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# Young Girls Are Coming to the Canyon

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# Young Girls Are Coming to the Canyon

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*YOUNG GIRLS ARE COMING TO THE CANYON*

By

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Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

Stephen F. Austin State University

In Partial Fulfillment

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May 2018

*YOUNG GIRLS ARE COMING TO THE CANYON*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Set mainly in Los Angeles in 2008, *Young Girls Are Coming to the Canyon* is a novella that explores familial relations and what truly constitutes a family. Joni and Grace face the sudden, violent death of their estranged mother, Beverly, and decide to search for their father's family. As Joni struggles with commitment and Grace is conflicted about impending motherhood, one relative leads to another and they travel across the country to discover Beverly's secrets, as well as the truth about their father.

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## CHAPTER ONE

Coming home was never an option for Joni, at least not in her mind. Bev had done her best to make sure of that, so the fact that she was sitting on a bench outside of LAX at the crack of dawn, waiting for her sister, Grace, to pick her up was surreal. It wasn't that she didn't love the idea of California; she could have moved anywhere outside of Los Angeles, but she had needed to put as much distance as possible between herself and the west coast. To truly escape, she'd needed to change the scenery, which required her to purchase flannel shirts and cowboy boots with ornate stitching.

Joni had only seen her mother, Beverly, twice since she left home nearly seven years ago; once three Christmases ago when Joni had surprised her with a visit and again on breaking news of the shooting that interrupted the episode of *Jeopardy* she'd been watching. No one ever expects to see someone they know in those reports and Joni was no different. She'd sat stunned and waited for the phone call from Grace that came half an hour later. It seemed someone had leaked the information before the police had had a chance to reach out to next-of-kin. Grace asked if she'd come home. "Of course," she'd said, and told her she'd let her know when she had flight information. She opened the browser and googled "cheap airline tickets," clicked on the first link, and stared blankly at the scrolling banner of happy families and businessmen checking luggage and boarding flights. Rather than going any further, she left her office, which was really



just a corner of her living room that allowed her to face away from the television and continued watching *Jeopardy*.

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Grace pulled up to the terminal and waved to Joni but didn't get out. Joni tossed her bag into the popped trunk, slammed it shut, and slid into the passenger seat. Grace didn't wait for her to buckle her seatbelt before she took off.

"Sorry, Jo, but you know this terminal gets busy. You've gotta move pretty fast or people get pissed." She smiled weakly and patted her big sister's knee. "How was your flight?"

"Nothing special. So, have you been in touch with the funeral director or anything? Made any plans?"

"Well, no, I thought I'd wait for you to get here. I really don't want to do it by myself."

"I'm not sure I'll be able to contribute much. I don't know if you're aware, but I haven't really had much contact with Bev since I moved." Joni turned up the AC in the car and flicked her sunglasses down onto her nose. "Jesus Christ, it's hot."

Things hadn't changed much since she'd left, aside from a few fast food and strip mall additions. Joni imagined what it must have looked like that summer in 1967 when Beverly, wispy cornsilk hair and freckles, had moved there. She'd shown pictures to Joni and Grace, pictures of her at the beach with ruffled bikinis and round, oversized sunglasses, and outside the movie theater in striped bellbottoms, her fingers in a peace

sign, the marquis behind her with *THE GRADUATE* written in blocky letters. She'd been beautiful and carefree back then.

They passed Wonderland Drive and Joni spotted the famous split-level white house where four people, along with John Holmes' career, died. There was a rental sign out front. Always a morbid child, she had wished they'd lived nearby when it happened, but they hadn't arrived in Laurel Canyon until five years later. Locals still talked about it and various other crimes, sometimes with a twinkle in their eyes, as if they were proud of their gruesome place in history.

Bev's house was four blocks away, a brick two-story with white shutters and a sad, overgrown yard with more junk on it than she'd ever seen: broken planters, faded lawn ornaments, and the occasional piece of gardening equipment. Grace pulled into the driveway but neither of them attempted to get out of the car. The house, now that it was uninhabited, seemed so much larger. Their mother's influence had always filled it nearly to capacity. Joni remembered a time when all she thought of was escape and, before she'd even set foot onto the property, those familiar feelings had begun to creep up on her.

"We should go inside," Grace said, but made no effort to do so. They sat for a few minutes.

"What's up?" Joni finally asked.

"I'm just waiting for you," she said.

Grace led the way up the cluttered path and unlocked the door. The crushing scent of menthol cigarettes, baby powder, and floral perfume greeted them.

“Why is the yard such a mess? I’m surprised the city hasn’t fined her.”

“She got a warning in the mail last month. The guy who mows her yard usually piles all that stuff up in the backyard where no one can see it, but Bev always brought it back out after he left. She said the city was trying to stifle her artistic nature,” Grace said. “She fired him three months ago and I doubt she was very nice about it. I thought about calling him but I’m too embarrassed.”

Joni offered to do it. She was long past feeling embarrassed by her mother’s behavior.

\*\*\*

Joni’s old bedroom was a time machine: posters of No Doubt and Leonardo DiCaprio, a vanity with plastic containers of dried up body glitter and scented nail polish, and stacks of magazines beside the dresser. She took one from the top, an issue of *Seventeen* with Claire Danes on the cover, nearly pristine in condition aside from the thick layer of dust. She wiped it off with her hand and clapped the dust onto the floor, then skimmed through the dating tips and took a quiz on how to tell if you’re a good kisser. According to the magazine, she was.

Joni slipped her phone from the front pocket of her bag and plugged it in to charge. She had a missed call and text from Nick, her boyfriend in Birmingham, but she shut the screen off and laid it on the nightstand. She knew he only wanted to check on her, to make sure she’d arrived safely, but this trip was about more than Bev. It was about breathing room.

Sitting on the bed, she kicked her shoes off and dug her toes into the stained brown carpet. A warmth spread up through them and, for the first time since she'd walked through the door, she was calm. The giant poster of Keanu Reeves sprinting from a flaming bus had long since escaped her ceiling and was twisted on the floor near her window. Joni picked it up and felt for the corner tape to check its stickiness. Standing on her bed, she pushed the corners to the plaster, but it fell down on her.

Joni stumbled down the stairs four hours later, still drunk from a nap. She'd never been a napper, though people were often surprised to discover she didn't care much for sleep. They assumed all introverts liked that sort of relief, but Joni saw sleep as a waste of time, even if all she'd be doing otherwise was reading a book or watching TV.

Beverly used to take naps every afternoon from noon to two. Joni took advantage of the unsupervised time during the summer, sitting beneath the eave of the house in the backyard and smoking what was left on her mother's cigarette butts. Grace would scowl at her and threaten to tell, but she never did. Instead, a family friend found out and told Bev, but she honestly didn't care that her ten-year-old daughter was already damaging her pre-adolescent lungs. After all, she'd begun smoking when she was only eight. She'd stolen a dime from her grandmother's change purse and walked down to the nearest convenience store to purchase a pack with her cousin. Once, Joni's grandmother had called to check on the girls, asked what she was doing, and Joni replied, "Watching people have sex on TV." That was the end of Bev's naps.

Grace was busy on the phone, making arrangements she'd discussed with Joni in the car. They'd decided on De Havilland's Funeral Home because of the name. Bev, being a born Southerner, always appreciated *Gone with the Wind* as a true historical period piece. "That's really the way it was, girls," she'd say, smoke billowing from her thinly painted lips as she pointed her cigarette toward the television.

"We have an appointment in one hour, Jo. He was able to fit us in just before closing. Tomorrow morning, bright and early, we'll see the florist and decide on the arrangements. Should we do an 'in lieu of flowers' or just let people send whatever they want?"

"Yeah, in lieu of flowers, please donate to the American Cancer Society in her name," she joked.

"You're not funny," Grace said.

"I know."

\*\*\*

The funeral home smelled like chalky peppermints and new carpet. Grace was rattling a candy wrapper in her pocket, something that normally wouldn't bother Joni, but in this excruciating silence, the crinkling sounded like a jackhammer.

"Stop fidgeting," she told Grace.

Jason de Havilland was a fourth-generation mortician. He'd been presiding over funerals for the past twenty years and attending them since he could remember. Later, on the ride back to their mother's house, Grace would comment on the morbidity of a

child becoming accustomed to seeing dead bodies. Joni thought it sounded nice, like a perfect education. The best way to be comfortable with death is to be surrounded by it.

De Havilland took them to a room in the back that contained numerous caskets in any color or material you could imagine. Once he'd left them to make their decision, Joni climbed into a pastel pink coffin and posed as a corpse.

"I think I'll take this one for myself," she said, fingering the lining.

Grace didn't say it, but her eyes did. *You're not funny.*

"Don't you think Mom would want something elegant? Maybe mahogany? Or cherry. She loved cherry."

"She's dead, Grace. I say we bury her in the cheapest container we can find."

"Don't be so crude," Grace said.

They did, however, agree on one of the cheapest caskets available. It was plain, but still made it seem as if they cared about their mother's passage into the hereafter.

"Are there any songs you'd like us to play?" de Havilland asked.

Joni snorted as Grace elbowed her in the rib.

"We'll think about it and let you know in the morning, if that's okay," Grace said.

"Please do. We want it to be perfect for you. I look forward to hearing more from you tomorrow."

They picked up two frozen pizzas, a six-pack, a liter of Coca-Cola, and three pints of Ben & Jerry's before going back to the house. Joni texted Nick, telling him she was sorry she hadn't called him back, that she was really busy with the funeral

arrangements, and that she'd talk to him soon. The girls had set it upon themselves to start clearing things out that night and going through old LPs, cassettes, and CDs to find funeral music.

"It can't be anything too irreverent," Grace had said. "No 'Ding Dong, the Witch is Dead' or 'Maneater'."

"What'd you do with Bev's personal stuff? You know, the stuff she had on her when it happened?" Joni asked.

"It's in a box by the door. I haven't been able to look at it."

"Let's open it," Joni suggested.

"I know you don't care that she died, Jo, but I do. It's not a joke, you know. I'd just like to wait before I go through our mother's blood-stained purse if you don't mind."

"You're right. I'm sorry. I really am sorry that she died. Truly," she said. She hoped Grace believed her.

"What do you think her last thoughts were?" Grace asked.

"Well, the guy was holding a gun to her head, so she was probably afraid. I'm sure she was thinking that she didn't want to die."

Grace nodded and picked up a Bob Dylan record. "What about one of these?"

"You know how she felt about him, Grace. Hey, what about passive aggressive irreverence?"

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A brilliant spray of pink carnations and baby's breath was chosen, mostly by Grace. Joni tried to imagine the life of a florist. It must be similar to the life of a flight attendant, she thought, always seeing people on their best and worst days. People only buy flowers to celebrate or mourn. She wondered about the suicide rate of florists.

After stopping by Target for a pair of black pumps and waterproof mascara, Grace swung by the funeral home to drop off the list of songs they'd chosen: "Young Girls are Coming to the Canyon" by The Mamas and the Papas, a song Bev had sworn was written about her, "Long as I Can See the Light" by Creedence Clearwater Revival, and finally, "Sleepwalk" by Santo & Johnny. Joni had pulled the last two from her own funeral playlist, reluctant to share something she loved for such an occasion, but there was no way she'd be able to play all 73 songs at her own anyhow. "Small sacrifice," she'd said.

They spent the day calling relatives and friends who were far down on the list, the ones Grace hadn't been able to get to on her own. Joni didn't expect any of them to show since the funeral was taking place in less than twenty-four hours, but they were those kinds of people who wanted to find out firsthand, so they could get all the details.

The doorbell rang as Joni was finishing up a call to her cousin, Shelly, who'd moved to Florida when they were children. She welcomed the interruption and hurried off the phone to answer the door. An oddly familiar face greeted her.

"Hey, Joni. How are you holding up?"



He was far taller than last time she'd seen him, but his skin was still the same clay color it'd always been and he was still thin as a rail. He'd gained a confidence that was evident in his casual lean on the door jamb.

"I'm doing okay, Robbie. Thanks for asking. What's going on?"

"I've been taking care of your mom's yard for the past year or so, and I know she liked things a particular way, but I was wondering if you'd like me to clean things up and do something about all," he waved his arm at the yard, "of that."

"I was meaning to call you, actually. That'd be a big help. Is there somewhere you can just haul all of it away to?"

He pursed his lips, but nodded. "I can take it to the dump if you're sure you don't want it."

"We don't," she said. "How much?"

"Consider it a condolence gift," he said, and jogged down the steps toward his truck.

Joni watched him from the front window as he unloaded his equipment. He noticed her there and waved before putting on his gloves. No wedding ring, she thought.

"Hey, Grace, did you know Robbie was mowing Mom's yard?"

"On the phone!" she shouted back.

Joni joined her in the dining room, the sheets and scraps of paper, old telephone books with tribal designs on the cover scattered between their two chairs. She sat down and called the next person on the list.

*BEV AT THIRTEEN*

Bev opened the back passenger door of her father's '64 Rambler American station wagon and pulled the waist of her pants down a little to better expose her midriff. Her sister, Stacy, usually accompanied them to family movie night on Thursday, but she'd been allowed just this once to stay home and study for a geometry test she was supposed to take the next day. Stacy had confided to Bev that she was inviting Mark Spivey over to make out.

Bev's dad had reluctantly agreed to see *The Graduate*, mostly because he didn't know what it was about. Bev had sold it to him as a classic American love story, which made him cringe. Her mother thought it sounded nice and so he'd acquiesced. They'd only been living in Los Angeles for five months and Bev's mother was still playing photographer every chance she got. She liked sending them back to her friends in Birmingham in an attempt to show them how much better they were all doing now that they were west coasters.

"Let me take a picture, honey!" her mother said.

While her father bought the tickets, Bev posed in front of the marquis, one hand on her cocked hip and the other forming a peace sign. Her mother snapped the photo and then turned to take random photos of passers-by and the landscape. Bev's father waited for them near the door.

After the movie, they all rode home without speaking to one another. Bev heard her father muttering, "Classic American love story, my ass," under his breath as he

twisted his moustache with his left hand. They pulled into the driveway and Bev saw Stacy's bedroom light flicker on.

## CHAPTER TWO

The lawn was looking better than Joni had ever remembered it. Robbie had stacked the miscellaneous junk on the other side of his truck and was raking the cut grass into neat piles. She remembered back in grade school when he'd made piles of things on the playground or in the classroom: Legos, crayons, even rocks. There was never any order to it, but he preferred for things to be in small groups, the same way he preferred to interact with others.

She went outside to offer him a bottle of water. Silently, he took it from her and drained it.

"Once I'm finished here, I'll drive home, unload, and bring the trailer back so I can load up that stuff. Shouldn't take too long."

"It's no problem. Thanks for doing it." She smiled. "Hey, do you want some company on the ride? It'd be nice to see someone I know other than Grace."

"I'd like that," he said, then turned back to the dried piles of grass.

Joni went back inside and ran up to her bedroom. She couldn't change clothes—he'd think it was weird. She wondered why she was even concerned about her appearance. She had Nick waiting for her back home. She leaned over the vanity to check her reflection. She looked tired, older than she should. Joni tugged at the bags beneath her eyes and huffed. "In case you were considering it, just imagine how you'd

look if you had a husband and a crying baby,” she told herself. She went back downstairs to wait for him.

“What do you want for dinner?” Grace asked.

“I don’t really care,” she said. “I’m going to go with Robbie to the dump. I don’t know how long we’ll be gone.”

“He’s a lot different these days, huh?”

“I can’t really say. I’ve barely spoken to him,” Joni said.

“Trust me. Let’s just say he doesn’t mind being touched anymore,” Grace said. She smirked and made her way to the kitchen. Joni followed.

“What do you mean by that? Did you sleep with him or something?”

“Absolutely not. I’m just saying that I’ve seen him around, out and about with a lot of different girls and he seems to be doing okay. It isn’t all bad, Jo. Yeah, he gets around but at least he’s gotten over some of that stuff from when we were kids.”

Joni’s shoulders relaxed. She hadn’t even noticed she was so tense.

“That’s good. He was a sweet kid.”

He picked her up half an hour later and she noticed he hadn’t bothered to shower or change his clothes either. He honked the horn and she took off out the door, opening the creaky door of his truck and hopping inside.

“Sorry to be so rude but the dump closes in less than an hour,” he said. He smiled at her and reversed out of the driveway. Jackson Browne was on the radio and he turned it up, tapping his steering wheel to the beat of “You Love the Thunder.”

Joni waited for the song to end before she spoke. “So, besides mowing my mom’s lawn, what are you up to these days?”

He shrugged. “Landscaping and lawn service on weekdays. Bartending over at The Spare Room on weekends. I don’t have time for much else. What about you?”

She didn’t want to tell him she was unemployed, so she said, “I’m an artist.”

“No shit. What kind of art?”

“Painting. And sculpture.” Joni couldn’t draw a straight line.

“Your mom never mentioned that, but then again, she didn’t talk to me much. It makes sense now why she was always complaining about me messing up her yard. She told me once that it was an ‘art installment.’”

“Yeah, well, that was Bev.”

Robbie turned the volume down on the radio.

“I forgot you never called her Mom. I know you had a rough relationship with her and everything, but I’m sorry about what happened. She didn’t deserve to go out like that,” Robbie said.

“I suppose having your brains blown out by a bank robber is an unpleasant way to go. She really didn’t deserve it, but at least it was quick.”

He nodded.

“Are you married? Kids?” Joni asked.

Robbie chuckled. “No wife and no kids. What about you? I don’t imagine the artsy lifestyle leaves room for a lot of relationships.”

“That’s true. No husband. No kids,” she said. “It’s just me. Sort of.”

“So, why Birmingham? Do you guys have family there or something?”

“Bev grew up there. She wouldn’t really talk about it, but I always got the sense she hated it. I figured it was the one place she’d never go.”

Joni leaned over and twisted the volume knob, blaring Crosby, Stills and Nash above the noise of the highway and rattling garbage dragging behind them.

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It was nearly dark by the time he dropped her off. Grace was waiting up for her, half a pizza on the coffee table and an episode of *Intervention* keeping her company. Joni sunk into the couch beside her and took the half-eaten pizza slice from Grace’s hand. Grace stared hard at Joni.

“What the hell was that?” she asked.

“I’m too tired to lean forward and get a fresh piece,” Joni mumbled between bites.

“Bitch,” Grace said before starting on another piece. “I take it the drive to the dump wasn’t all you’d hoped it’d be.”

Joni finished her pizza and sat up. “I wasn’t hoping it’d be anything, Grace.”

“I told you he was different,” she said.

They completed the episode without speaking. The night owl that she was, Joni wasn’t ready for bed even if it meant she might doze through her mother’s funeral. I’m a horrible person, she thought. Grace suggested they continue cleaning out their mother’s bedroom, hoping the busy work would eventually wear her out, at least mentally.

There were shoeboxes and suitcases full of photos. Grace opened each one, rubbing her fingers along the edges and smiling at memories. Sometimes she'd hand it over to Joni, saying, "Remember this?" Sometimes Joni did remember. Joni had many memories of those photos, not just of the taking, but of looking at them while their mother was out of the house. Joni would stretch as far as possible on her tiptoes and pull the closest one down from the closet shelf. She'd lean against the bed and smile at vacations and birthdays until she heard the car door outside.

Joni had brought her friends in once to look at them, but they were more interested in the collection of erotic romance novels, joking about Reginald's member and the over-the-top descriptions. Joni wasn't interested but sometimes she'd let them sneak a few out to take home as long as they promised not to tell where they came from if they were caught.

Reaching up now, Joni felt a bundle farther back against the wall. She jumped a little and was able to pull it and a ton of dust down on her. Joni saw her mother, that familiar image, flaxen-haired and nubile, but these were photos she'd never seen. She wiped them off with the hem of one of Bev's dresses and sat beside her sister on the floor. Joni slid the rubber band off and stared. Bev stood between two boys, older than her judging by the amount of facial hair. She was older than the previous photos Joni had seen. The man on the left grinned, his flat, white teeth in contrast against his nearly black mustache. The other man's coloring was similar, probably related, but he wasn't happy about taking the picture. His long hair fell across his eyes, but he was turned to the corner and Joni wondered what he'd been looking at, if anything. She was laughing



and holding a beer in one hand. Joni checked the back of the photo where she saw, “Jim’s BBQ – June 1980.”

“This was taken the year before I was born,” Joni said. She passed it to Grace.

“Do you recognize these guys?” Grace asked.

Joni shook her head. “Probably just some friends of hers.”

The next photo was of Bev and the smiling man again. It looked like they were at some sort of night club and they were both obviously drunk. Joni saw in the mirrored background the image of the other man from the previous photo. This time, his hair was shoved away from his face and he was laughing.

“Wait a second. Grace, is that Dad?”

Grace grabbed the photo and examined it.

“Jesus Christ.” She put it down. “Why didn’t she show us these?”

Joni had only the vaguest memories of her father. Just a year after Grace was born, when Joni was five, he shot himself on an overpass near their house. Very few photos of him remained in their house, but never on display, and every time the girls asked to see more, Beverly told them there weren’t any, that they should only be concerned with their new father, whomever that might have been at the time. Now, orphaned and confused, they’d found something of a treasure trove—images of their parents when they were happy. The back of the photo read “Beverly and Doug – April 1980.”

“Who is Doug?” Grace asked.

“They look pretty close, huh?”

“Too close,” Grace said.

“Maybe he thought so, too,” Joni said, referring to their father’s expression in the previous photo.

There were sixteen more photos, some with their dad, some with Doug, and some with others they didn’t recognize. One of the photos was taken when Bev was a child. She was hugging a black woman’s skirted leg tightly, the woman’s hand resting gently on Bev’s head. “Miss Caroline and Beverly, 1962,” it said on the back. The last one was a photo of Doug holding newborn Joni.

Joni laid awake that night, her thoughts more uncontrollable than usual. Was Doug her uncle? Her real father? Just some guy her parents had both known? Why were they hidden in the closet? Who was Miss Caroline? She tried to piece everything together. There was snow in some of the photos, but maybe they were taken on vacation. She hated not knowing more and having no trail of breadcrumbs to follow. She hated her mother for being so secretive about that period of her life. About all periods of her life. Joni wouldn’t even know who to call to find out more. Shortly after her father’s death, Bev cut all ties with his family. Joni had no memory of them. She wondered if they ever thought about her or Grace.

*BEV AT TWENTY-SEVEN*

Bev had been waiting in the bathroom for two hours. The test was ready. She stood and picked the vial up, then noticed the brown circle indicating she was in fact pregnant. She quickly wrapped it in toilet paper and pushed it to the bottom of the trash can. Bev and Randy had decided when they got married not to try for children. They liked their independence. She'd been taking birth control since then, but she guessed she was one of the few unlucky ones for which the pill had been ineffective.

She told Randy when he got home from work that evening and reminded him that the test wasn't foolproof; she'd still need to see a doctor to be positive. Bev had expected him to be upset but he smiled and spun her around. When she said she hadn't decided if she was going to keep it or not, Randy told her there was nothing to decide. From that moment on, he'd doted on her like never before. She'd stopped spending so much time with Doug because of it. Bev honestly didn't know who the father was—Randy or Doug—but she thought, or hoped, they looked enough alike that it would never be questioned.

When Joni arrived, she favored Bev more than anyone else and Bev took that as a sign. She swore to God she'd never be with Doug in that way again and she'd meant it. She kept her promise for a while, but when Randy's moods began to turn dark, just about the time when Joni was turning a year old, she broke it.

### CHAPTER THREE

The funeral home was decorated with an array of flowers and inspirational plaques with Bible verses on them. Joni was grateful, of course, but thought none of these people had actually known Bev. Their mother had despised church since her last husband, Greg, had left her for a woman they shared a pew with. “Sometimes even churchgoing men have the devil in them,” she’d said.

Grace and Joni hugged the guests and listened to their heartfelt stories about working with their mother or playing cards with her on Thursday nights. Only a few relatives could make it on such short notice, but Joni enjoyed seeing distant cousins, aunts, and uncles. Their Aunt Stacy had been unable to make it; she’d suffered a severe stroke two years before and had difficulty traveling.

As the service was ending and “Sleepwalk” was playing overhead, Grace and Joni were escorted to the front of the chapel to see Bev’s casket. Because of the unfortunate circumstances of her demise, there was no open casket. Instead the walls were lined with pictures of her in nearly all stages of her life. Joni was sad to see the progression from the waifish Michelle Phillips look-a-like to the over-teased, over-plucked version she’d become.

Joni glanced over her shoulder at the mostly unfamiliar faces and spotted an ink blot of hair in the back of the room. Robbie was chatting with an older gentleman, softly patting his shoulder as he smiled. She took one more look at the casket and followed

Grace out the side door where they waited for the guests and pallbearers. Robbie was one of the last to leave, behind the man he'd been talking to. He nodded toward her before walking to his truck.

Following the hearse, Grace and Joni rode in silence. Californians couldn't always follow driving etiquette, especially in the bigger cities. Beverly tried many times to pull over on the freeway when she encountered a funeral procession, nearly getting them all killed a time or two. It was practically impossible unless you were driving on side streets, but Bev still held on to her Southern traditions. Traffic here couldn't stop for death and Joni wondered if there'd ever been a time when it had.

Few guests showed for the burial. Joni guiltily wished she was with the ones who'd gone home. She tried to muster some tears, mainly for Grace, who was clearly more emotional. Joni had always had difficulty crying in public. She didn't like the kind of attention that crying brought, people with sympathetic faces and gentle hugs. Grace was the empathetic one. She'd tear up at the sight of another person crying, even a stranger. Bev had been the same way, though Joni always suspected it was more of a show for her. She enjoyed the theatrics of it all. In fact, Joni imagined Bev was pissed that people weren't more upset about her passing. The girls stayed nearly an hour after she was lowered into the ground.

Sitting amongst the half-eaten casseroles and cakes, Joni and Grace laid the photos they'd found in the closet out on the dining room table. The guests had gone and left a mess behind them, one neither of them felt like worrying about until tomorrow.

They hadn't talked about the photos since the night before. Joni was just considering going out for a drink when the doorbell rang. Robbie poked his head inside before either of the girls had a chance to answer it.

"Sorry. I hope I'm not intruding, but it was unlocked," he said.

They shook their heads and Grace made a place for him at the table. "Are you hungry? We have plenty of leftovers," she said.

"No thanks. I thought you guys might want to fill up on something more substantial," he said and pulled a bottle of cheaply labeled tequila from a paper bag.

Grace shook her head. "None for me, thanks. I can't do tequila." She made a gagging sound.

Joni found a stack of disposable cups on the corner of the counter and passed them toward Robbie who poured a small amount into two. They both drank it quickly as Joni tried to catch her breath.

"Jo, do you remember Dad's funeral?" Grace asked.

"No. I asked Mom about it once and she told me she'd had him cremated and there wasn't a funeral or memorial service. She said everyone was too ashamed of what he'd done."

Grace nodded and cast her eyes to follow Robbie's gaze.

"What are these?" he asked, pointing his pinky toward the photos.

Grace spoke up. "We found them in Bev's closet last night. They're mostly of her and Dad, and some guy named Doug."

"May I?" he asked.

“Sure, yeah,” Grace said.

He picked them up and smiled. “Your mom looks so happy. She was really pretty.”

“She was,” Joni said.

He asked about their dad and they told him the story. Occasionally, he’d pour another shot for himself and Joni and she’d stop and drink it with him before continuing. They told him things they’d heard and everything Joni remembered about him, which wasn’t much.

“Before he stopped coming home at night, he’d tap on my door every morning, just before dawn, singing a song he’d made up. It was our time together before Bev got up. Maybe he wasn’t here every night, but he was with us all day.”

“How does this Miss Caroline lady fit in?” he asked.

“No clue,” said Joni. “She grew up in Alabama in the ‘60s, so I think she might be someone who worked for Bev’s family. Like I said, she never talked about that.”

Four shots in and Joni was feeling the lightness of the tequila. Everything seemed funny and she knew the volume of her voice was increasing because Grace would grimace a bit every time Joni spoke. Joni took one last shot before Grace excused herself for bed.

“Are you tired? I can split if you want to hit the hay.”

Joni shook her head.

“No husband or kids, but I can’t imagine you’re all alone back in Alabama?”

Robbie’s left eyebrow was cocked.

“There is someone, but it’s complicated.”

“Isn’t it always?” he asked before draining his cup. “Do tell.”

“Nick is, well, Nick. I know you don’t know what I mean. He’s just sensitive, I guess. He’s a musician and he throws himself into everything so completely, including relationships, and it’s just so overwhelming sometimes, but God, he’s sweet and good. He’s really great. I mean that. I just don’t know and I’m talking too much. I’m sorry. I’m just confused about everything.”

“I’m a firm believer that if it’s the real thing, you’ll just know,” Robbie said.

He poured one more shot and tossed it back before squeezing her hand and leaving her alone with the mess.

After Robbie left, Joni covered the dishes she thought they’d reheat in plastic wrap and puzzle-pieced them into the refrigerator before dumping the worst ones in the garbage. She and Grace had decided to split the duties in the morning, but Joni needed something to do. She knew the dishwasher didn’t work; her mother had never bothered having it fixed after it suddenly stopped working the summer Joni turned fourteen. Now it served as a fancy drying rack for the dishes Joni washed by hand. She had no idea whose dish was whose. She imagined stacking them on a table in the now clean yard and inviting people to find them themselves.

Joni gnawed on her bottom lip as she plunged her hands into the soapy water. She didn’t want Robbie to think she’d been talking badly about Nick or to get the wrong message that she didn’t care for him. Every time she thought of leaving Nick, she felt the pangs of guilt. He’d always been so good to her, but he was clearly more devoted to



her than she was to him. It'd been that way since the beginning. She tried to imagine all the hateful songs he'd write about her afterward. She'd heard the ones he'd written about his other exes.

After the kitchen and dining room were clean, she made her way up the stairs to her bedroom. Out of habit, she tiptoed around the creaky spot on the top stair. Joni considered trying to sleep while the alcohol was still in her system, but remembered the deep jacuzzi tub in her mother's bathroom. She gathered her toiletries from the hallway bathroom and snuck past Grace's room into her mother's half-gutted bedroom.

Joni turned on the faucet, the hot on full blast and the cold barely nudged so that it was just cool enough not to scald. She'd always enjoyed seeing the pink line where her skin had been submerged and the steam that rose from it. She hissed as she got in, but she was used to the temperature soon enough. Wiping her hands on a towel, she picked up her phone to see new texts from Nick. She read them, so thoughtful and selfless, "Just wanted to tell you I love you and I hope you're okay," and "Give me a call when you get a chance. I miss your voice," but she knew there was an underlying tone that text couldn't capture, one that said, "I don't want to sound selfish, but I want you to come home." She texted back that she was okay and she'd call him tomorrow. She pushed the button to turn on the jacuzzi jets, but nothing happened. She pressed harder still and thought, *Christ, doesn't anything work in this damn house.*

*BEV AT SIX*

Miss Caroline woke her up in the morning, whistling or humming softly, because her own mother was too busy already catching up on the day's gossip. Bev thought it was impossible that so much could happen overnight, but her mother always had something new, not that she shared it with anyone other than her girlfriends.

“Rise and shine, Valentine,” Miss Caroline would say.

Miss Caroline was in her forties, which seemed ancient to Bev. Sometimes when Miss Caroline was giving her a bath at night, she'd try to count the wrinkles near Miss Caroline's eyes. She had one daughter of her own, Amelia, who was allowed to come with her sometimes on days when she wasn't in school. Bev and Amelia would play with the water hose in the backyard, pretending to be firemen or elephants. Once, at school, Bev had been asked to draw a picture of her family. She included her mom, dad, and Stacy, but she also drew Miss Caroline and Amelia on the other side of herself. It wasn't uncommon in those days for children to think of the help as their family, but it wasn't something Bev's parents were ready to acknowledge.

After that, the baths and wake ups ended. Bev's mother decided she was old enough to care for herself in those ways, and if she wasn't, Stacy could help. Bev lay in her bed in the mornings after Stacy had woken her and waited for Miss Caroline to pop her head in the door and whisper, “Rise and shine, Valentine,” before she made her way to the kitchen to start breakfast.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Joni woke with a mild headache and a slightly fuzzy mouth. It was almost noon by the time she went downstairs and by then Grace had nearly half the living room packed. Grace was in the kitchen making a sandwich when Joni found her and offered to make one for her, as well, but Joni only shook her head and drank two glasses of water.

“Are you feeling okay?” Grace asked.

She ignored the question and gestured toward the living room. “I see you’ve been busy this morning.”

“Just trying to get it all finished before you decide to go back to Alabama. Speaking of, when are you planning on leaving?”

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were trying to get rid of me,” Joni said.

Grace said nothing.

“I don’t know. In a few days, maybe. I’ll at least stay until we’re finished. Did you think I’d just leave all of this to you and go back to my rich, fulfilling life?” They both smiled before they left the kitchen and returned to the task at hand.

They spent the rest of the day on the living room and got a good start on the dining room before they called it. Most of it was useless stuff to be donated, but they’d decided to keep some of Bev’s books and collectibles, as well as all the photographs.

Grace took A-L from the bookshelves and Joni was left with M-Z. The sun was setting when she remembered she'd told Nick she'd call.

"I'll be right back," she told Grace and went to the backyard for privacy. He answered on the third ring.

"Hey you," he said. His voice was one of the first things that attracted her, Southern and raw, always like he'd just woken up.

"Hey yourself," she said.

He wanted to know how the funeral had gone, if she'd gotten to spend time with family, and how the packing had gone. She filled him in on the details as he laughed or offered sympathy in all the right places, but never interrupted.

"I know I already asked, but is there anything I can do to help? I can fly out there and work on packing up the house or whatever you need."

"I know and I appreciate it, but I just need to deal with this on my own."

"Sure," he said. "Do you know when you might be coming home?"

There it was. "I don't know yet, Nick, but I'll keep you updated."

He said he understood and that he loved and missed her. She said she missed him too and ended the call. She looked at the overgrown backyard and the rusty swing set in the corner. She and Grace had abandoned it after they'd found a wasp's nest inside the hollow pipe on top. Bev had been angry with them for not playing on it any longer than they had and reminded them how much it'd cost and how much of a sacrifice it'd been to designate yard space to something so large. They told her why they

no longer played on it, but just like the dishwasher and jacuzzi, the problem went unsolved.

Joni picked up a shovel from the back patio and walked toward the swing set in the corner. She smacked the edge of the shovel against the pipe to see if anything was disturbed, but nothing revealed itself. She checked the stability of the swing by putting some weight on it, and though it was rusted and hadn't been used in close to thirty years, it seemed sturdy enough. She went back inside and called out to Grace to meet her in the backyard. When Grace walked outside, Joni was standing next to the swing set, inspecting the chains.

“What are you doing?” Grace shouted.

Joni waved her over. “Remember this thing?”

“Yeah, I do, and I remember the giant wasps that lived inside it.”

“I think they're gone,” Joni said. “See?” and she tapped the shovel on it just like before. Again, nothing appeared.

“So?”

“So? So, let's swing. It seems pretty solid,” Joni said.

She sat carefully on the plastic swing and could barely fit on the narrow seat. Slowly, she lowered her weight onto it and began to push herself off the ground. Grace offered to push her from behind. Joni went higher and higher until the chain links near the base of the swing snapped. She was only midway into the air and plopped down hard on her butt.

“Ow!” she shouted and began laughing so hard she could barely breathe. Grace joined her once she realized Joni wasn’t hurt.

Joni picked up the plastic seat near her and held it up. “Just like everything else is this place,” she said, and tossed it behind her into the grass.

Later that night, Joni made up her mind to go out. She decided on The Spare Room, the bar Robbie said he bartended on weekends. Grace said she had some things to take care of and that she should go and have fun without her. Joni was sore from the swing set fall and didn’t feel like dressing up, so she wore the same jeans and t-shirt she’d been wearing all day, even though the back of her pants were grass-stained and dirty. She told herself it’d be dark in there anyway.

Grace had been kind enough to lend Joni her car, though she questioned her sister’s judgment seeing as how Joni was planning to go to a bar where she would inevitably have a drink or two. It took her some time to find it even with her phone’s GPS telling her where to go. It was a part of town Joni wasn’t particularly familiar with and the turns were confusing. When she finally managed to find it, the parking lot was full and no street parking was available. She drove around the block until she saw someone leaving and pulled into their space.

The bouncer hadn’t even bothered to look before letting her in. It was darker inside than she’d imagined. It bore a faint resemblance to some sort of pirate bar from a movie, but there was no consistent theme she recognized. Joni pushed her way through the crowds, clutching her purse below her arm, and found the bar on the far side of the

room. A girl close to her age was behind it, and after a few minutes, she caught sight of Joni.

“What can I get you?” she asked.

“Is Robbie around?”

She smirked. “He’s around. He’s on break but he’ll be back in a few minutes.

Can I get you something while you wait?”

“Whiskey sour,” Joni said.

Robbie showed up fifteen minutes later. He leaned over the bar to hug Joni halfway, smelling strongly of smoke and perfume.

“Of all the gin joints,” he said. “What’re you doing out and about tonight?”

“Just felt like getting out of the house and I remembered you said you worked here on the weekends. I thought I’d check it out and see you in action,” she said.

“Well, I’m no Tom Cruise in *Cocktail*, but I hold my own. Can I get you another one?”

Joni nodded and told him her drink order. He made it quickly, slid it over, and moved on to another customer. She struck up a conversation with the man next to her. He was in town for work and wanted to experience some of the LA nightlife, but he was afraid to wander too far from his hotel. He told her about his family back in Florida and his new position in the company. Joni offered no personal information about herself aside from the fact that she’d grown up there. He eventually closed his tab and said goodnight, leaving Joni to fend for herself once more. She checked her phone but had nothing.

“We close in about half an hour if you want to wait around. We can grab some food or something,” Robbie said.

“I’d like that,” she said. He shouted at the room for last call.

Robbie told her to wait for him at a diner around the corner while he helped close the bar. She was on her second cup of coffee when he joined her.

“They have really good pancakes here. Burgers, too,” he said.

The waitress took his drink order, coffee, and said she’d be back for their orders.

“Where’s Grace?”

“She said she had some stuff to take care of. I just think she didn’t really want to come out,” she said. “This has been harder for her than it has been for me. She and Bev had a sort of semblance of a relationship.”

“Have you talked to your boyfriend?”

She nodded. “He’s been so damn understanding, it’s almost annoying. He wants to know when I’m coming back.”

“That’s a fair question I think,” he said. “What’d you tell him?”

“Just that I didn’t know. Seems like that’s my answer to everything these days.”

“It’s as good of one as any.” He took a gulp of the hot coffee, his eyes watering.

“What are you two going to do about the photos you found? The ones of your dad, I mean.”

Joni looked confused. “What do you mean? Why would we do anything about them?”



“You don’t know that side of your family, right? Maybe you two should take a trip and go see them. It’d be good for you guys.”

“How would you know what’s good for us? I haven’t seen you in almost twenty years. You don’t know anything about me.” Joni was surprised by her response. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“Fair enough. I just think it’s important to know your family, where you came from.”

Joni recalled the stories she’d heard about Robbie. Bev had told her he’d come from a Romanian orphanage as a toddler where he’d been taken in and surrendered multiple times by various family members before being adopted by The Evans family who lived down the street.

“You think it’s important, huh? Do you like knowing where you came from?”

His eyes narrowed over the rim of his cup. Robbie gulped hard, then put it down. “I don’t like it, Joni, but it’s part of who I am. Can’t change it so you learn to live with it. At least I know what I’m rising above.”

“I shouldn’t have said that,” Joni said.

“It’s fine.”

The waitress returned and he ordered a double cheeseburger. Joni said she was fine with just coffee.

He continued, “I think it might be nice to spend time with your sister, and to find out you two aren’t alone.”

Joni wondered how she'd even track them down. She'd have to investigate better as they were going through Bev's things. Maybe she could find a copy of her dad's obituary somewhere and look up the surviving family it mentioned. The more she thought about it, the better it sounded—getting out of town with her sister, lots of music and unhealthy snacks. The idea of a road trip is always better than the trip itself, she reminded herself. Bev's house was stifling. They needed air.

Robbie and Joni talked long after he'd finished his food. He told her about his adventures after graduation, joining a commune and learning to farm before he decided the lifestyle wasn't for him. He moved back to the city and nearly got married but changed his mind a week before the wedding. He'd worked a food truck in Alaska and taught children in Thailand where he saved enough money to backpack through Europe. Grace was right, he had changed. Joni remembered the shy boy who never wanted to be touched and spoke very little. Here he was, a seasoned traveler who was much more experienced than her in many ways. He was always thinking of places to go and had nothing keeping him where he was other than the fact that he wanted to be there. Joni admired his attitude and his freedom. Robbie asked about her life and she was embarrassed by how little she'd actually done. Her biggest accomplishments were moving away from Bev and managing to avoid making any real commitment to anyone or anything.

He walked her to Grace's car with his hand on the small of her back. She told him goodnight and thought he might try to kiss her, but he didn't. He only hugged her

and kissed her cheek before saying goodnight. He made sure she was safe inside her car before disappearing around the corner.

It was nearly five a.m. when Joni got home. Grace was awake and sitting on the couch, her legs folded beneath her as she stared straight ahead breathing deeply.

“What are you doing up?” Joni asked.

“I wasn’t feeling well and I couldn’t sleep,” she said evenly. “Trying to meditate.”

Joni was tired, but she had been thinking about what Robbie said.

“Grace, what do you think about taking a road trip?”

Grace didn’t lose focus. “To where?”

“We could go find Dad’s family, our family,” she said.

Grace turned to look at her. “Seriously?”

Joni nodded. “I think it’d be good for us.”

Grace smiled at her then turned back around.

“Guess that means we’re going,” Joni said.

Grace gave her a thumbs-up over her shoulder.

“We could even take Bev’s car. Wouldn’t she just love that? Joyriding in her car as we search for the family she didn’t want us to have.” Joni laughed mockingly. “I’ll bet she’ll be turning over in that fresh grave of hers. That didn’t take long.”

She waited for Grace to laugh, but there was only silence.

“I know. I’m not funny,” she said and went upstairs.

She laid in bed and thought about the places they'd go and how they'd find who they were looking for. She knew her grandparents' names, so that was a start. She knew they used to live in New Mexico, but she didn't know exactly where. Joni thought she'd talk about it with her sister in the morning if Grace was feeling better.

After a few hours of rest, she made her way downstairs. Grace was asleep on the couch, her knees folded over the armrest. Joni watched her for a moment before she started breakfast. She wasn't much of a cook, but she found some pancake mix in the cupboard. Pretty foolproof, she thought. Grace slept through the cooking and Joni's eating, even through Joni watching *Maury*. When she rolled over at eleven, she groaned and squinted at Joni.

"What time is it?"

"Just past eleven," Joni said. "There are cold pancakes in the kitchen. I can heat some up for you."

Grace held out her hand to protest. "Thanks, but no."

"Are you okay? You seem a little off your game this morning. Maybe it's something you ate," Joni said. She got up to check Grace's temperature with the back of her hand.

"Jo, do you remember that time on the swings?"

There had been many times on the swings, but Joni knew exactly what Grace meant. She nodded. It was the night Bev had met Mike, one of her boyfriends between husbands. Bev had left Grace and Joni with a Californian-to-a-T babysitter named Cindy who lived two houses down. Five-year-old Grace wanted to go swimming but

they didn't have a pool and Bev had specifically warned Cindy not to take them anywhere unless it was an emergency. Cindy had told the girls she'd take them anyway, but before they'd finished their pizza, she was passed out on the couch under the influence of something. Joni tried to distract Grace by letting her wear her swimsuit while she played Barbies in the bathtub. They'd fallen asleep watching MTV in Joni's bedroom. Sometime later, they awoke to noise in the living room. Cindy had been replaced by Bev, half out of her mind and screaming. A man they'd never seen was leaning over her as she groaned and vomited on the rug. Joni took Grace's hand and led her out the back door. If anyone noticed, they didn't try to stop them. Joni pushed Grace on the swingset until the house was silent.

She spoke slowly. "That's when I knew we couldn't count on her. God, it's a sad thing to say out loud, especially now that she's gone, but you've always been there for me, even when you weren't. I loved her because she was my mother, but I didn't like her."

"Where's this coming from?" Joni asked. "Just a few days ago you were giving me shit about making jokes and now—"

"You were being an asshole." Grace sat up and took a drink of water she'd left on the coffee table. "I don't ever talk about this stuff and I don't want it to seem like I'm speaking ill of her now that she isn't here to defend herself. That's not what I mean." She began picking at her cuticle, a nervous habit she'd had since childhood. "Jo, I'm pregnant."

"Who's the father?" Joni asked after a moment.

“This guy I went on a few dates with back in March. He doesn’t know. He was a really nice guy, but he just wasn’t looking for anything serious,” Grace said.

Joni hugged her sister, letting her rest her head on Joni’s shoulder.

“We don’t have to take that road trip,” Joni said. “I don’t want to put too much stress on you.”

Grace wiped a tear away. “Oh, we’re going,” she said. “Where to first?”

*BEV AT THIRTY-FOUR*

Bev married Jack in Las Vegas two years after Randy had gone. She'd met a few men in between and hoped they'd be the one, but none of them were ready to marry a woman with two young children. They wanted some fresh young thing who was still unfertilized. Bev looked young enough to reel them in, but as soon as they found out about Joni and Grace, they were looking for ways out.

She met Jack in a bar. He wasn't especially handsome, but he wasn't the worst she'd ever been with. Bev told him right out about her girls and he didn't backtrack. Jack asked her to meet his mother on the third date; Bev didn't know he still lived at home with her. His mother was an elderly lush whose house smelled like moth balls and cedar. He moved in with Bev and the girls just two weeks later.

Jack was a drinker. Bev had noticed it but hoped it would drop off after they were married. It didn't. He'd come home from work, when he went, and get drunk. Then he'd build a fire outside and ask Bev and the girls to join him. He'd pour a little wine into a coffee mug for Joni and fill it to the top with water and ice; Bev never argued. She thought if they showed the girls from an early age that alcohol was no big deal, maybe they wouldn't have a problem with it when they were older. Grace was only two, an age Jack deemed as "too young," and Bev never asked what he thought an appropriate age was.

They'd drink until Bev couldn't stay awake. She'd go inside with Grace but often asked Joni if she wanted to stay with Jack. She always did. Bev never had the guts to ask Joni if anything happened on those nights.



## CHAPTER FIVE

Joni typed her father's name followed by obituary in the search engine, but nothing came up. He'd died before the Internet had become a household commodity, but she'd expected to find some mention of his death somewhere. Following that, she typed her grandfather's name, Robert Wilder, into the search engine and waited for the results. There were too many to look at so she narrowed it down by state. There were still more hits than she'd have liked, but it was easier to get in touch with fourteen people than six hundred.

She started calling the list on the white pages website. She got no answer from the first three. The fourth had never been married to a Donna, their grandmother's name, and the next two didn't answer either. The sixth call was answered by a young woman named Ruth. Joni thought she sounded her own age or younger. When Joni began asking questions about Robert, she was informed he'd passed away three years ago.

"Was he married to a woman named Donna?" Joni asked.

Ruth seemed skeptical. She wanted to know why Joni was so curious about a man she obviously didn't know, but Joni didn't want to say outright that she thought these people were her grandparents. However, she was afraid if she didn't, the girl would just hang up on her and she'd get no further information.

"I think they're my grandparents," Joni said.

“What do you mean you *think*?”

“It’s a complicated story and I don’t really want to get into it with someone I don’t know, but I haven’t had any contact with my father’s family since I was very young and I’m trying to reconnect with them,” she said.

“Are you...Randy’s daughter?” Ruth asked.

“Yes,” Joni said.

“Did something happen to your mother?”

Joni was caught off guard. “She died recently.”

“I hope you’re not going around looking for answers about your dad. He’s dead and buried. No use in dragging all of that up now,” Ruth said.

“No, I’m not really looking for answers. My sister and I don’t have anyone now that Bev is gone, and we were just trying to find some family.”

Ruth made a noise on the other end, one that Joni couldn’t decipher. Ruth explained that she was a cousin of theirs, that her mother Emily, Bev’s sister-in-law, had tried to get in touch with them off and on over the years, but Beverly had ignored the calls and letters. Ruth lived in their grandparents’ home in Roswell with her fiancé and two dogs, while her mother had a house in nearby Border Hill. Their grandmother had moved to New Orleans after the death of her husband and remarried recently to a widower who loved to travel and dote on her.

Joni told her that she and Grace were considering taking a trip to meet them all. Ruth was apprehensive but told Joni they were welcome any time. Joni hung up with the promise they’d speak again soon. She found Grace on the couch still, a bag of potato

chips in one hand and a glass of milk in the other. Joni told her about Ruth and their grandfather, how their grandmother had moved to Louisiana and remarried, how they'd never forgotten about Randy's little girls.

Joni thought Grace might cry when she said, "Let's go."

While Grace packed, Joni looked up directions on MapQuest.

"It's almost a thousand miles!"

Grace poked her head around the corner. "Then we'd better get a move on."

As Grace carefully folded the clothes she'd brought with her from her own apartment, Joni balled up her own and squashed them into the suitcase. She printed out the directions and promised herself she'd buy an atlas when they stopped for gas. Grace remembered to pack the photos they'd found in case they learned more about Doug or Miss Caroline.

Joni called Nick to tell him the plan. He was supportive but worried she was getting her hopes up. She didn't tell him about Grace. Nick didn't linger on the phone like usual.

"I just don't want you going there expecting to find a missing piece and leave feeling disappointed. I do hope you find what you're looking for," he said.

She told Nick she missed him and she'd speak with him soon, then called Robbie. He was less surprised by their decision to go, wished them luck, and said to call if they got into trouble along the way.

By 3:30 that afternoon, they were on the road.

Joni wanted to drive, but it was Grace's car and she didn't want to seem too controlling on the outset by asking. Besides, it'd been a long time since Joni had driven in a city the size of Los Angeles. She figured they'd switch out eventually. Joni had tried to convince Grace to take Bev's car, but she wouldn't agree to it.

The first hundred miles took nearly three hours because of traffic. By the time they stopped in Palm Springs for drinks and snacks, Joni's throat was raw from shouting Spice Girls and Backstreet Boys songs at Grace. Joni loaded up on gummy snacks and soda to keep her awake once the sun started setting and the scenery depleted. After stopping nearly every hour so Grace could use the bathroom, they decided to stay in Phoenix for the night.

Grace pulled the car around the front of a Sleep Inn while Joni went inside to secure a room. Joni returned a few minutes later with their keycards and directed Grace to the right side of the building. Joni pulled their bags from the trunk and offered to carry Grace's things as long as she got the door. Luckily, they were able to score a room on the first floor so there were no stairs or elevators involved. There was some trouble with the key, but they finally got the door open. Joni tossed their bags onto the dresser and chair and threw herself onto the bed.

"Will you turn on the air, Jo?"

Joni rolled over and tried to stretch far enough to touch the controls without getting up. It didn't work. She groaned and pushed herself up.

"The things I do for you, little sister."

While Grace was taking a shower, Joni tried to call Nick and check in. He didn't answer but she left a message.

"Hey, it's me. We've stopped in Phoenix for the night. I think we'll be able to make it to Roswell tomorrow night, barring any accidents or emergencies. It's been kind of weird." She paused before asking, "Where are you?" She wondered why she wanted to know. Joni trusted him and she'd been less than reassuring about her own feelings. She had no right to be concerned. "Nevermind. Just call me when you're free. Miss you." She ended the call and pulled the covers over her head.

She woke to Grace hitting her with a pillow. The curtains were open, the sun was out, and Grace had gone down the lobby to get waffles and sausage for them both. Joni hadn't even bothered removing her shoes before she fell asleep. Her pillow was smeared with makeup. She checked herself out in the mirror and snorted.

"I'm a damn mess," she said.

"I've seen you look worse," Grace said. "Come eat your breakfast before it gets cold and the butter won't melt."

They ate while they watched an episode of *Roseanne*. Grace used to pick on Joni for her crush on John Goodman. It had nothing to do with the fact that he was overweight, mind you, but because he was an old dad. Grace would immaturely make barfing noises but Joni didn't care. She could tell he was nice and funny. Besides, he was a good dad. Maybe that's why Joni liked him.

Joni showered and dressed in comfortable clothing without bothering to fix her hair or apply makeup. She checked her phone before packing things up and saw a text from Nick at 3 am.

“Played a gig at Saturn last night and hung around after. Hope you’re sleeping well. Love you.”

She vaguely recalled him telling her about the show and realized she hadn’t been paying much attention to what he’d said lately. She’d been so wrapped up in her own stuff. She made a mental note to make it up to him when she got back.

Joni dragged the bags outside and put them in the trunk while Grace checked them out of the hotel. Before long, they were back on I-10 and headed to Las Cruces where they’d switch to US-70. Nick called as they entered Lordsburg and Joni pulled over to answer.

“Where are you guys?” he asked.

Joni told him. “I think we’re going to get some lunch while we’re here. How was the show?”

“Good. Dave and Paul were able to join me. I think we scored some new fans. There were some girls visiting from Pennsylvania and we hung out with them after the show,” Nick said.

“Oh.”

“Not like that. They were just nice girls. You know you don’t have to worry about that, right?”

She thought she did.

“Anyway, I’m about to go up to the lake for a few days with the family. If you can’t reach me, that’s why. You know how service is out there.”

“Tell them I say hi. Have fun out there,” Joni said. He didn’t sound like himself, but she didn’t want to pry over the phone with Grace in the passenger seat.

“Will do. I love you, too. Let me know how things go with your family.”

“I will. Bye.”

She ended the call and looked over at Grace who was staring at her.

“That was a weird conversation from your end,” Grace said.

“What do you mean?”

“Short, and you didn’t have much to say. Is that how all of your conversations with him go?”

“You know I hate talking on the phone,” Joni said. “Besides, there’s not much to say. You and I haven’t done anything worth sharing yet. He was just telling me about the show he played last night and some people he met afterward.”

“What kind of music does he play?” Grace asked. “I just realized I don’t really know much about him.”

Before beginning to drive again, Joni found a CD with some of his songs on it in her bag. She pushed it into the player and turned it up. His gravelly, quiet voice came through the speakers, accompanied only by an acoustic guitar. The song, like most of his, was about a love he’d lost and how he wanted it back. It used to make Joni feel insecure to think he was still pining about some girl he’d broken up with however long ago until she realized it was what he knew.

“He’s good,” Grace said. “He sounds really sad.”

“He does,” Joni said.

After lunch, they listened to the rest of the CD, then switched back to the peppy ‘90s stuff they’d been listening to.

They reached Roswell around 9:30 that night and decided to wait until the next day to reach out to Ruth. Joni suggested Mexican food for dinner, correctly expecting it to be good in New Mexico, and afterward they found a hotel, another Sleep Inn.

“So, should we just call her in the morning and say, ‘Hey, we’re here!’ and hope she doesn’t mind?” Grace asked.

“Guess so. She did say we were welcome any time, so if she doesn’t want us here, that’s her problem, right?”

“She was probably just saying that now that I think about it. That’s something I would say if a someone called me and said they were going to visit. I wouldn’t want to be rude even if I didn’t want them to come,” Grace said.

“I know. Even if she doesn’t want to see us, maybe we can talk to her mom or another cousin or something. If nothing else, we can drive down to New Orleans and see our grandmother.”

Grace nodded and turned over in her bed.

Joni had always envied Grace’s ability to fall asleep so easily. Joni thought about Nick’s family spending the weekend at Smith Lake and what they were doing. She liked his family, which was good because Nick was extremely close to them all.



His older brother had two kids whom Nick adored. They were a small family, but close-knit. They always made Joni feel like a part of it. She loved being here with her sister, but a part of her wished she was there with them. This sudden attachment to Nick was unfamiliar to her. If it was confusing her, she could only imagine how he felt, but it's what he'd wanted from her from the start.

Instead of texting or calling him, she texted Robbie. She felt foolish and a little guilty for having expected something romantic from him. Nick wouldn't have ever done that to her and she was glad now that Robbie hadn't tried. Joni told him about their trip so far, uneventful as it'd been, and that she'd let him know how things went tomorrow. She didn't expect a reply and she didn't get one.

*BEV AT TWELVE*

The police came to the door and asked Bev for her parents. She left to fetch them but her parents asked her to wait in the kitchen. When they returned, Bev's mother had been crying. Her father sat down at the table with her and told her there'd been a terrible accident.

"Miss Caroline and her daughter were killed," he said. Not just them, but her husband and their oldest son, too. Bev asked what happened, but they wouldn't tell her any more than that. She cried for Miss Caroline and for Amelia until she nearly made herself sick. Finally, her father told her to knock it off, behaving that way and getting all worked up over the help, but her mother let her cry into her dress until she fell asleep.

When school ended in June, her parents told her they were moving to California. Her father had gotten a job there and he'd be making more money.

"Besides, I don't feel safe here," her mother had said.

Two weeks later, their car was packed and they were on their way. Bev never returned to Birmingham and she never spoke of Miss Caroline or Amelia, though years later, she'd found out that they had been murdered by a group of white boys who had a problem with Miss Caroline's son and Bev cried for them all over again.

## CHAPTER SIX

They both woke too late for the continental breakfast. Though they were hungry, they took their time getting ready since they'd be attempting to contact Ruth after they ate. They chose the Denny's across the street and practiced what they'd say to her. Grace said Joni should call since she's the one who spoke to her initially. After they paid, Joni stepped outside and dialed Ruth's phone number. She answered after two rings. Joni greeted her and said they'd driven to Roswell in hopes she and Grace could speak with her. Ruth didn't seem any more excited to speak with her than she had the first time, but she agreed to meet with them for lunch.

"If it goes well, maybe we can drive out to Border Hill and see Mom," Ruth suggested.

Joni wondered what she meant by "if it goes well." They agreed on a place for lunch and hung up. Grace joined her outside after using the bathroom and Joni informed her of the plan.

"We're meeting at a Chili's for lunch, and then *if it goes well*, she'll take us out to see Aunt Emily."

"Why wouldn't it go well?" Grace asked.

"I was wondering the same thing."

"Weird."

“Maybe she just means if we get along and things seem good. We’ve never met her, or any of them for that matter. For all she knows, we could be lying. I don’t know why we would, but who knows what she’s thinking? She’s probably just trying to cover her ass in case we turn out to be weirdos or something.”

“You’re probably right. She probably didn’t mean anything by it.”

They spent the remainder of the morning at the International UFO Museum.

Ruth was already waiting for them at Chili’s when they arrived. Not knowing who they were meeting, Joni told the hostess they were looking for someone who might or might not be there yet. The hostess pointed toward a booth in the corner where a red-haired woman around Joni’s age was sitting alone. Grace pushed Joni in front of her and they walked toward her. She looked up from the menu and smiled. Joni thought she looked much friendlier than she’d sounded.

“Ruth?” Joni asked.

She stood and embraced her carefully, then Grace. Her smile didn’t seem genuine in the least. Joni thought Ruth must have been taught good manners and she was just doing her best to fake it. She was very pretty and Joni thought she could see some familial resemblance between them. They all sat, Joni and Grace on one side and Ruth on the other. The waitress took their drink orders and left.

“You girls are so pretty. You both look just like your mother,” Ruth said, never losing the toothy smile.

“Thanks,” they said.

“How was the drive?” she asked.

“Not bad,” Grace said. “Pretty uneventful.”

“How is everyone?” Joni asked.

“Everyone’s doing well,” Ruth said. “I told Mom we’d probably be coming by this afternoon if she wasn’t busy. She’s excited to see you both. Said she hadn’t seen either of you since Grace was a baby.” She took a drink of her water and tapped a manicured nail on the table tile. “I’m good, too. I’m getting married in January,” she said and extended her hand so Joni and Grace could see her engagement ring.

“Oh, wow! How’d you guys meet?” Grace asked. She was much better at conversation than Joni.

“In college,” Ruth said. “We met at a party Perry’s fraternity was throwing. He was just the funniest guy I’d ever met and we’ve been together ever since.”

“Congratulations, Ruth,” Joni said.

“What about you two? Any marriages or babies?”

Joni and Grace shook their heads. The waitress returned to take their orders as Joni tried to think of a way to keep the conversation going without having to mention her own lack of success in the dating and employment pools.

“I was really sorry to hear about your mom. I never actually got to meet her, but I’ve heard about her over the years. That’s a nasty way to go,” Ruth said.

Joni and Grace learned that the easiest way to keep things going was to ask Ruth about herself. She’d talk forever about her job or remodeling their grandparents’ house or her upcoming wedding. They both heard all about the venue and bridesmaid dresses, what kind of flowers Ruth had chosen and why, and the song they’d chosen for their

first dance. Joni needed a break after lunch, but Ruth was ready to drive out to her mother's. She offered to drive them there and back to their car when they were ready. It was a short drive, just enough time to hear about her planned honeymoon.

"I'm sorry if I was rude on the phone," Ruth said just before she pulled into a driveway. "It's just that things were complicated between your mom and dad and the rest of the family. Everyone kind of felt like she took him away from them, and then when everything happened with your dad, everyone was so ashamed. Your mom cut everyone off when they tried to help her. She just wanted to move on and forget everything and everyone. I know that isn't your fault and I shouldn't have been so mean. I really was happy to hear from you." Her grin returned as she stopped in front of a small A-frame house. "We're here."

Ruth's mother, Emily, was waiting at the door for them. Emily hugged them tighter than Ruth had, as if she really was happy to see them. Joni thought she even saw Emily wipe a tear away before she led them into her cramped living room. There were a number of porcelain dolls lining the walls, sitting in rows high up on shelves and thin tables.

"Lovely dolls," Grace said. She'd always borne an affinity for dolls, something Joni never had. She wondered if that meant she had no maternal instinct from the beginning. Grace had always enjoyed playing house and carrying around babies. Perhaps that's why she was the first to get pregnant.

"Oh, thanks. After Ruth left home, I needed something to focus on, so I started collecting them. I have nearly 100 now, but only my favorites are on display out here.

The rest are in the guest room if you'd like to see them." Joni could tell Emily wanted to show them to her, so she obliged. Emily led her down a dark hall to a bedroom with a dresser and trundle bed. There were shelves built into the wall holding more dolls. Emily picked out some she thought were particularly interesting and shared their stories, where they'd come from, and how much they'd cost. Finally, Joni asked if she could have a glass of water.

"Of course! I'm so sorry. Listen to me blathering on like some crazy lady," she said before leaving the room. Joni turned off the light and followed her out, closing the door behind her. She joined the others in the kitchen.

"Ruth told me about your mother. That's just terrible," Emily said. "She and I never got on very well, but I wouldn't wish that on anyone. How are you girls holding up?"

"We're doing okay," Joni said. "Bev and I weren't very close. In fact, I hadn't seen her in several years."

"You called your mother Bev?" Ruth asked.

"That was her name," Joni said.

"How come you guys didn't get along?"

"Probably for the same reasons no one else did. She was a difficult woman. It was nearly impossible to get close to her. I mean, she kept so many secrets and we're just now finding out about them." Joni took the photographs out of her purse and handed them to Emily. "We found these in Bev's closet. Do you know who this guy is?" She pointed at Doug.

Emily looked at the photograph for a long time. “He was my husband,” she said.

Ruth took the photograph from her mother and studied it.

“Was?” Grace asked.

“We divorced when Ruth was seven.” Emily slowly flipped through all the photographs Joni had given her. She placed them on the counter and put her hand to her lips. “He looks so happy in these,” she said.

“Why do you think she saved them?” Joni asked.

“That’s one of the reasons I never saw eye to eye with Beverly. I suspected there was something going on between them. They were always so close,” Emily said as she straightened up. “When he left, I assumed he was going to her in California, but he stuck around to watch Ruth grow up. I imagine that’s where he really wanted to be, with Beverly, but I’m sure she was remarried by then. She always said she was no good alone.”

Joni nodded. “She remarried two years after Dad died.”

Emily flinched, confused for a second, then she too nodded. “He died.” She took a deep breath before continuing. “Your grandparents never could get over that. They had difficulty believing he was gone, tried giving him the benefit of the doubt. We grew up Catholic.”

Grace picked out the photo of Bev with Miss Caroline and asked Emily if she knew anything about it.

Emily said she didn’t, then asked if they’d like to sit in the living room and catch up on happier things. It was dark before Joni suggested they get back to their



hotel. Emily had told them about an aunt, Marie, who lived in Tallahassee, but she'd lived there before Joni and Grace were born and hadn't ever met them. Nevertheless, if they were interested in seeing her, Emily offered to call her and arrange a meeting.

“What about Doug? Is there any way we can speak to him?” Joni asked.

“He moved to Dallas eight years ago for work. I'm sure he'd like to see you if you can make it,” Emily said.

“We'd like that,” Joni said before Grace had a chance to respond. Emily gave her the contact information she had for him, admitting that it might be outdated since they rarely spoke. Ruth, who spoke to him regularly, looked it over and confirmed that it was still correct. Emily asked if they could stick around for another day or two so she could spend more time with them. They said they would.

Ruth dropped them off back at the Chili's parking lot and said she'd call Joni in the morning to schedule some lunch and shopping or sightseeing. Grace took the keys from Joni and slid behind the wheel. Before Joni could shut the door, Grace was backing out of the parking lot.

“What's your problem?” Joni asked.

“I have stuff I have to get back to, Jo. I can't just go on some cross-country road trip looking for all of our long lost relatives. You should have asked me before you agreed to anything.”

“I thought that's what we were doing, looking for family. Isn't that what we said we were doing?”

“Sure, but I thought we’d just come out here and see the ones who lived here. I didn’t realize we’d be going to Texas and God knows where else. There’s something kind of weird about them anyway. It’s the way they talk about Dad,” Grace said.

“I know it’s weird, which is even more reason to keep looking. Don’t you want to know what was going on with Bev and Emily’s husband? Or about this Miss Caroline lady? I want to know what happened.”

“Why are you so determined to find out about Bev now?” Grace asked.

“Now that she’s not here to muck it all up, maybe I can get to know her better. Her history is our history, you know,” Joni said.

“Or you’re just avoiding going home,” Grace said.

“I’m not. I’m just confused about some things and it’s nice to have time to work them out. What do you have going on back in LA? You’re living off pathetic modeling wages you earned five years ago.”

“I’m pregnant! I have to see doctors. I have to decide whether I want to tell the father. I need to figure out how I’m going to afford to take care of this baby or if I even want to! I should have been saving what little money Bev left me instead of spending it to go on some crazy trip with you. Jesus, it’s not like finding out anything about her now is going to fix things. She was the way she was. Does it even matter now?”

“It does matter,” Joni said. “You can go home if you want, but I’ll keep going.”

Neither of them spoke for the rest of the night.

Joni stepped outside to call Nick the next morning to tell him about Emily and Ruth. He answered, but the call kept cutting out until it dropped. He sounded so happy and she envied his family's ability to bring out the best in him. She tried to call once more but the call wouldn't connect.

She texted, sending the message in several parts. She told him about their odd relatives and the possibility that they'd be traveling further east than they anticipated. She told him she might be going alone, not to worry, and that she missed him now more than ever.

When she returned to the room, Grace was awake and vomiting in the bathroom. Joni knocked lightly on the door and asked if she needed anything.

"Water," Grace replied.

Joni opened the door and found Grace sitting next to the toilet, resting her cheek on the seat. She poured a cup of water from the tap and handed it to Grace who drank it quickly and asked for a refill.

"I was wondering when this would kick in," Grace said. "It's been fairly smooth sailing so far."

Joni's phone rang. She hoped to see Nick's name, but it was Ruth. She greeted Joni cheerfully and asked if they'd like to join Emily and her for lunch at a local winery. They agreed on a time, giving Joni and Grace a few hours to unwind and get dressed.

They watched *A Haunting* and ate leftover snacks from the trip. Joni finally spoke up about their argument the night before. Grace told her it was just pregnancy

hormones and stress and that she would go with her to Dallas to meet Doug if she wanted. After that, she'd reevaluate.

They met Ruth and Emily at the winery at one o'clock. Some of the lunch crowd had died down by then. Emily told them she'd spoken to Marie that morning and let her know that Joni and Grace might be visiting. She'd be happy to have them. Grace told them they'd be driving to Dallas tomorrow to speak with Doug. Emily seemed nervous about it, but agreed it was probably the next best place to go.

After lunch, Ruth took them around to local shops that sold mostly Southwestern style jewelry and clothing. Ruth didn't wear these things herself, but she assumed Joni and Grace would want something souvenir-like to take home. Joni was thinking something more along the lines of a shot glass or keychain. She thought it might be nice to pick something up for Nick. Though he liked to wear jewelry, she didn't imagine any of the items she saw would be his style. In the second to last shop, Joni bought a large silver ring with a compass rose stamped on the front. Nick often wore a necklace with a similar design. In a family of overachievers, he often felt directionless. Joni understood that more than she cared to admit.

Perry met them all for dinner so Joni and Grace could meet him. He was everything Joni imagined: tall, tan, and slightly cheesy. He matched Ruth perfectly. Ruth wanted to order a round of margaritas for the table, but Grace tried to refuse politely.

"You don't drink?" Ruth asked.

"No, I do, but I'm just not tonight," she said.

“Come on! Just one!”

“I can’t,” Grace said.

“What is it? Are you pregnant or something?” Ruth asked, then laughed.

Neither Joni or Grace said anything. Perry was busy playing a game on his cell phone.

“Are you?” Ruth whispered.

Grace said she was, which led to questions about the baby’s father. Grace told Ruth he wasn’t in the picture and didn’t know anything about the pregnancy. Ruth, for once, sensed Grace’s discomfort and steered the conversation toward her own future children. Joni tried to imagine what Perry and Ruth’s kids would look like and nearly choked on her drink when Ruth announced they’d be having one boy and two girls, the boy being the oldest, of course, and that their names would be Remington, Brylee, and Kieran. She tried not to be too judgmental knowing if she ever had any children of her own, there would be someone out there who thought their names were ridiculous.

Joni and Grace said their goodbyes in the parking lot. Ruth hugged them tighter, more comfortably this time. She made them promise to call and keep in touch, especially with the baby on the way. Perry shook their hands and opened their car doors when they were ready to leave. They waved as they drove away.

Back at the hotel, Grace plotted out the trip to Dallas using the atlas she’d picked up at a convenience store while Joni tried to find something on TV.

“Looks like we can switch over to I-20 once we get to some town called Post. We can avoid tolls that way,” Grace said.

“I guess we can just call him when we get there and see if he’s willing to meet us.”

“Don’t you think we should call him first so we don’t drive all the way there for nothing?” Grace asked.

“Sure, okay, but you’re doing the calling this time,” Joni said.

Grace decided it was too late and she’d call in the morning. She wanted to know if Joni had spoken to Nick. She hadn’t. Grace said she should try to call again, but she didn’t want to bother him while he was having fun. Joni said she’d try again tomorrow.

Joni awoke early the next morning. Grace was still sleeping. She decided to check on their expenses. She totaled up everything they’d spent so far, guessing when it came to herself. Grace had kept all her own receipts, but Joni, being much more carefree, hadn’t thought to do it from the beginning; she’d only started when Grace mentioned it to her. They’d spent too much already, but they only had to get to Dallas and back to LA. She walked into the hallway and called Nick. He answered this time, his voice still rough and sleepy.

“I’m sorry I called so early. I just wanted to hear your voice,” Joni said.

“Is something wrong?” he asked, humor in his voice.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just not like you to call so often and for no reason.”

“Everything’s fine,” she said. “I’ve just been doing some thinking. I know we have to keep looking, but I’m kind of ready to be home, too.”

“That makes two of us,” he said.

They chatted for a few minutes as he told her about the weekend at the lake. His whole family had been there; he'd played golf with his brother and dad, dress up and My Little Pony with his nieces, and spent time cooking with his mother and sister. They'd all asked about her, he said, and he told them she was out doing her thing, but she'd be back soon.

Grace poked her head out the door and Joni nodded to her. She didn't want to get off the phone, but she could tell he was still tired, and she and Grace needed to get on the road as soon as possible.

"We're headed to Dallas today to see Doug. It's an 8-hour drive alone, not considering traffic, eating, and bathroom breaks, but we're going to try and make it there in one shot. I'll call you when we get there tonight," Joni said.

"Be careful," he said.

"We will," Joni said and ended the call.

*BEV AT TWENTY-FIVE*

Bev looked down at her mother in the casket. She barely recognized the stiff, painted body in front of her. She'd been so beautiful, but the mortician had done his best. When Stacy called to say their mother had died in a car accident, Bev wasn't surprised. Their father had died from a heart attack three years earlier; until his death, he'd driven their mother everywhere. She was a terrible driver. Bev didn't even ask if it was her fault. Turns out, it wasn't.

The attendees of the funeral hugged her before and after the service. They all told her how wonderful her mother was and the good she did for the community since she served as a member on several committees. Bev was sorry she didn't know that side of her mother better. Bev had loved her, but she didn't cry for her mother the way she'd cried for Miss Caroline.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

There wasn't much to see, attraction-wise, as they drove the rest of the way through New Mexico. Joni put in a road trip mix she'd made on Grace's laptop one night in the hotel. They rolled the windows down and sang along to The Grateful Dead and Led Zeppelin. A Corvette passed them and Joni recalled a trip to Florida they'd taken when she was nine. Beverly had promised to take them to Disney World instead of Disneyland but her boyfriend, Bobby, had refused to pay for four flights. Instead, they'd driven the entire way in Bev's black Trans Am. Bobby made them all sleep in the car: he and Bev in the front bucket seats, Joni in the backseat, and Grace, still small, stretched across the back dash. That was the last time Bev took them on an extended trip.

They stopped just past the border in Plains for lunch. Joni had forgotten they'd agreed to call Doug before they left and asked Grace if she'd remembered to do it.

"I knew there was something I was forgetting," Grace said. "I'll call him now while we've stopped." She took out her phone and dialed the number Emily had given her. It rang a few times and Grace braced herself to leave a message. Instead, a man answered.

"I'm not interested in whatever you're selling, so please take me off your call list," he said.

Grace scrambled. "I'm not selling anything. Is this Doug Wilder?"

“It is. May I ask who’s calling?”

“My name is Grace. I’m Randy and Beverly’s daughter,” she said.

There was a long pause on the end of the line, then finally, “How did you find me?”

“Be—Mom—died and we, Joni and I, wanted to find some family. We tracked down Emily and she told us about you. She’s the one who gave us your phone number.”

“What happened to Beverly?” he asked.

Grace told him the story and heard him wince. “I told her it was too dangerous to be living out there by herself. She was always too independent for her own good.” He sighed. “What can I do for you, Grace?”

“Joni and I are in West Texas and we’d like to see you, if that’s okay.”

He asked if he could think about it and call her back. Grace had no choice but to agree. She ended the call and told Joni what he’d said.

“Should we just keep driving and hope that he’ll agree to meet with us?” Grace asked.

“I guess so. We could hang out here, but I think we should just keep going. If he doesn’t want to see us, we’ll figure something out,” Joni said. “Did he say anything else?”

“He seemed upset about Bev. The way he talked about her made it sound like he’d spoken to her recently. He talked about her living alone.”

Joni gritted her teeth. Just another secret Bev was keeping from them.

They ate and got back on the road, hoping to hear from Doug before they got to Dallas.

They made it to Sweetwater before he called. He was hesitant and seemed concerned but agreed to meet with them. They stopped for gas and more snacks before finishing the trip. They arrived in Dallas around 7 that night and stopped at the first hotel they came to. It was Joni's turn to pay, so Grace pulled around front and let her out before locking the doors behind her.

Though they'd only been gone four days, Joni was growing weary of hotel living. She wondered how Nick did it when he went on tour. Joni knew his crew couldn't afford nice hotels, so they often shared rooms in roach coaches. She also knew they spent most of their time in the van or the bar, wherever they were playing. He'd asked her to go with him once, but she didn't imagine she'd be a welcome presence since none of the other wives or girlfriends ever went. Still, she wondered what touring life was like. Nick, although he was a brilliant songwriter, wasn't always great at describing things to Joni's satisfaction. As a free-spirited optimist, he didn't often take notice of the negative aspects of touring. He enjoyed the high he got from performing live, the adventure of traveling to a new place with new fans to be gained.

Grace called Doug to let him know they'd arrived. He asked if they were interested in meeting up right away; he had to work the following morning and wouldn't be available for most of the day. They were tired, but Grace agreed to meet with him. He said he'd drive to their side of town somewhere close to their hotel. They

decided to meet at a local place called Lee Harvey's. Joni and Grace freshened up, changed clothes, and were out the door in twenty minutes. The drive, for them, was short, but Doug hadn't arrived yet. They waited outside for him.

Fifteen minutes later, he pulled into the parking lot. He straightened his shirt and walked over to them. He looked remarkably like their father, or what Joni imagined he would look like now—dark hair and moustache, though Joni could make out streaks of gray.

“Which one of you is Grace?” Doug asked.

Grace raised her hand a little, prompting him to stick his own out for a shake. She accepted and he moved on to Joni.

“Doug,” he said, pointing to himself with his thumb. “It’s a pleasure to see you girls. It’s been a long time.”

“How long?” Joni asked.

“I haven’t seen you since you were a baby,” he said to Grace. “You were one of the most beautiful babies I’d ever seen.” Sensing their unease, he asked if they’d like to go inside. Grace and Joni followed him closely as he led them to a corner booth. A waitress came over to take their drink orders.

“Hot dog, Doug! It’s been some time since you’ve been in here,” the waitress said. “Where you been hidin’ at?”

He smiled wide. “I moved across town, darlin’. I’m just here to see my nieces while they’re in town. They’re staying nearby.” The waitress turned to look at them as

Doug introduced them. “This is Missy. She’s been working here for...how long has it been now?”

“Four years,” she said and rolled her eyes. “It’s hell puttin’ up with fellas like this one,” she laughed. “What can I get you girls?”

Joni ordered a gin and tonic, while Grace ordered just a tonic. Missy brought them over quickly and slid a beer in front of Doug, then winked at him before she turned away.

He took a drink. “I’m really sorry to hear about your mother, girls. She was something else, you know. I used to say they broke the mold when they made Bev.”

“You’re not kidding,” Joni said. “When was the last time you spoke to her?”

“A few months ago. We didn’t keep in touch much after your dad, well, you know. I think it hurt her too much to see me and she just wanted you guys to be able to move on and forget.” He pulled out a cigarette. “Do you mind if I smoke?”

Grace shook her head, then said, “She never mentioned you.”

Joni took the photos from her bag and pushed them across the table to Doug. He picked up the first, the one from the barbecue, and touched Bev’s face.

“Those were good times.”

“Was Dad depressed?” Joni asked. She was tired and didn’t want to waste time.

His brow furrowed. “Not particularly, no. He always suspected something was going on between Bev and me, and that caused some tension, but he loved your mom and he loved you girls. He was just sick, you know. He made some terrible mistakes—he’s human.” He raised his hands in defense. “Now, I’m not saying I forgive him for

everything, but he's my brother. I know everyone else turned their backs on him and that's their prerogative, but he's still my baby brother."

"I don't get it. He only killed himself," Grace said. "It's not like he murdered someone. Everyone's acting like he's Ted Bundy or something."

"Yeah, I know that's what Beverly told you, that he shot himself. Hell, they all just want to act like he's dead. Your mom and I never could see eye to eye about that. When I left—"

"What do you mean they all want to *act* like he's dead? He *is* dead. He's dead, Doug," Joni said.

"Shit, girls. Your dad isn't dead. I don't know where he is these days, but he's still breathing, as far as I know." Before they had a chance to interrupt, he said, "Look, Beverly had her reasons for telling you what she did. I don't agree with her decisions, but she was a good mother and she did what she had to do. I thought for sure she would have told you by now though." Joni and Grace were speechless. "And don't get any bright ideas about going to find him. Nobody knows where he is. There's no sense in beating a dead horse."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Joni finally asked.

"I've said too much and I'm sorry for turning things upside down for you girls, but Beverly, God rest her soul, is gone and I don't know why I'm telling you, to be honest."

Still confused, Joni asked, “What mistakes are you talking about? What did he do? It had to be something pretty terrible for everyone to pretend he’s dead!” She laughed. “This is the most absurd thing I’ve ever heard.”

Doug nodded. “I know, really I do, but it’s true.” He paused. “I don’t really feel comfortable talking about what happened, not that I even know, but I can imagine you girls aren’t going to let it die. If you insist on wanting to know more about it, you should talk to your grandma.”

“What good would that do, Doug? She’s been acting like he’s dead for twenty-three years. Why on Earth would she change her story now?” Grace asked.

“If you know he’s not dead, she can’t exactly argue with you. She’s embarrassed by what happened. We all were. If you just show up and surprise her, she’ll have no time to come up with a story for you. Your best bet is to drive down there and confront her without warning.”

Joni was still laughing. “I can’t believe this. I can’t believe you. Bev was a piece of work, that’s for sure, but she wouldn’t have lied about something like that. Things like this just don’t happen in real life.” She tossed a few bucks on the table and got up to leave. “It was really nice to meet you, Doug,” she said. “Either you’re crazy or you’re lying or both, but I’m not going to sit here and listen to it anymore. Grace, are you coming?”

Grace looked up at her before sliding out of the booth. She smiled weakly at Doug and thanked him for his time. “Can I call you later?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said, then they walked out the door.

As soon as they were inside the car, Joni turned to Grace. “Can you believe that shit spewing from his mouth? Honestly.”

Grace stared straight ahead. “Maybe he wasn’t lying, Jo. Why would he lie?”

“Why would he lie? The better question is why would everyone else lie? Who pretends someone is dead? Who does that? No one! This guy is just jerking our chains. You can’t honestly believe him.”

“I don’t know what I believe right now,” Grace said. She started the car and drove them back to their hotel.

Neither of them talked as they watched *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Joni went back over everything Doug had said. She attempted to recall times she’d mentioned her father to Bev over the years, trying desperately to accurately remember Bev’s reaction each time. There was no possible way to remember them all. Had Bev acted strangely when Joni asked about him? Bev always seemed hurt, but Joni assumed her mother was still grieving in her own way.

What about Emily and Ruth? They certainly seemed to act as if he was dead. If—*if*—it was all a lie, how could they be so casual about it? There were so many questions, but Doug obviously had no intention of answering them. Grace turned over in her bed to face the wall, throwing her right hand over her left shoulder just the way Bev had always done.

“I think we should go to New Orleans,” Grace said.

“Okay.”



*BEV AT FIFTY-FOUR*

The man grabbed her by the back of the neck and said he'd kill her. Bev had been locked inside the bank with the other hostages for only half an hour, but it seemed much longer. The police had arrived within minutes and she could hear helicopters overhead. He'd shot one hostage already, one he randomly chose from the group, and now had his sights set on Bev.

She normally did everything through the drive-thru, but this morning she'd forgotten to bring a deposit slip. The tellers always sighed and seemed to take longer when they were asked to provide one through the window, so Bev parked and went inside. She stood in the lobby filling out the slip when the man burst in. Bank robberies were nothing new in Los Angeles; they happened nearly on a daily basis, but there were rarely casualties.

Bev heard a pounding at the door, the gun cock, and thought about her yard. She hoped Robbie wouldn't throw everything away.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Louisiana was mostly flat and disappointing. Joni and Grace had made a joke of it, calling it “extra Texas.” They were glad to see it become more of what they’d imagined the further south they drove. Joni was playing a mix CD she’d made last year when she’d driven up to Chicago to surprise Nick at a show he was playing. It had been their first anniversary and he’d felt guilty about being gone. Although Joni didn’t put much stock in milestones such as anniversaries, his sadness about missing it had worn her down. She’d called in sick at work and drove straight through, making it just as he was coming on stage. She couldn’t hear any of those songs now—“Thunder Road,” “In the Aeroplane Over the Sea,” “Maggie May”—without thinking about that awfully long trip that had absolutely been worth it in the end.

The highways turned into bridges and the ditches into swamps as they got closer to New Orleans though they could barely see any of it by that time. Grace had called Doug early that morning to get their grandmother’s address. He’d gladly given it to them and wished them luck. He told Grace to call him afterward and let him know how it had gone. She said she would and thanked him again for his time and for what she hoped was the truth.

Grace pulled up outside of their grandmother’s condo and parked. They had no intention of disturbing her so late at night, but both of them felt stuck. They sat in

silence for nearly an hour before Joni suggested they find yet another hotel. Grace drove them to a nearby Holiday Inn.

Grace yawned as she knocked on the door. Joni hadn't been able to sleep the night before. She'd stayed up late texting Nick. He was out and barely responding, but she kept sending them. She listed possible reasons. Had their father had cheated on Bev? Had he gotten in trouble with the police? Had he hurt someone?

Joni held her coffee tightly between her hands as they waited for someone to answer the door. There was coughing and shuffling and, finally, a woman shouted from somewhere inside that she was coming. A slightly overweight elderly woman in makeup and curlers opened the door. She was smiling behind freshly painted lips, the lipstick already settling into her fine lines.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"We're looking for Donna Wilder," Grace said.

"You've got her. What can I do for you girls?"

Before they'd gotten out the car, they'd decided Grace should be the one to take the lead. "We're your granddaughters," she said. "Grace and Joni."

Donna stared at them for a moment, the smile still plastered on her face.

"What's that now?" she asked through her teeth.

"Randy was—is—our father," Grace said.

"Oh," she said.

"Oh? That's it?" Joni asked.

“Why don’t you girls come inside?” She led them over to a scratched-up leather couch that had clearly been napped on too often. It sagged in the middle, little wrinkles and cracks in the fabric that looked similar to Donna’s skin. She smiled genuinely this time and hugged them both, patting the backs of their heads. “Would you girls like any tea or coffee or anything?”

Joni held up her disposable cup from Starbucks. “I’m all set.”

“No thank you,” Grace said. “We’ve really just come to find out more about everything.”

Donna sat across from them in a rocking recliner and sipped from a coffee cup.

“I’m so glad you girls found me. I wanted to get in touch with you but after your father died, your mother cut us all loose. I’m sure you know about that, though. I heard about what happened to her. It’s just terrible.”

Grace nodded and opened her mouth to speak, but Joni cut in. “We can chat about all of that later, but Grace and I have some things we need to ask you beforehand.”

Donna’s perpetual smile began to drop. “Of course, honey.”

Joni looked toward Grace, then back at Donna. “We went to see Doug. He told us that Dad is still alive.” Donna looked down at her feet, covered in fluffy socks with rubber tread on the bottom. “We just want to know what’s going on. We’re not 100% sure we even believe what he told us, but it’s not something we can ignore. He said you were our best shot at finding out what happened, that he was uncomfortable discussing it any further with us and that he didn’t know much to begin with.”

Donna rocked gently in the chair. After a minute or two, she spoke. “That doesn’t surprise me. I have to say I’m uncomfortable talking about it myself. I thought about lying to you about it for a minute there, but I think there’s been enough lying over the years. It’s probably time you girls knew what happened.”

She told them how Randy had suspected Beverly was sleeping with Doug. He became depressed angry, sometimes violent. Beverly complained he was never home and that he was spending too much time at the bar. Beverly thought he might have been running around on her. He’d begun sleeping on the couch or in his car or somewhere else. Randy had lost his job, meaning Beverly had to pick up extra shifts at the restaurant in which she worked. He stayed home with the girls during the day while she worked. One day she came home early and found Randy giving them a bath. This wasn’t unusual, but there was something wrong about it, something Bev said she couldn’t put her finger on. Randy initially denied everything Bev accused him of—he was being inappropriate with his daughters, he was a pervert, he’d been fooling around with cheap women at the bar—but after hours of accusations, he decided to just leave. He’d checked out a long time ago. He still denied everything regarding Joni and Grace, but Bev was hurt and determined to hurt him. She called anyone who would listen to tell them he’d been molesting their daughters and cheating on her. The whole family was in disbelief, but Bev said she’d caught him and forced him to admit it. Emily didn’t want him around Ruth, of course, and there seemed to be a divide in the family between those who believed him and those who believed Bev. Doug loved Bev, but didn’t trust the lies and begged her to tell the truth. She refused to change her story. Donna had

been on the fence about it for years, but had made her peace with it after her husband's death. She no longer believed any of it.

The girls listened closely, keeping any questions to themselves until the end. Finally, Grace asked, "But why did she tell us he'd died?"

"It was just easier to make it seem like he was gone forever. If you girls had no hope of being able to find him, then she was in control. Bev begged us all to go along with it and we agreed, but she was too afraid we'd slip. I thought about finding you now that you're all grown up but decided maybe it was best left alone." Donna folded and unfolded her hands in her lap. "I'm sorry you had to find out this way, but I'm glad you know the truth now."

Joni shook her head. "How do we know you're telling us the truth?"

Donna shrugged. "I guess you don't."

"I know Bev wasn't the perfect mother, but I find it hard to believe she'd have concocted this whole thing just because she was upset about some suspicions. That's just crazy." Joni turned to her sister. "What are you thinking?"

Grace, always the more sensitive sister, was holding herself together admirably. "I don't know what I believe. At this point, we can only get one side of the story and that just sucks. I don't want to believe it." Then, to Donna, she said, "Is there any way we can contact our dad? Doug said we shouldn't even try to find him, but I feel like we've come all this way already, you know?"

"If you want to find him, he's been living up near Atlanta. I have a phone number for him but it might be old. I can try calling him if you'd like?"

“Yes,” they both said.

Donna stood up from the chair and crossed in front of them to the kitchen. She rummaged through a basket on the bar and pulled out a small slip of paper, then picked up the handset and began dialing. There was no answer. She covered the mouthpiece and whispered, “Do you want me to leave a message?”

They both nodded. She told him it was Mom, that she had something she needed to talk to him about, and to please call back as soon as possible at her number in New Orleans. She hung up and smiled faintly. “And now we wait,” she said.

Afterward, she wanted to make small talk with Joni and Grace. They tried, but there was too much on their minds to be casual. Donna asked about their lives, if they’d gone to college, if they were married, etc. She seemed disappointed in their answers, Joni’s especially. She told them a little about her own life, her husband, and how she managed to pass the time. “I’m very heavy into Bingo these days,” Donna said.

They waited an hour before they announced they’d like to get some food and take a nap since they’d been on the road so much lately. Donna seemed hurt they didn’t want to stay longer, but Grace tried to reassure her that they’d see her again before they left town. Grace left her cell number and the number at the hotel in case their father returned Donna’s call. She said she’d call Grace the minute she heard anything.

Joni didn’t feel like going back to the hotel, though Grace was tired and sluggish. She didn’t want to talk about anything just yet; Grace said she needed some time to process things. They decided to compromise on a distraction and see a movie. Joni drove them to a nearby shopping mall and parked in a spot reserved for expectant

mothers near the front. Inside, she bought tickets to *The Strangers*, two large drinks, two small tubs of popcorn, and a box of Junior Mints for Grace who liked to sprinkle them on top of the popcorn, creating a nasty, melty mess she always had to leave the movie to wash off. It was opening weekend and the theater was packed. Not even watching Scott Speedman and Liv Tyler get slaughtered in a manner eerily reminiscent of the Manson murders, something Bev had spoken about often to frighten them about speaking to strangers, could distract Joni from all the new information she'd just had dumped in her lap. From the look on Grace's face, she felt the same way.

After the movie, they wandered around the mall and ate loads of overpriced junk food. Joni considered calling Nick to tell him everything she'd found out but realized she didn't have much to tell him. What did she really know? She knew her father was alive and that Bev had lied about it, but she didn't feel like telling the story until she knew more of it. He'd only ask questions for which she had no answers.

As they sat in a ripped, sagging booth in a dumpy Chinese restaurant, Grace put her menu down and stared at Joni.

"Why do you think she did it?"

Joni knew she was talking about Bev. "Who can say now?"

She drank her iced tea down quickly, the straw making gurgling sounds in the bottom of her cup. "I guess we'll never know the whole truth." They ordered and chatted about the movie, then *Felicity* and *Dawson's Creek* and what the actors were doing ten years later until they were far removed from the conversation about their father.



They'd nearly given up on hearing back from Donna and were weighing their options, when, two days later, she called to tell them she'd heard from Randy. He wasn't sure he wanted to see them after all this time and said he'd take a few days to think about it. Donna told them he was living in Atlanta and working on an oil rig. She said it wouldn't do any good to go there without his blessing; she didn't know where he lived and didn't want him to be uncomfortable if he wasn't ready to reunite. This information left them at a crossroads. They didn't have the money or time to waste just waiting around for him to possibly call them, but they'd come too far to just go home empty-handed. They sat in the hotel lobby, taking advantage of the free continental breakfast, and tallying up their expenses so far.

"We just can't wait around for him," Joni said. "Either we drive there and hope he's willing to see us or we drive home."

Grace poured syrup on the remaining third of her waffle, burnt just the way she liked it. She cut it up into pieces and twirled one around and around, gathering as much syrup as she could, then bent down and jammed it into her mouth. She contemplated their options as she chewed, then said, "How far is it to Birmingham from here?"

"Why?"

"You live there so we can just hang out until we hear something or give up." She took another bite, swallowed, and added, "Besides, I've never met Nick."

The idea of seeing Nick was both exciting and scary. Who knew where their relationship stood at the moment? Joni wasn't sure she wanted Grace to meet him when

they were on such shaky ground, but Grace was right that it was the best thing for them to do.

“It’s about 350 miles from here I think. I’ll call Nick and let him know we’re coming so we don’t scare him.”

“Why would we scare him? Wait, do you guys live together?”

Joni stood up and took one last drink of her orange juice. “Yeah,” she said, then threw it in the trash can and walked back to their room. She went inside and dialed Nick. It was still early for him, but she figured he’d go right back to sleep. Instead of his groggy voice, Joni heard a woman.

“Hello?” she said.

“Um, I’m calling for Nick,” Joni said.

“Oh, he’s still asleep. You want me to wake him up?”

“Absolutely not,” Joni said and hung up. She began furiously packing, determined to go home and confront him. By the time Grace returned to the room, Joni was fully dressed and packed, waiting for her.

“Wow, that was fast,” Grace said. “Did you let him know we’re coming?”

“Nah, I thought we’d just surprise him,” she said.

“Is everything okay?” Grace asked.

“It’s fine,” she said. “Hurry up and get packed so we can get on the road.”

Before they left, Grace called Donna to let her know the plan.

“I’ll call you if I hear anything, honey,” Donna said.

“I’ll just hold my breath,” Grace said.

*BEV AT THIRTY-TWO*

Bev came home and found Randy in the tub with the girls. He seemed shocked when she opened the door; he turned away slightly.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m just giving the girls a bath,” Randy said.

She asked him to get out. He stood and wrapped a towel around himself, then bent to pick up Grace who was sitting against the corner. Bev stopped him. When he left the room, she took Grace out of the tub and haphazardly swaddled the wiggly one-year-old, then made Joni get out. She dried her oldest daughter’s hair roughly and fought the urge to cry.

Lately, Joni had been wetting the bed. She was overly affectionate, especially toward Randy and his friends. Bev spoke to a friend of hers who suggested Randy might be abusing Joni. Her own husband had been molesting their daughter and the counselor had told her those were obvious signs. Bev didn’t have the nerve to ask Joni if anything was happening.

She put the girls to bed and confronted Randy in the living room. She accused him of the abuse. He was appalled that she’d think so poorly of him, that she could think he’d ever hurt his children. They fought for what seemed like hours. He thought she’d cheated on him with Doug and with other men. Bev thought he’d cheated on her with women he’d met at the bar. Randy told her he didn’t want to be with her anymore and that he was done. He packed his things and left that night.

Bev expected him to be on the couch when she woke the next morning, but she never saw him again. Rather than telling the girls that he'd left them, she thought it would be easier if they thought he had no choice, but she didn't want to be nice about it. She was still angry and upset. She called his family and told them what had happened. When the girls were old enough to ask questions, Bev told them he'd killed himself. If they thought he was dead, they'd never go looking for him and that made Bev feel safe.

## CHAPTER NINE

They arrived in Birmingham around mid-afternoon. Joni had remained tight-lipped about the phone call that morning. For the first time since they'd left Los Angeles, no one had to use a map. Joni drove through the lush, hilled neighborhoods until she reached a wealthy area full of quaint shops and one-way streets. Joni turned down a side street and just behind a line of boutiques and bars pulled into the parking lot beside her condo. It wasn't the nicest place, but it was in a good neighborhood. Grace was surprised Joni could afford something like this on her nonexistent salary.

"It's Nick's. He bought it before we met," Joni said. She got out and slammed the car door behind her. Grace rushed to catch up. Joni unlocked the bottom door and stomped up the stairs to the front door. She heard music and talking coming from inside, Nick and his friend Paul playing a song. She hesitated. As angry as she was, she didn't want to cause a scene in front of other people. Maybe she could just ask to speak to him in private and then let him have it. She unlocked the door, leaving it open for Grace who was behind her, and walked inside. Nick was sitting on the couch wearing nothing but a pair of faded black jeans. He looked up at her, surprised, and then smiled. He stood up, swung his guitar around to his back, and hugged her.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

She smiled weakly and waved to Paul. "It's a long story," she said. "I'll tell you later."

Joni introduced Grace to them both as Paul excused himself.

“You don’t have to leave,” Joni said.

“No, it’s fine. I have some stuff I’ve gotta do anyway and I’m sure Nick would like to hear that long story, whatever it is.” He packed up his guitar and left.

Joni had thought Nick would be happier to see her. He made no attempt to kiss her or tell her he’d missed her. Then again, it seemed he’d been keeping himself busy.

“Can I talk to you in the bedroom?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said and pulled his guitar strap over his head, setting the guitar gently in its stand in the corner. He followed her into the bedroom and closed the door.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Are you cheating on me?”

He stared at her. “Are you being serious right now?”

“I called here this morning to tell you I was coming and a girl answered. She said you were still asleep!” She was flailing her arms about. She knew she looked crazy.

Nick laughed. “And?”

Joni blinked, but said nothing.

“Paul and Rose stayed over last night. They were over here drinking, and we were just hanging out. I told them to stay. We all just passed out in the living room,” Nick said, his voice growing louder and rougher.

“Oh,” Joni said. She wanted to believe him, and if she was being honest, she knew she had no reason to suspect him. He’d never even hinted at being that kind of guy. “I’m sorry I jumped to that conclusion.”

“It’s fine,” Nick said, though he was obviously frustrated. He sat on the bed. “No, it’s not fine. While we’re in here, I can’t keep doing this with you, Joni. You run hot and cold and I never know if you’re coming or going. I love you. Do you realize you’ve never actually said that to me? I told you I loved you the minute I realized it and I’ve never heard you say those words. I mean, we live together for crying out loud.” He paused. “Shit, what the hell am I thinking? It’s my fault, I guess. You were giving me signs all along and I just refused to see them.”

“What do you mean? I do love you!”

“I don’t want to hear it now, when you’re just trying to keep things from blowing up. There’s no meaning in that.” Then, “Why are you even here, Joni? Why are we still going through the motions if you’re not into it?”

She started to cry. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you. I know I’ve been distant and non-committal. I just didn’t realize how good I had it until—”

“Until I started pulling away? Sounds about right. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking myself since you’ve been gone and I’ve decided to give you an ultimatum.”

“Don’t do that,” Joni pleaded.

“You’re either in or you’re out, Joni. That’s just the way it is. No more playing around hoping you’ll change. I’m not doing it anymore.” He stood up and rubbed his arms, which were covered in tattoos.

“So what now?” Joni asked.

“I know you’ve got a lot of shit going on right now and I’m not asking you for an answer right this minute, but I’m not wasting anymore time. You need to let me know what you want to do and soon.”

She nodded.

“I’m trying my best to be understanding here. I think I’ve been pretty damn patient up until now, but I’m ready to start a life with someone, preferably you. This is not fair to me, Joni.”

She stood in front of him, taking his hand and braiding their fingers. “I know,” she said and turned his face toward her. She kissed him but he pulled away.

“Shall we go back out there so y’all can catch me up on what’s happened?”

“Sure, but I think this calls for alcohol,” Joni said, dejected.

She sat on the couch while he popped the tops on two beers in the kitchen. He sat next to Joni, but not too closely. Grace stretched out on the chaise attached at the end. Joni told him the whole story, starting from the beginning even though she’d already told him most of it in her texts.

“So he’s living in Atlanta now and doesn’t know if he wants to see us,” Joni said.

“Yeah, and we thought we’d just hang out here for a few days and see if he tries to contact us,” Grace added.

“Of course,” Nick said. “You’re welcome to stay as long as you want, Grace, and well, Joni, you live here.”

“Thanks,” Grace said. “It’s really nice to meet you, by the way.”



“Same to you,” he said. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Me too,” Grace lied.

They spent the evening eating greasy pizza, watching reality tv, and talking about music. It was as if Grace and Nick had known each other for years. For the first time, Joni couldn’t imagine herself anywhere else.

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Nick’s parents invited them out to the lake house the following weekend. Joni was apprehensive about joining them since she hadn’t given Nick any answer yet. She didn’t know how much his family knew about their situation, but she guessed it had been more obvious than she’d probably thought. She was never very affectionate toward Nick who was often touching her casually and sweetly in some way. Anytime the topic of marriage came up, though it was never about them but some cousin or niece of theirs, she became restless. But Grace wanted to get out and enjoy the sunshine; she was already missing the California weather.

On Saturday morning, they made the hour-long drive up to Smith Lake. They were the last to arrive. When they drove up the house, Nick’s brother was unloading the bags from his car while their father set up the golfing equipment on the dock. Nick and his brother liked to tee off into the water while they drank beer and talked about politics. Sometimes Nick’s younger cousin, Tyler, joined them. His parents had died when he was young, and Nick’s parents had raised him like one of their own. He’d been away at college in North Carolina but was now home for the summer. Tyler waved as

he stepped off the porch to help Nick's brother, Tim, with the bags. Nick went to join them after he carried their own bags inside.

Joni and Grace went into the house. Nick's mother, Lisa, and sister, Amber, were in the kitchen making lunch. They embraced Joni and Grace, even before Joni had the chance to introduce her. The guys carried Tim's family's things into the back bedroom and greeted the ladies in the kitchen before rushing out back to join Big Tim, Nick's dad. Tim's wife, Paula, emerged from the back bedroom with two little girls in new swimsuits who were eager to test them out.

They spent the day barbecuing, swimming, and tanning while Nick and his brother, cousin, and dad hit golf balls into the lake. If his family knew anything about their current situation, they didn't let on, even though Nick wasn't acting like his usual self. Before, when they'd visit, he was attentive and thoughtful, checking on her often.

Joni spent most of the time with Grace and the other women. Nick waved to her occasionally and held her hand at the dinner table. When it began to get dark, they decided to build a fire for them to sit around. Nick and his father played guitar and sang. It didn't take long for Grace to fall asleep. Joni woke her and offered to show her to the guest room. Joni led her to a screened-in porch in the back right corner of the house. Nick's parents had converted it into a makeshift bedroom with a twin bed in the corner. Luckily, there were only a few weeks of the year when sleeping outdoors would be a problem and they hadn't quite reached the stifling part of summer yet. They sat on the bed together listening to the crickets and distant singing and laughing. Joni hadn't told Grace about the ultimatum Nick had given her. She knew her sister could tell something

was wrong, that they weren't acting like two people in love, but she hadn't been ready to talk about it.

“So, are you going to tell me what's going on?” Grace asked.

Joni could have played it off and pretended she had no idea what Grace was talking about. It's true she and Grace hadn't been close since Joni had moved away, but they'd been through enough together in the past two weeks to bother lying. There had been enough of that already.

“Nick wants me to make a decision,” Joni said. “You'd think it would be easy. I don't know if you've noticed, but I have a little trouble with commitment.”

Grace laughed.

“It's funny. I left here wanting space, but things changed. The more I wanted to talk to him, the more unavailable he became. I guess our roles got reversed somewhere. I think I want to be with him—I do want to be with him—but I'm afraid I'm just clinging to something familiar because everything else is shit right now.”

Grace held Joni's hand. “Do you love him?”

“I do.”

“That's scary.”

Joni rubbed Grace's back until she fell asleep, then closed the door and returned to the group. They were all packing it up for the night, so Joni helped Lisa straighten things up.

When they were alone, Lisa asked, “Is everything okay between the two of you?”

Joni compressed the collapsible chairs and slid them back into their sacks.

“Grace or Nick?”

“Nick,” Lisa said as she folded the bag of marshmallows in on itself.

“We’re just going through a rough patch,” Joni said. “I’m sure it’ll get better.”

“I hope so,” Lisa said. She reached out to pat Joni’s cheek and smiled.

Joni leaned forward and hugged her. They held each other tightly until Big Tom stuck his head out the door to check on them. She heard Nick’s voice seeping through the door as he sang softly to the girls before bed. Joni helped Lisa carry things inside and joined them all to wind down.

When they left on Sunday afternoon, Joni knew what she was going to tell Nick. As he drove the country roads with the windows down and Guns N’ Roses blaring from the speakers, he looked over at her and smiled. She listened to him singing along to “Sweet Child O’ Mine” and planned out what she’d say to him when they were finally alone.

Nick stayed behind to unload their bags and carry them up as Joni and Grace went inside. The light was blinking on the phone. Joni walked over to it and pressed the button to play their messages. There was one from Paul who was checking on things and asking if Nick would be interested in playing a gig in Austin in a few weeks and one from Donna.

“Hi girls, I’m just calling to let you know I heard from your dad. He’s not real comfortable meeting with you two, but I’ve talked him into it. I told him you were

staying in Birmingham and he wanted to know if you could meet this week sometime. He works offshore and is about to head out for a job on Thursday. Call me back and let me know.”

Joni and Grace stared at one another. Nick pushed the front door open and dropped their bags just inside it. He could tell something was off.

“What’s going on?”

“Our grandmother just called back. Dad is willing to meet with us next week.”

“That’s good news, isn’t it? Neither of you look too happy about it.”

Joni sat on the couch and picked at the nail polish Grace had applied for her a few days ago. It was already chipping.

“I just thought I’d feel different about it,” Joni said.

Nick sat next to her and put his arm around her. “How do you feel?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Not excited.” Joni looked up at Grace, standing near the kitchen counter in a baggy, shapeless dress. She was still small. No one who didn’t know about the pregnancy would have ever guessed.

“I want to meet him,” Grace said.

Grace called Donna that night once they’d all settled back in. Donna said she’d set up the meeting and let them know the details. Their father hadn’t wanted to share his phone number or address. Joni knew that was just a way to cover his own ass in case he decided to back out. She hoped he would and maybe they could just move on. She was interested in the truth but she didn’t know why she cared. Even if Bev had kept him from contacting them as children, he didn’t try after they were grown. It’s not like

they'd changed their names. Something in her had changed since Donna revealed her version of the truth and Joni hadn't noticed it happening.

When Joni and Nick went to bed that night, she told him she loved him. He asked if she was sure. She said she was. He decided to believe her.

*BEV AT TWENTY-THREE*

He was the best-looking guy she'd ever seen. He bought her a drink and they chatted about movies and music before playing a game of pool. He said his name was Doug and introduced her to his brother Randy. Bev pretended to be bad at pool. Doug pretended to teach her to play.

She'd moved to Phoenix for school and loved the town so much she decided to stay after graduation. Her father had recently died, and her mother wasn't comfortable enough flying or being behind the wheel to visit. Stacy had married an attorney and moved to New Hampshire. Bev felt like she was really on her own and she loved it.

Bev did all the things she could think to do to win Doug over and it seemed to be working. When he walked her and her friends to her car that night, he leaned over her and kissed her cheek. Her body was humming. He told her how pretty she was and how he wished he'd met her a year ago, but that he was getting married soon. She asked if his brother was single.

## CHAPTER TEN

Joni and Grace drove to Atlanta on Tuesday to meet their father that evening. He'd asked them to come to some dive he knew and join him for dinner. They made good time. Joni loved to travel, but she was glad this was their last stop. There was nowhere to go from here except home. When they pulled into the parking lot, Joni parked close so she could spy on the diners inside. Looking around, she saw him there. He sat in a corner booth near the far-right window, drinking a cup of coffee. He hadn't shaved in days. He really did look a lot like Doug. Joni guessed by his appearance that he wasn't doing well.

"Are you ready?" Grace asked. She slipped her bag over her shoulder and opened the door. Joni didn't move.

"I don't want to do this," she said.

Grace pulled the door closed. "What do you mean?"

"I don't want to see him. I don't need to see him," Joni said.

Grace's nostrils flared. "You mean to tell me we've come all this way just for you to decide you don't want to see him? How much time and money have we wasted if you're not even going inside?"

"Maybe you think it was wasted, but I don't. I know we've come a long way, Grace. He was dead, and I don't want or need anything from him."



Grace opened the door again and stepped out. She leaned into the door frame. “I didn’t come all this way for nothing. I’m going inside.” She slammed the car door behind her and stomped into the diner.

Joni watched them meet. Grace smiled brightly and walked toward him. He didn’t even stand for her. The disappointment Joni was trying to avoid was showing itself on Grace’s face. They shook hands and he looked down at the table, staring into his coffee cup or patterns on the table top. The waitress stopped by and Grace ordered something. Grace and Randy spoke briefly, Grace leading the conversation. Joni imagined she was telling him about herself, what she was interested in and how she’d grown up. He nodded when she paused and looked up at her occasionally. The waitress brought a glass of water and asked if they’d like to order food. Grace shook her head. She was getting upset. She said something, then waited for him. Finally, he looked at her and spoke at length. When he finished, Grace stood up and excused herself, and when she returned to the car, Joni checked the clock. The entire reunion had only been twenty minutes long. Grace strapped herself in with force and told Joni to drive.

Grace cried for a long time and Joni let her. She finally stopped to blow her nose and told Joni what he’d said to her.

“I asked him why he never fought Bev on the accusations or why he never tried very hard to see us and he said he didn’t want to. He said he wanted out of the marriage and hated her so much by the time everything blew up that he just wanted to cut out and pretend that part of his life never happened. Said there were a few times he felt guilty and tried to call or write, but Bev intervened. He said she believed all those things she’d

accused him of and there was no changing her mind. He said he tried to start over but just wasn't cut out for marriage and fatherhood after her. He said that we were better off without him then and now."

Joni hated him for saying those things. She knew Grace had hoped for more and so had she. At least now they could move on and they weren't really missing anything. He'd done them a favor by being honest with Grace instead of leading her on just to let her down later.

When they got back to Birmingham, they began to make plans for the return trip. Joni thought it best if they just cut clear across the country since neither of them had any real desire to reconnect with any of the relatives they'd met recently. They didn't even bother trying to call Marie in Florida.

The night before they were set to leave, Grace told Joni she wanted to drive back alone. Joni protested, didn't think it was a good idea for a young, pregnant girl to be travelling so far alone, but Grace insisted. Joni was working on things with Nick and Grace needed some time alone to think about things. She said the long drive would help clear her head. Joni finally let it go and said she'd stay behind as long as Grace called her daily to check in. She promised she would and, the following morning, she said goodbye to Joni and Nick, hugging and kissing them both.

As promised, she called Joni every day to let her know how she was doing. On the fifth day, she called to say she'd made it back home. Grace had decided not to tell the father about the baby. She was sure she could provide him or her with everything

they'd ever need. It was better than having a father who didn't really want you, she'd said.

They were able to sell Bev's house quickly because of the location. They'd contemplated keeping it, but decided it was an unnecessary burden for them to keep up with, especially since Grace had planned to move to Birmingham before the baby was born. Her obstetrician was unhappy with her choice but was able to refer her to someone she trusted. Grace had found out she was having a girl but the name was still up in the air.

"I'll know it when I see her," Grace said.

Grace had packed everything away, paid Robbie to carry some of it to the dump, and packed the rest to go with her to her new home. Robbie had been a big help to her, carrying furniture and boxes and stacking them carefully in the U-Haul. He even offered to travel with her and help her unload it when she got there.

"Thanks," Grace said, "but Joni is flying out to ride with me."

He asked about Joni often. Grace told him she'd decided to give it a real shot with Nick. Grace reported to Joni that he seemed disappointed by her choice.

When Grace picked Joni up from the airport this time, Grace got out of the car to hug her. They took their time leaving the terminal even though they were on the receiving end of honking and even some yelling. Joni stayed the night at Grace's before they left the next morning.

The drive was long and hard and they had to stop often for Grace, but they made it within a week's time. Joni had tried to get Grace to fly back to Birmingham and stay

with Nick while she drove back alone, but Grace wanted the time with her while it was still just the two of them. They decided to find out more about Miss Caroline when they got home since no one else had been able to tell them anything.

The little house Grace bought had a swing set in the backyard that looked similar to their old rusted one. The first evening there, after Nick and Paul had laboriously unloaded the U-Haul and returned it to the rental company, Joni and Grace tested the swing set's sturdiness. It was newer and cleaner. Joni tapped on the pipe at the top and waited before sitting on the hard seat. Grace stood nearby and watched, too afraid it might break. They watched the sun go down over the loblolly pines across the street.

## VITA

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