the carousel, but if not, you just take your claim check downstairs to unclaimed luggage." The man paused a moment, rocking back on the heels of his highly polished black shoes. "I don't mean to rush you, but this is the end of my shift."

Strength flooded back into Griffin's limbs, swept in on a devastating wave of humiliation.

"Where exactly am I?"

"Well sir, this is the waiting area we generally use for unaccompanied minors. They stay here till a parent or adult comes to fetch them. You were in the medical bay earlier, but it was determined that you…" the man broke-off, searching the ceiling for the right words, "…that you didn't require any medical attention."

"And what was determined that I do require?"

The man took Griffin's empty paper cup from him and tossed it in a nearby trashcan. "Just sleep it off, man. Just sleep it off."

It dawned on Griffin that this man, and the staff of this airport, believed he was a drunk. There was no sense in protesting. The last thing he desired was more scrutiny.

He blanched. How long he had been unconscious? Who had handled him?

"If you like sir, I can walk you out. Hail you a cab."

Recalling the repugnance staining his crotch, Griffin despaired. There were horrors in life even worse than being maimed in a plane crash.

He knew his luggage wouldn't be downstairs in unclaimed baggage; it was three-hundred miles away in Rochester. He had certainly missed his connection and would now have to wait in line for hours, reeking like a hobo, until a new flight could be found. Which meant getting on another plane, the thought of which caused a straight jacket of fear to tighten around his chest. Would there be no reprieve?

As if to answer his silent prayer the door opened, and two hulking men in dark suits appeared. They wore guns.

“Griffin Sherwood?”

He nodded meekly.

“You’re coming with us.”

Chapter Ten

Bonnie

She pressed herself up from the hot concrete in time to see the disappearing figures of the two baggy-pants young men running like maniacs—and the security guard in hot pursuit.

The old skycap extended a lover-spotted hand, pulling Bonnie to her feet.

"You okay?"

She nodded, brushing the sidewalk crud from her sweats. The skycap guided her aboard the shuttle, placing "her" black bag on the luggage rack. He grabbed the suitcase left behind by the apparent thieves and lugged it down to the waiting Asian woman, her face a scowl of horizontal lines, bang, brows, mouth. The woman inspected the bag, then shook her head and walked away muttering. It wasn't hers. Probably wasn't even stolen.

Through the scratched and greasy bus window Bonnie watched the security guard bring down one of the punks while the other escaped into a parking structure. Maybe they didn't steal that bag, but those two were guilty of something. Then again, who wasn't guilty of something? She sighed and shook her head.

You should never run.

Pulling the can of tomato juice from her tote bag, she popped the top and took a long, cool glug.

Given the grimy exterior, Bonnie wasn't expecting New York's Grand Central Station to be so snazzy. Bright as a Las Vegas casino, and just as crowded; topped with a spectacular muraled ceiling of gold stars in an aquamarine heaven.

But Bonnie wasn’t some slack-jawed hayseed, staring and pointing and snapping photos, practically begging to be mugged. She rolled past the tourists toward the information kiosk under the huge four-faced clock.

Once in line, she slipped the Webster I.D. card from her pocket and gazed into the soft eyes of Dr. Griffin Sherwood.

Bonnie recalled the lightness of his downy, baby-chick head on her breast as she cradled him. In the safety of the dark cabin, the attendants temporarily strapped into their own seats, Bonnie had removed her disguise. The professor's fear had been so naked, so raw, a human face seemed a small comfort.

She'd added a few calming agents to the airplane vodka, Xanax she'd borrowed from Laurel and codeine she snitched from Mark and a bit of leftover this and that she'd picked up for June's bottle. As a kicker she'd thrown in some of Maude's Mirapram. According to the label, the drug had been prescribed for Parkinson's disease, which everyone knew was an illness that made you shake, and the Professor had been trembling like a leaf.

It worked like a charm—and so fast! The Professor's eyes glazing over as he spoke, his words garbled and slurred, only a few of which she could pick out. A lovely bit about the 'sorrows of your changing face,' made her catch her breath even now. It had mattered to him that she'd revealed herself. He had seen her.

When he finally drifted away, as if in a magical partnership, so did the plane. No more jolts or bumps, it floated smooth as an ocean liner on a sea of glass.

While he slumbered she'd boned up on the side effects for Mirapram listed on the package insert. The most common, the one in bold letters, confirmed she'd made a wise decision; "**may cause patients to fall asleep without warning signs during activities of daily living,"**

Also listed were: nausea, fainting, hallucinations, muscle weakness, fast or uneven heartbeats, blurred vision and amnesia. There was a warning not to crush the pills, which she had. Or mix them with alcohol, which she had, as this would increase the intensity of the side effects.

But there was nothing on the package that implied she might've killed him. That was a relief. With any luck, Dr. Sherwood would just suffer a little memory loss.

Some jerk cut through the line, jostling Bonnie's arm, sending the Professor's I.D. card tumbling from her fingers. She bent to pick it up, brushing away a speck of grit, cursing the oaf's back as he scuttled off without apology, or even a backwards glance. She'd barely uprighted herself before a family of three tromped through the same place, their ill-mannered child running over Bonnie's foot with a Hello Kitty backpack.

This was the downside of being an invisible woman. If there were a line a mile long and someone had to cross to the other side, they'd do it in front of Bonnie. And she could hardly fault them.

More than once, Bonnie had hunted for her own reflection in security mirrors; so shapeless, formless, ageless, blending so seamlessly into a crowd, that she'd have to raise a hand or cock her head to be certain of herself.

"Can I help you, Miss?"

Bonnie stepped forward, acknowledging the information booth employee with a nod. He looked Middle Eastern, or maybe Indian—thick black hair, sleepy dark eyes, and clipped speech. Bonnie liked being called Miss; much preferred it to its old lady counterpart, Ma'am.

Her finger stroked the card in her pocket.

...the sorrows of your changing face...

"I need to get to Webster College," she said.

"Webster, I hear it is a pretty town. The closest station is Rochester. There is an MTA train leaving for that destination in forty-five minutes from track number two. Nice train."

He placed a worn map of New York covered with a tangle of colored lines that indicated the various train routes and stations, on the counter between them, moving his slender finger along a pale blue line, running north up the page. His breath smelled faintly of cinnamon gum.

"Webster is thirty-five miles Northwest of Rochester station. You can get there by taxi, or you can take a bus. The fare for this train is sixty-three dollars."

"That sounds fine."

"I believe I have a bus schedule. Just a moment."

He turned aside, rifling through a stack of brochures and timetables while Bonnie searched her cluttered totebag for her wallet.

“Hey! Which way to track six?”

The words were delivered with a humid spray on the back of Bonnie's neck. Turning, she came face to face with a squat ape of a man wearing a pit-stained Mets jersey.

“Excuse me, there is a line,” Bonnie said evenly.

The boor didn’t even look at her. “Relax, lady." He held up five fingers on one hand and the fat thumb of the other. "Hey Saddam! Track Six??"

The station employee frowned, but pointed in the direction of the station's Northwest corner, then he passed Bonnie the bus schedule, his hand shaking ever so slightly, frustration burning in his dark eyes. Bonnie recognized a bit of her own repressed fury, and thanked him politely.

She was eager to leave this dirty, vulgar city and these rude people behind. Bonnie mused that it was a good thing she didn’t carry a weapon, the temptation to use it would be overwhelming.

And no one would ever suspect me, she thought, as she passed under the huge American flag that dominated the center of the train station. Even with a smoking gun in her bag, a detonator in her underwear, fingers stained with accelerant.

Chapter Eleven

Mark

Mark was feeling pretty good. Good enough to slap a twenty into the ready palm of the attendant who'd cleaned his clubs. It had been a long time since he had hit an eighty-two, but he'd been in the groove today. That's what his foursome kept telling him, and what great fucking guys they turned out to be.

When they'd checked into the hotel the previous night, Laurel frazzled from the flight and the baby, miraculously, still asleep, he was given the big luxury resort spiel. To get a decent tee-time, he'd have to fill out a foursome. It pissed Mark off that at two hundred bucks a round he'd probably end up chasing balls in the weeds with some old farts, or even worse, old women. But the guys he was grouped with—all there for some real estate conference—were pretty cool. One of them turned out to have a cousin in Mark's old frat at USC. Talk about a small world. So there he was, a beautiful day in paradise, emerald green fairways overlooking the Pacific, just killing the ball on the back nine. Add to that the three beers he'd enjoyed at the clubhouse and Mark's mood had mellowed considerably.

Now as he rode in the huge white van that ferried guests to and from the course, surrounded by red-faced men in double knit shorts, the AC blasting over their communal drone, Mark felt a twinge of guilt for having left Laurel alone with the baby all day. The kid had started crying in the middle of the night, and. Laurel looked pretty beat when he left this morning. He had offered to stay, halfheartedly, but she insisted she'd be fine.

Looking out the window at the lushness of the resort stretching out to the vast white sand beach and blue-green ocean, he shook his head. *Jeez, of course she'd be fine. It was just a baby. His mom had raised five of them, all boys, with no help and he had never heard her complain.* The island sun beat down on him through the window, a pleasant contrast with the sub-arctic temperature inside the van.

The van pulled up to the resort entrance. Stepping down to the pavement, Mark winced as a spasm shot through his back. Damn. He was just approaching forty, but had fallen out of a regular exercise routine. Eighteen holes of golf and he felt it. He had some pain killers in his shaving kit. Better nip this in the bud or tomorrow he'd he hobbling. After asking the bellman to store his clubs, he hurried past the Koi pond and fake waterfall to his suite, repeating a cheerful "Aloha" to the maintenance staff he passed on the way.

He inserted his card key, the lock disengaging with a soft click. The room was dark, the plantation shutters shut tight against the sun.

The throb in Mark's back subsided as he imagined his wife curled drowsily in bed. Maybe if he was very quiet, and didn't wake the baby, he could rouse her for a quickie. There was something about the island air, or maybe it was the beer, but he was feeling horny. It occurred to him that ever since Bonnie had entered their lives, instead of becoming more available to him, Laurel somehow was less available. It seemed she was always with her sister.

But Bonnie—their little dark cloud—was gone.

He slipped into the bedroom, his golf spikes leaving clods of dirt in the fancy carpet. The bed was a rumpled mess of sage green linens. Laurel must've slept in so long she missed the morning maid service. His wife would never let a maid clean a room while she was still in it because of her childish belief that the housekeeping staff was "judging her." Maybe she had taken June out to the pool or the beach.

The red message light was blinking on the bedside telephone, which reminded Mark that his BlackBerry was still turned off. Having your cellphone ring on the golf course was a breech of etiquette, and besides, the reception on the course was crap. He pulled the phone from his rear pocket and powered it up as he wandered back into the front room to open the shutters.

The sunlight revealed total chaos, diapers and bottles and pacifiers and toys scattered everywhere. And for Chrissakes it smelled like something had died. The stench seemed to come from a heap of soiled linens piled in the hotel port-a-crib. Typical Laurel—beautiful, but a slob.

Mark looked down at his phone. A dozen missed calls, four from Laurel. He punched the speed dial. The stink from the port-a-crib was disgusting, and he opened the sliding door onto the Lanai to let in some fresh air. Laurel's voicemail picked up, and he left a message.

"Laurel, it's me. I'm back at the room. Where the hell are you?"

He dialed into his own voice mail. There were two calls from the office. Sweeping aside the scads of random baby junk on the desk—why one baby needed so much shit he would never know—Mark located the hotel pen and stationery. As he bent

over to jot down the details, his back spasmed again. Damn. The third call was from Laurel. Her voice sounded small and faraway. There was a constant, high-pitched wail in the background, like a siren.

"Mark…mmm..it's me. June won't stop crying. She won't stop. It's been, I don't know, three hours? And she's spitting up. A lot. Sort of throwing up. The front desk called to say the people in the next room are complaining about the noise. They were nice about it, though. They're sending the resort doctor."

There was a beep and another call from his office. He pressed skip on his way to the bathroom and heard Laurel's voice again. She sounded like she was crying, her voice fading in and out. Mark couldn't tell whether it was a problem with the cellular service, or a problem with Laurel.

"Mark? Please, pick-up. There's something wrong with June. She's…she's screaming Mark. Screaming. It's worse than the airport. The doctor said something about her heart rate. They're taking us to the hospital."

There was another beep as the call ended. Mark unzipped his shaving kit, noticing the rotten smell was also in the bathroom. The hand towels seemed to be soaked in it. He skipped through more calls from the office. Then he heard Laurel's voice. He couldn't understand her. She was totally hysterical. He replayed the message, shrugging the phone between his shoulder and his ear as he wrestled with the prescription bottle, spilling codeine pills all over the marble sink.

He could hear her say “Mark," followed by a birdlike cry...then something about “her”…then more sobbing, then a beep. God the woman was frustrating. She didn’t even say what the fuck hospital they were at.

He couldn't think straight. Part of the problem was that all the day's beer was now straining for release. Spilled pills crunching beneath his golf spikes, he stepped into the john, unzipping his fly, holding his streaming dick in one hand and scrolling his BlackBerry with the other. He skipped to the next call, from an unknown, local number.

“Hello Mr. Miller. This is South Island Memorial Hospital. Your wife brought your infant daughter in today. It’s very important you come in to the emergency center immediately. The entrance is at the corner of Kula Highway and Keikulluike.”

Mark tucked himself back into his pants, replaying Laurel’s last message. It sounded like she said...

Fuck.

He pushed the replay again. As he reached to flush, his BlackBerry slipped through his fingers and splashed into the toilet.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

He picked up the hotel phone, dialed the front desk, and demanded a taxi, tossing the dripping carcass of the dead Blackberry on the table as he ran out the door.

It couldn’t be, but between sobs it had sounded like Laurel said, “Mark. We’ve lost her.”

Chapter Twelve

Griffin

"So, it is the ghost of Virgil—representing what we call human reason—who protects and guides Dante through the regions of hell. And yet as they approach the city of Dis, they cannot pass. Reason is not enough; they require the help of an angel. What could be the significance of this?"

Griffin peered over the podium at the sea of blank faces that greeted him every Tuesday and Thursday morning in "Myth, Man, & Discovery." The course name had been changed this year from its previous title, "Classics of Western Literature," for what the administration called "reasons of accessibility."

The problem created by this new accessibility was that students who would never have considered the arduous study of Homer and Dante enrolled, expecting some sort of Joseph Campbell self-empowerment mumbo-jumbo. He did his best to dissuade these students by posting a favorite quote from *Inferno* on the first day of class. He could still see the words bleeding through the poorly cleaned white-board. "Abandon all hope ye who enter here."

He managed to get 15% to flee by drop day.

In front of him, were the hopeful young scholars who remained. Some scribbled as if taking thoughtful notes—undoubtedly Sudoku puzzles— others held their cell phones in their laps, surreptitiously texting friends or playing games. From Griffin's

perspective this was a particularly disturbing trend, as the texting boys looked as though they were diddling themselves.

He glanced down at the class roster, fifty some odd names of which he would remember maybe ten by the end of the semester—the best five and the worst five. He was about to select one at random to answer the question when a hand shot up.

"Yes, Miss...?"

"Ng, Suzanne Ng."

"Yes, Miss Ng?"

The class tittered, apparently because Miss Ng was pronounced just like the word missing—the height of hilarity. Griffin felt the throb of an incipient headache behind his left eye.

"When are we going to get our papers back?"

Predictable. Not one of them ever raised their hand to offer some critical insight or risky hypothesis. Instead every question posed was, "Is this on the test?" or "How many points is this worth?" Where was the intellectual curiosity? When had higher education become a negotiation over numbers and scores?

Griffin sighed. "Hopefully next week, Miss Ng."

This was optimistic. The papers had not yet been recovered from last week's disastrous plane trip. They had been carry-on, and since he had not carried them off, they remained in an airport labyrinth dubbed the "found property department."

What a disaster that trip had been. His only bit of luck was that, because of some FAA investigation, all of the first class checked luggage had been held at JFK. After

summoning him from the holding pen for unescorted minors, the men with guns had led him to a room where his weathered brown suitcase sagged forlornly beside a stylish set of designer luggage. It had been rifled through, but nothing was missing.

Whether out of basic human decency or because he smelled terrible, the officers had permitted him to freshen up in the lavatory. He removed his shirt, finding it speckled with regurgitated tomato juice and, despite the fact that it was nearly new, balled it up and buried it in the trash bin. He wanted to do the same with his slacks, but they were Italian wool and perfectly tailored. Griffin had a difficult time finding slacks "off the rack," and to toss these would be frivolous. Instead he rolled them up, wrapped them in paper towels, and put them into his bag. Having only packed for the weekend, all he had to wear were his clothes from the previous day. They were wrinkled, but still an improvement.

For two hours the FAA officers pummeled him with questions, his mind so foggy it was like being grilled with Algebraic equations in Chinese. They made references to a report in which one of the flight attendants claimed he became "agitated" during the flight. The other referred to him as "hysterical," and later "drunk as a skunk." Griffin sat meekly in his wrinkled shirt, offering up his pathetic defense. *He was unnerved by the massive turbulence. He didn't drink*. Noting the dubious expressions on the officers' faces, he responded to the rest of their inquiries with a simple, polite, "I'm sorry, but I don't remember."

It was only now, a week later, that he surmised that he had somehow been drugged by the passenger seated next to him on the plane. The strange woman was the

subject of most of the FAA questions. Her age? Her size? Her coloring? Did she say or do anything unusual? He could recall little more than a black cap and red mouth and dark glasses. Finally, he was released, given a number to call if he remembered anything further, but it seemed best to put the tawdry event behind him. Get on with his life, back to teaching.

Or back to the classroom, at any rate.

Griffin resubmitted his question. "So does anyone have a response to the query regarding Virgil?"

Students shifted, shuffled papers, avoided eye contact with him, but then slowly, gracefully, a single hand rose. Griffin knew this one's name. Trey Johnson. He was a senior, "star" of the football team, whatever that meant in a school as small as Webster. Griffin had been surprised to find him enrolled in the class. It was an upper division course, and Griffin had a reputation among the students as a "hard ass," since he refused to subscribe to the current trend of grade inflation. Webster's athletes generally stuck to easier majors, communications or sociology, or one of the various cultural studies.

Yet here was Trey Johnson, raising his hand with what could be described as a Fosse-like elegance.

"Yes, Mr. Johnson?"

"If Virgil represents human reason, and, as we've learned, unlike the earlier classical epics, "Inferno" is a Christian poem, then perhaps Dante is making the point that reason without faith is powerless."

Feeling the muscles in his face pulling in an unaccustomed way, Griffin realized he was smiling.

“Yes, Mr. Johnson. That is exactly right.”

Mr. Johnson didn’t smile back. His glittering eyes, set in a chiseled black face met Griffin’s with an expression that indicated he knew he was right. He was accustomed to being right. That he'd answered the question because no one else in the class would or could, and he wanted to move on to something more challenging. He, for one, didn’t need watered-down Dante spoon-fed to him like so much pabulum.

Around Mr. Johnson, students began fussing with their backpacks and water bottles denoting the end of the period. Griffin dismissed them with a wave. As they funneled from the room, he pretended to be engrossed in a sheaf of papers in order to discourage interaction with any malingerers who might desire extensions on their assignments. But out of the corner of his eye he watched Trey Johnson rise from his chair, stretching his muscled frame a moment before gathering his books and sauntering from the room with a cheetah's coiled agility.

Could it be? Griffin dared not hope.

Finally. A real student.

Chapter Thirteen

Bonnie

The polo shirt was a color that could best be described as coral, and it pulled a bit across her bust, but it wasn't too bad. Bonnie studied her reflection in the bathroom mirror at the Liberty Inn Motel off highway 250 on the outskirts of Webster, New York. The bathroom managed to smell simultaneously of Clorox and mildew, and one of the bulbs in the light fixture was burnt out, but the Liberty Inn didn't care that she had no credit card as long as she paid cash in advance. After all, there wasn't anything in the room to steal. The sticky phone required a calling card and the circa 1980 T.V. was bolted to the wall.

The Clairborne suitcase she had banked on belonging to a middle-aged woman, instead held men's clothes. Not a total disaster, as the man was more or less Bonnie's size, and his taste was effeminate, leaning towards the preppie androgyny of Banana Republic and J Crew.

There were a few V-neck cotton sweaters in beige, gray, and duck yellow, some white oxford button downs with pastel stripes, and polo shirts in seafoam green and this coral one, or perhaps salmon was a better word, the pinky-orange of an infected wound.

Bonnie ran her finger across the appliquéd tiger that leaped over her right breast. The labels in the shirts read "Le Tigre" which sounded French and queer. Everything in the bag had been perfectly pressed and folded, even the briefs, which were so white and clean that Bonnie felt fine about stepping into a pair, pulling them up over her wide hips, flattening down the pouch.

All in all it hadn’t been an awful choice once you got past the buttons and zippers on the wrong side, and the knowledge that you looked a little dykey.

Bonnie pulled the gray sweater over the polo and yanked her hair into a rubberband, frowning at the dark circles under her eyes. She had arrived late the previous day, and finding a cash motel in a college town brimming with cozy B&B's hadn't been easy. After a lukewarm, slightly rusty shower, she'd settled in for a good night’s sleep; but the combination of nerves, anticipation, and the change in time zones had kept her up much of the night. It didn't help matters that she slept fully clothed to avoid contact with the motel sheets, which were stained with God-only-knows**.** She would have to hurry to catch the 11:15 bus.

#

Webster College was just as Bonnie had pictured it; red brick and white clapboard buildings set among tall trees, the autumn leaves yellow and orange, a steepled church here, a bell tower there. Like one of those decorative, ceramic villages they sell at Hallmark stores during the holidays. The temperature was at least ten degrees cooler than it had been in New York City, and though she was snug in her Le Tigre polo and sweater, in another few weeks, she’d need to find herself a real jacket.

Wandering up a stone pathway clogged with fresh-faced, if overwhelmingly white, Webster undergrads, Bonnie admired their healthy robustness, the school spirit evident in the name Webster routinely spilled across their fleece. They were nothing like the skanky, skeletal, young people in Los Angeles, with their infected piercings and

tattoos. She felt a moments regret that she hadn't encouraged her own daughter, Roxanne to attend a school like this. Maybe she wouldn't have wound up such a mess.

She hovered and eavesdropped, catching a snippet of conversation here, an unguarded cellphone exchange there. She would have to proceed with caution; she was not invisible in this place. The campus was larger than she had imagined, and she had no idea which building held Griffin Sherwood's classroom.

Arriving in a small courtyard with a freestanding coffee bar and bunches of students at flimsy metal tables, she stepped up and ordered a regular coffee, black. She considered asking directions from the barista, an athletic looking boy with a mop of uncombed hair. But as she exchanged her dollar for the hot Styrofoam cup, he thanked her, and called her ma'am. He hadn't done this with any other customer. Which made her feel conspicuous.

Taking a small sip of the brew, which was surprisingly good, Bonnie turned to the courtyard tables. She couldn't wander aimlessly all day, so she chose—approaching two sensible-looking young women who sat side-by-side quietly writing in their binders, a stack of textbooks in front of them.

"Excuse me," Bonnie addressed them, "Can you help me?"

One of the girls lifted her head, tucking a perfect wheatstalk of bang behind her ear, and looked at Bonnie squarely, and Bonnie knew this girl really saw her. Saw her rumpled hair, her mannish sweater, saw the way her chinos gaped at the waist and pulled taut across her thighs and the circles dark as bruises beneath her eyes.

"Sure," the girl said, slyly nudging her friend's foot under the table.

Bonnie imagined breezing into Professor Sherwood's class unannounced, an entire roomful of students twisting around in their chairs and staring at her this same judgmental, snickering way. Then what? What had she been thinking? Suddenly the entire idea seemed ridiculous. Without a flinch, Bonnie changed her tactics.

The few minutes it took Bonnie to follow the girl's directions to the administration building were all she needed to rework her plan. The chubby coed manning the help desk pointed the way to the human resources office, where Bonnie finished her coffee while scanning the campus job board. This would be a safer route. After all, what reason could she give for barging into Dr. Sherwood's classroom? Much better they meet again as peers— fellow Webster employees.

The pickings were slim, so she settled on a supervisory position in the campus bookstore. It was either that or cafeteria work, and she rejected the idea that the next time she encountered Griffin Sherwood she would be wearing a hairnet. She wasn't a vain person, but that simply would not do.

The application was simple; Bonnie manufactured a little story about herself and filled in the blanks accordingly. She used her real first name, and stuck with Adler as her last. Her adventure as Maude Adler was still fresh and familiar. Bonnie Adler had moved here recently to be near her aging mother. For the previous six years she had lived in Los Angeles managing the office staff at Century Mortgage and Loan, where they specialized in sub-prime mortgages. Bonnie knew it was the details that made a story plausible.

A few months ago she had come to work in the morning to find the building locked. When the janitor let her in, the office was empty, the furniture gone, the confetti

of a thousand shredded documents knee deep. Unfortunately, that left her without any references.

The lie already felt true.

The helpful human resources secretary with the bad teeth and three framed photographs of a Labrador Retriever on her desk accepted Bonnie's application, dismissing her with a rehearsed, "We'll be in touch." But it only took the lifting of a photo and the wistful admiration of the sorry animal in it, along with the brief fable of her own Lab who passed away last year, to grease the wheels. After patting her hand sympathetically, the secretary whispered, "If you don't mind waiting a bit, you could probably be interviewed this afternoon."

Bonnie took a chair in the waiting area next to a heavyset woman with a birthmark that looked like a smeared chocolate chip on her forehead.

Let her have the cafeteria job.

The tiny, birdlike human resources supervisor, Helen, clucked approvingly at Bonnie's devotion to her sick mother, commenting that even little Webster was no stranger to the sub-prime lending scandal and wasn't it just criminal? Bonnie could feel the woman's darting eyes, beneath their shimmery-shadowed lids, assessing her. The eyes said, "Lesbians make great office managers; they are bossy and no-nonsense", while the mouth, pink lipstick feathered into its smug lines said, "You seem perfectly qualified."

Bonnie saw the future unfold. She didn't know much about bookstores, but was sure she'd whip this one into shape. Griffin Sherwood would eventually stop in. He'd say there was something familiar about her—hadn't they met somewhere before? And Bonnie would say, "I don't think so, but anything is possible." They'd banter about lazy students or bestsellers. A friendship would develop. This would lead to long chats over lunch. He'd recommend favorite authors. Maybe even loan her books from his personal library, pages creased and cornered by his fine pale fingers…

"Of course you'll have to be live-scanned."

Yanked from her daydream, Bonnie said, "What's a live scan?"

Bonnie knew full well what live-scan was. Still she nodded as if intrigued at finding that the future had arrived with all its flying cars and magical technology as Helen chirped, "It's an instant digital method of fingerprinting. Clean, fast, and I promise, painless. It's used by many government agencies, schools and the like."

And occasionally private citizens, Bonnie added silently. Mark had insisted that the first nanny he and Laurel hired, Maria, be live-scanned. She refused and quit because her immigration status was hazy and she had a not entirely unjustified paranoia of the U.S. government.

These were the circumstances that led to Laurel calling and pleading with Bonnie to come and help with June. Said they were desperate, and Mark would be generous. Bonnie had been working a string of meaningless jobs while halfheartedly trying to track down Roxanne. At the time, it felt like fate—which had skipped town with her own daughter—was giving her another shot.

Mark did not insist that Bonnie be live-scanned. She was, after all, family. But they would insist at Webster College. And because of some foolish misunderstandings in her past, she might be in the system.

Helen was still talking, her frosty pink lips fluttering, “Here’s the form. You just walk it over to campus police. It’ll take five minutes. Tops.”

Bonnie thanked Helen for the opportunity and shook the woman's bony little hand. Then she asked for a campus map.

She headed in the general direction of the campus police, conscious that eyes might be following her. Once she had put some distance between herself and the administration building, she doubled back, crumpling up the live-scan form and dropping it in a trashcan.

On the outskirts of campus, at the athletic field, she paused a moment to watch a dozen students practicing hurdles. The bookstore idea had been wrong from the start. It would take weeks, maybe months to become anything more than a casual acquaintance of Griffin Sherwood. That’s what happened when you pushed things instead of letting them evolve organically.

Bonnie had time. She’d figure it out.

There was an abandoned blue Webster sweatshirt lying near her on the bleachers. She tucked it under her arm before making her way to the bus stop.

Chapter Fourteen

Griffin

Griffin had a title he liked, “The Artifice of Otherness,” written and underlined, twice, with his Mont Blanc on a yellow legal pad. Griffin always worked in longhand. He felt it gave him more time to finesse the language. Although, as of yet, there was little language to finesse.

Leaning back in his chair, the old leather shushing beneath his shifting weight, Griffin's gaze drifted from the depressing expanse of blank page out the window. He watched the old maple that shaded his porch drop one languorous leaf, then another. Only a couple months left until winter. Last year had been a particularly long and bitter one. Still, where else but in the Snow Belt could a college professor, tenure or not, afford such a house?

On his quaint, tree-lined block of alternately crumbling or restored Victorians and Colonials, Griffin believed his house to be the most charming. The Queen Anne had been built in the 1890s replete with a wraparound porch, patterned masonry, cross-gabled roof, and a tall turret, common to that era, which circumscribed the office library in which he was now nestled. This office was his sanctuary, the interior a octagonal cylinder of eight slender walls, the four facing East stacked with books, and the four facing West wainscoted with windows, offering a view onto the street below.

The grand walnut desk where he crafted his writing was kept free from personal items. All of Griffin’s awards and diplomas, degrees and certificates, were cluttering his

department chair office at Webster, a poorly lit cubbyhole with a swinging door of demands and complaints, just two miles away.

Seven months out of the year Griffin walked or rode his bicycle through the quiet Webster streets to and from campus. But from mid-November to mid-March inclement weather sometimes necessitated the use of public transportation—distressingly filthy even in this otherwise tidy town—along with the cobbling together of rides from colleagues and the occasional taxi. He had never learned to drive and would no sooner purchase a car than a television.

Back to the page; this new piece of criticism was long overdue, and it wasn't going to write itself. Griffin scanned his bookshelves for inspiration. Solid cherry hardwood, they soared twelve feet from floor to ceiling, complete with an old-fashioned rolling library ladder, although this was mostly for show. Climbing gave him vertigo, so he placed lesser works on the top two shelves, mostly autographed copies of unrequested publications written by his peers.

A rumbling from the street below distracted him. Looking down he spied a brown UPS truck pulling up to his front curb. A deeply tanned man in brown shorts stepped out with a large parcel. Moments later Griffin heard the deep resonant gong of his doorbell.

He waited in the hopes that Mrs. Palifox would get it. Mrs. Palifox had been his housekeeper for many years. She was quiet, dependable, and relatively inexpensive.

He could never keep track of which days she worked, but a persistent tap at his front door told him today wasn’t one of them. Griffin sighed heavily, placing his Mont Blanc in its black lacquer pivoted stand.

#

The package was from the airlines, and it contained the fifteen pounds of essays he had left on the plane, still in the brown expandable folder. Griffin had assumed he'd never see them again. Holding them now, he had to suppress the rising anxiety he felt whenever he recalled that bizarre flight.

He took the folder to the kitchen, spilling the papers onto the butcher-block table. Then to calm his nervous stomach he poured himself a cold glass of milk. Mrs. Palifox always made sure there was low-fat milk in bottles, not cartons, the way he liked it. He drank deliberately, dabbing his mouth with a clean dishcloth from the drawer when he finished, and rinsing out his glass in the sink before turning his attention to the pile of essays.

Maybe two-thirds of the papers had been graded, their pages flecked with red marks and helpful comments that would go unheeded. In his experience, whatever careless errors a student made on his or her first paper—dangling modifiers, informal language, generalizations—he or she would continue to make all year, no matter what Griffin wrote in the margins. But there was only one paper he was interested in right now, and he dug through the rest, reminded of a joke he once heard about an optimistic child digging through a mountain of manure, certain that somewhere inside it, he'd find a pony.

Trey Johnson. There was the name in the upper right hand corner, Times New Roman, 12-point font, black ink. The assignment, the first of the semester, had been a simple response to Dante and his views on the nature of sin.

Trey had continued to impress Griffin. His intellect and reasoning abilities were beyond that of the average Webster student. On occasion, the athlete would even debate Griffin on certain interpretations, and there was nothing Griffin enjoyed more than a little thrust and parry.

Yesterday Trey had lingered after class, approached the podium, and asked Griffin for clarification on a point. It was the first time Griffin had stood so near him, and he was riveted by Trey's size and strength and sheer magnetism. No wonder all the females in the class fawned over him; he really was a whole other species of man.

It didn't add up.

Griffin had never had a "star" athlete in any upper division course, and he was suspicious. What was the angle? Were the fans that drooled in Trey's wake feeding him answers? Was someone in administration ensuring the ace player didn't lose eligibility? Men that looked like Trey Johnson were not scholars of classical literature. Period. The days of the inquisitive Adonis who strove to develop both his body and brain disappeared after Socrates and Plato—if he had ever existed at all.

Griffin skimmed Trey's paper quickly first, then read it slowly, deliberately, savoring every line, pondering each turn of a phrase, every analytical detail.

As he read, he drummed his fingers, the sound reverberating in the spotless white kitchen. He had seen something like this paper before, he was sure of it. It was a constant problem at Webster—plagiarism. But Griffin never forgot a writing style, particularly one this distinctive.

He put Trey's paper aside. It would come to him. In the meantime, a snack.

A few months back, Mrs. Palifox had asked if, going forward, Griffin could pay her in cash. In return she would pick up groceries and other household necessities—light bulbs or paper towels—on the days she cleaned. Cash was an inconvenience, but Griffin enjoyed coming home to fresh bread and milk that hadn't expired.

Communication was generally made through receipts stacked under the saltcellar on the kitchen counter. Recently she had added Scotch shortbread biscuits to her provisions and Griffin was mad for them. He found an unopened box in the pantry, tucked it under one arm, and poured himself a second glass of milk.

Munching on the crumbly, buttery shortbread, Griffin pensively reviewed the elements of the paper. Smoking out a plagiarizer was like detective work. Griffin didn't just run search engines on suspicious essays, he kept an extensive file of noteworthy papers from previous semesters to use as a cross-reference. He had it on good authority that all the large fraternities and sororities kept similar files, sharing exams and essays with their members. He was just fighting fire with fire.

The English department's plagiarism policy included the public humiliation of announcing the student's crime before dismissing him or her from your class. Shame had too long been absent in the lives of these children, and Griffin believed in its redemptive powers. But he did not relish the idea of shaming Trey Johnson.

The football star had been a dream student hovering on Griffin's horizon. But, like many dreams, perhaps there was nothing substantive there—just smoke and mirrors.

Yet, he'd seemed so genuine. The refreshing way he challenged Griffin, forcing him out of his intractable ways, making him a better teacher. They were men from

distinctly different worlds; yet more than once Trey had put words to an idea that Griffin remembered having himself, back when he was still a student.

Stricken, Griffin lowered the glass of milk from his lips.

Brushing the crumbs from Trey's paper, he began to read it one last time. Of course! No wonder the writing had seemed so familiar.

Impulsively, he flung the entire pile of student papers into the sky, giving a timid whoop as they briefly hung in the air before spattering all over the floor around him like a covey of downed birds.

Chapter Fifteen

Mark

He spotted Teddy Goldberg the moment she stepped into Marty's!, an aggressively air-conditioned, casual chain restaurant agreed upon for its proximity to the courthouse. Seemed that even glorious Hawaii had its share of crappy family style eateries featuring humungous portions and crayons for the kids.

She was exactly as she had been described to him, fiftyish, plump, with a massive bosom and a behind to match. Standing by the vacant hostess desk, patting her short, wiry curls, she could have been anyone's Jewish Bubbe, but when he waved her over, her bulldog stride gave him a sense of what he was paying six-hundred dollars an hour for.

In this ocean of dads sporting whimsical Hawaiian prints, Mark's white dress shirt and conservative tie made him stick out like a Mormon missionary, but he wanted to make a good first impression. He wished Laurel had put a little more effort into her appearance. She was a bit of a train wreck, with her red-ringed eyes, her dirty uncombed hair, and a blouse that looked slept in.

Laurel didn't stand to greet the attorney, but absently extended a limp hand. Teddy grasped it firmly, as if by doing so, she could transfer some of her vigor into his wife's frail, bloodless, fingers.

"Have you eaten?" Mark asked.

"Actually I haven't. And now that I think of it, I'm famished," Teddy said taking the proffered menu as she squeezed herself into the booth.

A teenage waitress approached, her face half hidden by long, stringy hair. She mumbled a sullen greeting, notepad in hand. Her lopsided nametag read, Penny.

Teddy ordered a patty melt, which Mark could've predicted, given her girth. Laurel muttered something unintelligible, which the waitress somehow understood, scribbling on her pad.

"Penny for your thoughts," Mark winked, but either Penny didn't hear him, or she didn't get the joke. "I'll have the turkey sandwich, no mayo," he said.

“Would you like a deep fried onion blossom with that?”

The question felt rhetorical, hanging in the air a moment, buoyed by the grease molecules in the eateries atmosphere.

“No thank you,” Teddy said, taking charge.

The waitress accepted their menus awkwardly, as if they were tablets of stone, and wandered away without ever having borne the burden of eye contact.

Mark took his wife's lifeless hand in his own as a sign of solidarity. Laurel didn’t react, didn’t even look up. “So, Ms. Goldberg, what’s our next step?” he said.

Opening her briefcase, the attorney took out a manila file folder labeled MILLER.

“Well, we have some good news, and some bad news. The good news is that the court has agreed to turn over jurisdiction to Los Angeles; reunification being the general priority in these kinds of cases.”

Mark breathed a sigh of relief, “Well that’s great.” He squeezed Laurel’s hand, “Isn’t that great, honey? So when can we pick our little girl up and take her home?”

Teddy frowned, folding her plump, dimpled hands on top of the folder. Mark noted the enormous, glittering rock on her ring finger. That thing must've cost a few retainers.

“Mr. Miller, today was just your preliminary hearing. All we’ve done thus far is had the case moved. This way you and Mrs. Miller can get on with a semblance of normalcy until your official court date, which unfortunately can’t be set until I can get it on the docket. Our next major obstacle is that the family court system in Los Angeles is severely impacted with cases such as yours, so we will have to be persistent, but patient. I’m sure you’ve heard the old saying that the wheels of justice turn slowly.”

Mark felt sick and confused. “In the meantime, what happens to June?”

“She will remain in the custody of child and family services here in Hawaii.”

“What?” Laurel blurted, awakened as if from a zombie slumber, her blue eyes widening, “I can’t go home without my baby.”

Teddy’s response was interrupted by a ragtag group of wait staff carrying a sad scoop of vanilla ice cream with a single candle protruding from it. They stopped at the next table and began a lackluster rendition of “Happy Birthday to You” complete with cha-cha-chas.

Mark wanted to tell them where they could shove their candle, and their cha-chas, but instead he smiled and clapped along with everyone else. Like if he behaved in a normal fashion, his life would return to normal.

When the applause for the successful wishing and blowing subsided, Teddy said, “Mrs. Miller. I would recommend you find some temporary residence here in Hawaii. I was able to secure you very generous supervised visitation with your daughter.”

“Is that the best you can do?” Mark was incredulous. This was insane. They weren't criminals.

“Mr. Miller,” Teddy opened the manila folder and removed the uppermost document, her huge diamond sending flickers of reflected light, disco-balling all over the table as she placed it between Mark and Laurel. The letterhead read South Island Memorial and certain passages were highlighted in bright yellow.

“The toxicology screen the hospital ran on your daughter came back positive for trace amounts of a number of medications including diphenhydramine, methylmorphine, propoxyphene, and hydrocodone,” her voice registered no emotion.

Mark had heard about as much of this crap as he cared to. “That’s a crock of shit!” he roared.

Aware of the sudden pall his outburst cast over the happy families of Martys!, he brought his voice down several notches. Spitting his words out in repressed fury, saliva spattering the toxicology report.

“I told those idiots at the hospital, and I’m telling you now, they made a mistake. Someone at that lab must be on crack. I want my own tests run at a real lab in a real state.”

His attorney was stone-faced. “Mr. Miller. There is no mistake; the lab, the tests, and the report is real. Neither you nor Mrs. Miller was able to explain why your child

had these medications in her bloodstream, and therefore it is fully within the purview of the hospital to keep the baby until authorized to release it by the department of family and children. These are the facts."

She sat back in the booth, crossing her arms across the shelf of her bosom. The sweet Bubbe was gone. Nothing left but steel.

"And both of you will have to accept them before we can move forward."

Chapter Sixteen

Bonnie

Bonnie climbed the thickly painted white steps of the wraparound porch, the sweatshirt clutched to her chest, and rang the bell. She could hear the deep chimes within the house echoing the pounding of her own heart. Sweat beaded her upper lip. That was a good thing. It added authenticity.

The door opened, just a few inches, and Bonnie was face to face with her. The woman she had seen entering the house at 8am and departing at 3pm twice this week.

#

It had been a simple but exhausting task to find where Dr. Sherwood's lived. The day after her abandoned employment attempt, Bonnie had planted herself on a greenbelt across from the Webster faculty parking lot in the early dawn, registering the arrival of each car. When the Professor finally wheeled through the entrance, she grinned.

Of course he would ride a bike.

Bonnie watched—munching on a PopTart from the box she'd picked-up at the convenience store for breakfast—as Dr. Sherwood removed the plastic coated chain lock from around his chest where it had hung like a pageant sash, securing his bicycle to the rack. He was slighter, more delicate than she had remembered; a man distilled down to his most perfect essence.

She felt the same internal tug she had on the plane—a yearning that bordered on maternal. It took all her self-control not to run over and help him as he fumbled with the bungee cords that strapped his bookbag in place.

Over the next three days she watched and waited from a safe distance, chasing the old-fashioned black bicycle down the leafy streets of Webster, her heart pounding, breath rasping in her ears. Shaking off the disappointment when he vanished in the distance, picking up where she'd lost his trail the following day. Finally tracking Dr. Sherwood here, to this grand and fancy house that suited him perfectly.

#

The woman who opened his door wore an expression that was puzzled, but not unkind. Bonnie let the words tumble from her in a rush.

"Excuse me? Do you own a cat? A little grey tabby? Or do you know anyone on the street who does?"

The woman shook her head. Her otherwise attractive face was tired and drawn. She was maybe thirty-five, with olive skin and strong features accentuated with dark heavy hair and brows.

Bonnie gestured with her chin to the bundled sweatshirt in her arms.

"I was walking…just down the street, and I saw this poor little thing. It must've been hit by a car. I think it has a tag. Maybe…if I could use the phone?" Bonnie unfolded one corner of the sweatshirt revealing a furry paw.

“Of course. Please," the woman said, opening the door wide and ushering Bonnie in.

Bonnie inhaled deeply of Dr. Sherwood’s home, taking in every detail as she was led through a sitting area fronted by a huge bay window. The furnishings were spare, a forest green patterned loveseat, coffee table, two burgundy wingback chairs, a credenza topped with a silver tea tray—everything in excellent taste, nothing overdone or fussy.

The floors were highly polished dark wood. A few gilt-framed paintings hung on the walls. Bonnie could only make out a couple of the generic English fox hunt variety before she was hurried into the tidy, white kitchen where she lay her bundle on the table. The woman stood close behind her as she unwrapped the small, grey cat.

A soft gasp escaped the woman.

“Is it dead?”

The animal’s body was still, and somewhat deflated. There was blood trickling from the corner of its mouth. One eye, partly opened, was milky and opaque.

This cloudy eye was the first thing Bonnie had noticed when (fatefully) the cat had approached where she'd been squatting behind a parked car, just a few houses away. It was a pathetic old thing, mangy and lumpy, and undoubtedly half-blind. Some folks just didn’t know when to let an aging pet go.

“Maybe if I got it to the animal hospital." Bonnie said. "Is there one nearby? Do you have a phone book?”

Bonnie allowed panic to enter her voice, watching as the woman laid her hand on

the cat, and lowered her ear to its bloody mouth. She did this with the resigned serenity of someone who had seen death before. Lifting her head she sighed.

"It is too late for the hospital."

"Oh no. Is there a nametag?"

Earlier there had been a tag. The cat's name was Twinkle. Its phone number and address were on a tarnished silver heart tossed somewhere in the shrubbery down the street. The tabby had served its purpose; informing the owners would only cause them unnecessary heartache.

The woman gently twisted the collar around the cats neck, searching.

"There is no tag."

Bonnie collapsed onto one of the kitchen chairs, and the woman followed suit. For a long moment the two of them just stared at the motionless form in front of them.

Bonnie spoke, "I'm sorry. I should go. You've been very kind."

The woman reached across the table and touched Bonnie's shoulder.

"Please, rest a few minutes. You've had quite a shock. This is a terrible thing that has happened."

Rising to her feet, the woman respectfully covered the cat again with the sweatshirt.

"Could I offer you some water, or tea perhaps?"

Her name was Febiola Palifox, but her friends called her Feby. An unusual first name; she said it was Persian, but she herself was from Canada. Bonnie mentally pinned a question mark next to that. Feby's husky, melodic voice didn't sound like Canada. She

had a teenage son. Bonnie couldn't determine from her elusive responses whether she was divorced or widowed, but Mr. Palifox did not seem to factor into her life.

Feby had worked for Griffin Sherwood for seven years. She said he was a good and fair employer, and that he was one of four clients she kept house for. His was the only house she cleaned twice a week; but the house was large and he was a bit of a helpless bachelor.

Bonnie accepted a second cup of tea and another shortbread cookie, both of which were delicious. She'd been living on peanut butter and PopTarts the past week, trying to make Maude's money last. The last couple days had been rough. The hotel was disgusting and the boredom of waiting weighed heavy on her. Sitting in this bright kitchen drinking tea from a china cup embossed with roses, a cup Dr. Sherwood may have raised to his own lips, made Bonnie feel human again, despite the grisly evidence to the contrary, wrapped in a stolen sweatshirt, four feet away.

"Do you live nearby, Bonnie?"

"Just a couple miles south, on West Third."

Feby took a thoughtful sip, then lowered her cup, looking over at the lifeless bundle.

"I noticed the sweatshirt—it's from the college."

"I have a few of them. Proud parent. My daughter, Roxanne, graduated from Webster last year."

Bonnie pulled her wallet from her back pocket—this was the best thing about wearing men's pants, plenty of pockets—and removed a photo, passing it over to Feby.

The housekeeper made the appropriate fawning noises, noting the family resemblance. Of course the girl in the picture wasn't Roxanne, who undoubtedly was living under a freeway somewhere, like a hobo. It was a studio photo taken of a young woman in a graduate's cap and gown looking much as Bonnie imagined Roxanne would currently look if she had only listened to her mother. Bonnie had found it in an unsupervised backpack at the Webster library.

"My employer, Mr. Sherwood, teaches at the University. He is very well respected," Feby said. Bonnie quashed the envy rising in her belly.

"I was thinking of looking for a job over there myself. Not teaching, of course. With my daughter gone I find myself trying to fill the hours."

"You have… no one else in your life?"

The pause in the question was a polite nod to Bonnie's masculine attire.

"The rest of my family is in California. I've considered moving back, but I'd miss the seasons." Bonnie's teacup was empty, and Feby did not offer to fill it again. A cue. "I'm sorry. You've been so gracious and I've taken up too much of your time."

Bonnie rose, and Feby followed suit.

"I've enjoyed our visit. But I do have work to finish before Dr. Sherwood comes home."

Bonnie moved toward the sweatshirt.

"No. Please. I will dispose of it. You still have quite a walk ahead of you." Feby shook her head at the bundle. "So sad," she said.

Then Feby did something Bonnie was unaccustomed to. She linked her arm with Bonnie's as she walked her to the door.

Emboldened by this intimacy, Bonnie said, "You know, I walk right past this house all the time. I'm supposed to walk an hour a day for my high blood pressure. Doctor's orders. Maybe I'll stop by and visit again?"

Bonnie felt Feby stiffen almost imperceptibly. Had she overplayed her hand? But the housekeeper smiled as she reached for the door.

"It would be nice to talk again sometime, Bonnie. But, of course, it would be inappropriate to meet you at the home of my employer. Perhaps we could meet somewhere for coffee on a weekend? I don't work on weekends."

Bonnie's heart sank, but she had Feby write her number on a post-it. Folding it into her wallet, she allowed her eyes to soak in Dr. Sherwood's house one last time before turning away.

The door closed behind her with a click. She already missed being inside the house. It seemed to her Feby had rushed her along faster than was necessary. And that last comment she made—was Feby insinuating that she, Bonnie, did not understand what was appropriate and what was inappropriate where Dr. Sherwood was concerned? It made her like Feby a little less, and considering the circumstances, that was probably a good thing.

The cat had been hard enough

Chapter Seventeen

Sordoni

"The cause of death was subarachnoid hemorrhage. Isn't that a stroke?"

Sordoni nodded.

Behind the thin metal frames of his glasses, Micah Adler's hollow eyes chased down the page.

"And this subarachnoid hemorrhage was caused by…pre-existing conditions."

The room was so quiet the detective could almost hear this information being processed.

"That would be natural causes, correct?"

"Look, I'm really sorry, Mr. Adler. I still believe in my gut that there is something screwy about the whole thing. I wouldn't have pressured you for the autopsy unless I honestly believed it would indicate foul play."

"I understand, detective." The young man, already pale, seemed to turn ashen.

Sordoni took a roll of antacids from his desk drawer and peeled one off with his thumb.

"Tums?"

"No thank you."

The detective's stomach felt like hell and fishing around in his desk gave him a reason to avert his attention from the poor schmo in front of him, his eyes now welling,

removing his little wire frame glasses to rub them. For Chrissake. The worst part was Sordoni knew himself to be the asshole in this situation. He'd crawl into his desk drawer right now if he thought he would fit.

Micah Adler was obviously a decent guy, devoted to his mother, Maude, or as the department referred to her, "the stiff in the can." But dead is dead. Larry didn't pretend to understand this 'desecration of the body' mumbo jumbo. Before he got this cushy stint with the LA Airport Police he'd worked Rampart for a few years. He'd seen some motherfucking desecration. Maybe that's why he believed whether you left this earth in a body or a baggie, your maker accepted you.

But the Adlers were orthodox Jews; therefore they wanted to plant old Maude within twenty-four hours. She'd be resting in peace right now had it not been for the intervention of one Larry Sordoni.

His own supervisor had told him to let it go. Given her age, her medical history of stroke and Parkinson's disease, no physical signs of violence, her death and the theft of her personal belongings were probably unrelated. It was what the Airport Police officially called a "crime of opportunity."

But Sordoni refused to play politics; maybe because steaking a first class ticket amounted to grand larceny, or maybe because Mrs. Diaz had been right. Once the TSA found out the dead old lady was just a dead old lady, no one gave a fuck about her anymore. He'd followed up with the FAA to determine if anyone had flown in Maude's place. But in the delay between identifying the body and convincing the guys at the FAA

a crime had been committed, the person who had stolen the dead women's boarding pass was long gone.

Sordoni almost caught a break when the passenger who had been seated next to the suspect was located, still inside JFK's terminal. But the guy was a boozehound, his interview with the airport police was useless, ditto those of the oblivious flight crew.

The only tangible evidence the detective had was some grainy airport security video; a ghostly black and white image of a figure hovering on the fringes of the frame as if waiting—for what? Too see if Maude had a companion? To see if the cops were on the way? The figure briskly walks into view, hands a ticket to the attendant, and vanishes through the gate. A vague, squat, female with sunglasses and a baseball cap. No one found her suspicious. No one even noticed her. That's L.A.

Had this thief murdered Maude? Only an autopsy could provide that answer, so Sordoni negotiated with Micah and the black hats of his community. Agreeing to the supervision of a rabbi.

And here was his vindication, a broken son who had agreed to the mutilation of his mother's corpse.

"There's a notation from the Rabbi that there was blood drawn from my mother's heart and sent to a lab," Micah said.

"To check for drugs and poisons," Larry said, "toxicology can take up to six weeks."

"This blood needs to be returned."

"I don't understand."

“All of her. She needs to be buried whole. It is in the Talmud. The blood needs to be returned before we can bury her.”

It was the craziest thing Sordoni had ever heard. But the look on Micah Adler’s face made him pick up the phone and ask his secretary to dial the coroner. The phone was on its fourth ring when Micah made a garbled sound.

Sordoni kept his eyes on the telephone, figuring Micah had probably gotten to the details about his mother’s heart. The heart that had loved her family with a devotion that could move mountains and so on and so on. Larry had heard enough about Maude to know that if a Jew could be a saint the Adlers would be ringing the Pope.

This mighty heart had been carved out and plopped on a butcher’s scale. It weighed 8.3 ounces.

That shit’s harsh on paper.

Chapter Eighteen

Mark

Mark and Laurel stewed in the sweltering silence of the taxi that was ferrying him back to the airport—concluding, what would go down in history, as the most fucked-up vacation ever. Teddy Goldberg had arranged a place for Laurel to stay, but Mark needed to return to Los Angeles, to work, to earn money to pay for this nightmare. For the foreseeable future, this separation would be their life. It was inconceivable.

Twice he had reached for his BlackBerry, as he always did in a taxi, to check in with the office, collect messages, make demands, to feel in his hand the reliable shape of his touchstone, only to come up empty. Losing his phone left a more constant, tactile void then, well... he was ashamed to even think it. But he did. And it was this thought, along with his inability to fill the emptiness with busy chatter that forced him to dwell, to reflect, to realize…

"My God. Bonnie…"

His words were lost in the hot, gusting wind from the half-open windows. It seemed none of the taxis on this God-forsaken island had a functioning air-conditioner. Laurel was leaning forward, elbows on knees, studying the license information for their driver, Bengomen Ropolidon, encased in yellowing plastic on his seat back.

"Did you say something?" Laurel said.

Mark pounded his fist into his empty palm for emphasis. The gesture was practiced, artificial, something he had seen in a film and then appropriated for real life.

“Bonnie, it was Bonnie, Of course.”

“What about Bonnie? What are you talking about?” Laurel said, the wind flipping her feathery bangs into her eyes.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it? If the hospital didn’t make a mistake, and the drug tests are accurate, then Bonnie must've been drugging June.” Mark reached instinctively for his phone, stopping short when he remembered, once again, that it wasn’t there.

“Give me your phone,” he said.

“Why?”

“I’m going to call Teddy. See if she can have Bonnie arrested.”

Mark reached for Laurel’s straw handbag, which rested on the floor of the cab. With uncharacteristic speed Laurel grabbed it first and clutched it to her chest. “That’s crazy!”

This last part Laurel said loud enough to catch their driver’s attention. Bengomen’s shiny black ponytail twitched, his dark eyes squinting back at them from the rearview mirror.

Bengoman. What kind of name was that? The driver’s enormous mug-shot scowl and bushy hair exceeded the frame of his license photo. Maybe Samoan? Right now his mane was secured with a thick, red, rubber band. Probably cab company policy.

Mark lowered his voice, drawing his face close to Laurel’s.

“Don’t be thick, Laurel. Who had access? Bonnie. And her behavior has been suspicious. You told me yourself she hasn’t returned any of your calls since we got here.”

“There could be a million reasons for that. Anyway, you said yourself that the hospital report was bullshit.”

“Well our attorney seems to think it’s legit. Somebody drugged our daughter. I know it wasn’t me.”

There was a long pause while Laurel absorbed the implication of Mark’s comment.

“Well it certainly wasn’t *me*.” Before Mark could repeat his accusation, “And it wasn’t Bonnie. She would never, ever do anything to hurt our family. What reason could she possibly have?”

Arguing, Mark realized, would get him nowhere. But the idea that all along it had been Bonnie behind this clusterfuck made all kinds of sense. How had he not seen it before?

Convincing his wife would be difficult. Laurel was like that 'see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil' monkey where Bonnie was concerned.

Mark sighed, “Maybe you’re right.”

He gripped the knees of his navy blue slacks, shaking his head in resignation. “I guess I’m just grasping at straws.”

Laurel reached over covering his hand with her own. “Mark, honey, we’ll get through this…”

For a brief moment, Mark allowed himself to enjoy the touch of his wife's hand. It was the first time she had expressed any kind of affection toward him in days. Still, he couldn't stop himself from snatching the now unprotected purse from her lap and rifling

through it, tossing the contents, lipstick, tissues, tampons, onto the cracked vinyl seat of the taxi.

Triumphantly, he snagged her cellphone, but Laurel made a lunge for it. Mark yanked his arm back at the elbow; his left fist, clutched firmly around the phone, clocking Laurel, hard, just under her right eye.

Laurel howled.

Mark sat there, stunned stupid. He couldn't believe he had hit her. Of course it was an accident. He had never, would never.

Laurel doubled over, her blonde head in her hands, shoulders shaking, wailing into her lap.

"I'm sorry baby. I didn't mean to..."

But Laurel continued to make terrible, heartbreaking sounds, whimpering and sniffling. In the rearview mirror, Bengoman's eyes judged him.

Mark put down the cellphone, taking Laurel's quaking shoulders in his hands, massaging them as he tried to comfort her.

"Laurel, sweetie, please stop crying. Please…"

In an instant Laurel had the phone in her grasp, and with one smooth motion she hurled it out the window of the speeding taxi. Mark followed the projectile with his eyes, twisting his torso in order to see it through the rear windshield, causing last week's back spasm to return with a sharp, red, flash of pain. The phone bounced once, then shattered into a hundred bits of plastic and metal, joining the rest of the trash on the shoulder of Kula highway.

Laurel shrugged off Mark's clumsy embrace and began slowly replacing all the items he had removed from her purse. Her right eye was already swelling.

Bengoman, drove on, eyes straight ahead, stoic as a Buddha, except for the nearly imperceptible twitch of his ponytail.

Chapter Nineteen

Bonnie

"…The man asked for Febiola Gharavi Palifox. My friend Bea told him I was no longer with Superior Professional Home Service, and the man told Bea, that if she or anyone at Superior hears from me, to let him know. Then he said, it's important, it's about…"

Feby leaned so far into the center of the table that Bonnie leaned forward in kind, and their foreheads nearly touched. The housekeeper's husky, melodic voice was barely audible, "…my son."

This was the third time Bonnie had joined Feby for tea and conversation at the Kozy Kitchen in downtown Webster—one of those coffee shops that equated charm with gingham curtains and dusty bunches of potted plastic geraniums. It had been two weeks since the incident with the cat. The women had met one Saturday afternoon, then the following Wednesday, and now on a Tuesday morning, before Feby began work, but after Bonnie's 'speed-walking' at Webster College.

On her first trip to Webster, Bonnie had observed droves of students running, sometimes alone, Ipod wires trailing from their ears, sometimes in sweaty packs of two and three. She soon learned that early mornings and weekends they were joined by middle-aged, average looking citizens from the community who co-opted the tree lined paths and athletic track, running or walking, sometimes holding tiny colorful dumbbells.

The runners were mostly male, in black shorts and white tees, the walkers mostly female, attired in pastel fleece.

Bonnie had taken the bus to the local Wal-Mart and purchased some cheap grey sweats and puffy white “cross-trainers.”

The morning strolls around campus were the highlight of her day. Invisible again, Bonnie discovered that college students were ridiculously careless. She quickly amassed a collection of cell phones and wallets, passing her evening hours at the Liberty Inn sorting through their contents; old receipts, amateur fake I.D.s, condoms, and dog-eared photos. Most of the kids favored debit cards over cash, but she was getting by.

At some point she was bound to run into Doctor Sherwood, and she practiced in her head what she would say when she did. Comment on the weather, and no she didn't think they'd met before, but then she had one of those faces.

When it happened, he was coming out of the administration building, eyes downcast, absorbed in thought, as if the world was resting on his narrow shoulders. Bonnie increased her speed and changed course, headed straight for him. As the distance between them narrowed, she could see the ink stain on his left cuff and noticed a button on his navy blazer was hanging by a thread. Her heart raced, and not just from the exertion of what was now, a full trot.

It seemed he would not look up, not meet her gaze, so she leaned in, jostling him as he passed.

"Excuse me," she said.

"It's fine," he said, those soft eyes lighting on her for a split second, stopping her dead in her tracks. But his glance went through her, beyond her, to some distant horizon, and he kept walking.

She stood there on the rise of hill, watching his slight figure recede past the bird-spattered stone statue in the middle of the big lawn. When she had been a been a young mother, she'd been warned that having a child was like having your heart walk around outside your body. She'd never really felt that until now, as she lost sight of him in a flood of students.

He didn't remember her at all.

She told herself that maybe this was for the best. The fight had been traumatizing, and if the cops decided to look for whoever flew on Maude's ticket, they'd probably interview her seatmate. Maybe they already had. So the less the Professor could recall about what happened on that plane, the better.

Still, it was intolerable.

“So what do you think, Bonnie?” Feby’s voice was anxious. She held her mug in both hands, her short, clean fingernails lightly tapping the sides, creating ripples in the brown liquid.

This was the reaction Bonnie had counted on, but she pretended to be puzzled, drawing Feby out.

“You’ve lost me. What do you think, Feby?”

“I think the man, the one who called…might be my husband.” Feby swallowed the word husband like a bitter pill, washing it down with a sip of her tea.

Feby was a good person. When Bonnie had expressed an interest in possibly picking up some housekeeping work through Superior, Feby had been generous with phone numbers and connections and all sorts of good advice. Details about her client's preferences; products and methods she preferred.

But now Bonnie was ready to start down her path with Dr. Sherwood, and Feby was in her way.

During their visits, the housekeeper had given way under Bonnie’s subtle poking and prodding. She learned that years previous, Feby and her young son had fled Iran for Canada, where she met and became engaged to Mr. Palifox. The three of them then moved to the U.S. and settled in Buffalo. After many months of cooking, cleaning, and shoveling snow, Mr. Palifox, who sounded like a horse's ass, ditched her. In the meantime her VISA had expired.

Bea was a friend from Buffalo who had moved to Webster to run the office at “Superior Professional Home Service." When Feby called her with her plight, Bea offered her a job, but as soon as Feby had regular clients, Bea encouraged her to get off Superior's books and become an 'independent contractor', because of her legal status.

Bonnie had taken this tidbit back to her hotel and called the INS from a pilfered cell phone. They all but laughed at her. Apparently illegal housekeepers were a dime a dozen and not worth their time. Bonnie upped the ante, implying that Feby was a burqa-wearing suicide bomber on a personal Jihad. This only served to make the nitwit on the

phone more interested in Bonnie, refusing to deal with her unless she divulged her name and personal information. Lazy civil servants. She'd have to be more creative.

Feby had left her son's father behind in Iran. It was clear to Bonnie that, even after many years, Feby lived in constant dread of her ex. He was the reason she'd hooked up with a jerk like Palifox. She'd needed him to get to America, to change her name, to create a new life—an aspiration Bonnie could understand.

Picking up one of the stale biscuits that passed for 'scones' at the Kozy Kitchen, Bonnie broke it in half. She peeled the gold foil from a square of butter.

"The name he used, Gravy-whatever. Was that your married name?"

"Gharavi. Yes. No one here knows me by that name."

Except Bonnie. *I even know the correct spelling*, she thought, buttering her scone, affecting a look of concern.

Feby spilled the contents of her heart, detailing her fears and suspicions; the melodic words rising and falling as Bonnie's mind drifted.

How difficult life must be for a woman like Feby, so obviously foreign, in a small town like Webster, where even the college faculty had a sad lack of diversity. There were a couple Black and Asian professors, a heavyset Latina who wore her dresses too short, and only one male teacher who looked Middle-Eastern. He drove a light blue Honda Accord.

Two days ago Bonnie had waited for him while performing her pre-walk stretches in the faculty parking lot. As he got out of his car she caught his eye and said, "Good

Morning," and he replied in kind, his voice throaty, his accent musical—not precisely like Feby's, but similar.

Bonnie hovered around the faculty parking area for a long while, doing some squats and lunges, until she felt the moment was right. She could hear distant activity on campus, but no one had entered the lot for several minutes.

The baseball bat was hidden in the bed of ivy that bordered the crumbly asphalt. It had been tricky getting it here from the athletic field—the only way to walk off with it was to slide it down one pant leg and into her sock, then limp away stiffed legged.

She tucked the note she had written under the wiper blade of the Honda Accord. Walking around to the rear of the car she took a wide stance, brought the bat back over her shoulder, and let it rip, connecting with the left rear tail lamp.

She dropped the bat, and without a backward glance strolled toward the bus stop.

Thusfar the plan had worked. The professor must've returned to his car, pulled the note Bonnie left under the wiper, and read the apology she wrote from Febiola Gharavi Palifox stating she was sorry her son accidentally broke the taillight playing baseball, along with a contact number—the number of Superior Professional Home Service.

Feby was nervous. She should be.

"The man who called. Did Bea say anything about his voice?" Bonnie asked.

Feby pushed her tea away.

"He was polite, but agitated, and he spoke with an accent, like mine. Oh, Bonnie! Do you think it's my ex-husband? Do you think he's tracked me down?"

Bonnie washed down her last dry bit of scone. She needed this plan to work. She was out of ideas, barring an accident of some sort. The thought of something tragic happening to Feby brought her no pleasure.

"Tracked you down? I don't know, Feby, that sounds a little dramatic."

Wiping the corners of her mouth with her paper napkin, she shrugged, adding, "On the other hand, who else could it be?"

Chapter Twenty

Griffin

Griffin Sherwood had never attended a football game—or any other athletic event held at Webster for that matter. So when Ken Hallinan, a science professor with whom he occasionally caught rides on snow days, asked him if he was going to the Homecoming game, Griffin was surprised when the words "Sure. Why not?" came out of his mouth.

They'd been standing side-by-side in Webster's media room, amid the dull constant hum of the machines, copying, collating, stapling. Griffin was picking up a dozen spiral bound readers for his graduate course on twenty-first century criticism; a compilation of selected essays which included a couple of his most important pieces, despite the fact that they were actually published at the end of the twentieth century. Semantics.

A gangly boy with a protruding Adam's apple placed a tall stack of pastel blue and green diagrams on the counter. Griffin never used colored paper.

"Here you are Professor Hallinan."

"Thanks, Ron."

The boy gave Ken a shy smile and then went off to find Griffin's order. Griffin had been there first, but he lacked Ken's easy rapport. By the time he learned the name of the student who ran the copy room, that student was invariably replaced. He had long ago resigned himself to getting his copies last.

It was a strange and serendipitous occurrence to have Ken bring up this football game, as it had been weighing on Griffin's mind. There had been a frisson of energy in his lecture hall this morning, a super-heated thrum focused on Trey Johnson. At dismissal it swelled into a chorus of voices, "Good luck Trey," "Big game tonight," "Show those fuckers how the bulldogs get it done."

It was Homecoming.

Ken, ever thoughtful, offered him a ride to game. "It'd just be the two of us, the missus is staying home with our boy."

Griffin found Ken's homespun diction perplexing. Hallinan had a PhD in molecular physics from CalTech, and yet he used the colloquialisms of a small town Sheriff.

"Thank you Ken. That would be very kind of you."

The copy attendant, whose name had already slipped Griffin's mind, was still searching the stacks for his order. Griffin attempted some small talk to fill the void.

"So your boy doesn't care for football?"

"Hard to tell, he's only three months old."

Now Griffin remembered. There had been a collection taken up for the new baby recently. But there was always some faculty solicitation going on at Webster for weddings or funerals or births. The sorts of personal milestones Griffin was never a part of.

"Oh, right."

But Ken took no offense. He just grinned his big Ken grin. “So. I’ll swing around for you six-ish?”

“Great.”

“Go Bulldogs!”

“Beg pardon?”

“The Webster mascot.”

“Right. Go Bulldogs.”

#

Griffin had walked past the football stadium hundreds of times during his tenure at Webster, but he had never seen it from this perspective. As he and Ken made their way through the throngs of students, to the narrow set of bleachers reserved for faculty, he was struck by the noise and pageantry and somewhat unnerved by the mob mentality that masquerades as school spirit.

The air was thick with the smell of hot dogs and popcorn. It was a brisk evening and Griffin worried he'd catch a chill with nothing but a light windbreaker over his white button down shirt—but the Webster stands were packed so tightly the cold didn’t have a chance.

The windbreaker had been a last minute choice. Game or no game he felt that as department chair he should comport himself in a dignified manner and was pulling on a navy blazer when he heard the toot of a car horn. Looking out the window he saw Ken

behind the wheel of his SUV wearing a bright orange sweatshirt emblazoned with a bulldog—a bulldog with encephalitis, judging by its outrageously huge head. Griffin removed the blazer, replacing it with the casual green nylon windbreaker he occasionally wore for weekend outings on his bicycle.

He may have been only person on the Webster side who wasn't wearing the school colors, or name, or mascot. As they ascended the steps to join the dozen or so teachers and administrators wearing their Webster caps and shaking their pom-poms, Griffin could hear students hollering, "Hey Hallinan!" and "Whut-up K-Hal!"

Ken reached out, shook hands, waved. Once, in a gesture Griffin found completely befuddling, Hallinan looked up toward the top of the stadium, made little circles with his right forearm and barked loudly like a dog. This was met with a cacophony of barking and other dog noises.

They squeezed in on the end of a bench, Griffin sandwiched between Ken and a beefy red-faced fellow Griffin recognized from the history department. The man slapped Ken hard on the back in greeting, so when Ken introduced him, Griffin braced himself, but Jerry Cazel just extended a meaty hand that swallowed Griffin's in a hearty handshake.

"Just in time for kick-off," Cazel yelled over the crowd noise, "You catch many games this year Griffin?"

Griffin shook his head, "This is my first."

"Well it's great to have you out here supporting the kids. We might not have a shot at play-offs this year, but we got a couple outstanding players…"

The roar of the assembled masses hemorrhaged into a head splitting crescendo as the entire arena came to its feet. Beneath the blazing stadium lights the field took on a magical quality, somehow deeper and greener and wider, as in the distance the Webster players came pouring from some hidden tunnel, a thundering horde of Gladiators. A line from the Yeats poem sprang to his lips.

"Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."

The game that followed was anticlimactic, still the spirited crowd insisted on standing almost the entire time. Griffin would sit, hoping others would follow suit, but instead found himself in a little cave carved out by the massive behinds of his colleagues. He was punched and pummeled as people stepped over or around him, at one point spilling something cold and sticky down his neck.

Ken and Cazel engaged in interminable analysis of each play pitched at full volume with Griffin trapped between them, spattered by their exuberant saliva. Even so, the game made no sense whatsoever. Griffin could, however, read a scoreboard, and at halftime Webster was losing by quite a bit.

Ken and Cazel wandered off to join the huge line snaking around the stadium to the Men's restroom. Griffin needed to go, but lining up with students to use a public urinal was out of the question. His bladder was much too shy. Instead, he remained in the bleachers and watched the odd little homecoming tableau, ignored by all except Griffin and a smattering of sorority girls.

He was tempted to leave, to walk home, but didn't want to be rude.

Ken and Cazel still hadn't returned when the second half began. By now whatever 'thrill of the new' the game had held for Griffin had completely worn off, and he regretted the entire evening. He had been interested in seeing Trey Johnson, curious what all the fuss was about, but couldn't tell one player from the other in their clunky helmets.

Fortunately, the Webster fans had also lost their enthusiasm, and weren't standing anymore, so at least he could sit and watch, like a rational human being. Griffin shut his eyes against the blistering lights. He could be home right now in his comfortable study, writing, or enjoying some music.

"Get it to Johnson, he's wide open..."

Griffin sprang to his feet and looked downfield. There was a tangled swarm of players in a chaotic crush, and then—just one. Tall, strong, graceful, precise, breaking away, sprinting down the field like Apollo with winged feet.

That a youth gifted with such athleticism should also be gifted with intellect seemed an unfair bounty of the gods, but there it was. Griffin was humbled, remembering his suspicions that Trey had plagiarized that first paper, when on further reflection, he'd realized that Trey's work had a familiar ring because it sounded as if Griffin had written it himself—back when his work was still brimming with passion.

The player who was holding the ball managed to stagger back two steps from the mob and throw the ovoid long, and high. For a moment it was lost in the glare, before descending like a dove into the open hands of Trey Johnson. Two players from the opposing team were in pursuit, and Griffin could not control the words that sprang from his throat.

“Run Trey. Run!"

Griffin was mortified at his lack of restraint, but his voice was lost among the multitudes all on their feet now, all yelling for Trey to run! to go! to win! And Trey, with super-human dexterity, twisted sideways, evading one of the marauding defenseman and leaping over the other, diving into the end zone in a half somersault. Springing back to his feet in exaltation, the football held aloft, and with it the hearts of everyone in attendance.

Webster lost 27 – 7. Griffin had never witnessed anything so thrilling in his life.

Chapter Twenty-one

Bonnie

Feby didn't show up at the Kozy Kitchen Thursday morning. Bonnie hadn't expected her to, but she ordered her tea and scone and waited nearly an hour anyway.

The previous day Bonnie had gone back to the Webster faculty parking lot with a new note— a simple and brief "sorry"—followed by the name Febiola Gharavi and the street address of Superior Professional Home Service. She left it on the windshield before kicking the rear fender of the blue Honda, leaving a small dent. Cheap Japanese import.

These were paranoid times. Bonnie had carefully fed Feby's fears, knowing she would in turn feed Bea's, and then gambled that Bea would be narrow-minded enough to assume any testy Middle-Eastern man carrying a piece of paper with Feby's old name on it, asking about her son, could only be her crazy estranged Iranian husband. That Bea would not believe his story about a damaged car, if he even offered one. Playing her part in this drama was probably the closest Bea would ever get to being a heroine in a Lifetime TV movie, and she'd perform predictably, saving Feby from the Godless men who ran her backwards country.

Bonnie paid her bill. With a fresh spring in her step, she headed the six blocks to Dr. Griffin Sherwood's house.

Professor Sherwood never came home before four. She had plenty of time. Just to be certain the house was empty, that Feby was really gone, she mounted the wide porch steps and rang the bell. Then she knocked.

With a sense of entitlement so powerful she didn't have to pretend, Bonnie tried the front door. It was locked. Beneath the welcome mat, she found nothing but a scuttling beetle, which she ground into the porch with her cross trainers. Standing on tip-toe, she ran her hand around the top of the doorsill.

No key.

There was no collection of potted plants or ceramic frogs or other likely places for concealing a key on the porch. So Bonnie descended the stairs and made her way around the back of the house, not bothering to creep or skulk. She didn't look like a prowler, and if she didn't act like a prowler, well then, she wasn't a prowler. Crunching down the gravel path between the tall brown weeds of the neglected side yard, she heard voices from the neighbor's house in shrill conversation followed by giddy laughter. The television.

The back door to the kitchen was also locked. The valance was at half-mast, and cupping her hands to her eyes, Bonnie peered through the paned glass. There was a slip of paper underneath the saltcellar on the butcher-block table. In her panic, Feby might leave town without telling Bonnie, but she would never leave without notifying her employer.

Bonnie retreated into the patchy, leaf-strewn grass of Professor Sherwood's backyard. One of the second story windows was raised just enough to see a flutter of white curtain, as if the house was teasing her with a flirty hello.

She continued around the exterior perimeter of the house, admiring the Victorian's classic details while despairing at its impenetrability. There was only one logical way in—a shame, really.

In the gravel of the sideyard, she found a heavy stone the size of her fist. She carried this to the rear door, where she removed her right shoe and sock. Wrapping the stone in the white cotton tubesock, she tapped the lowest left window pane on the kitchen door. It only took three sharp taps for the window to shatter.

Tossing the rock, she pulled the cotton sock high over her arm, swept the broken glass from the six-inch square frame, reached through and unlocked the door. There was no deadbolt. Well, that would be one of her first projects once she was running the household.

Avoiding the shards of glass with her still bare foot, Bonnie stepped into Doctor Sherwood's gleaming white kitchen. She took a deep breath and let the sensation of rightness wash over her. During the last two weeks there had been moments, when she had doubted herself. But there were no doubts now; this was where she was meant to be.

Taking a seat in the same chair where she'd so recently shared a cup of tea with Feby, she shook away the splinters that clung to her sock and tugged it back onto her foot, followed by her shoe. She then removed the note from under the saltcellar. Within the folds of the paper she found a house key.

Dear Mr. Sherwood, I'm afraid I've been called away on a family emergency. In the meantime I suggest you call Superior Professional Home…

Bla-bla-bla.

Bonnie laid the paper on the table and searching through the kitchen drawers found a pad and pen. She began her own note, her first message to Professor Sherwood, in a close approximation of Feby's penmanship.

Dear Mr. Sherwood, I've been called away on a family emergency. I have already notified Superior Professional Home Services and they are sending a qualified replacement so your service need not be interrupted.

Sincerely,

Feby Palifox

Bonnie thought a moment, and added

P.S. Sorry about the window. My fault.

Satisfied, she placed this new note under the saltcellar before tearing up the one written by Feby and tossing the pieces onto the floor where they mingled with the broken glass. Then she began searching for a broom and dustpan.

#

All it took was a little shove here, a little tug there, and now everything was falling into place.

Bonnie checked her tote one more time for the folded paper tracing she'd made of the Professor's window, squeezing it in her fingers to confirm the glass shard was still

wrapped inside. Tomorrow she would take this to Webster Glassmasters, which she located in the Yellow Pages, to insure the replacement was a perfect match.

She had only allowed herself one hour to walk through Professor Sherwood's house, just a few minutes in each room, not touching, simply admiring and assessing the home where she would begin her new life. Her old life already seemed far away.

Let sleeping dogs lie, she thought.

Still, it would be nice to hear her sister's voice, even if Bonnie couldn't yet share the news of her own good fortune. And she was just a teeny bit nervous—no, not nervous—she was curious, whether there had been any fallout when the airport fools had finally discovered Maude in the handicap stall. Curious whether the authorities were wondering the whereabouts of Maude's expensive handbag, or her first-class ticket. Curious whether they had, perhaps, questioned any of the guests in the premiere lounge.

She cranked open the drawer of the wobbly end table where she stored her collection of cellphones, right next to Gideon's bible. A couple of them had been in there for over a week, and they still worked. Wasteful rich kids—can't be bothered to report a lost phone as long as mommy and daddy are footing the bill.

It was too much to hope for an outgoing number with a Seattle area code, but she'd managed to scavenge a couple of cheap, prepaid cells with numbers that didn't start with a 585 or 716, the codes for the surrounding areas of upstate New York. Laurel might not notice where she was calling from, but Mark would.

She selected a phone, felt the smooth weight of it in her palm. Noted the time on the LED readout and subtracted three hours. If she called now, Mark would still be at the office. But just in case, best to call Laurel's cell.

“Hello?”

“Bonnie? Bonnie, oh thank God.”

Laurel’s voice was soft and faraway.

“Laurel?”

“Are you okay? Why didn’t you return my calls?”

Rolling back onto the bed, Bonnie stacked the flabby Liberty Inn pillows against the wall with her free hand for some support. “Things have been crazy, with all the confusion and last minute change of plans…and then I forgot my phone on the plane," she said.

She'd actually dumped the phone into the sanitary napkin disposal box at the JFK restroom. Her cell service had been part of Mark's family plan, and it just felt like the right thing to do.

Bonnie continued, "It took forever to get a new one. But I did try to call you from the clinic. It went straight to voicemail.” This was a safe bid, as Laurel still got confused over how her voicemail worked.

“I, um, lost my phone too. You must've called then. I only just got it replaced."

“Really? Aren’t we a pair? I’m sorry I’ve been out of touch…” Bonnie paused and sighed heavily for effect, “But there have been some serious complications with Roxanne’s treatment. Very serious.”

She let that sink in, then brightened, “But enough about my problems. How was Hawaii? Did you come home with a glorious tan?"

There were some snuffling sounds on the other end of the line. And then the dam burst and Laurel spilled a crazy story; about June, and the hospital, and the hearing and the lawyer. About renting an apartment in Hawaii and spending her days with June in the pediatric ward under the watchful supervision of Children and Family Services.

Bonnie thought a moment about the special bottles she'd prepared to insure her niece slept on the plane—but only a moment—because then Laurel told her about Mark’s suspicions, and the fight in the taxi.

“He hit you?”

“He didn’t mean it. He just wanted the phone,” Laurel said.

“What an asshole.”

“Bonnie, what he said about you, about you and the baby…”

“It's okay. I know that you know I'd never hurt June. What possible reason could Mark have for blaming me?”

“Just that you took care of her, and that you left just when...when she got sick."

Bonnie knew Laurel was telling her the truth. Honesty was one of her more charming quirks. Laurel had never knowingly deceived anyone in her life. Which was why you could never tell her anything in confidence, unless you *wanted* other people to hear it.

“This is really crazy. Even for Mark. Unless…”

“What?”

“I don’t know. But maybe he’s pointing the finger at me to avoid suspicion?”

“What does that mean?”

Over the constant din of highway traffic, Bonnie heard the click of heels on concrete walking past her door…*2...3...4...sometimes it took Laurel a while…*

“Oh, Bonnie. No. Mark could never…”

“Of course not. I’m so tired I’m not thinking straight. It’s just, well, he would get so upset all the time whenever she was fussy—really upset."

There was a long silence at the other end of the phone.

Maybe she had overplayed.

“Listen to me. Now I’m the one making false accusations. It’s probably just some incompetent hospital mix up with the drug tests.”

But she could tell Laurel was thinking.

“Oh Bonnie, I wish you were here. Could you come to Hawaii? Please?”

Bonnie heard the rumble of a car engine turning over outside, and her room was momentarily lit by the glare of headlights pouring through the shabby drapes, dancing across the walls like a searchlight in a prison escape movie.

“I would if I could, but Roxanne is having a lot of trouble. I’m ashamed to say it, but she relapsed. She was using again.”

“Oh no!”

“She’s back in recovery. I don‘t feel like I can leave her right now”

“I’m sorry. I’m being selfish.”

“Don’t worry. This will all work itself out, Laurel. The most important thing you can do is stay strong for your baby girl, Okay?”

“Okay.”

“You let Bonnie worry about everything else.”