



Starlight & Dark Nights

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Category: Romance

Description: She's mastered the art of hiding.
Now she has to find the courage to be seen.

Jude Majors seems to have it all: a handsome astronaut husband, beautiful twin daughters, and a house on Florida's sparkling Stardust Beach. But behind the polished smile and perfect life, Jude is drowning. Haunted by a painful childhood shaped by wartime prejudice, she's spent decades silencing the parts of herself that felt too different, too broken, too "other." Now, the cracks are starting to show.

Drinking has helped her cope—until it nearly kills her. Faced with terrifying consequences, Jude must finally confront the past she's worked so hard to bury and the identity she's long been taught to hide. But healing doesn't happen in isolation—and this time, she won't have to do it alone. With the fierce, loyal women of Stardust Beach by her side, Jude may find that even the darkest parts of her story deserve compassion, and even the most fractured hearts can shine again.

Raw, redemptive, and deeply human, Stardust Beach: Book Four is a gripping story of self-acceptance, found family, and the strength it takes to reclaim your voice.

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Prologue

DECEMBER 1941

“You aren’t safe here. This is no place for an American girl. Not right now.”

Judith Nagasaki looked up at her mother as she stood in the doorway to the bedroom that they shared. Judith, seven years old and unaware of anything other than a lot of hushed talk amongst the adults, was playing with a tiny doll she’d gotten as a birthday gift from her grandmother that year.

“Why, Mama?” Judith asked, wide-eyed and afraid. “Why is this not a place for me?”

Keiko Nagasaki walked over to the bed with her hands clasped together; she was small, delicate, and her dark hair was combed smoothly against her perfectly round head. She sat on the edge of the low bed that she shared with her only child, looking at Judith with so much love and wonder that it seemed she might cry.

“Mama?” Judith tried again. “I’m not an American girl. I’m Japanese,” she said in English.

This made Keiko smile wanly. “Oh, my baby,” she said, sliding from the bed to the floor so that she was sitting knees-to-knees with her daughter. She reached out and took the doll from Judith gently. “It’s not safe here because Japan did something to America two days ago, and now America has declared war on Japan.”

Judith’s eyes darkened. “What did Japan do to America?”

Keiko demurred, looking down at her hands, which were holding Judith's small, dark-haired, dark-eyed doll in its tiny red kimono. "They did something very cruel when America wasn't expecting it, and now America is very angry."

"And they'll come here and hurt us?"

Keiko looked right into Judith's face. "They might." She bit her lip, considering the possibilities. "I think you should go and stay with your father."

Judith's face crumpled the moment the words were out of her mother's mouth.

Her father? She barely remembered him! He was a stranger to her!

Judith's mother had met him in Hawaii as a young, beautiful Japanese girl with waist-length hair and a soft demeanor. Michael Harper, Judith's father, was there with the Navy, relaxing and enjoying the tropical lifestyle. He'd seen Keiko across a restaurant and been drawn to her like a moth to a flame—or so the story went. But Judith did not remember him, and the photographs of her father that she had made her shy away in fear. He was big-boned, tall, blonde, and blue-eyed, and Judith took after her mother, coloring-wise. She was pale and tiny, and Michael Harper seemed to seven-year-old Judith like a giant from a children's story.

"No," Judith said softly, shaking her head. "No. I don't want to. I want to be with you. I can protect you in case the Americans come."

Keiko's smile came then—thin, watery, sad—and her eyes softened. "My darling," she whispered in Japanese, reaching over to touch her little girl's forehead, brushing her black hair away gently. "I've already spoken to him. You have to go. He'll protect you there."

And because Judith always did what her mother said, she nodded and stared at the

doll that sat on the floor now. She willed herself to be tough and unafraid, but deep down, she was scared.

“Okay?” Keiko asked her daughter, taking her hands in her own. “Okay?” she asked again.

Judith nodded, but she could not look at her mother. She could not say okay. She could not be unafraid.

* * *

The boat left Japan after midnight, and Judith was on it. Keiko was not. She had explained to her daughter that a Japanese face arriving on the shores of the United States shortly after the bad thing that Japan had done was a one-way ticket to danger and disaster. Though she pretended to understand, this made Judith more, and not less, fearful.

As the boat pulled away from its port, the dark sky blanketed the ship and a million twinkling stars watched it slip away into the ocean like a thief in the night. On shore, several small fires burned hotly, flames licking the sky. Judith overheard two American men talking about the hellfire that was about to rain down on Japan, and she wondered whether the fires she could see had something to do with hellfire.

Her chaperone on the boat was the wife of a member of the Navy and was known to Michael Harper, which had assuaged Keiko’s concerns a little bit. Not a lot, but enough for her to decide that this passage was the best and safest option for her young daughter. The woman was named Esther, and her blonde hair was curled into sausage rolls and pinned to the sides of her face. She wore painted-on red lipstick and she held herself upright, shoulders back. Judith was sure she’d never seen anyone so glamorous.

“Your father will be waiting in Los Angeles,” Esther promised, sweeping Judith’s dark hair away from her cheek and tucking it behind her ear. It was comforting, the way that Esther mothered her, but it also made Judith sad; she wanted her own mother, not someone else’s. And Esther was already someone else’s mother: a twelve-year-old boy called Chester, who Judith hated on sight. The feeling seemed to be mutual, as Chester ignored her as much as possible, and whenever his mother left them alone in their stateroom, he called Judith words she didn’t understand, like “half-breed” and “slant eyes.”

After he’d said those things the first time, Judith had locked herself into the tiny bathroom and stared at her face for nearly an hour, inspecting her eyes to see if they really did slant, and wondering whether being a half-breed was something that she could see on her skin or in her own smile. She’d decided that she had no idea what she was looking for, and she finally let herself out of the bathroom.

Esther had gone to play cards with some of the other Navy wives on the ship, leaving Chester in charge. Judith said their names over and over in her mind: Esther and Chester. Chester and Esther. The words made her think of chestnuts and chests of drawers and undergarments and small, furry brown animals—though she didn’t know why. None of it made perfect sense to her, but she let her mind wander as she stared out at the vast expanse of ocean beyond the porthole windows of the ship.

“Esther and Chester,” she whispered to herself, picking at a loose thread on her dress. “Esther and?—“

“What?” Chester slammed the door of their room, startling her. “Are you saying my mother’s name?”

Judith turned to him and stared. She clamped her lips together, as she’d grown accustomed to doing in Chester’s presence.

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“Where is my mother?” he asked, narrowing his eyes at her as if she might be hiding Esther somewhere in the room. “Did she leave?”

Judith was afraid to answer and afraid not to. She toyed with the idea of getting up and running past Chester, opening the door, and fleeing into the long hallway of the ship. She also toyed with the idea of telling him she hated him and hoped he fell over the side of the ship and drowned. But she did neither. Instead, she sighed.

“She went to play cards,” Judith said, unable to meet Chester’s gaze. “With the women.”

“The women,” he parroted, using an annoying voice. He stood there, blocking the doorway as a look came over his face. “How old are you again?”

“Seven,” Judith whispered. “I turned seven in October.”

Chester eyed her appraisingly. “You know, for a half-breed, you’re not completely ugly. I bet you could even be pretty when you grow up. As long as you take after your dad and not your mom.”

Judith could feel an insult in there somewhere—what she did not yet know was the abrasive grind of a racist remark—and her heart seized up in her chest. She wanted to defend her mother to this boy, but she wasn’t sure how. Or why she needed to.

“Stand up,” he said, glaring at Judith. She stood. A strange look came over Chester’s face and his neck flushed bright pink. The color crept up to his cheeks and he turned to lock the stateroom door. “You want to see something?” he asked her.

Judith did not really want to see something, but for some reason this felt like an olive branch; perhaps an offer of friendship. She nodded.

“Go into the bathroom,” Chester said, checking the lock on the door again. “Hurry. I have something you’ll really want to see.”

Judith felt a prickle of fear as the hairs on the back of her neck stood up, and she understood later in life that this is the warning sign an alert animal gets when they are in some sort of danger. But at the tender age of seven, she did not yet know this, and she walked into the bathroom with an innocent heart.

Chester came in behind her, locking the door and changing her life forever.

* * *

By the time the boat docked in Los Angeles, they’d missed Christmas, and Judith had learned far more about the anatomy of young males than she had ever wanted to know. In fact, she’d never wondered about them at all, and was therefore entirely shocked to find that beneath his clothing, Chester had an entirely different piece of equipment than what she had.

Michael Harper was there at the port, waiting for Judith under a bright, cloudless blue sky. He squinted as Esther escorted his young daughter off the boat. Esther delivered Judith to him with a fair amount of excited chatter about her husband, who had served in the Navy with Michael in San Diego and also in Hawaii.

Judith was hungry and needed to use the restroom, but instead of saying so, she hopped from foot to foot as her father talked to Esther, keeping one watchful eye on Chester as he spit over the side of the dock into the water. She would not miss him, nor would she miss Esther’s ignorance of her own son’s behavior. Overall, Esther had been kind to Judith, but Judith did not particularly like her; any woman who could

have raised a son like Chester was someone she did not trust.

In the car, Michael looked at his daughter in the rearview mirror. Judith sat in the back of his station wagon, eyes trained out the window in wonder as she watched the palm trees and the Christmas decorations that were still hanging on houses and businesses.

“How was the trip?” he asked her, hoping that she might say something.

Judith shrugged. “Fine,” she said so quietly that it was almost inaudible. “It was fine.”

Michael cleared his throat and tried again. “Did you do anything for Christmas on the boat?”

Judith exhaled loudly through her nostrils. “We ate turkey on Christmas Day.”

“Anything special for the children?”

Judith was bored of this conversation already. She was tired, homesick, lonely, fearful, and she still needed to use the restroom.

“Did Santa make an appearance?” Michael Harper swung his car onto the freeway and pushed down on the gas pedal, propelling them towards some unknown place that he’d referred to as “home,” as in “let’s get you home, shall we?”

Judith finally turned her head from the window and looked at her father. “Santa?” she asked. “Yes.” There had been a Santa, just not there alone. Judith instantly recognized the man in the red suit as one of the Navy men whose family was bunking in the same hallway as her and Esther and Chester.

“And did you get any gifts?”

Judith shook her head. There had been candy, but no gifts.

“Well, lucky for you, he knew you’d be coming to my house, and he dropped off a few packages.” Michael pulled the car off at an exit and slowed to a stop, waiting for a light to change. “He left some very nice looking gifts there, and we thought we’d save Christmas dinner for when you could join us. How does that sound? Doing Christmas with us tonight?”

Judith could sense a hopefulness that bordered on desperation in her father’s voice, so she pasted a smile on her face and gave him a single nod. “Okay,” she said.

His house was completely unlike the one that Judith lived in with her mother. Instead of a minka-style house with its sliding doors and tatami floors, her father’s home was a 1920s Spanish influenced dwelling with arched doorways and windows. Inside, there were black iron railings, red-tiled floors, and stucco walls. Judith’s bedroom looked out on a sprawling green lawn that sloped down to a wide street. Los Angeles was nothing like Japan.

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“You’ll sit here,” Bea, Judith’s stepmother, said, pointing at a chair near the end of the table where her father sat. “Our children sit here and here,” she added, touching two of the other chairs that surrounded the table.

Bea had immediately informed Judith that she could call her Beatrice or Bea, but never Mom or Mother. Bea’s disdain for her husband’s first child was palpable, though Judith was young enough that she did not understand the dynamics of the situation, nor did she know enough to formulate thoughts like: “My stepmother hates me”—she just knew in her bones that she did.

Their Christmas dinner was a ham with potatoes and green beans, and after Judith and her younger siblings—a startling revelation: siblings!—had finished, they were allowed to sit beneath the Christmas tree with its dried-out needles and wait patiently for the gifts that they’d been promised.

These children, three-year-old Mary and five-year-old Oliver, were well-behaved—Judith could give them that. As she sat with her knees folded beneath her, Mary and Oliver did the same, staring wide-eyed at the lights and ornaments and not talking to Judith.

Finally, her father emerged from the kitchen, the sleeves of his shirt rolled up to his elbows.

“Present time!” he said in a friendly, booming voice. He clapped his hands together and crouched down near the children, taking the wrapped packages from beneath the tree and handing them out to his kids as they sat there in a row.

“Mary,” he said, handing his youngest child a wrapped box and then another. “And Oliver,” he said, pushing something bigger towards his only son. “And finally, Judith.” He offered her something small with an almost apologetic look in his eyes. After he’d given them all boxes to open, he stood and unhooked three stockings from the mantel, handing one to each child. Judith noticed that hers looked the least full, but she pasted a smile on her tired face, trying not to look or feel slighted.

The journey had been long, and until just that morning, she’d spent all her waking (and sometimes sleeping) hours trying to dodge Chester and his strangely roaming hands. She’d tried her hardest to be good and to act like a happy, normal girl for Esther as they ate their meals together aboard the ship, and now here she was, sitting in a house with a father she barely remembered and a new family she wasn’t sure if she even liked, and all she wanted was her mother. Her mother, her house, her own bed, her familiar surroundings. She wanted to hear people speaking Japanese, to sip miso soup from a ceramic bowl in the mornings, and to play with the doll she’d been allowed to pack in her tiny suitcase to take with her on the journey.

Suddenly, tears felt imminent, and Judith did not want to cry. Not in front of these strangers. Instead, she bit her tongue as hard as she could, holding it between her teeth as Mary and Oliver ripped into their packages and emptied their stockings.

Just as she’d suspected, her younger half-siblings were the recipients of toys and games and candy in their stockings, while she had received a small pink hairbrush, a handful of shelled walnuts, and an orange in her stocking. For good measure, someone had dropped in a piece of caramel, which she held in the palm of her hand now, hoping that the warmth of her skin would melt it and render it inedible.

It wasn’t that Judith expected the world, nor had she ever experienced a Christmas that was full of gifts and magic and Santa Claus, but it would have been nice on this, her first day in California, to feel as if she wasn’t just some appendage to this already-formed family. She looked around at her father, who was making eye contact

with his wife, and then at Mary and Oliver, who were happily playing with their new toys.

Over the coming weeks and months, Judith had plenty of opportunities to feel that sense of “otherness” that she’d felt when Chester had called her a half-breed; on more than one occasion, kids at her new school looked at her curiously, as if they wanted to ask her what rock she’d climbed out from under. And that’s how she felt, too: like she’d turned over a stone and slithered out from beneath it.

Her English was good: her mother had raised her to speak both English and Japanese fluently, but her father and Bea had instructed her fiercely to never slip into Japanese. No matter what happened, she was to stay quiet unless she could speak a sentence comfortably in English. She was never to mention Japan, and rather than calling herself Judith Nagasaki, she was now Judith Harper, for better or for worse.

Judith drifted off to sleep each night in the darkness of this strange California home, pretending that she was stretched out in her bed in Japan next to her mother. She breathed loudly, imagining that the sound of her own breath was really the sound of her mother’s breath—in, out, in, out—rhythmically falling asleep. It soothed her.

During the days, she counted the hours of difference in the time between herself and her mother (seventeen hours) so that she could always know where her mother was and what she was doing: when it was morning for Judith, her mother would be fast asleep in her bed. As Judith went to sleep each night, her mother would be eating her lunch of rice and fish in Japan, and perhaps thinking ahead to the chores she needed to do around the house that evening. It calmed her, thinking of her mother. It also stirred up emotions in her that she preferred to keep hidden from everyone else, so she took to hiding herself away in bathrooms and closets so that she could cry alone.

It was during one such secretive session in a coat closet that Judith overheard Bea talking on the telephone in the hallway.

“She’s only seven,” Bea said in this conversation that was, to Judith, one-sided. “I know. But Michael is a man of his word, and he insists that we take care of her. She’s his daughter. But will I have to raise her alongside my own children until she’s eighteen? Is it my responsibility to take care of his...well, his mistake?”

Mistake. The word sat heavily in Judith’s heart as she listened to Bea shuffle her feet on the wooden floor of the hallway. The rest of the conversation meant nothing to Judith, because all she could hear in her brain, in her heart, rushing in her ears, was the word “mistake.”

For the rest of her life, she would know that she was someone’s mistake.

CHAPTER1

December 13, 1964

DEREK TRAGER

“Good morning,good morning, it’s time to reach for the moon,” Maxine Trager sings to her husband in her slightly off-key, warbling voice. “Good morning, good morning, my love will be home sooooooon.”

Derek laughs at this and reaches for her in their bed, pulling her warm body closer to his.

“Did you sleep at all?” Maxine asks, snuggling into the spoon of his body with the back of hers.

As Derek reaches around his wife’s body, he can feel the swell of her stomach and he lays a palm flat, waiting to see whether or not he’ll get the light quickening of tiny hands and feet from inside her belly. He hasn’t yet, but Maxine can feel the baby

moving inside of her, and so he places his palms on her stomach each day, hoping for a greeting from the tiny astronaut who is currently floating around inside the universe of Maxine's body.

"I slept a bit," he lies, kissing the back of her neck. In truth, he did not sleep a wink. Being chosen to lead the Gemini orbital mission in Bill Booker's place had been unexpected, and Derek feels as if he's been given a gift that he isn't sure he deserves.

"Let me make you a good breakfast," Maxine whispers. She turns her body around in his arms until they're nose-to-nose, and she kisses him gently. "Unless there's something else you'd like to do first."

A slow smile spreads across Derek's tired face as he returns her kiss in a way that lets her know exactly what it is that he'd like to do.

When the Tragers finally emerge from their bedroom—Maxine wrapped in a satin robe, Derek wearing a thick cotton robe and leather slippers—they can hear small, happy noises coming from their daughter's bedroom. Their son, Ryan, who is a seventh grader, is still asleep.

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“I’ll get Wendy up,” Derek says, kissing Maxine on the forehead one more time before he heads to the nursery.

“Dada,” Wendy says, jumping up and down inside her crib. She’s got a stuffed teddy bear in the bed with her, but she’s thrown her favorite blanket over the railing and onto the carpeted bedroom floor. “Night-night,” she says, pointing with one stubby toddler finger at her pink blanket with its satin edging—the blanket she’s referred to as her Night-night ever since she could form the words. “I want.”

“Well, if you want Night-night, you shouldn’t have thrown it, missy,” Derek says, stooping over to scoop up the blanket. He puts it over his shoulder and then holds out both hands, reaching into the crib to take his eighteen-month-old from the bed. He holds her warm, squirming body in his arms and walks over to the bedroom window to open the curtains. “Look what’s outside,” Derek says, smiling as Wendy nuzzles her face against his shoulder, which is really just her nuzzling up to Night-night. “The sun is up.”

Wendy turns her head to look. “Sun,” she says, pointing at the blue sky the same way she’d pointed at the blanket on the floor. “Down.”

Derek puts her down on the floor, and she pulls her blanket off his shoulder so that it’s clutched in her tiny fist and dragging on the carpet behind her.

“I go Mama,” Wendy says, toddling off in her footie pajamas like she’s the boss of her own world.

Derek stays in the nursery for a moment, inhaling the sweet scent of baby powder,

lotion, and of his own child. Being an astronaut is exciting and rewarding and fulfilling in all the ways a person would imagine it to be, but being a father, well...that's something else. The moment his son—his first child—had been cleaned up, bundled, and handed off to him, Derek realized that he'd never known true love before. Ryan's big, searching eyes followed him everywhere from that very first time he'd looked at him. His reliance on Derek as sole protector, as guide, was absolute—and it's a feeling that Derek cannot compare to anything else.

And now: a third baby. He stands there as the sunlight streams through the window and warms the shag carpet beneath his feet. Of course, he and Maxine might have waited a bit longer before giving Wendy a little brother or sister, given the choice, but it had taken longer than expected to have another baby after Ryan, and the magic of life has sparked between them again. He couldn't be happier. So far, they've kicked around a few names: Michelle, Matthew, Bridget, maybe Brock. It almost doesn't matter, because this baby will arrive and announce him or herself to the world, coming into their family with its own personality, forging its own path through life.

It fills Derek with wonder.

“Hon?” Maxine calls from the kitchen. “Coffee.”

Derek straightens the afghan on the back of the rocking chair in the nursery and gives the room—with its pink walls, its pictures of moons and stars and balloons hung over the changing table and the crib—one last glance.

But now it's time for coffee; he'll need a lot of coffee to get through this day after a night of no sleep.

* * *

After Derek is showered and dressed, he walks down the hallway to find his wife and

daughter in the middle of the living room, still in their pajamas.

“Lazy morning for my girls?” he asks, surveying the open boxes that Maxine is sorting through.

“I wanted to get the ornaments and decorations out. We’ve got less than two weeks until Christmas.” Maxine stands up, one hand on her hip as she turns around in a circle. “I can’t find the tree-topper anywhere.” She frowns and then looks at Derek. “Have you seen it?”

“I have not.” Derek reaches down to touch Wendy’s white-blond hair as she clings to his leg and looks up at him. “I was just about to ask you if you’d seen my navy blue tie.”

This snaps Maxine out of her decorations dilemma and she claps her hands together just as the telephone rings. “Oh!” she says, stepping over a box and holding up the long skirts of her nightgown and robe as she does. “I have it. Let me get it.”

As she hurries to the laundry room, Maxine stops and lifts the phone from its receiver in the kitchen.

“Hello?” Derek can hear her say, with that little questioning lilt at the end of the word. There’s nothing that he loves more than calling his house to check in on her in the middle of his work day and hearing that soft, precious, “Hello?”

“Oh, Jude,” Maxine says. “Good morning. I’m good, how are you? I know, very exciting. Yes, yes.” Derek can hear the distraction in his wife’s voice as she chats with their next door neighbor, Jude Majors. Jude’s husband, Vance, is one of his coworkers, and the women have gotten closer to one another over the past year or so, though Maxine is always quick to say that while she loves Jude, no one is actually close to Jude Majors; you have to know a person before you can actually get

close to them.

“You’re so right,” Maxine is saying into the phone. Her voice filters out from the kitchen, and Wendy runs around, poking her head and hands into the boxes.

Derek keeps an eye on his little girl closely so that she doesn’t pull out anything she shouldn’t be playing with. How does Maxine do this all day—watch a toddler and keep her safe every moment she’s awake? It seems like an impossible task, and rather than admonish his daughter as she reaches for a glass ornament, he takes three big steps in her direction and lifts her up, turning her upside down to her great joy and amusement.

Wendy whoops with laughter as Maxine comes back into the room holding Derek’s necktie.

“That was Jude,” Maxine says unnecessarily. “She called to wish you good luck, and to ask if I wanted to go with her tonight to Jo Booker’s reading at NASA.”

Derek sets Wendy on the floor again, her face now pink and her eyes dancing from the physical play. He stands still as Maxine puts the tie around his neck, pulling one end longer than the other, folding it over the other side, looping it, knotting it, tugging it into position.

Derek pretends to cough like she’s choking him and Maxine laughs, swatting his arm.

“Are you going?” he asks her.

Maxine shrugs, admiring her husband as she swipes a hand down his arm and then over his chest, brushing off invisible lint.

“I might,” she says casually. “I have a sitter lined up in case I feel like it, and it might

be something fun to do. It's impressive anyway, isn't it?"

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“Hmm?” Derek is straightening his own tie now. “What is?”

“You know, a woman raising three kids, writing stories like she does.” Maxine walks back over to one of the open boxes and bends awkwardly at the waist, digging through it as she looks for the star that goes atop the tree. “Most of us just make dinner and raise the kids, but Jo really does it all. And can you believe she named one of her characters Maxine?”

Derek walks up behind his wife, putting his hands on her behind; she straightens up in a hurry, laughing in surprise. “Derek!” she shouts, looking at Wendy as she pulls herself up onto the couch with her Night-night tucked in next to her.

“Oh, all she knows is that her father is making her mother laugh,” Derek says as he leans forward and puts his lips to his wife’s ear. “And as for naming a character Maxine, why wouldn’t she? Only pretty girls are called Maxine.”

Derek smiles as his wife blushes and turns her face into his neck.

“I’ll miss you today,” she whispers. “You smell nice.”

It’s Derek’s turn to laugh. “Does the way I smell have an impact on how much you miss me?”

Maxine stands up on her toes and kisses him fully on the lips. “No, it’s just a nice bonus.”

Derek accepts one more kiss from his wife, picks up Wendy for one last cuddle, and

then sets her back down on the couch.

He revs the engine of his white Corvette in the driveway just for good measure and then pulls out onto the street just as Vance Majors opens up his own garage next door. The men exchange a quick wave, and then Derek steps on the gas.

He's got a mission to lead.

* * *

The day is full of anticipation. Derek drinks too much coffee, listens to everyone intently, and tries to keep his head in the game. He is hyper-focused, but also exhausted from lack of sleep. Still, he will not get a second chance to make a good first impression on Arvin North and the bigwigs at NASA, and he wants this to go well.

It has to go well.

"Trager," Bill Booker says. It's late afternoon, and the men are in the preparations area where they suit up for missions. They've done a dry dress rehearsal, they've gone through all the procedures. They are as ready as they possibly can be for this first space orbital mission.

"Booker," Derek says in return. Both men put their hands on their hips and face one another. It's like looking in a mirror.

Bill had been a lieutenant colonel in his previous life, as had Derek. They both wear their hair short, neat, close to the scalp. At about six feet tall, they are both among the tallest of the astronauts, and their personalities are even similar. When Arvin North had taken Bill from the position as lead astronaut and subbed in Derek instead, the switch had made perfect sense.

“Talk to you for a second?” Bill asks, his brow furrowed.

Derek follows him across the high-ceilinged, cement floored space, and they find a quiet corner to talk.

“I have some concerns,” Bill says, running a hand over his face as he talks. His eyes shift around the large room, taking in the astronauts and engineers as they bustle around under the fluorescent lights high above.

Derek feels the bubble in his chest start to deflate; of course Bill Booker has some concerns. Why wouldn't he drum up some concern that might alter the course of this mission now that he's not sitting in the lead seat anymore?

"I'm listening," Derek says gruffly, folding his arms across his chest. In the way that humans tend to mirror one another, Bill does the same.

"Listen, you're not going to like what I'm saying here, but I think it's important."

Derek continues to stare at Bill with a firm look. "Okay."

"There's an issue with the bolts on the door. I don't like the way the latch sticks, and I think if there were any sort of hazardous leak or anything happening inside the capsule, the bolt could be a serious detriment. I'd like to push for postponing and have it looked at."

Derek hears the words, and he understands the severity of the issue. But there's something bothering him about the way that Booker has left this concern for the day of the mission. Couldn't he have brought this up way sooner--even while he was still assigned to lead the mission? Why wait and dump this on someone else?

"We're not even leaving the atmosphere," Derek counters. "This is suborbital. We're

testing for different things, and I highly doubt that we'll face anything that even compares to what we'd face once we hit 330,000 feet."

Bill lets his arms fall and he puts both hands in the air, waving them back and forth like an air traffic controller. "No, no, no. You misunderstand me, Derek. This isn't me trying to kill the mission because I'm envious. I can assure you of that."

Derek lifts an eyebrow, but wisely stops it mid-arch and continues to listen.

"I'm not trying to throw a wrench in this because I think it should be me on that flight," Bill goes on. "But I won't be able to live with myself if I don't point out the questions and concerns that I have right now. Trager, I need you to hear me out."

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Derek desperately wants to walk away from this conversation and pretend that Bill has said nothing. A bolt? Really? A loose bolt...a bolt that sticks...a latch issue. It all sounds like the kind of thing that could seriously derail the mission, and, in this moment, there is nothing Derek Trager wants more than to be the commander of the Gemini orbital mission.

Derek exhales loudly. "I hear you. And your concerns have been registered. But if Arvin North says all systems are go on this, then do you really think I'm the guy to put a halt to an entire mission?"

Bill looks around in a way that borders on frantic. "I think the two of us bringing our concerns to North would carry some weight."

"And just your word alone wasn't enough?"

It's Bill's turn to exhale. "I didn't talk to him yet."

Derek gives a huff of a laugh as he looks at his silver wristwatch. "We're less than three hours from liftoff, Bill, and you haven't even brought this up with him yet? Instead you came to me?"

"I couldn't sleep last night," Bill admits. "I wanted this to come off without a hitch, even if I'm stuck here on the ground. Believe me," he implores, "there's nothing I want more than to see this mission be a raging success. But I tossed and turned and thought about the things I know and the tests we've run, and I can tell you one thing, Trager: even more than I want Gemini to be successful, I want to avoid a catastrophic event of any kind."

It's this--this right here--that finally does Derek in. The use of the word "catastrophic" feels to Derek like a gross overstatement of the issue. He would never intentionally brush off a major concern and put the lives of himself and his fellow astronauts at risk. No sane person would. But is he willing to throw the whole mission at this point on a hunch that kept Bill Booker awake last night? It's a predicament. He knows that his response here matters.

"Bill," Derek begins, feeling resigned. "You know that I care about safety as much as you do--as much as any of the other guys do--but I can't help wondering how much of this is tied up with your own ego."

Bill takes a step back as though Derek has slugged him. "What?" he booms. "You think that this has something to do with my own ego? That's crazy. And selfish. I would never--"

"Bill," Derek says in a low voice, motioning with his hand for Bill to bring the volume down, as his words are echoing throughout the cavernous space. "Everyone knows you've had a tough go of it this year, okay? We're all aware of your ex-wife," he says in a near whisper, referring to Margaret, Bill's first wife, who had taken her own life on the Fourth of July. "And we know that you've been under some...stress."

"Stress?" Bill says, not replicating Derek's lowered voice. "This has nothing to do with my personal life, or my ego," he splutters, "this has to do with the safety and integrity of this mission and nothing more."

Derek can feel himself closing down internally. This has gone far enough. He holds up one hand to stop Bill. "I've heard you, and your complaint is noted, as well as your apprehension. I hear you, and I feel that you do care, Bill. But I still think that I'm going to do whatever Arvin North says. If he pulls the plug on this, then so be it." Derek throws both hands in the air. "Otherwise, I'm going to get suited up and ready to go. Is that fine with you?"

The shutters have closed behind Bill's eyes and he nods now, looking distant. "Fine. You should do that."

As Booker strides away, Derek stands in the corner a moment longer, watching his colleague push at the heavy metal door angrily. It slams against the wall outside, sending the loud echo of Bill's discontent ringing through the enormous room.

Derek shakes his head. He'd never intentionally ignore danger. He just wouldn't. But he's the commander of this mission, not Bill Booker, and his gut says that it's time to press ahead, not pull back.

* * *

"Propulsion?" Bob Young says, holding a checklist in hand as the three astronauts sit in the cockpit.

"Go," Derek responds.

"Life support?" Young says in an almost mechanical voice. Derek can both hear and feel the excitement and the nerves in his copilots' voices and body language.

Murphy Hendricks leans over to check the various switches and stats in front of him. "Go," he responds.

"Communication?" Young says.

"Ground control," Hendricks says into his headset.

"Ground control, check," comes the slightly scratchy reply from someone inside of the NASA mission control center.

“Go,” Hendricks replies.

The men proceed to check the environmental controls, the emergency procedures, and mission objectives, and then they verify the functionality of all their tools and the instruments they’ll utilize for the mission. Finally, with system checks done, they review the launch procedures and settle in to mentally prepare themselves for the countdown.

For some of the men, this moment of quiet reflection is best spent praying to or communicating with their higher power. For Murphy Hendricks, it’s a time to close his eyes and look like he’s sleeping, but Derek knows full well that Hendricks is singing the lyrics to a song from start to finish in his head, imagining himself on stage with his drum kit as he performs for a crowd. Bob Young is definitely someone who prays, so Derek leaves him to it. And for himself, Derek prefers to think of the faces of the people he loves.

Maxine appears before his eyes, resplendent in her frothy robe and nightgown. The gentle swell of her belly is visible as she leans forward to pick Wendy up from the couch and hold her on one hip. He’s loved Maxine since the moment he’d first laid eyes on her, but never more so than after she became a mother.

Ryan, their firstborn, is everything a father could want from a son. He’s polite, but with a sharp mind that’s always working. In the first thirteen years of his life, he’s given both of his parents a real run for their money, asking the kinds of questions that make adults look at one another with raised eyebrows, as if to say: How on earth do we answer that? Ryan, as a small boy, was king of inquiries like: Who puts the sun away at night? Who is Santa Claus’s boss? Why are there both sharks and alligators? Good questions, all, and ones that Derek replays in his memory now as he smiles at the blinking lights on the panel before him.

Wendy, his baby girl, light of his life...her small, adorable features swim before him

as he thinks of the way she waits at the screen door for him to come home, calling out, “Dada! Dada!” with such excitement that his heart nearly explodes. And this new baby—whoever he or she turns out to be—will complete their family in ways that none of them can even anticipate.

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“Mission control to Gemini,” comes a voice through their headsets. “This is Arvin North.”

Derek snaps to attention, leaving the reverie of his family behind for the moment. He’d expected Bill Booker’s voice.

“Gemini to mission control,” Murphy Hendricks responds for them. The three astronauts look at one another with curiosity.

“Men, I’ll be replacing Booker on this mission. All systems are go on this front. On-board checks completed?”

“Checks completed,” the three men say in unison.

“Good. Countdown starts in five minutes.”

The men exchange another look, but none of them bring up the topic of Booker’s removal; there’ll be time to discuss that later.

When the countdown begins, Hendricks and Young stay focused on the panel before them, and Derek runs through the mental checklist of his own responsibilities, preparing himself for what’s to come. Space. Leading his first real mission. This is the start of something enormous.

“T-minus ten seconds,” comes the voice from mission control. Derek braces himself. His heart begins to race. “Nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one. And, liftoff!”

“Godspeed, men,” a second voice crackles over their headsets. It’s Arvin North.

It’s the last thing Derek Trager, Bob Young, and Murphy Hendricks hear as the shuttle bursts into flames.

CHAPTER 2

January 1965

JUDE

Hope and Faith, whose eighth birthday is the following day, are standing in the middle of the living room, arguing over a doll.

“I got that for Christmas,” Hope says, glowering at her identical twin. “Santa brought that forme.”

“You can share, Hopey,” Faith says in a bossy tone of voice. “Mama said we have to share everything.”

Jude is standing in the kitchen as her girls go back and forth over this damn doll, and it’s taking all of her willpower not to add a splash of vodka to her orange juice to soothe her jangled nerves.

Being a mother has been one of the great joys of her life, though Jude doesn’t think that it’s a job she does particularly well. When she’d gone into the hospital to give birth, she’d expected to come home with one giant, lumbering baby boy. A baby who would turn into a toddler and tumble all over in the grass, break things, and show a natural curiosity for the world that might guide him on his own adventures, leaving Jude free to mostly observe.

Instead, she'd been handed a tiny, squirming baby girl covered in slippery vernix, and the doctor had immediately gone back down between her legs, telling her to keep pushing. Much to Jude's dismay, a second girl had emerged, and Vance, her patient, stoic husband—waiting outside the delivery room as fathers generally did—had been informed that he had not one boy, but instead, two girls. He'd come in to Jude's room as soon as he was allowed, standing aside from her hesitantly, a look of shock on his handsome face.

“So,” Vance had said, laughing and crying at the same time. “I guess we have two weddings to pay for.”

Jude, flooded with hormones and exhaustion and terror, had begun to sob openly. “Twins,” she said, shaking her head. “I had no idea.”

Vance laughed louder. “Honey,” he'd said. “How could you have known? It was a total surprise.”

“But what will I do with girls?” she asked, her eyes skating towards the window and focusing on the gray sky outside the hospital window. They were living in Texas at that point, and the January day was overcast, but not rainy.

Vance shrugged. “You'll love them. You'll read to them and sing to them and raise them up right. You'll teach them everything you know about being a woman and a mother.”

His words were meant to be soothing, but instead, they'd struck fear into Jude's heart. How could she teach anyone how to be a woman and a mother when she barely remembered her own mother? When her sole impression of womanhood was a stepmother who had shunned her for most of her childhood? She'd had a few teachers to whom she'd looked at with admiration; women of superior patience and femininity, but as far as a mother figure...well, she hadn't seen her own mother since

1941.

“Jude?” Vance had asked gently, as if he were calling her back down from a high place, begging her to join him. “Everything is going to be okay. I know you’re tired right now and probably hurting, but I promise, things will be good. The babies are healthy and they’re beautiful.”

“Do they look...” Jude couldn’t bear to finish the question. She’d spent her life trying to look as American as she possibly could, and it was so ingrained in her, the importance of blending in, that she immediately wanted that for her daughters.

“They look gorgeous,” Vance had said forcefully. “Perfect in every way.”

Once he’d left to get a cup of coffee and to look at the babies in the nursery, Jude had allowed herself to stare at the sky until it lulled her into a hazy sleep-state. While dozing, she considered all the many ways she’d tried to acclimate and assimilate to her surroundings over the years: she’d stopped speaking Japanese altogether, to the point that it was but a distant memory that tickled the back of her brain now. She’d immersed herself in all things American: the music, the movies, the pop culture. And, as a teenager, she’d gone so far as to start dying her dark hair a mousy blonde, though there was nothing she could do about her dark eyes. It had all worked, at least in Jude’s estimation, to help her blend in and be what she needed to be to survive, but she feared for her brand-new baby girls that they’d spend their entire lives doing the same thing: trying to be something different, something elusive, something better than what they were.

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“Mommy!” Faith calls out now, coming into the kitchen with one fist on her tiny hip. “Hope is being mean to me.”

Jude sighs and sits in a kitchen chair, patting her thighs. Without words, Faith sits down on her mother’s lap and turns to look right at her, eyes imploring her mother to intervene. To solve the problem. To be the voice of reason.

My beautiful girls, Jude thinks, tucking Faith’s hair behind one ear.

“Remember what I told you?” she says to Faith, glancing at the doorway to the kitchen as Hope appears there, looking sheepish. She is holding the doll in her hands.

“I remember what you told us, Mommy,” Hope says. “You said that someday we might only have each other, and so we should always be nice. Not everyone gets a sister.”

“That’s right,” Jude says, pulling out the chair next to hers for Hope to sit in. Once both girls are seated, she looks back and forth between them. “I hope that Daddy and I are here for a long, long time, but in life, sometimes people grow up and their very best friends are their brothers and sisters. You come from the same place, and you understand each other. That’s important.”

“Just like you and Aunt Mary and Uncle Oliver?” Faith asks innocently.

Jude swallows hard before answering. She and Mary and Oliver are not close. Her girls know them, of course, and have met their children, but for their entire lives, Jude has been pitted against Mary and Oliver, so the relationship is not a warm one, but

rather a functional one.

“Aunt Mary and Uncle Oliver and I have different mothers,” Jude explains. Outside the kitchen window, a bird flies in and lands in a tree, catching Jude’s attention. She watches it momentarily as it flutters its wings and settles. “And there are things about our childhood that make it hard for us to be best friends.” She is afraid of saying too much, and so she stops there.

“Like what?” Faith pushes.

Jude shakes her head. “Just the way our father was.” Michael Harper had died before his granddaughters were born, and therefore Hope and Faith have no face, no memories, to assign to this man who was their grandfather. “He raised us differently, or rather, he let Grandma Bea raise us differently.”

The girls know their grandmother and are on good terms with her, but then again, they’re only eight years old. Jude fully anticipates that some of Bea’s feelings towards her husband’s oldest child will trickle down to Hope and Faith as they grow up, but as of yet, Bea has been consistently kind to them on the occasions when their paths have crossed.

Bea had remarried after her husband’s untimely death from lung cancer, and, in a weird twist of fate, she’d married a widower named Irving, a former Navy man who’d lost his wife, Esther, in a car accident, leaving him with his children, Chester and Ann, to raise alone. Of course, Irving and Michael Harper had known one another, as was already established when Michael suggested that Irving’s wife escort his young daughter from Japan to Los Angeles in 1941, but the eventual melding of the families had been enough for Jude to put as much distance between herself and Bea as possible. There is no way in hell she wants to spend holidays with Chester or to allow him anywhere near her girls.

“Are you raising us differently?” Hope asks, frowning at Jude.

“I’m raising you differently than Grandma Bea raised me, Uncle Oliver, and Aunt Mary, but I’m not raising you differently than each other,” she says, hoping that this distinction will make sense to her girls. “I love you both the same, and I want you both to understand that neither one of you is any less or more important in this household.”

The girls look at Jude with serious expressions, and she realizes that there’s no need to drive the point home today; she has plenty of years to show them and to tell them how important they both are to her.

“Now, why don’t you two go and play—nicely—while I finish making the cake for your birthday party tomorrow?”

At the words “cake” and “party,” Hope and Faith suddenly adopt a whole different attitude. Hope holds out the doll with a look of mild reluctance, and Faith smiles at her gravely.

“Thank you,” Faith says, accepting the doll. A brief flicker of regret passes over Hope’s face, but Jude gets them both on their feet and sends them off to play so that she can gather the ingredients for the lemon cake and buttercream frosting.

With the girls chattering happily in the front room, Jude moves around the kitchen, tying her apron around her waist, pulling a mixing bowl from the cupboard, and taking flour, sugar, eggs, and butter out and setting them all on the counter.

As much as the idea of a party thrills the girls, it does less to inspire joy in Jude; she’s always been more of an observer than a doer. Given the choice, she’d generally choose to sit on the sidelines and keep to herself. By tucking herself away from others, she’s more readily able to blend in, to hide the things about herself that she

knows she should not share. But by keeping herself removed, she also misses all the opportunities for real friendship. Real camaraderie. True depth and understanding.

She's lived the past twenty-four years of her life this way, and it's hard to imagine suddenly doing it any other way.

By the time Vance gets home from NASA that evening, there's a frosted cake resting on a wire rack, the food has been prepped for the next afternoon's party, and Jude has vacuumed the entire house, cleared the pool area, and set up a table and two long benches beneath a tree. Hope and Faith have both taken a swim, showered, and are sitting in an oversized hammock reading books peacefully.

And—though she tries to remain completely steady on her feet—Jude Majors is already drunk.

CHAPTER 3

Jo

It all feels like a fever dream for Jo, and she's been moving through her days on autopilot. Everything plays on a loop in her brain, tormenting her all day and keeping her from restful sleep at night: Jeanie Florence calling her house one evening looking for Jo's husband, Bill; meeting Jeanie at Frankie Maxwell's house; having that niggling women's intuition in the back of her brain that things could go seriously astray with Jeanie and Bill. (She hated herself for thinking that, but she had! Instantly!) And then, finally, the moment that she sees on the back of her eyelids when she tries to fall asleep at night: Bill and Jeanie, standing before a burning space shuttle at Cape Kennedy, holding hands as Jeanie looked up at him with a gaze that could only be described as loving.

"When is the party, Mom?" Nancy asks now, interrupting Jo's thoughts as she sits at

the coffee table in her living room, wrapping up two Barbie dolls for Hope and Faith's birthday.

Jo glances at the slim, gold watch on her wrist. "One o'clock," she says. Bill has gone into work for the morning, even though it's Saturday, and rather than questioning this or begging him to stay home, Jo feels relief at his absence. Bill being gone gives her the chance to breathe, to think, to not pretend that everything is fine by plastering on a game face and smiling at him every time he enters the room to ask where he put his briefcase/book/brown belt. Having him out of the house allows her to reexamine the image of Jeanie Florence's face in her mind yet again.

"Do I have to go?" Nancy asks, trying to sound sweet, but instead sounding a little pouty. "They're only turning eight, Mom. They're more Kate's friends than mine."

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Nancy, who is ten, would rather spend her every waking moment with her nose in a book, and in a sense, Jo can't blame her. She leans back against the couch, letting the wrapping paper she's just been creasing unfold a bit as she sighs.

"You don't want to go and swim? Jude said they were barbecuing hot dogs."

Nancy looks at her mom with the patience of a saint. "I'm reading areallygood book right now," she says.

Jo still struggles with the fact that her oldest children are not babies any longer. Jimmy, who is now thirteen, and Nancy, her studious bookworm of a girl, are both trustworthy and calm. Leaving them home alone for a few hours while she takes Kate to the birthday party would be no big deal.

"Okay," she says, relenting. "You and Jimmy can stay here, because I doubt he's interested in going to a party for two little girls."

"You got that right," Jimmy himself says, striding through the room with a baseball mitt on one hand, and a well-worn ball in the other. He pounds the ball into the mitt, as he so often does, trying to wear in the mitt he just got for Christmas. "Can I play catch outside with Paul and Wayne?"

Jo nods. "Of course. Just keep an eye out for cars."

"We always do, Mom," Jimmy says, rolling his eyes.

As the kids wander off, Jo is left alone with her thoughts again. She leans forward

and begins to tape the packages for the twins, watching her own long, slim fingers as they press firmly on the paper.

Her wedding ring sparkles, and Jo eyes the small diamond. Bill had given her that ring when they'd only been dating for a few months. Their courtship had been a quick one, their wedding small. And, up until recently, Jo has always thought that their love story was big. Their hopes and dreams worked in tandem, not against one another, and they always seemed to be in step.

She pulls a piece of tape from the dispenser and closes one end of the first Barbie box. Okay, she thinks to herself. You're forgetting a lot of bumpy patches here, Josephine. Don't gloss over the hard stuff. She flips the box and starts to fold the paper at the other end. Jo isn't trying to lie to herself, but sure, there have been a few things that have made it feel like she and Bill are shouting to one another across a great divide.

Moving to Florida a year and a half ago had been the first thing that felt divisive, in her mind. She'd been a Minnesota girl, born and bred, and leaving her home and her extended family for constant sunshine and the unknown had been hard. It had taken Jo reminding herself many, many times that when you marry someone, you sign up to support them through all their hopes and dreams. Particularly if that someone is your husband, and he gets hired by NASA to become an astronaut. What woman wouldn't support a dream like that?

Kate runs through the room in a short, flowered dress, her tanned legs moving quickly as she races into the kitchen. "Mommy, Mommy—can I have some Kool-Aid?"

"You may," Jo says mildly. "Please rinse your glass afterwards." Kate's request doesn't stop her wrapping or halt her train of thought.

Moving to Florida had been the first thing that felt like she and Bill weren't entirely on the same page, and then there had been the fact that Jo wanted to do something for herself, and so she'd started to volunteer at Stardust General Hospital. While Bill doesn't fundamentally have a problem with women working, with volunteering, or with Jo finding her footing in their new community, he'd struggled a bit at first with her being away from the children, and it had been a point of contention between them.

And then there is Jo's writing. She'd felt the itch to write stories the year before, and with some real effort and a stroke of luck, Jo had gotten her short romance stories published in True Romance magazine. The pay is minimal—only ten dollars a month—but it had caught the eye of the PR department at NASA, and they'd thrown a reading in her honor. Unfortunately, that reading coincided with the explosion at NASA in December and the deaths of two astronauts, and Jo's writing has suffered since then, but her writing is yet another thing that she feels has come between her and Bill.

He's always been loving and supportive, but it's all been hard. Every time one of Jo's columns comes out she feels as if her husband is patting her on the head like a dog, congratulating her mildly for her ten dollar paychecks and for getting her little story published, but it hasn't been lost on Jo that he's never read her work. Any of it.

And if he did read it...that would be another thing. Her story, which is being printed in installments in True Romance, is about a woman in love with an astronaut. She'd set out not intending to infringe at all on their own lives or their marriage, but somehow the writing had become personal, and Winston, the main character in Jo's story, had started a flirtation with a woman at work. Now, does Jo want to be embroiled in a scenario where art imitates life? No, not really. She's chastised herself for that a number of times, but somehow writing her own emotions down just feels so good—so cathartic—that she can't stop herself.

The doorbell chimes and Jo uses the heels of her hands on the coffee table to push herself to standing and crosses the vast sea of the carpeted living room to open the front door.

Frankie Maxwell is standing there, sunglasses in place, a cigarette held between her first two fingers.

“So, are we going to this shindig?” she asks throatily, exhaling a plume of smoke up into the sky.

Jo laughs. She looks her best friend up and down. “Is this a red carpet event? I thought it was a birthday party for two eight-year-olds.”

Frankie slides her sunglasses off her face. “Am I overdressed?” She glances down at the gathered and belted waist of her celadon green raw silk shantung dress. On her ears are two studded stones of a similar green color, and her hair is styled in smooth waves.

Jo glances down at her own capri pants and button-up blouse. She feels like they’re attending two different events. “No, you look gorgeous, but now I feel like I’m dressed to sweep out the garage or something.”

Frankie waves a hand and brushes past Jo. She makes a beeline for the kitchen and finds an ashtray in the cupboard, which is the one she always uses when she’s visiting Jo.

“You look gorgeous,” Frankie assures her, taking one last drag on the cigarette before stubbing the butt out in the ashtray and pushing it aside. She’s standing next to Jo’s kitchen counter. “I just felt like I spent the week cooped up inside, and I wanted to put on a dress that makes me feel good.”

“How is Ed? Has he been doing alright since the incident?”

“He's a little quieter than normal,” Frankie says, pulling out a kitchen chair and sitting down. She crosses her legs.

Both women clam up at the mention of the incident. The Gemini orbital mission, which was supposed to be led by Bill before he'd ultimately been removed from the test part of the project, had resulted in the deaths of Bob Young and Derek Trager. There isn't a single person involved with NASA who didn't spend the holiday season feeling traumatized by their terrifying and avoidable deaths, and the women in particular felt a shudder each time they imagined their own husbands trapped inside of a burning space capsule.

“How is Maxine doing?” Jo asks, reaching for the ashtray and dumping the single cigarette butt into the trash. Maxine Trager, Derek's wife, is someone they know and like, and Maxine's tragedy has become something of an unspoken cautionary tale to the women, as they watch her try to privately and publicly navigate the death of her husband.

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Frankie shakes her head and looks off into the distance. “I saw her downtown the other day. She was taking her kids into the church, and let me tell you, she looked horrible.”

Jo winces. “Of course she did. I’m sure she hasn’t slept since December thirteenth.”

“Have any of us?” Frankie asks so quietly that her words are barely audible.

Jo, who knows how quickly she can fall down the rabbit hole and imagine herself in the worst case scenarios, wipes her hands on a dishtowel and takes a deep breath. “I’d better finish wrapping these Barbie dolls and make sure Kate is ready to go,” she says. “I’m guessing that Jude is nervous about throwing this party.”

“Nervous?” Frankie, a former Rockette who is not the least bit shy, cannot imagine being anything but excited about inviting people over to hang out by her pool.

“Sure,” Jo says. “Jude isn’t exactly a social butterfly, in case you haven’t noticed. I bet Vance has pushed her to throw this party, and that she’s doing it for the girls.”

“I wonder if they’ll serve alcohol?” Frankie folds her arms across her stomach and tilts her head to one side.

Jo, still holding the dishtowel, snaps it in the direction of her friend. “Be nice!” she says with a warning.

Jude’s drinking has bothered Jo for a long time, but no matter how many times she’s pointed it out, the other women in their group have shrugged it off. To Jo, it’s not

nothing that a young mother drank so much that she ended up falling, hitting her head on the concrete, and sliding into the pool. Jude had been saved by a neighbor who saw the whole thing happen, and when she was brought into the hospital during one of Jo's volunteer shifts, Jo had gotten a front row seat to her friend's personal struggle. She'd even taken Hope and Faith home with her overnight while Vance stayed at the hospital with Jude.

Frankie holds up both hands. "I'm just saying—I could use a cocktail."

"Well, slow down there, Boozy McGee," Jo says, looping the dishtowel over the handle of her stove. "It's only noon. Maybe start with a Tab or something."

When they arrive at Jude's, there's a shroud of morbid curiosity hanging over everything. First is the fact that the Tragers' house is right next door, with its curtains pulled shut tightly and the car hidden away in the garage. Jo wonders momentarily whether it's bad form to throw a pool party right next door to the house where a young, pregnant widow of only a month is living with her two children, trying to survive the days and nights since their unimaginable loss.

She tries not to visibly shudder as they walk up the driveway with Kate in front of them, holding the wrapped Barbie dolls to give to the twins.

Inside the house, Jo plasters an uneasy smile on her face, greeting everyone as Jude leads them out to the pool, which she can't help but remember is the sight of Jude's near drowning.

"You okay?" Frankie nudges her as they sit in chairs near the pool while the children all gather together to listen to Hope and Faith talk excitedly about the cake and the presents that are forthcoming. "You look terrified."

Jo shrugs. "I don't know. Something feels off."

This makes Frankie laugh. "Are you a psychic medium now, Josephine? You gonna read all our palms and talk to our dead relatives?"

As she says this, Maxine Trager walks through the gate holding two wrapped boxes. She looks pale and drawn.

The women who are gathered around the pool go quiet, but then realize it immediately and try to go back to their conversations as if their worst nightmare hadn't just come to life before their eyes.

"Maxine," Jo says quickly, standing up and sweeping her hands down the front of her capris. "Come sit with us."

God, I hope she didn't hear Frankie say that, Jo thinks, trying to keep the mortification off her face.

Maxine walks over to them. "I'm not staying," she says, looking stricken. "I just wanted to bring gifts for the girls."

Jude comes out from the kitchen holding a platter of cheese and Ritz crackers. She sets it on the picnic table and rushes over. "Maxine," she says. "I'm so sorry--were we being too loud?"

Maxine waves a hand as Jude takes the gifts from her. "No, no. Not at all. But even though I'm not in the mood for a party, I wanted to bring gifts by for Hope and Faith."

"Maxine, you didn't have to..." Jude trails off, holding the wrapped gifts dumbly.

Jo steps in to save her when she realizes that Jude might cry. "I want to bring dinner over for you and the kids this week," Jo says to Maxine boldly. None of this "tell us what we can do for you" nonsense that people say when they aren't sure what else to

say. In Minnesota, where the winters get cold and long and the people speak more plainly, Jo learned that you told a grieving person what you were going to do for them rather than asking them to figure it out for you. And if they didn't want what you offered, then that was just fine too.

"That would be really nice, Jo," Maxine says in a near-whisper. "The kids and I are getting by, but I'm afraid I make a lot of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. You all have been so wonderful checking in on us and bringing meals, and I know I need to get back on my feet here soon, I'm just...not there yet."

This time it's Maxine who looks like crying, and Jude looks torn between staying and taking care of the guests who are there to celebrate her daughters' birthday, and walking her friend back home.

Again, Jo steps in: "Jude, I can get everyone here something to drink if you want to take Maxine home and get her settled in. And Maxine, if you feel like sending the kids over, we are all more than happy to watch Wendy for a bit and to have Ryan join us for cake and games."

Maxine's eyes look like saucers and all of a sudden Jo realizes that she's looking at a woman on the verge. Jo turns to Jude. "Jude, can you bring Wendy back with you? We'll keep her for an hour or two so that Maxine can catch a nap, okay?"

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Maxine looks like she wants to protest, but instead, Jude puts an arm around her shoulders and walks her back to the gate, shooting a grateful look at Jo over her shoulder.

True to her word, Jo heads for the kitchen and starts pouring Kool-Aid for the kids, then filling glasses with ice for tea or Tab for the women. She sets everything on a tray that she finds on the kitchen table, and she's about to carry it out to the table by the pool when she spots a cupboard that's slightly ajar. The urge to look is overwhelming, so Jo glances around, makes sure she's alone, and then peers inside without opening it much further. Right there, amidst the bottles of vinegar, oil, and jars of spices, is a clear bottle of vodka. It's partially hidden behind the Worcestershire sauce, but Jo can tell by the label that it's a half-empty bottle of vodka. She leaves the cupboard door as is and heads outside with the drinks.

When Jude comes back, she's got tiny, blonde Wendy on one hip and is cradling the little girl to her as she points out the other kids.

"We'll all keep an eye on her," Barbie promises as she joins the group. "She can play with Huck."

Barbie Roman has three boys--Huck is the same age as Wendy--and she crouches down next to her older two boys to tell them to play nicely with the little ones.

"I set up an area away from the pool where they could play games," Jude says, pointing out a patch of grass near the fence where the kids are gathered.

"Everything looks really nice, Jude," Frankie offers. As the only one of the women

with no children of her own, she isn't one to get really into kids' birthday parties, but she can appreciate a well-organized event when she sees one.

Jo gives Frankie a look of gratitude. Their little group of five women is close-knit, but Jude is the outlier of the bunch. Carrie and Barbie get together occasionally with their kids to chat the same way that Jo and Frankie have paired off and become closer, but so far Jude has kept to herself. Sure, she'll show up to every event and get together, but there's a reservedness to her that makes it difficult to break through the barrier and really get to know her.

"Thanks, Frankie," Jude says.

Carrie Donovan has joined them. "So anyway," she says, reaching out to brush her daughter's hair from her eyes as she sprints by the group. "I hear I just missed Maxine. What's the word? How is she holding up?"

Jude bites her lower lip and looks at the cement beneath their feet. "She's barely hanging on, from what I can see. It's rough."

"You were just inside her house--is she keeping up with things?"

Jude pulls a face. "I don't want to gossip, but no, not really. There are piles of laundry, and the sink is full of dishes."

"I don't suppose Ryan is in a position to help much," Jo says, thinking of how Jimmy would react in the same scenario. "Though he's going to need to step up here and be the man of the house."

"Idea," Carrie says, holding up a finger. "How about if we all offer to go over one afternoon and clean her house top to bottom, and we enlist our husbands to take Ryan out to catch a ball or something so that he can have some reinforcement from guys

who knew his dad. And they can--oh, I don't know how you would say it--maybe give him some advice on how to step up to the plate around the house now that his dad is gone? I mean, Maxine has another baby coming. She's really going to need him to pitch in with the little ones."

Jo is nodding as she listens. "That sounds like a great idea. I think we should set up a time to head over and clean." She turns to Jude. "Do you think maybe you could arrange to get her out of the house one afternoon? If not for a trip to the salon, then maybe just for a cup of coffee or a long walk? We can head over and get things shipshape."

"And I can make some easy pasta dishes that she can freeze and eat whenever," Frankie offers.

"That sounds wonderful." Jo nudges Frankie with an elbow and turns to watch the children in the grass for a moment. The older kids are doing a great job of looking after the younger ones, and so far, Jude seems to be easing into the event.

"I think we have a plan then," Barbie says. "A good one."

Jude excuses herself then to head back into the kitchen and finish prepping the snacks and cake, and Jo watches her go. She wants to follow and see if Jude is topping off her own drink with a splash of vodka from the open cupboard, but just then there is a wail from the grassy area as two of the kids have knocked into each other and need soothing and attention.

From the window, Jo can see Jude moving around the kitchen, but she's distracted and forgets to worry too much about whether Jude can make it through the party without dipping into the vodka.

CHAPTER4

Bill

Cape Kennedy has been operating at a low hum since December thirteenth. Rather, there is a distinctive, insistent buzz to the activity surrounding the investigation into the Gemini fire, but every employee walks through their days with grim, determined looks on their faces, speaking in low, hushed tones, and looking out at the launch area morosely.

"Booker," Arvin North is standing at Bill's desk. "Speak with you in my office?" North has his hands in his pockets and he jingles his keys and coins with one hand. "Be there in ten minutes."

A phone call would have sufficed, Bill thinks as he looks out the wide window at the tree line and the blue sky in the distance. But Arvin North has a knack for being forthright in a way that borders on the uncomfortable.

Vance Majors walks over and pauses by Bill's desk, watching Arvin North leave the floor through a set of double doors.

"Buddy," he says, eyes still on the doors, even after they've swung closed again. "You okay?"

Bill leans back in his chair and laces his hands behind his head. Sure, he's okay. He's fine. He's been struggling for several weeks now--since the fire--with the fact that it was his hunch that something like this would happen, but in addition to the fact that he'd been right, he's also struggling with the knowledge that he should have spoken up sooner. Why wait until the afternoon of the launch to bring it up to Trager? Or until they were standing in mission control to voice his concerns to North?

Bill sighs heavily. "I'm hanging in here. Like everyone else. North wants to see me in ten minutes—don't know what that's about."

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Vance sucks in some air through his teeth and it sounds like a sympathetic whistle. “Hopefully nothing serious.”

Bill’s eyes travel over the entire floor as he sits there. He doesn’t want to admit it—even to himself—but he’s always hoping that his eyes will snag on Jeanie Florence. To his absolute misfortune, he and Jeanie had shared a clandestine and completely forbidden kiss the night of the fire, and since then, their interactions have been scarce. Actually, Jeanie has (probably intentionally), kept their interactions close to zero.

“Hey,” Vance is saying, leaning closer to Bill’s desk. “Weird to see Bob’s desk cleared off.” He nods at the spot that Bob Young, the other astronaut who’d died in the fire, had occupied up until December thirteenth. Just recently, someone has come in and completely cleared away everything, even the cup of pencils and the ink blotter. It’s been wiped so clean that the faux wood shines.

Bob Young, late twenties, and largely considered one of the most handsome astronauts, had perished alongside Derek Trager that evening. But given that Bob was the only astronaut who was single and without kids when he died, it’s almost as if he’s simply vanished. There is no widow to attend to, and there are no children to step in and care for. There is no reminder that he was ever in Stardust Beach at all, except for the empty house in the neighborhood that his parents have already come down from Pennsylvania to empty out.

“Yeah, it is weird,” Bill agrees, still looking at Bob Young’s empty desk. The chair is pushed all the way up and under it. Even the cord to the desk phone has been untangled, recoiled, and rests neatly next to the handset. For a moment, Bill wonders

who will sit there next, and if it will feel like moving into the house of someone who has recently died. And then of course there is his actual house...

“Anyway,” Vance says. He taps Bill’s desk with the tips of his fingers and glances around. “Keep us posted if North says anything interesting, will you?”

Bill puts on a smile that has no wattage to it. “Sure. Will do.”

After Vance is gone, he stands. He stretches. He surveys the floor again. It’s mostly men, with a few female engineers scattered about, brightening up the sea of white shirtsleeves, charcoal gray pants, and tastefully patterned ties. The women are like the frosting on the cake, Bill thinks, admiring a secretary named Helen as she saunters by, her blue floral skirt swishing behind her. In her wake, she leaves a trail of powdery lilac perfume.

He contemplates calling home quickly just to hear Jo’s voice, but then dismisses the idea. Things have been somewhat touchy with her since the night of the fire, and Bill thinks that maybe it’s affected her more than he would have expected. After all, a fire that killed two men is bad enough, but the notion that Bill had been set to lead that mission himself and that he could have died must be messing with her head.

Not only that, but 1964 had been a tough year all around. Jo had found her footing with her writing, and he was sure proud of her for that. But between her late nights with the typewriter, and her long afternoons volunteering at the hospital, sometimes it seemed to him like she came home and put together a slapdash dinner for him and the kids and then counted the minutes until they were all asleep so that she could go back to her imaginary world.

Bill is punching the buttons for the elevator as he considers this. It’s entirely possible that he feels envious of Jo’s writing and the way that it allows her to escape, at least a bit, and that this has kept him from settling in to read her stories. He hasn’t read them

yet, and that's something that feels like it's coming between them. Maybe not a lot, but he can pick up on a frisson of displeasure every time someone mentions Jo's stories in his presence.

The elevator doors slide open and Bill steps into the car to find two of the women from the Human Resources department. They're hugging file folders to their chests and talking in low voices.

"Mr. Booker," one of them says, nodding at him.

"Ladies." Bill pushes the button for Arvin's floor and the doors close.

One of the women clears her throat. "Um, I read your wife's stories, and they're fantastic. You must be so proud."

Bill, who is standing in front of them with his back to the women, turns slightly. "Thank you, I am," he says with a smile and a nod. "She's a stellar wife and mother, and I'm incredibly proud of her writing and the way she's putting herself out there."

The other woman makes a sound that's almost like a giggle and Bill can see them exchange a look between them before turning their gazes to the ground. "She's putting everything out there," the woman who has said nothing so far mutters.

Bill hears it, but isn't sure he's heard it correctly. However, before he has a chance to clarify, the elevator dings and the doors open. He gives them a perfunctory nod and walks off, turning in the direction of North's office.

This can't be good—this meeting. They've been briefed and debriefed on the ill-fated Gemini orbital mission, and there can't possibly be new ground to cover. The one thing that hasn't happened yet is for North to pull Bill aside and to parse the discussion they'd had that evening in mission control for meaning.

“Booker,” Arvin North says from behind his desk. His office door is open. “Come in.” He waves at Bill to enter and gestures broadly for him to sit. “Close the door behind you.”

Bill does as he’s told, but he does not sit comfortably in the silent office. For all the times he’s been in here, he’s never before felt as if there wasn’t enough air to breathe.

Arvin puts his elbows on the desk and presses his fingertips together, making a steeple as he watches Bill’s face. “I’d like to have a discussion with you before we undergo any sort of formal inquisition by the legal department or anyone outside of our daily sphere.”

Bill nods, though the words “legal department” have given his heart a bit of an electric jolt.

“We had an interaction in the moments before I pulled you from the mission,” North starts, then pauses. “Rather, you brought to my attention some concerns you were having, and I want to address those now.”

Bill feels a storm of emotions start to boil inside him. Now?! he wants to shout. Now you want to address my concerns? Instead, he waits. He has to wait. Saying too much is never a good idea, and saying too much when your career and your future are on the line is an even bigger mistake. Not to mention the fact that, by nature, Bill is a man of few words. Stoicism was instilled in him from a young age, and he will maintain a stiff upper lip in front of his boss no matter what happens.

“First of all,” North says, “you mentioned to me that you felt we had an issue with the technology of the capsule about twenty minutes before liftoff, did you not?”

Bill pretends to recall the evening in a leisurely fashion—as if he isn’t constantly playing and replaying the events of December thirteenth in his mind when he’s

awake—and then he nods. “Yes, that sounds right. About twenty minutes prior to countdown.”

“I see.” North waits and stares at him, apparently waiting for Bill to say more. When he doesn’t, North gives a small cough and then reaches for a pack of cigarettes and a lighter on his desk. He taps out a cigarette, and, at length, puts it to his lips, flicks the lighter, touches the flame to the filter, and inhales. Once he’s taken a full drag and exhaled, he lets the lighter snap shut and sets it back on the desk. “Bill,” he says, “I’m going to level with you. We have some real trouble on our hands.”

“Yes, sir,” Bill says, agreeing, but also encouraging North to go on. It’s not his place to do the telling here, and so he won’t.

“This is a PR nightmare, as you can probably imagine.” North lets a wry smile play at his lips. “Our PR department—mostly comprised of attractive ladies who like to put on carnivals and luncheons, or readings by local authors,” he says, tilting his head at Bill to indicate that he’s talking about Jo, “is in a tizzy. We’ve lost two astronauts a year after JFK’s assassination. Sure, President Johnson is a huge proponent of the space program, but these are big hits to NASA. With a fiery explosion killing two men in the prime of their lives, people are going to look at us and wonder what the hell kind of dog and pony show we’re running here.”

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Arvin North stands up and starts to pace his own office, looking agitated. He puffs his cigarette a few times, exhaling up at the ceiling tiles, which are already taking on a slightly yellowish hue from all the cigarette smoke they absorb on a daily basis.

“If word gets out that you wanted to call off the mission and that you had misgivings, and that I refused to listen...it looks bad for us. The optics are not good, Booker. I don’t want the entire program to be jeopardized over one mistake.”

Realization dawns on Bill as he listens: Arvin North is afraid. He’s afraid he botched this mission, and he’s afraid that he’s going to be called on the carpet for it. Bill is not used to seeing North in any light other than as a completely capable and calm leader. The man makes informed decisions, holds people accountable, and tackles huge things every day of his life, and now here he is, just like any other man, sweating as he imagines that he’s done something terribly wrong.

“I understand that, sir. I don’t want us to be under a microscope any more than you do, and I don’t like the thought of us being grilled by the legal department—or anyone else.” Bill nearly takes a breath here; this is more than he usually says to Arvin North in one go. “I’m worried for all of us. Every one of us. And for the program.”

North stops pacing and lets the hand holding the cigarette dangle at his side as he looks right at Bill with a burning, inquisitive gaze. “I need your help, Booker.”

Bill understands immediately. It’s possible his own career hinges on this moment. “Okay.”

“Did you tell anyone else about your concerns? Write them down? Share them with anyone—even your wife?”

A lump the size of Jupiter starts to form in Bill’s throat. He knows exactly who he shared his concerns with, and the ramifications of that conversation are ones he feels every single day.

“Derek Trager, sir. I talked to Trager.”

Arvin North puts a hand to the back of his neck and rubs it as he begins to pace again. He looks pensive. Nods once, then again. “You spoke to Trager about this? Out at The Black Hole over beers, or in private?” North waves a hand around to show Bill that he needs more detail.

After a deep, fortifying breath, Bill tells him. “I cornered him on launch day in the prep room. We talked alone. There was no one nearby.”

The calculations and configurations going on in North’s mind are written all over his face, and he sucks hard on the nearly burned-down cigarette butt, exhaling sharply. “Voices echo in the prep room. It’s concrete with ceilings that are hundreds of feet high.” He sounds desperate. “Think. Try to recall. Was anyone at all within earshot?”

Bill rubs his lips together and focuses his gaze on the window behind North’s desk. It looks out on a launch pad, though they’re several stories up in the air. “No,” he finally says. “I can’t think of anyone who was around us. Could our words have echoed? Maybe. But we were talking to one another in close range. I was intentionally trying to keep our conversation between us.”

North walks over to the same window that Bill is looking out of and turns to face the outside world. He puts a hand on his hip, and his shoulders have a slight hunch to them. All along, Bill had pegged his boss at about fifty, maybe fifty-two, but this

conversation has changed that assessment: North looks at least sixty-five as he stands there, staring out at the land around them like a king taking in his beloved kingdom. When he turns back to face Bill, it is with resignation.

“Trager knew,” he says simply. “And yet he got into that capsule.”

The nodding of Bill’s head is so slow and slight that it’s almost imperceptible. “I think a part of him thought I might be inflating my concerns to get in the way of his chance at a mission.”

Arvin North grits his teeth and his cheek muscles flex. He stubs out what’s left of his cigarette in the heavy glass ashtray on his desk and then puts both hands on his hips.

“Dammit,” North says. He looks like the weight of the world is on his shoulders. “His poor wife and children.”

It’s unspoken between them, but it’s clear that North agrees with Bill’s assessment, and that it’s entirely possible that Derek Trager thought Bill might be trying to interfere with the mission due to a bruised ego.

“Okay,” North says with a deep sigh. “We’ve got work to do. This is a huge mess, and obviously an enormous tragedy for us all on both a personal and professional level. No question about that. For now, I’m going to ask you to close ranks. And by that, I mean the ranks are you and me, and no one else.” He lowers his chin and looks right at Bill. “Am I clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“We don’t discuss this with anyone else, and when we’re at home with our wives and kids, we’re at home with our wives and kids. Got it? None of this is pillow talk to share with the wives, and if we can avoid it, we don’t even think about this unless

we're alone."

"Understood, sir."

North gives him one final nod and then glances at the door, dismissing him.

Bill reaches for the doorknob and is more than ready to get the hell out of there when North stops him.

"Bill," North says, just before the door opens. "You were right," he says in a hoarse whisper that's tinged with regret and sadness. "I'll be goddamned, but you were right all along."

CHAPTER 5

Jude

"The girls seem to have enjoyed their party," Vance says to his wife mildly one evening as they're sitting in the den. "Think you'll get together with all the wives and kids again soon?" He is sifting through a stack of mail as he sits at the desk in the den, putting bills to be paid in one pile, and correspondence in another.

Jude, who is folding laundry on the couch, glances in his direction. Vance has always been her comfort, her happy place. They'd met one evening in Los Angeles at a bar in Hollywood, and the moment she'd seen him across the room, she'd been smitten.

“Sure,” Jude says.

She puts one of the girls’ shirts on the coffee table, folds another, and makes a new pile next to it. Even though they’re twins, she doesn’t normally dress them alike. Sure, for photos or special occasions because it’s cute, and they generally protest against this injustice, but on a daily basis Hope and Faith prefer to be seen as individuals, and Jude can respect that. To her, they are two wildly different people, and because they have such different personalities and so many small things that are unique to each of them, it often surprises her when people confuse the girls with one another.

Vance takes the checkbook from the drawer and begins to pay the power bill. “You all seem to get along so well,” he muses, head bent as he puts pen to check. “And the girls really need those friendships. You know how it is—for girls, friendships can make or break you.”

Rather than responding, Jude shakes out a pair of shorts with a crisp snap of her wrists, and she folds them and sets them on Hope’s pile.

Of course she understands the importance of female friendship, and she also understands that this is Vance’s way of saying that he hopes she’ll coax them into being more social than she is. At first he hadn’t minded that she kept to herself as much as she does, and in fact, it seemed that he’d been charmed to be with a girl who had so much time for him. He’d never had to wait his turn as she went out with friends, never had to endure painful double dates set up by his girl because she and a best friend were determined to make their men be best friends, too. But after a while, he’d started to question it: But who is your best friend? If you were to get married,

who would be your maid of honor? Who do you call when you want to talk about girl stuff?

Jude gathers the pile of tiny socks that have run through the laundry and begins to match them as Vance tears off the check he's written, sticks it into an envelope, and licks the edges to seal it. He turns to look at her, making sure she's heard his last statement.

"Yes," she finally says, "I know how important friendships are for girls."

"Remember when we met?" he muses, one side of his mouth lifting in the handsome smile that had roped her in so quickly. "At the Burgundy Room?"

Jude nods. It happens frequently between them that one will be thinking of something and the other will voice it without warning. She'd just been sitting here recalling the night they'd met, and now here he is, talking about it.

"I do," she says, smiling.

"You were wearing that dress the color of—what flower was it?"

"Lilacs," she offers.

"Right. And you had that flower tucked behind one ear. You glowed like the light of heaven in the middle of that bar."

Jude tries to remember the way she'd looked in the mirror that night, and to transplant that image into the middle of the Burgundy Room so that she can see what Vance saw. She knows that the ruched silk of the fitted dress hugged her curves and fell down to her knee in a flattering curtain of fabric. The dress was such a pretty pastel purple with a shine to it, and she can imagine that it caught the glow of the lights in

the Burgundy Room, as everything there was cast in red—the lights had been changed from regular bulbs to deep red ones, and they made the dark wood bar, the bottles of dark liquid on the shelves, and the cozy little booths, look burgundy. To Vance, she must have stood out like a sliver of warm light as she moved through the room.

“I had an orchid,” Jude says now, remembering the way her friend, Catherine, had paused outside the bungalow where they were living, and snapped a small vanilla orchid from its vine to tuck behind Jude’s ear. The flower, a pale yellow, stood out against Jude’s smooth, dark hair. She remembers it all. “It was from the vine that grew on the wall outside our rental house.”

“Right,” Vance says, turning his whole body in the desk chair so that he’s looking at her. He puts an arm over the back of the chair and leans on it. “And that girl you lived with—what was her name?”

“Catherine,” Jude says. “It was Catherine.”

“What ever happened to her?” He looks genuinely curious.

Jude shrugs and reaches for a nightgown that belongs to Faith. “I’m not sure.”

“You just lost touch? Maybe you could find her again.”

Jude feels a frown starting to crease her brow. It’s moments like these when she has to remind herself that Vance is a helpful, loving husband, and it’s her happiness that he so desperately wants to secure, not some form of control over her. But regardless, there’s always this feeling of paternal bossiness that tinges the interactions where he so gently “suggests” she do something, and Jude has to work hard not to react.

“We did lose touch,” Jude says carefully. She stops folding clothes to scratch her bare

upper arm. “And I suppose I could try to find her, yes.”

Satisfied, Vance turns back to the checks and bills. “Maybe she can come to Florida and visit. I bet you girls would like to catch up after all this time,” he says with his back to her.

“Mmm,” Jude says noncommittally. “Maybe so.”

She stands and picks up the pile of Hope’s clothing, walking it down the hall to her daughter’s room. Because the girls are both fast asleep, she sets the pile on top of Hope’s dresser and pauses to turn off the dimly burning lamp that keeps the room from being too dark during bedtime. Both girls have this same lamp in their rooms: a ceramic base made of a charming little boat full of animals, kind of like Noah’s ark. But to Jude, they feel like the animals are crossing the ocean on a ship, perhaps leaving behind the family and the places they love most—family and places they might never see again. The giraffes are craning their necks to catch one last glimpse of the familiar, and the elephants are looking ahead, trying to guess what comes next.

Is it even possible to track Catherine down right now, in 1965, when they haven’t seen one another since 1956? Maybe Catherine is married with a new name. Quite possibly she isn’t even in California anymore. And if it’s possible to find Catherine, maybe it’s even possible for Jude to find her own mother. Anything is possible.

With a switch of the lamp, the room is plunged into darkness.

CHAPTER 6

Jo

The women are gathered at Jude’s house on a Wednesday morning, and she’s made a pot of coffee. Barbie, Carrie, Jo, and Frankie are all there, and they’ve gotten sitters

for their kids or sent the older ones off to school.

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"What's the plan?" Barbie asks, pouring a stream of milk into her cup of coffee and then reaching for the sugar. "Are we just cleaning anything in sight?"

Jude clears her throat. She's standing at the sink with her back to the table, washing her hands. "I'm taking Maxine and Wendy to the park," she says. "But I feel bad leaving you all to do the heavy lifting while I push a baby on the swings."

Jo waves a hand. "Not a problem. We have enough of a team here to get things done. Let's divide and conquer." Jo pulls a small notebook and pen from her purse and flips open the cover to a fresh page. "Barbie, do you want to take the kitchen?"

"Sure thing."

"Okay," Jo says, scribbling on the page. "Frankie, how do you feel about the bathrooms?" She winces slightly, anticipating that this will not thrill her friend.

Frankie sighs and motions to the jeans and the plain white men's t-shirt she's wearing. "I'm dressed like a lumberjack for a reason: I'm ready to get dirty."

Carrie dips a tea bag into her hot water. "Where do you want me, boss?"

"How about dusting, vacuuming, and bringing me all the bedsheets and laundry?" Jo writes something on the page. "Which means I'm on laundry duty. I'm a whiz at ironing, mending, and getting everything ready to go back in drawers and closets."

Jude turns around as she's drying her hands on a dishtowel. "What about Derek's stuff?" she asks. All conversation and movement halts.

"Yikes," Barbie says. She looks pained at the thought. In fact, they all do. Imagining having to deal with the laundry, the toothbrush, the shaving kit, all of the stuff that a husband would leave behind if he'd gone to work one day and never come home--it was horrific to even contemplate.

"Bring it to me," Jo says decisively. "We're going on a month here since the accident. If she hasn't washed his clothing yet, then it's time, and we'll get her life in order. We won't throw anything away. If she's still got his bathroom items out, perhaps we could tuck them into a medicine cabinet. We'll do our best not to move photos, books from his nightstand, reading glasses--anything. That's up to Maxine. But the laundry needs to be washed."

Once their cups are rinsed and sitting on Jude's drain board, they go next door so that she can collect Maxine and Wendy and take them away. The moment their car is out of the driveway, the other four women stand in the middle of the living room and look at one another grimly.

"The Christmas stuff," Frankie says glumly. "I wasn't expecting that."

"She must have put up the tree for the kids' sake," Carrie whispers, reaching out to touch the dried branches. Needles fall from the spindly tree and land on the floor. "But it's a fire hazard now, and definitely an eyesore. This needs to go."

Jo puts her hands on her hips as she surveys the room. "Let's get to work here, shall we?"

And so they do. No one puts a record on the turntable, and when the house phone rings, they all studiously ignore it. There is work to be done, and they want Maxine Trager to return to a clean house with her little girl. By the time Ryan gets home from middle school, they want to be packed up and out the door so that what remains of the Trager family can reassemble in a clean house, be together without worrying about

things like dishes and laundry, and look ahead to what their future holds.

* * *

"Josephine?" Bill calls as he enters the house that evening. "Jo, are you here?"

Jo, who spent nearly four hours at Maxine's house, laundering and ironing clothing--including the bedsheets and pillowcases--is in her daughter Nancy's bedroom, crouched down on her knees next to the bookshelf. They are going through Nancy's large book collection and choosing the ones she might be willing to donate to the pediatric wing of Stardust Beach General Hospital.

"Hold on, sweetheart," Jo says, running a hand over Nancy's head before pushing herself up to a standing position. Nancy glances up at her mother, but then turns back to the books, rediscovering old favorites that she's forgotten about.

"I'm here," Jo calls out as she pads down the hallway and into the open front room. Bill is standing there, briefcase in hand. "What's going on?"

"I tried calling you today," he says. It's not accusatory, but there's definitely a question there. "I didn't think you had a shift at the hospital or anything."

Jo tries to keep the exasperation out of her voice. "I was at Maxine Trager's with the other wives. We cleaned her house from top to bottom while Jude took her to the park with Wendy. We thought it would be a nice thing to do."

"Oh." Bill nods, setting his briefcase down. "Well, that is a nice thing you all did. I'm sure she appreciates it."

Jo leans her hip against the back of the couch and folds her arms across her chest as she looks up at her husband. "Actually, we were thinking maybe the men could do

some things with Maxine's son, Ryan. Like, next time you and Jimmy go out and toss a ball around, maybe you could invite Ryan to join in? Stuff like that."

Bill looks tired. "Sure," he says, nodding. "We could do that. Might be a good thing to do for the boy."

They stand there for a moment and then Jo remembers the lasagna in the oven. She pushes away from the couch and rushes to the kitchen, grabbing two potholders as she flings open the oven. The cheese is bubbling, and the pasta sauce looks like it's about to boil. She slides the glass dish out and sets it on a trivet on the counter.

"Hey." Bill has followed her into the kitchen and he stands in the doorway, rolling up his shirtsleeves. "Jojo."

Jo turns just her head to glance in his direction as she digs through the drawer for a spatula to cut and scoop out servings of the hot pasta. "Yes?"

"I want to read your stories."

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Jo nearly drops the spatula. "You want to read my stories?"

Bill aims for nonchalance as he lifts one shoulder. "Yeah. Is that so strange?"

Jo knows him well enough to realize that there's something to this request. Bill has been busy and only marginally interested in her writing. The fact that he wants to read her stories now is setting off an alarm bell in her mind.

"No," Jo says to him, trying to look unconcerned. "It's not strange." She holds herself steady and keeps her gaze on her husband's face. "I'll get you the magazines and you can read them at your leisure."

Bill gives a single nod, as if this decides everything. "Okay then," he says. "I think I'll go and get washed up for dinner."

Jo stands there in the kitchen. She has no idea what prompted this, but she's sure that Bill will have some sort of response to the things she's written. She just doesn't know what that response will be.

CHAPTER 7

Jude

January days aren't long like summer days—after all, the girls go to kindergarten and Jude gets at least a bit of time to herself—but they can feel restless in a different way.

January is full of all kinds of reminders for Jude: her mother's birthday is right there

in the middle of the month, and January was the first full month she'd spent living under her father's roof. Every year over Christmas, Jude begins to dread the new year, to remember the way it had felt to ring in 1942 in a place where it felt like the sun never stopped shining. She remembers trying to get used to living with her stepmother and her half siblings, and the distinct feeling of showing up at a new school and not only being the new girl, but being a girl who could barely speak. It took her weeks before she could comfortably utter a word without fearing that if she opened her mouth, Japanese words might come spilling forth.

She's fixing dinner now, waiting to go and pick up the girls at Frankie's dance studio on the main street of Stardust Beach before racing back to pull everything out of the warm oven and place it on the table just as Vance arrives home, but the silence of the house beckons for her to stop what she's doing and think. Remember. Wonder at the twists and turns, the hills and valleys of life.

Almost on autopilot, Jude fills a glass with cubes of ice, pours in a splash of vodka, fills it up to three-quarters with orange juice, and then tops it off with a bit more vodka for good measure. She sits at the kitchen table and crosses her legs, gazing out at the way the sun is dipping lower in the sky. The swimming pool is placid and the patio furniture is tucked away, just as Vance prefers it to be when no one is out there.

For years, Jude had given herself a hard time over this need for an afternoon drink, but she's gradually come to think of it as the counterpart to her morning coffee: one will wake you up and get you going, and the other will slow things down and help you ease through the rest of your day.

But had she always felt this way? She sips her Screwdriver now thoughtfully, listening to the kitchen radio as the Beatles come on singing "I Feel Fine." She taps her foot along to the music, letting the toe of her shoe hit the linoleum as she hums to the tune.

It was all so long ago, those first drinks—those first forays into nothingness. Jude had been young (so young!) when she'd met Alice, and at the time, it had felt impossible to think that things had been any other way. Alice was a hurricane, a firestorm, a force of nature. All green eyes, red hair, and guts. Nothing but sass and certainty. And for a time, Alice had been Jude's mentor.

It had started one day during her junior year of high school, and it had ended with Jude being brought home by the cops. Oh, had her father been mad! And Bea...wow, she'd never seen her stepmother show so much emotion in her presence, and it had been so extreme that Jude remembers now how the urge to laugh had been almost impossible to ignore. But she'd been drunk that night, and so the laughter had bubbled forth against her will, enraging her stepmother even more.

But Alice...Jude thinks about her as she drains her first drink and then goes to pour another. The way Principal McCarthy had marched Alice into Jude's Algebra class that afternoon, pointing to the empty seat next to Jude's and ordering Alice to "Sit. Be quiet. Listen. Learn."

Jude can see the whole scene play out in her mind as she sits in her chair again, swirling the fresh drink around with a light flick of her wrist. She takes another long drink, crunching an ice cube between her teeth.

"What are we doing in here?" Alice had asked, leaning towards Jude. The top buttons of her white blouse were opened, and as she leaned, Jude saw several inches of creamy cleavage; no other girl in their school would have dared to wear the top of their blouse open this way. "Should I just give up now, or can you tutor me?" Alice winked at Jude, a grin spreading across her pretty face.

Jude wanted to respond, and she was intrigued by the thought of tutoring the wildest girl in their school. She let her eyes graze over the untamed mane of red hair that tumbled over Alice's shoulders. Everyone knew that Alice Kamp was the girl who

never said no. If a boy asked her out, there was no end of the line; the horizon of possibility stretched on endlessly, which obviously meant that Alice was never short on dates or invitations.

By the time the bell rang, Jude had decided that she'd offer to tutor Alice. Even though most of the girls hated her, it was clear that they also revered her. Alice was spoken of in a way that indicated a plain fear of her power and her knowledge of the world. And that was it, really—wasn't it? Alice knew things that the other girls didn't. She had a way of moving through the world that oozed confidence and world-weariness and amusement all at once, while the rest of them were just awkward, inexperienced teenage girls.

Alice was standing there, packing her books into her bag as Jude put away her pencil and her notes. "I can tutor you," Jude offered. "Can you come to the library after school today?"

Alice turned towards her, surprise all over her face. "Today?" She lifted an eyebrow. "Don't you know better than to ask a girl for a date without some notice?"

Jude felt her face go red. She wasn't sure what to say.

"Sorry," Jude muttered, shoving her things into her bag and trying to get out of the classroom.

"I'm kidding," Alice said, glancing at the clock high up on the wall. "I can meet you right after school. But I've got a date at five o'clock, so I can only stay for a while."

Suddenly it felt like the sky was opening up and the sun was breaking through the clouds. "Okay," Jude said, smiling. "I'll meet you at the table under the window. Bring your math book."

Their friendship had spun quickly and inexplicably into a closeness that Jude hadn't anticipated. For as busy as Alice was with boys and after-school detention, the one thing she'd been missing was female friendship. From that first day in the library, she'd taken Jude under her wing and taught her everything she knew...about everything. At first, Jude's eyes had opened wide as she described the kinds of things she did with boys in the backseat of their cars, and then she'd had to intentionally close her mouth as Alice explained the various ways a young girl could earn detention from the principal. (For the record, those ways included: smoking cigarettes out the window of the girls' bathroom; hiding out in a bathroom stall in the boys' room with the captain of the basketball team; skipping classes and making out with the vice principal's son underneath the bleachers in the sports field; writing her own phone number on the wall outside the boys' locker room and indicating in permanent ink that anyone calling this number would be ensured a good time; and swearing in Home Economics class before refusing to bake a cake because Alice had no intention of ever becoming "a big, fat housewife.")

They'd been friends for about a month when Alice introduced Jude to what she called her "magic elixir," a concoction that Jude quickly realized was some sort of horrible combination of all the alcohols that Alice could sneak from her father's liquor cabinet. She carried a small, silver flask in her purse, offering Jude sips of it whenever they met in the girls' bathroom between classes.

Jude can still remember her first drink of the stuff: she'd been washing her hands at the sink, using that horrible pink powder that came out of the soap dispenser and barely made a lather when you rubbed it under water, when Alice stepped out of the stall, still zipping up her skirt.

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“Hey, Judy,” she’d said, using the name that Jude—then known far and wide exclusively as Judith—only ever allowed Alice to call her, “you should try this before you go to English class.”

With her skirt zipped and her shirt tucked back into place, Alice produced the flask from her purse and passed it to Jude. Jude unscrewed the lid cautiously, taking a whiff of it. It burned her nostrils and she winced, passing it back.

“No thank you,” she said, shaking her dark head.

“Trust me.” Alice tipped her own head back and took a long pull from the flask before wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “Here. Your turn.”

Jude was dubious. The stuff smelled awful, and she didn’t even know what was in it. Her dad occasionally met other military guys for drinks and came home with alcohol on his breath, but Bea forbade any alcohol in the house, so Jude didn’t really have much experience with it. She put the metal flask to her lips and took the tiniest, most hesitant sip she could manage.

She gagged. “God, what is this?”

Alice laughed wickedly, pushing the flask back to her. “Have a bit more. It’s whiskey.”

“It tastes like fire. Like burned oil and wood.” She took another drink to see if she’d been mistaken the first time, but she quickly discovered that she hadn’t. “I hate it.”

Alice laughed again. “Well, my dad didn’t have any more of the other kind. He got a bottle for Christmas that tasted like vanilla and spices and it was amazing, but this is just some cheap stuff.”

“I don’t know why people like this.” Jude turned back to the mirror, looking at her reflection as Alice took another swig and then passed her the flask again.

“Take one more drink—a real one,” Alice implored. “And then let me know after English class how you feel, okay? I can guarantee if you have a good bit of it sloshing around in your belly, you’ll get through old Norwood’s Shakespeare discussion and have a much better time in her class. That’s a promise.”

Jude considered this for a moment because Alice hadn’t really led her astray in any other way. She’d taught her all about what teenage boys looked like naked (Jude tried not to flash back on what a prepubescent Chester had looked like without his pants on--the memories still made her shudder), how to sneak through a bedroom window without breaking the screen on the window so that your parents would never find out, and how to lie to your teachers about menstrual cramps so that you could sneak off campus for a quick cigarette or a milkshake. So why would Alice lie to her now? She accepted the flask and took another drink, a real mouthful this time.

And true to Alice’s word, a warm, fuzzy feeling had overtaken Jude during English class. As the rest of her classmates discussed *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and took notes while Mrs. Norwood walked around the room, pointing at the things she’d written on the chalkboard with a long pointer stick, Jude floated in a happy haze. She’d looked out the windows at the way the birds landed in the branches of the trees, and she’d doodled her own name intertwined with James Dean’s. The whole hour passed in this easy, light way, and when Jude walked through the hall afterwards with her books in her arms, she saw everything in a new light. The floors were shinier, the sounds of teenagers talking sounded more melodic to her ears, and the boys even looked a bit cuter. She smiled at people whose gazes she normally avoided, and when

she found Alice, she could tell by the look on her friend's face that she was amused by something Jude was doing.

"What?" Jude had asked, confused. She tossed her head and met Alice's eye. "Why are you laughing?"

"You're tipsy," Alice had responded. "How do you feel?"

Jude motioned for the flask. "Let me have a little more."

"More?" Alice lifted an eyebrow as she looked around the parking lot where they were standing. "Okay, you wild child. Here you go."

And so it had begun.

The phone rings now in the late afternoon, and Jude startles. Alice and her flask and her flaming hair slip from Jude's mind as she flips her wrist over to glance at her watch. She jumps to her feet and rushes to the phone.

"Hello?"

"Jude? It's Frankie."

A rush of mortification fills Jude with horror. "The girls."

"They're waiting for you," Frankie says, "but I'm all done here for the day. Would you like me to drop them home? Everyone else has already been picked up."

"Frankie," Jude says, looking at the glass on the table that's less than half-full. She's working her way to the bottom of drink number two, and she can feel the looseness in her limbs. The world around her is fluid. "I am so, so sorry. You have no idea. I was

making dinner, and time just got away from me. I would never?—“

“Jude, it’s fine,” Frankie assures her, sounding a little miffed. “I’ll just drop them by on my way home. No harm, no foul. We’ll see you in about fifteen minutes.”

Jude hangs up and looks at the watch on her wrist again. She’s not driving, and the girls will come home and play for a bit as she finishes dinner, so she decides to top off her drink. Just one more time. If she hasn’t hit the bottom of the glass yet, then even if she refills it, it’s still only her second drink, right?

She reaches for the vodka and turns it around, looking at the label as she does. As always, it reminds her of Alice and the bottles they’d pilfered from Mr. Kamp’s liquor cabinet. This brand had become their safe choice, and so, even as an adult, Jude gravitates towards it, with the familiar colors and font on the label. She tops off her glass and then adds just a splash of orange juice, mixing it quickly with a long spoon intended for iced tea. She’d gotten the spoons as a wedding gift, though she rarely—if ever—used them for anything except stirring up a cocktail.

Jude sinks back into her seat at the table with a sigh, thinking again of Alice and the way she’d been amused the first few times Jude had gotten drunk and thrown up. There had been the time they’d climbed up Mount Lee in Griffith Park, north of the Mulholland Highway in Hollywood, and drank as the giant spotlights came on behind each letter. Jude had eventually lain in the dirty patches of grass, staring up at the night sky as she laughed and laughed, and after the laughter made her stomach hurt, she rolled onto her side and vomited. This had been a story that was oft repeated between the two girls, and when Jude eventually learned to control her drinking and find her limit, she would roll her eyes at the memory, chastising her former self for not being able to hold her liquor.

In fact, it had been the last night of her friendship with Alice that had really made her feel like an uninformed novice. They’d taken Alice’s car, as usual, and her father’s

alcohol, as usual, and driven to some place where they could drink and talk. They were listening to the radio in the car beneath a streetlight, passing a bottle back and forth as they wondered what the future would bring (Jude wanted to go to college to get away from her stepmother; Alice wanted to go to Vegas and become a showgirl who wore red lipstick to the grocery store and took a different lover every week).

“You’d wear stage makeup to buy groceries?” Jude asked, watching Alice twist the rearview mirror towards herself and fluff her hair as she looked at her own reflection.

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“Just a little bit.” Alice pushed the mirror back into place and turned to Jude. “Gotta highlight and emphasize what the good Lord gave me.” For extra emphasis, she cupped her breasts and pushed them together comically, showing Jude her cleavage.

The girls laughed and then fell quiet.

“I feel like college is going to be the first time in my life when I can really be myself,” Jude admitted, looking through the windshield at the pool of light that the streetlight cast on the pavement.

“How so?”

Jude lifted her shoulders. The good thing about Alice was that she liked to have fun, and she never required you to tell her too much. If Jude felt like not talking, they just drank and laughed instead. But this question felt real, and she could sense Alice watching her and listening intently.

“I came here right after Pearl Harbor,” Jude said solemnly. “I left Japan on a ship and my mother sent me here to live with my father and his wife after the U.S. declared war on Japan. She thought I’d be safer.”

“Wait.” Alice said the word like it was a complete sentence and then they sat there in silence for an elongated moment that stretched out between them. “You’re Japanese? Or...” She was obviously trying to put the pieces together in her mind, and Jude didn’t want to leave her hanging.

“My mother is, so I guess I am. Yes. But she raised me to speak both languages, and

she never let me forget that my dad was an American, so when I came here, all I had to do was try to blend in. For the first few months I barely talked to anyone. I was afraid I'd accidentally say something in Japanese, or that I'd have an accent. My stepmother got my hair done in a way that made me fit in better, and I dressed like everyone in my classes, and...eventually it kind of stuck. I felt American. I still do."

Alice stared at her like she'd just revealed that she had a secret love child with Bing Crosby and had sent the child to live with nuns in a Swiss convent. "Where is your mom?" Alice probed, her voice both accusatory and disbelieving. "Is she still in Japan?"

Jude regretted ever telling Alice the truth about her life, and she would have given anything in that moment to take it all back. "I think so," she said softly, her words barely audible. "I guess she is. I haven't heard from her in years."

Alice shook her head a few times. "Unreal," she said, her eyes never leaving Jude's. "You're a Jap."

The word felt like a slap to Jude's face. She physically recoiled. "I?—"

"No, there are no 'buts,' Jude—you're a Jap. Your people bombed Pearl Harbor, and my uncles both died. That's all there is to it."

Jude's eyes stung with tears. She'd never revealed her truth to anyone, and she suddenly understood why her mother had been so fearful for her, and even, to some extent, why her father and Bea had insisted she try so hard to fit in. She finally got it.

"It's not like that," Jude whispered to Alice. She was holding a half-drunk bottle of brandy between her knees as they sat there on the bench seat of Alice's car. "My dad is American."

“But you’re not,” Alice spat back, reaching over and grabbing the bottle of liquor from Jude’s lap and holding it to her chest like it was a valuable possession. “Get out of my car. Go. I can’t believe I ever put my mouth on the same bottle as you.” She looked at the bottle in her hands that had, just moments before, felt so important to grab. She thrust it back at Jude, bumping it roughly against her arm. “Here, take it.”

Jude collapsed inside--her heart folded in on itself. She fumbled for the door handle and nearly fell out onto the sidewalk, leaving the bottle of brandy behind.

Alice reached across the bench seat of the car, sweeping Jude’s purse with her hand so that it flew across the seat and out the door, landing on the pavement and scattering its contents everywhere. A tube of soft pink lipstick rolled into the gutter, and Jude's house keys landed near her foot. Before slamming the door and peeling away from the curb, Alice lifted the bottle of brandy and threw it as hard as she could towards Jude. It hit the sidewalk and shattered on impact, its shards and contents splattering against Jude’s bare legs.

The red taillights were gone in an instant, and Jude was left kneeling on the sidewalk, trying to gather her belongings in the weak pool of light from above. She looked around at the darkened houses on the street; they’d parked in a quiet neighborhood in an area known for its orange groves and dusty backroads. The only thing to do would be to knock on the door to someone’s house and beg to borrow the phone so that she could call her father. When Jude finally gathered the courage to knock on a door, the woman inside immediately smelled the alcohol on Jude’s skin and saw her tear-stained cheeks and the blood on her legs from the shards of glass on the sidewalk and panicked. She called the police, who took Jude home and dropped her right at her doorstep, where her father stood wrapped in a bathrobe under the porch light, looking disappointed and grim.

From that day forward, until she met Vance, Jude never again told anyone her truth.

CHAPTER 8

Jo

Frankie and Johad started their evening walks together shortly after meeting and becoming friends. Frankie would come over in the after-dinner twilight, meet Jo at the end of her driveway, and then they'd stroll down the streets of their neighborhood together, smoking cigarettes and talking about whatever needed to be discussed and worked out at the moment.

"She was drunk?" Jo asks incredulously as they walk, accepting a cigarette from Frankie and then waiting as Frankie holds up the lighter for both of them.

Once they're walking again, Frankie nods. "Yep. Three sheets to the wind. She forgot to get the girls after class—oh, they're such cute little ballerinas," she says as an aside, "such good girls. But she never showed up, so I called her and she said she lost track of time making dinner."

"Huh." Jo inhales and exhales a stream of smoke, putting her free hand into the pocket of her lightweight sweater. It's not cold, by anyone's measure, but it is evening in January, so the temperature has dipped enough that bare arms don't feel entirely comfortable. "I've lost track of time before making dinner. It happens."

"Sure," Frankie says. "But when I knocked on the door, she looked like she'd just climbed out of bed after a roll in the hay."

Jo gives a surprised laugh. "Frankie!"

"Well, she did." Frankie has an amused look on her face as she watches Jo bend over at the waist and continue to laugh. "She had crazy hair, and her eyes were at half-mast. She even confused her own daughters."

Jo stops laughing. “You mean she confused them with her behavior?”

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“No,” Frankie says, shaking her head, “she confused one for the other. Called Hope by Faith’s name or vice versa—I can’t remember. But come on, Jo. Drunk is drunk. You’ve been saying it for a while, and old Judith has a real problem with the sauce, doesn’t she?”

“Yes!” Jo says with emphasis. “I really, really think it’s an issue. I tried to talk to Vance about it when she fell in the pool, and I could tell he worries about it too, but I don’t know what else I can do.”

“We could talk to her. Sit her down. Ask her if she realizes it’s a problem.”

“I don’t know...” Jo is hesitant to confront a woman who is, in her mind, fairly reserved and private. She doesn’t want to alienate Jude altogether. “But what if she’d driven to pick up the girls in that state?”

Frankie tut-tuts as she shakes her head. They pass by a house at the end of a street where a couple is sitting on a porch swing, rocking back and forth slowly as they sit there sipping drinks. Frankie and Jo wave at them, and the couple waves back.

“True,” Frankie says as they round the corner and are once again out of earshot of their neighbors. “That would kill me if anything happened to the girls and we didn’t speak up.”

“Let me think of how we can approach this,” Jo says, flicking the ash of her cigarette. She still can’t believe sometimes that she, Josephine Booker, smokes cigarettes as she walks around beneath the palm trees and the evening sky in balmy Florida. Two years ago, she never would have imagined the life she has now, but somehow it all feels

right. Like a natural transition from the old Jo to the new one.

“Hey, what happened with the stories?” Frankie nudges Jo, pulling her attention back from thoughts of how things used to be. “You called me a couple of evenings ago in a tizzy because Bill had asked to read them.”

Jo is mildly embarrassed now to remember that she’d gone into the bedroom and dialed Frankie from there, whispering covertly as everyone washed up for dinner. “It just felt weird,” she says. “He’s never really shown any interest in reading my stories, and sometimes I feel like he’s just kind of amused at my little ten dollar checks. He seemed a little perplexed about the reading on the night of the accident, too. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I think he’s proud of me, but I’m not sure he sees what all the fuss is about. He just doesn’t seem to care.”

“The fuss is that you’ve become a published writer,” Frankie says loyally, her defensiveness creeping up as she stops walking. “He should be more than proud. He should be telling every person he meets that his wife is incredible.”

Jo laughs. “Let’s not get carried away,” she says, dropping her cigarette on the pavement and grinding it out with the toe of her shoe. “My real concern is that he’s going to be mad. There’s way too much in those stories that he’s going to think I’ve stolen from our lives, and Bill is not that kind of man. He’s very buttoned-up, and he’s serious.”

“Yes, I’ve gathered,” Frankie says wryly. “But don’t you think that maybe he’ll just see it as art imitating life? That some of your reality has crept into your work? That happens all the time with artists.”

“Maybe,” Jo muses. “We’ll see. He asked for the stories two days ago and I gave him a stack of magazines, and he hasn’t mentioned them since. So I have no idea what’s going on, and I’m a little afraid to ask.”

The women walk on in contemplative silence for a while, watching as cars drive by lazily on the streets, pulling into driveways, or disappearing around corners.

“So what are you writing now?” Frankie finally breaks the silence.

“I’m trying to write an installment that sticks to the main characters and their relationship, but I have to tell you, Frank, it’s been incredibly hard to leave out the things that have been really happening: Margaret’s death, and the explosion. Can you imagine how much a tragedy would ramp up the emotion of this story?” Jo reaches over and grabs the elbow of Frankie’s blouse as she talks. “But that would be too much—I can’t include either of those things.”

Frankie narrows her eyes, considering the dilemma. “Yeah, I’m with you there. But in the story, Winston’s first wife already died of cancer, so you couldn’t really have her die again, and putting in the Gemini disaster would be the fastest way to get pulled into NASA and reprimanded. I think they’re proud of you, but not looking for you to fictionalize their worst moments. Bill’s already got enough problems without getting called on the carpet for his wife misbehaving.” She wags a finger at Jo with a faux stern look on her face.

“You are so right,” Jo says, shaking her head. They’ve looped around the block and are back on her street. “I should probably head in here—I promised Kate I’d read her two chapters of her book tonight before bed if she helped her sister dust the living room while I was gone.”

“Bribery,” Frankie says with a wink. “I like it.”

The women hug lightly and part ways, but Jo can’t stop thinking about Frankie’s words: Bill does have a lot on his plate, but is his stress that obvious to everyone else? She hasn’t even mentioned seeing him and Jeanie Florence together the night of the disaster—in fact, she can’t bring herself to talk about it, even with Frankie—and

even without that little bit of drama, Bill is coming across as overburdened to Frankie.

This tickles the back of her mind as she tucks Kate in that night and reads Charlotte's Web with her youngest child. Usually, she's the only one who can see when Bill is having a hard time, so if Frankie can pick up on it, then maybe they really are in trouble. Maybe he's not doing as good of a job of keeping his ups and downs tucked away and reserved for quiet times as Jo thinks he is. Maybe he's spiraling at work, and the other guys are seeing it and talking about it to their wives.

None of these thoughts comfort Jo, but as she turns out the lamp next to Kate's bed and pauses in the doorway to watch her daughter's sweet face in the light from the moon, she knows there's really nothing she can do about it. She can keep an eye on him, but ultimately, Bill has to fix himself--no one else can do that for him.

CHAPTER 9

Jude

"You can't keep doing this," Vance says, pacing the length of the carpet next to their bed. Jude is sitting at the foot of it, her head in her hands, elbows on her knees. "You cannot drink this much and function, Judith. It's not acceptable, and it's not right."

Tears fill Jude's eyes as she avoids her husband's gaze. It's Saturday morning, and it's been a few days since Frankie brought the girls home from dance class. She'd said nothing to Jude when she did, other than the fact that it was "no problem," and that she was "happy to do it anytime" before she turned and walked off their porch with a quick backward glance. But somehow she must have picked up on the fact that Jude had over-served herself in her own kitchen and reported back to Jo or one of the other wives. Jude can't imagine how else Vance has gotten it in his head that she's sitting around the house drinking.

“Do you know how much stress I have at work right now?” Vance asks her, his face incredulous. “Do you understand how much I need my wife to be here, be sober, and be raising our daughters without making a spectacle of us? Or, even worse, getting into an accident with the girls in the car after dance class?” He stops pacing and stares at her, his eyes searching her face as she turns her head to look up at him. “I’m counting on you, Jude. We’re partners here. I can’t parent three girls.”

This stings. Calling her a child is an unnecessary blow, though Jude can see the parallels he’s drawing, as she currently feels a lot like a teenager girl being lectured by her overbearing father.

“I have a cocktail sometimes while I make dinner,” Jude says, standing up. She’s decided the path she wants to take, and she’s sticking with it. “I’m never drunk during the day, Vance. I don’t sit around here with a drink in hand, ignoring my children. It isn’t like that.”

Vance watches her for a beat and his shoulders slump in defeat. “Judith,” he says hoarsely. “I need you to get yourself well. I have too much on my plate to do this alone.”

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His eyes are sad and vulnerable, and in them, Jude sees concern, not judgment. She wants to go to him and wrap her arms around his body, burying her face against his chest as she's done so many times. Vance has always been a source of real comfort for Jude, and from the first time they met, he's been her safe place. His love is unconditional, but right now, his exasperation is palpable.

"I'll do better," Jude says contritely. "I'll stick to having a cocktail only after dinner, if that helps you to feel better."

Vance puts a hand to his face and then pinches the bridge of his nose as he nods vigorously. "Yeah," he says, "that would help. At least if I'm here, I can handle things when you can't. But if I'm at work, I can't be worrying about you and the girls." His hand falls and he looks at her again, this time with slightly reddened eyes. "Can you understand that?"

They stare at one another for a long, drawn-out moment, and from the front room, they can hear Hope and Faith's high-pitched little girl voices as they play Barbies together.

"I can understand that," Jude says, sealing their agreement.

But what she really hears is that she needs to hide away more of herself. If that's who she is—a woman who enjoys a drink to relax—then she needs to be less of that. She needs to be less Japanese, less of a burden to people, less of a liability. There are so many parts of her that she needs to actively keep hidden away, that she's nearly losing track. It makes her dizzy to contemplate.

“Come here,” Vance says, holding out a hand to her. Jude takes it, albeit somewhat reluctantly, and lets her husband pull her to him.

In Vance’s arms, Jude tries to let herself melt. The tension that’s locked up her back, her neck, and her shoulders needs to flow back out of her, but it feels permanent. Jude closes her eyes and puts her ear to Vance’s chest, listening to the solidthump, thump, thump of his beating heart. She can do this. She can hold herself accountable and stay laser focused until Vance gets home in the evenings. She can be a better helpmate for her husband, watching the girls and keeping gossip and trouble away from him so that it doesn’t interfere with his career and their livelihood.

Not only can she do this, she has to do it.

When Vance finally kisses the top of her head and releases her, Jude puts a wan smile on her face and watches him walk across the bedroom. He heads out to the front room, and the deep rumble of his voice as he talks to their girls filters back to her.

Once Jude hears the sliding patio door and she knows that her husband has gone out to sit by the pool, she smooths the bedding and tugs the corner of it firmly to straighten it out. She’s got this. Starting today, starting now, she can do the one very small thing that Vance is asking of her. It won’t be hard. It won’t be hard at all.

She’ll turn off her brain, not think of all the things about herself that are too dark to share with others, and she’ll be the best mother and wife that she can be. The days won’t be too long, because she’ll fill them with trips to the grocery store, with housework, with cooking, and with taking the girls to the park when they’re not at school. She’ll take them to dance and wait out on the sidewalk with the other mothers, chatting and watching the little girls through the large front window of Mia Perla, Frankie’s dance studio, as they pirouette, point their toes, and gleefully act like a bunch of tiny sugarplum fairies. That actually sounds fun to Jude. Way more fun than sitting alone in the kitchen, thinking about Alice Kamp, or her mother, and

wondering if she should top off her drink.

Jude straightens the things on their dresser and both of their nightstands, determined to stay on task, to stay focused, to stay sober each day until the sun dips its first rays below the horizon. Totally possible, she thinks to herself, I can do anything I set my mind to.

Jude pauses in the middle of her bedroom, ears perked up for the sounds of her husband and children: she hears them outside as the girls take their Barbies out to the pool area, most likely to play another game with them while their father reads the newspaper nearby. Certain that everyone is occupied, Jude goes into the en suite bathroom and opens the cupboard beneath her sink. There, tucked away in the back next to her Kotex, is a bottle that looks like it might be filled with some sort of bath or body oil. Instead, it's filled with vodka. Jude glances over her shoulder as she crouches down there, a desperate animal not wanting to be caught.

With one final listen to ensure that she's in the house alone, she uncaps the pink bottle and takes a long swig, then another. She'll brush her teeth and put on fresh lipstick before going out to the kitchen with a smile on her face. This is the last time, Jude promises herself. I don't need this to get by.

But she does need it to stop the shaking of her hands.

* * *

The day dragged on nearly without end as Jude counted the hours until she could mix herself a drink and sink into the couch with a magazine. She did her best to stay busy all day--first a walk to the park with the girls while Vance washed and waxed the car, then an art project in the backyard that involved newspapers and glue, and finally, the long slog through dinner, bath time, stories, and then, finally, bedtime.

But the day had been filled with interminable thoughts about all the things that Jude normally drinks to forget. She found herself alternately imagining her mother's face the last day she'd seen her; thinking about the way that Alice had thrown her from the car and called her a "Jap" that night when they were teenagers; and remembering the feeling of otherness that had essentially defined her entire childhood. None of it helped her to stop wanting a drink, and Jude vows to herself now, as she mixes a cocktail in the stillness of the evening, that tomorrow will be easier.

She just needs a mantra. Or a project.

A project! Yes! she thinks, stirring pineapple juice with vodka this time. She needs something to keep her busy; something that will demand sobriety to accomplish. There's driving, of course, but a woman only has so many hours a day that she needs to spend behind the wheel of a car.

She sips her drink and puckers her lips at the tartness. She could take Vance's suggestion and search for Catherine, something she's certainly thought of over the years but never really entertained. The idea, however, begs the question: to what end? When and if she tracks down a woman she hasn't seen in nearly a decade, what will she say? What will she do?

In her mind's eye, Catherine is dipped in honey; she is a celluloid dream. With her hair of spun gold, her skin smooth and tanned by the California sun, Catherine emerges in Jude's memory like a film starlet from another time--and, in fact, that's precisely what she was. Catherine Hamnett, Hollywood actress. A woman with a low, rumbling laugh like the engine of a giant truck, and a pair of legs that started at her hips and went on for eternity. When Catherine turned her head, others did too. Everyone wanted a look at her: cheekbones with a sharp curve that swooped down to a perfect jawline, blue eyes like a mysterious pool of water that seemed bottomless.

Catherine Maryellen Hamnett, Jude thinks. Where are you now?

She isn't even sure whether finding Catherine will answer questions or raise them. Whether tracking her down will fill some hole in her life or her heart, or whether it will just make her wistful for a life that she left behind when she married Vance and had the girls. But doesn't every woman have a part of herself that she packs away in a neat little box and tucks into a corner of her heart, trying to hide it from the light of day? Doesn't every woman have things that she drinks to forget?

No, perhaps not...but maybe confronting the past is the only way for Jude to have a real future. She stands up from the couch and walks into the kitchen, debating a second cocktail. Instead, she rinses the glass, turns out the light, and walks back to the bedroom to sleep.

It's the first night she can remember only having one drink in years.

CHAPTER10

Jude

"Okay, and when is the last time you saw Mrs. Hamnett?"

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:22 am

Jude moves around in her seat and crosses her legs at the ankles. She's holding her purse in her lap as she sits across the desk from a private investigator in an office in Daytona Beach, which is an hour and a half drive from Stardust Beach. "It's Miss Hamnett," Jude corrects. "Catherine Maryellen Hamnett. She wasn't married when I knew her, although she might be now."

The investigator, a man named Harrison Watts, scribbles on a lined notepad on his desk. "I see."

The sound of a woman wearing high heels clicks down the hallway just beyond the closed office door. Jude musters her courage.

"The last time I saw her was in October of 1956. We were in Los Angeles, and she was my roommate."

"Address?"

"6151 Richmond Street," Jude says without pause. "A small bungalow in a neighborhood in Hollywood. Our neighbor, Mr. Gaines, worked in the film industry, and we would see the likes of Elizabeth Taylor and Marlon Brando on our street, just dropping in to see Mr. Gaines for a drink or a party."

Harrison Watts looks up from his notes, shooting Jude a dubious look over the tops of his black-framed glasses. "Oh?"

Jude nods, encouraged. "It was very glamorous. I mean, our bungalow wasn't--it was small and we had bougainvillea and orchids running wild around the outside--but our

street was full of creative types and...men who lived with other men. You know." Jude drops her eyes to her lap and keeps her gaze averted momentarily before forcing herself to look at Harrison Watts directly. "Catherine was an actress."

"And you? What were you doing at the time while rooming with Miss Hamnett?" Mr. Watts removes his glasses and leans both elbows on his desk as he assesses Jude again. He's clearly seeing something in her that he hadn't seen at first glance. "Were you an actress as well?"

"Me?" Jude nearly laughs out loud. "No. Oh, heavens no. I was a secretary. I met a girl who typed memos at MGM and ran the mail around their office when I was fresh out of high school, and she got me an interview. So I worked as secretary to one of the vice presidents at MGM," Jude says proudly. "I loved it."

Harrison Watts is still watching her closely. "You met movie stars?"

"Oh, sure. Plenty—at work. But it's different when you're in your front yard trying to trim the flowers and Elizabeth Taylor climbs out of the back of a car to have champagne at your neighbor's house, you know?"

"I don't know, but I can imagine." Mr. Watts goes back to writing notes. "It all sounds very glamorous for a young lady."

"I suppose it was," Jude admits. "Anyway, Catherine was under contract at MGM--strictly bit parts, dancing scenes in big productions, walk-on roles--but she had big dreams. Everyone did, of course."

"Even you?"

Jude's eyes drift to the window that looks out at the sunny skies above Daytona Beach. "Even me. I thought I'd stay in Hollywood, and that somehow my mother

would find me and come to live with me. I don't know...just little girl dreams, I guess."

Mr. Watts frowns. "Your mother? Is she missing as well?"

Jude blows out a loud breath. "In a sense, yes. But that's a whole other story. Right now, I'd like to track down Catherine Hamnett and see what I can find out about her."

Mr. Watts seems like he wants to say something, but then pauses, picks up his pen, taps it on the paper. He's about to write something, but instead he sets the pen on the desk and laces his hands together. "If you don't mind my asking," he finally says. "Aside from being your roommate, what was the nature of your relationship with Miss Hamnett?"

Jude's eyes drift back to the blue skies outside the window. "That's actually what I'm trying to figure out."

* * *

"Catherine?" Jude called out, walking through the front door of their shared bungalow.

It was October 16, 1956, a Tuesday. The day that Pan Am flight 6 from San Francisco to Honolulu made the first water landing on record. All passengers and crew survived. Catherine was sitting on the couch in a sundress, holding a cat in her lap who had taken it upon himself to climb in through the bedroom window and make their house his home. Jude did not yet know Vance Majors, and therefore her life was not ruled by NASA, by talk of space, or by thoughts of a husband who might one day reach the moon, and so the news of any sort of aircraft landing anywhere was just a point of interest, not a major event in her life.

Neither woman even brought it up.

"What's going on?" Jude asked, setting a paper bag of groceries on the small counter in the kitchen. "Did you work today?"

Catherine sighed, stroking the white fur of the cat she'd jokingly named Frank Sinatra for the distinct way he crooned at her bedroom window. "Just for a few hours. I got to the set and we all sat in wardrobe for two hours before finding out that the star of the show wasn't coming. Something about a bad night of sleep." She rolled her eyes to show how she felt about this. "We all got sent home."

"Is it Her Royal Highness?" Jude asked, referring to an actress notorious for inflicting her own personal dramas and delays on entire casts and crews.

"You know it." Catherine picked up Frank Sinatra, set him on the ground gently, and stood up. "I was counting on that paycheck, and working with the director is a dream come true."

Jude was slowly unpacking the groceries from the bag: a small carton of eggs, a loaf of bread, two tomatoes, a package of chicken breasts. Catherine came over and rested her elbows on the counter as she watched.

"Are you making chicken tonight?" Catherine reached for a handful of grapes as Jude took them out of the bag. Jude slapped her hand playfully, laughing.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:22 am

"I'm making chicken fettuccini," Jude said, turning her back on Catherine to put the eggs and chicken into the refrigerator.

"Mmm." Catherine popped a grape into her mouth and chewed. "I'm starving."

"You barely eat." If it sounded like an admonishment, that's because it was meant to be one; Jude did not like Catherine's persistent dieting. She understood that being svelte was a prerequisite for a dancer and an actress, but the idea that Catherine wanted to make herself into something that she wasn't just to please the strangers who cast their gazes upon her was tiring for Jude to contemplate. It was enough that she herself had endured a lifetime of trying to make herself into something that was more palatable to others--she did not want Catherine to have to live that way.

"I eat enough to get by," Catherine said simply. "And I'll definitely be eating some of the fettuccini you make tonight."

"Can I pour you a glass of wine?" Jude reached into the cupboard and took down two glasses, which she turned upright as she uncorked a bottle of red. "I want to hear more about the scene you were supposed to do today."

Catherine pulled a stool up to the counter and accepted the glass, holding it by the stem as she lifted it up and settled in. Talking in the kitchen together as Jude cooked was one of their favorite things to do, and most nights they did it while sharing a glass or two of wine.

"Well," Catherine said with relish, holding up one hand as if Jude would not believe it. "We were supposed to be doing a Vegas scene today, where all the women were

dressed as showgirls. Feather headdresses,” she said, holding a hand up to mimic a tall feather on top of her head, “beaded body suits, and tons of choreography. I had this one dance where I was supposed to be front and center, and...”

Catherine went on, sharing details of the scene she’d missed out on as Jude cut up vegetables, boiled pasta, and prepared the chicken. She nodded, sipped her wine, and inserted questions and comments where they were supposed to go, but as she moved around their tiny kitchen, all Jude could think about was how beautiful Catherine was. How much she glowed. She wanted to stop cooking and just stare at her. To watch her freely. Instead, she topped off her own wine, lifting an eyebrow at Catherine to see if she wanted more.

It was as close to domestic bliss as the two women had ever been in either of their lives, and for Jude, it was as close to feeling like herself—to being free—as she’d ever been. During one long evening with a full bottle of wine between them, she’d told Catherine about her trip over from Japan, about the fact that she never saw her mother again, and about her relationship with her dad and his wife and kids. And, much to her surprise, all Catherine had done was listen sympathetically.

When Jude was done talking, Catherine had reached over and taken her hand, watching her with an open, curious, intense gaze.

“You’ve been through so much, Judith,” she’d said breathlessly. “You’re so brave, and so strong. I admire you so much.”

She hadn’t been entirely sober when it happened, but Jude had been sober enough to know the truth in that moment, and to acknowledge it—at least to herself.

She was in love with Catherine Maryellen Hamnett.

* * *

Mr. Harrison Watts is a man with things to do, places to go, and people to see. He lets his newest client stare out the window for a long spell as she thinks about God knows what, but then when an amount of time has gone by that feels almost uncomfortable, he clears his throat.

“So, Mrs. Majors. What would you like me to do?”

Jude’s gaze sharpens as she looks at the private investigator sitting there in a shaft of sunlight, dust motes settling all around his office.

She smiles.

“I want you to find her,” she says. “I want you to find Catherine.”

CHAPTER 11

Bill

Arvin North has kept himself busy. Busy and unavailable. There are meetings to attend, documents to read, to create, to file, to pass on, and there are always people from the various press organizations who approach and want interviews, comments, or sound bites.

Bill watches all of this from the sidelines, keeping his eyes and ears open and his mouth shut. This is how it’s been for the past month and a half since the accident, and this is how it will remain until such time that things return to normal.

But will they? Will they ever really return to normal? Bill is sitting at his desk during the lunch hour one day, enjoying the fact that the floor is nearly empty. He usually appreciates taking his break with his coworkers and spending the time talking about the news of the world, but today all he wants is peace and quiet. He’s feigned

busyness during the traditional break time, and will head over to eat the meat loaf sandwich packed by Jo after everyone else has cleared out of the lunch room.

It's his hope that, by avoiding the time when idle chatter and gossip rule the conversation, Bill can steer clear of any questions about, or discussion of, the accident. He's suffered through enough sleepless nights since then, wondering if and what he might have done differently to get a different outcome, and in truth, he knows this is a fool's errand. But, by the same token, so is talking about it. Even in hushed tones.

Not to mention the fact that Arvin North has asked him not to talk about it. There is still a hint of trouble on the horizon, and Bill is doing his very best to ignore it and avoid it. He comes to work, he does as much of his job as his mind will let him, and he tries to take solitary breaks in the morning and the afternoon as a way to stay focused.

"Hey," a female voice says.

Bill nearly jumps out of his skin as he turns around. He's been so lost in thought that he wasn't even expecting Jeanie Florence to appear. And that's unfortunate, as he's looked forward to talking to her—to seeing her one-on-one—because now that she's right here, he isn't even sure that he can speak.

"Jeanie," Bill says, standing. He looks around; the desks are empty. There is one solitary engineer sitting far across the giant room at a desk by the window, and he has his back to Bill and Jeanie as he holds the receiver of his desk phone to one ear and looks out the window.

"How are you?" Her eyes are soft, kind, concerned.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:22 am

Bill considers lying, or doing the usual job of saying he's fine, things are good, he's getting by. But this is Jeanie, and there's no reason for him to lie. "I've been better." He holds her gaze. "How are you?"

Jeanie shrugs as she looks around. There is a slight nervous energy to her. "It wasn't the best holiday season I ever had," she says with an unconvincing smile. "But my sister is able to stand up, and she's taken her first few steps, so my family is thrilled."

"Hey," Bill says, mustering what he thinks is the appropriate amount of excitement. "That's fabulous news!"

The summer before, Jeanie had gone to Chicago for her brother and sister's nineteenth birthday party. She'd gone out with the twins after, and her brother, Patrick, had been driving when they were in an accident on a dark country road. Jeanie had escaped with minor injuries, Patrick with none to speak of, but Angela had been badly hurt, and it was unclear for months whether she'd ever be able to stand up and walk again.

"Yeah," Jeanie goes on, still avoiding Bill's gaze for the most part. "Her goal was to be able to walk down the aisle at her wedding this summer, so it looks like she might be able to do that."

"I'm really happy to hear it," Bill says. He puts his hands into his pockets and looks at the man whose back is still to them. Finding time to talk to Jeanie since they'd kissed the night of the accident has been nearly impossible, but now that they're alone here, he isn't even sure what to say. "Um," Bill tries. "Do you think we could step outside and take a break together?"

“A smoke break?” Jeanie wrinkles her nose, referring to the time that Bill had taken her outside and given her a cigarette, which had been her first.

“Nah, we don’t need to smoke.” Bill pushes his chair in and leads the way, hands still in his pockets. He looks over his shoulder uncertainly, as if Jeanie might not follow him. “We can just talk.”

Outside, the afternoon has a sharp, clear feel to it. The humidity of summer is gone, and the blue skies are breezy, not blazing. Nearly everyone who works outside during the day has parked their open-top trucks and gone to eat lunch in the shade somewhere. The doors to a hangar in the distance are open, and Jeanie and Bill can see men sitting around on the concrete, eating their lunches out of metal lunch pails.

“So you went home for Christmas?” Bill starts.

At the same time, Jeanie says, “Bill, I’ve been thinking.”

They both laugh.

“You go first,” Bills says solicitously. “Please.”

Jeanie takes a deep breath. “I did go home for Christmas, yes, and there was snow,” she says, smiling at him gently. This is obviously her way of couching whatever she’s about to say in kindness. “But Bill, we need to talk.”

“I agree.” He nods. “I’ve been wanting to talk to you since that night, but it seems like there’s never a good time.”

“There never will be a good time,” Jeanie says quietly. “But there’s no way to ignore what happened between us.”

“And I don’t want to,” Bill says. “I’ve thought of it so many times.”

Jeanie flushes bright red as his words land on her. “I’ve thought of it too, Bill,” she says, stammering. Jeanie drags the toe of her sandal across the dusty pavement as they stand near the building. “And I wasn’t lying: I do feel something for you. But it’s something I shouldn’t feel. It’s something that I shouldn’t want or even think about. You’re a married man with children, and everything about it is wrong, Bill.”

He wants to argue with her on this point, but of course he can’t. It is wrong. All of it.

“I just...I like you so much as a person, Jeanie. Talking to you is like having this great conversation with someone whose voice just, you know.” He pauses. “Makes my heart leap a little.”

At this, Jeanie laughs and she looks incredibly young. Girlish. When he looks away, she grows serious. “I’m sorry, Bill. That was just such a sweet thing to say.” She swallows hard. “It was nice. And I understand what you mean, because mine does, too. Talking to you about books or space or anything, really, is just so damn fun for me. Seeing you and catching your eye across a room makes me feel weightless. But we’re not. There’s a definite gravity to both of us, and to our lives, and we can’t ignore that. This isn’t some passionate love affair set on a planet where no one gets hurt.”

Bill makes no attempt to dispute this. “Of course,” he says.

“And I’m not the kind of girl who does those things anyway.”

A storm cloud passes over Jeanie’s face and Bill wants to grab her and pull her close. He wants to kiss her again, but this time not in a stairwell; this time right here, on the tarmac, within shouting distance of fifty men eating tuna fish sandwiches and sliced pears and thermoses of water. Only he doesn’t do it. Instead, he leans the back of his

head against the wall behind him, closes his eyes, and turns his face up to the sky.

“I don’t go around kissing other women’s husbands,” Jeanie says, her words as forceful as bullets. “And I certainly don’t fall in love with men who aren’t free to love me back.”

Bill opens his eyes and turns his head to look right at her. “Then why not go back to dating Peter Abernathy?”

“Oh, that’s rich, Bill. You know I don’t have feelings for Peter,” Jeanie says sharply. She’d casually dated Peter Abernathy back in the fall and early winter, but it had been a bid for companionship more than it had been a real play for love and romance. If anything, what it had truly been was a way for Jeanie to stop thinking about Bill. And it had failed miserably, by her own admission.

“He’s single at least. He has no kids. No ex-wife who just killed herself. No past at all, it would seem.” This is Bill’s way not of pushing Jeanie towards Peter, but of pointing out just how boring and dull Abernathy truly is. The man is a dolt, Bill thinks, picturing Peter standing dumbly beneath a single streamer at his thirtieth birthday office party one afternoon just a couple of months before. “He’s a blank slate, and you can make him into anything you want him to be.”

Jeanie looks angry now, and she turns her full body towards Bill, nearly touching his arm with her breasts as she steps closer to his ear. “I don’t want a blank slate, William Booker,” she whispers, her eyes searching his as she stands up to him. “I want a man who brings something to the table. I want a man with a past. I want someone who challenges me.” She stops talking and stares at him for a beat before taking a step back. “But what I don’t want is someone else’s husband.”

Bill is aroused by her nearness, and this alone floods him with guilt. He needs to walk away from her, but he can’t. He can’t physically make himself move.

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:22 am

As they stand there, eyes in a deadlock, the men from the hangar end their lunch break and start to stream out into the afternoon sun, swinging lunch pails lazily as they walk off their midday meals.

Bill breaks his stare with Jeanie and watches them in silence. A few men smoke cigarettes, and some get into their open-top Jeep/truck vehicles, putting them in gear as they take off for different corners of the NASA property to do all sorts of things. They scatter like ants as Bill watches them. When he looks back at Jeanie, she is still staring at him with a look in her eyes that he can't quite name.

"I won't call that night a mistake," Bill says. He leans against the wall again, but this time he doesn't put his head back, he just folds his arms across his chest and turns his body slightly towards Jeanie. "I won't apologize. But I will say that I understand what you're saying, and I don't want to make you the kind of woman who does something she deems inappropriate."

Jeanie suddenly looks irked. "You're not making me do anything, Bill. I'm not a puppet—or a little girl. I'm a grown woman. I wanted to kiss you." Her voice is rising as she gets more emphatic. Jeanie stops herself and glances around; there is no one nearby, but still she lowers her volume. "I wanted to, and I'm not sorry either," she says in a near whisper. "But it can't happen again. I can't be coming to work every day, hoping to see you. I can't get dressed in the morning and think 'Will Bill like me in this dress? Will he sit by me at lunch?' We're not in high school." Her dark eyebrows are knit together as she glares at a spot on the ground. "I need to grow up and move on."

Something in Bill softens and nearly breaks as he watches her. He's causing this girl

real torment, and while he's fine shouldering the burden of the mess he's making, he isn't keen on the idea that he's making this beautiful, intelligent young woman feel the way that she obviously does.

"I do like you in that dress," he says. His eyes linger on the way the black A-line dress grazes her torso and leaves her arms bare. Her long, brown hair is smoothed into a sleek chignon, and for some reason, she looks older today than she normally does. "And I like sitting with you at lunch, but I also know I need to stay away from you. I need to stay away from everyone and just catch my breath."

Jeanie's anger with herself seems to vanish as her face changes to one of concern. "What's wrong?"

Now Bill does put his head back against the brick wall again, letting his eyes close. "I'm just having a tough time. The accident really threw me."

"I know."

When he opens his eyes, she's still looking at him. "I feel partially responsible. Or completely. I don't know." Bill clamps his mouth shut; this is more than he's said about the accident up until this point, and far more than he should be saying, according to his agreement with Arvin North. But there's something so trustworthy about Jeanie Florence. It feels like—no matter what he has to say—Bill's secrets will be safe with her. That he can unburden himself to Jeanie without fear of consequence. She is, above all, level-headed, rational, a thinker. Against his better judgment (and ignoring the fact that, a few months prior, he'd mistakenly thought she was the one who'd spoken badly about him at work), Bill exhales.

"I don't think you should," Jeanie says carefully. Two men in a Jeep drive by and wave at them. Bill nods back, but Jeanie keeps her eyes on him. "You didn't design the mission, the space craft, or have any hand in whatever caused the mishap. You

weren't even officially on the mission anymore once the countdown started. The buck stops with North on this--or someone above either of our pay grades."

Bill feels relief to hear that she doesn't blame him, but then she has plenty of reason to feel guilty about her own actions that night, and her natural inclination might be to absolve them both of any wrongdoing on the evening of December thirteenth.

"But I could have been more forceful," Bill argues, though his heart isn't in it. He believes quite strongly that he could have been more adamant, but at the moment, he's just exhausted. He hasn't gotten a whole night of sleep since mid-December, and on top of that, he's got a stack of magazines in his briefcase that are filled with his wife's stories. He's halfway through the first one and while it's good storytelling, it's already feeling far too familiar.

Jeanie is nodding and digesting his concerns about what he might have done wrong with regards to the Gemini mission, and when she speaks, her words are measured.

"Bill." She puts a hand on his upper arm tentatively and leaves it there. The feeling of her skin against his short-sleeved shirt sends a thrill through him. "I think we should just keep our focus on what comes next. There are whole other departments and committees whose job it is to investigate this accident, and they'll find out that--well, maybe they'll find out that you were right and maybe they'll find out that it was something else, but that's out of our hands." She's pleading with him, but it's nice to have someone else saying words that feel good to hear. "For now, the best thing you can do is to just come to work and think about what else we have going on. There's work to be done here, and?—"

As Jeanie is talking, Bill sees a commotion from the corner of his eye. Several of the open-topped trucks have circled the lot and come together, where the men are parking and jumping out to rush towards one of the hangars.

“Hey,” Bill says, interrupting Jeanie. “Something’s up. Something’s going on.” He’s absolutely certain from the determined and tense look on most of the men’s faces that there’s a situation brewing.

Jeanie turns her head and follows his gaze to where, in fact, a group of men are all gathering. “What do you think it is?” She glances back at Bill.

“I don’t know. Maybe we should head back to the office and find out. I’m sure protocol wouldn’t have us out here just watching from a distance. If it’s serious, we’ll hear about it.”

Rather than waiting for the elevators, Bill and Jeanie rush into the building and up the stairs, emerging on their floor out of breath. The others are just coming back from lunch, and phones are ringing at several of the desks, including Bill’s.

He picks it up. “Booker.”

“Bill,” Arvin North says into his ear. “Situation out front. We’ve got protestors.”

Bill frowns. Jeanie is standing next to him, looking at him with open and curious concern on her face, but he avoids her eyes. “Okay,” he says into the receiver.

“There’s a group of people and at least one camera crew. They’re saying we messed up with Gemini, and there’s talk of too much funding going towards NASA and not enough towards the rest of the issues in this country.”

“I’m listening,” Bill says, hoping that no one nearby can tell that he’s talking to North.

“They say there’s no such thing as bad publicity, but I’d beg to differ on that.” Bill can hear Arvin North exhaling cigarette smoke before he goes on. “This, Lieutenant

Colonel, is bad press.”

“So it would seem,” Bill agrees.

“I want you to steer clear of news crews, you hear me? We’re not commenting on this—no one is commenting. Gather the rest of the team. We’ll meet in the conference room in fifteen minutes.”

“Understood,” Bill says. He hangs up and turns back to Jeanie. “Looks like we missed lunch and it’s not on the horizon for either of us.”

Jeanie says nothing, but arches an eyebrow in question.

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“We’ve got protestors out front, and North wants us in the conference room in fifteen minutes.”

Jeanie gives a single nod. “I’ll spread the word.”

* * *

“Protestors?” Vance Majors stands up, pacing along the wall. Generally, when Arvin North calls a meeting, the men know better than to stand and interject. But something’s clearly bothering Vance. “Why would anyone in their right mind be opposed to what we’re trying to do here?”

“Majors,” Arvin North says sharply, “have a seat.”

Vance does as he’s told, though he sits back in his chair with a dark look in his eyes.

“Now,” North goes on. “We have people picketing the entire periphery of Cape Kennedy, and the entrance to the Cape is filled with people holding up signs and shouting at cars. From what I’ve gathered, they’re upset about Gemini, but also about the fact that government funding is going towards the space program rather than towards Civil Rights issues.”

“Like what?” Todd Roman, also not one to speak up in these meetings, raises his head and asks the question in a way that makes it seem as though he hasn’t meant to. Everyone looks in Todd’s direction, and his youthful face grows animated. “I just mean, there are ways to spend different pots of money, and people don’t seem to understand that. It’s possible that the money NASA receives wouldn’t even go

towards the things they're protesting for. The money might go towards other scientific advancements. Research. So essentially, they're kind of wasting their own time. And ours."

Vance is nodding as Todd speaks. "And they're hindering our ability to do our damn jobs," he adds, looking far less youthful and far more angry than Todd Roman. "We show up here every day and are willing to put our lives on the line—quite literally," he adds, and everyone goes silent for a moment thinking of Bob Young and Derek Trager. "And for what? For ignorant people out on the street to stand there with signs glued to sticks, shouting about how money is being wasted?"

Bill, who is always prone to silence in meetings and other scenarios where he's being spoken to by a superior, clears his throat. "But don't forget," he says, holding out a hand, "they have the right to peacefully gather and protest. So far, we haven't heard of anything that would qualify as not peaceful. No one is breaking the law, are they?" He turns and looks at Arvin North.

"Not as of yet," North confirms. "We had a group approach the front doors of the building, but they've been escorted off the property by the police. My understanding is that the authorities are more than willing to keep them in check."

"Not much else going on in Stardust Beach, huh? Cops are all over some people who want to march in circles and chant." Jay Reed, always jocular and a true peacemaker, tries for a bit of levity. It falls flat. "Sorry," he says, giving a close-lipped smile in surrender.

"The space program is a very important part of this community—and our state," North says. "Everyone takes the safety and sanctity of Cape Kennedy seriously, and people infiltrating the property in order to shout negative things at our workers will not be accepted."

Jeanie is seated across the table from Bill, and he catches her eye. They stare at one another for a moment and then she looks away.

“I have also heard that there are news crews out there and that they’re looking for soundbites. I understand that many of you engage in after hours fraternizing at The Black Hole,” Arvin North adds, “which is fine. Your time is your time. But I want you to be on high alert, and be aware of anyone you don’t recognize. I’m sure it won’t surprise a sharp bunch of people like yourselves, but there are news organizations out there that would be willing to wait for an inebriated astronaut to stumble out of a bar and spill the beans. Don’t let that be you.” North lowers his chin and takes his time dragging his gaze across every face at the table. “If I turn on my television or open my newspaper and see your face, or read a quote from any of you, there will be consequences. Am I being clear?”

A chorus of “Yes, sirs” breaks out around the table.

Arvin North heaves a sigh of resignation. “Alright then. Back to work you go. All of you. Heads down, mouths closed. As you were.”

The astronauts and engineers file out, barely making eye contact with one another. They have work to do. Things to focus on. Issues to hammer out before their next mission, which has been postponed but not cancelled. But all it will take is a misspoken word for the program to come under the kind of scrutiny that will hurt them all. They cannot afford that.

Bill is the last to leave the room, and as he does, Arvin North catches his gaze and holds it for a beat.

Bill nods and walks out.

CHAPTER12

Jude

It works for most of the day—usually. Jude wakes up, dresses quickly and drinks three cups of coffee as she gets the girls up, fed, and off to school. She then does everything around the house that needs to be done, and she drums up all the willpower she can muster to keep her mind focused on anything other than the thought of having a drink.

There have been plenty of days over the years when Jude has gotten to the lunch hour and then poured a stiff drink to enjoy on her patio while she reads a book and eats a sandwich. So it's hard not to indulge in that little bit of pleasure. It's incredibly difficult to tell herself that iced tea is as good as a cocktail. That staying clearheaded for the girls is what she needs to do. She's gotten so good at convincing herself that there is absolutely nothing wrong with a little relaxing, and that she's never been too drunk to take care of the kids. And just when she gets that thought in her head, she remembers: the pool.

The day she fell into the pool had been a bad one. She'd been thinking about her mother a lot, and Jude wanted nothing more than to reach out to Keiko, to tell her she missed her, and to see how she was, but she knew that was impossible. After the trip to Los Angeles on the boat there had been letters for a solid year, maybe more, and then nothing. No word of Keiko, or her whereabouts. No contact whatsoever. Jude had missed her mother terribly and she still does, but she's gotten to the point where she understands that perhaps Keiko had disappeared from her life for reasons that were out of her hands. Jude isn't even sure she wants the answers anymore.

But the day of the pool incident had been hard. She'd started drinking early, just sipping on and off as the girls played, and by lunchtime, she'd gotten so sloppy that all she could do was make toast for the girls before she went outside to pick up the Barbies and toys that Hope and Faith had left all over the place. Normally she'd make the girls do it as one of their chores, but they'd eaten their toast and gone to their

bedroom to play a board game, so Jude had just done it herself. And that's the last thing she remembers, truly. She'd woken up in the hospital with concerned people all around her: doctors, nurses, Vance, and—as she volunteered there several days a week—Jo Booker. The horror of it all had hit her in waves, and when she thinks of it now, it still feels like a fresh wound.

Jude puts a hand to her head involuntarily, touching the spot she'd hit on the cement of the pool deck. According to her neighbor, Ken Smithers, who has since moved back to Houston with his family, he'd been up on a ladder cleaning his gutters when he'd seen Jude fall and roll into the pool, and he'd gotten in through her side gate as quickly as possible to pull her out. The whole thing had been terribly shocking for Vance, who really hadn't known how to address it or what he should do to help her, and they'd hidden as much of it as possible from the girls.

Seeing Ken Smithers once she'd gotten home from the hospital had been hard on Jude; she'd felt embarrassed and ashamed of herself, but even with those feelings looming over her, she'd continued on with her drinking. All it took was too much thinking about her mom, about her childhood, about feeling shunned by Alice, about losing Catherine's friendship, and Jude would pour herself a drink. Always just one, which led to another, and another, and...

She shakes her head now, letting her hand fall away from the small scar on her temple where she'd needed stitches. Talking to Harrison Watts about finding Catherine has infused her life with a new sense of purpose, and Jude has to admit to herself that she has no idea what she'll do with the information if Mr. Watts does call to let her know that he's tracked down her old friend. Will she call her? If Catherine lives close enough, will she go to her? Surprise her? She truly has no idea, but for some reason, the search for Catherine has become her one mission, her one reason for staying sober and focused.

And if that's all she has (and, God, she should be doing it for her daughters! Or her

husband! Or herself!), then she'll take it. Sobriety is going to be an uphill battle, and she'll use whatever tools she can find in her arsenal to fight against the forces inside of her that want to hide in the bottom of an empty bottle. She has to. Jude cannot afford to end up slumped over in a pool again, or having to show her face and swallow her shame in front of friends and neighbors who find her at her lowest point.

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She has girls to raise, and unlike her own mother, she needs to have the chance to be here for them.

* * *

Catherine had a singing voice like a songbird crossed with a bewitching fairy. She would lounge in the bathtub for hours, her voice echoing in the tiled room and trickling down the hallway as she sang a haunting rendition of “I Don’t Want To Set the World On Fire” by the Ink Spots. Jude could hear the splash of water as Catherine flipped around, refilling the tub with bubbles and hot water, and she would stop whatever she was doing to listen as Catherine hummed to herself and switched to “You Always Hurt the One You Love” by the Mills Brothers.

Sometimes, as she sat at her chipped vanity table in the light of a pink-shaded lamp, putting cold cream on her smooth skin, Catherine would talk to Frank Sinatra—that dumb white cat—telling him all about her day, about the movie stars she’d seen on set, and about the way the director or the other actors had treated her.

“And can you believe that man came up to me and asked me what size brassiere I wear? Can you even stand the audacity, Frank Sinatra?”

Jude walked past the bedroom and saw her friend sitting on the bench seat, looking down at the cat on the carpet at her feet.

“He’s not in the costume department, and he’s not even in charge of the film—he just wanted to talk about my breasts!”

Jude paused that time, leaning against the doorframe as she watched Catherine reach out a long, elegant arm, letting her thin wrist dangle as she brushed her fingers over Frank Sinatra's upturned head.

"Men," Catherine had said, shaking her head. "So silly. So predictable."

"Aren't they, though?" The words were out of Jude's mouth before she could stop them.

Catherine turned in surprise. "Judy! I didn't hear you there."

Jude stepped into the bedroom and perched on the edge of the bed, with its satin coverlet and the marabou feather slippers placed side-by-side for Catherine to step into. She may not have been a starlet yet, but she certainly subscribed to the notion that a woman needed to act the part regardless. Jude loved this about her.

"Sorry," Jude said, putting her hands between her knees and rounding her shoulders as she yawned. "I didn't mean to creep up on you. I just heard you talking, and I didn't know that old Frank was here."

Catherine glanced at the window sash, which had been pushed open. Outside, against the dark night sky, the leaves and branches of a lemon tree were visible.

"Frank knocks politely until I let him in, don't you, Mr. Sinatra?" Catherine looked at him again, and he sat there, perfectly still, looking up at her. It was a mutual admiration society, for sure.

"A man really said that to you?" Jude asked, leaning back on the bed so that she was propped up on her elbows.

Catherine spun around on the bench seat until she was facing Jude, and she tightened

the satin sash of her robe as she crossed her legs at the knee, revealing about a mile of bare thigh. “He did,” Catherine said with a pretty pout. “And I would have smacked him on the nose, but he’s the brother-in-law of the film’s producer, so I bit my tongue until it bled.”

“Nepotism,” Jude said with a roll of her eyes.

“Asshole-ism,” Catherine barked back.

The women laughed, and then fell quiet. Outside, crickets chirped noisily in the dark night.

“Do you really think you’ll make it?” Jude asked, still braced on her elbows as she looked at Catherine. “Do you think you’ll stay in Hollywood until you end up famous?”

Catherine blew out a breath like the question was a big one that needed contemplating. “Well,” she said, reaching down to scoop up Frank Sinatra. “I think I will stay. I mean, what else would I do, Judy? Go back to Missoula and marry a man who owns a farm?”

Jude shrugged. “Doesn’t sound too bad—if you like that sort of thing.”

Catherine stood then, cradling Frank Sinatra in her arms as she walked over to the open window. “Well, I don’t mind a man on a horse, but I’d rather ride him myself.”

“The man or the horse?” Jude rolled over onto one elbow, watching Catherine move in the light from the lamp.

Catherine reached up to the open window and set Frank on the sill gently, urging him to jump down and go home. They weren’t one hundred percent sure, but they

assumed that Frank actually belonged to Mrs. LaJolla, the old widow who lived behind them. Either that, or he was an opportunist who made his way into every yard and every home on the block.

Once the cat had gone, Catherine turned back to Jude. “I guess neither,” she said. Catherine crossed the room, her satin robe billowing behind her. She sat on the edge of the bed next to Jude, but since Jude was lounging on an elbow, Catherine had to look down at her. She reached out a hand and let her long fingers comb through Jude’s dark hair. “I’ve never fallen hard for a man at all—or a horse, for that matter.”

Jude smiled up at her, feeling uncertain. Unsettled. Finally, she sat up, only when she did, she realized that their faces were far too close together.

“You’ve never been in love?” Jude asked, feeling breathless. “Never?”

Catherine tossed her long, honeyed hair over one shoulder. “I wouldn’t say never, but I would say that I’ve never been willing to throw away my own dreams for a man. I’ve never felt that urge to give up my life and devote myself to helping some guy find his own happiness. I haven’t wanted to raise anyone’s children, or do anything conventional for that matter.”

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“So...you’d call yourself unconventional, then?” Jude knew she was pushing, but there was something deep inside of her that made her feel rather unconventional herself. And no matter how hard she tried, Jude couldn’t put her finger on what it was.

“Sure,” Catherine said casually. “I would say that’s true enough. How about you?”

It was Jude’s turn, and she knew that honesty was her only real option here. “I think I’m...different. I don’t think I’m normal.”

This made Catherine laugh. “Okay, let’s not get carried away, Judy. No one is calling you abnormal. You’re not weird or anything.”

Jude bit her lower lip. “I think I am. I grew up without a mother for most of my life. And I never told anyone about this, but remember how I told you about when I came over on the boat from Japan? How I was with that woman and her son, Chester? Well, he did things to me. We were just kids, though,” Jude added hurriedly. “So it wasn’t like I understood. I didn’t like it or anything?—“

“Jude,” Catherine said softly. She reached out and took Jude’s hand in hers. “You don’t need to explain. I think most of us had some neighbor boy or a creepy cousin who tried things with us when we were young. You’re not alone.”

Jude blinked. This was the first time it had occurred to her that the same things might have happened to other girls. “Really?”

“Of course. My older sister’s boyfriend cornered me in the bathroom when I was

twelve and made me touch it.”

“It?” Jude repeated. “How old was he?”

“Seventeen.” Catherine laced her fingers through Jude’s. “He told me that if I ever said a word about it to my sister or to my parents or anyone else, he’d drive his car off a cliff with my sister in it. I believed him.”

“What happened? Did she eventually break things off with him?”

Catherine laughed, though it lacked any joy. “Not quite. He left her when she got pregnant with my niece at eighteen.”

“God,” Jude said. She shook her head. “Men.”

“Boys,” Catherine corrected. “But I haven’t had any amazing experiences with any of them—boys or men. I don’t hate them or anything,” she clarified, “I just don’t think I get them. And I’m not sure that I want to.” Catherine shrugged and stood up, sliding her bare feet into the marabou feather slippers and walking over to close and lock her bedroom window.

With Catherine, there was no need to get to the bottom of these feelings; she seemed to simply accept things as they came to her, and she generally let things pass without judgment, which was something that Jude both admired and feared about her. A woman without judgment felt confusing to Jude: did she truly not care, or was she playing at some sort of zen state that wasn’t truly possible to ever reach?

“You mean you don’t want to fall in love and get married and really understand your husband?” Jude frowned. She thought this was ultimately what every woman wanted. In fact, she assumed it was what she herself wanted, though the image of her settled down, married, and entrenched in a life that she shared with a man seemed as foreign

as another country.

Catherine was gathering discarded dresses and blouses from around the room, and as she stopped at a chair in the corner and picked up a pair of nylons still attached to garters, she looked right at Jude.

“No, Judith,” she said, a smile dancing in her eyes. “What I want is to take as many lovers as I please, and to live in Hollywood forever. I want a pool, and a bar cart with little tongs to pick up ice cubes, and I want a yellow convertible, and three cats. I want to hire a cook to make my dinner every night, and I want to see my face on a billboard. What I do not want is to be someone’s little wife. I am not washing a man’s laundry, listening to him talk about work, and I’m definitely not interested in raising his children. And if you pictured me doing all those things, then we don’t really know each other at all.” Catherine walks into her tiny closet and tugs the cord that turns on the overhead light. “What about you, Judy? Is it in the cards for you—marriage, kids, the whole shebang?”

Jude could hear Catherine but not see her as she moved around inside the small walk-in closet, and this gave her a sense of boldness that she didn’t normally have. The words she’d been holding in for months were right on the tip of her tongue, and the thoughts she had about her and Catherine suddenly didn’t seem far-fetched at all. “I’m not sure that’s ever in the cards for girls like us,” Jude said seriously. “Maybe we’re just built differently.”

The movement inside the closet ceased, but the light stayed on. Jude held her breath.

When Catherine finally appeared in the doorway of the closet, it was with a look on her face that Jude couldn’t quite name. It was a wildness and a questioning; it was a hunger and an answer.

“Maybe we are,” Catherine said. She was nearly breathless, and Jude swore she could

see Catherine's heart beating as it pulsed rapidly in her neck. "Maybe girls like us aren't a dime a dozen." She reached up and pulled the cord, turning off the light in the closet so that she was standing in darkness. "Maybe we just need something a little different than the other girls do."

Jude felt lightheaded as she waited for Catherine to step out of the closet and into the light. Instead, she stayed there, halfway hidden in the shadows. She stayed that way for so long that Jude wasn't sure what to do, and so she stood and brushed the front of her robe, smoothing the wrinkles from it.

This was enough for one night, and so she walked to the door of the bedroom, turning back to see Catherine leaning against the closet door.

"Goodnight, Judy," she whispered.

CHAPTER 13

Jo

"Josephine! Hey, Josephine!"

Jo stops in her tracks. She's in the middle of her shift at Stardust Beach General, where she's been volunteering now for a year and a half, and Dr. Chavez is gaining ground behind her. She stops and turns, pretending like she hadn't seen him standing at the nurses' station.

"Oh, Dr. Chavez," Jo says with a big smile. "How are you?"

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He catches up to her with a puzzled look on his face. “I waved at you as you walked by—you didn’t see me?”

Jo shoots him an apologetic smile. “Sorry, I was lost in thought there. That happens to me sometimes when I’m thinking of my next story.”

She starts walking again and he falls in place next to her, striding down the shiny linoleum floors towards the pediatric wing.

“That’s actually why I wanted to talk to you,” Dr. Chavez says, slipping his ballpoint pen into the pocket of his white lab coat. “I read your stories—all of them.”

Jo is stunned into speechlessness. She almost laughs, but catches herself. “You read all of them?” The idea of Dr. Chavez shopping at the grocery store for his meals and plucking a *True Romance* magazine off the shelf to pay for at the register tickles her funny bone. “I’m flattered.”

“And amused,” he says with a wink. “Which is understandable. A lot of the stories in the magazine were a bit on the frilly side—at least for my taste.”

Jo puts her fingertips to her lips like she can hide her smile. “Frilly?” she repeats.

Dr. Chavez shrugs and it comes across as boyish, almost shy. “Definitely from the female perspective. But yours—yours were special. The way you set a scene is really deft.”

“Huh.” Jo puts her hands into the pockets of her gray skirt and leans one shoulder on

the wall as they stop at the double doors to the next wing. “Deft.” It’s not really the kind of flattering term a writer dreams of, or at least Jo has never dreamed of being deft. Romantic? Yes. Talented? Of course. But deft? Deft sounds like a compliment for someone who fells a tree, or herds cattle.

Dr. Chavez’s cheeks dimple as he smiles. He dips his chin, and looks up at Jo almost bashfully. “Sorry, I’m not in the business of verbally critiquing talented authors. I meant to say that the world you built in your stories is a vivid one. I feel like I know the characters, and like I understand their motivations and emotions. I really feel for Maxine, you know?” He holds up a hand as he talks, which is charming to Jo. “I can see her trying her hardest to get Winston’s attention, and how disappointed she must feel when she sees him standing outside a bar with another woman.” He shakes his head. “It all feels so real.”

Nurse Edwina, the head nurse and Jo’s direct boss, swishes by on her soft-soled shoes, shooting Jo a knowing look as she does. Jo locks eyes with her for a second and then looks away.

“Thank you,” Jo says. “There is no higher compliment than to tell an author that her words and her characters feel real.”

“They do. You made an old bachelor feel like a giddy young girl in love.”

Jo throws back her head and laughs. “Like a giddy young girl in love?” She giggles even harder. “Dr. Chavez. I can’t even picture that. And you’re hardly old.”

He shrugs. “Hey, I’m just telling it like it is.”

A page rings out on the intercom: “Dr. Chavez to pediatrics. Dr. Chavez to pediatrics.”

Jo is about to say something else when he points at the speaker with one finger. “They’re playing my song,” he says with a smile. He reaches over and touches her elbow lightly. “Keep writing, Jo. I think I accidentally signed up for a lifetime subscription to True Romance, so I want to make sure I’ll be seeing your byline in there every month.”

“I’ll try,” Jo says, the laughter dying down as she wipes the corners of her eyes. “I’ll do my best.”

Dr. Chavez lifts a hand in farewell as he punches the button that swings open the double doors to pediatrics, and Jo is left standing there, leaning against the wall with one shoulder.

She’s got to keep writing. If someone like Dr. Chavez—someone she holds in such high esteem—is encouraging her to keep going, then she has to. But Bill still hasn’t said anything about the stories, and she’s afraid to ask him whether he’s read them or not. In fact, she’s kind of hoping that he hasn’t. If Bill forgets about the stories, then she can just switch to a new plot. New characters. A whole new storyline. Sure, people love reading about Maxine and Winston and the space program, but she can wrap up the trajectory of their love story and find new inspiration somewhere else. Maybe a good doctor and nurse romance? People love those, too.

"Josephine," Nurse Edwina says as she comes squeaking down the hallway in her orthopedic shoes. "You gonna just lounge there all day looking dreamy, or are you going to deliver some cheer to the pregnant ladies in the maternity ward?"

Jo knows Edwina is teasing her--the older woman is all bark and no bite--so she smiles and pushes away from the wall.

"I'll make the rounds," Jo says. "That way I can hit all the rooms you've already been to and make up for your lack of cheer."

“Oooh,” Edwina says, pushing open the double doors with her rear end and shaking her head at Jo. “She’s a sassy one, isn’t she?”

Jo’s never been called sassy. She kind of likes it.

* * *

By the time Bill gets home that evening, Jo has convinced herself that her writing is truly something special. She’s hummed her way around the kitchen, making a pot of spaghetti and tossing a salad for dinner, and as she worked, she heard Dr. Chavez’s words in her head over and over, telling her that her stories were strong enough to capture his attention.

Bill’s car door slams outside and Kate comes rushing out from her bedroom to greet him. It must happen in every family, but it’s been bittersweet for Jo to watch her kids grow up and lose some of their innocent, childlike tendencies. The children used to all rush out when Bill arrived home at the end of a long day, excited to see their father and eager to have someone other than Jo to chatter to, but over the years, it slowly became just Nancy and Kate, as Jimmy started to run off with friends to play catch or make little boy mischief, and then Nancy was suddenly too busy reading a book most days to come out of it and greet her father at the door. Now it’s just Kate, and sometimes Jo feels like her youngest only comes to the door to greet Bill because no one else does.

“Hi, Daddy,” Kate says, leaning into him for a quick hug. She’s got a doll in one hand, and she’s looking into the kitchen with interest. “I think Mommy is making spaghetti.”

Bill kisses the top of his youngest child’s head absently and then ruffles her hair. “I think she is,” he says. “You can go play for a bit. We’ll call you for dinner.”

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It's his tone; Jo can hear it and sense that something is up with Bill. She stirs the spaghetti with one hand on her hip, keeping a side-eye turned towards her husband.

"I read your stories," he says when they're alone. Bill opens his briefcase, pulls out the magazines, and lets them land on the kitchen table with a slap that's almost accusatory. At the sound, Jo nearly drops the wooden spoon in her hand. "I don't know what you were thinking, Josephine." Bill's voice is quiet, but his tone is grave. "That entire story is about us."

Jo turns her back to the stove, leaning against the counter. "Bill..."

He holds up a hand and lowers his gaze. They stand there like that for what feels like an eternity. "Do you understand how invasive that is for me?" Bill puts one hand on the back of a kitchen chair and leans on it like his back is hurting him. He shakes his head before looking right at his wife. "I opened that story only to find that you'd written about us up on the roof of the house on that hot summer night. That was ours, Jo. That's our story."

"Of course it is. I know it is," Jo says, her eyes welling with tears. "It's our private story, Bill. And I shouldn't have written about the roof. You are so right. I'm sorry." She searches his face and waits to see what more he'll say.

"And the rest of it...my job. The things I go through as an astronaut and as a man..." Bill's words trail off and he stands there, looking forlorn. "I can't stand knowing that women all over this country have read our story and that they know about how I feel."

Jo is tempted to tell him that, most likely, the women who read her story aren't all that interested in the day-to-day inner workings of an astronaut's job, and that they're far more interested in what happens between Maxine and Winston, but she realizes that this isn't the time to interrupt. Instead, she nods. "I'm sorry, Bill," Jo whispers. "I'm so sorry. I just felt like us coming here was such a changing, formative thing for me—for us—and it really inspired me. I just started writing, and that's what came out. I couldn't help it."

"But you could," Bill says firmly, finally raising his voice.

Nancy comes out of her room then, book in hand. "Hi, Daddy," she says, looking back and forth between her parents. "How was your day?"

Bill puts a hand to the back of his neck and rubs it before answering. "It was fine, Nance. Your mom and I are talking now, sweetheart. Would you mind giving us a few minutes before dinner?"

"Actually," Jo says, untying the apron that's around her waist. She lifts the neck loop over her head and passes the apron to Nancy. "Honey, I want you to keep stirring the pasta sauce, okay? Your dad and I will be outside."

Jo motions at the sliding door to the pool deck, and they walk out, closing it behind them. She folds her arms across her chest, watching through the window as Nancy props up her book on the kitchen counter, puts the apron over her head and ties it at the waist, and begins to stir the pasta sauce absentmindedly while keeping her eyes on the book she's reading.

"Okay," Jo says, sitting on the edge of a pool chair. She looks at Bill and waits for him to go on. He's the one who has things to say here, not her.

Bill throws his hands in the air and turns around, pacing in the grass towards the

fence line. “Well, I can’t ask for a retraction, Jo. There’s nothing to be done now, but I’m currently under a microscope at work. Everything I do is up for scrutiny, and having this story out there feels damn near humiliating.”

Jo is gobsmacked. “Bill...how? How is it humiliating to have people read a story about a person who feels real? Whose troubles are real ones? Nowhere in it does it say that the story is about you, and I don’t even use my married name when I write.”

“Oh, believe me, I know. You think I didn’t notice that you went by Josephine White instead of Josephine Booker? I noticed.” Bill jabs a finger at his own chest. “I noticed.”

Jo sighs heavily. “Okay,” she says. “Okay. I understand that you’re upset, and I wish I could do something to make you feel better, but I think it’s obvious that you want to be mad at me.”

“That I want to be mad at you? Jo,” Bill says, walking in circles as he puts his hands to both temples. “Why would I want to be mad at you? You’re my wife. My partner. The mother of my children. I want us to be on the same page, and I definitely don’t want us to be on opposite sides of the fence. But if you’re going to disclose the most personal parts of my life—of our life together—then I feel like I can’t trust you.”

This hits Jo like a blow to the chest. “You can’t...trust me?” She blinks repeatedly, trying to hold the tears at bay. Trust is everything in a marriage, and until now, it’s never been in question—for either of them.

Bill looks at her with wounded eyes. “You know what a private person I am. You know that I don’t share things about myself with just anyone. The idea that you were letting strangers read the most private parts of my life just bothers me on a deep level, Jo. Can’t you see that? I feel exposed. I feel like you’ve shared me without my permission. I had no say in this, and that bothers me most of all.”

Jo swallows hard and holds back her tears. Betraying Bill has never been her intention, and she takes the accusation seriously. Very seriously. “I never meant to share things about you, Bill. I just started writing and it felt so good, so cathartic. It helped me to work through some of the things I was feeling to just be able to open up—even on the page, even to people I didn’t know—and to put some of my thoughts and emotions out there. I know that’s selfish, but sometimes I need to talk about things, and baby, I have to tell you,” Jo says, shaking her head as she sits on the edge of the chair, looking up at her husband, “you aren’t always much of a talker. That’s hard for me. I can’t approach you, and I can’t talk about you with you. I needed to think and write and process the parts of our life that are difficult for me. Can you see that?” she pleads, one hand pressed to her chest.

Inside the house, Nancy flips on the kitchen light, which illuminates the dining room area. Jo looks at Bill as he turns his back to her, folding his arms over his chest.

“I don’t like it, Jo. I feel betrayed. I can’t help it, and I know that’s extreme and maybe feels a bit dramatic,” he says, turning halfway around so that he can glance at his wife, “but I feel hurt by this. I have a lot going on at work, and a lot of people thinking that maybe I’m not fit to do my job, and to feel like my own wife doesn’t think I’m approachable or that I’m someone she can talk to...that really hurts me.”

Jo stands slowly, walking up behind Bill like she’s approaching a horse that might spook. He turns back to the fence, and Jo slides in behind him, putting her hands on his waist and letting them move around so that she’s holding him around his midsection. She puts her cheek to his strong back and tightens her embrace.

“Bill. I never meant to hurt you, or betray your confidence, or make you feel like I couldn’t talk to you. I just have some things in my heart that are bothering me, and they came out on the page.”

Bill is silent, but Jo can feel him breathing. When he finally speaks, it’s calm, and he

sounds almost fearful.

“You know what really bothers me, Jo?”

“What?” Jo closes her eyes, keeping her cheek pressed to his back. “What bothers you most?”

“The way you wrote all this under a different name. It’s like you were trying to hide it from me. Like you wanted to get away with something and that I’d never find out.”

Jo pulls away but stays behind him, her arms loosely holding his torso. “No, that’s not why I used my maiden name, Bill. It’s not. I just wasn’t sure about you having a wife in the public eye at all. I didn’t know if that would be something that could fall back on you, and this seemed like a fun hobby. A lark. I thought I might write a few short stories and make a few bucks and that would be it.”

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“Then why didn’t you just sit me down and explain all of that. Why didn’t you tell me what you were doing and let me decide for myself how I felt about it? By hiding it and not talking about it, you basically told me that I wasn’t fit to come to my own conclusions. To feel the way I felt. You took that away from me, and it feels deceptive. Deceiving the person you love is like stripping them of their dignity, Jo. I’m a grown man, and I need to know that the woman I’m married to has my back and will always be up front with me.”

“Bill, I will. I swear.” Jo pulls all the way back from him and walks around Bill so that they’re face to face. “But I’ve been writing for almost a year now, and you never asked to read any of it. It was like you didn’t care.” She looks up at him desperately. “I didn’t ever set out to hide things from you or to do something that would upset you, but I do feel like you had every opportunity to read my work. To ask me what was going on with my stories. I even did a reading at NASA, for God’s sake. Almost all the women you work with have read my stories. I just...I feel bad that you feel bad, but you really pulled away from me. You showed no interest in my writing. Zero.”

“I’ve been busy, Jo.” Bill puts his hands on both of her shoulders and looks deep into her eyes. “We came here with a goal—a big one—and I needed to put as much of my focus on this as I possibly could. That’s why I struggled at first with you taking the volunteer position at the hospital. I needed you to be my partner first and foremost.”

“But I am.”

“I know you are, but can you see how I felt like you were pulling away from me? How it seemed like you wanted to go off and do your own things rather than focus on

the family? And then to take up writing on top of that...”

Jo hears what he’s saying, and she understands the expectations on her as a wife and mother, but she can’t help feeling like Bill is wrong. He’s wrong in thinking that Jo giving her time to the hospital, or staying up late to write and be creative, are ways that she’s pulling away from him and the children. Instead, she sees those as very distinct ways that she’s becoming more for them, not less.

Jo drops her gaze as Bill’s hands gently knead her shoulders. “Bill,” she says, shaking her head. Her voice is so low that it’s almost a whisper. “I’m not pulling away from you. I’m just trying to find me. I want to know who I’m supposed to be, and I think doing that will set a wonderful example for the kids—the girls in particular.”

She bites her lower lip and feels the burn of tears, but they aren’t tears of sadness. Instead, Jo feels almost angry that she has to defend herself, that she has to make Bill understand her desire to be her own person. He’s never once had to explain to her why he wants to go to the moon or why he needs to stop at the Black Hole for beers with his coworkers at the end of the day.

When Jo looks up at Bill, he’s watching her with a curious gaze. “You think the girls need to see their mother giving her time away for free at the hospital and writing stories under a pen name?” His tone is gentle, but the sarcasm is sharp and heavy to Jo’s ear.

She takes his words in, holds them, and then lets out her thoughts with her breath. “I do,” she says. “I think they need to see that women have a lot to offer the world. If they both become wives and mothers then that’s wonderful and a blessing to us, but if either of them wants to do something else, something?—“

“Say it, Jo. Something more.”

She shakes her head emphatically. “That wasn’t what I meant, but okay. If they want to do something more, then at least they know it’s possible.”

Bill pulls back even further; he can’t meet her eye. “I never knew you were unhappy with your life. With our life.”

Jo has taken all she can take from him in that moment. She cannot listen to any more from him without speaking her mind.

“You know what? I never knew you were unhappy, either.”

Bill’s eyes flash with fire. “I’m not.”

“Oh? Then why did I drive by The Black Hole and see you outside in the parking lot with Jeanie Florence?” she says in a voice that comes out sounding like an angry, accusatory hiss. “When you turn your affections to another woman, you make a fool out of me. Out of our marriage.”

“Jo.” Bill looks incredulous. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You do.” She is firm in this. “You know.”

Bill has the good sense to look confused. “How would I know what kind of scenarios you’ve cooked up in your head? Other than reading them on the page,” he shoots back, turning the focus of the conversation back to what he sees as Jo’s crimes.

“That wasn’t a scenario I cooked up, Bill. That happened. I drove by one day on my way home from the hospital, and you were standing there with her, talking in a way that looked...intimate. It looked wrong. It felt wrong.”

“And then, rather than talking about it with me, you wrote about it. You turned

something innocent into fodder for the public to read about, and you made me look like a bad guy.”

Nancy slides open the patio door then, Jo’s apron hanging down past her knees in a way that makes her look like a little girl dressed up in her mother’s clothing. “I think the sauce is ready, Mommy.”

Jo turns to her daughter. “Okay, sweetheart. Can you take it off the burner and put on a pot of water to boil for the pasta?”

Nancy nods and slides the door closed between them slowly. Her eyes are wide with wonder and concern as she watches her parents’ faces.

Jo spins back around to face Bill. “I’m done having this discussion for now. I wrote what I wrote, and I know I saw what I saw. I will give you my word that, in wrapping up this ongoing story between Maxine and Winston, I won’t include anything that is happening or has happened in our actual lives. But I need to write another installment to end things. Are you fine with that?”

Bill spreads his hands wide and gives her a look as if to say “Do I have a choice?”

“I’m giving you my word, Bill.”

He exhales loudly and scratches at his neck with an agitation that leaves red marks where his nails scrape skin. “Fine. Finish the damn story. And then I never want to read anything personal about myself, about our marriage, or about this family in a women’s magazine again, am I making myself clear?”

Jo lifts her chin just a fraction of an inch—it’s her way of being defiant without being overt. “You’re being very clear,” she says in clipped tones. “I got your message.”

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“Fine. Then let’s eat dinner.”

He throws the sliding door open with the kind of force that makes Jo cringe. The last thing they need is a patio full of shattered glass, and a houseful of startled children.

For tonight, anyway, she will make peace.

* * *

Jo’s determination to make peace lasts all of twenty-four hours, because the next day she comes home to find a letter in the mailbox from an agent in New York City, and it’s addressed to her.

Irene Powers, the head of PR at NASA, had asked Jo for permission to share her story with an agent she knew, and Jo had agreed. But she’s never imagined opening her mailbox to actually find a letter there from Martin Snell of Snell & Banks Literary.

Jo slips her finger beneath the flap of the envelope and opens it slowly, pulling the letter out with care. Her hands are shaking, and she looks up and down her street as if someone might be observing her.

She clears her throat and focuses on the letter.

Mrs. Booker,

I have received and read your writing sample, forwarded by my close friend, Irene Powers. She has enclosed a letter explaining that you have a unique voice and some

interesting insight, and I cannot disagree. I have enjoyed reading your short work on Maxine and Winston's relationship, and would very much like to read more from you. If you could possibly forward me the first fifty pages of whatever you're working on at the moment, I will read them at my earliest convenience and get back to you.

Thank you so much for sharing your work with Irene—and thank you to her for sharing it with me. I look forward to reading more of your work.

Sincerely,

Martin Snell

Snell & Banks Literary

Jo reads the letter three more times and then rushes into the house. Fifty pages?! She doesn't have fifty pages. What she has is her work cut out for her.

For the rest of the day, as she moves through her chores and takes care of the house and the children, Jo begins to plot her next story.

CHAPTER 14

Maxine

She's two months in. Two months into widowhood, and just weeks away from giving birth to her third child. Maxine Trager is a shell of the woman she'd been before December thirteenth, and she has no idea how to pull herself together. How to be a mother again, and how to put one foot in front of the other after losing Derek.

Actually, that's not true: she knows that finding a purpose will help her to get out of

bed in the morning. Wendy and this new baby should be enough—not to mention Ryan, though he's plenty old enough now to take care of his own daily needs and to process the loss of his father without constant explanations about where Daddy is and why he's not coming home—but Maxine has quickly discovered that the notion of endless days and nights of diapers, bottles, laundry, and cooking aren't enough to help her see the light at the end of this long, dark tunnel.

What actually pulls her out of her own head surprises even her: it's the protestors that have taken up residence on the outskirts of Cape Kennedy. They're just enough off the property that no one can take away their right to peacefully protest, but they show up every day, without fail. They're a motley crew of young men and women, of college age students and retirees, of people holding homemade signs, and of others just pacing and chanting things that can't be heard when car windows are rolled up.

Maxine passes this gathering each day as she makes her way around town, forcing herself to walk into the grocery store, the pharmacy, or the bakery. She takes Wendy to the Little Spinners dance classes that Frankie Maxwell runs each Monday and Wednesday morning for girls ages two through four, and she stops at the service station for gasoline, staring through the windshield as the young men in their starched shirts and pants rush around, filling her tank, washing her windows, and checking the air in her tires.

It's on one such morning—Valentine's Day, in fact—that Maxine sees this group of protestors, and her first response is indignation: how can these people be opposed to NASA when they aren't even sure what goes on there? How can they be angry at the way this country has prioritized space exploration when it's clearly the way forward—the way of the future?

She'd been called into the office shortly after Derek's death, and it had taken Jude Majors and Jo Booker nearly two hours to coax her out of her robe and slippers and into a dress, and then Jude had driven Maxine to the meeting with Arvin North,

holding onto Maxine's arm the entire time to offer her support.

Arvin North, along with a small faction of men in suits and ties, had greeted Maxine with gravity, leading her into a conference room where a table was laden with coffee, cream, sugar, pitchers of water, and a small tray of breakfast pastries. All of it remained untouched.

"Thank you for joining us, Mrs. Trager," Arvin North had said. He sat at the end of the table, looking at Maxine as she perched, shrunken, in the chair at the opposite end of the room. Next to her, Jude had sat with her purse looped over one arm, chair pulled close to Maxine's in solidarity. Jude had not been invited directly, but Maxine had refused to attend without her.

"Your husband is a hero both in this program, and to our entire country," Arvin North said. An ashtray rested near his elbow, though he made no move to light a cigarette. "He and Bob Young will go down in history as men who gave their lives so that America could make progress towards the moon."

This had rung hollow for Maxine then, and it still does now.

"Derek leaves behind a wife and three children," Maxine said in response, rubbing her ever-expanding belly as she eyed the men in suits. "He lost his life before he ever got to meet his newest baby. That is a tragedy, Mr. North. There is no way for me to reconcile me losing my husband—my children losing their father—with this country making great strides towards outer space. The two things do not compare, in my book."

"Yes, I understand, Mrs. Trager." Arvin North bowed his head slightly, pausing before he said more. "But when a man signs on to become an astronaut, he understands that there are certain dangers involved. He knows that he must accept that death is a possibility, and that in the event of a tragic, unforeseen accident, his

family might be forced to go on without him. That does not make it any easier, but Derek Trager was a man of great practicality, and he knew both the risks and the rewards.”

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“I’m sure he did,” Maxine said, pulling her spine straight and sitting up as much as she possibly could, given the incredible weight she carried around in her chest every minute of every day. “But I’m also sure that he did not believe for one second that a test mission would have ended this way. He would have never chosen to leave us behind, Mr. North. He would not.”

The men looked at one another uncomfortably, and finally, one of them stood. He slid a manila folder down the length of the table, passing it from one set of hands to the next, until it stopped in front of Maxine.

“We have prepared an offer of settlement that we’d like for you to read over, Maxine,” the man who was still standing said. He averted his gaze as she stared at the file with wide, unseeing eyes. “This is a standard provision for an astronaut in the event of catastrophic loss of life, and it accounts for the fact that your husband had a family that he leaves behind.”

The room was so quiet that Maxine could hear the stomach of the man closest to her grumble. She touched the front of the file, and then opened it slowly, seeing a page with black typewritten words all over it. None of it registered.

“You can take this home with you, Max,” Jude whispered, leaning in closer to her. “You don’t need to sign anything now.”

The men shifted around in their chairs, and the one still standing tapped the table with the tips of his fingers. “Actually, we’d really like to get this signed off on today.”

Maxine looked right at him. “Today?” she said, shell-shocked. “You want me to sign

off on the value of my husband's life today?"

The discomfort in the room ratcheted up several notches as everyone realized that this was exactly what they were asking of her.

"How about if we step out and let you read it over?" Arvin North offered, standing up slowly so that the other men would follow suit. "Perhaps we could leave you and Mrs. Majors here, and you could talk it through with her. You know, bounce some thoughts and questions around with another girl." His smile was lopsided, and Maxine wanted to stand up and slap him. Hard.

"Yes," she said frostily. "Why don't you leave us girls to talk about how much money will make it okay if our husbands go to work one day and then never come home?"

The room cleared out quickly, and she and Jude were left alone.

"Oh, Max," Jude said, keeping her eyes off the file. "This is more intense than I ever could have dreamed. Are you okay?"

She was speaking so quietly that it made Maxine think of being in a classroom where the teacher had left and you knew you weren't supposed to be talking to your neighbors.

"I am most definitely not okay," Maxine said out loud. She stood up and winced visibly at the cramp that shot through her stomach. She put both hands on the sides of her belly and rubbed the baby, trying to soothe its kicking as she paced the room. "I feel like someone is trying to get me to say it's fine that my husband died, and that a few thousand bucks is enough for me to walk out of here today and get on with my life."

Jude stood near the wall with her arms folded. "I don't think it's that simple," she

said gently. “This is a formal way of NASA apologizing to you and showing you that they’re sorry for your loss, Maxine. And of course they care about you and the children, and about doing right by Derek.”

Maxine let out a huff. “Doing right by Derek,” she repeated, almost under her breath. “Hardly.”

Jude walked across the room and put her hands on the back of a chair so that she was standing next to Maxine. “Look,” she said. “I cannot fathom what you’re going through right now, and I sincerely hope I never have to. That’s me being honest—selfish, but honest—however, I want you to know that we’re all on your side. We’re here to help you get your bearings.”

Maxine’s eyes flashed and tears clung to her bottom lashes. She pressed her lips together tightly and gave Jude a nod. “Of course,” she said. “I know you’re all here. I just can’t pull myself upright, Jude. Every single minute of every single day is a challenge to hold my own head up on my neck.” She motioned at her head as if it might fall off her shoulders and roll away at any moment. “I have no idea how I’m going to take care of myself as well as a baby and a toddler.”

“We’ll help,” Jude offered. “And Ryan is with you. He’s a big boy—he can help. We’ll do this as a team, okay?”

Maxine looked right at her. She knew that Jude wasn’t just being kind, and that this is what the wives of astronauts needed to be prepared for, even if only in the darkest recesses of their mind. The fear of losing their husbands needed to be always present so that they weren’t caught unawares. And in that morbid preparedness was always the knowledge that they might need to step up and help a fellow wife in need.

Maxine shook her head. “But the other wives are your friends, not mine. They barely know me.”

“Not important,” Jude said. “Sometimes I feel like I barely know them myself—or maybe that they barely know me—but I know without a doubt that any one of them would step up and help if it was needed. Trust me on that.”

Maxine heaved an exhale that released a knot of tension in her chest. She nodded again. “I’m just going to step into the hall for a moment and look for a restroom. If anyone comes back, will you tell them where I’ve gone?”

Jude nodded and stayed standing, hands on the chair. “I’m right here,” she promised.

Maxine let herself out into the hallway and as she closed the door behind her, she took another deep breath. She smoothed the front of her dress over her baby bump and leaned her back against the door as she got her bearings.

“And you’re sure that Booker understands?” A man’s voice drifted through the cracked door of an office across the hallway. He was speaking quietly, but the hall was silent, so Maxine heard every word. “He knows that no matter how strong his misgivings were prior to the launch, he needs to keep his mouth shut at this point while we do the investigation, right?”

“I’ve spoken to him on a number of occasions,” Arvin North said. Even without seeing his face, Maxine knew it was him talking. “He put up a stink that day about the bolt and his feelings that we should hold off on launch, but frankly, I think he was a day late and a dollar short.”

The men were silent for a long minute.

“You don’t think that listening to him would have been the way to go?” the other man asked.

“Obviously it would have,” North said, his words thick with sarcasm. “But hindsight

is always twenty-twenty, isn't it?" They fall silent again. "We need the wife to sign off. Bob Young was single and had no children, so that's a bit more open-and-shut. His parents came, signed papers, and left with a check. Case closed. But Trager's wife seems a bit more undecided."

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“Pregnant women are loose cannons,” the other man said with warning in his voice. “We need to watch her.”

“We need to be kind to her,” North said firmly. “She’s not just an obstacle or something to be dealt with. She’s a pregnant widow who has done nothing wrong.”

For as much anger as Maxine had felt towards NASA and at the whole situation, respect welled up in her then for Arvin North and she looked up and down the hallway for the women’s restroom sign. Her bladder was actually screaming at her, and before she thought any further about signing paperwork, she needed to relieve herself.

“Well,” the other man said. “Let’s just hope she takes the money and signs the papers. It’s not that I have no feelings, Arvin, and it’s certainly not like I have no sympathy for a woman and her young children, but I have a job to do here, and that job is to protect the program. At all costs.”

The door, which had been opened just a crack at that point, started to inch open further. Maxine decided to go to the right, and she rushed down the hallway and ducked into the ladies’ room before anyone stepped out into the hallway.

She flipped on the light and locked the door, looking at herself in the mirror over the sink. They wanted her to sign off on Derek’s death, and apparently Bill Booker had put up some sort of a fit about the shuttle on launch day. She wasn’t sure what he’d been worried about, but it was clear to Maxine that there was more to this tragedy than a simple accident that couldn’t have been avoided.

There was more to the way the men in charge were handling the disaster, and more to the way they were handling her.

And she didn't like any of it.

Thinking of it now, on Valentine's Day morning, Maxine feels a rush of discomfort. She's been putting off signing the papers—in fact, she'd taken them home the day of the meeting, telling Arvin North and his cronies that she wanted to have a lawyer look everything over—and now she's feeling more sure than ever that the right thing to do is not to sign the paper, but to dig deeper.

"Check your air, ma'am?" a young man in coveralls asks, leaning into Maxine's window at the service station. "You're looking a bit low on the front right side."

Maxine's mind is somewhere else entirely, but she drags her eyes over to the boy, who is all of about nineteen, and gives a distracted smile. "That would be great," she says. "Yes, please."

As soon as she's paid up, Maxine rolls out of the lot and onto the main street that passes in front of Cape Kennedy. There, as they are every day, are the protestors. A woman in an orange shirt lifts her sign by its stick, bouncing it in the air as she shouts something at Maxine, who is staring as she waits at a red light.

Maxine rolls down her window.

"NASA doesn't care about how much money it takes from this country!" the woman in orange shouts, cupping her mouth with one hand. She stares at Maxine intently after the words are out. "They're taking from education, and from social services. They're taking money from your pocketbook!"

The light turns green and Maxine rolls forward, but slowly. Almost on a whim, she

pulls into the next parking lot, turns off her car, and gets out. Before she knows what she's doing, she's wandered down the sidewalk towards the knot of protestors, and she stops in front of the lady in orange.

The woman looks back at her as she lowers her sign, her eyes going from Maxine's face, down to her overly large belly, and back up to her face. It takes a moment before recognition dawns. "You're the lady from the car," the woman motions at the street. "You just passed by."

"I did," Maxine says, putting her hand to her stomach. She rubs it and looks at the other protestors, who are still chanting and waving signs. Most are ignoring Maxine altogether. "You looked right at me."

The woman lifts her chin defiantly. "I look at everyone. I want the word to get out: NASA is taking money from other deserving programs and using it for disastrous missions that are getting us nowhere closer to being on the moon. And why the hell do we want to be on the moon anyway?"

Maxine bites her bottom lip; Derek had a million reasons why he thought man should walk on the moon, and his love of space has infused most of her adult life. Keeping her mouth shut is hard, but Maxine does it. She nods to let the woman know she's listening.

"The Gemini orbital mission that caught fire in December was a travesty," the woman goes on. "And can you imagine how many millions of dollars it's going to cost taxpayers? Not just the loss of equipment and the payouts to the astronauts' families, but in the investigation that's sure to follow?"

One car passes by beeping its horn cheerfully in agreement with the signs, and right after, another passes by blaring the horn with a middle finger thrown out the window. Stardust Beach is mostly made up of astronauts and astronauts' families, so Maxine

feels fairly certain that this group of sign holders sees more birds flying through the air than it sees friendly waves. The cars drive on.

“Of course. Space travel is expensive,”

“But are you prepared, as a taxpayer, to eat the cost of that mission?” the woman asks, her eyes burning as she searches Maxine’s gaze. “Do you think that’s the right way for the government to be spending its money?”

As cars whiz by and people shout their sayings and objections to NASA into the wind, Maxine stands there, thinking about this question. For as many years as she’d supported Derek’s desire to go to the moon and the fact that space travel is, in fact, inevitable and exciting, she is suddenly left to wonder whether these people might be right: maybe sinking all this effort into missions that leave women without their husbands and children without their fathers is a travesty. Maybe it all is a waste of time, money, and energy.

And, in her heart, she knows what she heard that day in the hallway when Arvin North had mentioned Bill Booker needing to keep quiet. She knows that something went catastrophically wrong and resulted in the death of her husband, and she knows that whatever that was, Bill Booker has something to do with it.

“You should come to our next meeting,” the woman says, walking towards a chair that has a pile of mimeographed papers on it. There is a big rock resting on top of the papers to keep the wind and the breeze from the passing cars from picking up the pages and sending them flying. She takes a paper and thrusts it at Maxine, glancing at Maxine’s stomach again as she does. “We meet on Thursday evenings, and we’d love to have your participation.” Again, her eyes fall on Maxine’s huge belly. “As long as you’re able to, anyway.”

Maxine takes the paper and skims it quickly. All the details are there. She folds the

paper and tucks it into her purse, nodding her thanks before she turns to walk away.

“Hey,” the woman in orange calls after her. Maxine pauses. “Why did you pull off the road and walk all the way over here? What sparked your interest? I’m just curious. Is your husband opposed to the space program?”

It’s a fair question, given that most women she knows do vote and choose their stances based on their husbands’ feelings on the issues at hand, but Maxine lets the question sit for a minute before answering. “My husband,” she says. “My husband was definitely not opposed to the space program.” She feels the tears coming on and wants to get away from the protestors before they start. “He believed in it wholeheartedly. In fact, he died for it.”

Maxine doesn’t wait for realization to register on the woman’s face before she turns to go, walking back to her car hurriedly with one hand cradling the squirming baby inside of her.

CHAPTER15

Jude

Jude has been worried about Maxine, but she's got troubles of her own, so she does her best to go over or call every other day, just to check in on her friend. The rest of her energy is focused entirely on being a good and present mother, and on not drinking.

Most days she manages to get through the entire day without giving in to the urge to pour a Screwdriver in a tall glass, and instead she finishes dinner, the dishes, and bedtime with the girls before she allows herself one drink.

That's her compromise: stay focused, stay alert, get one drink at the end of the day. And it's been working so far. On two or three occasions she's managed to make it to bed at night without a single drink, but thus far, Jude has felt as though she's her most relaxed, happy self if she can just have one solitary drink in the evening.

Vance, for his part, has watched the whole thing with slightly removed interest. He's made it clear that he wants what's best for his wife, but he's both unable and unwilling to police her and rip the bottle from her hands. And Jude knows that this is how it has to be: no person has ever quit drinking successfully by force. She has to want it, and after seeing herself drink to excess and forget to pick up her own girls, she knows that it's what she needs to do.

When the phone rings on a Thursday morning, Jude answers, unclipping her earring and putting it in the pocket of her dress.

“Good morning, Majors residence,” she says, glancing at the pile of ironing in her kitchen distractedly.

“Mrs. Majors?”

“Yes, this is she.”

“This is Harrison Watts.”

Jude stands upright at the sound of the private investigator’s name. “Mr. Watts,” she says, feeling breathless. “How can I help you?”

“I’m calling to help you, Mrs. Majors,” he says gruffly. “I have a few more questions for you on Catherine Hamnett.”

Jude looks around the room anxiously, though she’s home alone. Finding Catherine had been Vance’s idea in the first place, but she’d decided not to tell him about driving to Daytona Beach to meet with Harrison Watts, or that she was looking for Catherine. To do so would mean talking about Catherine, and that isn’t something she feels like doing at the moment.

“Okay,” Jude says. “Shoot.”

“What was her relationship to a Mr. Edwin Gaines?”

Jude frowns. “Mr. Gaines? He was our neighbor. He worked in the industry, as most people in Hollywood did in those days, and he threw parties for the biggest stars you can imagine.” Jude twists the phone cord around her finger, remembering the way Mr. Gaines would stand on his front porch holding a tiny pair of stem-gripping rose pruners in hand. He wore thick-framed black glasses, and had his hair swept to one side. He would watch with a half-amused, half-curious smile every time Catherine or

Jude walked up the path to their little bungalow. “I don’t think they had a relationship, other than a friendly one.”

“Mmm,” Mr. Watts says over the phone line. “I see. And do you know what her life was like immediately after you met Vance Majors? What I mean by that,” he adds, “is do you know whether she stayed in your shared dwelling once you’d left to marry Mr. Majors?”

Jude shakes her head. “I don’t know. That’s why I came to you. I left with Vance, and she never returned my letters. It was like she vanished.”

“And we never did see her on the big screen.”

“Well, no.” Jude has to admit this out loud, though she does still find herself hoping on occasion that one day she’ll be in a theater, and as the lights go down, Catherine’s face will appear. “No, I’ve never seen her in any film since then—not even in the background.”

“Right.” Harrison Watts is quiet for a moment, and Jude can imagine him sitting at the desk in his Daytona Beach office, sun streaming through the high window, as he scratches notes on a piece of paper. “Okay then. I have a few more ideas I can pursue.” He falls silent. “Mrs. Majors? I was wondering if I could ask a few things about you.”

“Me?” Jude is taken aback; this is supposed to be a fact-finding mission about Catherine, not about herself. “I suppose.”

“What can you tell me about your early childhood?”

Jude laughs in a way that sounds like a sharp “Ha!” She puts a fist to her mouth and swallows before answering. “You want to know about my childhood? Why?”

Harrison Watts waits before answering. “Well, I think there’s a story there.”

“Isn’t there always?”

“Of course. But some stories are more interesting than others. What can you tell me about the first ten years of your life?”

Jude sinks onto the stool near the phone and continues to wrap and re-wrap the cord around her fingers like a little girl playing cat’s cradle with a length of yarn.

“Well,” Jude says. “I can tell you about my trip back here from Japan when I was seven. It was the last time I ever saw my mother...”

* * *

The phone conversation with Harrison Watts plays through Jude's mind all day as she runs the vacuum, checks the mailbox, and prepares an after-school snack for the girls. Talking about her mother, about the boat trip, and about her early life has made her want a drink—desperately—but she's trying to stay focused on her daily tasks and to stay clear-headed so she can think over all the things she shared with Mr. Watts.

When the doorbell rings at one o'clock, Jude wipes her shaking hands on a dishtowel and goes to answer it. In her mind, she's already calculating how many hours until she can have her one drink of the day (six hours and thirty minutes, to be precise), but she knows she can make it. She knows she can. She will never again fall, she will never again hit her head, she will never again land in the pool. She cannot.

"Jo!" Jude opens the door and peers out. Jo Booker is standing there, holding a pocketbook with a no nonsense look about her. "I wasn't expecting you."

"I didn't call," Jo says apologetically. "I was out and about, and I thought I'd see if you were home. May I come in?"

Jude steps away from the door. "Sorry, I didn't mean to be rude. Of course, come in. Please."

Jo follows her into the kitchen, where Jude finishes the snacks for the girls and puts them into the refrigerator.

"Can I make a pot of coffee?" Jude offers.

“That would be great.”

The women make small talk about the weather, the beach, and the children, as Jude prepares the coffee. When they’re finally seated together at the table, Jo takes a deep breath.

“We need to talk about Maxine.”

Jude is not surprised. Every time she goes next door to see Maxine, she’s got some new fact to share about the amount of money NASA is spending on space travel versus the fact that the military is shoring up to send Marines to Vietnam and no one is talking about that. So far, Jude has taken it all as the ravings of a distraught widow, but the look on Jo’s face is alarming.

“She’s been attending meetings with those protestors who stand outside the Cape.”

Jude keeps her face placid. Maxine is her friend, and she will not give away to Jo the fact that this alarms her. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” Jo says tersely. “I know someone at the hospital whose sister has gotten involved, and she told me that the widow of the astronaut who died has been coming.”

Jude can’t say much to that; since Bob Young had no wife, that leaves only Maxine as the possible widow in attendance. “Why do you think she’s doing that?”

“I was hoping you might know.” Jo reaches for the coffee and pours a bit more into her cup, then stirs in a few teaspoons of sugar. “After all, you two are close.”

It’s the word “close” that throws Jude. She’s never truly been “close” to any of her female friends—not since Catherine, anyway. Her entire life has been her holding

people at arm's length, trying not to do or say anything or reveal any details about herself that might result in her being cast off, as she has been so many times in her life. But that's not what this discussion is about.

"Maxine and I have become friends," Jude allows. "But not so close that she's told me about these meetings. I'm just as puzzled as you are."

Jo sips her coffee but keeps her eyes trained on Jude. She sets the cup on the saucer with a clink and waits before speaking. "It's dangerous, Jude. We need to convince her to stop attending these meetings. She has every right to be upset, and she has every right to question for herself and her children what might have happened to Derek, but she can't take the things she knows about NASA and the space program to these people. She can't make her grievances public."

Jude's eyes fall to the dark pool of liquid in her own cup. She looks into the coffee as if it might hold the answers of the universe. Or at least the answers about what Maxine Trager is up to.

"I don't think she's telling them anything she knows through Derek. She wouldn't."

Jo arches one eyebrow. "A grieving woman is unpredictable, Judith. You don't know that she's not talking about things Derek told her."

Something prickles the back of Jude's neck. Since she's stopped numbing herself all day long with alcohol, she's been more alert and aware of the things that go on around her. Even to the point that she can tell when someone is saying one thing, but meaning another. It had started with a trip to the grocery store where she'd run into another wife from the neighborhood who wouldn't stop talking about the astronaut wives' luncheon she'd just been to with a group of women, when what she'd clearly been saying is that she doesn't think that Jude is actively involved enough. And now she can feel it with Jo. There's something beneath the surface of this conversation.

"I know Maxine pretty well," Jude counters. "She's scared and she's lost, but she's not going to intentionally sabotage the space program or anything." The way she says it almost feels like she's confident in her next door neighbor, but in truth, Jude feels like she knows no one well enough to speak to what they will or won't do. Still, Maxine is her friend, and she doesn't want Jo Booker or any of the other women thinking that Maxine is losing her mind or putting their husbands' careers in jeopardy.

Jo nods. "Well." She purses her lips before making her next statement. "There's a rumor floating around that she's attending these meetings and talking about how Bill has something to do with a cover-up involving the accident, and I can't have that, Jude. Just like Vance, Bill has worked way too hard to get where he is, and he can't afford to have people saying things about him that are patently untrue. You would feel the same way about your husband, wouldn't you?"

A wave of nausea rolls through Jude as she realizes how right Jo is: she would feel the same way about Vance. He's always been so supportive of her, and so loving, even in the midst of her own problems. He worries for her and for the girls and he wants her to stop drinking to better herself and their family, but he is never unkind about it. In fact, there have been many nights when he's felt her quiet sobs shaking the bed, and rather than saying anything, he's simply rolled over and edged up behind her, wrapping his arms around her gently and holding her. Vance has never asked her to give detail about any part of her life that she doesn't want to, and he seems to implicitly understand that she's a complicated person with plenty of things that she can't talk about.

Jude steels herself. "Of course. I would feel absolutely the same way about Vance," she says, neither agreeing nor disagreeing about whether Maxine is spreading this information around or not. "I'll make a point of talking to Maxine myself, okay?"

Jo takes a long last pull on her coffee and stands up. She brushes the front of her shift dress as if she has crumbs all over her, though she looks as impeccable to Jude's eyes

as she always does.

"Thank you, Jude," Jo says with an efficient smile. "I appreciate that. And of course you'll let me know if there's anything I can do to help Maxine."

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"Of course," Jude agrees, showing Jo to the door. "I'll let you know."

After seeing Jo off, she goes back to the kitchen, puts the creamer in the refrigerator, and then walks across her front lawn to knock on Maxine's door. She needs to get to the bottom of this.

* * *

Maxine is sitting in the middle of her living room when Jude knocks and opens the door. Rather than answering, Maxine has simply called out: "Come in!"

Jude looks around at the front rooms of the house that the women had spent so much energy cleaning: it's a shambles again. Piles of laundry--she can't tell whether dirty or clean--dot the room, and Maxine is wearing a pair of giant denim overalls that cover her enormous stomach. They must have belonged to Derek, and Jude tries not to appear alarmed at the way her friend looks, with her messy hair pulled back haphazardly, and her bare feet tucked beneath her.

Wendy plays with a tangle of dolls and clothing in one corner of the room, and she's still wearing pajamas.

"Hi, Max," Jude says softly, approaching her as she might a scared, lost puppy. "How are you?"

Maxine looks up at her with big eyes. "I'm fine, Jude," she says firmly. "I've never been better. Well, not never--obviously I was better on my wedding day or on the day my children were born--I've been better lots of days." She stops her train of thought

and laughs, letting her head fall back with abandon. "But I'm good. I'm finding my sense of purpose again." With great effort, Maxine puts her hands on her knees and tries to push herself to standing.

Jude rushes over and offers both hands, then braces herself to help Maxine get into a standing position. Once Maxine is up, Jude looks around at the piles of signs and papers that cover the living room floor. They're all for the protests. She sees anti-space sentiments, and facts and figures about the amount being spent by NASA.

"Maxine..." Jude puts her hands on her hips as she surveys the scene. She wants to admonish her, to ask her friend what in the world she's thinking. She wants to remind her that Derek would have been heartbroken to see his wife going against everything he'd worked for and believed in, but she knows—in this moment—that it's Maxine who is heartbroken and trying to find her footing again. For herself, for her two children, and for the baby on the way, Maxine is trying to make sense of the split-second tragedy that took her husband from her.

So instead of asking her how she can possibly be indulging in this protest, Jude looks right at Maxine. "How are you?" she asks simply. "Are you sleeping?"

Maxine's back is swayed slightly as she pushes her belly forward, fists on her hips to match Jude's stance. She exhales through her mouth loudly. "I'm not sleeping amazingly well, no. I have a whole human rolling and kicking me all night, and I'm in a bed alone that I've always shared with my husband. I have a two-year-old who asks me every single day when her Daddy is coming home, no matter how many times I try to explain that he's not, and my teenage son has suddenly stopped talking to me. So I'm actually not doing all that great, Jude. Thanks for asking." Her tone is plaintive, not sarcastic, and in it, Jude can hear desperation.

Jude wants to help her. She wants to reach across the divide and offer a hand to her friend, but if she's honest with herself, the idea of taking on Maxine's problems and

emotions makes her want to pour a drink. It's weak to even think that; it feels like giving in. But Jude can't help thinking it in her head, acknowledging the desire, and then letting it go. Having a drink has always been the thing that smooths over the rough edges and the jagged feelings, the thing that helps her to put a smile on her face and to act like she belongs.

But now, now life is changing. Now she knows the true danger and cost of giving in to the desire for a drink. She understands what she has to lose, and what's at stake is far greater than the need for alcohol. Her life is filling up with activities that push out the bad thoughts, and the people around her need things from her that keep her busy: her girls need a hands-on mother; her husband needs a wife who doesn't drink so much that she falls into the swimming pool and nearly drowns; her friends need her to be present and accountable and able to pitch in on projects, on events, and just to be more social in general. And, right now, Maxine needs Jude to put her own garbage aside and focus on helping to pull her friend to the shore.

"Max," Jude says, reaching out both of her hands and holding them there until Maxine realizes that she's waiting to take her hands and hold them. She lets Jude, and they stand there, looking at one another over the swirling mass of signs and papers protesting the work that their husbands—and their friends' husbands—have always believed in. "I'm here for you, okay? I want to help you. I know it's hard to ask, so I'm just going to do things unless you tell me not to. I'm going to come by and look after Wendy so that you can nap, and I'm going to make food and bring it over." Maxine looks like she's about to protest, so Jude shakes her hands and forces Maxine to relax her shoulders so that her arms are loose like wet noodles. "Just take a deep breath. No one is saying you're a bad mother or unable to care for yourself, but we can't always do it on our own."

Maxine's eyes well with tears. She nods. "It's hard to do it alone."

"Of course it is! Any big thing we take on by ourselves can seem impossible, but

getting from day to day right now is not impossible. We've got this. A person can do anything if they have friends and support, and I'm not going to leave you here to figure this out alone."

Maxine is now crying openly. She's still holding Jude's hands, and she nods as tears run down her cheeks. This scene has gotten little Wendy's attention, and from her spot on the floor, she says, "Mama? Mama cry?"

Maxine looks down at her blonde baby girl and nods, still holding Jude's hands. "Yes," she says to Wendy. "Mama is sad. Mama cry."

Wendy's face contorts into one of sympathy and concern. "No cry, Mama," she says, getting to her feet and rushing over to her mother. She wraps her arms around Maxine's legs and looks up at her with big eyes as she wedges herself between Jude and Maxine. "Daddy come home soon."

At this, Maxine breaks into big, open sobs and reaches down to touch the top of Wendy's head. Her eyes go to Jude's, as if to say, "See?"

Instead of saying anything, Jude puts one of her hands on Wendy's head as well, and they stand there, connected like that, three humans braced against the vastness of the universe.

CHAPTER16

Bill

These damn protestors are making everyone's life harder. The scrutiny on NASA has ramped up, and the directive everyday inside Cape Kennedy is: eyes down, mouth shut, stay focused. Bill is trying his hardest to do this, but every time he drives past the knot of people who think that the work they're doing is pointless and a waste of

time and money, it feels like a sharp jab to his ribcage.

“Booker,” Vance Majors says as they pass one another in a hallway. Vance has his arms full of files. “How goes it?”

Bill stops in his tracks and they step to the side to stay out of other people’s way, standing closer to the wall. Bill runs a hand over his tired face. He just shaved that morning, but he can already feel the rough burn of stubble beneath his hand.

“It goes,” Bill says. “But man, these are tough times.”

Vance nods and looks away. “Sure are.” He seems like he wants to say more, but Bill has no clue what it might be. He knows from Jeanie that Vance had been the one to ask her about throwing Bill under the bus the previous summer, and that he’d wanted to go to Arvin North about Bill’s supposed frailty or instability or whatever the hell Vance wanted to call it. Of course, like any high-stakes job, being an astronaut has its pressures and it fosters competitiveness, so a part of Bill understands that Vance was only looking out for himself, but a smaller part of him likes to think that maybe Vance truly did have his back. Maybe he saw that Bill wasn’t in the right headspace for the mission and wanted to step in and give him an assist.

That seems far-fetched, given the intricacies of human nature, but Bill wants to like and respect Vance Majors, and he doesn’t want to let one incident drive a wedge between himself and any of the other members of his team.

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“How’s Jude?” Bill asks when the conversation falters. “She doing alright?” It’s not meant as a barb, or as a tit-for-tat where Vance questioned Bill’s mental health so he questions Vance’s wife’s, but it could easily be taken that way.

Vance leans a shoulder against the wall as two engineers pass by, deep in conversation, heads leaned in to one another. The two men walk on and Vance’s attention turns back to Bill.

“She’s actually doing pretty well. Thanks for asking.”

It’s clear that everyone knows the gist of Jude’s pool accident, though no one discusses it. Bill has, perhaps, a closer view of the situation, as Jo is always going on about her worries for Jude, and how she wishes she wouldn’t drink so much. They’d also had Vance and Jude’s daughters stay overnight during the hospital stay, so Bill feels as though he’s close enough to the Majors to inquire.

“Jo really likes Jude,” Bill offers. “She’s always saying how much she enjoys spending time with her, and how our youngest daughter loves your girls.”

It’s enough to set Vance at ease, and he visibly relaxes even though the topic on the table is his wife, and, indirectly, her alcohol problem.

“Thank you,” Vance says, lowering his voice. “It’s been a big adjustment, being here. Jude is a loner by nature, and while she loves our girls, I worry that she doesn’t get out enough and talk to other women. I recently encouraged her to track down an old friend from California, and she’s been trying to hold her drink better.” Vance pauses and runs a hand over his hair; he looks like he might have just said more than he

wanted to. “Anyway, she’s trying to find her footing.”

Bill feels sympathy for the man, regardless of whatever professional jealousies might exist between them. “I hear you,” Bill says. “When the wife is unhappy, it makes the whole family unhappy, doesn't it?”

Vance gives a sad laugh. “Yeah. It does drag the home life down a bit.” He pauses. “Jo’s always so upbeat, and she has so much going on. Jude really admires her drive.”

Bill feels a wash of pride at hearing these words. He himself needs to be better at encouraging and complimenting his wife for all of the things she does, but it feels damn good to hear someone else do it. Especially another man. A base and simple part of Bill feels something akin to joy over finding himself a wife who is a good mother, a good homemaker, and who impresses the people around them. Her looking good makes him look good, and while that’s a silly way to simplify Jo, it’s true. She might have written a whole story about things he would have rather she’d kept to herself, but Jo is no dummy, and she’s no slouch in the woman department. She gets the job done.

“We’d love to have you guys over for dinner—how about Friday? Just our two families,” Bill stresses. He isn’t even sure what prompted him to extend the invitation, but it feels right. And he’s sure Jo will be fine with it.

A big smile stretches across Vance’s face as he nods slowly. “Yeah,” he says, warming to the idea. “That would be incredible. We’d love that.”

The men part ways, and Bill feels satisfied that he’s extended an olive branch to Vance in a multitude of ways. He wants to let the man know that he forgives him for his underhanded way of reporting Bill to Arvin North the previous summer, but he also wants him to understand that astronaut families are like military families: they stick together. When one man—or his wife—is suffering, they all are. He feels like Jo

will be proud of him, and he whistles to himself as he walks the halls, thinking about the barbecue they might have on Friday, or the meal Jo will prepare for them to sit down and enjoy.

He rounds a corner at the end of the hallway in this thoughtful state, and runs smack into Jeanie Florence. She's holding an armful of files and they scatter, papers fluttering to the floor like dandelions.

"Oh!" Jeanie says, watching the mess with dismay. "Dammit."

Bill is contrite. "I'm so sorry," he says, sinking to his knees beside her. "I wasn't paying attention, Jeanie. This is my fault."

She doesn't agree or disagree, just starts gathering papers and file folders as people walk by, stepping over the mess and glancing back with pity.

Bill carefully stacks papers and tries to keep his eyes from straying to the décolletage that's visible as Jeanie bends forward. She's wearing a pretty pale green dress with a v-neck, and a gold medallion necklace swings gently as she moves around on her knees, collecting her lost work. When she glances his way, Bill is, in fact, looking at her lightly freckled cleavage. He pulls his eyes away quickly.

"I like your necklace," he says, hoping that will cover for the way he's been caught admiring her womanly features. "Is it new?"

Jeanie sits back on her heels and takes the pendant between her fingers. "It was my mother's, but she gave it to me when I graduated from college," she says. "I'd always admired it as a little girl, and she said I was finally old enough and responsible enough to wear real gold." This makes Jeanie crack a smile—a real one—and let go of the medallion. "But you know what? When she gave it to me, I finally did feel old enough and responsible enough."

Bill sits back on his heels and looks at her; he's missed chatting with Jeanie so much, and even though they'd talked that day outside on their break, they've had very little interaction since, and every time Bill catches a glimpse of her he thinks of her words: What I don't want is someone else's husband...

At this point, that's all Bill will ever be: someone else's husband. First he was Margaret's husband, and then he was the man who left her. Next he became Jo's husband—and someone's father—and now he feels marked by this. Used up. Undesirable. No younger woman will ever look at him again and think about a future with him, of a series of firsts. And it isn't that he desires that, necessarily; Bill does not hit The Black Hole and check out the young ladies gathered there. He does not hope and pray that one will approach him and try to get him to buy their drinks. He does not enjoy flirtation as sport. Bill, by nature, is a serious man with serious thoughts, but when it comes right down to it, he is still a man. And a man wants to feel that—at least on some level—he is still desired by beautiful women.

“Well, it's lovely,” Bill says, shuffling the papers and handing them back to Jeanie with a look of apology. “I'm sorry we had to meet this way, but I'm always glad to run into you.” They both laugh at this. “Okay, not literally,” Bill says, holding up a hand.

Jeanie looks as though she wants to say something more but is struggling with it. She bites her lip and stands, holding the mess of papers and files that she will undoubtedly spend the afternoon re-sorting. “Hey,” she says, tucking her straight, brown hair behind one ear. “I was going to stop at The Black Hole for a drink today. Buy you one?” She glances around and lowers her voice. “As friends?”

Bill can't help it, though he desperately wishes that he could: his heart leaps in response. “I should be buying you a drink to say sorry for ruining your work.” He motions at the mess in her arms.

“That’s fair,” Jeanie says with a smile. “I’d let you buy me one. As friends.”

Bill’s heart slows to its normal pace. “As friends,” he confirms.

Jeanie holds everything tightly to her chest and looks at the toes of her shoes before glancing back at Bill’s face. “See you there.”

* * *

The Black Hole is packed that day after work. It's a sunny evening, and there is a group of Air Force pilots in town to tour NASA and to have a conference in Stardust Beach. Their mere presence in town has brought out the Cape Cookies in full force, and the ladies who enjoy seeing men in uniform and aviator sunglasses are all there, faces made up, bodies--both lithe and curvaceous--bedecked in soft, pretty dresses in a rainbow of colors. Their laughter tinkles in the air, giving the evening a hint of promise.

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"What can I get you?" Bill asks Jeanie as they choose seats at the long table that's populated with their closest coworkers.

For Bill, that's Vance Majors, Ed Maxwell, and Jay Donovan, and for Jeanie, that's Rebecca, a fellow engineer who is newly married to a pilot, a man named Eric, who is also there with them. Rebecca has been more than clear that she's happy to be married and ready to settle in to motherhood, and that she'll stop working the minute she gets pregnant.

"Could I get a Paloma, please?" Jeanie looks up at him as she slides into a chair next to Rebecca's.

Bill returns from the bar with a whiskey for himself and the Paloma for Jeanie, and they end up sitting directly across the table from one another as Roy Orbison's "Pretty Woman" comes on the jukebox. Bill can't help but make fleeting eye contact with Jeanie every time she lifts her drink and takes a sip, and as she does, he notices the flush to her cheeks, the way her hair rests against her bare shoulders, and the glint of the gold medallion that rests in the hollow of her collarbone. He feels a thrill every time their eyes meet, and a glimmer of hope and emotion burns in his chest as he remembers what it felt like to stand on those stairs with her the night of the accident. What it felt like to hold her, to kiss her, to feel the warmth of her skin.

"I take it you're a married man, Booker," Eric, Rebecca's husband, says, nodding at the ring on his finger and effectively dumping a bucket of cold water over Bill's head. Eric and Rebecca are sitting so close together that he has his arm looped around her shoulders easily. It's a loving, protective move, and one designed to let the world know that he's sitting next to his chosen person. Bill can't even remember the last

time he and Jo touched each other in public, much less sat so close that she could rest her head on his shoulder. "Any advice for a guy who just took the plunge?"

Bill takes a sip of his whiskey, holds it, and then swallows before answering. He sets his glass on the table and gives Eric a long, hard look. "Make sure you remember who wears the pants in the family," he says. With a quick tip of his glass, he knocks back the rest of his drink and stands up. His head is buzzing from the fast intake of alcohol.

Eric looks at first as though he assumes that he's the one who wears the pants in the family, but as Bill glances pointedly at his watch and then picks up his wallet from the table, realization dawns over the newlywed man.

"The boss expecting you home for dinner?" Eric asks knowingly.

Bill winks at him. "Look at you, learning already. You two are going to be just fine." He gives Jeanie a small, impersonal salute, and then waves at the rest of his coworkers before beating a hasty retreat. He needs to get the hell out of there--fast.

Bill and Jeanie Florence are cut out for a lot of things, but as he'd watched the golden evening sunlight draping itself across her soft skin, he'd realized that being "just friends" is not one of those things.

He drives home with the top of his Corvette down like he's trying to race against the clock.

CHAPTER17

Jude

She's humming. Legitimately humming. Jude has woken up for the past few days with

a feeling of dancing butterflies in her stomach that have nothing to do with anticipating or desiring a drink, and for the first time in years, she feels...excitement. Curiosity about where life might take her instead of dread. She feels hopeful and alive and fully present.

"Mom?" Hope is standing on the grass, looking up at Jude as she hangs a damp bedsheet on the line with clothespins. "Are we going to Kate's house today?"

Jude nods at her daughter instead of answering, as she has two clothespins clamped between her lips. Once she removes them and clips them to the line, she speaks. "We are. Mr. and Mrs. Booker have invited us for dinner, and we're going to take potato salad and a cake with us."

"And your wine?" Hope asks innocently.

The words send a chill through Jude's limbs. She'd taken to telling the girls that her drink--wherever she'd set it down--was called her "wine," and lately she hasn't been drinking in front of them at all, which makes it even more curious that Hope has mentioned it now.

"No, sweetheart," Jude says, sinking down onto the grass as her daughter sits down next to her. Behind them, the sheet hangs heavily, barely moving in the slight breeze. Hopefully by the time they get home from dinner, it will be dried and ready to iron. "Mommy's not taking any wine over there."

"But you like it, right?" Hope squints one eye tightly as she picks at the blades of grass beneath her legs.

Jude isn't even sure how to address this. She knows she must, but she hasn't expected her eight-year-old daughter to grill her over her consumption of alcohol on a Friday afternoon.

"Well," Jude begins. "I have enjoyed it in the past, and I think that sometimes we enjoy things so much that we let them become too important in our lives. So when that happens, it's a good idea to step back from that thing and decide whether it's something we really need, or if we just enjoy it out of habit."

Hope is busy piling the grass on her bare knees and she doesn't meet Jude's eye. "If you enjoy being a mom too much, will you stop doing that?"

Jude nearly laughs at the preposterousness of this question, but the sadness in it stops her cold. "Honey," she says. "No. Absolutely not." Jude reaches for her little girl's hand and takes it in her own. The piles of grass stay on Hope's knees. "I love being your mother more than anything in the world." She looks up at the few clouds that dot the blue sky and thinks of a better way to explain. "It's more like, when you do something that changes who you are, it's not always a good thing. But you start to count on that thing to make you feel like yourself. I think you come to believe that you are only yourself when you're doing that thing. And I know you don't understand how wine works, but it makes you feel stronger, and like the world is less scary."

Hope is watching her mother intently. She looks like she's trying to follow.

"I don't want that anymore, baby," Jude says, squeezing Hope's hand in hers. "I don't want to think that I can only handle the world with a glass of wine in my hand." Jude hates herself now for ever calling it wine; for the rest of her girls' lives, they'll associate wine, which can be very acceptable in small doses, with their mother roaming around the house drunk and being unavailable to them.

"You don't want to fall in the pool again?" Hope's eyes are big and she looks frightened at the possibility of such a thing happening.

A sob catches in Jude's throat and she puts her hand to her lips, covering her mouth. She shakes her head, but can't speak.

"Mommy?" Hope says, still holding Jude's hand. "It's okay. Mr. Smithers saw you and he pulled you out so you didn't die. You're okay."

Jude's head is still shaking back and forth; she cannot believe she put her girls through such a thing. She can't even imagine how that must make them feel, and there is no part of her that ever wants to repeat that.

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“I know, sweetheart,” Jude says, forcing herself to hold Hope’s gaze. “I didn’t die, but it was a dangerous thing I did, and drinking too much wine—or other adult drinks—can be very bad. And that’s why it’s something I’m not doing as much of. I want to be the best mommy I can, and being a good mommy means never falling down like that again. Okay?” She holds Hope’s hand between both of hers; she’s pleading with her baby girl to understand.

“Okay,” Hope says simply, glancing at the sliding glass door as Faith comes outside. “Hey, Faith,” she says, standing up and brushing the blades of grass from her knees. “Want to jump rope?”

Without missing a beat, the two identical girls head through the house to find their rope and take turns jumping in the driveway out front.

Jude exhales and closes her eyes. There’s a sensation deep in her chest that she almost can’t identify. But after taking a few good breaths, she realizes what it is: it’s determination. Jude is determined to do this for herself, for her marriage, and for her daughters. She’s ready to find out who the real Judith Majors is, and she’s going to do it sober.

Jude stands up and goes back to the kitchen to finish baking the cake that she’s taking to the Bookers’ house.

* * *

“Welcome!” Jo opens the door widely and ushers Vance, Jude, and the girls into the house. Jude has dressed the twins in matching pink dresses, and she watches them

proudly as they stand there, smiling at Jo politely. "Do you girls want to go and play with Kate? She's got her dolls spread out in the backyard."

With a glance at their mother for permission, Hope and Faith rush through the house, which is nearly a carbon copy of their own in layout.

Jude looks around: she's always been impressed by Jo's chic taste in decor, though she heard recently that Jo had felt inferior when she'd first moved to Florida, and that she'd hired a decorator to help her find an aesthetic that's more beachy and less down-home. For some reason, this makes Jude feel better. Ever since she and Vance got married, Jude has always felt that she's the wife in any group who has no taste, no class, no real personality. She knows this isn't strictly true, but to find out that a woman as put together as Jo Booker might have those same inklings of inferiority makes her feel less alone.

"Let's chat in the kitchen while the men have a beer outside," Jo says, leading Jude towards the heart of the house.

The men drift outside without any further prompting, and Bill grabs bottles of beer from the fridge as they go.

"How are things going with you?" Jo asks as she turns her back to Jude and continues prepping things on the counter. "Are you doing alright? I feel like you've been busy with Maxine, and I haven't seen much of you lately."

Rather than sitting down, Jude leans against one edge of the counter with a hip and folds her arms across her chest. "Things have been busy," Jude says honestly. "I have spent a fair amount of time with Maxine, but I've been working on some other things, too."

A brief silence falls between the women; Jude remembers Jo walking in on her in

Carrie Donovan's kitchen when they'd first met, pouring herself more vodka when she thought no one was looking. She also remembers that Jo was right there when she'd woken up in the hospital after her fall into the pool, and thus, she knows she can speak to Jo more frankly than she perhaps can to the other women.

Jude clears her throat. She feels nervous even saying the words. "I've been drinking less."

Jo turns her head just slightly, but keeps her back to Jude. "Oh?"

"It seemed like something I needed to do," Jude admits. "I drank too much one evening and forgot that I needed to pick up the girls from Frankie's dance studio, and it was sort of a wake-up call. Things were getting messy."

Rather than readily agreeing with the messiness, Jo simply nods and turns back to the food on the counter. "I think that's really wonderful, Jude. I do. I'm proud of you. I understand how difficult it can be to step back from something that's become a big part of your life."

Maybe it's the kindness of Jo's tone, or possibly even the lack of judgment in her words, but Jude's entire body relaxes. She holds her words in for a moment before speaking.

"Thank you. I never really understood how big of a problem it had become, but I'm trying to figure some things out."

Jo stops what she's doing, wipes her hands on a dishtowel, and walks over to where Jude is standing. She looks her in the eye. "Never forget that we all have things to work out, Judith. Life is a process of growing, learning, making mistakes, having regrets, and figuring out how to move on from the things that hurt us, or the things we do that hurt others." Jo pauses and looks like she has something specific in mind.

“Sometimes it’s hard to accept the ways we hurt one another—even the people we love—but as long as we can find a way to make things right, and as long as we learn something about ourselves in the process, then maybe it’s not all for nothing.”

Jude smiles and forces the tears in her eyes to recede. She looks up at the ceiling and blinks a few times; crying in front of people isn’t something she does because it feels like an extreme kind of vulnerability. Once she takes a deep, steadying breath, she nods.

“You’re right. And I’ve hurt plenty of people.”

“And been hurt, too, I would imagine.” Jo looks at her wisely.

It’s not in Jude’s nature to be overly revealing, but there’s something about Jo that makes it feel okay to share with her. “I have been hurt,” Jude whispers. “I’m lucky to be married to Vance and to have his love, and our girls are such a point of pride for me—pride and joy—but my childhood wasn’t great, Jo.”

At this point, the tears won’t be held back, and Jo opens her arms to Jude, pulling her close. “Hey, it’s okay,” Jo says soothingly. “Whatever happened when you were a child is not your fault, Jude.”

And Jude knows she’s right—she has to be right. Conventional wisdom of adulthood tells Jude that, certainly, the things that happened in her childhood were out of her hands—at least to a certain extent. The choices made by her parents were not things she could control, nor did she have a hand in Pearl Harbor, in Chester touching her inappropriately on the boat on the way from Japan to Los Angeles, or in the way people reacted to her throughout her life. At seven years old, she was not in charge of her relationship with her adult stepmother, nor could she control how Bea felt about the child her husband had fathered with another woman. It was not her decision not to see her own mother again after leaving Japan. She could not even fault herself for her

feelings towards Catherine Hamnett, though she has most definitely tried to cast herself as the villain in that situation a number of times.

“You’re right,” Jude whispers into Jo’s shoulder as the other woman holds her. It’s not awkward, and Jo makes no move to let her go, but rather rubs Jude’s back in slow, comforting circles. “You are so right, Jo. I was a little girl, and I let all these things build up inside of me over the years, and I made them into things I needed to bury. I needed so badly to forget where I came from and the things that had happened, and in order to do that, I tried to drown myself in alcohol. And it worked for a while—it really did. I managed to float through my days in a haze and to block out the bad thoughts, but in the end, they always catch you, don’t they?”

“Sometimes,” Jo says. “Sometimes. And that’s okay. But you can’t give in to them permanently. You have to get up every day, just like you’re doing, and live your life with intention. I have my things too, you know. I have thoughts that are troubling to me and that really bother me, but I try to keep my mind and my body busy with other things.”

Jude can’t help herself—the curiosity wins out here. “What kinds of things trouble you, Jo? You’re so smart and successful.” Jude takes a step back from Jo and wipes her eyes with both hands. “You always seem so put together.”

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Jo laughs disbelievingly. “Well, I’m not.” She turns to the kitchen counter and goes back to what she’d been doing. “I have my moments, you know. I feel uncertainty and I have insecurities. Everyone does.”

For some reason, this is groundbreaking to Jude. Even Jo Booker has moments where she feels insecure and uncertain. It feels to Jude like the kind of revelation that deserves reciprocation. She weighs the cost of sharing something extremely personal with Jo, and then decides that, in the past year and a half that she’s known Jo, she’s come to really like and trust her. Out of all the wives, Jo is the one Jude feels is the most down-to-earth and relatable.

“Vance had this idea,” Jude says carefully, watching Jo’s narrow shoulders as she works at the counter. “He thought I should try to find the woman who was my roommate when he and I met. I haven’t seen her since I married Vance, but she was someone important to me. Someone I cared about very much.”

“She sounds important,” Jo says. She walks over to her sink, turns on the water, and runs her hands beneath the stream as she watches the husbands and children outside for a moment. With a dishtowel in hand again, Jo turns back to Jude. “We should always hang onto the people who mean something to us, don’t you think?”

Jude is back to leaning against the counter, arms folded. She’s already said so much; she’s already allowed herself to cry, to be embraced by Jo Booker on a Friday evening like it’s something commonplace that she does—just hugging her friends.

Jude nods. “I agree. And there’s one other person I really want to find,” she adds. “It’s extremely important to me to find her.”

“Who is that?” Jo asks mildly as she plates the hamburger patties that she’s been shaping on the butcher block cutting board.

“My mother,” Jude whispers. “I haven’t seen my mother since 1941.”

Jo spins around. She doesn’t just turn, she spins. “Oh, Jude,” she says, her voice full of emotion. “You haven’t?”

Jude shakes her head. “She put me on the boat in Japan after Pearl Harbor because she thought I should be here with my father. America had declared war on Japan, and she thought I’d be safer here, with my father and his family. All I had to do was perfect my English and learn to blend in.”

“You don’t really look...” Jo trails off as she inspects Jude’s face.

“I know,” Jude says. “I don’t really look Japanese, which was a good thing when I arrived here. I look more like my mother now,” she adds with a wistful smile. “I have photos of her, and sometimes I look at them and think how much I’ve grown to resemble her.”

“She must have been a beautiful woman,” Jo says with sincerity. “I mean, I’m sure she still is.”

“If she’s alive. I don’t even know that.”

“Could you ask your father if he knows anything?”

Jude gives a shake of her head. “He passed away several years ago.”

“Oh, Jude.” Jo tilts her head to one side sympathetically. “You have been through so much. You’re such a strong woman.”

Jude can't help it: a wry smile spreads over her face. "But you can see now why I drank so much?"

At first Jo looks appalled, but then she laughs. "Okay, I can see the temptation."

The women laugh together guiltily, like two people who have just admitted something that they shouldn't have.

"But," Jo says, sobering quickly. "I am glad that you're addressing these things. I think that's brave and important, and your girls are going to notice how hard you're working on yourself. Even if they don't see it now, they'll realize it when they're older."

Jude waves a hand. "Oh, I don't know about that. And if they don't, that's fine. I just know I need to get my house in order, so to speak."

"Well," Jo says, lifting her chin at Bill as he raps at the glass door with his knuckles. He slides it open and she passes him the platter of hamburger patties. The door closes again. "I think it's great that you're searching for your friend, and I hope you find your mother, too."

Jude inhales and shakes her hands, trying to pull herself together. "Thank you," she says with a watery smile. "Thank you for listening, Jo. And for being so frank."

Jo walks past her with a bowl of baked beans that she sets on the kitchen table for the time being. She wipes her hands down the front of her apron and smiles at Jude. "Of course," she says. "That's what friends are for."

* * *

Jude wakes up that night in the middle of a nightmarish no-man's land. She's been

tossing and turning in her sleep, and because of this, her sheets are tangled around her arms and legs. Vance is passed out next to her, sleeping like a corpse.

Jude wanders out to the front room in just her nightgown and slippers. She's sweated through the silky fabric and she's parched. She noticed that Jo hadn't offered her a beer or a cocktail all evening, and Jude respects that. In fact, by the time they got home from the Bookers' house and put the girls to bed, she'd decided to forgo a drink altogether that evening.

But now, at nearly two in the morning, Jude is pacing around the kitchen and looking at the clock. Anxiety is coursing through her. Even though talking to Jo had felt like a relief and a true release, something about the whole exchange reminded her of when she'd met Alice in high school, and the night she'd finally told her everything—with disastrous consequences.

Of course this won't be the same thing at all. That's impossible. Jo Booker is a grown woman with a lifetime of experience, not a wild teenage girl with no clue about the world, and there's no way she'll suddenly turn on Jude and hold things against her that are out of Jude's control. But the feeling that she's said too much is there. The feeling that she's overshared has kept her in a fitful half-sleep all night so far.

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Without thinking, Jude opens the cupboard and digs around behind the cans of soup and bottles of oil, vinegar, and corn syrup. She pulls out an unlabeled bottle that's half-full of clear liquid and holds it up to the weak light that's coming from the hood of the oven range.

It's vodka. Without even opening the bottle, she can smell it. She can feel the way it burns her nostrils. She can taste it. Jude can imagine the sensation of vodka burning down the back of her throat and settling in her stomach, and she's already anticipating the way it will ease her nerves and calm her brain.

All she needs to do is open it and put the bottle to her lips. Relief will be almost instantaneous.

Jude sits on the cool tile of the kitchen floor and puts her back against the cupboard as she holds the bottle. Rather than opening it and drinking, she holds it to her chest, feeling the cold glass against the skin between her breasts.

There had been a time, one morning when she and Catherine lived in that bungalow in Los Angeles, that she'd fallen asleep on the kitchen floor with an empty bottle in her hand. Catherine had come in around five in the morning after a night spent on a movie set, and Jude had awoken to the haze of the earliest morning sunlight, her eyes opening slowly to reveal a pair of feet and ankles that were blurry and out of focus.

"My god," Catherine had said, dropping to her knees. She turned her head sideways, hands planted on the floor, as she looked into Jude's eyes. "What happened here, Judy?"

Jude, who had always prided herself on her ability to keep her drinking under wraps, tried to lift her head from the floor. A severe pounding sensation curbed that desire and she laid her head back on the floor and closed her eyes. She moaned to herself.

“Judith,” Catherine said, putting a hand to her roommate’s shoulder and shaking her. “Hey, Judy. You have to wake up. You can’t just be here on this floor all day. There’s no way this is comfortable.”

Jude had given in then and done what she knew she had to, letting Catherine help her to a sitting position. Her head lolled slightly to one side as Catherine put an arm around her waist and slung Jude’s arm around her shoulders.

“Let’s get you to the tub,” Catherine said in short pants as she tried to heave her slightly larger friend up and around the house. She got Jude into the bathroom and then helped her sink carefully down to the floor so that she was sitting on the bathmat.

Catherine ran a hot bath and kept up a stream of conversation as the tub filled.

“Did you drink that whole bottle? Baby, you can’t do that. It’s not good for a woman to drink like that. It’s bad for your heart and your liver, not to mention your looks.” As she talked, Catherine gently pulled pieces of clothing off of Jude, leaving her sitting on the rug in just a pair of panties. Rather than covering her bare breasts with her arms, Jude had leaned her head back against the side of the porcelain tub and looked up at Catherine: glowing, angelic, beautiful Catherine, who was still wearing a full face of makeup, with her hair pinned into perfect waves.

“How come you didn’t go out last night and meet up with someone, Judy? Staying home and drinking alone is not good for a girl. If you’re feeling sad, you need to be around people.” Catherine got down to her knees again and looked right into Jude’s eyes. “I need you to take care of yourself. I care about you, and you should too.”

At these words, Jude felt her insides crumple. “I care about you too, Catherine. A lot.”

Catherine stood up and offered both hands, pulling Jude to her feet. She completely ignored the fact that her friend was naked once she peeled off her underwear, and instead put her hands on the back of Jude’s hips and guided her into the steaming bathtub.

“Step in, Judy. There you go. You’re going to get cleaned up here, and then I’ll get you into bed.” Catherine sat down next to the tub and reached for a chipped tea cup that she kept on the basin of the sink. She dipped it into the bathwater and poured it over Jude’s head, letting it stream over her temples as Jude slipped under the water and leaned back. “Let’s wash your hair and get you warmed up, and then you need to sleep this off,” Catherine said soothingly. “This needs to never happen again, do you hear me? It’s dangerous, and it’s not good for you.”

Jude let Catherine wash her hair gently, rubbing the shampoo into a lather. She kept her eyes closed as Catherine began to sing softly.

Once her hair was rinsed and her skin felt warm to the touch, Jude opened her eyes. Catherine was right there, leaning tiredly on the side of the tub as she sat next to it. Her eyes were open as she watched Jude.

“Thank you,” Jude whispered. “Thank you for taking care of me.”

Catherine smiled, but there was sadness in her soft eyes. “You’re welcome, Judy. I’d do anything for you—you know that.”

It was only when Jude was back in her own bed, wearing a cotton nightgown and tucked beneath her covers, that she could say what she really meant to say.

Catherine stood in the doorway, hand on the light switch. “Get some sleep, Judy,” she whispered as the birds began to chirp outside the window. “Close your eyes.”

“I love you, Catherine,” Jude whispered, feeling the wetness gather in the corners of her eyes. “I really love you.”

But she wasn’t sure whether Catherine heard her or not, as the door clicked shut and she didn’t say another word.

Jude is still sitting against the cabinet with her eyes closed now as she recalls that evening. She’s holding the unlabeled bottle in her hand and she finally opens it. Jude closes her eyes again and puts the bottle to her lips. The alcohol touches her tongue and then she spits it back into the bottle and stands up to dump the liquid down the sink and rinse out the empty container.

She’s come too far to let a single memory throw her. She’s worked too hard to let a little emotional vulnerability do her in.

Jude shuts off the kitchen light and goes back to bed.

CHAPTER 18

Jude

Being called into NASA for a sit-down with Arvin North is not Jude’s dream come true. In fact, the Tuesday after her dinner with the Bookers, she’s been summoned along with Jo, Frankie, Barbie, Carrie, and a few other wives she knows only in passing.

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“Ladies,” Arvin North says, standing at the head of the long conference table. He looks at them with a serious gaze. “We have a problem.”

The women shift in their seats, eyes catching one another’s in question. Some seem to have no idea what the issue might be, and others shoot each other meaningful looks.

“It seems that one of our very own has begun to spend serious time with the protestors, and this is not a good look for the organization or the program.”

Ah, Jude thinks. We’re here about Maxine.

“Mrs. Trager has been spotted standing outside the entrance to Cape Kennedy with her toddler in a stroller nearby, and she’s helping to spread anti-NASA sentiment. Do any of you know anything about that?”

Jude looks at the table. Of course she knows about this, and she has her own feelings about it, which, frankly, are mixed.

“As the wives of men who are working in a career that’s hugely important, extremely influential, and highly visible, we cannot have you doing anything that misrepresents NASA or shines unwelcome light on the program. Especially now,” he says, putting his hands into the pockets of his slacks as he begins to pace the room. He looks like a man in desperate need of a cigarette and a cup of coffee, and Jude’s eyes follow him as he walks.

“So, I will ask you again,” North says, pausing to take a deep breath. “Does anyone know anything about Maxine Trager joining the group of hoodlums holding signs out

on the main road?”

It seems as if none of the wives is going to speak when Frankie Maxwell clears her throat. “Maxine Trager isn’t the wife of an astronaut,” she says in her gravelly voice. “At least, not anymore.”

This causes Arvin North to stop pacing. He looks at her like he can scarcely believe she’s said such a thing. “Mrs. Maxwell,” he says with disbelief, “that hardly seems relevant. The Trager family still lives in our designated neighborhood in Stardust Beach, and moves amongst us as our own. To have Mrs. Trager behaving in a way that’s detrimental to NASA is, in effect, to have her behaving in a way that’s detrimental to your own families. To your husbands. To you. We need to put a stop to this.”

Frankie inhales like she’s considering the situation and then lets her breath out. Rather than crossing her legs daintily at the ankles as the other women have done, she’s turned her chair sideways and crossed her legs at the knee. She swings the top foot, wiggling it around so that the patent leather of her high heel catches the overhead lights.

“I don’t think it’s our business to interfere with a woman’s right to free speech,” Frankie says. There is a challenge in her tone. “I’m pretty sure that’s a First Amendment right.”

Arvin North looks as if steam is about to come from his ears. He’s clearly not used to presiding over a group of women like this, and he appears uncertain for a moment.

“Maxine Trager’s rights stop at the gate to this organization,” Arvin North says.

Frankie opens the clasp on her purse, pulls out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter, and lights one. Jo pushes a heavy glass ashtray in her direction.

“Thanks, Jojo,” Frankie says, exhaling a stream of smoke. She turns back to Arvin North. “Well, fortunately for you, Mr. North, Maxine hasn’t crossed onto the property of this organization. So her rights are still intact.”

Arvin North looks as though he’s been slapped. “Mrs. Maxwell...” He shakes his head, stunned by her impertinence. “Are you trying to tell me that you think it’s fine for these protestors to make light of the work your husbands do? Do you believe in your heart that your men doing a dangerous job is just child’s play? Are you not in favor of being a part of a groundbreaking, game-changing effort to explore space and get to the moon?”

The other women have all turned to stare at Frankie, who has garnered their attention and, Jude can sense, their admiration.

Frankie puts an elbow on the table and leans on it. Her cigarette is in that hand, and she sits there for a moment, letting the smoke waft up towards the ceiling. “Mr. North, I support anything my husband wants to do, and I’m extremely pro-America when it comes to leading the space race. My parents came to this country from Italy as immigrants near the turn of the century, and we have always believed in building our country up.” Frankie’s eyes sweep the table and take in her fellow wives. “But our husbands have all chosen a career that is incredibly dangerous. We could lose them, and every one of us knows it.”

“You knew that when they signed on to NASA,” North argues.

“Of course we did. We’re not dummies.” Frankie frowns. “But one of our own actually lost her husband, and it’s driven home to all of us, I would imagine, what the real stakes are. So forgive us if we side with Maxine just a little. She’s angry. She’s scared. She’s hurting. And, for God’s sake, she’s about to have another baby. Can you imagine how she feels?” Frankie stubs out the cigarette and leans back in her chair, brushing her hands over her skirt to smooth it. “She wants someone to blame,

and I'm sorry if that feels like it's you."

The other women stay conspicuously quiet. In truth, they do see how Maxine is feeling, and they worry about her and want her to be well. Jude knows this because they're all in the same position. With a mere fluke or twist of fate, any one of them could be in Maxine's shoes right now. There is a distinct "There but for the grace of God" feeling amongst them, and they all know it.

"I'm fairly close to Maxine," Jude says, speaking up for the first time. Every set of eyes at the table swings in her direction. "We're next door neighbors."

Arvin North gives her a look of encouragement, urging her to go on.

"I've been checking in on her, and I think I had some inkling that she felt unsettled and dissatisfied with what the future holds for her. I don't believe that any part of Maxine has malicious intent; I think she just needs to belong to something. She needs to believe in something again."

Wisely, North pulls out a chair and sits at the table so that he's at eye-level with the women. He puts his elbows on the smooth table and then buries his head in his hands for a moment. As the women watch and wait, he massages his temples, takes off his glasses and rubs his whole forehead and the bridge of his nose before putting his glasses back on.

"Okay," Arvin North says. He sounds like he's trying to begin again and take this conversation in a different direction, and Jude watches him carefully. "Let's think of some ways we can all help Maxine. I appreciate your friendship with her, Mrs. Majors, and your caring. I'm sure she's been the beneficiary of some of your casseroles and perhaps your babysitting services, but we really need to dig in and find a way to pull her back to reality."

It's crystal clear to Jude that by "reality," North actually means "our side," but she doesn't entirely disagree. While Maxine has every right to express her discontent over her current lot in life, and she certainly does have the First Amendment right to gather and protest peacefully, Jude knows that this is not the way for Maxine to heal her heart. Her baby could come at any point—seriously, any day now—and standing out on the sidewalk with a bunch of scruffy protestors trying to stir up drama with the country's space program isn't the way forward.

Jo finally speaks up. "Mr. North," she says, placing both hands on the table carefully. She looks right at him. "Maxine Trager is a woman in an extreme amount of pain. Nothing will bring her husband back, but for the moment, she feels like doing something bold will take away a little of the hurt. That may or may not be true, but I think we can all agree that there are things we do to mask our own painful spots and to help us navigate the things that feel bad." To her credit, Jo keeps her eyes from straying to Jude, but Jude knows that this message encompasses everything they'd discussed at the Bookers' house the Friday before.

"I can relate," Arvin North says. He leans to the side in his chair, putting one elbow on the arm rest as he levels his gaze at Jo. "And I agree, we all try to drown our own sorrows and find something that's bigger than what ails us. I get that. But this isn't the right way. You all see that, don't you?" He looks around the table imploringly, and there are slight, begrudging nods from nearly every wife in the room. "The negative publicity we're getting from having her out there is going to impact all of us—either directly or indirectly. And I heard she's agreed to an interview with CBS this week." He looks frazzled as he says this. "We need to get to her before that happens."

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“So, what you’re saying is that without her husband here to reel her in,” Frankie says, reaching for her cigarettes like she might light another, “you’re turning to us. You need us.”

North appears loathe to admit this, and he’s eyeing Frankie’s cigarettes lustily. “I need you,” he agrees. “Yes. I need your expertise as wives, as women who know Maxine, and as a unit of ladies who has agreed—even tacitly—to support our organization. Can you help me?” he begs.

Frankie looks at each woman around the table for confirmation before looking back at Arvin North. She taps a cigarette from the pack and puts it between her lips, leg swinging again as she flicks her lighter with red-painted nails. “Sure,” Frankie says, almost as if it’s an afterthought. “We’ll help you.”

* * *

The women have agreed that Jude will be their point of contact with Maxine, which is fine with her. Jude knows she’s not ballsy like Frankie, not universally adored for her gumption like Jo, and not as cute and likable as Barbie or Carrie, and so her way of pitching in and showing that she truly does support NASA and the space program is to step up and do what she can do—which, in this case, is to get through to Maxine.

“So, you need to basically use psychology on her to get her to do what you want?” Vance asks that night at dinner. “You need to play a mind game with her?”

Jude stops in the middle of the kitchen with the salt and pepper shakers in hand. “No,” she says, amused. “Not really. I believe that Maxine has a right to feel how she

feels, but I need to understand why this is the thing she's choosing to focus on. To help NASA, I first need to help her."

Vance nods in understanding. "Okay, I see that." He's sipping a beer and standing in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room with his necktie loosened, watching his wife move roasted chicken and potatoes from stove to table. "I think it's really caring of you to step in and work with Maxine—both as her friend, and as my wife."

Jude smiles at him; things have been far easier between them lately, and the only thing she can really attribute it to is the fact that she's now moving through her days entirely sober and just indulging in one drink before turning in for the night. The evening that she'd nearly drunk from the bottle of vodka while sitting on the kitchen floor is still fresh in her mind, but Jude doesn't feel the immediate pull to find the kind of numbing relief that she normally feels when she gets anxious or stressed about something.

"You know," Vance says, pushing away from the wall and walking over to where Jude is standing. She's got her back to him as she turns off the burners on the stove. Vance loops one arm around her waist and nuzzles his face into the back of her neck. He smells like beer and Jude smiles. "I feel like things have been going well lately. Don't you? Hmm?"

Vance kisses the back of her neck and a chill runs down Jude's spine—it's a good, warm tingling feeling, and it's been a while since she's felt relaxed and present enough to melt into her husband's embrace.

Jude nods her head. "Things have been going well." She swallows. "I've been drinking less."

"I know," Vance says in a voice so low that it's almost a whisper. "I've noticed. And

I'm proud of you. It's not easy to overcome something that's begun to take over your life."

Jude stills in his arms. "You think it was taking over my life?" He's not wrong, but she's bothered by the fact that her husband most likely felt as though she was so lost in the drink that she couldn't function in her most important roles as wife and mother. "You thought I was becoming a drunk?"

"Oh, baby," Vance says. He turns her around gently and takes the oven mitt from her hands, tossing it onto the counter and setting his bottle of beer beside it. He puts his hands to the sides of her face and looks into her eyes. "No. I'm not saying that at all." A look passes over his face that is concern mixed with love and compassion. "I understand the things you carry around with you, and I know that they bother you a lot. There are so many people who find ways to keep their head above water through a drink or two, and I think that a lot of times it gets to where two drinks become three or four, and before you know it, you're in a place you never imagined. It feels shameful and bad, but Judith, I've never stopped loving you. I only want to help you."

For what feels like the millionth time recently, Jude wants to cry. This goes so entirely against her nature and her inclinations to give into open displays of emotion that she simply clears her throat and looks at the wall while her eyes dry out. Does she even deserve Vance's love and support? Has she been enough of a wife and a mother to him and the girls to have earned the love of a man who believes in her through thick and thin? She isn't sure, but starting now, she wants to be that woman. She's going to be that woman.

"Thank you," Jude says, looking back at her husband as he holds the sides of her face between his big, slightly roughened hands. He touches her so gently, and with so much reverence, that Jude is almost ashamed of how she's put her own addictions ahead of everything else. How silly—how foolish—to believe that her own husband

wouldn't understand how she feels about the things that have happened in her life. How ridiculous to take his suggestion to find Catherine and then not tell him that she was actually doing it.

Jude clears her throat. "Remember when you told me to look for Catherine?"

Vance frowns slightly at this quick change of topic. "Yeah, I recall that conversation. I think you should absolutely connect with an old friend. Remind yourself of who you used to be and build up the relationships in your life." He's nodding at her. "Of course, I remember saying that."

"I went to Daytona Beach and met with a private investigator," Jude says. "I used the money I got when my dad died to pay for his services," she adds quickly, wanting him to not worry that she's out spending money with no regards for their family budget.

"Okay," Vance says. He's visibly calculating the things she's saying. "That's fine. And how is it going?"

"He called with some follow-up questions, but I'm not sure if he's had any luck yet."

Vance reaches for his beer on the counter and takes another sip. "Wow. What do you think you'll do if he finds her?"

Jude hasn't really decided that. "I'm not sure. Maybe call and say hello? But I've been thinking...what if he could find my mother?"

Vance's eyebrows shoot up. "That's an even bigger wow." He drains his beer and sets the empty bottle back on the counter. "I wasn't sure that was something that you wanted to do. I would have suggested it, but that's a touchy subject. At least in my opinion." Vance puts both hands to his chest and looks at Jude seriously. "I know

your feelings run deep on that one.”

“They do.” Jude reaches for the discarded pot holder and twists it between her hands. “I think for a long time I felt as though she abandoned me. I felt like she put me on a ship bound for something totally unknown, and then I never heard from her again. And that hurt. That felt like a betrayal.”

“Of course,” Vance says empathetically. “Of course it did, sweetheart.”

“But now I’m not so sure.” Jude smacks the pot holder against her hand as she thinks about her feelings with regards to her mother. “I was so young. So many different factors could have been at play there, right?”

“A multitude,” Vance agrees. The twins can be heard in the front room, chatting in their high-pitched little girl voices. It’s nearly dinnertime, and they’ll be storming in soon to ask when it’s time to sit down and eat.

“What if she simply lost track of me? What if something happened to her? What if my dad refused to let her talk to me?”

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“Do you think that’s a real possibility? Did you ever hear him say anything negative about her?”

Jude shakes her head. “No. I did overhear my dad and Bea having a conversation late at night on a few occasions, and she had plenty of choice things to say about my mother, but my father held his tongue.”

The girls choose this moment to come in, and Faith is wearing an overly dramatic pout. “Mama?” she says. “Can I have the big piece of chicken tonight?”

This nearly makes Jude laugh out loud; what eight-year-old girl needs a giant hunk of chicken? But instead of laughing, she holds out both hands and her girls come to her, letting her hug them to her body.

“You both get equal pieces of chicken,” she says, kissing each girl on top of the head in turn. “Daddy gets the biggest one because he worked hard all day.”

“Ha!” Hope says to her sister. “Told you.”

Vance chuckles. “You two go wash your hands and faces and come back to the table, okay?”

The girls never disobey Vance, so they run off to do as he’s asked, and Jude is alone with her husband again.

“Listen,” Vance says, turning to wash his own hands at the kitchen sink. “No matter what happened to your mom, I know she loved you—and she still does. If you want

to find her too, then find her. Ask this guy to search for her, and go all out to make it happen.”

The girls come rushing in and take their places at the table, putting their napkins in their laps as they’ve been taught to do.

“Are you sure?” Jude asks. “I mean, I can use my own money for that as well, but do you think it’s too much change all at once?”

Vance blows out a breath, letting his cheeks puff out. He puts his hands on his hips as he considers this. “Sure, it’s a lot of change. Yeah. But if there’s one thing I’ve learned lately,” he says, shooting a glance at his daughters as if they might pick up on the fact that he’s referring to a major tragedy. “It’s that life is short. Too short, sometimes. And you have to grab ahold of the things that bring you joy where you can.”

Jude nods vigorously. He’s right. Of course he’s right. Vance, her voice of reason, her rock, her beloved husband. She’d loved him from the first time they spoke, and it was never an option for her to do anything but love him. Whatever feelings she’d had for Catherine had been shelved and mostly forgotten as Jude had chosen the path she knew was right for her.

In fact, she’s still sure it’s the right one for her, but she’s got some loops to close. There are just a few things that she needs to put to rest, and with Vance’s encouragement, she’s going to do just that.

CHAPTER 19

Maxine

The baby! Oh, the baby!

Maxine shoots up in bed as a lightning bolt of pain rockets through her body. Almost improbably, a matching lightning bolt cracks the dark night sky outside of her bedroom window.

“Ryan!” Maxine says, calling for her son. “Ryan, I need you!” she rasps.

When there is no answer, Maxine swings her legs over the side of the bed and searches with her bare feet to find her slippers. It’s been several months since she could see her own feet, so she’s grown accustomed to working without the visual cues of her own body. “Ryan!” she tries again.

Maxine opens the door to her bedroom and feels her way along the hallway in the darkness. The only thing that helps her to see what’s around her is the bolt of lightning that illuminates the house. Again, a matching physical shock runs through her, and she nearly doubles over.

“Ryan?” Maxine says tentatively, turning the knob on her son’s bedroom door. She cracks it open fearfully, thinking for some irrational reason that she might find his bed empty, but when her eyes adjust to the darkness, she sees his familiar sandy blonde head resting against the white pillowcase. His eyes are closed.

Maxine desperately needs someone to call for an ambulance or to help her get to the couch, but the mother in her can’t bear to wake her sleeping child. Instead, she feels her way back along the wall, panting and breathing from her mouth as beads of sweat spring up on her brow. She’ll make it to the couch on her own, and hopefully if she breathes carefully and focuses on something intensely, she can hold this baby in until morning when her children awaken and can help her.

“Oh!” Maxine cries out, wincing in pain. A hot gush of liquid streams down her inner thighs, and she knows that waiting will not be an option.

With heaving, labored breaths, Maxine makes it to her kitchen phone, where she dials the Majors next door.

“Vance,” she says through gritted teeth when Jude’s husband answers. “It’s Maxine. Next door. The baby—“ But she can’t say more, as the pain starts to take her like a wave that’s trying to drown her. “Vance, help,” she finally manages to get out.

In under one minute, there is heavy pounding on her front door.

“Maxine!” Vance shouts. “It’s Vance. Let me in!”

Maxine is on her hands and knees on the living room carpet, and she forces herself to crawl—albeit slowly—to the front door.

“I’m trying,” she says with tears in her voice. “I’m trying to stand, Vance.”

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“Hang on,” he says from the other side of the door. He rattles the knob for good measure and then gives up. “Give me one second.”

Almost instantly, she can hear Vance pounding at the bedroom window that is Ryan’s. “Son,” he’s shouting. “I need you to wake up. It’s Vance Majors from next door. Your mom needs you. Wake up, Ryan.”

It takes a moment, but the young boy comes stumbling from his room groggily. “Mom?” Ryan says, looking with alarm at his mother on the floor, crouched on all fours. As lightning flashes again, Maxine rounds her back and howls; the scene must be terrifying for a thirteen-year-old boy.

Vance pounds on the front door again. “Let me in, Ryan. I need to help her.”

Ryan does as he’s told and then stands aside, staring wide-eyed as Vance comes to Maxine and kneels beside her. Vance, who had been a medic in the Army, has seen more life and death than Maxine can imagine, and he speaks to her calmly, asking questions about her contractions and rubbing her back as she sobs in pain.

“Son?” Vance says, turning to Ryan. “I need you to press 0 for the operator and tell her we need an ambulance. Can you do that? You’ll have to give her your address. Can you help me out here?” He holds eye contact with Ryan as Maxine looks on, blowing puffs of breath out of her mouth as sweat runs down her temples.

Ryan nods, but he is pale. Certainly there has been enough trauma in his young life of late, but Maxine needs him right now. She really needs him.

“Okay,” Vance says calmly to Maxine. “We’ll have help here shortly to get you to the hospital, but in the meantime, I’m going to walk you through this, alright?”

Maxine nods frantically. She’ll do anything Vance tells her to at this point.

Within minutes, he has her on her back, and she’s squeezing his hand tightly as he explains every pain to her. Of course, Maxine has had two children and she knows all these things, but it does help to distract her to focus on Vance’s calm, even voice.

“Jude will be over in a minute,” Vance says, sitting on the floor next to Maxine as her chest heaves with each strong contraction. “She’ll stay with Ryan and the little one while we go to the hospital, okay?”

“You’re coming?” Maxine asks him. Her vision blurs with the pain. “You’re coming with me?”

Vance looks away for a long moment, but he does not let go of her hand. “I am,” he says firmly. “It’s what Derek would want, and I know it’s what I would want if...well, if the roles were reversed. I’d like to do this for him, as a friend and as a man.”

Maxine nods as her hot, salty tears mix with the sweat that’s pouring from her skin. “I’d like that,” she says between gritted teeth. “And Derek would, too.”

* * *

By April, little Benjamin Derek Trager is already smiling and moving his arms and legs around whenever his brother or sister stops to coo at him. He’s a happy baby, and Maxine is grateful that, unlike Ryan and Wendy, he sleeps for long stretches and eats like a horse. None of this “feed a little, take a break, cry for more milk as soon as Mama gets settled doing something else”; this guy latches on and gets his fill. His

zest for everything is admirable, but sometimes Maxine looks at his sweet face and wonders whether some of his enthusiasm will be dimmed when he realizes that it's just her—that he has no father.

But worries like these only plague her at night. During the day, she's far too busy with a toddler and an infant to entertain existential concerns.

The group of protestors that had initially caught Maxine's eye has grown; no longer is it just a mildly curious bunch of people who aren't sure they believe in the government funding the space program. Of late, the group has grown to include some rougher characters, and Maxine has been attending the meetings with baby Benjamin in tow. She sits at the back of the group, a blanket securely wrapped around her as she nurses the baby out of view, and listens to the men and women speaking passionately about the way the government is trying to hijack this country. And she's not sure they're wrong. In fact, they make a lot of sense.

One of the men, a college professor named Hamlin Morse, worked hard to convince the group that there is a subversive movement by those in power to make America into a nation of lemmings. Professor Morse tells them that, by giving too much authority to the government, the country is on a course that will lead to a nation of people who are addicted to prescription drugs, who are dumbed down by subpar educational systems, and who feel dissatisfied enough with the economy and the status quo to vote against their own interests. Maxine has listened with fascination as he tells them that the notion that America is the land of the free and a place where dreams and opportunity are readily available is a sham.

After their meeting two nights ago, Professor Morse had called Maxine at home and initiated a conversation with her that left Maxine wanting more. Far more.

"I noticed you looked dubious," Morse had said on the telephone. "I apologize for interrupting your family time, but I wanted to make sure you understood my point.

It's important to me that people hear what I'm saying."

"I heard you," Maxine said, holding Benjamin in her arms as she cradled the phone receiver between her ear and shoulder. "I just thought it sounded far-fetched that the government wants to turn us into zombies."

"No, no, my dear," Hamlin Morse said. "Not zombies, per se. They need us to be alert enough to do the menial jobs in this country. We might get addicted to their lab-created drugs, but they need us to be desperate enough to work. And they need our tax money to fuel their pet projects, like NASA."

"Mmm," Maxine said, rocking Benjamin from side to side. "So you really don't believe that America is a land of opportunity? That we care for one another, and that our government cares for us?"

Hamlin Morse gave a sharp, "Ha!" at this. "Cares for us? No, Maxine, I don't. We are worker bees. We are cogs in a wheel that keeps turning because we are willing to be manipulated into turning it. Do you want to be a part of that? Is that what you want your child to be a part of?"

Maxine blinked on the other end of the phone line, considering this. No, she did not want her children to fall prey to the kind of future that Hamlin Morse was describing—of course she didn't. She wanted their lives to be meaningful, and worth something. She wanted them to be valued and cared about. Morse's words weighed heavily on her heart.

"No, I don't want that for them." Benjamin fussed in her arms and she went to place him in the playpen she kept in the middle of the living room. "I want them to be happy."

Morse made a phlegmy coughing sound on his end, and Maxine could hear him light

up a cigarette. “Well, Mrs. Trager,” he said thoughtfully. “If you don’t want them to end up giving their lives to the political machinery the way your husband did, then you need to act now. You need to join the movement and create some real purpose in your life.”

Maxine thought about this. Her purpose was being a mother. And, prior to the accident, her purpose had been to be Derek’s wife. But his death had changed that—at least on the surface. Maybe her purpose now was to be his wife in the sense that she could let other people know what was really happening, and in some way, perhaps save the lives of other people. Other’s people’s husbands, fathers, loved ones. If people knew that there were dark forces at work behind the scenes, then maybe they could avoid the kind of fate that Professor Hamlin was describing to the group at their meetings. Maxine thought that being a part of this could be a way to do something positive—to turn Derek’s death into something with meaning.

“What would I do?” she asked Morse.

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The professor made a big show of exhaling loudly. “Well,” he said. “You could join the movement officially. There are plenty of things to protest besides NASA.”

The idea of putting her energy towards anything else hadn’t even occurred to Maxine.

“Like what?”

“Oh, like racial inequality across the South. Like non-unionized factory jobs. Like women’s rights. You will be amazed at what sorts of injustices linger just below the surface once you start to peel back the layers. Trust me.”

Maxine looked around the modern, comfortable home she was living in with her children. Technically, Stardust Beach was a place meant for astronauts and their families. She was now officially just a hanger-on, given that she no longer had a husband who backed out of their driveway each morning and made his way to Cape Kennedy. Maxine and her children were superfluous. She had finally folded and signed the document given to her by Arvin North and the other suits at NASA, and the check she’d received was sitting in the bank, gathering interest.

In the end, Derek’s life had been worth \$200,000. Maxine was also granted half of Derek’s annual salary each year, and with this money, she knew she could support herself and her children. She could leave this house in Stardust Beach, sell some of their belongings, and go where she needed to go.

“With three small children, you’ll have some obstacles that a lot of the rest of us don’t,” Professor Morse went on. “But I think you would be an excellent example for us of someone who did everything ‘right,’ but in the end, was ultimately wronged.”

Maxine chewed on the fleshy skin inside of her cheek as she listened to this. Until she met the protestors, she'd never really considered that she'd been "wronged" in any way. At first, it had seemed like just tragic bad luck, but with time, Maxine had grown to understand that Derek's death had been a lie. And she was tired of supporting that lie. She couldn't do it anymore.

"Okay," she said, feeling stronger. "Okay," she repeated. "I'll join you all. Where are we off to first?"

Morse gave a happy laugh. "Well, there was just a big march from Selma to Montgomery in Alabama. Let's say we head that direction. Spread the word. Join the cause. Start making a difference." His voice was laced with excitement and vigor. "You've just agreed to join a very important cause, Maxine. I'm proud of you."

It had been a while since anyone said they were proud of Maxine. Her hands were full, and she was exhausted. Hearing the words caused her eyes to water.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you for saying that."

She hung up from the call and spent the rest of the evening imagining her new life: travel, adventure, purpose. Her children would see the injustices of the world and do something alongside her to change them. A part of her life had ended, sure, but a new seed had been planted, and she was ready to water it and watch it grow.

It was time to leave Stardust Beach.

CHAPTER 20

Bill

"There's no way that Derek would have been fine with this," Ed Maxwell says as he

bites into a triangular section of a cheese sandwich during lunch break.

Bill, who has long since started eating with his coworkers again, shakes his head as he takes a bite of the leftover chili soup that Jo has put into a thermos for his lunch.

"No," Bill agrees. "He would not have been fine with it."

Ed turns to Jay Donovan, who has just set his own lunch box on the table next to Bill.

"Hey, what ever happened to your wife joining the civil rights crowd to register voters?" Ed asks out of the blue.

Jay laughs uncomfortably as he pulls out his chair and sits. "I mean, she'd love to be a part of something bigger than herself--that's just Carrie--but obviously she has two children and a husband and a home, so I think, at least for the time being, she's staying put."

"You know who isn't?" Ed lifts an eyebrow like he's holding the keys to a piece of hot gossip. "Maxine Trager. I hear she's taken up with that nutty professor who got fired from Yale for being too radical."

Bill frowns. "Who?"

"You know all those protestors who came out after the accident? He's like their guru. Their shaman."

"Are you trying to tell me that a professor from Yale turned into some kind of a cult leader and decided he had a bone to pick with NASA?"

"That is exactly what I'm saying." Ed shoves the rest of his cheese sandwich into his mouth and chews.

"And you're saying that Maxine is somehow involved with him?" Bill is dubious.

Vance, who has been flipping through the sports section of the newspaper while they talk, looks up. "Jude has been trying to talk to her for months, but it sounds like she's really getting in deep with this movement."

"So that meeting that North had with the women a few months back--they weren't able to get to her and talk sense?" Bill sets his spoon down and puts the thermos to his lips to drink the broth.

"Jude tried," Vance says. He folds the newspaper and pushes it aside. "She offered to watch the little ones if Maxine wanted to get out and spend an afternoon or two a week volunteering or something like Jo does." Vance nods at Bill. "That did good things for Jo, right, Bill?"

Bill nods and continues drinking his soup.

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"So ultimately, she kind of lost her mind?" Jay asks. "It has to be rough on her, being alone and raising three kids. And Derek dying while she was pregnant..." His face blanches at the thought. "Women go through their own things, but that had to be really tough. Maybe volunteering a few days a week wouldn't have been enough to give her focus. Maybe she needs something bigger."

"So you think it's okay for her to pack up her children and follow some snake charmer around the country?" Ed is appalled. "I'm kind of thinking that NASA didn't do enough to help her."

"She got a settlement," Jay says reasonably. "That amount of money should be enough to take care of her and the kids for years, even if she packs them up and moves north to be closer to family. But she's choosing to do something else, and that is a damn shame, but I'm not sure what else NASA could have done. Or if it's even their responsibility to fix things for her."

Bill is done with his soup and he recaps the container. "I think she's a grown woman who can make her own family decisions," he says firmly. "But is this the way I'd want my own wife to live if something happened to me? Hell no." He reaches for the banana in his lunch pail and starts to peel it.

"What would you want her to do if she was in Maxine's shoes?"

Bill thinks about it as he chews the first chunk of banana. "Move back to Minnesota. Be amongst friends and family. Get her life together that way."

"But if you weren't here, then you wouldn't have any say," Ed points out.

"True. And you never know how a major tragedy affects a person." Bill squints through the window out at the blue skies of late May. It's progressively gotten hotter the closer they've gotten to Memorial Day, and he feels tired. Tired and weary. The ongoing investigation into the accident has been gnawing at him, and Arvin North has grilled him up, down, and sideways as they prepare to go into query sessions that involve panels of experts. The stress has been rough on Bill's sleep and on his digestion.

The men continue to further debate Maxine Trager and the way she's dishonoring her late husband by turning into what Ed is referring to derisively as a "hippie." This catches Bill's attention; he's not overly familiar with the term, but he knows that it's something akin to a beatnik, and that it's a lifestyle that isn't looked upon favorably by most of the people he knows.

Jay is defending her to the other guys when Jeanie Florence walks into the break room. A shaft of sunlight touches her long, brown hair, and she turns her head in the noisy room to smile at one of the other female engineers, who is pointing to an empty round table in the corner of the room. Bill's eyes follow her.

"Hey," Todd Roman says as he sits on Bill's other side. He follows Bill's gaze and then turns his attention back to the lunch that his wife, Barbie, has packed for him. As Todd quickly bites into a sandwich, he elbows Bill. "Booker," he says, pulling Bill's attention away from Jeanie. "Earth to Booker."

Bill gives him a half-hearted smile. "Sorry, were you talking to me? I was lost in thought."

Todd shoots him a look and leans in conspiratorially so that the other guys won't hear. "You know, women talk."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning Rebecca picked up on Jeanie acting differently when you were around, and she mentioned to Susan in the engineering department that she thought there was something going on between you two, and Susan went and, I don't know--I lost the trail there, man. But someone told someone who told someone else, and now here I am, just simple old Todd Roman, trying to mind my own business, and I'm overhearing that one of my teammates is kissing a female engineer in the stairwell."

Bill can feel the color drain from his face. He has no response. There is nothing in his head that he can formulate into a viable sentence, and he is quite sure that his face is giving him away entirely. To laugh would be to sound like a maniac, and so he just sits there, staring at the vending machine near their table, thinking of what a mess he's making of his life with this one simple act.

"I'm sorry, Todd," Bill says evenly. He packs up his lunch and latches the metal pail as he stands. "I'm really sorry that you had to hear that."

Bill walks away. He does not turn back. He does not give himself the satisfaction of knowing how Todd responds to his apology, because he does not think he deserves to be absolved of the discomfort and guilt that he's currently feeling.

* * *

Jo is the one who generally takes the evening walks. She and Frankie have been out together, wandering the neighborhood under the starry night sky for the past couple of years. She often comes home smelling of cigarette smoke and Bill suspects that it's not just the scent of Frankie's cigarette that's clinging to Jo, but that she's indulging in one of her own every so often. He doesn't mind—not really. If Jo's biggest secret is that she's sharing a smoke with her best girlfriend, then Bill is a lucky man and he knows it.

Tonight the air is clear and warm. It's nearly June and not quite dark yet. There are

children playing in the driveways and front yards, and every few houses he passes, Bill sees a man he knows from NASA outside sitting on the front steps with a cigarette, watering his lawn in shorts and a white t-shirt, or retrieving the evening paper from where it landed when the paperboy tossed it from his canvas bag.

Without meaning to, Bill finds himself in front of the Tragers' house. The garage door is up, and Maxine wanders out with a box in her arms. She is thin; it's nearly impossible to tell that she was pregnant only three or four months ago.

"Mind if I help you with that?" Bill calls from the sidewalk, not wanting to startle her.

Maxine turns. She has a scarf tied around her head, and her face is free of makeup. She looks young and lovely. "Oh! Hello," she says.

She and Bill have been introduced on a number of occasions, but they have never socialized or had dinner at one another's houses, so she looks as though she isn't sure what to call him.

"It's Bill," he says. "Bill Booker. Jo's husband."

"Yes, yes. Of course." Maxine waves a hand as she smiles tentatively. "I know. I'm sorry, I was just lost in thought. How are you, Bill?"

He approaches with his hands in the pockets of his plaid shorts. "I'm well, Maxine. How are you?"

She's standing in the midst of a garage full of boxes, many of them with things inked on this sides like "Ben's Room," or "Kitchen." Maxine puts her fists on her hips and squints out at the last lingering light that hovers on the horizon.

“I’m alive, Bill. Six months ago I wasn’t sure that I would be, but here I am.”

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It's an honest, straightforward answer, and Bill wants to ask her so many different questions. It's unusual for a man who barely knows a woman to just approach and start peppering her with personal questions, but these are unusual circumstances, so Bill goes ahead with it.

"I have to know...how did you manage, Maxine? How did you get through the first days and weeks? If you don't mind my asking, of course." Bill nearly blushes as he realizes that he's just asked a widow to relive the early days of her biggest loss.

Maxine smiles at him softly. "I woke up, I got my toddler out of her crib, and I made a pot of coffee. I had friends who checked in. Some days I wasn't sure I would make it or that I wanted to, but then the baby I was carrying would kick me and it was a hard reminder that life goes on." She shrugs. "It just does. It has to."

Bill nods as he takes this in. He's still standing with his hands in his pockets when a sprinkler across the street kicks on loudly. "But what's this I hear about you leaving Stardust Beach with some professor?"

This makes Maxine laugh. "That sounds like I'm running off with another man, which—I can assure you, Bill—I am not." She pauses. "Professor Morse is in his sixties and he has some really big ideas. When I realized that NASA had let my husband die, I needed to do something. The protests at the Cape were something small, but then I stumbled into something bigger. This is a movement. This is an opportunity to get in on the ground floor with people who want to make this country a better place. People who want to make a difference. I need that, Bill. My kids need that. Our country needs people who are invested in its improvement, and not complicit with its demise."

Bill feels as though her words are somehow canned; they sound to his ears like propaganda handed out by whoever is leading this charge to “fix America.” But what does he know? Maybe all these beatniks banging on about change know things that Bill Booker doesn’t.

“So you’re going to go with him, but...I’m sorry, it’s none of my business.”

“Professor Morse and his wife have been very kind to me and the children. I’m taking all my belongings up to my parents’ house in Virginia, and then I’ll join them in Alabama.”

That clears things up for Bill, though it was never his business anyway to understand whether Maxine had already found love again. He’s just worried about her, and the thought that some smooth talker might have preyed on the weakness of a lonely, broken woman has tugged at his heart. But this sounds like Maxine knows what she’s doing.

“Wait,” Bill says, backtracking. “What do you mean about NASA ‘letting’ Derek die? How do you figure?” He frowns at her, puzzled. “Again, if you don’t mind my asking.”

It’s Maxine’s turn to look puzzled. “You know the same things I know, Bill,” she says, her hazel eyes holding his gaze and burning him with intensity. “You tried to stop the mission right before launch, and they wouldn’t listen to you.”

“How do you know that?”

Maxine looks at the sprinkler across the street, and then back at Bill. A flicker of amusement passes over her pretty features. “I just do. I would venture to say that everyone in Stardust Beach knows things that other people think are secrets.”

Bill feels naked as she stares at him with her hard gaze. He wants to ask what she means—what she knows—but he doesn't. Hearing the words cross Todd Roman's lips that day at lunch had been startling enough. To hear that the gossip mill was turning hard and fast enough to spread details to the wives and widows of the entire neighborhood fills Bill with mortification. And worry—certainly word will get to Jo this way.

Bill pulls his shoulders straighter and sucks in a big breath. He nods. "You're right. We all know things and hear things, but we don't always know or hear the truth."

"Mmmm," Maxine says, sounding noncommittal.

"Anyhow," Bill says. "I wanted to stop and offer to help you with anything you need as you get ready to leave." He gestures at the stacks of boxes in her garage. "Feel free to put me to work."

As he offers, Bill isn't sure why he's doing it: is he being a kindly neighbor? Is he seeking some sort of redemption for the fact that his delay in speaking up may have played a part in Derek's death? Is he trying to do something good to balance the fact that he and Jeanie have done something bad—a sort of karmic retribution? He decides to chalk it up to doing a plain old good deed.

"Thank you, Bill," Maxine says, taking a step back from him. Their conversation has ended, and he can tell that she needs to get back into the house where the children are no doubt waiting. "I appreciate that. And I'll definitely let you know."

Bill walks away slowly, turning back one last time to see Maxine closing the door to the garage for the evening. He got the distinct impression that the two of them are somehow comrades in arms; two outcasts, two wrongdoers, just attempting to put one foot in front of the other as they go about their lives and try to survive.

Everyone is judging Maxine for throwing her kids into some sort of cockamamie scheme to travel America and protest random things, but certainly anyone who knows what Bill has done is judging him as well. He's not only the man who didn't speak up soon enough before a tragic accident, he's also the man who is married to one woman, but passionately kissing another in a stairwell at work while tragedy is about to occur.

But the thing that really sticks with him as he walks home in the encroaching darkness is this: if every woman on the Cape knows about him and Jeanie, and if Todd Roman has even heard about it, then how long until Jo knows?

His blood runs cold and he picks up his pace. He suddenly wants to be nowhere but home.

CHAPTER 21

Jo

Frankie is busy with her husband that evening, so it's no bother for Jo when Bill says he'd like to be the one to go for a walk. In fact, it's better for her if he goes and she manages bedtime for the children, as it gives her time to think while Kate negotiates extra stories, Nancy tries to hide the book she's reading beneath her pillow, and Jimmy ignores Jo's pleas to wash behind his ears and not to forget the back of his neck while he's getting ready for bed.

The letter she'd received from Martin Snell a few months earlier has been in her mind consistently ever since, and yet she can't bring herself to write what the literary agent had asked her to. Ever since the day she'd gotten the letter--the day after she and Bill had a falling out over the fact that he felt betrayed by her stories for the magazine--she's felt like she has a pill lodged in her throat that she can't quite swallow.

Nothing has fully distracted her from this sensation of unease, but she's had moments of feeling like herself. For instance, Jo and Nancy had embarked upon a mission to sew a dress together for Nancy's first middle school dance, and by the time the event rolled around in early May, they'd created a beautiful baby blue chiffon dress with little pink rosebuds sprinkled all over it. Nancy had been proud to have her parents drop her off at the middle school gym to meet her friends, and for that one evening, Jo had been entirely satisfied with something that she was involved in.

Her blooming friendship with Jude has also been a balm for her soul. Ever since meeting Jude two years prior, Jo has carried around a feeling in her heart that something wasn't quite right with Jude, and she's been extremely concerned about the other woman's drinking. So to have Jude open up to her and share her feelings has been incredibly gratifying, and Jo can only hope that her support has meant something to Jude. She thinks that it has, as she's noticed and felt an openness from Jude on the occasions that they're together.

But aside from these small distractions, Jo has been living with a kernel of doubt in her heart for six months now. She knows what she saw the night of the accident at Cape Kennedy when she stumbled out the door and found Bill with Jeanie Florence, and she knows she also saw her husband sharing what looked like an intimate moment with Jeanie in the parking lot of The Black Hole. Warning bells went off the very first time Jeanie called their home, despite the fact that, after meeting her, Jo actually quite liked the younger woman, and Jo does not take this little bit of women's intuition lightly.

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So putting her fingers to her typewriter and getting anything productive done has been a challenge. She's tried repeatedly to find a new story, a new angle, and to get excited about the fact that Mr. Snell has asked her for fifty pages of something new, but the longer she goes without producing anything, the more worried Jo feels that she might never be able to write anything again.

"Mom?" Jimmy calls from the hallway.

Jo is standing in the front room, re-shelving the vinyl albums that have been sitting next to the turntable.

"Yes, honey?"

"Do you know where my red and black striped shirt is?" Jo's lanky teenage son calls back. Jimmy has grown so much this past year, and now he's the same height as Jo, which always throws her. In addition, he's started to request that they call him Jim, rather than Jimmy, though both Jo and Bill forget most of the time.

"I folded it this afternoon," Jo says as she sets an album back on the console. "Let me find it."

It's these small tasks--these minuscule moments of motherhood--that make up Jo's days. Sure, she's carved out a corner of life for herself through her volunteering, and yes, she's even felt a flicker of some sort of joyful independence through her writing, but being a mother is and has always been the most important facet of her life.

As she pulls the laundry basket from its place atop the dryer, Jo reaches into the pile

and pulls out her son's shirt. It's as she's holding it in her hands that she realizes how fleeting time is; before she knows it, Jimmy--Jim--will be driving. He'll ask to borrow the car. He'll have a girlfriend he'd rather spend time with than his own family. He'll graduate high school and leave for college. And who will he be when she's all done raising him? Who will she be when she's done raising her children?

The existential questions come hard and fast, and, without expecting it, Jo is suddenly crying as she stands before the dryer, holding her son's shirt. In her own mind, time is flying by, and suddenly she pictures herself with gray hair, standing here in the same spot, folding a basket of laundry that's much smaller without the dresses, shirts, socks, and pajamas of her children.

"Mommy?" Kate asks, touching Jo's back with her small hand. "Are you okay?"

Jo turns and looks down at her youngest daughter. "Oh, yes, sweetheart. I'm fine. I'm good." Jo forces a smile and wipes at her eyes. "Go jump into bed, okay? I'll be right there to read you some stories. I promise."

Kate does as she's asked, and Jo takes the shirt to Jimmy, rapping lightly at his door and then handing it to him when he opens it. He stands there in just a pair of pajama pants, his narrow ribcage visible as he towels off his damp hair.

"Thanks, Mom. Goodnight," Jimmy says, closing the door again. Even this is like a knife in Jo's heart, the simple fact that her little boy no longer needs or wants her to tuck him in. She sighs and stands there for a moment, wondering what it would feel like to be in Maxine's shoes, just starting all over with a brand-new baby. Or even in Frankie's shoes, as she prays for a first pregnancy to complete her little family with Ed.

"Okay, Kate," Jo calls out. "I'm coming. I hope you have stories picked out for us!"

She passes by Nancy's room, pausing in the doorway to look in at her daughter as she lays in her bed, holding up a book that blocks Jo's view of her face. Jo stands there for a moment, reveling in the peaceful feeling that comes with having all of her kids there, safe, and doing what they're supposed to be doing. It's when she climbs into bed with Kate and starts to read the first book that she hears the front door open and close. Bill is home, and suddenly, that feeling of a pill that's stuck in her throat returns.

Jo swallows around it and keeps reading.

CHAPTER 22

Jude

The call from Harrison Watts comes at noon on a Tuesday in early June. Hope and Faith are out of school for the summer, and Jude has been in control of her drinking for months. There are evenings when she'd love to pour a second cocktail, and surely there are days where something will flare up inside of her and her first thought is: "Mix a quick drink and relax," but she's done well. She's proud of herself. She feels strong.

"Mrs. Majors," Harrison Watts nearly growls into her ear over the phone. "I've got news for you."

Jude watches the twins as they run out the front door to play in the yard. It's hot and humid and horrible out there, but children don't ever seem to notice such things. Sticky weather? Let's play! Pouring rain? Time to jump in puddles! Snow? Let's get out there and catch some frostbite! She smiles as they plonk down in the thick grass with their dolls.

"Mr. Harrison," Jude says. She's standing near the phone in the kitchen, one hand in

the pocket of her pleated skirt. “I’m ready.”

But is she? Jude’s heart is thumping madly—galloping like wild horses in her chest—and the edges of her vision are going white. She pulls a chair over to the counter and sits down so that she won’t pass out.

One last memory of Catherine has been in her mind recently, and she hopes against all hope that the news Harrison Watts is about to give her isn’t bad news.

Catherine, maybe twenty-three at the time, had asked Jude to attend a funeral with her. An actress she’d known in Hollywood had been dating the head of a major studio when she’d been found dead in Laurel Canyon. The circumstances were mysterious and suspicious, but no foul play was indicated by the authorities. Jude and Catherine had dressed in black and taken a taxi to the Hollywood Forever Cemetery.

It was October, and the sunlight was softened. The trees felt on the cusp of turning, and everything was autumnal.

“What do we think really happened?” a semi-famous actor whispered to the man with him. “Strangled? Stabbed? And they actually want us to believe there was no foul play?”

“We all know that he’s married,” the other man whispered back. “And that the wife’s family is disconnected.” He says “connected” as if there are air quotes around the word.

“Mmm,” said the actor, shaking his head with pity. “Such a shame.”

“Always find yourself someone you can go out with in public, otherwise you’re in a dangerous relationship,” the second man said as they gazed right at each other.

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“Oh, like us?” the actor whispered back, so quietly this time that only Jude and Catherine could hear. A look passed between them that seemed to send them both right to the edge of having a fit of laughter, and then they looked away.

“She wasn’t very nice,” Catherine whispered to Jude, leaning in so close that her breath was warm against Jude’s ear. “I worked with her one time and she called me a bitch.”

Jude turned her head sharply. “Are you serious? I thought she was supposed to be America’s sweetheart?”

Catherine chuckled softly. “Well, maybe she was. But to anyone who worked with her, she was about as much fun as eating a sandwich full of broken glass.”

Jude winced at the imagery.

They sat through the service and all its theatrics, shaking their heads disapprovingly at the loss of such a young, vibrant life, and watching as the actress’s mother lifted the black net veil from her eyes to dab at them with a handkerchief. It was all very sad and beautiful and Hollywood.

Afterwards, Catherine wanted to walk through the cemetery, which Jude found somewhat morbid, but she was also curious.

“Look—Bugsy Siegel!” Jude pointed out the mobster’s grave as they passed. “Wow.”

“Here’s Charlie Chaplin’s mother,” Catherine said with reverence. “Like, the woman

who gave birth to Charlie Chaplin is in this spot.”

“Graves are weird,” Jude said. She shivered. “Just the idea of being in a box...I don’t know. I don’t think I want to do it.”

Catherine looked at her, amused. “Then what will you do? Have someone throw you overboard at sea?”

Jude shrugged. “I’m not sure. It’s a long way off though anyway.”

And it felt that way at the time—almost impossible to fathom death and eternity. In her early twenties, Jude could only think of the moment. Of going to work, stopping for groceries on the way home, and cooking dinner with Catherine each night. She could think ahead to whether they’d go out for a drink that evening, and possibly what she’d wear the following day, but what she wanted her eternal rest to look like? No. No way. Not possible.

“Of course it is, Judy darling,” Catherine cooed, looping her arm through Jude’s as their high-heeled shoes poked holes in the grass. They walked on, passing moss-covered stones, trees laden with leaves that would soon fall, and freshly-dug graves with warm, soft flowers still resting where loved ones had placed them. It was melancholy and Jude sighed deeply.

“I don’t want it all to pass me by,” Jude said. “I don’t want to wake up and suddenly I’m old and I’ve never fixed the things that needed to be fixed. I don’t want to miss the chances to say the things I need to say.”

“What do you need to say?” Catherine asked as they meandered through the gravestones, stopping to admire particularly old ones or the resting places of famous people they recognized. “And to whom?”

Jude thought about this. Catherine's warm arm was still looped through hers. "Well, I'd like to talk to my mother again."

"Okay, that could happen—potentially," Catherine said. "And?"

"I'd like to ask my father where she went and why I never heard from her again. And I'd like to find a few people and really let them know how much they hurt me." She thinks of Chester on the boat all those years ago; of her stepmother, who has always made her feel inferior; and of Alice and her hateful words that night when she threw her out of the car and tossed a bottle at Jude. She carries those wounds inside her heart every single day.

"Hmm." Catherine sounded thoughtful. "Well, I think your parents are a good idea. Those relationships are important and they have roots. But, the people who hurt you along the way..." Catherine trailed off and they walked in silence for a bit. "Sometimes people lash out and hurt other people to make themselves feel better. Maybe those people were just hurt in their own ways, too."

Jude hadn't really ever thought of it that way. "Maybe," she said. "Could be."

Catherine stopped and turned to look right at Jude. They stood there beneath the drooping branches of a California live oak tree, Catherine petite and pretty, Jude taller, sturdier, and lovely with her simple, symmetrical features and dark hair.

"You know, Judy." She pursed her lips for a moment. "Those guys in front of us at the service were onto something, I think."

Jude's heart raced; was Catherine talking about the men being...together? In love? Somehow partners and lovers and?—

"You can't be with someone who you can't go out into public with. It's too

dangerous. It's dangerous for your heart, and for your career, and it just doesn't work." She shook her head, looking regretfully towards the rough trunk of the tree next to them.

When Catherine finally dragged her eyes back to Jude, she looked right at her, and in her eyes Jude could see all the things she'd hoped and wanted to see. She saw love.

"I think, in a different world," Catherine said softly, "you and I could be together. We could make dinner together every night, and we'd fight off the bad guys of the world together. But that's not real life."

Jude's chest constricted at these words; Catherine was not wrong. That was not real life.

"So I'm going to say this, and I'm going to say it one time only," Catherine said, glancing around before she took a step closer and laced her fingers through Jude's. "I think you're lovely." She stood up on her tiptoes and put her lips to Jude's, kissing her softly—but just for a moment. "When it's all over for me, I want to know that I said the things I felt, and did the things I should have done. We all want that, Jude."

Jude stared back at her in wonder. "I think you're lovely, too," she said, the words coming from her lips automatically. "I really do."

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"I know." Catherine was still holding Jude's hands and she shook them lightly. "But I need to say one more thing, and I think it's really important for you to hear." Her eyes searched Jude's for a moment as they stood there beside the grave of an actor who'd died in the forties, fingers intertwined. "Judy, don't drown your sorrows anymore, okay? Because sorrow can swim. Trust me."

Jude nodded. Catherine had seen her at her worst, and she'd put up with all of her idiosyncrasies and insecurities. And, somehow, she'd loved her anyway, which was enough.

It was absolutely enough.

Two weeks later, Jude met Vance at the Burgundy Room and they'd gotten married three months later.

And the rest is history, Jude thinks now, breathing as she holds the phone to her ear and waits to hear what Harrison Watts has to tell her about his search for Catherine.

"Well," Harrison Watts says, "I was able to locate her. My apologies that it took all this time, but it's more difficult than you think to find someone who doesn't necessarily want to be found. Maybe someday there'll be an easy database we can use to access everyone on the planet, but for now, it's just an old-fashioned hunt and search."

"Right, I understand," Jude says, trying to hurry him along.

"Wait, would you rather meet in person?" Watts asks gruffly. "I have an updated

photo of her driver's license if you'd like that."

A huge breath escapes from Jude and her chest deflates with relief; Catherine is alive. If she has a current driver's license, she's alive.

"No, I'm happy to just hear for now where she is or whatever you found out, and then maybe you can mail me the information."

"As you wish," Watts says. On the other end of the line, he shuffles some papers and clears his throat. "Okay. Catherine Maryellen Hamnett, who now goes by Cathy M. Pulido. She lives in a small town outside of Las Vegas with a husband, Nestor Pulido. They raise horses and have four children, ages six, four, two, and three months. Cathy is, by all accounts, a farm woman and a full-time mother. I was able to send one of my associates who is located in Nevada to Blue Diamond--that's the town she lives in--and we got photos of her on horseback. Quite lovely," he adds as an aside. "You might want those ones."

Jude nearly laughs out loud at the joy of hearing that Catherine is alive and well and raising four children and riding horses in some small town called Blue Diamond. "Wow," she says, shaking her head. "Just wow."

"I love a story that ends well," Watts says with little emotion. "Happy we could track your friend down for you."

"I'm scared to see the bill for the work, but I'm happy, too," Jude says. "Really happy."

"Alright then. I'll get the photos and the information in the mail to you this afternoon, along with a bill for my services."

"Thank you, Mr. Watts," Jude says. "I appreciate all your hard work."

Jude floats through the rest of the day on a cloud, daydreaming about Catherine and her life in Blue Diamond. She feels nothing but joy to hear that Catherine is doing well, but a pang of wistfulness hits her every so often as she remembers her friend's pretty, young, hopeful face. They'd been not much more than girls together; young women whose futures were still almost entirely unwritten. Inexperienced girls just embarking upon the path to womanhood, entirely uncertain about where they'd end up.

It's a few days later when she opens her mailbox and finds a large manila envelope addressed to her in a scrawling cursive script with a return location in Daytona Beach. Jude holds it, knowing what's inside as she looks at the looping lettering, wondering whether the handwriting belongs to Harrison Watts or to his secretary.

She goes inside, willing herself not to stall any longer.

Standing in the middle of her kitchen while the house is quiet--the girls have been invited to Jo Booker's house for the afternoon to swim and play--Jude holds the envelope reverently. For a split second, she wants to pour a drink before opening it, but the desire passes and she lets it fade and settle around her, as she always does.

Don't drown your sorrows, Judy...sorrow knows how to swim.

Without another thought, Jude tears the envelope open and pulls out its contents: a piece of paper with an address for Cathy Pulido in Blue Diamond, Nevada; an image of Catherine's smiling face from a database of Nevada drivers; and, finally, a black and white 8x10 photo of a blonde woman on horseback. The picture is just as lovely as Harrison Watts had said it was. In it, Catherine sits confidently in the saddle, back straight, head turned sideways. The wind lifts her hair, and she's looking into the sun, clearly unaware that someone is capturing her image. It brings tears to Jude's eyes to see her.

There is one more thing in the pile of documents from the envelope: a folded piece of paper with the distinct scrawl of a man.

Mrs. Majors--

I am happy to send you all of these documents on your friend. Seeing her, I can appreciate your desire to find her once more, or at least to ascertain her safety and happiness.

In our talks, you told me some things about your life that I jotted down, and I hope you won't think it forward of me, but I did a bit of sleuthing of my own accord. In that poking around, I found your mother, who I know you did not ask me to locate specifically, but I wanted to.

No one should be left wondering how and where their parents are. In my vast experience, life is far too short for that.

As it turns out, Keiko Nagasaki gave birth to a son named Rodney in 1953, which means you have a little brother--congratulations! Following is her last known address in Honolulu. I wish you all the best in finding her, or I hope that it simply brings you comfort to know that she's alive and well.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further need for my investigative services.

All my best--

Harrison Watts

Jude reads the letter a second and a third time, feeling stunned each time her eyes graze over her mother's name. And she has a brother? A brother who is twelve years old? A brother roughly the same age as Jo Booker's son...or Maxine's son, Ryan! She simply cannot wrap her mind around it.

In spite of the heat, Jude takes a glass of water out and sits next to the pool, still holding all the papers and photos in her hands as she sits on the hot concrete and dips her bare feet in the cool water.

She goes through the photos and the information on Catherine one more time and then slips it all back into the envelope, which she'll put away somewhere safe and only take out when she needs a reminder that she was once young, once naive; that at one point, her story was still largely unwritten. And her life could have gone so many directions! She could have stayed in Hollywood. She could have forged a life with Catherine (but could she really have? She'll never know for certain...). She might have taken any number of paths that wouldn't have led her to the Burgundy Room on that October evening, where she met Vance Majors and cemented the life she's currently living right now.

All of it is okay now, because Catherine exists, their shared past exists, and the futures that they're creating in their own little universes include marriages and children and horses and beaches and all kinds of things that a young Jude might never have imagined.

She won't contact Catherine; not now, and maybe not ever. And she's okay with that.

But her mother...her mother.

Keiko Nagasaki, last known address: 513 Coconut Avenue, Honolulu, Hawaii.
Children: Judith Nagasaki Majors, born April 12, 1934. Rodney Kobayashi, born December 26, 1953.

Jude folds the paper and holds it between her hands as she drags her bare feet and calves through the pool water. This changes everything. There is a feeling of security in knowing that her mother is out there, even if her father no longer is. Keiko is within her reach for the first time in almost twenty-five years, and knowing that brings Jude a kind of anticipation mixed with peace. That's another thing she's had to get used to now that she isn't drinking so much: she feels all these things. All these emotions. And they aren't all bad--some of them feel really good.

Jude looks across the fence at the house where the Tragers lived for two years, and she misses hearing Maxine open the door and call out for her children. She'd done everything she could for Maxine, had tried to understand her fears and her new outlook on life, but in the end, she'd had to accept that Maxine was doing what felt right for her. For her children. For her future. Which, if you think about it, is all anyone really can do--even Jude's own parents did what they felt was best at the time, even if hindsight makes it difficult to understand some of their choices.

Jude stands up with her empty water glass and the envelope in her hand. She stretches towards the sun, closing her eyes as it warms her skin.

The past is securely behind her, and she's learning to live with it. Her present is all around her, and she's now fully awake for it. She's living it.

And the future? Well, she thinks, opening her eyes and looking at her mother's address one more time. My future is still unwritten.