



The Fadeaway

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Category: Romance

Description: Life giveth, and life taketh away. For a woman of a certain age, loss is not unexpected, but when Ruby Hudson loses someone she loves dearly, it changes everything...

At fifty, Ruby knows that life is a series of ups and downs, wins and losses, but she's still wholly unprepared to lose someone she loves so much. In the process of working through her grief, she discovers that there was so much she didn't know about this person she loved—so many contradictions and hidden stories. Has she turned a blind eye to everything but being First Lady, raising kids, and, now, to being a widow? Did she truly miss all of the wild and wonderful things about this person she'll spend the rest of her life missing? Can anyone truly know the people they love, and appreciate them while they're still here? Or are we simply left wondering how we missed so many details about another person while we're tangled up in our own lives?

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Patty

Patty Dallarosa has to hand it to her daughter for choosing a perfect little enclave for her post-White House life--Shipwreck Key is a magical place. When Jack Hudson had intentionally flown his single-engine plane into the water off the coast of France, he'd derailed the lives of Patty's daughter, Ruby, and of her granddaughters, Athena and Harlow. Selfish Jack Hudson, Patty thinks to herself as she walks on the beach now, admiring the water. President of the damn United States, with a gorgeous wife and two wonderful daughters, and he needed to have a mistress and a son in another country. Shameful.

Patty can cluck about it now—and she does, frequently—but there's not much to be done about it. In fact, there's nothing at all to do. At fifty, Ruby is as grown as a woman can be, and she seems to have absorbed the betrayal, the drama, the grief, and the heartache in a way that leaves Patty, quite frankly, speechless. Shortly after Jack's untimely death, Ruby had packed up the family's belongings, left the White House, and started the process of, well, processing. She'd taken a year to do that, then moved down to Shipwreck Key to open a bookstore and start a new life for herself. And Patty understood that. She'd walked that particular path herself, had buried a husband before she'd ever dreamed she might, pulled herself together for the sake of the daughter who was watching her, and had started her own Act Two.

A seagull swoops overhead, making a lazy pattern in the air as Patty stops walking to simply watch the bird in flight. That's something she's done more often lately: stop and watch. Observe. Slow down. Appreciate. At seventy-six, she likes to think that she hasn't slowed down markedly in any way that other people might notice (yet she's a smart enough woman to know that she's only fooling herself on that one), but

she can feel her hips creak when she climbs out of bed in the morning, and can feel her own energy wane in the evening after a particularly long and busy day.

As Patty watches the bird dancing against the evening sky she breathes in deeply—pulling in a long, full breath through her nose and letting it fill her chest. She lifts her arms slowly, tipping her head back and closing her eyes with her arms outstretched like she's on a rollercoaster. For one brief moment, she lets herself feel like a bird, like the soft breeze might catch beneath her wings and lift her, carrying her away. It's a light, heady feeling that fills her as she tries to feel as one with the earth and sky, and Patty smiles to herself because this sort of behavior was something she never would have engaged in as a younger woman. In her forties, fifties, even in her sixties, Patty felt like a sensible, headstrong woman with a mission, and now she suddenly feels...untethered from responsibility. Unaware—or maybe she just doesn't care—about the way that other people see her. She no longer needs to behave like an attorney; she does not desire to have men look at her with lust or passion in their eyes. Patty wants to be seen as a good mother, a loving grandmother, but beyond that, she doesn't give much credence to what strangers see or think when they look at her.

But that's been a fairly recent development; for years, no matter where she went, Patty longed to be wanted. She flourished under the approving eyes of people who saw her as a high-powered lawyer, and she felt whole when a man eyed her from head to toe, summoning up the courage to flirt, to make small talk, and to ask her out. Relationships and personal interactions were her fuel. Not so much anymore, she thinks, letting her arms fall back to her sides as she opens her eyes and refocuses on the water that's lapping at her feet on the beach of Shipwreck Key. There's no time for fluff. For nonsense. For that which is impermanent.

“Mom!” Ruby calls from the porch of her house. Her voice carries on the breeze, reaching Patty's ears. Patty turns, smiling as she waves back at her beautiful daughter. “Dinner!”

Patty's arm falls and she turns and crosses the sand towards the five-bedroom beach house that Ruby lives in right there on the water. The house is well-lit against the evening, and light spills from the kitchen and out onto the porch.

It is September. It is time for earlier sunsets, chillier nights, for changing foliage. In other parts of the country, leaves are turning, pumpkins are swelling on vines, the smell of crackling bonfires fill the evening air. Patty feels the cool sand sift between her toes as she reaches the deck, placing one hand on the railing and the bare sole of her foot on the bottom step.

It is time for her to walk inside her daughter's kitchen, to pour a glass of wine, to smile as Ruby recounts the last book club meeting, or tells a funny story about Harlow and Athena.

It is time for the truth.

It is time.

"So, Dexter hasn't said anything about it yet?" Patty asks. She sets the serving spoon back on the trivet as she waits for Ruby to finally sit down.

"He responded to my email and said he just needed some time to work and think," Ruby says. Her back is to her mother as she moves around the kitchen, picking up the salad bowl and moving it to the table, then going back for the salt and pepper shakers. "He was starting to feel like he was too close to the flame, I think."

Ruby's voice carries through the open kitchen and into the dining room, to which it flows. The whole space is large, well-appointed, lovely. Patty has always admired her daughter's taste, but in buying and decorating this home, Ruby has truly outdone herself. The white marble counters look soft under the overhead lights, and the gray veins of the stone are picked up by the soft dove gray cabinetry. The wooden floors

are rustic, as is the long dining room table, with its farm-chic aesthetic. The rest of the house looks like a spread from Coastal Living magazine, with whites, creams, sands, and pops of yellow and blue and coral. It's tasteful and understated. It is very Ruby.

"I say just give the man a little space," Patty advises her daughter casually. She lifts her wine glass and sips, though she waits for Ruby to settle before lifting even a single piece of flatware. Patty is from a time and place where manners and presentation are everything; being impeccable and unimpeachable are traits that Patty values and prizes, and she has instilled both in her only child.

"I'm trying to," Ruby says, blowing out a loud breath as she sits down at the table. "But waiting is killing me. I still don't know what he'll ultimately decide—that I'm too old for him, or that he's willing to forgo children..." One of Ruby's shoulders lifts and falls as she tries (and fails) to appear nonchalant.

Patty watches her lovingly. Her baby girl is all grown up, and she's lived more life than most women ever do. Still, there is an element of Ruby that is and will always be a little girl to Patty. Her nonchalance reads as uncertainty; her casual patience as reticence.

"Listen," Patty says, unfolding her napkin and letting it rest across her lap. "If you give a man space and he comes back to you, then he was always yours. If he doesn't, then he never was, and it's better you learn that sooner rather than later."

Ruby pours a splash of wine in each of their glasses, topping them up. "True," she says, tilting her head to one side and then setting down the bottle of wine. "Oh, Mom, I know you're right, I just miss him."

"Sure you do," Patty agrees. "That's natural. A girl can get used to having someone to share the minutiae of her life with. Having someone to say good morning and

goodnight to, and someone to do other things with.” Here, Patty wiggles her eyebrows suggestively and shimmies her shoulders. This makes Ruby laugh.

“Mom,” she says, shaking her head. Ruby sets her glass on the table and reaches for the casserole she’s just pulled from the oven. It’s a chicken, rice, green bean, and wild mushroom casserole, and against the autumnal placemats and napkins, it is yet another thing that feels to Patty like fall.

Patty steels herself for a moment as she watches her beloved daughter, caught in the soft light of the chandelier above them as she dishes casserole onto both of their plates and then gathers bunches of salad with wooden utensils and distributes it as well. Ruby has endured so much, seen so much. She is a survivor, her Ruby. When Patty’s husband, Reuben, had died of a heart attack, eleven-year-old Ruby had been Patty’s rock. Of course the girl had mourned the loss of her father—mourned him terribly—crying herself to sleep, turning inwards for the better part of a year, and finally talking to a therapist who had somehow convinced the young girl that it was unlikely she’d lose her mother as well as her father. It had been hard to watch, but Patty had had her own life to get back on track, and she knew that Ruby needed her to pull it together. So she had.

“Bread and butter, Mom?” Ruby asks, holding out a basket full of sliced baguette. Patty smiles and takes a piece. “Hey,” she says, reaching for the butter. “I was thinking that tomorrow we could spend the day at the bookshop, and then you would be there for book club in the evening—the women are dying to see you.”

Patty smiles at this; the ladies who take part in Ruby’s book club are gems, and she enjoys their company. “Mmhmm,” Patty says, nodding as she butters her own bread.

“And then the next day, I was planning on getting a boat from here to Christmas Key—don’t worry, Dexter is in New York, so this isn’t some ploy to bump into him—and I thought we could lie on the beach there, have dinner at the bistro, and

stay at the B&B. I was thinking one night, for sure, but we could stay for two if you wanted.” Ruby holds a bite of casserole on her fork as she watches Patty for a response.

“You have big, adventurous plans for us,” Patty says, smiling wanly. “You’ve always been that way.”

“Oh?” Ruby laughs, forking the bit into her mouth and chewing.

“Yes, darling girl, you have. Remember the time we went to see my parents in Seattle? And you woke up early every day, ready to conquer the city. You had plans for the Space Needle, the aquarium, and the fish market all in one day. At one point, your grandmother pulled me aside and asked if I had ever thought of giving you a tranquilizer.”

Ruby guffaws at this. “She did not!”

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“Okay,” Patty admits, “she didn’t. But she did offer me two drinks every night rather than just the one, something she had always believed to be uncouth for a woman.”

Ruby shakes her head, still laughing. “Wow. So you’re saying I’m a busybody?”

“No,” Patty says. She reaches across the table and puts her hand on Ruby’s arm, resting it there as she looks into her daughter’s eyes. “I’m saying you’re a planner, a doer, a dreamer. You make things happen, Bibi,” she says, using a nickname that Ruby hasn’t heard in years. As a toddler, unable to say her own name, Ruby had called herself “Bibi,” much to her parents’ delight. It’s been ages since Patty has called her that.

“Thanks, Mom.” Ruby’s eyes shine. She pushes the salad around on her plate. “I just want to make sure we do fun things while you’re here. I was also thinking we could take a trip to the mainland, if you want. We can do Destin, or if you’d rather travel a bit, there’s always Miami, or even Disney World.”

It’s Patty’s turn to laugh out loud. “Disney World? Oh honey, not on your life. I’m all Disney-ed out after living near Anaheim for so many years, and going there with you and the girls. Seriously. Just park me somewhere with a book and a margarita. That’s all I need in the way of entertainment.”

Ruby frowns, but just slightly. Something in her eyes gives away the concern that’s flickering behind her brow. “Are you feeling too tired to travel, Mom? We don’t have to. I can cancel Christmas Key—seriously. I’m not trying to run you ragged every time you come to visit me.”

This is it—this is Patty’s opening. This is her chance to open a metaphorical window, to take a deep breath, to let the first whisper of autumn into their lives. She holds Ruby’s gaze across the table, searching her daughter’s eyes so deeply that she feels as though it’s only been a minute since Ruby emerged from her own body, slick and wailing, encountering the cruelty of the world around her. But no—it’s been fifty years, Patty reminds herself. Ruby is well-acquainted with life and its ups and downs. She’s been breathing her own oxygen for decades; soothing herself when the going gets tough.

“Bibi,” Patty says, using the nickname again. Her eyes well with tears. “I?—“

But instead of speaking, Patty reaches up, slowly, and tugs at one end of her hair. As she does, her whole scalp shifts like quicksand and she pulls the hair firmly from her head. Ruby’s eyes widen as shock paints her entire face: Patty is bald. The hair that was on her head now sits in her lap. Her eyes, apologetic and worried, are still on her daughter’s face.

“Mom...” Ruby’s voice catches in her throat and a shaky hand goes to her mouth.

There are no words. The look between them is one that’s full of meaning and dialogue.

How long has this been going on?

Three years—since you were in the White House.

What do we know?

Well...honey, we know how it’s going to end.

Are you sure?

I'm sure. The doctors are sure. We've done it all--everything we could think of to stop it.

Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you let me help? Why did you keep this from me?

A mother's job is to give her child wings to fly, not to clip those wings by burdening her unnecessarily.

Mom, this is not something frivolous; you needed me.

I need you now.

I'm here.

I'm here.

I'm here...

Dinner is forgotten. Ruby reaches across the table with both of her hands and clasps her mother's fingers. She squeezes. She stares into Patty's eyes as the tears flow freely down her own cheeks. "Mom," she whispers hoarsely. "Mom."

"Bibi, my darling girl," Patty manages, holding back the flood of her own tears. She's never been good at farewells. "I think we should call Harlow and Athena."

Ruby nods, her mouth set in a grim line. "I'll get them down here as soon as possible," Ruby says. "You'll stay here with us."

"The backbone of this family has always been the women," Patty says, holding her head and shoulders up proudly. "We'll be okay, sweetheart."

Ruby nods. “We’ll be together.”

Neither of them repeats the phrase about being okay, because they both know that there is no such thing as okay anymore. Instead, Patty tilts her smooth, shiny bald head to one side, admiring her daughter’s strength.

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“Yes,” Patty says, the chandelier’s light shining off of her scalp and making the diamonds on her earlobes sparkle like tears. “We’ll be together.”

Ruby

The house is silent. The white walls are covered in framed photos from every era of Patty Dallarosa’s life, and the long hallways with their wood floors and skylights are lit with the golden California sunlight of late afternoon.

In the kitchen, Ruby stands next to a wooden butcher block island, looking at a controlled tangle of herbs growing in a window box over the sink. A black-and-white striped towel hangs over the handle of the oven. Ruby looks out at the living room, her eyes landing on the brick fireplace, on the couches shielded by white linen slipcovers, on the piles of books resting on end tables and stacked beneath a window.

This is her mother’s house. Washer mother’s house, Ruby reminds herself, still feeling so stunned that her eyes barely blink. Patty is gone. One month. One month was all it had taken for the cancer to claim Patty, and while there never would have been enough time to say all the things that needed to be said, or to do all the things that Ruby wanted to do, one month was most certainly not enough.

In the stillness of the house—the house that would never again be filled with Patty’s laughter or the smells of her cooking—Ruby’s phone rings. She slips it from the back pocket of her jeans, barely clocking the name on her screen.

“Hello?” she says, feeling lost in every sense of the word.

“Ruby.” It’s Dexter North. His voice is full of worry and sympathy. “I’m so sorry.”

These three words, I’m so sorry, said in the voice of the man she’s grown to love—that’s all it takes to break Ruby. She leans against the side of the island, letting herself slide to the floor. Her back rests against the block there in the center of the kitchen, and her head falls forward. She starts to cry silently.

“Hey, Rubes,” Dexter says, probing. “Are you there? Are you okay?”

Ruby nods and then clears her throat. “I’m here. And I’m going to be okay. I just got to Santa Barbara, and I’m at my mother’s house. She’s gone, Dex.”

“I know,” he says softly. “I know. I got your message just now, and while I know you were expecting this, it’s still not easy. It’s never easy.”

Ruby swipes at the tears on her cheeks with one hand. “I didn’t mean to text you out of the blue like that,” Ruby says, trying to hold herself together. She and Dexter have been taking a bit of time apart, and while he’s been abreast of things following Patty’s bombshell about the cancer, and while he knew that Ruby was caring for Patty during her final days, she’d stopped short of texting him the minute Patty passed away. She hadn’t wanted his frantic call, his offer to do whatever he could, his words. What she’d wanted was for him to be there, at her side, holding her as she processed her mother’s death. In lieu of having him there, she’d kept her distance.

“Ruby, you should have sent me a message or called when it happened. My god...” He stops talking for a minute, and Ruby can imagine him standing there, his t-shirt and jeans hanging over his lean frame as he runs a hand through his hair with one hand and holds his phone with the other. “Just because we’re sorting through things and I’m working on the book doesn’t mean that I am not here for you. Ruby, I am right here, always. And I could have come to you at any moment—I would have. I still will. Do you want me in Santa Barbara?”

Ruby shakes her head as the tears fall again. “No, Dex, you have things to do. And I’m not being a martyr at all—I truly don’t want to pull you away from your work. I’m just here to sort through her immediate business. I need to talk to her lawyer, her accountant, make sure her bills are squared away. I need to speak to a real estate agent and talk about selling this place, and I want to go through her things and make sure I get some keepsakes for the girls. Her parents are long gone, as is her only sister. I have no siblings, and as far as I know, there’s really no one else in her life.”

Dexter stays quiet for a long beat. “You think your mom had no friends aside from you?”

“Well, no,” Ruby scoffs. “She dated a fair amount over the years, and I know she had friends she met up with occasionally for drinks or dinners, but I don’t think she has any other big relationships. Her sister died without having any kids, so I have no cousins for her to dote on...it’s always been the two of us, and then when I had the girls, our little band of women expanded by two. Other than that, I feel like she had a fairly small social circle, and that any relationships she had were purely superficial.”

“Huh.”

“What?” Ruby frowns and pulls her knees to her chest as she sits on the floor of her mother’s kitchen.

“I’m not trying to argue with you, Rubes, but I met your mom and she was a wildfire. Personality-plus. She had, to my eyes, a huge appetite for life, and I just can’t imagine that that didn’t extend to her relationships, whatever those might have been.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure about that.” Ruby pulls at a strand of her hair and winds it around her forefinger as she thinks. Is it possible that her mom had a big life and tons of interests that Ruby hadn’t even known about? Sure, there were years where Ruby had been completely enmeshed in her own life—her own dramas—and years when she

was busy being a mom and the First Lady, but...had she really overlooked the fact that Patty was out living a big life on the west coast and not sitting around, tending to her indoor herb garden and reading mystery novels?

“Well, you knew her better than anyone,” Dexter says soothingly. “And I think you’re incredibly strong to be there so soon, getting things in order. It’s amazing, and I want to help in any way that I can. So if you want me there, I’m there. All you have to do is say the word.”

Ruby smiles sadly. “Thanks, Dex. I appreciate that. But I think I can get all of this sorted in three, maybe four days, and then I’ll be back on Shipwreck Key.”

“Okay. But while you’re there, can we check in once a day? Would you be willing to let me know how you are—maybe each evening? I want to be here for you, Ruby. It’s important to me.”

This offer leaves Ruby blinking back tears. “Yes,” she says. “Sure. Of course. I’d like that.”

They’re both quiet as Ruby looks around the house, letting it truly sink in that she’s in her mother’s house alone, and that Patty isn’t about to come downstairs and ask if she wants to take a drive, or walk in through a side door with fresh flowers from her garden.

“You know, just because things aren’t totally figured out between us doesn’t mean that I need a break from you, Rubes—I don’t. I love you, and I want you to know that.”

Ruby appreciates his honesty and she certainly appreciates the words, but it’s almost too much at the moment. She can’t appropriately wade through the aftermath of her mother’s death and also try to figure out where she and Dexter are. But she doesn’t

want to push him away or seem ungrateful for his love.

With effort, Ruby stands and brushes off the back of her jeans. “Thank you, Dexter. I love you too,” she says. “I’ll check in with you tonight.”

They say their goodbyes and Ruby doesn’t even pause to wonder whether she’s been too curt with him; there will be time for that later. Right now, she has things to do around Patty’s house, and only a few days to get it all done.

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By dinnertime, Ruby has located a list of passwords written on the back of an envelope and tucked into Patty's top desk drawer. Some of them are as simple as Ruby&Patty1234 and others appear to be auto-generated complexities that require Ruby to hunt and peck for numbers and symbols to crack the gates and access her mother's bank and retirement accounts. All told, Patty has plenty of money to her name, and it appears that her home—on a lovely, tree-lined street in tony Santa Barbara—has been paid in full since 1993.

Patty owns her car outright, a condo in Seattle that she rents out to a woman named Ellen at an overly fair price, and she's been sending a check each month in the amount of \$2,000 to a place called Fair Skies Village in Austin, Texas. There's also what appears to be an annual disbursement of \$10,000 to a school of some sort in New York City. None of this raises Ruby's eyebrows in the sense that she feels her mother has been swindled, but she certainly wonders who and what Patty has been sending money to Austin and New York for.

Ruby takes off her reading glasses and turns on the lamp that sits on her mother's desk. She puts her head into her hands and rubs her temples as she fends off a mild headache. It's after six o'clock and she hasn't paused to eat anything all day, but somehow the time has slipped away as she makes notes on a legal pad at her elbow. She'd known when she'd agreed to take on the job of handling her mother's estate that there was a considerable amount of work tied to the process, but she hadn't known exactly how much work it would be, and this is suddenly starting to look like more than a three-day project.

Rather than heading back to her hotel this early (Ruby can't bring herself to sleep in her mother's house alone, even though she feels childish and ridiculous about it), so

she heads to the kitchen to rifle through the drawer of takeout menus her mom has always kept. After a brief perusal, she settles on enchiladas and a Diet Coke from a local Mexican restaurant that delivers, and she opens a bottle of wine from the wine rack next to the refrigerator and pours a glass.

Back in the office, Ruby stands at the window, admiring a jade plant that Patty keeps on the windowsill. Its smooth, fat leaves turn toward the waning sunlight. On the bookshelf against one wall are rows and rows of books, ranging from memoirs and autobiographies to classics to popular fiction. Interspersed between novels are little framed photos and tchotchkes, and Ruby is drawn to one in particular: a ceramic elephant that has clearly been made by the hands of a child.

She picks it up, turning it over in her hands. Was this something that one of her girls had made for their grandmother in elementary school? Its trunk is painted hot pink, and the body is turquoise and lumpy. Ruby smiles at it as she looks at the underside of the belly. There, scratched into the ceramic, are the initials MR.Hmm. Not Athena or Harlow. MR?Ruby sets it down again and moves on to a small, square picture frame of a much younger Patty standing outside in a vineyard with a distinguished older man. The sun is setting behind them, andthey're both holding glasses of sparkling, golden wine. Their smiles are wide, like they've been caught mid-laugh as they share a joke, and the man is leaning in to Patty, nearly pressing his cheek to hers. One of her many suitors? A fellow attorney at a work retreat? Ruby has no idea.

She crouches down to see the bottom shelf, which is lined with identical red boxes. Ruby slides one out and opens the lid. Inside are rows and rows of neatly opened envelopes, and as she thumbs through them, she sees that the return addresses are from everywhere: Toronto, London, Singapore, New Mexico, Washington D.C. (written in Ruby's own hand), and Seattle. The postmarks are chronological. Ruby puts the lid back on and sets the box aside. After spending a good portion of the summer reading her late husband's diaries and letters, she isn't sure that she's quite ready to delve into someone else's correspondence and personal papers.

And yet...

She has to. Ruby sighs and pulls out a letter from the front of the box dated May 13, 1996. It's from Seattle, and the name on the top left hand corner is Ellen Majors. Oh, Ellen! The Seattle renter, Ruby thinks, sliding the paper from the envelope and unfolding it as she sets her wine glass on one of the bookshelves.

Patty,

It's May and I'm here in rainy Seattle, wandering downtown on a day with nothing else to do. There's nothing like spring in the Pacific Northwest to remind you that you've chosen to live in the dampest, dreariest, most bone-chilling part of the country!

Ruby pauses here and sighs. She's momentarily hit by a wave of sadness, realizing that she's combing through the effects of yet another person who is gone from her life. Is it even okay to be reading a letter meant for her mother?

She turns back to the handwritten words on the page.

Seeing you over Christmas was rejuvenating for my heart. I thought--at one point--that we might never speak again, and I just don't think I could bear that, Patty. I don't. We've known each other for most of our lives--first as friends, and then as more--and no matter what, you will remain near and dear to my heart until the end. The very end, beloved, cherished Patty.

Remember the time we both crawled out of our bedroom windows and took the bus to The Coliseum to see the Beatles thirty years ago because your mom convinced my mom that rock music would turn us into harlots and destroy any moral fiber we might have built up in our eighteen years of life? I still laugh at the memory of us standing at the bus stop, bumming cigarettes off of that guy in the leather jacket. How

wholesome we were, Pat-Pat! Just think of Ruby at that age, wanting to see bands like--what was it that she was into a few years ago?--Nine Inch Nails? Our mothers would both roll over in their graves if they saw the musicians on MTV. John, Paul, Ringo, and George look like choirboys in contrast!

But I digress...once again, seeing you was wonderful, Patty. Laughing, reminiscing, talking like old times. I have a lot of regrets, but you don't factor into any of them. I hope you'll visit again soon--

Yours,

Ellen

The letter drops to Ruby's lap and she looks up at the window and the sky, now the color of a bruised plum as night falls over Santa Barbara. The doorbell rings in the distance and she stands and brushes off her pants once more, setting Ellen's letter on the desk.

Dinner is eaten at the kitchen table as she FaceTimes Sunday Bond, her best friend and the former Second Lady.

"Are we dining together?" Sunday asks as she sits on the couch in her little house on Shipwreck Key. She's eating a bowl of popcorn and there's a glass of wine on the end table next to her. The room is dim but for the lamp on the table.

"Am I catching you at a bad time?" Ruby lifts the lid off the foil container and sets up her Mexican dinner on the table. It's six-thirty in California and nine-thirty in Florida, so she knows that this is well past Sunday's actual dinner time. "Do you mind if we chat while I eat? Or, wait--is Banks there?"

Ruby sits down with a thunk, reaching for a chip and dipping it into the container of

salsa that came with her dinner.

"No, he's home tonight," Sunday says. She puts a few pieces of popcorn in her mouth and then talks around them casually. "We agreed that one night a week we'd stay apart for sure so that we could both catch up on our shows and have some quiet time." She scoops up another handful of popcorn. "I have a bunch of episodes of *The Bachelor* to watch, and he's watching some show about mining for gold in Alaska. Plus I think it's nice to have some time to ourselves. Absence makes the heart grow fonder and all of that."

"Right, right," Ruby says, distracted. "So, hey. I think my mom might have had a lesbian love affair when she was younger."

Sunday's hand stops midway to her mouth and a kernel of popcorn falls on her chest. "Patty?" Her eyes are wide with disbelief.

"Yup."

"Why? What makes you think that?"

Ruby shrugs one shoulder as she forks up a bite of enchilada. She chews it with her elbows on the table and one foot tucked up underneath her. "I read a letter from her friend Ellen, and it just felt...extra friendly. It was the way she worded some things. I don't know."

Sunday nods. She narrows her eyes and looks past the phone screen at a spot in her living room. "Okay," she says. "And how do you feel about it?"

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Ruby shrugs again. "I mean, I don't care obviously. Like, I don't care in the sense that it changes anything about how I feel about my mother, I just wish she would have told me."

"What makes you think she should have told you? Do you tell Harlow and Athena everything about your love life?"

"There's not much to tell," Ruby says, sounding incredulous. "I've dated a few men, I was married to their father for decades, and now I have one--maybe, it's kind of unclear at the moment--boyfriend, so...what's to tell?"

Sunday tips her head and shoots Ruby a look that travels across the thousands of miles between them. "Okay, let me be clear: do you tell them about the hot sex life you have with a man who is closer to their age than he is to yours?"

"Oh, god! No!" Ruby says, shaking her head emphatically and waving her fork around. "No way. And I wouldn't have wanted to know that about my mom either, but I would like to think she could have told me anything. I would've listened without judgment."

"There's no such thing."

"No such thing as what?"

"A lack of judgment. We all do it. We judge everything--it's human nature. Now," Sunday says, pointing a finger in the air like she's about to make a strong point, "it's what we do with that judgment that counts. Do we hold it against someone, or do we

just file it away as information we now know about them? I believe, Ruby, knowing you as I do, that you would have simply taken in that knowledge and moved on. That's how you are. But can you see Patty's fear that you might have held it against her?"

Ruby thinks about this, and she understands that there are fears that mothers hold in their hearts--fears that they'll do something to shame or disappoint their children. So yes, she can understand. She nods. "Okay, I can see it. Maybe." She looks away from Sunday as she picks at her food.

"So what are you going to do with this information now?"

Ruby inhales slowly and then releases it. "Well, this woman--Ellen is her name--is still renting the condo my mom owns in Seattle and it's now a part of her estate, so I guess I need to talk to Ellen. Decide what to do with the property and how it will affect someone who my mother clearly loved."

"Okay, that makes sense." Sunday sets the bowl of popcorn on the coffee table and picks up her wine instead. "Are you going to call her?"

Ruby gives a single shake of her head. "No," she says, deciding on the spot what she'll do. She looks directly at Sunday and she can feel herself bolstered by the determination to figure this out and do whatever it is her mom would have wanted her to do. "I'll get a flight to Seattle and go there myself. I think it's time that Ellen and I finally meet."

Ruby

Seattle is cold. It's gray. It's rainy. It's everything that Ruby has always believed it to be, though she's visited the city on numerous occasions and during every season. As a young girl, she and her mother made the trip at least twice a year to visit Patty's

parents, Eugene and Margaret, both die-hard Seattleites with a love of clean air, strong coffee, and the outdoors.

Before leaving Santa Barbara, Ruby made an appointment with Patty's accountant, but before getting even more embroiled in her mother's finances she needs to find out more about this property in Seattle.

"This is it, ma'am," the Uber driver says, pulling up in front of a beautiful duplex and idling at the curb. As he does, the windshield wipers streak the light rain across the glass, and jazz music hums quietly from the speakers.

Ruby looks out the window of the backseat at the house in the Montlake neighborhood of the city; it's within spitting distance of the University of Washington, and most of the houses look like the type that you see in movies set in Seattle: picturesque with peaked roofs, front porches, emerald green lawns, and moneyed exteriors.

Ruby glances at the address on her phone screen one more time and then back at the house, which is decidedly not a condo.

"Thank you," she says, sliding out of the car and putting the sole of one leather boot on the cold, wet pavement. Rain immediately starts to speckle the shoulders of her coat.

The door closes with a heavy thump and the driver leaves her there, standing at the foot of a short driveway as she looks up at the house. One street over, traffic rushes by on a busy street, but this home is tucked into a protected enclave of expensive homes, hugged by tall trees and lined with parked cars, basketball hoops, and all the trappings of the upper middle class.

"Ruby." A woman opens the front door. She stands there, arms wrapped around her

body as she watches Ruby walk up the driveway and to the house. “Welcome.”

“Ellen?” Ruby pauses for one brief moment to confirm, though she knows this must be the woman who had written her mother that letter—that one and so many others, all lined up in the boxes in Patty’s office. Ruby had read most of them, more and more certain with every missive that she’d stumbled onto the great love affair of her mother’s life. “It’s so nice to meet you.”

Ruby is prepared to offer a hand, but Ellen steps out onto the porch and throws her arms open wide. “I can’t believe you’re here,” Ellen says in a hoarse whisper, pulling her close for a hug. “Your mom...I’m so sorry, honey.”

They stand there like that for a moment. Ellen smells like clean, powdery perfume, and the open house behind her beckons with the scent of freshly brewed coffee.

Finally, Ellen releases her and wipes the tears from her own eyes. She takes Ruby’s hand, and leads her inside.

They quickly dispense with Ruby’s coat, purse, and boots, and end up in the middle of a warm kitchen with many windows and a collection of copper pots that hang over an island.

Ellen pours them each a cup of coffee and brings cream from the refrigerator as Ruby looks around.

“Sit, sit,” Ellen says, waving at the table. Ruby sits. “I know why you’re here.”

Ruby doesn’t even know why she’s here. She accepts the coffee and waits for Ellen to join her. When she does, Ruby taps a nail against the side of her ceramic mug, trying to formulate her thoughts. No matter how much time she spent on the airplane imagining this moment and this conversation, she still couldn’t have truly envisioned

herself asking a strange woman to tell her the circumstances of her love affair with Patty.

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When Ruby doesn't speak, Ellen does: "You want to sell the house and I completely understand. I've lived here forever nearly rent-free, and it's time for me to move on and let you settle your mom's estate."

In truth, those thoughts had been part of Ruby's mental meanderings, but she hasn't made any such decision formally. Sure, this house is probably worth a fair amount of money, but there's so much more that Ruby needs to know.

"Actually, I have no idea yet," Ruby finally says, lifting her coffee mug just to feel the warmth against her cold hands. "This is all new to me, and I'm really just getting my ducks in a row. I don't have any siblings, as you know, so it's just me trying to figure this out." She dips her head and pauses before going on. "I understand that you and my mother were close, I just don't know how close, or how you two maintained a friendship all these years."

At this, Ellen bursts out laughing. The unexpected mirth jolts Ruby and she looks up from her coffee mug in surprise.

"Sometimes it's not about maintaining a friendship, Ruby," Ellen says. She's looking at Ruby from the other end of a kitchen table that's covered by a yellow and white tablecloth. "It's about a shared past that bonds you together with ties that are unbreakable."

Ruby decides that being forthright is her best option, given that she's only spending twenty-four hours in Seattle. "I read some of your letters."

Not even a flicker of shock registers on Ellen's face; she appears totally unsurprised.

“I wrote many,” she says carefully.

“You did.” Ruby nods, still clutching the mug with both hands. “I loved the one about you two sneaking out to see the Beatles.”

This makes Ellen laugh again, and this time her head tips back and her eyes close. The lines on her face look like etchings from years and decades of joy, and suddenly the woman she’d imagined up here in Seattle, pining away for Patty, becomes someone different, someone happy.

“We were a couple of hooligans, that’s what we were,” Ellen says, swiping at a tear that’s escaped during her laughing fit. “Our mothers never knew about that little escapade. I’m sure you’ve had a few yourself that you never told Patty about.”

“Oh, probably,” Ruby says, smiling nervously. “But my mom and I have always been pretty close.” Her smile fades. “I mean, wewereclose.”

Ellen clucks sympathetically. “Oh, Ruby,” she says. “It’ll take time.”

Ruby gives a nod. “I know. And it’s fresh. She came to Florida and stayed with me until the end.” The words nearly choke her as she says them, trying hard not to remember the frail, pained woman who had taken the place of lively, vivacious, funny Patty.

But even in her pain, there had been humor; Patty hadn’t faded altogether until her very last hours. In fact, there had been a day on Shipwreck Key—maybe two weeks into Patty being there—that Ruby had paused in the middle of the kitchen, copper pot in one hand and dishrag in the other, and listened to the silence.

The house, empty save for her and Patty after Harlow and Athena had left the island again, had fallen into a soothing sort of routine. The women woke up, had coffee,

Ruby cared for her mother and got her all the medications that she started her day with, and then they'd sit together at the table and talk about everything under the sun.

Before noon, Ruby would get Patty set up on a couch comfortably, a cup of tea on the coffee table, and all of her stationary sets and pens were set up close by. Patty would write notes to mail to her friends until sleep overwhelmed her, then she'd doze until late afternoon, sleeping right through lunch.

One afternoon, things got terribly quiet much earlier than usual, and Ruby stopped what she was doing, holding that pan in one hand and listening for the sound of Patty picking up and setting down the mug of tea, or dropping a pen and calling for Ruby to help her retrieve it. But that day, there was nothing. The house had gotten so quiet that Ruby could hear the clock on the wall ticking.

Her first urge was to call out for her mother, but instead, she'd set the copper pot on the island, holding the dish towel in hand as she tiptoed into the front room. There, on the couch, Patty's head had lolled back, and her eyes were closed. Her mouth hung slack. The pen she'd been writing with rested in her right hand, and the paper had slipped off her lap and landed on the rug beneath the coffee table.

"Oh, no," Ruby had whispered to herself. In fact, the words came out so quietly that she might not have said them aloud at all.

She took cautious steps towards her mother, her heart rate picking up in anxious anticipation.

When Patty didn't stir, Ruby leaned forward, putting her face as close to her mother's as she could bear, hoping that she'd feel the exhalation of breath from either Patty's mouth or nostrils.

Ruby stood there, cheek next to her mother's mouth.

“I’m not dead yet,” Patty had said in a regular, if somewhat raspy, voice.

Ruby shrieked and jumped back, putting both hands to her chest. “Jesus, Mom!” she’d shouted, feeling her eyes well with tears. “I thought you stopped breathing.”

Patty chuckled and reached out one shaky hand towards her daughter. “I’m sorry, Bibi, I couldn’t resist. You just looked so serious. I had to lighten the mood.”

The tears fell freely down Ruby’s cheeks as she broke into a smile; even she could laugh at the ridiculousness of thinking her mother had died without a final joke or a few words for Ruby.

“Mom,” Ruby had said, pulling the sleeve of her lightweight sweatshirt down over one hand and using it to wipe her eyes and her nose. “Don’t die, okay?”

Patty’s face softened as she watched her adult daughter standing there, vulnerable as a little girl in the face of her mother’s impending demise.

“Bibi, I will hang on as long as I possibly can, if only to give you a few more nuggets of wisdom before I go.”

Ruby had laughed at that too; they both knew that Ruby had enough nuggets of her own wisdom at that point.

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“We spoke while she was staying with you,” Ellen says now as they sit there in her kitchen in Seattle. “And she sent me letters from Shipwreck Key.”

“I guess I just want to know more about your relationship with her. Whatever you can tell me. Whatever you’re willing to share,” Ruby adds quickly, understanding that women of their generation may not be completely open about their sexuality with people they’ve just met.

A soft, knowing smile crosses Ellen’s face, and she looks out the window at the rain that’s falling on the trees outside. She is lost in thought. Ruby waits.

“Your mother...” Ellen begins. She stops, holds up one hand, clears her throat, and then goes on. “Patricia was one-of-a-kind. We became friends in elementary school, and we were thick as thieves from that point on. It wasn’t until high school that I realized how I really felt.”

Ruby braces herself, knotting her hands together in her lap as the rain begins to pelt the windows in earnest. “About my mom?” she asks gravely.

Ellen tips her head to one side, watching Ruby’s face. “About her sister.”

“My aunt Olivia?” Ruby frowns.

Ellen nods. “Mmm, yes. Olivia. She was a year older than us, and like something out of a 1940s movie. Thick, wavy hair, glossy red nails and lips, and eyebrows penciled in so that she always looked amused. Smart as a whip, too.” Ellen turns her head to watch the rain streaming down the glass, and then she looks back at Ruby and leans

forward, resting her elbows on the table. “Olivia and I fell in love. It wasn’t acceptable at that time, and we never told a soul, but your mother knew.”

Ruby is puzzled by this. The letters had definitely felt to her as though Ellen had been in love with her mother, and there had been no mention whatsoever of Aunt Olivia.

“But...Aunt Olivia was married to my Uncle Jim.”

Ellen shrugs and then wraps her hands around her coffee mug again. “What can I say? There are many, many people our age in marriages that were meant to cover up the fact that we were in love with someone of our own gender. I myself never married, but I respect what Olivia felt she needed to do.”

“So,” Ruby says, shaking her head as she tries to come to terms with this revelation. “You two were in love?”

“We were.” Ellen nods. “And then your mother and I were in an accident, and it changed everything.”

“Wait. You got into an accident? I don’t know anything about this.”

Ellen takes a long, deep breath and then starts to talk. “One rainy night in November 1966, your mom and I went out driving around town, as young women did when they were looking for trouble.” She laughs here, giving a single, disbelieving shake of her head as she recalls that night. Her eyes are faraway, and she taps her short fingernails against her ceramic mug. “We were in the Capitol Hill area, and we’d been drinking. Your mom was driving.”

Ruby is on the edge of her seat here; for her entire life, Patty had hounded her ceaselessly about never drinking and driving, and about never getting into the car with anyone who had. She has a feeling that this story is at the heart of Patty’s

obsession with drunk drivers.

“Anyhow, she was driving and the rain was coming down in sheets, and somehow we missed a stop sign. Ran right through it. The next thing I knew we were facing the wrong way on that street, and headlights were coming at us. I don’t know why, but I told your mother to get out and go for help. I could feel that something was wrong with my leg, and I knew that if your mom left me there, I could slide over behind the wheel, which is exactly what I did.”

“You got in the driver’s seat?”

“I did. I dragged myself over there, and when the ambulance and the cops came, I acted like I’d been driving. Your mother came back and she saw me there, but we didn’t discuss it.”

“But why did you do that? Didn’t you worry you’d get in trouble?”

“I didn’t think at all, I just knew that something was really wrong with my leg, and that if your mother was behind the wheel after drinking more than I’d drunk, that she’d get in trouble for the accident. I didn’t want that.”

Ruby listened, imagining the scene: a young Patty, running through the rainy night and sobering up quickly as she got back to the scene of the accident and realized that her best friend had slid behind the wheel to cover for her.

“I lost my right leg below the knee, Ruby,” Ellen says gently, leaning away from the table and extending her leg. She tugs at the leg of her pants, pulling it up so that Ruby can see the titanium lower leg of her artificial limb. The foot is encased in a shoe that matches the one on her other foot. “And because everyone thought I was driving, it was just deemed an ‘unfortunate accident.’ I wasn’t even drunk enough to make the cops question my sobriety.”

“So you two got away with it? That doesn’t sound like my mom,” Ruby argues, still not able to fully envision that this had happened, and that Patty would have agreed to go along with it. “Why did she stay quiet?”

“I told her that if she let it play out that way, it would be better for both of us. That she could leave and go to college, and that we wouldn’t get into trouble that way. And I only asked one thing of her in return.”

“What was that?”

“I asked her to tell Olivia that I didn’t love her anymore.”

Ruby waits, thinking that there might be more. When nothing else comes, she takes a sip of her coffee and then sets the mug on the table again. “Was it true?”

“It most definitely was not true.” Ellen avoids Ruby’s gaze. “I told your mother to make sure Olivia believed I’d moved on, and that she should do the same. I wanted her to marry, to have children, to have a life. I knew that—in those days—being with me would mean that she’d never truly be happy. We would never truly be happy.”

“Even if you were together?”

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“As what? Roommates? That was common in those days: two spinster women, shacking up together to ‘save money’ by being roommates. Most people’s families either believed it wholeheartedly, or went along with it because they wanted it to be true. But that’s not how I wanted to live with your aunt Olivia. I wanted to hold her hand as we walked through bookstores together, to kiss her on street corners. I wanted us to adopt a little boy and name him Shane?—“

“Shane?”

“I know, silly and girlish of me to name our children, wasn’t it?”

Ruby blinks, caught by surprise at this touching detail. “No, I...it’s sweet. I love that you felt this way about my aunt. I guess I never really got to know her well enough to understand her life, or to have any concept of a path not taken. I feel—I don’t know.” Ruby blinks a few times. “Pleasantly surprised I guess, just to find out that Olivia had a great love in her life.”

Ellen is clearly steeling herself as she asks, but she manages to get the words out anyway: “And you don’t think your uncle Jim was her great love?”

Ruby thinks about this. “They seemed happy enough. Don’t you think it’s rare to know people who are so fully in love that you can’t imagine them with anyone else? Uncle Jim could have been anyone, but it just so happened that he was a decent guy who owned a hardware store in Olympia, and he and my aunt got along. But wild, passionate love? I don’t know for certain, but I don’t think so.”

This seems to satisfy Ellen, and she watches the rain for a long time, saying nothing.

“I’m glad she had that life,” Ellen finally says. Her voice is low, and her words are measured. “When she died, I was able to say goodbye.”

“You were?”

“Of course. Your mother told me she had breast cancer, and I called your uncle and explained that I was an old friend and wanted to visit her at the hospital. I went on a Saturday, and she died the next day.”

Ruby feels a chill run through her body. “Did you tell her the truth—that you never stopped loving her?”

Ellen’s eyes are glossy with unshed tears. “I don’t think I had to. I just sat next to her and held her hand, and we listened to the sound of the machinery that was keeping her alive. At one point, we both cried and I got up to find Kleenex so that I could wipe her tears. I truly believe that she understood. I think she was happy with the way things turned out. Or maybe I just want to believe that.” Ellen pats the table here and stands, walking over to the sink where she tears a paper towel off a roll and dabs at her eyes with it. This time, as she moves, Ruby can see the slight limp to her walk.

When she sits down again, Ruby reaches over and takes Ellen’s hand in hers, squeezing it firmly. “I think you’re safe believing that,” she says, looking Ellen in the eye. “And thank you for telling me all of this. I think it’s beautiful how much you two loved one another, and beyond generous that you let her go so that she could have the life she did.”

Ellen stares at the tablecloth beneath their coffee mugs. “I don’t know about generous, but I loved her enough to let her go, which is the kindest thing you can do sometimes.”

Ruby looks around the kitchen, still holding tightly to Ellen’s hand. “So that’s why

my mom bought this place and it's why you've lived here all these years."

Ellen dips her chin, then gives Ruby's hand a squeeze back and lets it go. "She very kindly offered to let me stay here for free, so long as she could use the guest room any time she came to Seattle. But I insisted on paying her—I'm no freeloader."

"Oh, I would never think that of you," Ruby reassures her. "I don't need to know or understand the reasons for your arrangement with my mom, because now I understand your history together. She wanted you to live here, and I wouldn't do anything to change that."

"I'd like to buy the house, Ruby," Ellen says, meeting her eye. "I'd like to pay you market value for it, and own it outright. I would have done it before Patty died, but she always insisted that the house was mine for as long as I wanted to stay, and that if I ever ran into financial trouble, she'd let me stay anyway. So now I want to buy it and make sure that you're never in a place where you have to put up an old lady out of some sense of duty or obligation to your mother."

"Ellen, it's not like that." Ruby laces her fingers together and places her hands on the table. "My mom wanted you to live here, and you'll continue to live here. I haven't met with her attorney yet, but let's see what provisions she put in her will for this house, because, knowing my mom, she had plans for it."

Ellen takes a breath and nods. "Okay," she says. "Fair enough. But just know that I'm prepared to pay whatever I have to pay. Your mom came here so many times, and we laughed and cried in this house." She glances around at the walls and the windows. "For me, this is home, and it always will be."

The women finish their coffee as the rain lets up, and when it's time for Ruby to leave, she hugs Ellen at the door and then releases her, stepping onto the porch with a hat pulled down over her forehead, and a scarf wound around her neck. Her blonde

hair is tucked beneath the hat in a bun at the nape of her neck.

"I'll be in touch," Ruby says, waving to the Uber driver, who is idling at the curb with his headlights on. "Soon."

Ellen stands in the doorway as Ruby climbs into the car, and then she waves as the Lexus rounds the corner.

Ruby glances through the back window of the car; the scene is rain-soaked and suburban. She misses the warmth of Shipwreck Key, her own bed, and her friends.

"Headed to the Hilton, ma'am?" the driver asks.

Ruby realizes for a moment that she's out in the world completely without Secret Service, her only shield against recognition an oversized hat and a bulky neck scarf. A thrill runs through her at this little bit of freedom.

"Yes, to the Hilton, please."

Ruby leans back against the seat for the rest of the ride and watches the rain slick the streets, the buildings, and the cars around them.

Ruby

"I'm so glad you're here." Ruby has a red handkerchief tied around her head and she's wearing a beat-up gray t-shirt and a pair of too-big overalls. "I'm not sure I could do this on my own."

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"You could," Helen Pullman says, leaning her weight against the doorframe of Patty's bedroom in Santa Barbara. She's flown in from D.C. after Ruby's quick trip to Seattle, and the women have plans to go through Patty's jewelry and clothing together. "You have gone through much bigger things--and on a public stage, I might add--and the death of your mother, while terrible, is not unexpected in the life of a middle-aged woman."

Ruby is taping the bottom of a box and she stops mid-job to look at Helen. "You don't pull any punches, do you?"

"It would be a waste of my time," Helen says, ambling over to the bed and sitting at the foot of it. "I ran the Oval Office and kept your husband on track, so helping you organize your mom's house will be a walk in the park."

True to form, Helen keeps them on task with a firm but loving hand, and by late afternoon there are boxes of family photo albums taped and ready for Ruby to FedEx back to Shipwreck Key for storage, as well as several boxes of clothing, dishes, shoes, and brand new linens set by the door that she plans to donate to the local women's shelter. Helen has headed off at least four breakdowns, swept through whatever room Ruby was in throughout the day and dropped off a box of tissue to dry Ruby's perpetually flowing tears, and made the whole thing about ten times more fun than it would have been by insisting that they put some of Patty's vinyl on the turntable as they work.

"Helen?" Ruby calls out, trying to be heard over Fleetwood Mac as she sits on the floor of her mom's sunny little office. She shifts around on the faded rug that covers most of the wood floors. "What do you think I should do with this?"

Helen pokes her head into the office and Ruby sees that she's got several of Patty's silk scarves hanging over one shoulder like she's moving them from one spot to another. "What, babe?"

From her spot on the floor, Ruby holds up a blown glass hibiscus flower the size of her palm. She frowns at it. "It's beautiful, but it feels too fragile to FedEx."

"Pretty," Helen says. "Put it in the box to go."

Ruby gives a little huff of a laugh. "It's that easy, huh?"

Helen shrugs. "If you don't know where it came from, who made it, or why it was important—and if it has no meaning to you—I say send it down the river. But if you think it has some importance, then I guess bubble wrap the crap out of it and send it home with the rest of the boxes."

Ruby understands the simplicity of making these calls; it should be easy to look at an item that she has no emotional ties to and say yay or nay quite easily, but something about this delicate glass hibiscus gives her pause.

"I'm going to hang onto it for now. Maybe I'll just carry it on the plane with me to take home."

Helen shrugs and moves on, leaving the room with a wide-brimmed hat on her head that she's picked up from its spot on a chair, and the scarves still dangling over one shoulder.

As the record in the front room ends and Helen switches it out without asking, Elton John's crooning voice drifts down the hall. Ruby continues sifting through her mother's personal items, emptying out drawers and pulling books and photos from shelves. The picture she'd picked up before her trip to Seattle catches her attention

again, and she turns the frame over in her hands, unclasping the latch to take the back off of it. The photo comes out easily and Ruby turns it over, looking first at the front—her mother, standing in that gorgeous afternoon light in a vineyard with a handsomely weathered man—and then at the back, where a faded inscription is scrawled in Patty’s looping cursive: With Lyle W. Napa 1988.

Lyle? Ruby frowns. Lyle who? In 1988, Ruby’s father had only been gone a few years, and she and her mother were living in Southern California, navigating Ruby’s teenage years together as Patty argued court cases and dipped her toes back in the dating pool. But this man—Lyle—appeared to be more than a casual date. The way he leaned in to Patty, the familiarity with which she pressed her face close to his. The faraway look in their eyes, as if they’d just been talking about something that had made them both wistful, made Ruby feel as if she’d stumbled into a room in the middle of two people having a private conversation.

Ruby stands from the floor and stretches her arms overhead, then picks her way through the piles of books and photos and tchotchkes until she’s standing at Patty’s desk. She flips through the calendar next to the computer, running her fingers over the last entry Patty had made there: May 21—appt with Dr. Sanderson; send \$ to FSV.

This tickles her brain and Ruby wiggles the mouse on the computer until the screen springs to life. There, as a screensaver, is a photo of Patty with her daughter at her side and her two granddaughters behind them, their hands resting on her shoulders lovingly. It had been taken during a visit to Shipwreck Key the previous year, and Ruby’s eyes fill with tears at the sudden memory of a visit with her mother where she’d assumed that nothing would happen to her for years to come. If nothing else, life has taught her in the past few years that everything is temporary; there is no guarantee not just of a tomorrow, but of the very next moment. From Jack’s death and finding out a year later about his diagnosis, to Harlow’s getting trapped in the crossfire in a shooting in New York City, and now Patty’s death, Ruby feels as though life has grabbed her by the roots of her hair and dragged her into midlife

kicking and screaming.

With a few keystrokes, Ruby is back into her mother's account, and she skims the disbursements again until she finds what she wants: FSV—Fair Skies Village. The retirement home in Austin. Sinking into the chair rather than hovering over it, Ruby navigates to a new browser page and types in the name of the retirement home, watching the screen as an image of a building that looks like it's situated on a golf course appears before her.

It's almost resort-like, with palm trees, manicured green grasses, and man-made oases sprinkled around the main building. Ruby scrolls to the bottom and finds a phone number.

After a few minutes of explanation and transfers, she has a woman on the phone in the main office, and she's once again explained that her mother has passed away, and that she has been sending checks to Fair Skies Village each month for several years, and now Ruby needs to find out more about these payments so that she can determine what her mother's intentions were.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I can't give out information about current residents," the woman on the line says.

"I'm not asking about your residents," Ruby explains patiently, "I just need to understand what my mother's monthly payments were for. If she was supporting one of your residents and her checks stop coming, that could be hugely detrimental to the person relying on them."

"Yes," the woman agrees. "It could. Let me see what information I can provide." She asks Ruby a few questions and taps at her computer keys audibly while Ruby waits. "Hmm. Okay. I see that two thousand dollar checks have been coming monthly from Patricia Dallarosa for nearly twenty years now." There is a pause. "And that the

remainder of the payments are coming from someone in Austin. I guess...I could reach out to the person paying the other portion, who appears to be the resident's daughter, and perhaps she would be willing to talk to you about it? That's the best I can do."

"Of course," Ruby says. "That would work."

"I'm sorry I can't give you more than that."

"No, no—I understand. Patient confidentiality." Ruby is mildly distracted as she gives a phone number and her email address to the woman.

"Ruby Hudson," the woman on the other end of the line says. "I bet people confuse you with the former First Lady all the time," she teases, a smile in her voice.

"Oh, you have no idea." Ruby takes off her reading glasses and spins around in her mother's desk chair so that she's facing the window. "Thank you for your help. I'll wait and hope to hear from the woman you're reaching out to, and I guess we'll go from there."

"My condolences on your mother's passing," the woman says before they hang up.

As soon as Ruby ends the call, her phone rings again and she answers.

“Hello, Mrs. Hudson?” a man says.

“Yes, this is Ruby.”

“This is Alan Berkshire, your mother’s attorney. I’d love to meet with you as soon as possible, and I understand that time is of the essence to you as well, based on your message.”

Ruby clears her throat. “Yes. It is. I’m only in Santa Barbara temporarily, so I’d like to handle as much of this in person as I possibly can. Could we set up a time to meet?”

“How is this afternoon?”

Ruby flips over her wrist and consults her watch; it’s nearly three o’clock. “I can be there at four?” she offers, calculating how quickly she can run a brush through her hair and slap on some lipstick. “You’re downtown on State Street, correct?”

“Right by the courthouse,” he says. “You’ll know you’re there when you see brides and grooms standing on the grass with professional photographers and makeup artists,” he jokes, alluding to the fact that the courthouse is incredibly picturesque and a popular spot for Instagrammable weddings.

“Got it. I’ll be there at four,” Ruby promises, ending the call and standing up quickly. “Hey, Helen?” she calls. “I need to go meet my mom’s attorney now. Are you fine here for a bit, or do you want to come?”

Helen materializes in the doorway of the office; the hat and scarves are gone, but she's holding a small painting gingerly in her hands. "Do you think this is a real Picasso?"

Ruby squints at the artwork. "Maybe?" She walks over to inspect it. Sure enough, the telltale signature is right there on the canvas. "Apparently there's a lot about my mom that I didn't know, so maybe she's been squirreling away invaluable works of art behind my back along with hiding the fact that she was the one driving in an accident where a woman lost her leg. Who even knows at this point?" Ruby throws her hands in the air and then lets them fall in exasperation.

"Yeah, that was a doozy," Helen agrees. She leans against the doorframe with one shoulder, still holding the painting. "I didn't want to ask too much about it, but you said she was drinking and driving? And some lady is living in her house up in Seattle because your mom felt bad about the leg?"

Ruby blows out a long breath. She needs coffee. "I think it's so much more than that, Helen. I just...this is overwhelming, you know? All of it." Ruby puts her hands to her face and stands there for a moment, breathing in and out.

"Oh, love. Don't I know it. My parents are both long gone, and let me tell you, with each of their deaths came a mountain of garbage—both literal and figurative. So just cut yourself all the slack you need."

"Yeah," Ruby finally says. She drops her hands from her face. "You're right. And do you think you can come with me? To the lawyer?"

Helen sets the painting down carefully so that it's leaning against the office wall out of the way. Ruby will have to deal with the Picasso later. "I'm ready when you are," Helen says gamely. "As long as we can get a latte somewhere along the way."

“My thoughts exactly.” Ruby grabs her purse off the kitchen island and forgoes a change from her sweatshirt into something nicer. She checks her bag for a hairbrush and a tube of lipstick so she can do a quick touch-up in the car. “Let’s roll.”

Alan Berkshire’s office was indeed located near the courthouse, and on this gorgeous, sunny October afternoon, Ruby and Helen stroll down the sidewalk with iced coffees in hand, dodging kids on skateboards and watching as young college students lounge in the emerald grass that surrounds the courthouse.

“Nice digs,” Helen says, lifting her sunglasses as she looks at the mission-style building with its dark ironwork and tiled roof. “Not a shabby place to spend your days.”

“A bit more relaxed than the White House, huh?” Ruby says, taking off her own sunglasses and dropping them into her purse as they pass through the front door of Berkshire, Hallywood, Briar, and Lane’s law office. The woman at the front counter is young and pretty, and her hair is loose and wavy, her nose studded with a glittering diamond. Ruby can’t help thinking that a young woman greeting the public in D.C. would be more likely to have her hair slicked back and her nose stud-free, but there’s something in the air in Southern California that makes her breezy attitude and natural look feel right.

“Welcome!” the front desk attendant chirps. She lifts a hand and waves at Ruby and Helen, and Ruby can feel Helen pause next to her, startled by the motion. She reaches out and grabs Helen’s hand, tugging her along so that she won’t gawk like an East Coaster.

“Hi,” Ruby says with a smile. “I’m here to see Alan Berkshire. Ruby Hudson.”

Recognition passes over the young woman’s face and her smile widens, though so do her eyes, making her look like a stunned little girl. “Oh! Mrs. Hudson. It’s an honor

to meet you.” She stands behind her desk, revealing a form-fitting, stretchy black dress over bare legs. The dress is about two inches too short. “I’m Reggie.”

“So nice to meet you,” Ruby says, falling immediately into First Lady mode. “And this is Helen Pullman. We have an appointment at four.”

“Yes, of course. I’ll let Alan know you’re here,” she says, stepping from behind the desk and revealing a pair of rhinestone bedazzled Birkenstocks on her feet. Her toes are painted hot pink. “Can I get you some coffee while you wait?”

Helen holds up her plastic cup and rattles the ice around to indicate that they already have some.

“No, thank you, Reggie. We’re fine.” Ruby smiles at her.

Reggie disappears down a long hallway, her extremely toned derriere wiggling its way to get Alan Berkshire.

Ruby can barely bring herself to look at Helen, but she glances in her friend’s direction just in time to see her put the straw of her iced coffee between her lips and raise her eyebrows quizzically.

“Ruby!” Ruby looks up as a man in a shirt and tie (sleeves rolled up; no jacket) approaches. He is fair-haired and balding, his remaining hair windswept and his face tanned as if he drives through Santa Barbara in a convertible on his way between his law office and the golf course. “Alan Berkshire,” he says, hand extended. His eyes dance merrily and he turns to Helen, who introduces herself. “Lovely to meet you both. It’s not every day I have a First Lady and a Chief of Staff walk into the lobby of my humble offices.” Alan spreads his hands to indicate the well-appointed but still rather bland space.

The women follow Alan to his office, which has a giant window that looks out at the courthouse lawn. Palm trees wave against a late afternoon sky that looks like turquoise brushed over with gold, and on the green grass, two young men in cut-off jeans toss a frisbee back and forth. It looks like an image that the California Board of Tourism might have conjured up to make visiting Santa Barbara a must-do.

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“Let’s dive right in,” Alan says, waving at two mid-century designed chairs for Ruby and Helen. He sits behind his desk and slides on a pair of reading glasses as he taps at his keyboard. “First of all,” he says to Ruby, looking back at her and taking his reading glasses off again as he makes eye contact with her. “Let me say how deeply I adored your mother. Patty Dallarosa was a force to be reckoned with, and I miss her laugh, her friendship, and her legal banter.”

“You knew my mother professionally?” Ruby frowns. “She wasn’t just a client?”

Alan’s laugh booms throughout the office and he leans back in his chair, pushing his shirtsleeves up further. “Oh, lord no. Patty and I go way back. We worked together on a huge trial in Los Angeles County in about...1995, I guess it was. She was several years into her career by then and man, was she a sight to behold.”

Ruby smiles at this, loving the look of admiration on Alan Berkshire’s face as he remembers Patty in the prime of her career.

“Dressed to kill, always,” Alan says, resting his elbows on the arms of his chair and steepling his hands before him. “She’d walk into a courtroom in head-to-toe Chanel with her hair and makeup done in whatever style was current. I’m not kidding you, Ruby,” he says imploringly, as if she might not believe his words, “your mother could have been a runway model, even in her forties. Or a movie star.”

“That’s true.” Ruby beams, feeling tears prick at her eyes. She’d always been unfailingly proud of her beautiful mother. “My mother never left the house without being fully dressed and made up. In fact,” Ruby says, glancing out the window at the satiny sky, “she never started her day until she was dressed. That was one of her

things: get ready enough so that no matter who knocks on your door, you're ready."

Alan is shaking his head. "She looked like a perfectly turned out starlet at all times, but her mind and her tongue were like cut glass and velvet, respectively."

"That's a perfect way to describe her," Ruby agrees. "She was never at a loss for words—some of them quite sharp—but she always knew the perfect way to sand them down and deliver them so that you weren't even sure you'd been cut."

"I watched her do it over and over in court," Alan says, following Ruby's gaze out the window.

"My mother was a one of a kind." Ruby puts a hand to her cheek. Tears are never far when she's thinking about Patty, but she'd rather keep herself in check here at the lawyer's office and not crumble into a pile of tears and memories. "I will miss her forever."

They take a brief pause, and then Alan puts his reading glasses back on and sits up straight. "On that note, I say we get down to it."

Ruby gives a firm nod and Helen pats her hand and then stands, holding her iced coffee. "If you'll excuse me for a moment," she says, nodding at the door. "I'll just ask the nice young lady up front--your daughter, I presume?--to show me to the restroom."

Alan smirks at Helen. "Third wife," he says with a guilty and slightly apologetic shrug. "She tells me that I need to keep things relaxed around here if I'm going to attract a younger, hipper clientele."

Helen stands there, looking down at Alan Berkshire disbelievingly. "It's your business, Mr. Berkshire, but as an estate lawyer, I'm not sure that 'younger and

hipper' is really your target audience." With that, Helen shows herself out of the office and closes the door gently behind her.

"She's got a point," Alan says, looking at Ruby over the top of his glasses. "She definitely has a point."

"Well, we've all gotten sidetracked by love a time or two, haven't we?" Ruby says kindly. "Anyhow, you were saying?"

Alan frowns at the computer screen before looking at Ruby again. "Well, your mother's net worth is fairly substantial," he says. "She invested well, and once you talk to her accountant I'm sure you'll get more up-to-date figures, but as of our last discussion, she had something like forty-six million in stocks, savings, and real estate holdings. Her will has some provisions that we'll need to adhere to, but as her next of kin, Ruby, you stand to inherit the bulk of that money."

Ruby blinks. She sucks in a breath and holds it. Blinks again. Releases the breath in one loud puff. "Forty-sixmillion? But...how? I..." She is at a loss for words at this point, and instead of saying more, Ruby clamps her mouth shut and waits.

"I think once you speak to her accountant and see the actual stock portfolios it might make more sense, but essentially, Patty took your father's life insurance policy and paid off her house. She then went back to work and put the lion's share of her salary into the stock market. That might have felt like a risky move for a relatively young widow, but Patty was playing the long game, and she was on the receiving end of some solid advice, as far as I can tell."

Ruby folds her hands, unfolds them. She's still trying to grasp how her mother might have turned her life into an estate worth forty-six million dollars. "What kind of advice do you think she got?"

Alan Berkshire shrugs. "Someone told her to invest in Apple in the eighties, and she did. Beyond that, I couldn't tell you the specifics, but she did well. As far as real estate, she owns the house here in Santa Barbara, as you know, and one in Seattle. She also owns an apartment in New York City, and--"

"Wait." Ruby slides forward on her chair, holding up a hand. "New York City? My mother?" Ruby shakes her head adamantly. "That must be a mistake. My mom doesn't own any property on the east coast."

Alan pulls a face that says I'm not quite done yet, and Ruby sits back in her chair, still shaking her head.

"She also owns a bungalow on Jekyll Island in Georgia."

"No," Ruby says, and it's not a protest, but a proclamation. "My mother would have told me if she owned more property."

Alan stands and places his reading glasses on the desk. He walks around it, sits in the chair formerly occupied by Helen, and looks at Ruby searchingly. "I find--in life, and in my business--that there are many, many things we don't know about our loved ones, Ruby. Both good and bad things. Fortunately, I think you'll find that most of what you don't know about Patty is good stuff, but I want you to know that there is stuff."

"But..." Ruby trails off, still processing the apartment in Manhattan and the so-called bungalow in Georgia. "My mom and I shared pretty much everything. There was no reason for her not to tell me these things. No reason at all."

"None?" Alan raises his eyebrows and waits for Ruby to come to her own conclusions.

Ruby racks her brain, thinking of what might have compelled her mother to keep secrets from her. Of course, it's natural for a daughter not to tell her mom everything, but as Patty had gotten older she pretty much just gardened and walked on the beach and met friends for happy hour for the last couple of decades of her life. What part of that needed to be some big secret? But what about the forty-six million dollars? How and why would her mother have accumulated that kind of money and kept it tucked away and hidden? None of it made any sense.

Ruby sighs; she's suddenly exhausted. "I guess I got kind of busy with my own life," she says, waving a hand through the air listlessly. "I was raising kids and then I was in the White House, and--"

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Alan's eyebrows shoot sky high. "And maybe your mom assumed--perhaps rightly--that you were too busy being First Lady to the entire nation to be interested in the daily goings-on of her life. Maybe she set out to support herself, to entertain herself, and to leave her own legacy that was separate from yours. Maybe she wanted to be something other than a young widow, a fierce lawyer, and Ruby Hudson's mom."

Ruby tips her head to one side and looks out at the sky and the trees. The palm fronds are now dipped in gold, and the two frisbee-tossing men have vanished. "Like what?" she asks, though her words are really more for herself than for Alan. If anyone can answer what else Patty Dallarosa might have wanted from life, it's going to be her daughter, not a fellow attorney who mostly knew her from the courtroom.

Alan shrugs; he's clearly a smart enough man to know that Ruby will have to find that answer for herself. He uses one hand on his own knee to push himself up to standing again, and as he does, he gives a nearly inaudible groan. "Bad knee," he says, patting his right thigh with one hand.

Ruby gives a half-hearted smile as she leans forward, tapping her fingers on his desk. "Okay." She's ready to refocus the conversation. "What do I need to know about the will? Is this a good time to go over it?"

Rather than sitting back in his own chair, Alan walks across his office and stands before the window, looking out at the early evening sky.

"Actually," he says, turning his head so that he's looking at Ruby, but keeping his body facing the window, "there are a few other people we'll need to have handy before I can read the will. How does tomorrow at ten o'clock sound?"

Ruby frowns; she's an only child, and her aunt Olivia has been dead for decades. Patty has no other family besides Harlow and Athena. Ah! she thinks, Harlow and Athena!

"My daughters? I can FaceTime them and loop them in--"

But Alan cuts her off by turning around fully. "They will be acknowledged in the will, but you can represent your entire family unless they want to join us by Zoom. We have a few other people joining us via Zoom as well."

"Who?" Ruby asks, standing. She is completely lost--who else might her mother have included in the will? Right then, Helen taps lightly and opens the door. She pokes her head in, reads the room, and backs out again. "Who else needs to be there?"

Alan holds up a hand. "Tomorrow, Ruby. That's all I can tell you for now, and I'm sorry."

Ruby is flabbergasted and also wildly curious; she isn't even sure she'll sleep at all for wondering what might be coming her way.

"Okay," Ruby says, though she sounds far more annoyed than defeated as she picks up her purse from the chair and slings the strap over one shoulder. "I guess tomorrow it is. I'll see you at ten o'clock, Mr. Berkshire."

Ruby

Ruby was listening to "Walk Like An Egyptian" on the radio in her bedroom while doing her Algebra homework. The sun was out and it was a perfect California afternoon, but Patty had grounded her from leaving the house with her best friend Kit, and so instead of sitting in front of the television and watching MTV all afternoon, Ruby had given in and taken out her homework.

"Ruby?" Patty shouted from downstairs when she arrived home at seven o'clock that evening. "I brought tacos."

Ruby had finished her homework by then and was stretched out on her bed, listening to the top forty hits of the week while she thought about Eric Sanderson, the cutest boy in the entire eighth grade, and--in her humble opinion--maybe a better skateboarder than Tony Hawk.

"Ruby!" Patty yelled again, louder this time. "Come down for dinner!"

Ruby was mad at her mother for grounding her, but if she thought about it rationally, she understood why Patty had done it: Ruby got caught skipping English class to leave campus with Kit because they'd heard that Eric and his friends were going to be at a skatepark by the beach. Getting grounded sucked, but having Patty tell Ruby that her dad would have been disappointed in her was the worst part.

Ruby turned off the radio and the bedroom light before wandering down the stairs in a house that had gone completely dark at some point during the evening.

"Hi, sweetie," Patty said, turning to smile at her daughter. She'd already kicked off her heels and taken off her suit jacket, and she was standing in the kitchen with a bag of tacos from their favorite restaurant, eating one straight out of the wrapper. "I'm starving. Court today," she explained, bending her head to one side and taking a bite from one end of the taco.

Ruby frowned; this was not the mom she was used to seeing. Patty was and had always been proper. In fact, Ruby's dad used to tease his wife about being the original Miss Manners, and since his death, Ruby had noticed that her mom worked even harder than usual at making sure she did everything by the book--something that generally drove thirteen-year-old Ruby insane.

"Mom," she said, staring at her mother. "Why are you eating standing up? Without shoes?"

Patty closed her eyes, chewing with a look of bliss on her face. "Because I'm starving," she said, reaching for a glass of wine that she'd just poured. "How was school?"

Still frowning, Ruby walked over to the cupboard and got out two plates. She made a big show of putting the tacos on the plates, of pulling folded, ironed napkins from a drawer, and then leading her mother to the kitchen table.

"Fine, fine, fine," Patty said, sounding as if she were the teenager in this situation, and like she was used to Ruby harping on her about things like keeping her elbows off the table and using proper grammar while on the phone with her friends. "I'll sit." Patty unfolded a napkin and put it over the silk skirt she was still wearing, then unwrapped another taco. "How was your day?"

Ruby shrugged. She wasn't sure that she wanted to forgive her mother for grounding her and for keeping her away from the skatepark for a week. In that amount of time, Eric could end up dating Lisa, and then Ruby would be stuck watching them walk through the halls of the middle school with their hands in the back pockets of each other's 501s. The very thought filled her with bile and disgust.

"It was fine," Ruby finally conceded, taking a small bite of her first taco. She was starving, but didn't want her mother to think they were having a moment or anything gross like that. "I ate lunch outside the counselor's office because I got called down for lunch detention for skipping school."

Patty didn't react to this, but kept eating ravenously.

"You know, I bet you skipped school before," Ruby said. She watched her mother

angrily.

"Nope. Never."

Ruby huffed in disbelief. "That's got to be a lie."

Patty shook her head. "Absolute truth. I graduated high school in 1967, and I never once ditched a class to go and watch a boy ride a skateboard in the sun," she said with a wink.

This infuriated Ruby that her mother might have known why she was skipping school. "I bet you did other dumb stuff. Did you smoke cigarettes?"

"Of course," Patty said with nonchalance. "And sometimes I told my parents I was going to a sleepover at my friend Ellen's, but instead Ellen and I would go to a party in the woods and drink beer with college boys. But I never skipped school." She took another sip of her wine and leaned back in her chair. "I know kids never learn from their parents' mistakes," she said carefully, watching Ruby. "But if you take anything away from this conversation, let it be that cigarettes are a nasty habit, and that teenage girls drinking with college boys in the woods is never a great idea."

"Did you ever drink and drive?" Ruby narrowed her eyes. She knew how strongly Patty felt about Ruby drinking and driving, or about her getting in the car with anyone who had. Up until that moment, it had seemed to Ruby that her mom was simply caught up in the current fever of the message being delivered by Mothers Against Drunk Driving, and like any teenager, Ruby heard her mother's pleas, but she pretty much let them go in one ear and out the other. After all, she was still only thirteen--no one was offering her alcohol yet, and no one who'd been drinking was offering to drive her anywhere.

Patty reached for another taco, her initial hunger slightly dulled by three tacos eaten in quick succession. "I've made plenty of mistakes," Patty said calmly. She pushed her last taco towards Ruby, who was still only halfway done with her first one. "And some of those mistakes are mine to keep to myself." She leaned forward then and reached for Ruby's hand, taking it in hers against Ruby's will. "Just know that everything I do, I do because I have so many hopes and dreams for you. I want you to know that you can do anything in life, and that I'm so proud of you. You're a good girl, Ruby Dallarosa. A wonderful girl."

Ruby, who had been expecting more of a lecture than this, felt her eyes burn. She'd forgotten to bring a glass of water to the table, and now she felt like she had a piece of crunchy taco shell stuck in her throat.

Patty closed her eyes for a long moment, still holding her daughter's hand. "Ruby," she said. "There will be many things we don't know about each other throughout the course of our lives, and that's as it should be. A mother can never know every facet of her daughter's life, and a daughter shouldn't know every bit of her mother's. It would be too much. We get to be in each other's lives, and if we're lucky, we'll even be friends. But we don't get to have full access to one another--that's just how it goes, and it will be like that for you and your daughter someday as well."

"I'm never having children," Ruby said, shaking her head. "We watched a video in health class this year of a woman giving birth, and it was disgusting. The camera was, like, right between her legs." Ruby made a face like she might vomit.

Patty chuckled and squeezed her daughter's hand. "Okay," she said gently. "But someday you might change your mind for any number of reasons, and if you do, it will be wonderful. And terrifying. And you won't always get it right, but you will do everything with love, which is really the only way to do anything. Do you see?"

Ruby thought about it; did she see? Her mother worked long hours and slept hard

every night, then got up and made sure that Ruby lived in a world that was as close to perfect as she could make it. She was giving Ruby a top notch example to learn from: a woman who would not be stopped by life's curveballs, and who threw herself into every single thing she did. That was love, right? And Ruby's dad, who she missed every second of every day, had made up jokes and songs and had listened to anything Ruby wanted to tell him about--he'd done all that with love too. Now that she thought about it, love was everywhere: her English teacher writing encouraging notes on her essays, telling Ruby she could be a great writer if she wanted to. Kit skipping class and getting into just as much trouble as Ruby so that Ruby didn't have to go to the skatepark alone where all the rowdy boys were hanging around, smoking cigarettes. That was love and friendship, wasn't it? Maybe her mom was right...

Ruby shrugged and took a huge bite of her taco. "Well, I guess," she said after chewing and swallowing (talking with food in her mouth would have horrified her mother—even the version of Patty sitting there without shoes on at the table). "Maybe I'll change my mind about having kids, but I doubt it."

Patty gave a throaty laugh. "That's fair, Bibi," she said, using Ruby's nickname, as she occasionally did. And even though Ruby had been mad at her mother for days, she suddenly didn't mind the familiarity of her nickname. "You're a woman who is going places," Patty said, standing up and stretching next to the table. She reached for the empty plates and for her wine glass, and padded into the kitchen on stocking feet. "But for now," she called over one shoulder, "the only place you're going is upstairs to shower before bed."

Ruby rolled her eyes and stood up. She knew better than to argue with Patty when they were just getting back on good terms. "Okay, Mom," she said, pushing in her chair and turning out the light over the table. "Thanks for the tacos."

Patty said nothing, but Ruby could hear the sound of water running in the kitchen and of her mother singing a Whitney Houston song softly to herself as she opened and

closed the refrigerator and the cabinets.

Ruby smiled to herself, feeling relieved that she and Patty had—in their own way—cleared the air between them. Things weren't perfect yet, but they were getting back to normal.

Rather than walking down to State Street on the morning of the will reading, which Ruby could have easily have done if she'd given herself an hour to amble down there, she pulls her mother's white Mercedes S-Class coupe convertible out of the garage, backing carefully down the driveway as she looks both ways for kids on bicycles or pedestrians with dogs on leashes. The car is beautiful, and somehow the tan leather interior still smells like Patty just drove it off the lot, even though the car is five years old. Ruby knows her mind is elsewhere, and while Helen offered to drive her to the meeting and have coffee in a cafe until Ruby finishes, she feels like she really needs to do this alone.

She woke up that morning with the memory of her adolescent scuffle with Patty over skipping school playing in her mind, and she laid in bed for the better part of an hour just remembering the times that she and her mother had not seen eye to eye on things, but had figured out how to navigate each situation just the same. She only hopes that she's done as good a job with her own girls, letting them be themselves while still learning how to adapt and compromise so that they can mesh with friends, family members, and love interests. It's tough, learning which parts of yourself need to change and which parts you should cling to firmly, but she believes that Harlow and Athena have grown into self-aware, self-confident young women who can both hold their own and also be flexible when necessary.

That was always the hardest thing with Patty: learning how to be flexible with her. She expected nothing but the best from herself, and therefore from those around her, and being the daughter of a woman with so much stamina and such strong convictions hadn't always been easy.

As Ruby swings the Mercedes into a parking spot a block from State Street and puts up the roof, she remembers a time—much like the one where she'd been grounded—where she and her mother had gone rounds and ultimately given one another the silent treatment for a while. It had been around the time that Ruby started acting in commercials and driving around L.A. to audition that she and Patty had come to an impasse. In Patty's mind, her daughter's time would have been better spent working as a legal assistant or even as a barista, which would have afforded her the time to focus on her homework rather than forcing her to waste afternoons stuck in hours of traffic, only to then wait for hours in a hot building for her turn to audition for bit parts or commercials, sitting with her back against a wall as she highlighted parts of her textbooks in preparation for essays and exams.

It had been one of Ruby's favorite parts of her life, but in Patty's eyes, she was spreading herself too thin in pursuit of something that didn't matter. It was only when Ruby had landed a Levi's spot and pocketed nearly twenty thousand dollars for her trouble that Patty had softened her stance.

"I suppose the money would come in handy," she'd said, looking up from the novel she was reading next to Ruby poolside at the Hotel Bel Air, where they'd checked in for a girls' weekend to mark the anniversary of Ruby's father's passing. "Your dad's life insurance policy has provided us with enough that UCLA is totally paid for, but having money in the bank for your future is a good idea. A woman never knows when she might need some cash on hand."

Ruby had rolled her eyes behind her sunglasses and flipped the page of her People magazine, but she was secretly happy that Patty had come around. They'd spent the rest of the weekend drinking mimosas, having lunch by the pool, and telling stories about Ruben Dallarosa that made them laugh and cry in equal measures. But the months leading up to that breakthrough had been rough, marked by Patty pointing out her displeasure at Ruby shuttling "from Hell's Half Acre to Timbuktu and back" in order to potentially secure a few bucks acting as a cheerleader in a beer

commercial, or a young mother pushing a fake baby in a stroller through the aisles of a grocery store. She'd repeatedly said that if Ruby wanted to, she could be a real actress, and that it would be no trouble for her to connect her daughter to an entertainment lawyer, an agent, or someone already in the business who wouldn't mind taking on a mentee, or, at the very least, answering a few questions from a budding actress.

But that's not what Ruby had wanted, she recalls now, stepping up onto the curb as she holds the strap of the purse she's slung over her shoulder. The sun is high in the sky, warming her blonde head from above, and she gives a half-smile at the memory of her mother wanting her to aim higher, dream bigger. It was just that being a "real actress" wasn't appealing to Ruby. Making a chunk of money here and there for a job that might last a day or two was what she wanted to do, and it gave her time to attend classes, do homework, throw dinner parties with her roommate, and date Kingston Riley, which had been another point of contention between Ruby and Patty.

"Good morning," Ruby says to Reggie as she walks into the lobby of Berkshire, Hollywood, Briar, and Lane at nine-fifty, leaving herself ten minutes to get situated before the meeting at ten.

"Mrs. Hudson!" Reggie says with a huge, white smile. "Alan is waiting for you. Would you like me to show you back?"

"No, thank you," Ruby says, holding up a hand so that Reggie won't jump out of her seat. "I can show myself back. Is it alright if I stop in the restroom first?"

"Of course—second door on the right," Reggie says, pointing. "Can I bring you a coffee?"

"Oh, please." Ruby puts her hands together and makes a theatrical face like she might die without coffee. "Cream and sugar would be amazing, if you have it."

“Absolutely. I’m on it.”

Five minutes later, Ruby is seated in the very same chair in Alan’s office as the day before, holding a ceramic cup and saucer in hand as she waits for him to start the meeting. He’s bustling around the office with his reading glasses on top of his head, pulling a book from the shelf, then reaching for a file. He gatherseverything he needs while Ruby sips her coffee, letting her eyes follow him as he moves.

“Can I help you with anything?” she offers.

Alan waves a hand. “No, no—you get yourself caffeinated. I’m just about ready here.”

Two minutes later, Alan has opened a Zoom call and it’s projected onto a large screen on the wall of the office.

“Good morning,” he says, clearing his throat as he sits. He switches on a camera that’s facing Ruby, and she appears on the screen as well. The boxes of faces on the screen make it look as though they’re in the opening credits ofThe Brady Bunch.

“Good morning, Mr. Berkshire,” a woman says. She’s younger than Ruby—maybe forty—and has dark hair and eyes. She’s sitting in a sunny kitchen somewhere.

Another box opens and a man and woman sit there together, shoulder to shoulder, looking uncertain. They say nothing.

Then Ellen joins the call, and Ruby recognizes her kitchen table and the windows

from the house in Seattle. “Sorry I’m late,” Ellen says, nodding at the camera. Ruby smiles at her.

“This is perfect,” Alan Berkshire says, clearing his throat again. Ruby can scarcely imagine an attorney with as much experience as Alan has getting nervous over a Zoom meeting to read a will aloud, and she realizes that this is his tell: Alan has something big to share that does make him a little anxious. “I’ll do introductions here quickly,” he says as he straightens his necktie. “I’m sure everyone here knows Ruby Hudson,” he says with a smile, nodding at Ruby although they’re the only ones in his office, “and Ruby, this is Ellen Majors, who is in Seattle, and Carmela Rivera, joining us from New York City. We also have Theodore and Zoe Westover calling in from Dallas.”

Ruby looks back and forth between the women and the couple on the screen. “Ellen and I have met, and Carmela, it’s nice to meet you,” she says, keeping her tone measured. “You as well, Theodore and Zoe.” She still isn’t sure what will come of this meeting.

“I’d like to start by laying out the terms of the will that involve everyone else, and then we can end our Zoom call and Ruby, you and I will continue to hammer out the details as they pertain to you and your daughters. Does that sound alright?”

Ruby knows that hers is the only input that matters here, so she nods. “That’s fine.”

“Fabulous.” Alan pushes forward. “First, Patty wanted me to address Ellen Majors, her lifelong friend, and close confidante.” He is reading now from a document on his computer screen. “Ellen,” he says, “Patty was clear in her request that you should continue to live in the house in Seattle. In fact, she would like you to take ownership of the property, and she has bequeathed it to you in your name, with a sum of five-hundred thousand dollars that she has earmarked for taxes, home improvements, or anything else you might need to do to the dwelling. She wanted me to thank you for

your love and friendship, and to let you know how much you meant to her. She has also left you her autographed copy of the White Album by the Beatles, and she has set up another fund that will be allotted for long-term care should you ever need it. In that event, the house will be sold and all proceeds will go into the fund, which is earmarked completely for your care. Do you have any questions?"

Ruby watches Ellen's face on the screen; she's crying quietly into a handkerchief, and she looks stunned. "I don't know," she says, shaking her head.

It's an honest response to such a shockingly generous revelation, and Ruby feels for the woman. She'd liked Ellen immediately when they met, and she likes her even more now for showing up to this meeting and most likely expecting nothing more than some Beatles memorabilia (and probably not a signed copy of anything), but walking away with a home and the assurance of long-term care instead.

"Okay, well you let me know if you do. In the meantime, I'll draw up papers for you, and we'll get everything situated as far as the house."

"Thank you," Ellen says between sniffles. "I'm completely flabbergasted, but this is so Patty. She was such a generous and loyal friend."

"As were you," Ruby adds, dabbing at the corners of her own eyes. Now that she knows their story, she can see why her mother loved and valued Ellen's friendship so much.

"Okay. And Carmela," Alan says, moving on. Carmela sits forward in her chair, eyes wide. She's been quiet so far. "You and your daughter and your sons will remain in the New York City apartment for as long as you'd like to. Just like with Ellen, ownership will revert to you with the proper paperwork, but there is no provision for selling the property in order to provide for long-term care; what you do with the apartment is up to you." Alan pauses and consults the document in front of him. "The

annual disbursements of ten thousand dollars to the Graham Academy in Brooklyn will continue until all three of your children have moved to high school, at which point the disbursements will increase for each child to cover tuition at the private high school of their choice. There is also a college fund set up for each child in the amount of \$75,000, which Patty hopes the kids will be able to combine with scholarships and grants so that they can obtain their degrees.”

Ruby has sucked in a sharp breath at all of this information; she still has no clue who Carmela is, what she and her three children have to do with Patty, and why so much money and real estate is being signed over to them without Ruby knowing anything about them. She wants to protest, or at least to stop the proceedings and ask some questions, but she knows that doing so will not change anything. Patty’s wishes are set in stone, and all she can do now is try to find out what her mother’s reasoning was.

“Are there any questions, Carmela?”

Carmela, looking stunned, shakes her head. “No, none,” she croaks.

“Okay, then I’ll move on to Zoe and Theodore.” Alan leans his head sideways as if to stretch his neck, then carries on. “Patty Dallarosa has made a separate provision for the ongoing care of your father, Lyle Westover.”

Lyle W! Ruby thinks. These must be the children of the man who lives at Fair Skies Village. The pieces are falling into place in her mind, but Ruby tries to refocus on what Alan is saying so that she doesn’t miss anything.

“This is so kind of her,” Zoe says, crying openly. Her brother wraps an arm around her shoulders. “Everything she’s done has been so kind.”

Theodore clears his throat behind one balled-up fist, trying to keep his emotions in check. “We’ve been so grateful, and frankly, I can’t believe she’s doing more than

she already has.”

Again, Ruby wants to speak up—to ask what and why and who and how—but she sits quietly, waiting for more information to be presented.

“Patricia has requested that her estate continue to pay out a sum of two thousand dollars a month, which is matched both by Lyle Westover’s children, and also by a separate fund from the law firm at which he worked for over forty years. In total, that money covers his care at Fair Skies Village in Austin, Texas. Should the cost of living there increase, Patty has allotted an extra one thousand dollars a month from her estate. She has also made provisions to cover Lyle Westover’s entire funeral and all of its expenses.” Alan pauses here, looking directly into the camera so that it looks like he’s making eye contact with Lyle’s children. “I’m sorry to speak so frankly about the eventual passing of your father, Zoe and Theodore.”

“No need to apologize,” Theodore says. “We can see the forest for the trees, but this level of generosity is...beyond comprehension.”

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It's on the tip of Ruby's tongue to ask Zoe and Theodore whether their father and her mother had ever had a relationship, but she knows that this isn't the time or place.

"Questions?" Alan asks of them, just as he had of Ellen and Carmela.

"No, not right now," Zoe says, dabbing at her eyes. She's pulled herself together enough to speak. "We just want to say thank you to Mrs. Hudson," she says, leaning into her brother.

"Um," Ruby says. She has no idea whether she should argue against their thanking her, or just say "You're welcome," and move on, so she goes with the latter. She has nothing to do with her mother's decision to fund their dad's ongoing care, but it seems best not to quibble.

"I think this is a good time to end the Zoom call now that all matters have been covered, and then Ruby and I can move on to the family issues. Thank you all for joining us, and my assistant will be in touch with details and paperwork. Please feel free to reach out with any questions."

Everyone murmurs their thanks and their little boxes fade to black in separate blips as their calls are ended, and finally it's just Ruby and Alan in the room. He turns off the screen and the camera, and leans forward on the desk, hands laced together. Today he's in unrolled shirtsleeves, a tie, and he looks less like he's about to end his day in order to play a quick nine holes with a circuit court judge, and more like he's there to do serious business.

"I'm sure you have a million questions about what your mother has done with her

will,” he says gently, keeping his eyes on Ruby’s face.

“I definitely do.” Ruby blinks in astonishment. “I know Ellen, and honestly, all of that makes perfect sense to me, but...who the hell are these other people?”

Alan nods sympathetically. “Your mother asked me to remind you of a conversation you two had once upon a time where she told you that you could never really know everything about a person, nor should you.”

Ruby is stunned. “I do remember it. In fact, I woke up this morning with that whole thing in my head. I laid in bed remembering it all: I’d been grounded, I was mad at her, and she came home late from court one night with a bag of tacos. We talked at the table and she told me that a mother never got to know everything about her daughter, and her daughter really never should know everything about her mother.”

Alan nods again. “Precisely. She was spot on there.” He pauses and then goes on. “She wanted you to remember that, and to decide for yourself whether you could simply accept that you’d never know everything about her, or whether you wanted to find out more about her as a person.”

Ruby contemplates this, though for her, there is only one answer. “I have to find out more,” she finally says, eyebrows raised as she exhales in resignation. “I need to know what life my mother was leading that caused her to bring all of these strangers to the reading of her will, and how in the world she ended up with a pied-à-terre in New York City and a bungalow on an island off the coast of Georgia.” Ruby stops and looks out the window for a moment. “Not to mention the reasons she might be funding an elderly gentleman’s long-term care. I’m totally at a loss, and I want answers.”

Alan pats the top of his desk with both hands and pushes his chair backwards so that he’s lined up to face his computer screen again. “Fabulous, then let’s wrap up here

with the parts of the will that pertain to you, and I'll send you on your way with the information you need." Alan smiles at her curiously. "I know you've already lived in the White House, which not many people get to do, but I believe that you're about to start a completely different adventure here, Ruby. I'd give anything to have the opportunity to learn more about my father at this point in my life, but unfortunately, everything about the man died with him. This is a gift she's giving you, and to be perfectly honest, I'm jealous."

Ruby takes a long, deep breath. "I guess I'm ready to meet my mother," she says. "Again."

Alan laughs gently, the crow's feet at the corners of his eyes crinkling. He goes back to the screen and most of it is as Ruby expected: major trust funds for Harlow and Athena; the house in Santa Barbara and the one on Jekyll Island left to Ruby, along with several million dollars, and a stock portfolio that Ruby would take a closer look at later.

Just before she leaves the office, he hands her a sealed envelope. "The information you'll need to start your journey," he says gravely.

Ruby almost laughs at the seriousness of Alan Berkshire's face; he looks like he's presenting her with a terminal diagnosis.

"Thank you," Ruby says with sincerity. "For everything."

She tucks the envelope into her purse, zips it tightly, and walks out into the midday sun. Though it wasn't ever something she thought she needed to do, it's time for Ruby to go in search of her mother.

It's time to find the real Patty Dallarosa.

Ruby

Seattle has been checked off the list, but Ruby still has a big journey ahead of her.

“Hi,” Sunday Bond says as she walks in to The Scuttlebutt the morning after Ruby gets back to Shipwreck Key. “How are you?” She drops her purse into an empty chair and sits down immediately, never once taking her eyes from her best friend’s face.

As she waits for a response, Marigold Pim and Heather Charlton-Bicks walk into the coffee shop and make a beeline for the table. Sunday takes her purse off the chair to make room for Marigold to sit down, and soon all three women are waiting eagerly for Ruby to bring them up to speed.

“I’m hanging in here, girls,” Ruby says.

Molly, the owner of The Scuttlebutt, finishes pouring a coffee for a customer and then makes her way over to their table as she wipes her hands on the front of her apron. “What should I start making? I have a feeling we’re going to need caffeine.”

Each woman gives her order to Molly gratefully and then they make small talk until Molly is done making their coffees so that she can sit down and join them. What started as a book club when Ruby first came to Shipwreck Key has quickly become a group of true friends, and without them, Ruby wouldn’t have had the strength to get through her first year and a half on the island. Having Sunday move down from D.C. in the midst of her divorce from the former Vice President helped too, but this group of women has become Ruby’s rock. She loves them dearly.

“Well,” Ruby finally says, putting an end to the small talk once Molly pulls up a chair and they’re all huddled around the table with their iced coffees and espressos. “I got my mom’s house boxed up and ready to rent.”

“You’re going to keep it?” Sunday asks.

“I think I am. I don’t really need a vacation spot in Santa Barbara at the moment since I already live in paradise here on Shipwreck, but I also don’t really want to sell the house, so I’m going to rent it out for the time being.”

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“Makes sense,” Molly agrees. She is the oldest and by far the most pragmatic of the group. “You’ve got an attachment to your mother’s house, and if you don’t currently need the funds from the real estate, then hanging on to it seems like a good choice.”

“Boxing up her stuff was hard,” Ruby admits. Her eyes go glassy as she remembers the letters, the closets full of clothes that still smelled like Patty’s favorite perfume (a Dior that she’d been wearing for years), and all the framed black and white photos that Ruby had had to take down from the walls and box up so a potential renter could make the space their own. She’d FedExed a few items to herself on Shipwreck Key for storage, including the potential Picasso that she’d need to get appraised, the blown glass hibiscus flower, and all of the correspondence between Patty and Ellen, which she thought Ellen might want to look through at some point.

“In some ways it feels more final than a funeral,” Heather says, looking out the front window at Seadog Lane as she sips her iced coffee. “When my mom died, I never really believed she was inside the box at the church; my brain just wouldn’t accept it, so I didn’t cry through the entire funeral. But once I had to decide which of her bracelets and necklaces went to which family member, and what sweaters and coats to give away to a charity shop, it felt real. I felt like, if I give her things away or take everything out of her house, then she’s not coming back, you know? She’s really not coming back.”

The other women are quiet for a long moment. At their ages—all late forties to mid-sixties—they’ve been through a number of losses collectively. They’ve all gone through most of the changes that menopause brings, spouses dying, parents passing, divorce, children growing up and leaving the nest, and so much more. Without planning to, each of them reaches for one another and suddenly they’re all holding

the hand of the woman on either side of them.

Ruby is the first to laugh. “Look at us: we’re a web of womanhood,” she says, squeezing Marigold’s right hand and Heather’s left one. “I feel so lucky to know all of you.”

“Thank god we’re from a generation that likes to read,” Marigold says in her throaty voice. “Younger women today are going to have to make friends in AI-moderated groups or something instead of good old-fashioned book clubs.”

Molly shakes her head. “I can’t even imagine their world. As sad as it is to grow older at times, I’m occasionally grateful that I won’t be here when the robots take over.”

Sunday cackles. “Oh, Molly,” she says, “the robots won’t ever take over.”

Molly raises her eyebrows skeptically and tips her head to one side. “Don’t be so sure. When I was young, we all watched *The Twilight Zone* and thought that everything was made up science fiction. But sure enough, now we have self-driving cars, airplanes can fly at supersonic speeds, and people are falling in love with AI robots.”

“Oh, I remember that episode,” Ruby says, taking a sip of her coffee. “Where the artificial intelligence fell in love with her programmer. Very prescient.”

“I’m just saying,” Molly says. She stands and holds up her hands in a don’t shoot the messenger stance as someone walks through the front door of the shop. “Hi there,” Molly says to the customer with a smile. “Get you something?”

The other women lean in closer and keep talking while Molly makes an iced coffee for the man at the counter.

“Okay, robots aside,” Sunday says to Ruby as she reaches for the cream that Molly has brought for the table. “What’s the first step now that you have things ironed out in Santa Barbara?”

Ruby blows a breath out of her pursed lips. “Hmm. I don’t know that I totally have things ironed out, but I feel like I’m on more solid ground now that I’ve cleared out the house, found a company to help oversee the rental, spoken to Mom’s accountant, and been to the reading of the will.” She squints as she looks out the large window. “I just have a lot more questions about my mother than I did when I went out there.”

“I think that’s the nature of the beast,” Molly says as she returns to the table. The bells over the front door jingle as the man leaves the coffee shop, and they’re alone again in the air conditioning with the sounds of 1970s soft rock playing from the speakers overhead. “Our parents are kind of unknowable to us. When we’re kids, they’re living totally separate adult lives; when we’re teenagers they feel like ancient, out-of-touch relics; and once we’re adults and can actually peel back some of the layers and learn more about them as people, we’re either too busy living our lives and raising children, or perhaps they’ve lost a bit of their edge and forgotten the past.” Molly shrugs. “So then when they’re gone, we’re left wondering who the hell these people actually were who birthed and raised us. Happens all the time.”

Ruby looks around the table. She gets a nod from the ladies who have gone through it—even just once—and then sighs. “I suppose you’re right. It’s unfortunate though, because I always thought my mom and I were extremely close, but clearly there’s a lot she didn’t tell me.”

“Do you think you want to know all of it?” Heather asks.

Ruby ponders this as she stirs a spoon around in her coffee, mixing in another packet of Splenda. “I think I do.” She nods. “I think finding out who she was when I wasn’t around is a way to honor her.”

“Or maybe to upset yourself,” Sunday says gently. “What if you find out things you don’t want to know?”

“I’ve considered that,” Ruby says honestly. “But while I may not have known every single thing about my mom’s life, I did know everything about her character. And so I feel really sure that I won’t find out anything that will change how I see her.” Ruby pauses, swallowing around a lump in her throat. “Sawher.”

The women give her a moment to compose herself before anyone speaks.

“Memorial service? Are you working on that, and is there any way we can help you with it?” Molly offers.

“I’m working on it. It’ll be November twenty-sixth, which would have been her seventy-seventh birthday. I think she would have liked that,” Ruby says with a sad smile. “Any excuse for a party, plus it being her birthday will mean that we have to make it a little more festive. If I didn’t do that, she’d be furious.” Ruby laughs through the tears that have started to slide down her cheeks. “So I have that coming up, and of course I appreciate the offer of help and will let you all know if I need to take you up on it. Mostly I’m just grateful to have all of you.”

Molly slaps the table with both hands and stands up again when a timer goes off in the back of the shop. “My afternoonmuffins are up,” she says, bustling behind the counter with an energy that belies her sixty-five years. “And we’re grateful to have you,” she calls out, disappearing into the back kitchen area.

“You let us know how things are going, and if you need me, I will be on the first plane to wherever you are,” Sunday promises, taking Ruby’s hand again. “Where are you headed first?”

“Jekyll Island,” Ruby says, grateful for Sunday’s constant support and friendship.

“I’m going to start there, then head up to New York City to meet with the woman and her children who are living in my mother’s apartment there, and then I’ll end up in Austin, where she’s been partially supporting a man in a nursing home.”

The women are all watching Ruby closely. “It’s a bit of a mystery—all of it,” Heather says in a breathy voice.

“It is,” Ruby agrees. “But it’s one I’m ready to solve.”

Ruby

Jekyll island isn’t much different than Florida in terms of its topography. Ruby arrives there around three o’clock with Banks in tow, and as they settle into their rooms at the Jekyll Island Club Resort, she stands on a small balcony and looks out at the green lawn and trees beyond.

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She'd felt pensive throughout the journey, uncertain what she'd find here. What ties could her mother have had to an island off the coast of Georgia? What might have driven her to buy a home here? Ruby leans forward onto the railing of her third floor room and scans the horizon. Autumn is in the air, and even an hour north of Jacksonville, she feels like she's starting to leave the tropical humidity of Florida behind.

The phone rings in Ruby's hotel room and she turns around to see the light blinking on the bedside table.

"Ruby?" Banks says when she answers. "You hungry?"

Ruby smiles as she cradles the receiver between her ear and shoulder. Banks, her Secret Service agent, has melted into daily life on Shipwreck Key, establishing his own routines and falling in love with Sunday, and since they've gotten the lay of the land down there, he's essentially become more of a neighbor than a bodyguard, and Ruby prefers it like that. But there was no way Banks was going to sit out a trip where Ruby travels all around the country to meet up with unknown people and, potentially, unforeseen dangers.

"I could eat," Ruby says, rubbing the soles of her bare feet across the vacuumed rug that covers most of the hardwood floors. She's in a suite with a sitting room, two giant queen-sized beds covered in crisp white duvets, and white crown molding around the ceiling. The balcony faces a lush, beautiful reserve, and to be perfectly honest, she'd be just as happy ordering room service and staying in her cozy suite for the evening. But she and Banks have begun to forge a friendship of sorts—even more so now that he's dating her best friend—and so she won't turn down an invitation to

dine together from a man who had, until fairly recently, kept their interactions to about ten words a day.

“Great,” Banks says. Ruby can hear the relief in his voice. No doubt he’d offered and then second-guessed the wisdom of them sitting in the hotel restaurant together as if they were on a date.

“Meet you in the lobby in twenty minutes?”

“I’ll be there.”

The grand dining room has white pillars running the length of it, and servers dressed in white aprons and black bowties. There are giant fans hanging from the ceiling, turning slowly to keep the air moving as well-dressed middle aged couples sip sidecars and martinis and look out at the green lawn. The women all look like ads for Chico’s and the men are tanned and dressed like they’ve just stumbled in off the golf course.

“So,” Banks says as they take the menus that their waiter offers. “What’s the game plan?”

Ruby orders a glass of champagne and Banks sticks with water, given the fact that he’s “on duty,” as he reminds her. Ruby sits back in the upholstered chair and surveys the room.

“I need to see this house. I have the address, and I know my mother owned it outright. Now I need to find out why. And decide what to do with it.”

“Maybe she just liked it here,” Banks offers.

“It’s pretty,” Ruby says with a shrug, her eyes trailing an elegant older woman in a

chiffon dress as she swishes through the dining room like she's on a Paris runway. "But I don't understand why she wouldn't have told me about it. In my entire life, I don't remember her saying a word about Jekyll Island. Nothing."

Banks takes a long drink of his water, which has a thin slice of lemon floating in it. The waiter sets Ruby's champagne on the table and disappears without taking their order yet.

"Do you think she kept this place to meet with someone?" Banks suggests.

"Like a lover?" Ruby splutters. "No. A secret love nest? Definitely no." She shakes her head. "The thing about Patty was that while she loved widely and prolifically, she did it all out in the open. I pretty much always knew who she was dating, as did everyone else."

"I heard she dated Harrison Ford," Banks says. It's uncharacteristic of him to be talking this much and to be the one dishing the gossip.

"She did," Ruby confirms. "And my friends and I were wildly impressed, because it was at the height of his Indiana Jones fame."

"But no top secret Hollywood love affairs? Anyone she would have needed to keep under wraps?"

Ruby shakes her head slowly as she chews on the inside of one cheek. "No, that would shock me. Truly. She was clear about the fact that she never wanted to get married again after my dad died, but she never once pretended that she was living some solitary life or that she needed to be ashamed of her many suitors."

"Okay, then maybe we can rule that one out," Banks says.

“I’ll entertain anything in the brainstorming phase, but what I really want are the answers.”

“Then let’s eat and maybe take a trip over to the house and look at it this evening.”

Ruby’s eyes brighten. “Yeah? You’d be up for that?”

“I’m up for anything that you’re up for, boss.”

Ruby chuckles. “It’s been a while since we were in this formal position with one another. I almost forgot how to do it.”

Banks motions for their waiter. “You’ll get used to it again,” he says, his eyes skimming the room like the Secret Service agent that he is. “It’s like riding a bike.”

The house—a small, avocado green bungalow near the water—looks deserted. The grass is about six inches taller than it should be, and the windows are dark and blank. It’s clear that someone has neglected the little house, and also that no one has been there in a while.

Ruby picks her way across the cement pavers that are nearly covered by the tangle of grass. There are multiple flyers of various sizes and colors shoved in between the screen door and the front door, and when she pulls the handle, an avalanche of paper falls at her feet. Ruby bends forward and picks it all up. There are pamphlets offering pizza delivery, lawn care services, assistance with finding Jesus, and handwritten reminders that Kayla lives on this street and is available for babysitting jobs.

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The key that Alan Berkshire had included in the envelope full of information he'd handed to Ruby on her way out of his office fit into the rusty lock. Ruby can feel the grit of the rust as she slips it in and turns it, pushing the door with her shoulder to open it. There's a sticky feel to the way it fits into the doorjamb, but it opens with a whoosh, and Ruby nearly stumbles as she steps right into a linoleum tiled entryway.

"Here, let me," Banks says gruffly, touching Ruby's arm to let her know that he wants to do a first sweep of the house.

It's stuffy inside, and Ruby stands there by the door, the cool autumn air at her back, and the musty smell of a house that's been closed up for far too long in front of her.

"Three bedrooms," Banks calls out from down the hallway. "Two baths. Everything looks like a time machine took us back to 1973."

"Can I look around?" Ruby calls, though she's already doing just that. The front room has a velvety couch in a bright gold color with teal blue throw pillows, and a large console television set sits on the floor across from it. There are beach scene paintings on the wall above the TV, and a lamp with a base made of sea glass sits on a dark wooden end table. A TV Guided dated January 1989 sits next to a coaster on the coffee table. "1989?" Ruby says to herself with a frown.

"Wow," Banks says from the other room. "This kitchen. I feel like I'm in my childhood home. Ruby, you gotta see this."

Ruby walks through a dining room with a long table and six matching chairs and then stops short. The kitchen is filled with appliances in the same avocado green as the

house's exterior, and the walls are papered in a floral pattern of orange, gold, and that same shade of green. A bright yellow phone is affixed to the wall, its cord long and coiled. Ruby picks it up, expecting to hear the familiar sound of a dial tone, but it's just dead air. She hangs it up again.

"What is this place?" she mutters to herself. Banks stands at the sink, his back to a small window that looks out onto a sandy yard. He's watching her. On the center of the round kitchen table is a bowl—ostensibly for fruit—but in it is a pile of unopened mail. Ruby picks up the first few envelopes and shuffles through them: Evelyn Huberman. Jacob Huberman. Patricia Dallarosa. "Who are these people, and why is my mother getting mail here?"

Ruby knows that mail meant for her mother can only legally be opened by the executor of the will, but at this point she figures no one is watching, so she sets down the envelopes addressed to the Hubermans and slides a finger under the flap of the one addressed to Patty. It's a notice from the homeowners insurance company, letting her know that a recent hurricane has raised the annual rates for insurance on the island, and it's dated three years ago.

Ruby drops the mail on the table and moves around the kitchen like a ghost, stopping to look at the photos affixed to the refrigerator with magnets. There is an older couple standing on the beach, pant legs rolled up to their knees, feet submerged in the water as they hold onto one another and grin at the camera. There is one of a little girl sitting in a high chair, her face covered in chocolate, two teeth visible as she smiles and holds up her small, chocolate-covered hands.

There are school photos of various kids that look like they've been attached to the front of the fridge since the 70s and 80s, and there's a postcard from Seattle with the Space Needle on the front. Ruby pulls the magnet off and takes the postcard off the refrigerator, flipping it over.

Evelyn and Jacob?—

We're thinking of you right now, just as we know you're thinking of us. These are hard times, and our families have been brought together by both love and pain. We're so grateful for all that you've done. Please visit soon?—

Margaret and Eugene

It's postmarked June 11, 1971.

Ruby turns around slowly, holding the postcard by its edge like it's a rare and valuable piece of art and her fingerprints might smudge it. "This is a postcard from my grandparents," she says to Banks. "Who in the hell are these people?" She suddenly feels like she's underwater and needs to sit down, but before she can find a chair, Banks crosses the small kitchen, puts one arm around Ruby's waist and the other beneath her elbow, and sits her on a chair.

"Let's open a few windows," he says. As he leans over the sink and frees the latch that keeps the window locked, Ruby can see the patches of sweat in his armpits. It's hot in the little house, and the ocean air immediately wafts in, cooling things off and reviving Ruby so that she can breathe again.

"Thank you," she says, setting the postcard on the table gingerly. She stares at it like it might be radioactive. "I'm really confused."

Banks leans against the counter and folds his arms over his chest. He's frowning. "You alright?"

Ruby nods slowly. "I feel like I walked through a portal into another world."

"One where Carol Brady might pop into the kitchen at any moment," Banks says

wryly, looking at the fake wood grain of an old-fashioned looking microwave with dials rather than buttons.

“The decor leaves something to be desired,” Ruby agrees, pushing herself up by placing both hands on the edge of the table. “But if this place truly belonged to my mother, then why didn’t she change any of it? This isn’t cool mid-century modern. It’s more like someone went to prison in the 70s and the house has been untouched for forty years.”

“Fifty,” Banks says.

“God, we’re old,” Ruby says, giving a long, slow blink as she shakes her head.

“We’re Formica counters old,” Banks says, glancing at the hideous gold and green swirl of the countertop.

“We’re fake plants in macramé hangers old,” Ruby says, tapping a fake jade plant that hangs over the sink.

Banks follows her as she walks into the dining room. “We’re plastic covers over furniture old,” he adds as they pause at a table that looks like it’s made from particle board and is surrounded by upholstered dining chairs slipcovered in clear plastic.

Ruby gives a shudder. “This house,” she says.

“Yeah.” Banks glances around at the curio cabinet filled with Precious Moments figurines and floral patterned china. “But I think that there might be more here than meets the eye.”

“I hope so. Because right now all I’m seeing is several loads of crap that needs to go to Goodwill.”

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Banks trails Ruby at a distance as she pokes her head into each of the bedrooms, where she clocks the decor: floral bedspreads with matching curtains; thick shag carpets in jewel-toned colors like citron and peridot; cheap wood dressers with doilies on top and clocks whose arms stopped sweeping across their faces eons ago.

But the last bedroom door in the hallway opens into a nursery. It's painted white and the carpet is a faded pink shag. The small toddler bed is pushed up against the wall and covered with a pink tufted spread, and there is a white shelf filled with teddy bears, dolls, and a Raggedy Ann whose red yarn head is tipped to one side quizzically.

Ruby says nothing, but takes a tentative step into the room. Banks stays in the hallway. Inside the small room that had clearly belonged to a little girl, Ruby runs a hand over the top of a dusty dresser. On it is a framed photo that she picks up cautiously, looking around the room as she does. The picture is of the same toddler from the photo on the fridge, only this time she's not covered in chocolate and strapped into a high chair. In this image, she's standing barefoot on the sand between two long female legs, holding the hands of a woman who is bent over and laughing. Ruby can tell from the trusting look on the toddler's face that she's being held by the loving hands of her mother.

She skims the image, trying to decipher the face of the woman that's hidden behind a curtain of shiny auburn hair, but all she can make out is the length of the nose and the curve of the lips as the woman smiles down at her baby. In the end, it's not the face that helps her understand the identity of this young mother, but the gold bracelet that hugs the woman's wrist. It's made of two gold ropes that are twisted together, and in the center of the bracelet is a gold anchor.

Ruby knows this bracelet. She knows as sure as she knows the sun will rise tomorrow that if she took a magnifying glass to the picture, she'd see a small Ruby sparkling at the center of the anchor.

She also knows that if she could sweep aside that long, hanging hair to reveal more of the face that this woman smiling down at the baby girl would be Patty—her own mother. Ruby also knows that the little towheaded girl in the photo is not her. She has no idea who the child is.

The room swims around her and the stuffiness of the house hits her like a wave of heat.

“Banks,” Ruby says, setting the framed photo back on top of the dusty dresser as she grips its edge, searching for her balance, which she seems to have misplaced. “Banks, I think I’m going to?”

The room goes black.

Patty

“Trixie, Trixie, my happy little pixie,” Patty singsonged, scooping water in a cup and dumping it over the blonde head of her baby girl as she splashed in the bathtub on Jekyll Island. “You’re Mommy’s best girl,” she said, watching as bubbles swirled around Trixie’s round belly. Her parents had been unimpressed by her choice of Trixie as a name, but they’d loved the baby instantly, and had been to Jekyll twice already to see their granddaughter in person.

Patty leaned forward and pulled the plug in the bathtub. Trixie put her pudgy hands underneath the water and squealed. “Ooooooh!” she shouted in her tiny voice. “Oooooh, Mama!”

With a fluffy towel in her hands, Patty leaned down and scooped her slippery girl from the tub, folding her into a yellow terrycloth cocoon and holding Trixie tightly to her chest.

“We miss Daddy, don’t we?” Patty cooed to the baby as she laid her on the changing table next to her Raggedy Ann doll and quickly powdered and diapered her. The windows of the beach house were open, and from the kitchen, she could hear the sounds of The Bee Gees singing from the radio that Trixie’s grandmother kept on the windowsill.

Trixie gurgled and grabbed her own tiny toes as Patty kept a hand on the baby’s belly to keep her from rolling off the table. Even at twenty, she knew how to be a good mother. She had defiantly insisted to her parents that—even though Bradley was in Vietnam by the time she found out she was pregnant—she was going to be the best mom in the world, and that she would raise her baby to be good and smart and kind-hearted. She had never loved the world of adolescence, and even though she’d had to defer her acceptance to the University of Washington when she’d fallen pregnant, she was ready to leave her teenage years behind and become a mother. Her own parents had been less than impressed and more than disappointed by this turn of events, so when Patty had informed them that Bradley’s parents had asked her to join them on Jekyll Island and raise the baby there until Bradley came home, they’d been happy to have her leave Seattle and raise a baby born out of wedlock in a place where no one they knew might see her.

Rather than be upset, Patty had understood. It was 1967 when she found out she was pregnant; nineteen-year-old unmarried girls frequently took long trips to visit aunts or cousins in a different state, returning to their hometowns haunted by the babies that they’d left behind or put up for adoption. No one spoke of these incidents, and, with luck, a girl might be able to put it all behind her, marry some unsuspecting young man, and start a legitimate family without ever having to disclose the fact that she’d already given birth once before. So the fact that Bradley’s parents had welcomed her

and were helping her to raise Trixie was thrilling for Patty. She loved Evelyn and Jacob Huberman like they were her own parents, and they, in turn, loved Trixie and welcomed Patty with open arms.

“Girls,” Evelyn called from the kitchen. “Dinner is ready!”

Patty made a face at her baby with wide eyes and a huge smile. “Dinner, baby girl! Should we go eat?” She reached out and picked Trixie up, sitting her on her bottom so that she could pull a clean nightgown over the baby’s head. “Let’s go eat with Grandma and Grandpa.”

Patty walked down the hallway with Trixie on one hip. Her little girl smelled like Johnson & Johnson’s baby shampoo, and she felt like a delicate feather attached to the side of Patty’s body. It was almost impossible to remember what it felt like not to be a mother, not to wake up to the sound of baby giggles, and not to think that the sun rose and set in the twinkling eyes of a tiny girl.

“Hello, lovie,” Evelyn said, bustling around the dining room table and setting down platters of fried chicken and mashed potatoes.

Jacob Huberman sat in one of the plastic covered chairs, his newspaper open as he skimmed the day’s headlines over the top of his reading glasses. When Patty had Trixie buckled into her high chair, he folded the paper and set it down.

“Good evening, Queen Trixie,” he said in his gravelly voice. As usual, Trixie grinned at him; she was gaga for her grandfather. “Were you a good girl today?”

Patty dished up some mashed potatoes for the baby, sticking a finger into the middle of them to make sure they weren’t too hot before setting the plastic bowl on the high chair tray. “She was an angel,” Patty said, taking the bottle of cold milk that Evelyn brought to her. “And I’m waiting to hear back from the doctor, but when I called

today, they said he was out until Monday.”

“Hmph,” Evelyn said, wiping her hands on her apron as she walked back into the kitchen to turn off the radio. As she snapped it off, Simon and Garfunkel’s voices cut out. Evelyn emerged without her apron and sat at the end of the table opposite her husband. “Doctors need to be better about getting back to their patients. This is serious.”

“Well, it might not be,” Jacob countered. “The baby was just drowsy. Could be nothing but a growth spurt.”

“She was more than drowsy, Jacob!” Evelyn picked a fried chicken thigh off the platter and passed it to Patty. “She wouldn’t wake up. Patty and I had to put her in a cool bath and basically force feed her some sugar water before she came to.”

Jacob looked at his plate as he dished up string beans. He said nothing more.

“It’ll be fine,” Patty offered soothingly, mashing some beans with a fork to feed to Trixie. “She’s healthy as a horse. I can’t wait for Bradley to meet her,” she said, changing the subject. It was a favorite topic of hers and Evelyn’s when they took Trixie to walk on the beach every day: what would Bradley think when he saw his little girl, the spitting image of him, cradled in the arms of the girl he’d left behind before he ever knew she was pregnant?

Jacob, however, enjoyed this topic less. He preferred not to discuss Bradley, Vietnam, or anything other than the stock market, baseball scores, and local news.

“Hey,” Evelyn said cheerily. “Let’s take Trixie on a walk after dinner, shall we?”

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Patty inhaled deeply and sighed, though she did it quietly and smiled and nodded as she did. “Yes,” she said, reaching over to feed Trixie a bite of green beans mixed with mashed potatoes. “A walk will be good.”

Ruby

“You fainted,” Banks says as he stands over Ruby, who is stretched out on the gold velvet couch in the front room. He’s opened all the windows and the sound of the ocean fills the house, as does the fresh, salty breeze. “Here.” Banks hands her a tall glass of water. “It’s from the tap, but there’s nothing else in the house.”

Ruby sits up slowly and reaches for the glass, drinking from it gratefully. “I haven’t opened a single drawer or found anything to tell me what went on in this house, but I’m already wishing it wasn’t the first place we’d come.”

“We can always leave,” Banks says. It’s a reasonable statement, but Ruby shakes her head emphatically.

“No,” she says. “I’m here, and I want to know more.”

Banks reaches for a photo album that’s sitting on the coffee table and he holds it out to Ruby. “I found this on the bookshelf,” he says.

Ruby takes it in both hands and sets it on her lap. With a cracking sound, the cover opens and the first page reveals four square photo prints stuck to a page beneath clingfilm. They’re all of the little girl—a picture of her sitting in a bathtub with bubbles up to her armpits; two of her laughing and chasing a kitten; one of her

standing in a white crib in the nursery, the toddler bed not yet installed as the baby holds onto the bars and grins at whoever is taking the photo. Ruby carefully peels back the clingfilm and pries one of the photos loose. Trixie, 1969 it says on the back in blue ballpoint pen.

“Trixie?” Ruby says aloud. “Huh.” She flips pages, and sure enough, there are photos that are clearly of her mother, hair pulled back off her grinning face as she holds Trixie, runs after her, and sits next to her on what appears to be this very same gold velvet couch. Patty is gorgeous. If it’s 1969, then she’s twenty-one, and this stunning, youthful image of her mother nearly takes Ruby’s breath away. “This is my mom,” she says in a hoarse voice, tapping the page with her finger.

Banks sits on the edge of the coffee table so that he can peer at the photos too. “She’s so young,” he says noncommittally. It’s clear that he wants to say more—to ask questions—but he doesn’t.

“I...I don’t know who Trixie is,” Ruby says. She feels almost betrayed as she looks at the photos, turning pages and watching the baby grow. Her mother is on every page. “I don’t think I even know who my mother was anymore. In my entire life, I never once heard her say the name Trixie.”

When she gets to the end of the photo album, she lets it slide from her hands onto the couch cushion and she puts both hands over her face.

“Banks,” Ruby says, looking at him. “Would you mind if we went back to the hotel and just started fresh tomorrow morning? I think fainting kind of threw me for a loop. I can’t even think straight.”

Banks stands and holds out both hands, which Ruby takes. “You head out to the rental car,” he says. “I’ll close all the windows and lock up. We’ll come back in the morning and try again.”

Ruby nods gratefully and stumbles on her way to the front door. She turns around one more time to look at the room in the growing twilight, realizing in that instant that she knows nothing about anything.

The next morning Ruby drinks three cups of coffee, spends an hour walking around the edges of the resort to clear her mind, and then shows up at the bungalow ready to try again.

“Can you bring me the boxes from every closet, please?” she asks Banks as she kneels in the center of the front room, pulling the tape off a box that she found in the coat closet. She tosses a beach towel over her shoulder and keeps digging.

“Sure, no problem.” Banks disappears down the hallway and the sound of him opening and closing closets and moving boxes drifts out to the front room.

Ruby moves another towel out of the way and discovers that the box contains an old-fashioned projector, which she lifts out carefully and sets on the coffee table.

Banks sets a box next to her with the words *Home Movies* scrawled on the side in a feminine hand.

“Ah, that looks like the next thing I’m going to need,” Ruby says, pointing back and forth from the box of home movies to the projector.

Banks stands there observing with his hands on his hips. “You want me to set it up?” he offers.

Ruby already has a fine layer of sweat on her forehead and the back of her neck, and she brushes a loose strand of hair from her eyes with the back of her wrist. “I need to find a place where I can project whatever is on these film reels,” she says, standing up.

“Okay, why don’t you let me figure that out, and you can keep going through boxes. No need for both of us to be working on the same thing.”

Ruby acknowledges him with a curt nod and moves on to another box. With the flaps open, she realizes that she’s looking at a container of baby items. Reverently, she lifts out a baby book, a hand-knitted pink afghan, and a tiny yellow dress covered with embroidered daisies. She sets each item down on the couch before moving on to the next.

After she has everything laid out on the couch, Ruby reaches for the baby book and opens it, looking at the first page. Trixie Michelle Huberman, it says. July 13, 1968. With a deep breath, Ruby flips the pages, pausing briefly to look at the tiny ink print of a baby’s foot, the snippet of white blonde hair trapped under plastic, the black and white photo of a newborn with its tiny fists balled up next to a plump face and tightly closed eyes.

As the pages turn, there are photos of Trixie growing inch by inch, pound by pound. There are handwritten notes about first doctor’s visits, first smiles, first gurgles. It all brings tears to Ruby’s eyes as she remembers her own excitement about her tiny girls hitting these milestones. Oh, the excitement of watching your baby morph into a real person! Those first moments of understanding when eye contact resulted in giggles, when tummy tickles devolved into full blown laughter, when one more verse of “You Are My Sunshine” sent your baby off to dreamland on the peaceful waves of a mother’s love. She recalls it all as she watches this sweet girl stand up on two feet, smile with her first baby teeth, and hold a sippy cup in one hand.

“Okay,” Banks says. He’s standing before Ruby, wiping his hands on the front of his black shorts, which are now covered in dust. “I have the projector up and running. Do you want to see what’s in the box?”

Ruby closes the baby book and sets it on the coffee table. “Yes,” she says, nodding.

“I want to see.”

Banks has set the projector up in the baby’s nursery, where a giant white wall allows the images to flicker on it as if on a movie screen. He has the projector propped up on the changing table, and as Ruby sits on the edge of the toddler bed, he spools the film and flicks a switch that makes the movie play.

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A crackling image appears on the wall and Ruby tilts her head to one side, her hands wedged between her knees nervously. She has no idea what she might see, and the thought of just how much she doesn't know scares her.

Once the film gets running, Trixie runs onto the screen wearing a gingham romper, her wisps of blonde hair curling over two little seashell-shaped ears. She claps her dimpled hands and smiles at a German Shepherd that is clearly on its best behavior.

Into the frame comes a young, coiffed Patty, and Ruby sucks in a breath, putting both hands to her chest. This is her mother at twenty. She can see instantly the echoes and hints of the woman she's known her entire life, but seeing her mother so young is like flinging open the door and finding a ghost.

"Oh," Banks says. He inhales and steps back, giving Ruby most of the room. Once again, the windows are all open and the fresh air is coming through the house, but Ruby feels breathless—almost faint.

"My mom," is all she can say before her eyes well with tears.

There is no sound on the film, so Ruby watches the silent movie of her mother reaching down and scooping up this beautiful baby, swinging her onto one hip and then dancing around the room in a way that looks almost like a jitterbug because of the jumpy film. Suddenly, the image changes and it's Christmas. A tree covered in long, loose strands of silver tinsel sits by a window in the front room of the bungalow, and through the window there is a palm tree and a sliver of blue sky. Ruby instantly recognizes the incongruity of Christmas on a Southern island.

Patty sits on the gold couch next to a woman with a beehive hairdo. The woman smokes a long, brown cigarette, holding it elegantly between her manicured fingers. As they sit there, talking and laughing with smoke curling around them, the baby toddles over to the tree with open arms. Patty laughs in surprise and springs from the couch, running over to Trixie to grab the girl before she topples the tree. The woman on the couch lets her head fall back as she laughs merrily.

The images and snippets of life keep coming as Ruby stares at the film's projection on the bare, white wall. The only sounds are of the ocean through the open window, and the film spinning through the projector. Banks stands in the doorway silently, waiting to be needed.

As she watches, Trixie sleeps in a crib peacefully, a teddy bear tucked under one arm. Another brief interlude shows Patty in a one piece swimsuit with cat-eye sunglasses as she splashes through the water on the beach, holding Trixie on one hip. Ruby watches as Trixie has a birthday, opening a box that holds the Raggedy Ann doll that now sits on the shelf in this very room. There is a scene where Patty is sitting outside the avocado green bungalow, the wind playing with her long hair as she reads a letter. She sits in profile, eyes trained on the page in her hands, her bare feet pulled up beneath her. She looks pensive.

Finally there is Patty wearing a black crepe dress, looking drawn. She stands next to a bunch of flowers with a cup in one hand. She is not looking at the camera. The film cuts off and the spool runs out.

"What did I just watch?" Ruby says, still staring at the wall like something else might pop up and offer further explanation. "Why was my mother just standing there in black, looking haunted?"

Banks walks over to the projector and takes the reel off, winding the end of it and putting it back in its flat, round metal container. "Shall I put on another?" he asks.

Ruby shakes her head. "I'm feeling...kind of overwhelmed." She stands and smooths the edge of the pink bedspread. "I need to process that."

Without further explanation, Ruby walks back to the front room and picks up the baby book, taking it outside with her. She finds the spot where Patty had been sitting in the home movie, her back to the house as she read the letter in her hands. In an effort to feel closer to her mother, and perhaps to understand her better through osmosis, Ruby sits the same way, pulling her feet up beneath her as she reopens the baby book.

She starts where she left off, reading Trixie's height and weight updates, opening the birthday cards that someone (possibly Patty) had carefully taped into the baby book, and looking at the photos of Trixie smiling for the camera. She was no more than two—maybe two and a half—when the updates stop. Ruby turns a page and it's blank. She turns another: nothing.

She's about to close the book when instead, she turns to the last page. There, taped to the back cover, is a white envelope that isn't sealed. Ruby pulls a folded piece of paper from it, opening it with clear hesitation. It's from the Jekyll Island Medical Examiner's office, and as Ruby's eyes skim the page, she stops breathing.

Trixie Michelle Huberman, DOB: 7-13-68. Death: 10-14-70. It lists height, weight, hair and eye color, parents' names, her address at the time of her death, and then finally, a cause: undiagnosed congenital heart disease.

"Banks," Ruby calls out, her voice a rasp as she starts to cry. Banks appears at the open window next to Ruby and she senses him there but doesn't look at him directly. "She was my mother's baby. And she died. I had a sister."

Banks disappears from the window and reappears as he walks around the side of the house. Without a word, he sits on the porch next to Ruby, putting an arm around her.

Her head falls to his shoulder.

“I had a sister,” she says again, sounding shocked. “And I never even knew she existed. She died, Banks. She had a heart defect, and she died. How come she never told me? How could my mother keep that from me?”

Banks says nothing, as is his way, but his calm, solid presence is soothing nonetheless. Ruby sits there next to him for so long that her legs go numb. The tides roll in and out in the distance, and Ruby does not move.

She cannot move. Her mother’s illness and rapid death had shocked her, but not nearly as much as these facts about her life.

Ruby and Banks sit there together until the spell is broken and she stands up, wiping her face with both hands and straightening her shoulders. “I need to find out what happened,” she says. “I need to know why she never told me.”

Patty

The crowd milled around inside the green bungalow, and at the edge of the kitchen, Evelyn Huberman stood with Patty’s mother, Margaret. Evelyn was smoking a cigarette as the women stood there, speaking to one another in hushed tones. Outside, Patty could see her father standing with Jacob Huberman, their backs to the house as they faced in the direction of the sea. They were both holding highball glasses and drinking their way through the sadness.

Patty wore a black crepe dress and held a cup of tea that someone had put into her hand. She stood next to a collection of flowers that made her nauseous with their strong scent, and she blinked slowly, not even registering the names of the people as they passed by her, touching her arm gently and whispering condolences.

Jekyll Island had been her home since the eighth month of her pregnancy. Trixie was born there. Patty had waited eagerly in the bungalow with the Hubermans for the return of their son from Vietnam, hoping every night as she closed her eyes to sleep that Bradley was safe, and that he'd come home soon to meet their baby girl. But now she had nothing.

At one point, she'd seen Jacob Huberman fiddling with his camera, possibly taking footage of the funeral or the attendees. Seeing this had nearly made Patty vomit, though she didn't have the strength to ask him to stop. She'd just stood there, holding her cup of tea and wishing it would all end.

"Patty," her mother said, walking up to her and gently taking the cup and saucer from her hands. "Honey, you should sit."

Patty did not care to sit. She did not care to stand. She did not care to live.

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Having to write a letter to Bradley explaining that their baby had died suddenly in her sleep from an undiagnosed heart condition had nearly killed her. What kind of woman was she to send her beloved a letter that he'd receive in the midst of a war, telling him that the daughter he'd never even met was dead? But what kind of woman would she be if she didn't send the letter, letting him go on believing that everything was fine when nothing would ever be fine again?

She let her mother lead her over to the gold couch and she sat down there, eyes wide as saucers. "I think you should come home with us, Patty," her mother said, sinking down onto the gold velvet cushions next to her. "Evelyn and I discussed it, and we think it would be best. The cold, fresh air in Seattle will do you good, as will a change of scenery. Nothing good will come of you staying here and being surrounded by the memories."

Against her will, a sob escaped from Patty's chest. It came out like a wail, and a few people stopped their conversations to glance her way, then politely resumed their talking so that the grieving mother could cry in peace.

"I need to wait here for Bradley," she said weakly. "He can't come home to find me gone."

"Honey," Margaret said, taking her daughter by the arm, pulling her up from the couch, and leading her out the front door so that no one would overhear their conversation. "You being here is hard for Evelyn and Jacob. They need to heal too. It's time to come home."

It was these words that finally jolted Patty out of her trance. "They want me to go."

Margaret nodded slowly. “We all think it’s for the best.”

And so Patty packed her things. She left behind everything of Trixie’s aside from one small stuffed bear and a baby blanket, and she kept the gold anchor bracelet with the tiny chip of ruby that Jacob had gotten for her as a gift to mark the month that Trixie was born. He’d said she was their anchor, their reason for being. Patty had known that Trixie gave them all something to focus on while Bradley fought in Vietnam, and without Trixie, there wasn’t much to live for. For any of them.

She went back to Seattle with her mother, moved back into her childhood bedroom, and saw a therapist who told her to find a new purpose and put it all behind her. She chose law school and put the teddy bear and the blanket into a box—both literally and metaphorically—and refused to speak about Trixie to anyone.

Her daughter Ruby would live the first fifty years of her life never knowing that she’d had a sister once, and for that, Patty would never be sorry. Some secrets were meant to be kept.

Ruby

“Some secrets are meant to be kept,” Ellen says now, talking to Ruby on the telephone.

Ruby has called Ellen in Seattle from Jekyll Island, where she’s gone back to her hotel room, showered, and is sitting on the balcony wrapped in a white terry cloth robe with the phone in her hand. It was clear from the first words of this conversation that Ellen has been expecting Ruby’s call.

“But we shared everything,” Ruby protests. She has her bare feet up on the railing, and she’s looking out at the green expanse of lawn and trees that surround the resort. “There’s nothing that my mother could have told me that would have made me not

love her.”

“That’s not it, honey,” Ellen says. “Some things are not meant to be shared. Your mother found a method to deal with her own sadness and loss, and for her, this was the way to do it.”

“By burying it?” Ruby asks disbelievingly. “Didn’t her parents encourage her to talk? To process?”

Ellen snorts. “Ruby, love, this was fifty years ago. No. Your mother had given birth to a daughter outside the bonds of marriage. She’d gotten pregnant at nineteen by a boy who’d gone to Vietnam. She moved across country to have the baby and stayed there for two years. There was so much hurt and disapproval coursing through that family...just take a moment to unpack all of that.”

“But my grandparents were wonderful people,” Ruby says.

“Of course. They were kind-hearted and loving parents, but they were also a product of their time. Never underestimate the pressures of expectation, Ruby. People expected their young daughters not to get pregnant, not to be drinking and driving with their friends and getting into serious car accidents, and not to move across country and wait for a soldier boyfriend to return from war—a man who wasn’t even her husband, I might add. There was a lot of scandal surrounding your mother at that time.”

“But people love a scandal.”

“Ah, ah, ah—people love a scandal when it’s not their own. You should know that best of all.”

Ruby falls silent as she watches three men in plaid shorts park a golf cart and get out of it on the gravel drive below her. They’re talking and laughing as they head into the

bar that's located on the ground floor.

"You're right. I'm being shortsighted here. My grandparents would have had plenty to take issue with at that point, and if my mother came home, it would have been easier not to talk about any of it."

"It always is."

"So what did she do next? She was, what—twenty-one?"

"She was." Ellen pauses. "She enrolled in college almost immediately and got an English degree, which is how she met Ruben."

"My dad," Ruby says, feeling her heart clench at the mention of her beloved father's name. "They met in college."

"They did indeed. And Ruben didn't really want to become a lawyer, but it was what his family expected of him, so he was there, doing his best to get through it. But meeting your mother sidetracked him a bit, and he decided to let her be the one to pass the bar, while he started an insurance company in Pismo Beach."

"Only she had me instead, and stayed at home with me until my dad died."

"Your mother was a wonder," Ellen says, sounding wistful. "She was the classiest broad I ever knew."

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This makes Ruby laugh. “A classy broad. Isn’t that the truth.”

Patty had always been the one to bring a touch of elegance to daily life. In their house, the napkins were ironed, the cakes made from scratch, and no one ever wanted for anything, because Patty made it her job—her privilege—to see to the happiness of her little family. She’d grown flowers in her garden and cut fresh ones to place in glass vases. She remembered everyone’s birthday, sent cards and handwritten notes for every occasion, and cooked full dinners from the cookbooks she’d gotten as wedding gifts. Whenever Ruby had asked why she didn’t have a brother or sister, Patty would smile at her and reach out to brush her daughter’s hair from her face. “Because you were exactly what I needed,” she’d say.

“I feel like she lied to me my whole life,” Ruby says to Ellen. “Like she had this thing she could have told me, and that it was an important piece of my life too.”

“But it wasn’t.” Neither of them says anything for a long time until Ellen speaks again. “It was an important piece of her life, and the only way she could move forward was to keep it in the past. Every person has the right to choose what they do and don’t share, even with the people closest to them.”

Ruby knows she’s right. “I can respect that.”

“I think you have to.”

“So why does my mother own this house now if the Hubermans sent her home? And what ever happened to Bradley? I’ve never heard a word about these people, so I don’t know anything.”

Ellen sighs on the other end of the line. “Bradley didn’t make it home from Vietnam,” Ellen says softly. “That was another thing that messed with your mother. He knew he had a daughter but never got to meet her, and then he was killed in action. I think all of that was hard enough for Patty, but imagine how it was for the Hubermans. Bradley was their only child. When they died in their sixties—both of cancer—they left the house and all of its contents to your mom. She’d gone back to visit them several times, and they considered her their next of kin.”

Ruby is stunned by this onslaught of information. Bradley had died in Vietnam? The Hubermans lost both their only child and only grandchild? As a grown woman, Ruby found this not just tragic, but unthinkable.

“God,” she says in a whisper. “I can’t even imagine.”

“Her relationship with the Hubermans was a sad one,” Ellen says. “She loved them and felt grateful to them, but whenever she went to Jekyll Island to visit them, they spent the whole time reminiscing, crying, and talking about people who were gone. Patty said they aged quickly after Bradley’s death.”

“Understandable.” Ruby stands up and paces the length of her balcony at the Jekyll Island Club Resort. She wraps an arm around her waist to hold her robe closed, wishing she’d ordered room service and that she had a drink in hand. With a sigh, she leans against the balcony railing. “So now I have this house that’s essentially a mausoleum, and I have no personal ties to any of it. I mean, there are photos and films of my—“ the words catch in Ruby’s throat here, “—sister, and of my mother, but I’m not even sure what to do with them.”

“Box them up, hon,” Ellen says pragmatically. “Ship them back to your place. Keep them until you’re ready for more research. Trust me: this is your first stop and you’re going to overwhelm yourself if you read every letter, look at every photo, and sit through every inch of film.”

“You’re right about that. I’ve been here for just over twenty-four hours, and I feel like I’ve lived a lifetime in a day. I could get into bed now and stay there all night.”

Ellen laughs softly. “Sadness can feel traumatic like that, and there’s no way that house isn’t full of sadness.”

“Okay,” Ruby says decisively. “I hear what you’re saying, and I think you’re right. I’ll send it all home and put the house on the market. I don’t think I’ll ever want to use the house for weekend escapes, or turn it into an Airbnb or anything.”

“Good thinking.”

An idea comes to Ruby then and it’s crystal clear. She actually feels a tingle of electricity run the length of both arms as she realizes what she’ll do. “And then I’ll take the proceeds from the sale of the house and split them evenly between the Texas Children’s Hospital, which is the best pediatric cardiology hospital in the country, and another for Vietnam veterans. I’ve worked with plenty of charities over the years, so I’m sure I can find a good one.”

“Wow.” Ellen goes silent for a minute. “That’s very generous of you, Ruby.”

Ruby doesn’t think so. “Not really. This house isn’t mine and it doesn’t belong in my family anymore. All of the people involved in this story are gone now, and it’s time for some young family to buy this house at the beach and turn it into a home. And as for the money, it will go exactly where it’s supposed to go.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Just be here if I have any more questions. Would you be willing to answer them? I don’t know when I’ll go through the rest of the pictures and home movies, but I’m sure there will be something I don’t understand that you might.”

“Of course. I’m always right here. All you have to do is call.”

“Thanks, Ellen. Oh, and one more thing—do you know if my sister is buried here on the island?”

“She is. There’s a cemetery on the island, and I think you’ll find Trixie there right next to her father and her grandparents.”

“Thank you,” Ruby says. “Thank you for being my mother’s friend and confidante all these years.”

Ellen gives a laugh that sounds like it’s laced with tears. “Oh, Ruby, honey. The pleasure was all mine.”

Banks stands under a banyan tree with his hands clasped respectfully behind him. He wears sunglasses and long pants, and he looks stoic. Ruby turns away from him and scans the gravestones that run the length of the tree-shaded cemetery. The grounds are well-kept. After asking a few questions of the office that oversees the cemetery, Ruby has discovered that Trixie, Bradley, Evelyn, and Jacob Huberman all share a family plot beneath a tree draped in Spanish moss. The breeze blows through the trees overhead as she scans the names, and in the distance, there is the sound of the ocean and the tinkle of wind chimes that someone has hung in a nearby tree.

Finally, a tiny headstone: Trixie Michelle, Beloved Baby Girl. Next to it is a larger one with both Evelyn and Jacob’s birth and death dates, and to the right, a small plaque with Bradley’s name and a short poem about a fallen soldier.

Ruby kneels there at the family plot, putting a small bunch of flowers on each gravestone. This is the least she can do—to pay respects to the people who meant something to her mother. In a parallel universe, perhaps this would have been her mother’s life: living on Jekyll Island, raising Trixie and perhaps other children with

Bradley when he returned home. She might have become a local fixture here, lived all her years on an island as a wife and mother, and been buried in this plot as well. Ruby might never have been born.

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But there's only so much capacity for this kind of thought, so Ruby lets it go, brushing her fingertips across the raised letters of her sister's name. A sister she'll never know; a person who will always be—for Ruby—a thought and not a reality. Trixie is a piece of the puzzle that made up Patty's life, and Patty's entire life is one piece of the puzzle that makes up Ruby's, so in this way, they are all connected. But Patty's great losses are hazy and distant for Ruby, and all she can do is honor them. So she stands, bows her head in silent prayer for these people she never knew, and then walks over to where Banks is standing.

"Ready?" he asks her gently.

"Ready," Ruby says with a firm nod.

The sunlight spills through the branches of the trees, dappling their heads and shoulders with light as they walk through the cemetery. Ruby slips her arm through Banks's and looks up at him, his cheekbones are sharp and his eyes are covered by his dark glasses. "Thanks for coming with me, Banks."

"Ma'am," he says with a firm nod. It's his way of saying both "It's my job, and it's my honor," and Ruby knows this.

They walk on in amiable silence. The sound of wind chimes follows them.

Ruby

The airplane circles JFK before landing two days later. Ruby has gotten a lot done on Jekyll Island: boxed up the personal items and FedExed them to Shipwreck Key;

donated most of the furniture and houseware to charity shops (amidst much joking from Sunday via FaceTime that she should call a museum to see if they want the rotary phone, the console television, or the plastic-covered dining chairs); and had a realtor come by to do an initial walk-through. She feels good about closing the book on that chapter of her mother's life on Jekyll, and someday--who knows when--she might feel like poring through more of the films and photo albums, or even reading the letters from Bradley to her mother.

She and Banks find their luggage and meet their car at the curb outside the busy airport. Ruby has on sunglasses and a hat, as she feels oddly more exposed in a giant city like New York than she does in a tiny enclave like Jekyll Island. Maybe it's the crush of humanity or the chance that the paparazzi lurks around every corner, but something about a big city makes her want to hide herself away.

"I'm not wasting any time while I'm here," Ruby says to Banks in the back of the Mercedes they're riding in. "I set up a meeting with Carmela Rivera at four o'clock, so that gives us just enough time to check into the hotel, shower, and meet back downstairs. Unless you'd rather sit this one out." Ruby is looking through the emails on her iPhone distractedly.

Banks makes an expression of disbelief. "Not likely," he says. "I'll be in the lobby waiting for you."

Sure enough, when Ruby emerges from the hotel elevator into the lobby at three-thirty, Banks is sitting on a couch looking freshly shaven and wearing pressed pants and a long-sleeved shirt. He stands.

"Ready?"

Ruby isn't sure that she is ready, to be perfectly honest, but she's committed to unraveling the story of her mother's life at this point. Frankly, after everything she

learned from Ellen in Seattle about the car accident in the late 60s, and then all that she discovered on Jekyll Island, she feels fairly confident that there isn't too much left that could shock her.

Carmela Rivera is clearly waiting for her when she arrives at the apartment on Riverside Drive. Ruby is gobsmacked by the opulence of the lobby, with its shiny marble floors and polished fixtures. A huge, crystal chandelier hangs over the center of the grand foyer, and three uniformed doormen bustle about with smiles on their faces.

Banks nods at a spot on a bench and Ruby understands that he'll be there waiting for her while she meets with Carmela.

Carmela opens the door to apartment 12B almost the second that Ruby knocks, and it's clear that she's just as nervous as Ruby is feeling.

"Come in," Carmela says, waving to a mostly cream and white colored living space that is lit by giant windows looking out onto the blue sky of a perfect autumn afternoon.

Ruby slips off her shoes without being asked and follows Carmela to a plush couch.

"Please, sit," Carmela says unnecessarily. "Can I get you anything? Coffee? Tea?"

"Actually, water would be wonderful," Ruby says. She's had her fill of coffee on the airplane and in her hotel room as she showered and changed, and any more caffeine will only give her the jitters. She waits as Carmela walks over to an open concept kitchen area and pulls two plastic bottles of water from a stainless steel refrigerator.

Carmela returns with the bottle of water and a glass; she sets both on the coffee table before Ruby.

"Just the bottle is fine," Ruby says with a smile, hoping to disarm her. "No need to stand on ceremony." She twists off the cap and takes a long, grateful pull from the water bottle.

"I hope your trip has been good so far," Carmela says. She has the slightest accent to her words, and Ruby admires the silky way her dark hair falls over her shoulders. Carmela has honeyed skin and lightly applied makeup, and that, combined with her simple, refined style, makes her look like she's just gotten home from a high-powered job and is ready to pour a glass of wine and put her feet up. But Ruby knows enough about people not to make assumptions.

"The trip has been interesting," Ruby says. "My mother owned a home on Jekyll Island in Georgia that I'd never seen, so I went there first to assess that property, then came directly to you."

Carmela nods and pulls her feet up under her, spreading her loose skirt around her legs as she does. "I'm glad you could make it, and I'm guessing you have a lot of questions."

Ruby looks around the apartment. She doesn't know a ton about the New York real estate market, but a large, light-filled, clean apartment on Riverside Drive with doormen and a fancy lobby could only mean one thing: a huge price tag.

"I have some questions, yes," Ruby admits, nodding slowly as she recaps her water bottle. "But I guess I'd rather just listen first. I have no idea how you and my mother even know each other, or--and forgive me for sounding blunt here--why on earth she would have left you a piece of real estate like this. So please, tell me how you met. I want to know anything you can tell me."

Carmela smiles and looks like she's about to start speaking when the door to the apartment flies open and three young kids spill into the front room.

"Mom! Mom!" a girl with two long braids says. "You won't believe what I--" She stops speaking as she realizes that her mother isn't alone. "Oh," the girl says, her smile faltering slightly. "Hi. Are you the lady?"

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"The First Lady, you dingdong," a boy says, reaching over and tugging on his sister's braid. "She's only eight," he says to Ruby, as if to explain.

Ruby smiles at them all and stands up. She knows enough about kids to understand that they want and deserve to be acknowledged just like any adult would. "I'm Ruby Hudson," she says, folding her hands in front of her.

"I'm Marcos," the boy who has spoken says, stepping forward. "And I'm twelve. Valeria is eight, and this is Felix. He's ten." Felix has said nothing and appears to be refusing to make eye contact with Ruby.

Undaunted, she looks at each of them in turn. "It's nice to meet you Marcos, Valeria, and Felix. I wanted to come and meet you all and talk to your mom for a bit, if that's okay."

"Of course it is," Carmela says quickly, standing up. She slips the straps of Felix's backpack from his shoulders and turns to Marcos. "Can you get the snacks I left in the fridge for you three and go do your homework in your room? Help your brother and sister, okay?"

Marcos nods and takes Felix by the arm, tugging him lightly towards the bedrooms.

"Felix is autistic," Carmela says quietly, sitting back on the couch. "He is nonverbal and I rely far too much on Marcos and Valeria to help me with him." She puts both hands up and shakes her head. "I know I do."

"Your children are beautiful," Ruby says sincerely. "And you can see how much they

love one another. That's a credit to your good mothering."

Tears spring into Carmela's eyes as she absorbs the words that every mother on the planet longs to hear: that she's a good mother. "Thank you," she says, looking down at her hands in her lap.

"Is it just you and the kids?" Ruby prompts, trying a different angle to get Carmela to keep talking.

Carmela nods. "Yes. I was married once, but it didn't work out. We had Valeria right before Felix started to show signs of autism, and I think having a four-year-old, a two-year-old with special needs, and a newborn was too much for him. He left."

Ruby shakes her head; it never ceases to amaze her that some men can simply shed their responsibilities like an old layer of skin that they no longer need, while women are left holding the bag. Over and over and over. Wash, rinse, repeat.

"I'm so sorry," Ruby says.

"I survived because of your mother." Carmela stands then and walks over to a tall shelf that lines one wall. On it are a variety of books, from children's picture books to paperback novels and hardcovers, and there are framed photos interspersed with knickknacks. Carmela leans one elbow on a shelf as she faces the windows, looking out at the Hudson River that winds past.

Once again, Ruby is amazed at the view and the location of this apartment. She cannot fathom how her mother acquired this many pieces of real estate that Ruby knew nothing about, but at the moment, she's more interested to hear how Patty and Carmela crossed paths.

"We met at a fundraiser for single mothers here in New York," Carmela says,

sounding faraway. “I had taken a position with an event planning company, and it was my job to work with the committee to put together the luncheon. Patty was on the board of directors?—“

“She was?” Ruby frowns.

Carmela nods and goes on. “She was my contact person with whom to discuss table linens, place settings, and the timing of the event. We met for coffee at a little shop in Brooklyn, which is where I lived at the time, and we hit it off immediately.”

A half smile tugs at the corner of Ruby’s mouth. One of Patty’s charms had always been the way she could meet someone and instantly make them a friend—Ruby had seen her do it her entire life.

Carmela turns away from the window and walks back to the couch, sitting on it again with one knee pulled under her and the other foot flat on the floor. She rests her arm on the back of the couch so that she’s facing Ruby. “We talked for hours. She told me about becoming a single mother when your father died, and about how she’d been a single mother before that, when she had a baby with a man who was sent to Vietnam.”

Ruby’s blood runs cold and she can feel her face change. “She told you about that?”

Carmela, totally innocent, nods. There’s no way for this woman to know that she holds information about Patty that Ruby herself has only had for a few days. “She did. And we had a lot of common ground because of it. Raising small children alone can be a traumatic experience, but she said she had the help of the baby’s grandparents, which changed her life. I had no one at the time. My parents were both ill and in Puerto Rico, and my ex-husband’s parents were never that involved with our kids. I have no siblings here. No one. I was working well over forty hours a week and paying for childcare, and some days I wasn’t sure I could get up and do it all again.”

Ruby is nodding and listening intently, but she does not interrupt.

“I think Patty could see on my face just how exhausted I was, so we quickly chose a bunch of things for the banquet,” Carmela stops here and laughs at the memory. “She said, ‘Hand me that binder,’ and I did. In less than five minutes, she’d chosen tablecloths, dishes, flatware, stemware, and laid out the timetable for the meal. Bing, bang, boom—done.”

Now Ruby laughs. “That was one of her signature phrases: ‘Bing, bang, boom—done.’ She’d say it whenever we needed to plow through something and move on.”

“Exactly. And she never second-guessed her decisions, which I admired. We chose everything, she closed the binder, and then she said, ‘Now, tell me about you.’ And we talked for three hours.” Carmela bites on her lower lip, and the sound of her children’s laughter floats out from a bedroom down the hall. Her face softens as she hears them. “I never felt like she saw me as a charity case, to be perfectly honest. It was just like I suddenly had the mother I’d always needed. Someone present, competent, and caring. Patty listened. Whenever she came to town she’d get a giant hotel suite, invite me and the kids, and we’d take them to the hotel pool and run around town like tourists. I’d get a bed to myself—which I did not have at the time, as I was sleeping with both Felix and a tiny baby—and she’d take care of the kids. It was amazing.”

Ruby is completely silenced by all of this. Stunned. She can’t even imagine it. And yet, she can totally imagine it. She’d done the very same thing with a newborn: fled into the arms of her mother, who was there and willing to help. When postpartumdepression had stung her like an angry nest of wasps, she’d fallen into Patty’s open arms and counted on her to act as a buffer between Ruby and the world—and she had.

“I believe that a part of her always wanted to be the kind of rock for someone else that her boyfriend’s parents were for her when she got pregnant and moved down to Jekyll Island,” Carmela says. She casts her eyes out the window at the late afternoon. The sun is quickly falling, and the crisp blue sky is fading to evening. “But she never did anything in a way that screamed ‘This is for charity!’ It was more like she had it in her heart to give back. To be there for people the way others had been there for her.”

Ruby nods; this sounds exactly like her mother, though she’d had no idea the extent to which Patty had been there for anyone other than her. Maybe that’s the curse of all children—even adult ones: to believe that you and you alone are the center of your mother’s universe. To think that she will always be there to make your life easier, and that the maternal love and care that she aims at you is only meant for you. Ruby can see now that her mother had far more to give than was needed by her only child, and that all of that love had been spread around to other people who’d needed it.

“I’m finding out a lot about her on this journey,” Ruby says. She swipes both hands over her cheeks, brushing away tears that have started to fall. “Things I had no idea about. I kind of feel like the loss of my mother has been compounded by the knowledge that she was far more than I ever knew her to be.”

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Carmela nods sagely. “I think everyone is far more than we know them to be.” She reaches over on the couch and pats Ruby’s knee as she smiles at her. “Even you.”

This gets Ruby’s attention and she lifts one eyebrow. “Even me?”

“Yeah,” Carmela says, pulling her hand away from Ruby’s leg. “I mean, forgive me for saying so, but you were the First Lady and we all felt like we had the right to watch you, judge what you wore and how you acted...and then after the President’s death, we realized that you were this whole person on your own.” Carmela makes a face at her own choice of words. “I’m sorry. That sounds bad and very anti-feminist.”

“No, not at all. I actually know what you mean.”

“I hope so. Because what I’m really trying to say is that we see people in one light, and then something happens and we realize that there’s more depth, more gravity, to them than we ever understood.”

Ruby chews on the inside of her cheek as she listens. This has been true for so many people she’s known, and of course the same holds true for her own mother—how could it not? “Right,” she says, tipping her head to one side. “Naturally. We never get the full view of people when they’re looking us in the eye. It’s only when they turn in profile or walk away that we see them for who they are, and we can observe them in every light.”

Carmela gives a nearly imperceptible shrug as she watches Ruby with sympathy. “I’m sorry that it’s only as your mother is walking away that you’re seeing her in this light, because it’s a good one. She was someone who did so much for others, and she

was a godsend to me and my children.”

“I’m seeing that now,” Ruby says. She looks around the apartment again. “I just wish I’d known about it...about you.”

“Hey,” Carmela says. She smiles widely to break the mood. “How about if you and I meet tomorrow morning and I take you to the kids’ school. I want you to see how well they’re doing, and how much your mother has helped them. We can drop by my office, because that’s all thanks to your mother as well.”

Ruby takes a long, deep breath and nods. “Yes,” she says. “Absolutely. I want to see everything. I want to know all the things my mother touched, and to visit the school. One hundred percent.” It’s her turn to reach over and touch Carmela on the arm. “But if you’ll forgive me, I think I’m going to head back to my hotel for the evening and rest. Maybe process this a bit more. I’m excited to meet up tomorrow though.”

Carmela stands. “Of course,” she says. “I can imagine that every bit of this is overwhelming for you. Losing Patty has been hard for all of us, but you’re her daughter, Ruby. That’s a whole different relationship.”

Ruby follows her to the door and impulsively hugs her. “Thank you for inviting me into your home and introducing me to the kids.”

“You’ll see them again tomorrow,” Carmela assures her. “They loved your mom and called her *abuelita*,” she says. “The kids miss her terribly.”

“Thank you,” Ruby says. She’s fighting tears again, so she turns to go.

“I’ll text you a time and address, and I’ll see you in the morning,” Carmela says, watching Ruby walk to the elevator.

Downstairs, Ruby emerges to find Banks sitting on the same bench where she left him. His back is to a wall, and he looks like he's observing people nonchalantly, though she knows him well enough to know that he's taking in every single thing that happens in the lobby of the building.

"Ready?" he asks, standing as she crosses the marble floor.

Ruby nods. "On to the next order of business," she says crisply. "And this part I can handle on my own."

Banks looks at her quizzically. "You're saying you don't need me?"

But Ruby is already walking to the door, the heels of her boots clicking against the marble. "Not for this," she says over one shoulder. "But you can drop me off."

"Where?"

Ruby pauses as the doorman opens the glass door with great ceremony. She looks up at Banks and smiles tiredly. "Dexter's apartment."

Ruby

It's awkward, and there's no way around it. Ruby and Dexter sit on opposite ends of the same couch, him with a bottle of beer in hand, and her with a glass of wine. She takes a sip to fill the empty space between them and to give herself another moment to think of what to say.

He looks good. It's been a few months since they've seen one another, and in that time, Dexter's hair has gotten a bit longer, his beard has grown in and he's trimmed it all so that it hugs his chiseled jawline, and he looks tan for November.

“I’ve missed you a lot,” Dexter says, elbows on knees, beer bottle dangling from his hands as he fixes his gaze on the coffee table. This is the most hesitant Ruby has ever seen him. Gone is the investigative journalist with the ability to dig deep into his subjects, make long, meaningful eye contact, and to move from topic to topic deftly. In place of those things, she sees someone nervous—almost boyish—who has things he clearly wants to say but doesn’t know how to. “I’m so sorry about your mom, Rubes. You have no idea. She was such a bright star.”

Ruby scoots forward on the couch and sets down her wine glass with a clink. “Thank you,” she says. Ruby stands and walks over to a floor-to-ceiling bookcase, admiring the titles on Dexter’s shelves. For as long as they’d been seeing each other, she hasn’t spent any time in his Manhattan apartment, and she’s taking it all in as he watches her.

There’d been a hug at the door when he opened it, deep and meaningful and full of sorrow for both Ruby’s personal loss, and for their shared loss in not seeing one another for so long. When Dexter released her, Ruby had immediately walked in and started to look around. A sense of pleasure fills her as she scans the small apartment and appreciates every item. It’s all so Dexter, and she’s happy to see that there’s nothing shocking, nothing out of character. If anything, his tiny home on Christmas Key—where she has spent time—is the place that’s out of character. Someone serious enough to have a shelf full of Russian literature, a clear interest in mid-century modern furniture, and a framed black and white photo of himself sitting across from President Obama in the Oval Office is quirky enough to buy a tiny home on an island that’s decorated for Christmas all year long is a bit of a disconnect. Each time Ruby visits him on Christmas Key she’s stunned all over again that a man as cerebral as Dexter North wants to take his morning coffee at a place called Mistletoe Morning Brew with a bunch of octogenarians. And yet she loves this about him.

“Tell me about this journey so far,” Dexter prompts her. He leans back on the couch and puts one ankle on top of the opposite knee as he watches her. “You started in

Georgia with a beach house you never knew your mom owned, right?”

Ruby slides the copy of *Anna Karenina* back where it belongs and turns to face him. “Actually, it started in Seattle right after she died.” Ruby walks back over to the couch and flops down, feeling more relaxed now from the half glass of wine she’s already ingested. She leans her head back on the cushion and stares up at the ceiling. Dexter has crown molding and a very simple, somewhat masculine chandelier. “After I talked to you that day at her house, I went up to Seattle and met her oldest friend, Ellen. I learned a lot.”

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“Such as?” Dexter prompts. “Oh, and all of this is off the record, obviously. And please only tell me what you want to tell me.”

Ruby realizes that she wants to tell him everything, and so she does—all of it. From the car accident and Ellen losing a leg, to her mother’s sister dying of cancer and Ellen making it to the hospital just in time to say goodbye. From finding the postcard on the refrigerator of the bungalow on Jekyll Island from her grandparents to these people who’d apparently owned the bungalow, to finding out about her mother, Bradley dying in Vietnam, and Trixie. It took her nearly an hour to tell the whole story, and as she did, Dexter got up, found the bottle of merlot he’d poured from, and refilled her glass.

Ruby kept talking as he shook his head and listened. She talked and talked, and as she did, her hands gestured wildly and she could feel the knots in her shoulders loosen up. Other than Sunday, she didn’t really have anyone she could talk this way with—not even her girls. Of course they were both beside themselves with grief over losing the grandmother they adored, but if there were things that a daughter never learned about her mother while she was still alive, then there were definitely things that granddaughters didn’t need to learn about their grandmother, even once she was gone.

“Wow,” Dexter says when she’s finally done. “I don’t even know what to say or what to ask about any of that. I think I just need to sit with it.”

Ruby laughs. “I hear that. Only I’m not done, because I just met with Carmela this evening. And we’re meeting up again in the morning for a full day of...I don’t know what.”

“The lady with the kids?”

“Yes. Apparently she and my mom met during the planning of a luncheon. My mother was on the committee for the nonprofit, and Carmela worked for the company that was putting the event together. They hit it off. Or my mom saw something in Carmela that she recognized.”

“I think it’s really admirable the way your mom built these lasting relationships. I mean, an elderly couple left her their beach house. Now, the circumstances around it were tragic, and certainly she probably would have chosen for her baby to live a long life, but it’s still kind of amazing that she meant so much to these people.”

Ruby is pensive for a moment as Dexter drains his beer. “Do you think, given the chance, she would have gone back and chosen for Trixie to live, even if it meant that she never would have married my dad and had me?”

Dexter nearly slams the empty bottle on the coffee table with the force of his conviction. “Ruby,” he says sharply. “Come on. You can’t do that. You should know better than anyone that you don’t get to go back and do those things over. There is no changing the past.” He stares at her long and hard, and she looks at her lap. “Okay, do you think Jack would have chosen to go back and not have Julien if he could have changed things? Do you think if he’d lived and never gotten a disease that you would have been able to sustain a happy marriage until the end? Would you wish for him to have lived if it meant that you never moved to Shipwreck Key, never opened the bookstore, never met me?”

Ruby looks up and straight into his eyes. “I?—“

Dexter cuts her off. “You can’t answer those questions, and you shouldn’t. Nor should they even be asked. We get what we get, right? Your mom landed where she did and met your dad and had you, you met Jack and got married, and ended up in the

White House with two beautiful daughters, and then you were widowed, moved south, and met me. Boom. Here we are. To me, I like to believe that these things go the way they're supposed to, whether we like it or not."

Ruby shrugs and turns her gaze to the bookshelf. "It might sound terrible, but I think I like the way things have gone." She looks back at him. "I'm glad I'm here with you." Her voice grows softer. "I've missed you, Dex. I wanted you to come back to me because you wanted to be there, but instead I've come and knocked on your door."

"And I'm not sorry about that at all." He scoots over on the couch so that their knees are touching. "Not one bit." Dexter takes her hand in his and holds it. "But Ruby...I think our timing is off to talk about all of this."

Ruby slips her fingers from his like he's burned her. She can feel her guard go up. "Why? Are you seeing someone?"

"No! God—no. I haven't even thought about it. Are you?" Dexter frowns.

It takes everything Ruby has not to laugh; does Dexter truly believe that a fifty-year-old woman has men crawling all over her? Does he think that potential love interests are just falling out of trees all over Shipwreck Key? "No, Dexter. The thought hasn't even occurred to me. Like I said in my email, I've been swimming, walking, and working at the bookstore. Thinking of you, and hoping that you're thinking of me."

"I have been," he says quickly as he reaches for her hand again. "I've thought about nothing but you. But when someone loses a person who is as important to them as your mom is to you, you need to give them space. Actually, that sounds wrong: I'm here to give you love and support and to let you know that you're not alone, but I'm also going to press pause on the relationship stuff with us until you work through this. Trust me—it's the wise thing to do."

Ruby can feel herself deflate a little; the notion of falling back into Dexter's arms is more than appealing, but she knows he's right. A major life change like losing her mother requires some time for introspection, for healing, for closure. And right now she's on a literal journey across country to find those things, so splitting herself in two to start back up with Dexter might not be the best idea.

"I hear you," she says, squeezing his hand. "And I appreciate your wisdom and patience."

"I'm here, Ruby. I promise you. I just want us to sit down and talk about things when you aren't carrying such a heavy emotional burden. So let's be patient because we can afford to be."

Ruby presses her lips together tightly and gives him a firm, resolved nod. "You're right."

After a long moment of holding her gaze, Dexter smiles. "Hey," he says, "how do you feel about jazz?"

"I love it."

"I know you have plans all day tomorrow and you're starting early, but would you want to go to a jazz club with me? One drink?" he says, holding up a finger. "And then I swear I'll have you in an Uber back to your hotel."

Ruby stands up and slips her feet back into the shoes that she's kicked off. "You're on," she says, tossing her hair over one shoulder and reaching for her purse. "Only I don't want you to put me in an Uber back to the hotel."

Dexter looks at her, confused. He waits.

“I want to come back here with you.” Ruby steps up to him and puts both hands flat against his chest as she looks up into his eyes. “For one night. It won’t confuse things for me, Dex. I want to be in your arms. I’ll get up early and head back to the hotel, and then I’ll take my time wading through all this stuff that has to do with my mom. Just give me one night...”

Dexter is gazing at her seriously, searching her face for clues that he should say no. When he seems satisfied, he nods. “You’re a grown woman who knows what she wants, Ruby, and that’s the thing I love about you most. I’ll bring you back here, no questions asked, and I’ll let you leave in the morning to take care of what you need to take care of—also with no questions asked.”

Ruby stands up on her tiptoes to press her lips to Dexter’s gently, and the instant she does, her body starts to melt. It feels so right, being this close to him again.

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“Then let’s go listen to some jazz,” she says, falling back onto flat feet. “And have one drink before we come back here. I’ll be out before the sun comes up.”

Dexter grabs their coats and turns off the lights as they leave.

Patty

Patty walked along Fifth Avenue holding shopping bags in both hands. It was nearly Christmas, and the streets of the city were decorated with tinsel and lights. At Rockefeller Plaza, skaters looped around the rink wearing mittens and stocking caps, and all along the streets people pushed in and out of warm stores and coffee shops, collars turned up against the biting cold.

But Patty smiled at everyone she met, not hurrying and not fretting about buying gifts on time or any of the other stressors of the season. Her only child, Ruby, was the First Lady, and her granddaughters were teenagers who loved books and clothes and makeup and anything else that Patty picked out for them. All of that was easy.

What wasn’t easy was feeling as though she didn’t belong anywhere anymore. After years of being a lawyer, she’d finally retired from the firm and found some volunteer work to keep her busy, but sometimes it didn’t feel like enough. No matter what she did, she’d never be a First Lady, would never again have a teenage daughter to guide through such an important phase of life, and she’d never again be in demand for anything. That knowledge led her both to heave a sigh of relief, just knowing that no one was counting on her to act on things in a particulartimeframe, and also to feel as though she was being left behind. And Patty didn’t want to be left behind.

Maybe that was why she clung so hard to the people who needed her—these people who weren't even technically family. Sure, she adored her daughter and her granddaughters, but none of them needed her. They had scads of people at their beck and call for everything under the sun: people to cook for them, shop for them, and protect them everywhere they went. At best, Patty had become an appendage—as all parents do when their children grow into adulthood—and at worst, a liability. Bringing her along anywhere meant more strategic planning, more security, and essentially, more stress for Ruby. And Patty knew that.

Meeting Carmela and her little ones had been fortuitous—as equally beneficial for Patty as it had for them. That first meeting with Carmela had been eye-opening; neither woman had known how much she was in need of someone exactly like the person she was sitting across from until the afternoon was over, and since then, Carmela had been like a surrogate daughter to Patty, and Patty a de facto mother for Carmela. Tit for tat.

And those beautiful children! So hungry in ways that Athena and Harlow never were. The baby just needing to be held while her mother attended to the middle child. The middle child increasingly growing distant as the signs of autism grew more prevalent. And the oldest just as charming and funny and self-reliant as you'd imagine a firstborn to be. Patty had loved them all instantly, and it had been nothing for her to figure out a way to support them through these important, formative years. Of course she'd pay for private schooling that would help them grow into strong, smart, capable children. And she'd already had her eye on an apartment in the city, a place she could stay whenever she made it to New York. Having Carmela live there and look over everything had ultimately benefitted Patty, and she never minded a few nights on the couch when she came to town, waking up to sleepy-headed little ones wanting to climb all over her and watch cartoons while she made them pancakes.

Patty hailed a cab, one hand in the air as the falling snow caught in the headlights of the cars and taxis on Fifth Avenue. That night was going to be special: she'd head

over to Carmela's—no, her own—apartment (she was forever forgetting that it was her name on the deed), and together they'd wrap presents and stuff stockings so that the children would wake up on Christmas morning to find that Santa hadn't passed them by. She dearly loved all the shopping and planning for a holiday like this, and while she'd be leaving the city the next day on the twenty-third to spend Christmas at the White House, in spite of all that pomp and circumstance, Patty kind of wished she was staying in New York to watch three small children open up the books, dolls, clothes, and games that she'd wrapped for them.

“Patty?” Carmela called out as she let herself into the apartment. Right away, she ducked down the hallway and left the bags of gifts in the master bedroom, kicking off her shoes at the door and shedding her coat as well, which she hung on a hook in the entryway. “Glass of wine?”

Patty walked into the warm kitchen in just her socks, stretching her toes as she went. “Love some,” she said, reaching out for the little one in the high chair. Valeria, then just two years old, laughed and reached out for Patty like she was her own grandmother.

“I just fed her,” Carmela said, pouring wine with one hand while she stirred a pot of boiling pasta with the other. “She's dying to get out and run around, but I couldn't keep an eye on her while I made spaghetti for the boys.”

“I've got her, love,” Patty said, taking the glass of wine from the counter and holding Valeria on one hip as she walked the toddler around the apartment, talking to her in a grown up voice all the while, asking how her day was, and telling her about shopping on Fifth Avenue like she might understand it all. It was the same way she'd spoken to her own daughter, and now look: Ruby was sitting in the White House with an English degree to her name. It might not have been the reason for her many successes, but it certainly couldn't have hurt to have a mother who read to her, spoke to her intelligently, and taught her all the basics about life—including shopping.

“And then at Bergdorf Goodman,” she was saying to Valeria, who was pointing at a stuffed giraffe that sat on the bookshelf. “I was at the perfume counter when—oh, do you want that?” Patty stopped in front of the bookcase, leaning one hip forward just slightly so that Valeria could reach her dimpled hands out and grasp the stuffed animal. “What do you say?”

“Tank you,” Valeria said gravely, putting the fur of the stuffed giraffe against her baby cheek.

The speakers in the front room were playing a Christmas station, and as the two boys ran through the room, Bing Crosby crooned about a white Christmas.

“Boys!” Carmela called out, setting a giant bowl of spaghetti on the table. She reached out for four-year-old Felix, whose face remained nearly placid at all times, his personality seemingly locked inside of his sweet, smooth little boy body. In one smooth move, Carmela buckled him into a plastic seat that sat atop a dining room chair.

Marcos, who was six but seemed twelve next to his younger brother and sister, brought a wet washcloth to the table and wiped off his brother’s face and hands before cleaning his own hands and sitting down.

“Thanks, baby,” Carmela said, dropping a kiss on top of Marcos’s dark head. She ruffled his hair and bustled around, bringing back sippy cups full of ice water, a plate of salad for Patty and one for herself, and two small dishes of steamed peas and carrots for the boys. “Valeria can play there in the living room, Patty,” she said, pointing at a spot where the baby’s toys were gathered. “We can keep an eye on her.”

This whole scene—all of it—was so unlike the life that Patty had led as a young mother. Even her brief time with Trixie had been spent with Evelyn and Jacob helping her, and with Ruby, she’d had a husband to help her all the way up to the

time her daughter was eleven. Patty had never had to do everything single-handedly. This frantic level of forward motion that she sensed from Carmela during every waking hour was unfamiliar to her. Having three young sets of eyes on her at all times made Carmela's job infinitely harder than Ruby's had been—at least in her mind.

And yet there was something about it that any single mother could relate to. The need to keep moving, to stay positive, to make sure everyone was fed and happy...those desires were certainly universal, whether you had one child or thirteen, whether they all had special needs or everyone was completely self-reliant. Patty watched it all with admiration, feeling as she always did when she watched other women seamlessly navigate life and motherhood, which is to say that she felt the world would fall apart without the glue that a woman provided. It was a glue made of equal parts love, devotion, and dedication, and it was administered daily to every surface with varying degrees of joy, patience, and resilience.

Once the boys were messily twirling pasta around their forks, Carmela gave a visible sigh of relaxation, lifted her wine glass, and held it up to Patty from her end of the table. "Cheers, Mrs. Dallarosa," she said with a tired smile.

"Cheers to you, my dear girl," Patty said back, nodding at her with a wink.

They got the kids fed, bathed, read to, and into bed just after nine, at which point Carmela turned down the jazzy Christmas music that was playing and sat on the floor amidst a pile of unwrapped gifts.

"Time to make Christmas magic," she said, pushing her frizzing hair away from her face. She looked exhausted.

"Honey," Patty said, setting down the scissors and the roll of wrapping paper she was holding in her hands. "Why don't you just go to bed and let me do this, huh? I have

no reason to be up early, and all I have coming up is the holidays. I get to relax—there's no more Santa for me."

"Patty," Carmela protested, waving a hand. "I can't go to bed and let you wrap all of this." She looked around at the sea of boxes and stuffed toys. "I mean...you bought all of this. I owe you more than I can even say already." Her eyes brimmed with tears, and like so many times during their relatively short friendship, Patty could see that the younger woman was reaching the brink of exhaustion and emotion.

Patty stood up. "I won't hear another word," she said, extending a hand to Carmela, who took it. With a tug, Patty helped her to her feet. "Off with you," she said, picking up a tube of wrapping paper and whacking Carmela on the behind playfully. "Go!"

Carmela laughed. "Patty, I already owe you too much."

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“You owe me nothing, but you owe yourself and your children a solid night of sleep. I’ll wrap until my fingers go numb, and if I don’t get it all done, I’ll hide the rest for you to finish after I’m gone. I promise.”

Carmela looked so grateful that she might have collapsed right there. “Thank you,” she said, opening her arms to Patty, who pulled her close for a tight squeeze. “For everything.”

Patty let her go and gave her a gentle shove towards the bedroom. “I want to hear nothing from that room but loud snoring, got it?”

Carmela lifted a hand and drifted to her room, stopping to peek into the kids’ rooms as she did.

Once everything was quiet, Patty poured herself a small glass of wine, turned the holiday jazz up a notch, and sat down by the lights of the Christmas tree to get to work.

She wrapped until she could hardly keep her eyes open, humming along to all of the familiar holiday songs on the radio. By the time she pulled the heavy duvet over her on the couch, there was a mountain of wrapped gifts beneath the twinkling lights of the tree. It was going to be some Christmas for Carmela and her kids, and Patty fell asleep smiling at the thought of them unwrapping everything in their pajamas on Christmas morning.

She left on the midday train the next day and made it to D.C. by cocktail hour. The White House was decked out in every sort of decoration imaginable, and Patty had a

well-appointed guest room with fresh towels and heated bathroom floors all to herself. Her room even had its own little Christmas tree, decorated in tasteful golds and reds. It certainly didn't compare to sleeping on a couch and being awoken at dawn to turn on the Disney Channel for three little rascallions, and while the experience of spending Christmas in the capitol as the guest of the President and First Lady was certainly special and unique, there was a tiny piece of Patty that wished she was sitting on a couch in New York, watching Carmela's kids tear into imperfectly wrapped gifts while she sipped coffee from a chipped NYPD mug.

It was the first time that Patty truly realized how much capacity her own heart held for love, for family, for giving. Now that she'd found it, she never wanted to let that feeling go. In fact, she wanted to blow the doors off her life and give to everyone around her. She wanted to quietly be someone to everybody she knew, and not for the accolades or the gratitude, but for the way it made her feel.

Never again in Patty's life would she just be a retired lawyer whose daughter was the First Lady; from that point on, she was going to be a giver, a nurturer, and a source of hope for the people around her. For the rest of her days, she'd give other people the kind of hope, love, and guidance that Bradley's parents had given to her. Patty would make sure that no one in her sphere suffered or went without. It became her life's mission to give and give until she fell into bed at night, exhausted, depleted, and filled with joy.

Ruby

True to her word, Ruby slips out of Dexter's apartment before dawn, leaving him with a lingering kiss and no words. He texts her while she's in the Uber that's taking her back to her hotel, and his words are few and sweet: Let me meet you before you leave New York. Please.

Ruby sets the phone in her lap and looks out the window at the gray, rainy morning.

It's Wednesday, and people hurry along the sidewalks in overcoats. Most of them are carrying briefcases and clutching the ubiquitous accessory of the office worker on a mission: a paper cup of coffee to go.

She knows that meeting Dexter is inviting complication into her life during a time when she can scarcely afford to do so, but it seems wrong to have spent the night with him and left without a proper goodbye, so Ruby gives in.

There's a cafe in the lobby of my hotel. I'll meet you there at six o'clock. My flight is at nine.

Banks is awake and ready for the day when Ruby calls his room, and he agrees to knock on her door in one hour, giving her time to shower and drink a whole pot of coffee while she gets ready.

"Shall we?" Banks asks, looking Ruby up and down when she finally opens the door to her hotel room. She's tired from the short night of sleep, but wired from the coffee, and she smiles distractedly.

"Come in," Ruby says. She's moving around the room, picking things up from the bedside table and shoving them into her crossbody purse. She's dressed in a pair of black leather pants, a black hip-length wool coat, and a black cashmere turtleneck with black ankle boots.

"Who died?" Banks nods at her outfit.

"It's New York, Banks. Black is never wrong." Ruby tosses a tube of lipstick into her purse, zips it up, and puts the strap over her head. "Let's roll."

When they get to the Graham Academy in Brooklyn, Carmela is already waiting outside, smiling and laughing as she chats with two other mothers who have clearly

just dropped their children off for the day. Ruby admires the carefree, assured way that the women all stand around in their yoga pants and puffer jackets, hair slicked back, Ugg boots on their feet. They seem to know exactly who they are and what their day will consist of. They wave goodbye to Carmela as Ruby watches, and she notices that Carmela is not dressed in the uniform of a School Drop-off Mom, but rather in a black floral dress with knee-high brown leather boots and a matching leather jacket. She has her makeup on, and she raises a hand in greeting as Ruby and Banks step out of the car.

“Carmela,” Ruby says, approaching her and giving her a light hug. “This is Banks. Officially he’s my Secret Service agent, but he’s been living on Shipwreck Key as long as I have, and the nature of our relationship has shifted a little.” Ruby is looking at Banks as she says this, and he keeps a steady, calm smile on his face. “Banks, this is Carmela. She and her children were close friends of my mother’s.”

Carmela offers a hand to shake, and as she does, she glances at Ruby like so many people do. “Oh, shoot. Can we shake hands?” she asks, wincing as he takes her much smaller hand in his. “I don’t know about the protocol here. My bad.”

“Protocol is fluid at this point,” Banks says, giving her a reassuring nod. “Trust me. Ruby and I have made our own rules.”

Ruby is aware as she watches them that perhaps Carmela is thinking that she and Banks have a much closer, much more personal relationship than that of First Lady and Secret Service agent, and she has no idea why she wants Carmela to know the truth, but something in her pushes her to speak up. “When Banks started dating my best friend, we basically decided to throw out the rule book altogether,” she says with a laugh.

Carmela’s appraising look changes. “Gotcha,” she says, putting her hands into the pockets of her leather jacket. Her long, auburn hair is full and wavy and it hangs

halfway down her back. “Shall we go in and have a look around? The kids should already be in their classes.”

Ruby smiles and nods. “Absolutely.” She’s decided that she’ll go wherever this day takes her, and that her mother would clearly want her to get to know Carmela and the kids, to see and to understand why she herself had gotten so involved with these people who, to Ruby at least, are perfect strangers. “Lead the way.”

Inside the Graham Academy, everything gleams as if it has been recently polished. The wooden floors look newly finished, the water fountains have no fingerprints, and the walls look as though they’ve recently received a fresh coat of paint. The overall effect is one of pride, of competence, and of seriousness. The interior says “We care about education and making a solid impression,” not “We’ll take your tuition money and buy expensive office furniture.”

Ruby looks around as they walk, their footsteps echoing through the empty halls. “This is very impressive,” she says. “I’m sure my mother would have loved it.”

“She did,” Carmela confirms, opening a door and guiding Ruby into the main office. “Let’s check in with the principal, and then I have free reign to show you around and take you wherever you want to go.”

Ruby frowns. “Is that okay?” she whispers. “In this day and age, are strangers allowed to roam around a school unsupervised?”

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Carmela leans in closer to Ruby and whispers back, her face pulled into a mask of mock-seriousness. “People know you, Ruby. You’re not a stranger. And I’m guessing that Banks has a fairly high level of clearance himself.”

Ruby blushes; she’s forgotten once again that she will be recognized wherever she goes. It’s been easy to do that since moving to Shipwreck Key, and in a way, it’s been a huge blessing for Ruby to just be able to blend back into the world around her—at least in her mind, if not in reality.

Once they all have lime green Visitor badges affixed to their chests, Carmela leads Ruby and Banks to the science lab, where Marcos and the other sixth-graders are intently formulating a compound and taking serious notes on their progress. When he spots them, Marcos gives them a lopsided smile and a wave, then goes back to measuring and working with his lab partners.

“Our science department has graduated kids who’ve gone on to top medical programs around the world, and each year for the past decade we’ve won national awards for our cutting-edge scientific research and projects.” Carmela leads them over to a modest trophy case that holds various plaques and statues, pointing at a gold figure of a girl holding a beaker in one hand. “We have an extremely strong and active Women in STEM program, and the majority of our female students participate in STEM classes and projects at some point during their academic career at Graham,” Carmela says proudly. She glances back at her son, who is hard at work on his lab work. “Marcos wants to become a doctor and find a cure for dementia.” Her eyes grow misty as she watches him. “My dad was diagnosed five years ago and died in the spring. I think it really affected Marcos.”

Ruby blinks in surprise. “Your dad had dementia? So did my grandfather—Patty’s dad. He died when I was in my thirties.”

Carmela smiles sadly as she meets Ruby’s eye. “I know. It was yet another thing that Patty and I had in common. When my dad got sick, she was right there by my side, offering words of wisdom and comfort. She knew what questions to ask the doctors, and what kind of help I should be offering my mom.”

Of course she would have done all that, Ruby thinks. Patty had clearly spent a lot of time and energy on this friendship, and rather than thinking it strange that her mother’s closest friend had been a woman younger than Ruby, it’s starting to make sense how they’d fit together and supported one another.

Ruby pulls herself together and focuses. “And how is your mom?” she asks, still watching Carmela’s face.

“She’s still living in their house in Puerto Rico. She’s come to visit a couple of times, but I can’t convince her to move to New York. Too busy. Bad weather. Her friends are there.” Carmela waves a hand through the air. “But it’s fine. As long as she’s healthy and doing her thing there, I can keep my own life afloat here.”

They move on to the special education wing of the building, where kids are in blended classes of students with higher levels of need and those who are functioning at their academic level. There is a room for nonverbal autistic students, and they find Felix in there, building a tower out of blocks of every size and color.

“Hi, baby,” Carmela says, sinking to her knees in front of her son. “How is your day?”

Felix doesn’t look at her directly, but it’s clear from the look on his face that he hears and senses his mother’s presence. A smile spreads across his round cheeks and he

proudly stacks three more blocks.

“This is where Felix spends a fair amount of time,” Carmela says. “Graham Academy has one of the strongest and most inclusive programs for autistic students, and he’s really grown here. I can’t even imagine where he’d be educationally if he wasn’t here.”

They look around the space, admiring the student artwork that hangs on the walls, and they stop to have a conversation with one of the teachers who asks very shyly and politely if she can get a picture with Ruby.

After posing for the photo, they move on to the gym, where Valeria’s second grade class is playing volleyball over a lowered net. The kids don’t seem to notice—or care—that the former First Lady is watching them, but Valeria waves excitedly with both hands, jumping up and down with glee as she steps up to serve while her mother watches. Every child in the gym is dressed neatly in navy blue shorts and white polo shirts, and Ruby notices that they take turns and speak in kind voices to one another.

“When your child is accepted to Graham,” Carmela says, leaning slightly in Ruby’s direction, “you’re required to sign an agreement about electronics. Children are not to be sent to school with phones or Apple watches, and if they are, parents agree that they office can confiscate them for the day and lock them up. There’s a zero-tolerance policy for breaking rules, as Graham Academy is strongly based on the idea that kids need to be able to foster creativity and independence, but also that they need to learn how to function in society. One of the basic tenets of this school is that we’ve moved too far away from a community-based society and too much in the direction of individuality, which leaves us disconnected from one another and unable or unwilling to work together to improve all of our lives. I stand by that wholeheartedly.”

“I’m impressed,” Ruby says, watching as Valeria spikes the ball. She’s focused on

the game, but still beams at them every minute or so. “I’ve seen a lot of schools and toured a lot of educational programs, but this school has very high standards.”

“Your mother helped me get the kids in here,” Carmela says, her eyes on her daughter as she changes positions on the court. “She could sense that my life was falling apart at the seams, and she said the first thing I needed to do was to make sure that my kids were on the right path. And she was absolutely correct. As soon as I had things moving forward for them, I was able to work on myself.”

Carmela leads them out of the gym and towards the front of the school again. “If you have the time, Ruby, I’d love to take you to my office.”

“I’m at your disposal today,” Ruby says with a smile. She’s feeling a little rundown, but she knows that’s her own fault for staying with Dexter all night, and she’s determined to muster as much energy as it takes to get to know Carmela.

It’s a short taxi ride to an office building with a plain brick exterior. Inside, a bank of elevators greets them and Carmela ushers them to the fourth floor.

“Welcome to Hibiscus,” Carmela says, opening a glass door that’s emblazoned with a white hibiscus flower. “It’s really a women’s legal aid program, but your mom and I thought Hibiscus was a prettier name for it to go by than Women’s Legal Aid.”

Ruby frowns as they stand in the middle of a fairly nondescript lobby. She suddenly remembers the blown glass hibiscus flower she’d found in her mother’s house in Santa Barbara. “Why hibiscus?”

“It’s the national flower of Puerto Rico.” Carmela smiles. “Come on, let me show you around.”

Banks takes a seat in the lobby as Ruby follows Carmela through a maze of hallways

and they stop to greet several people. Ruby shakes hands with them all, and a picture of what Hibiscus has to do with her mother grows clearer with each interaction.

“Patty Dallarosa was our hero,” a woman with a tight, black bun at the nape of her neck says. She wears no makeup, but giant gold hoop earrings. “She started the whole program with Carmela as a way for women in need to get free legal advice and assistance.”

Ruby looks around, taking in the black and white photos of laughing children that hang on the walls. “My mother did this?”

The woman with the black bun looks at her disbelievingly. “She never told you about this place?” She rears back slightly, looking shocked. “Huh. She was very proud of Hibiscus. Threw a number of fundraisers in New York over the past few years—even when she got sick.”

Ruby shakes her head slowly. “No,” she says. “She didn’t tell me. I don’t know why...this is very impressive. I’m so proud of her.”

The woman with the bun shrugs. “She always said that women with children needed so much more than society gave them. Support, assistance, and protection. One of our most vulnerable populations are women who have kids to feed. They get desperate. They make legal concessions to the men in their lives that do not benefit them or their children. Patty wanted to fix that.”

“Who gives the legal aid?”

“Lawyers in Patty’s personal network. She connected us with various attorneys who could give both advice and would do pro bono work. I can’t even tell you how many women she’s helped with this program.”

Ruby is impressed beyond words, and in fact, for a moment she has no words, just awe. She continues to shake her head. “Thank you so much for bringing me here,” she says to Carmela. “And for working with my mother on this project. What’s your title here?”

“I’m the Program Manager,” Carmela says with obvious pride. “I keep this ship afloat. Run the office, meet with the lawyers. I can be on hand to talk to the women who come in for aid, and with your mother, I planned all of our fundraising events. I’m very proud of our work, and she set up the organization so that I can work here until I retire. It’s been one of the biggest accomplishments of my life, running a place where women feel safe and heard.”

“I can imagine,” Ruby says, blinking back tears. She’s so impressed by all of it.

“Let’s go into my office,” Carmela says.

“It was lovely to meet you,” Ruby says to the woman with the bun. She follows Carmela into a simple office with a small window that looks out onto the street four stories below.

“Please, sit.” Carmela motions to a chair on the opposite side of her desk and then sits

in her own. “I wanted you to see the world that Patty helped me to build. It’s so important to me that you understand our friendship, and that she did all these things for me and my children out of the generosity of an extremely big heart.”

“I hope you don’t think that I would do anything to take this away from you,” Ruby says. “Her will is fairly ironclad anyway, but I firmly believe that my mother had the right to do whatever she wanted to do with her resources and her estate. I’m completely fine with her choices. I want to say that up front.”

Carmela gives a single nod and now she’s the one who looks like she might cry. “Thank you for that. I know I didn’t earn any of this, but I feel blessed by the gift of her friendship and love. Even if I had to move out of the apartment today, and even if there was no way to pay for them to stay on at Graham, I know I’d find a way to take care of my kids and to flourish. Because the most important thing that Patty taught me is to believe. I believe in myself, I believe in life, I believe in hard work. I believe in the goodness of people. She gave me that.”

Ruby stands up and walks around the desk, standing in front of a surprised Carmela, who eventually stands as well. The women embrace. “She gave me that too,” Ruby says into Carmela’s shoulder as they hug. “You have no idea how much of who I am is because of that woman.” Ruby takes a step back so that they’re looking at one another, tears streaming down both of their faces. “A woman who lost her husband unexpectedly stepped up and raised a little girl, showing her how to kick ass and take names. Everything I’ve done is because my mother made me think it was possible.”

“You are an impressive woman, Ruby Hudson,” Carmela says, wiping away her own tears with the pads of her thumbs. “And she loved you dearly. She spoke about you all the time—mostly stories about you as a girl.”

Ruby smiles at this image. “She was a proud mother, for sure. And a proud grandmother. I miss her all the time. It’s still weird that she’s not here.” Ruby frowns

briefly. “And weird how little it seems I actually knew about her.”

“You knew the important things,” Carmela says firmly. “You knew she was smart, brave, strong, funny, and good. The rest of it is just gravy.”

Ruby laughs at this. “Well, there’s a helluva lot of gravy,” she says, glancing around at the office space to indicate some of the things that she’d never known about. “So much that I’m learning about only now that she’s gone.”

“Keep going,” Carmela says. She gives Ruby a long look. “Keep learning. Even when they’re gone, our parents can still teach us.”

“You’re right,” Ruby says. “You are so right.” She takes a long, deep breath and composes herself. “Thank you for letting me into your world for the day. I know that I have nothing to say or do with any of this, but I’m so happy to know that Patty loved you and your kids, and now I know why.”

“Come again, will you?” Carmela asks genuinely. “Come visit—any time. There’s room for you in the apartment if you want to stay with us, and I promise you’ll get tons of attention from my kids next time.” She blushes as she realizes that she’s just asked the former First Lady to crash in her apartment with three kids. “Or you can stay somewhere nicer and we’ll show you around the city.”

“I’d love to stay with you,” Ruby says, reaching out for Carmela’s hand. “I’d be honored. But for now, I have to finish this journey and find out the rest of the story.”

“Texas?” Carmela asks.

Ruby nods. “Texas. I have a flight this evening.”

Carmela looks into her eyes as they stand there, sharing a moment of reverence for

the woman who did so much for both of them.

“Safe travels, Ruby. I hope to see you soon.”

“You will,” Ruby promises. “You will.”

Dexter is sitting in the cafe when Ruby rolls her suitcase across the lobby. She’s sent Banks to have a beer in the bar and to watch the Yankees game that’s playing on the big screen in there.

“Hi,” Ruby says breathlessly, setting her case next to the chair across from Dexter’s.

He stands and leans in, kissing her lightly on one cheek. Even after all this time, in public he is a perfect gentleman, always aware of how it might look if they’re spotted kissing or being overly demonstrative with one another.

They sit in their chairs and Dexter orders a pot of tea for them to share.

“I think this is good,” he says. Dexter is watching her across the table, hands laced together. “You doing this trip is good for you, and us taking our time is wise.”

Ruby waits for the barista in her black cotton apron to set the tea and two cups and saucers on the table. When she retreats, Ruby looks right at Dexter.

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“I do agree, but I feel like I’ve been waiting forever to talk things out, and waiting longer is hard.” Ruby pours a packet of sugar into her cup of tea and stirs. “I don’t want to wait. I’m ready to hear what you have to say.”

Dexter’s nostrils flare slightly as he inhales. He doesn’t look angry, just conflicted. “I hear you, and believe me, I want to grab you and kiss you and take you home with me for another night—or forever—but I still think this trip is something you need to complete without me mucking it up.”

Ruby ignores the fact that Dexter has insinuated that he might muck anything up, because he’s essentially told her everything that she wants to hear: that he wants to hold her, kiss her, love her, be with her. She smiles, and tears of happiness prick at the backs of her eyes.

“So...you don’t want to tell me that it’s over between us?”

“Ruby, it was never over between us. You got really in your head about the notion that I needed or wanted someone who could give me children, and yeah, of course that’s something worth thinking about, but it’s never been the issue that my heart hinges on. I’m someone who believes far more in love and happiness in the now. After all, no one is guaranteed a tomorrow. And you make me happy today.”

Dexter reaches across the table subtly and takes Ruby’s hand in his. He winds his fingers through hers and they hold one another’s gaze, forgetting for a moment that other people are there and that anyone could be watching and taking notes on the love life of the former First Lady. In fact, Ruby pushes it from her mind altogether, because she honestly doesn’t care. Her life is hers now, and she gets to live it

however she wants to.

“You make me happy today too,” she says in a voice that’s almost a whisper.

Dexter holds her hand tightly as he leans forward. “Then go and do what you need to do, and let’s spend Christmas together—can you do that? Maybe you could come here and we could do Christmas in New York?”

Ruby’s face falls. “I’d love to,” she says. “I would, but I’ve already invited Helen Pullman and her husband down for the holidays, and both Athena and Harlow will be there as well. Do you think you can come to Shipwreck?”

Dexter’s mouth quirks in a half-smile. “I think that could be arranged,” he says. “But let’s worry about details in a few of weeks. Right now, you need to hit the road again. And you have your mom’s memorial to do as well.”

“I do,” Ruby confirms. She nods grimly. “All of this discovery I’m doing right now is kind of keeping my mom alive for me, and I’m worried that actually holding a memorial for her will be my first realization that she’s truly gone. I’ve kept myself on the move here, and that makes it easier for me to forget.”

Dexter is still holding her hand and looking at her pensively. “I heard something once that I think is true,” he says. “I might be paraphrasing slightly, but the idea that we only have a relationship with someone while they’re alive is all wrong. Our relationship doesn’t die with them, it just changes. It shifts.”

Ruby thinks about this. “You’re so right,” she says. “My dad has been gone for almost forty years and while I miss him and I mourn the relationship I might have had with him as an adult, I do still have a relationship with him in some ways. Part of who I am is because of him, and the fact that he loved me as much as he did really informed my entire life.”

“And the same goes for Patty,” Dexter says.

Ruby is having a hard time holding back her tears now. She nods. “Hey,” she says, squeezing his hand and jiggling it a bit on the table to let him know she’s changing topics. “What about the book? We haven’t talked about it at all lately. Where do things stand?”

Dexter lets go of her hand and pulls his leather satchel from the back of his chair, where it’s been hanging. “Actually, I have the first five chapters here for you,” he says, sliding out a manila folder and setting it on the table between them. “I could have just emailed it, but I wanted to print it out for you so that you could read it and write on it or mark it up however you see fit.”

Ruby stares at the file on the table. This is the first five chapters of the book she and Dexter have been working on for more than a year now. It’s the culmination of their discussions, her tears, their heart-to-hearts, and everything that Ruby wanted to say about Jack. This book was also the source of her separation from Dexter, if she’s being honest, as they’d grown so close that he lost his ability to be objective and his editor had some real concerns about whether or not he’d be able to deliver a biography about President Hudson while he was falling in love with Ruby.

“I’m looking forward to reading it,” Ruby says carefully. She slides the folder towards her and holds it in her hands. It’s heavy with the weight of Dexter’s words, and she knows that this book has cost both of them in many ways, while also bringing them to each other. She would go through it all again just for the chance to have met Dexter. “Thank you.”

Dexter is looking at her seriously, watching her as she holds the folder in her hands. “Getting a little space and perspective while I worked on this was necessary, Ruby. I’m sorry if my leaving hurt you, but I really think the book is going to be better for it. I’m eager to know what you think.”

Ruby slips it into her shoulder bag and stands. “I should probably grab Banks and get to the airport,” she says. “Austin awaits, and if it’s anything like the rest of this trip has been, I’m about to find out some things about my mother that I never knew.”

“I hope you do,” Dexter says, standing and helping Ruby slip into the coat she’s slung over the back of her chair. “If the people we love stop surprising us, then life gets pretty dull.”

Ruby tugs at the collar of her jacket and buttons it. “The people I love never stop surprising me,” Ruby says. “And I hope that I occasionally surprise them too.”

As if to prove her point, Ruby takes a step towards Dexter, grabs the lapels of his jacket, and pulls him to her sharply. With no regard to anyone else in the cafe, she tugs him closer and then puts her lips to his, lingering in a long, chaste kiss that’s filled with unspoken promise.

“See you at Christmas, Dexter North,” she says, grabbing the handle of her suitcase and dragging it behind her as she walks straight out of the cafe. She doesn’t even bother to look back because she already knows that he’s standing there, watching her with a smile.

Ruby

Austin is as fun and quirky as Ruby has always known it to be, and while she’s officially there to meet with Zoe and Theodore Westover—and hopefully with Lyle Westover, who is living at Fair Skies Village—she spends the first day walking around downtown, eating from the food carts, and buying a pair of cowboy boots embroidered with a rainbow of flowers.

“Are you sitting outside with a margarita?” Harlow asks her mother as they FaceTime that afternoon.

Ruby sucks her slushy red drink through a straw with glee. “Yup,” she says. Banks is getting her another order of carne asada tacos with cilantro and lime, and she’s enjoying the way the November breeze caresses the back of her neck. The food carts are actually old Airstream trailers circled in an open lot, and someone has strung ropes of miniature Edison bulbs over the picnic tables. A young family sits at the table next to Ruby’s.

Harlow and Athena are both on Shipwreck Key for the time being, running the bookstore in her absence and most likely raiding her pantry and staying up all night watching movies together. Ruby loves how close her girls are, and while she laments the way their father’s death and their own personal trials have upended their lives, she knows how smart and resilient they both are. They’ll get their feet under them again, and until they do, they are both always welcome on Shipwreck Key—or anywhere that Ruby goes.

“Here you go,” Banks says, setting a basket of tacos on the picnic table.

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Ruby smiles up at him. “Say hi to Banks,” she says to Harlow, turning the phone so that he can see her on the screen. Banks waves at Harlow.

“Hi, Banksy,” Harlow says. “I hope my mom isn’t giving you too much grief.”

“Just the right amount,” Banks shoots back. He puts one leg over the picnic bench and sits down across from Ruby. “She wanted to spend today wandering and eating, so that’s what we’re doing.”

Ruby turns the phone back around so that she and her daughter can see one another again. “I needed a day,” she says. “I feel like, since Grandma died, I’ve just been on the go, and I’m going to be honest with you, sweetheart: it’s overwhelming.” Harlow gives her mom a sympathetic smile on the screen as she nods. “I hope that when my time comes, I have things pretty neatly sewn up so that you and Athena don’t have to do anything crazy. That’s my goal, anyway.”

“Mom,” Harlow says, lowering her chin and staring at Ruby head-on. “You just turned fifty. You have another forty to fifty years to accumulate crap and make weird choices and keep secrets from us. We’ll definitely end up doing exactly what you’re doing now.”

This makes Ruby laugh, but it also makes her wonder: will she leave a closetful of secrets for her daughters to unpack when it’s her time to go? She doesn’t think so—her life has been pretty straightforward thus far. But she would have said the same thing about her own mother’s life, so maybe there are things that her girls will find out about her once she’s gone.

Instead of addressing this, she waves a hand at the phone. “I don’t want to think about being old right now,” Ruby says instead. The frozen margarita has gone right to her head, and she’s feeling a little pensive, a little melancholy, and a little giddy all at the same time. Her journey to get closure on Patty’s life has almost come to an end, and she knows that the next thing that awaits her is the memorial. She’s sad about officially closing the book on her mother’s life, but she knows that what Dexter said in New York is absolutely true and will remain true for the rest of her own life: her relationship with her mother has changed, not ended, and that brings her a measure of peace.

“I love you, Harlow,” Ruby says to the phone, looking her daughter in the eye. “Let me know if you and Athena need anything at all, and if something comes up at the bookstore, I’m here for you. Just text or call.”

“We got it, Mom. Stock books, sell books, turn out the lights and lock the doors at night.” Harlow rolls her eyes as she says this.

“Wow, you boil my days down to such nothingness,” Ruby says with another laugh. “Okay, sell some books, and be good.”

They exchange goodbyes and then Ruby sets down her phone and picks up a taco. “Thanks for today, Banks. I needed this. I really, really needed to just eat and be a tourist and not do anything too crazy.”

Banks isn’t drinking, but he is eating a giant shrimp and rice burrito, which he holds in both hands. “No worries, boss,” he says, tilting his head as he prepares to take a giant bite. “I’m here to do whatever you want to do.”

“Tomorrow,” Ruby says, munching on a corn chip dipped in pico. “Tomorrow I want to find out what tied my mother to an old guy in a retirement home in Texas. But today I want to drink my margarita and listen to that guy play his banjo.” She nods

ata long-haired, bearded young man setting himself up on a stool with a banjo and a microphone.

Banks watches Ruby with a wry smile, then stands up from the picnic table without being asked and walks over to order her a second margarita. He may be a man of few words, but as their friendship has grown and their relationship has blossomed from their official positions with one another, Ruby has truly come to love and appreciate Banks's silent, stoic nature. He is one of the most self-contained men she's ever met.

"You know what?" she says, looking up at Banks as he sets another frozen margarita in front of her. "I love that you and Sunday are together."

Banks chuffs and sits back down to his shrimp burrito again. "Well, I'm glad to hear it."

"No, really," Ruby pushes on, leaning her elbows on the table earnestly as she looks into his eyes. "You two are perfect together. You really complement one another, and I think you're both just what the other person needs, you know?"

"Sure," Banks says agreeably, nodding as he continues to eat his burrito. "Sunday makes me very happy."

Ruby listens as the banjo player tunes up and starts to strum a song. She might be tipsy, but she isn't drunk, and she knows that a little of this banjo music can go a long way.

"I want to be as good for Dexter as he is for me," she says softly. She didn't realize that she was about to get serious right there amongst the food carts. "I want to be the person who makes his life easier to live, to be the one whose love feels like a gift, and not a burden. I worry, Banks." She looks right at him again, ignoring the banjo player as she twirls her straw around in the plastic cup. "I worry I'm taking from him rather

than giving to him.”

“Love is both give and take, Ruby,” he says, his face remaining placid.

“That’s true, and I know it, but I never want him to look back and think I took too much from him.”

“With all due respect, I don’t think that’s your call to make.” Banks sets his burrito down. It’s been a couple of months since they’d walked the perimeter of Shipwreck Key together and Ruby had shared with Banks her concerns about not being able to give Dexter children, and now she’s feeling that same way again: as if she might be short-changing him somehow.

“You’re right,” Ruby says. “As always.”

“Well, I’m not always right,” Banks says, watching her. “But when it comes to men and how they feel or behave, I can at least offer some insight.”

Ruby nods. “So you think he’s fine with just me?”

“Can’t say that for sure,” Banks says. “But he didn’t vanish. He’s still here, isn’t he?”

“He is,” she says. And he’d said some things before they parted that made her believe he was in it for the long haul. “I’ve just been thinking about this guy I’m going to meet tomorrow—Lyle Westover.” Ruby pauses and digs the photo out of her purse of her mom and Lyle in a vineyard in Napa and lays it on the table in front of Banks. “I mean, he’s clearly older than her, right?”

Banks makes a face like he’s considering this. “I’d say so. Maybe twenty years?”

“Exactly. And look what happened to them—he ended up here in Texas, living in

some retirement home and my mom just sent guilt money every month.”

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Banks sets the photo back on the table with a frown as the banjo player accepts a round of applause and vacates the stool. A young woman with two long braids and a guitar takes his spot.

“We don’t know that it was guilt money,” Banks says. “Could have been anything.”

Ruby makes a disbelieving sound as she picks up the photo again. “I think I’m right on this,” she says, lifting an eyebrow as she takes in the look on her mother’s face in the photo. To her eye, it looks like a loving gaze. The girl with the guitar strums the opening notes to “Yesterday” by The Beatles. “I think he got too old for her, and she felt bad about that, so she sent money every month.”

“Not to be rude, but have you been right about anything so far when it comes to your mother?”

Ruby laughs loudly here. “Not since she died, no. I had no clue about Ellen in Seattle, about anything that happened on Jekyll Island in the 70s, and I thought maybe Carmela was some sort of grifter who’d convinced my mother to write her into her will,” she admits sheepishly. “I was totally in the dark.”

“Then maybe approach this the same way,” Banks says as he takes a big bite of his burrito. After he chews and swallows, he goes on. “Meet this guy with the understanding that there could be an entirely different story here.”

“Once again, Banks,” Ruby says, reaching over and wrapping her fingers around his wrist for emphasis. “You are so right. What would I ever do without you?”

Banks's cheeks flush ever so slightly at the compliment. "Dunno, boss."

Ruby leans her elbows on the table and listens as the young guitarist goes through her short set: first The Beatles, next Carly Simon, and finally, Carole King.

In spite of the smile she plasters on her face for those around her at the other picnic tables, Ruby can't help but feel a wave of sadness wash over her as she thinks about her own future. Is she destined to one day be the former lover of a much younger man? Would Dexter feel relief at having her tucked away in a home somewhere—maybe so relieved that he'd send a check each month just so that he wouldn't have to deal with her himself?

Ruby listens and claps for each song, but she's already thinking ahead to what she might find out about Lyle Westover. Could he have been anything other than an older lover for her mother? Perhaps. Yes. Of course.

But was he something else? She didn't think so.

Ruby

The memory care unit at Fair Skies Village is locked and guarded. Ruby stands at the counter with her ID in hand, ready to sign in and be searched.

"Ma'am," the middle-aged woman behind the desk says to her, waving her over. The desk attendant leans on the counter conspiratorially, her ample breasts held tightly beneath a white nurse-like uniform. "You can come with me," she whispers in the overly solicitous manner that Ruby was accustomed to hearing as First Lady.

The doors emit a loud buzz and click as they swing open, and Ruby and Banks meet the woman, who has come out of the office area that is the front desk.

“Are you here for a meeting? A tour?” The woman’s eyebrows lift as she lets her gaze trail over Banks’s tall, imposing, muscular figure. There is no question that he is Secret Service; there almost never is.

Ruby takes out her phone and glances at her calendar. “I’m supposed to meet Zoey and Theodore Westover here at ten o’clock,” she says. “We’re here to see Lyle Westover.”

“Ah, Mr. Westover,” the woman says, folding her hands over her rounded stomach. “Let me take you to a meeting room, and I’ll bring his kids back as soon as they arrive.”

Ruby and Banks are deposited in an oatmeal-colored room with plush chairs, and the woman—whose name tag says Tonya—brings them each a coffee with cream and sugar. “I’m sure they’ll be here in a jiff,” she says, smiling as she backs out of the room. “Just let me know if you need anything at all while you wait.”

Ruby thanks her and blows on the hot coffee. “So,” she says to Banks. “This place is nice.”

“Nicer than some facilities,” he agrees mildly. “Looks clean. Secure.”

It’s small talk, but Ruby is grateful for it as she sits there waiting for Zoey and Theodore to arrive.

“Sorry we’re late,” Zoey says, appearing in the doorway. She looks harried, and Theodore materializes behind his sister. “Hi,” he says, lifting a hand awkwardly.

Banks stands and steps out of the way, leaving Ruby to shake hands and make introductions with the newcomers.

“We had to make a trip across town to the facility where our mother lives,” Zoey explains, pushing a few stray hairs behind her ears. “She had a fall yesterday, and they were worried she might have hit her head.”

“Oh, no,” Ruby says. She puts a hand over her heart. “I hope she’s okay.” As she says this, she mentally does the math: the mother of Lyle Westover’s children, who are in their forties, is also in a facility. Could they or would they have been married when her mother and Lyle went to that vineyard together in 1988?

“She’s alright, thank you,” Theodore says. He has his hands stuffed into the pockets of his khaki pants, and he’s looking at the tile floor beneath their feet. “CT scan checked out, and she doesn’t appear to have a brain bleed.”

“It’s kind of like putting out one fire only to have another one crop up when you have two elderly parents in need of care,” Zoey says. “I’m sorry—you probably already know this from personal experience,” she adds. Ruby notices lines around Zoey’s eyes that make her look tired and stressed.

“Actually, my dad died when I was eleven,” Ruby says. “And my mother, as you know, just passed. And she never needed any type of care until the very end of her illness.”

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“We’re so, so sorry about Patty’s passing,” Theodore says, slinging an arm around his sister’s shoulders. It’s a move that makes them look much younger than they are; like two teenage kids bonded together in the face of adversity.

“Thank you,” Ruby says. She picks up her purse off the chair. “I’d love to hear more about how well you knew my mother, and...I guess more about how she and your father fit together.”

Zoey tips her head to one side. “How about if we go and meet Dad?”

Ruby nods. This is what she’s been waiting for, though they are currently in a memory care facility, so she doesn’t hold out much hope for an interaction with Lyle Westover that will shed a lot of light on his relationship with her mother.

Banks stays in the small meeting room with a stack of outdated, well-thumbed magazines and the cup of coffee he’d gotten from Tonya the nurse/greeter, and Ruby follows Zoey and Theodore through the shiny floored, clean hallways. They stop at a door that says Lyle W. on a sign and Zoey knocks lightly.

“Dad?” she calls out, knocking again. “Can we come in?”

There is no answer, so she cracks the door slightly and peers into the room. Over her head, Ruby can see that the windows are large and let in a flood of light. Beyond the windows, Fair Skies Village stretches out in the distance: rich green lawn, stout palm trees, and a few cacti for good measure. A man driving a golf cart lifts a hand at a gardener in greeting and then drives out of view.

Zoey has stepped into the room so Ruby follows, standing off to one side. Lyle Westover is in a hospital bed, gray hair combed to one side, reading glasses perched on his nose. He has a newspaper open on his lap.

“Hi, Dad,” Zoey says, approaching him carefully. In Zoey’s cautious moves, Ruby intuits that there have been times when perhaps Lyle Westover hadn’t recognized his own children. “How are you?” Zoey asks, putting her hands on the guardrail of the bed and leaning slightly towards him. There is a reading lamp turned on next to Lyle.

“Hi, Zo,” he says, looking up at her with surprise and wonder. It’s as if he’d forgotten that his daughter lived within driving distance, or even that he’d seen her recently. He takes off his reading glasses and looks at the door. “Theo, you’re here too?”

“Hey, Pops,” Theodore says, waving at his dad the same way he’d waved at Ruby in the meeting room. He looks slightly ill-at-ease, but again, sort of young and as if he’d rather be somewhere else.

Lyle’s eyes land on Ruby. “Do my eyes deceive me, or is my newest nurse actually the First Lady?” He frowns and smiles at the same time. “What a lucky man I am.”

Ruby steps forward. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Westover.” She offers him her hand. “I’m Ruby Hudson.”

“Of course you are,” he says, taking her hand in both of his and holding it. “Your mother and I go back years. Decades. A lifetime.”

Ruby leaves her hand in his as she smiles at him. So far Lyle Westover seems to be totally lucid and able to discern both his surroundings and who is in the room. This gives her hope that maybe he’ll be able to tell her more about Patty.

“I’ve heard that,” Ruby says with a smile. “I’ve come to meet you, and to find out

more about your friendship with my mother.”

Lyle laughs heartily. “Friendship,” he scoffs. “It was so much more than that.”

So it’s exactly what Ruby had imagined. She works to keep the smile on her face, worried that Zoey or Theodore might see her falter and think that she disapproves of her mother having loved their father. In truth, it’s really none of her business what these two adults chose to do nearly forty years ago, but she does feel some small blush of shame on her mother’s part if she’s about to find out that Patty had carried on a torrid affair with a married father of two.

Without being asked, Ruby sinks into the chair next to Lyle’s bed.

“We could step out if you like,” Zoey offers, hooking a thumb towards the door. Theodore looks thrilled at having been offered an escape from this potentially awkward scenario. “Theo and I can go grab a cup of coffee while you two talk.”

“Off you go,” Lyle says, waving a large, square hand dismissively. His fingers are slightly knotted from arthritis, and there are visible veins running from his knuckles to his elbows. “Go get your coffee, kids.”

Ruby smothers a smile at the indulgent way that Lyle speaks to his fully grown children, and she settles into the seat, slipping off her coat and hanging it over the arm of her chair.

“So,” Ruby says, smiling at Lyle as she clasps her hands in her lap. Once again, Patty has made her intentions clear in her will and it would be expensive and difficult to try to argue against them, but Ruby gets the same feeling she had upon meeting Carmela that there is some sense of her needing to approve of the financial support Patty is giving. “I have a photo of you and my mother, and I’d love to show it to you.” She reaches into her purse and pulls out the photograph, which she sets on top of Lyle’s

blanket so that he can pick it up and examine it.

“Oh,” he says, his eyes looking faraway. “I remember this day like it was yesterday. There was live music—some unknown group was playing ‘Abracadabra’ by the Steve Miller Band—and a huge pot of lobster cooking on an open fire. Patty wore this long,” he pauses, trying to simulate something with his hands, “wrap dress thing. It opened over one thigh, and she drank Prosecco all night.”

This level of detail is amazing to Ruby, and although Zoey has warned her in a long email that Lyle is suffering from Parkinson’s, he is completely laser-focused at the moment, and he’s even speaking clearly, which Zoey warned her might not happen.

“Was this a work function, or...a date?”

Lyle lets the hand holding the picture fall to his lap and he looks over at her. “A date? Me and Patty?” He frowns, confused. “No. No. It wasn’t.”

Mr. Westover turns his head to the giant windows and looks out at the blue afternoon sky, watching with interest as the gardener digs a hole. He turns back to Ruby, still frowning. “What happened to that other nurse?” he asks.

Ruby scans his face, and there it is: the disconnect. She’s spent enough time in nursing homes over the years, shaking hands, taking photos, and greeting elderly people with dementia to know that something has shifted. A door has closed.

“Do you need the nurse, Mr. Westover?” she asks patiently, reaching over and touching his arm gently. The photo of him and her mother standing in a vineyard as a band played “Abracadabra” in the background is still in his hand. “I can get one.”

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He looks at Ruby again and shakes his head; he is clearly trying to refocus, to come back to the present, to place her. He looks out the window again.

Ruby pats his arm. She waits.

Patty

“I’ve never been a fan of this song,” Patty said with a laugh, looking up at Lyle as he offered her a glass of Prosecco. “It’s just so...” She searched for the word to describe her feelings about “Abracadabra,” but as she was thinking, Burt Ingram stepped up to them and clinked his glass against Patty’s without warning.

“Cheers, Pat,” he said, winking at her. Patty was not a fan of Burt’s, and while he was one of the partners at her firm, he was also one of her least favorite people.

“Patty,” she corrected him, pulling her Prosecco closer to her body as if he might have tainted it by touching his glass to hers.

“Hey, Ingram,” Lyle said, shooting Burt a warning look. “Had a few drinks, have you?”

Burt shook his hips in a ridiculous approximation of a much younger man on a dance floor. He shot Patty a look that was most likely meant to be a come-hither glance, but instead just looked lame and desperate.

“Just a few,” Burt said, chugging his beer from the tall glass in his hand. His cheeks and ears were bright red from the sun, and his wife stood about twenty yards away,

watching this whole exchange with a distasteful frown. “But I’m getting warmed up. You staying here for the weekend, Pat?” he asked her, lifting his chin in Patty’s direction as he bit his lip. Patty shuddered.

“I am,” she said, sipping her Prosecco and looking around to see if perhaps Mrs. Ingram might be making her way over to collect her semi-drunk husband.

“Who is staying with your kid?” Burt asked crassly.

Patty could feel the hair on the back of her neck and on both arms stand up. She bristled at the implication that she was a mother before she was a lawyer enjoying a weekend with her firm at a vineyard just like everyone else. Of course she was a mother first and foremost; no part of her would have denied that, but it annoyed her to no end when someone insinuated that she needed to find a babysitter in order to do her job the way a man in an equal position would have. The fact that her daughter was fourteen and not four never entered into the discussion—it was always the suggestion that she was leaving her child alone and fleeing that responsibility that bothered her. Did men get asked this same question? Who was staying with Burt’s kids?

“My parents have flown down from Seattle to spend a week or two with us, and Ruby is thrilled to have them here. They’re taking her to Disneyland this weekend.”

“So you’re single and ready to mingle?” Burt took a step in her direction and popped a hip like he might bump her with it.

Patty groaned.

“We were actually about to head out on a mini-tour of the vineyard,” Lyle said, offering Patty his elbow, which she took gratefully. “Catch up with you at dinner, Burt?” He said it as a question, but Patty could tell that it was not. She let Lyle lead

her away from Burt before she breathed a sigh of relief.

“Thank god,” Patty said, letting go of Lyle’s arm. He was a full-fledged partner at the firm, but Lyle Westover had grown to be one of her closest friends—both at work, and in life. It was hard to explain and Patty was loathe to do so; any time someone jokingly called Lyle her “work husband” or suggested anything that even smacked of impropriety Patty shut them down firmly. But for her, she did not need to define her dedication to Lyle, nor did she need him to define how he felt about her.

“Let’s check out the grapes,” Lyle said casually, leading the way as he held his wine glass in hand, sipping the rich burgundy liquid as they meandered. “We don’t need to ask for a tour if you don’t want to.”

“It’s actually quite interesting,” Patty said mildly. “I’d love to listen to someone explain how they turn grapes on the vine into something as heavenly as Prosecco.”

Lyle flagged down the man who had offered to give them a tour earlier and they asked him a few questions, listening as he described the growing process, the way they harvested the grapes, and the methods they used to bottle some of the most delicious wines Patty had ever tasted.

At the end of their half hour chat with the vintner, Patty pulled a camera from her purse. “Would you mind taking a picture of us?” she asked the man.

He smiled at them, wiped his hands on the front of his denim overalls, and took the camera. “I’d be happy to,” he said, snapping a few photos of Patty as she smiled up at Lyle. In turn, he looked at her and made jokes. Their laughter came easy with one another, as did their camaraderie.

Patty took the camera back from the vintner and slipped it into her purse again. “Thank you. And thank you for your time—this was fun to learn about.”

Patty and Lyle wandered on, discussing a case they were both working on (“We’ll bill them by the hour for talking about their case on our weekend away,” he said), and chatting about their children amiably. Zoey and Theodore were both young at that point—six and eight, respectively—and Patty always had stories to tell about what life was like with a daughter who was just starting high school.

“I’m sure I’ll have a million questions for you when the kids get to be that age,” Lyle said, taking the last swallow of his wine and holding his empty glass up in the golden evening sunlight. “You’ll have conquered the teenage years by then.”

“Mmm,” Patty said, smiling noncommittally. Lyle’s wife, Susan, was at home that weekend with Zoey and Theodore, and while Patty had met her several times, the two women weren’t terribly close. There was something untrusting about Susan that always put Patty on the defensive, though Patty knew she posed no threat whatsoever to Susan’s marriage, and she believed in her heart that deep down, Susan knew this too.

In fact, Patty and Lyle had gotten as close as they were by sharing some of their deepest secrets—the kinds of things that only good friends can share. It had started one evening as she took a client out for drinks at the Bel Age Hotel and had run into Lyle there. He was sitting in a dark corner of the bar at a velvet banquet booth, one arm around a much younger man. They were sharing a bottle of champagne, and Lyle’s tie was loosened and hanging around his neck. His full mustache twitched in recognition as he and Patty made eye contact. Lyle had tipped his head and indicated that they should meet out in the hallway.

Standing next to the bank of pay phones that night, Patty listened with mild curiosity as Lyle explained his situation: married to Susan, college sweetheart. Years of infertility followed in quick succession by two children they adored. He’d always known he’d liked men, but it was unacceptable when he came of age—his parents would have disowned him. No college money, no family, no idea what to do. He

knew it was wrong to go behind Susan's back, but they had long ago stopped being intimate, and to his knowledge, all she cared about at that point was a comfortable home, money to fund the kids' sports and ski trips, and a solid future. She had her hobbies, he had his.

Patty had nodded and listened, as any good lawyer knew how to do. There was no point in arguing or cross-examining; Lyle wasn't her husband, after all, and he was being completely up front with her. At one point, his eyes filled with tears and he begged Patty to forgive him. She knew as she set a calm hand on his shoulder that it was not she he was begging for forgiveness, but everyone in his life: his parents, his children, his wife, his friends, his coworkers.

And because Patty had a heart for such things (after all, her own sister had been wildly in love with her best friend Ellen at one point years before), she whispered the words Lyle wanted to hear: "It's okay, Lyle. It's alright to be who you are. No one needs to forgive you for that." What she couldn't speak to was his duplicity towards his wife and children, but that was not her business. From that point forward, what was her business was being Lyle's friend. No person in Patty's life would go unloved because of such a silly and arbitrary thing as who they loved. No way.

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They parted ways that night after Lyle walked back into the bar to find his date gone. Patty had paid the tab for the clients she'd brought to the Bel Age and gone home to Ruby.

At that point in her life, she'd already given birth to Trixie and lost that beautiful baby, watched her beloved husband die of a heart attack right before her eyes, realized she was alone in the world to raise her young daughter, and pulled herself together enough to put her law degree to use. She'd been through a lot, and Lyle's secret truly did not faze her. She offered him her unconditional friendship and support, and he, in turn, became something of a protector at work. Whereas before Patty had been given some of the toughest cases and tasked with some of the worst grunt work—all appropriate for someone as low on the totem pole as she was—Lyle began requesting her to join him on more high-profile cases, taking her along for meals that were expensed and allowing her to work on her cases at home at night while Ruby slept. Gone were the nearly all-nighters in the office, relying on the fax machine there to spit out documents from all over the world at all hours. Lyle insisted that the firm install a fax and a computer in Patty's home office, which had changed everything for her in terms of being able to work at home in her robe and slippers at midnight, versus sitting around a conference room in the wee hours with the other junior members of the firm.

But befriending Lyle hadn't been something Patty had done to gain fringe benefits; she actually quite liked the man. His sense of humor was droll, and his delivery of punchlines dry and direct. He'd been raised by British parents who'd relocated to Los Angeles, and that heritage showed in nearly everything he did. Truth be told, Patty adored him.

“Care to do the starlight wine tasting tonight?” Lyle asked her as they wandered through the rows of grapes together. Patty was strolling along behind him, admiring the way the long, golden fingers of sunlight reached between the grapevines and brushed Lyle's shoulders.

"That sounds nice," Patty said, holding her empty Prosecco glass in one hand. She and Lyle frequently sat together at meetings, attended the same functions, and essentially acted like the work-friends that they were. It never bothered her that there was water cooler gossip about the nature of their relationship, nor did she pay any mind to the sly comments she overheard the men make to Lyle. It just wasn't worth her time. But Susan's feelingswereworth her consideration, and Patty wanted to discuss that with Lyle.

"Hey, Ly?" Patty said, taking a few long strides to catch up with him. "Can we talk?"

Lyle stopped walking and turned, sensing the seriousness in Patty's voice. "What's up?"

"It's about Susan," she said, toeing the dirt beneath her flat shoe. "I know you don't like to discuss your marriage," Patty held up a hand to fend off his words, "but I think it's time we talk about her. Last time you brought her to an event I sensed that she was a little frosty towards me, and I'm not keen on your wife thinking that there's something going on here." Patty waved a hand back and forth between them.

"She doesn't think that," Lyle assured her. He reached out and put one hand on Patty's narrow shoulder, holding it firmly. "She knows it's not you."

But Patty was unconvinced. "How do you know? How are you so sure that she isn't sitting at home right now with Zoey and Theo, thinking that her husband is away on a work trip and sharing a room with me? I can't stand that, Lyle. It's not my business how you conduct your marriage, and I don't even ask a lot of questions, but I don't

want to be a part of hurting some sweet woman who doesn't know what's going on."

"Patty," Lyle said, giving her shoulder a firm shake. "She does know what's going on."

Patty had been about to say more, but Lyle's tone stopped her. "She does? You told her?"

Lyle tilted his head to one side. "Well, in a manner of speaking."

At this phrase, Patty's eyebrows shot up. "In a manner of speaking?"

Lyle let out a long breath and pulled his hand from her shoulder, running it through his own hair instead. "She found a letter."

"A letter?"

"From Abel."

"From Abel?" Patty clamped her mouth shut; all she was doing was parroting back whatever Lyle said, and what she really wanted was the full story.

Lyle exhaled again. "She was going through my briefcase and hoping to find a copy of the will we'd done recently so that she could put it in the safe in our bedroom. We'd previously had my sister in place as the guardian for Zoey and Theo in the event that anything happened to us, but then my sister went to rehab, and we realized we should probably revise that, and name a new executor while we were at it. Anyhow, she was searching for that, and found a letter from Abel that he wrote after our weekend away together."

Patty put one hand to her forehead. She'd been nothing but supportive thus far, and

she'd even talked practical things with Lyle because she really did care about Susan. She'd urged him to use condoms with his dates, not because he and Susan were still intimate, according to Lyle, but because she wanted him to stay alive—for all of them. She begged him not to meet strange men in unsafe places. Pled with him to remember that no matter who he met up with, he should think of his kids and remember their feelings as he pursued the lifestyle he felt he was truly meant to live. She'd been the very best friend she could be, but this felt like too much.

“Why did you keep a letter from a man who told you that he'd never be seen with you in public?” she nearly wailed, throwing the hand not holding her Prosecco glass into the air in frustration. “You should have thrown that away!”

Lyle looked wounded. “It was a poem,” he said, looking crestfallen. “It was a beautiful poem. No one has ever written anything like that for me.”

Patty felt the wind leave her sails. “Lyle,” she said softly. “Abel took you to a bed and breakfast in a city three hundred miles away because he said he never wanted anyone he worked with to see him with you.”

“It's because he doesn't want to be outed like that.”

“No, it's not,” Patty said, taking a step toward him and looking up into Lyle's eyes pleadingly. She really and truly wanted him to understand that she loved him and was on his side, but she couldn't let him live in a fantasyland. “He'd been in a long-term relationship with a man.” They both knew this: Abel, a history professor, had been dating another professor from the math department at USC. “He just didn't want to be with you.”

At this, Lyle turned and walked away, taking long strides through the grapevines. He cut through them and vanished from Patty's view.

Patty exhaled. Lyle had been found out by his wife, but she still didn't know where that put his marriage. Obviously Susan no longer assumed he was seeing Patty, but his wife was still a woman with feelings, and now Patty worried about her even more.

Lyle stayed in his room at the vineyard's hotel that night, not coming out for the starlight wine tasting after all. The next day when he and Patty finally saw one another again at breakfast, he sat down across from her on the outdoor patio, sunglasses firmly in place.

"I admitted it all to her when she found the letter, Patty," he said, pouring himself a cup of coffee from a carafe. "She said she knew something was wrong, but she just assumed I was having an affair with a woman."

"And?" Patty prompted gently.

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“I told her I’d been in love with men for as long as I could remember, and that, yes, I did and do still love her, but only as the mother of my children.” Lyle paused and poured a ribbon of cream into his coffee cup, stirring it with a silver spoon. “And I told her that the only person in my life who knew about it was you, and that you’d encouraged me over and over to be safe, and to come clean to her about it all. She appreciated that.”

Burt Ingram stopped at their table, clad in linen slacks and sunglasses, his wife close behind him. “Morning,” Burt said curtly, looking as though he might say more. “I hope you two have had a great weekend.”

“Fabulous,” Patty said for them both, smiling up at Burt insincerely. “Really nice weekend, Burt.”

The Ingrams move on then, and Patty watched them as they stopped at the table of another partner and his wife, chatting amiably and pointing out at the vineyard.

“So what now?” Patty asked, lowering her voice and placing both elbows on the table as she leaned towards Lyle. “Is she divorcing you?”

Lyle scoffed. “No. She is definitely not divorcing me, Patty.”

Patty leaned back in surprise. “She’s not?” She would have instantly left any man who admitted to her that he preferred the company of men. Or at least she thought she would have.

“No. Susan is perfectly happy with the lifestyle that I provide her. She loves that

Zoey and Theo have two parents, and, maybe most importantly, Patty—we're friends. We get each other. We've been together since college. No one knows me better than Susan."

Patty bit her lip; until Susan found that letter in Lyle's briefcase, Patty had known Lyle better than Susan had. But it wasn't worth mentioning at that point.

"I'm happy for you," Patty said carefully. She reached for the carafe of coffee and topped off her own cup as she glanced at the way Burt Ingram's wife's diamond tennis bracelet glinted in the sun two tables away. And really, what did she know anyway? Maybe she should just be happy for them. Ruben had died and left her a single mother after only thirteen years of marriage. Who could say what might have happened between them if they'd had decades together as husband and wife? What compromises and understandings might they have had to come to in order to survive, in order to weather the storm together?

"Thank you," Lyle said, watching her. "And thank you for being my friend, Patty. Through all of this. Not many people would stand by someone's side and be as nonjudgmental as you have. I appreciate it more than you will ever know."

"So...are you able to just date who you want now?" Patty frowned.

"Oh, god no. Susan's only request is my continued discretion. No one at the firm. No one in our circle, and, preferably, only people I meet outside of L.A."

Patty nodded and looked around pensively as she sipped her coffee. Arrangements. Agreements. Accommodations. She nodded again. She'd supported Lyle and loved her friendship with him thus far, and she would continue to do so—on one condition.

"I want to have lunch with Susan," Patty said.

Lyle's face blanched. "Why?"

"Not to talk about anything that would upset you," Patty promised him. "I just want to make sure she's got someone to talk to. Because look, Lyle, you have me to talk to, but she has no one. She isn't going to call up her mother and chat about you being gay. She's not having a cocktail with her gardening club and discussing that you prefer the company of men, or mentioning that you have sex with other guys the next time she's at dinner with her sister. She needs someone who sees her. And I want to be that person. That's all I'm asking."

Lyle considered this thoughtfully as he sipped his coffee. When he finally set his cup down on its saucer, he gave a single nod. "Consider it done. Or at least consider it offered, because I will tell her you'd like to have lunch." Lyle stayed quiet for a long moment. "You know, Patty, there's truly no one like you. I've never met another woman who would befriend someone in my shoes, much less insist on befriending his long-suffering wife as well, just so that she won't feel alone. You're something else."

Patty sipped her coffee again and smacked her lips loudly as she took this in. "I am something else, Lyle," she agreed. "But what that something is is somewhat undefined."

He cracked a smile then and they both laughed.

"Oh, Patty," he said, shaking his head. "My dear Patty."

Ruby

There is a commotion outside of Lyle Westover's room and Ruby looks up from the book in her lap. Lyle has fallen asleep as she waited for him to come back to her and regain the clarity that he had when she walked into the room.

"Code Six," a nurse says calmly as she races by the open door to Lyle's room. Several other nurses in scrubs follow closely on her heels, and Ruby glances at Lyle to see if this stirs him. It does not.

"Hi." Zoey pokes her head into the room. She sees that her dad is sleeping and drops her volume. "Any luck?"

Ruby stands up and sets her book on the chair, then follows Zoey out into the hall. "Not too much," Ruby says. She folds her arms over her chest. "He seemed completely with it there, and then...I don't know. Just gone."

"It goes like that." Zoey glances back into the room again and her eyes linger on the figure of her sleeping father. "He's here one minute and gone the next."

"Do your parents get to see one another?" Ruby asks gently.

"They do. We bring Mom over here two Sundays a month and she spends the whole day with him if he's having a good day, but if he isn't sure who we are, then we just visit for a bit, take her out to lunch, and get her back to her facility."

"That's a lot." Ruby watches her with admiration. "And I'm assuming you and your brother have families and lives of your own to care for."

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Zoey looks at her with tired eyes. "We do. We both have children and jobs and spouses. It's just so much sometimes. But they're our parents, you know?"

"You're doing your best, and I'm sure they both know that." There is a long pause as the nurse who called a Code Six walks by them with her eyes cast towards the floor grimly. "Listen, Zoey, do you mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"Not at all."

"I guess what I really wanted to know was the nature of our parents' friendship, and I was hoping to hear it from your dad, though I knew that was a long shot coming into it."

Zoey's eyes fill with tears. "Yeah, he was probably never going to be able to give you that much information--even on a good day." She tugs at her lower lip with her thumb and forefinger. "But as far as their friendship...I kind of wondered myself, to be honest. I asked my mom about it when I found out that Patty was paying for part of his care, but she seemed really hesitant to discuss it. In fact, my first thought--and I'm sorry to say it like this--was that my dad and your mom were possibly lovers?" It comes out sounding like a hesitant question.

"I thought that too," Ruby admits. "It's the obvious conclusion. And yet..."

"Right?" Zoey says, flinging a hand in the air like she's questioning the universe. "It just seems somehow unlikely."

They both take tentative steps into Lyle's room and find that he's opened his eyes. He

looks at the two of them, his gaze bouncing back and forth between them searchingly as if he's trying to remember which woman might be his daughter.

"Hey, Dad?" Zoey says softly as she steps her way across the room. "Did you catch a nap there?"

Lyle's eyes land on her gratefully and he holds out his hand to take Zoey's. She laces her fingers through his and looks at him with obvious love and affection.

"Before you fell asleep I introduced you to Ruby Hudson, Patty Dallarosa's daughter. Do you remember that?"

Lyle shifts his gaze to Ruby. He stares at her long and hard like he's trying his best to place her. Giving up, he looks back at his daughter.

"Patty worked at the law firm with you." Zoey shakes her dad's hand lightly as if to jog his memory. "You two were close friends, and Ruby wants to know more about that friendship. Is there anything you can tell us?"

Lyle looks at the photo that Ruby gave him before he fell asleep; it's landed on top of the blanket that covers him, and he lifts it with the hand that's not holding Zoey's. He inspects the photo closely, and as he does, Ruby can see a wash of different emotions cross his face. For a second, she thinks he might say something about her mom, and she holds her breath, hoping that he might tell them about his relationship with Patty—whatever it may have been. At this point, it doesn't even matter to Ruby what went on between her mother and Lyle Westover, she just wants to know for her own sake and so that she can understand her mother's life better.

But whatever connection Patty had shared with Lyle is gone. It died with Patty and is buried somewhere in Lyle's inaccessible memories. He lets the photo fall to his chest again as tears fill his eyes.

“It’s okay, Mr. Westover,” Ruby says, stepping closer and touching him lightly on one shoulder as he looks out the window again. Her eyes meet Zoey’s and they share a meaningful exchange. “I don’t want to make you sad or upset, I was just hoping to find out more about my mom. She’s recently passed, and I miss her terribly.”

At this, Lyle gives a small, choked sob.

Ruby and Zoey stand there with him as the sun bathes the green grass outside with warmth. Once Lyle closes his eyes again and is breathing smoothly, Zoey slips her hand from his and leads Ruby back out of the room.

“Well,” Zoey says, pausing right outside of her father’s room and giving Ruby an apologetic look. “Maybe it was none of our business anyway.”

“Maybe it wasn’t,” Ruby agrees. She’s disappointed not to have gotten the chance to hear stories about her mother in the courtroom, at least, but she doesn’t in any way want to upset Zoey Westover, who has been overly kind and solicitous to her. “And you know what?” Ruby waits as a nurse in crepe soled shoes that squeak on the tile pushes a grayed, hunched woman in a wheelchair down the hall. “I think it’s actually okay if we never know.”

Ruby

Shipwreck Key has gotten dressed up for the holiday season in Ruby’s absence. The first thing she notices when her boat pulls up to the dock is that Seadog Lane is draped in lights.

“Welcome back, Mrs. Hudson!” Bev Byer shouts in her direction as she walks up from the dock with Banks behind her, carrying both of their suitcases.

Ruby shields her eyes with one hand. “It’s not even Thanksgiving!” she calls back.

“Have we transformed into Christmas Key?”

“Oh, I wish!” Bev says. “Love the charm of that place. But I suppose we’ve got our own measure of enchantment here. Pour you a drink?”

Ruby glances at her watch. “It’s only eleven in the morning, Bev.”

“A pirate rinses the night from his mouth with a swig of rum,” he says with a faux growl.

“Well, in that case, I suppose I could sip a mimosa here while Banks grabs the golf cart.”

“I’ve been given my orders,” Banks says. He sets the suitcases at the front door of The Frog’s Grog, gives Ruby a small salute, and starts walking towards her house to pick up the golf cart. It’s not too far, and he’s been cooped up on the plane and the boat, so Ruby lets him go as she follows Bev into the dark, cool bar.

“So, what have I missed while I was gone?” Ruby sits at the bar; she’s the only patron in the joint that morning.

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“Bit of this, bit of that,” Bev says. He takes a bottle of champagne from the fridge behind the counter as well as a container of orange juice. “Your girls turned the bookstore into a nightclub, Phyllis and Joe finally told us all they were dating and threw a wedding on the beach,” he says, referring to Phyllis Stein, who owns the island grocery store, and Joe Youngblood, her decades-long employee, “and Sunday stood on the shore every night, keening into the wind about her beloved returning to her.”

“Well, I brought him back safe and sound,” Ruby says, “so she can calm down with the keening.”

Bev sets the champagne flute in front of Ruby and leans both of his weathered hands on the bar. “The truth is, not a whole helluva lot happened, but then nothing ever really does. Looked like the bookstore did decent foot traffic, and we had a couple of days of visitors—bigger boats full of day-trippers. I poured some rum for them, they strolled about, and then they left.”

“How is Tilly?”

Bev leans more heavily on the bar, lets his head hang, and emits the deepest, most grandfatherly sigh she’s ever heard. “She’ll be the death of me,” he admits, looking hangdog and defeated.

Ruby sips her mimosa. Tilly is one of her bookstore employees, and she’s also the nineteen-year-old granddaughter Bev’s been raising alone for more than a decade. “What’s going on there? Is she getting restless living on this island instead of in a bigger city?”

“You have no idea,” he says. To distract himself, Bev grabs a rag and wipes down the bar, rubbing small circles into the highly polished wood. “Her latest idea is to move to Tampa and go to tattoo school. Then she wants to open a tattoo parlor here on the island.”

Ruby nearly chokes on her drink. “Do we have a market for that?”

Bev drops the rag and puts both hands in the air. “Apparently I’m not allowed to judge whether the islanders are ‘tattoo type of people’ or not. I’ve already been dressed down for that.”

“But you have one,” Ruby nods at the tattoo that’s visible beneath the edge of Bev’s white t-shirt sleeve. She’s holding the champagne flute by its stem as she squints at it, head tilted to one side so she can assess his ink work. “What is it?”

Bev shoves the t-shirt sleeve up roughly to his shoulder, revealing a large, faded anchor with a mermaid wrapped around it. Ruby can see it more clearly now, but the ink has become muddied in places, and with some of the recent tattoos she’s seen, she’s pretty sure a current artist could have made it something far more colorful and beautiful.

“The mermaid is my wife,” Bev explains, looking at his bicep fondly as he runs a hand over the tattoo. “But back in my day, only the real outliers got inked. Military men, bikers, outlaws. Now every teenage girl has a damn rose on her ankle, or some kind of Roman numerals running up her arm for some reason or another.” Disapproval is written all over his face. “I don’t agree with it myself, and while I loved my beautiful wife, I sure as hell wish I’d thought more about getting something drawn onto me that would last forever.”

“Mmmm,” Ruby says, nodding. She puts her glass to her lips as she listens.

“But you can’t convince a girl on the cusp of twenty that she’s wrong—her birthday is this weekend, in fact—and I’ve seen the applications to different tattoo schools she’s been filling out.” He makes a face that looks like a cross between distrust and disappointment. “When she moved here, she was a little sprite of a girl. Thought she’d stay forever, maybe take over this place.” Bev gestures at the tables and the rafters of The Frog’s Grog. “Now here she is, wanting to up and leave for a bit. Don’t know what I’ll do without her.”

Ruby sets her nearly empty mimosa glass on the bar and stands up as Banks pushes open the door to the bar, letting in a flood of morning sunlight. She looks directly at Bev with a gentle, knowing smile. “You’ll miss her, and you’ll wait for her to come back to you—even for a visit,” she says, setting a twenty on the bar. “And on that note, my own girls should be waiting at home for me, so I’m going to go and see them.”

“Good to have you back, chief,” Bev says, sliding the twenty across the bar and punching a few buttons on his register so that it flies open.

Ruby takes a moment to consider this. She’s been across the country and up to New York, she’s traveled the length of the west coast from L.A. to Seattle, and now she’s home again. Of course, being home means it’s time to truly start planning a proper goodbye for her mother, but armed with a new understanding of who Patty was and what she meant to other people, Ruby actually feels ready. “It’s good to be back.”

“Mom!” Athena yells from the open window on the second floor of Ruby’s house. She’s standing there, shaking a sheet out the window, grinning from ear to ear with a red bandanna wrapped around her head. Ruby’s older daughter disappears from the window as Banks parks the golf cart, but she immediately pops out the front door of the house with both arms waving. “You’re back!”

Ruby is more exhausted from the journey than she’d imagined she would be. She

steps from the golf cart tiredly, wrapping Athena in both arms and holding her as tight as she can. It's impossible not to flash forward as she hugs her baby girl, imagining Harlow and Athena as much older women, making final arrangements for her once she's gone. But Ruby doesn't want to think of that now, so she releases Athena and glances around.

"Where's Harlow?"

Banks grabs Ruby's suitcase and gives Athena a single nod as he takes it inside the house and deposits it there.

"She's swimming—we thought you wouldn't be home until later."

"And what are you doing up there—waving a white flag in surrender? Sending a message to a boy to tell him not to come because your mother is home?" Ruby lifts her chin at the open bedroom window where Athena had been airing out the bedsheet.

"Ha. As if I'd invite a man to visit us here in paradise." Athena purses her lips, but then breaks into a smile. "Besides, Elijah is on the island. We've been hanging out a little." She gives one light, carefree shrug of her left shoulder. "You know—nothing serious."

Elijah Hartley is Marigold Pim and Cobb Hartley's son, and because Elijah himself is fairly well-known, being the only progeny of a former supermodel and an incredibly famous rockstar, he and Athena seem to really get one another. Ruby is happy that Athena is spending time with him, as Elijah is truly a smart, talented, kind young man. The kids had met up in Europe during the summer to travel together, and while Athena hasn't spoken about him much since, Ruby is well aware that that doesn't mean there's nothing going on there.

"Hey, that's understandable," Ruby says. She watches her daughter's face as it glows

from talking about Elijah. Athena had been burned quite badly in her first adult love affair: Diego, a coworker she'd fallen hard for at the Library of Congress in D.C., had neglected to tell her that he was just days away from his own wedding when he'd taken Athena back to his apartment for the night. Ruby had been so sure her daughter would never trust men again, but now here she is, looking calm and happy talking about Elijah Hartley. It pleases Ruby to no end to know that her girl is resilient enough to put herself back out there, and she's not going to spoil the whole thing by asking too many questions.

"Mom!" Harlow's voice comes from inside the house. Both the front door and the back windows, which face the water, are wide open, so Harlow has come in to find her mother and sister standing on the porch within view. "Welcome home!"

Ruby rushes through the door and straight into the arms of her youngest daughter, her wild child, her untamable girl.

"I missed you, Lolo," she says, nuzzling her face in Harlow's damp blonde locks. Harlow is standing in the middle of the living room wearing a red bikini with a towel slung around her hips. Her bare feet are sandy, and a stream of water trickles down her spine.

"We missed you too. We didn't even watch *The Golden Girls* without you."

“What did you do instead?”

Athena closes the front door after waving at Banks, who is headed to the guest house to unpack his own belongings. She turns to face Ruby and Harlow. “We made tacos, we both took our laptops to the bookstore and to the coffee shop because we had work to do, and we pretty much watched *Sex and the City* in its entirety.”

Ruby flops on the couch in the middle of the living space and sighs deeply, relaxing into the pillows. She’s so happy to be home.

“That sounds amazing,” she says to her girls, smiling up at them.

“Hey, why don’t you catch a few winks here, Mom?” Harlow says, holding her towel in place as she reaches for a soft chenille blanket that’s tossed over the back of the couch.

Athena slips Ruby’s shoes off her feet and lifts her mother’s ankles gently, swinging them around so that she’s now lying flat on the couch. Harlow spreads the blanket over Ruby and she’s instantly transported to a weightless, happy place.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Ruby says as her eyes close. “Wake me up in a little bit and I’ll make you girls some lunch...”

In the end Ruby does not wake up to make lunch—or dinner. When she finally opens her eyes, she finds that her daughters have worked around her all afternoon and evening, taking her suitcase upstairs, fixing a pot of soup and some grilled cheese sandwiches, and that they’ve let Sunday in. Ruby sits up on the couch with bleary

eyes as she looks around and finds her best friend curled up on a chair across from her, sipping a glass of iced tea and holding a book on her lap.

“Morning, sunshine,” Sunday says with a big smile. “How do you feel?”

Ruby pushes the blanket off her body and swings her legs around so that her feet are on the floor. Harlow brings her a glass of iced tea and sets it on a coaster on the coffee table.

“Thanks, honey,” she says to Harlow. “Um, I feel better, I think.” Ruby drinks the cold tea gratefully. “I just got hit by this wave of exhaustion. It feels so good to be home.”

“Dinner!” Athena calls from the kitchen. The women traipse in to the dining room table and sit in front of hearty bowls of tomato soup with large soup spoons laid out on Ruby’s favorite autumn leaf patterned napkins.

She lifts one up and looks at it before spreading it on her lap. “These were your grandmother’s,” Ruby says to the girls with a sad smile. She’s still not fully with it yet after her five hour nap, and her spoon clinks against the side of her bowl. “No matter how late she came home, my mother and I always sat at the table together to eat, and she always used her good linens. Never once in my life did I eat off a paper plate in my mom’s house.”

“Tell us about the trip,” Sunday prompts, running her spoon through the tomato soup.

“Wait, does Banks want to join us?” Ruby interrupts. She’s just realized that Sunday is here instead of with her boyfriend, and she doesn’t want to leave Banks out. Plus he’s probably starving.

“I came over here because he fell asleep,” Sunday said. “Did somebody drug you two

on the plane?”

Ruby shakes her head and takes her first bite of tangy tomato soup. “No, I think it was just a lot of human interaction and travel all packed into a week. But I’m so glad I went. I needed to meet these people in person, and I needed to know more about my mother’s life. I’m completely bowled over by the relationships she had that I knew nothing about.” Ruby goes quiet for a moment and the only sound is of the spoons touching ceramic bowls as the women eat their soup. “At first it left me feeling a little lonely. I thought maybe my mother was a stranger to me, or that she’d somehow replaced the relationship she should have had with me by bringing all these other people into her life. But that wasn’t true at all. She and Ellen go all the way back to childhood, Carmen simply happened to be a kindred spirit, and she’s known Lyle for decades, though I don’t think I’ll ever fully comprehend what that relationship looked like.”

“Maybe you don’t need all the answers,” Sunday says.

“I know now that I truly don’t.” Ruby reaches for one of the triangles of grilled cheese sandwich on her plate. It’s gooey and warm, and she dips a corner of it into her soup. “But I think the biggest mystery to me will always be why she never told me about Trixie. That’s a huge piece of her life and something that undoubtedly changed her. Why would she have kept it from me?”

Unbidden tears come to Ruby’s eyes for what must be the millionth time since she and her mother sat at this very table while Patty told her about the cancer. That was just over two months ago, but it feels like a lifetime has passed since she realized that she was about to lose her mom.

“Listen, I can speak to secrets of that magnitude,” Sunday says, setting her spoon in her bowl and placing both elbows on the table as she levels her gaze at her best friend. Sunday herself had given birth to a baby at a young age and had chosen to put

him up for adoption, and she knows the heartache of being a young mother without her child. "When it comes to being an unwed mother--especially at that time--there is a shame that follows you wherever you go, even if you reject that feeling. Even if you yourself aren't ashamed. Not to mention the pain that you feel every time you think of the baby who is not in your arms. I'm sure your mother felt a bit of both of those things, as well as many other emotions that might have simply been easier for her to bury and put behind her."

"That's true." Ruby nods thoughtfully. "You're right."

"Why are people always so hard on the women?" Harlow asks. She looks annoyed, and Ruby almost wants to chuckle at her youthful indignation. There was a time in her life when she, too, couldn't wrap her head around the injustices that women faced. She'd believed that some of it must simply be a misunderstanding, that if men only understood how their actions affected women, they might change. But then she'd grown up. She'd matured and realized that women sometimes get blamed and put into boxes and held back by all the things that men can't bear to stomach or take on themselves. She'd discovered that women usually carry far more on their backs than they get credit for, and that they are almost always their own harshest critics.

"Well, babe," Ruby says, looking at her daughters' faces. She's tempted to tell them everything that's in her head, but as she takes in their unlined, hopeful, sweet faces, she knows that life will teach them what they need to know about womanhood, and that what life doesn't teach them, they'll make up for themselves. That's the beauty about being a young woman these days, Ruby thinks. Some of the rules are just waiting to be rewritten.

Sunday jumps in and offers her own answer, which Ruby is grateful for: "Listen, girls. We get to do the good stuff: we get to birth babies, if we're blessed with them and if we choose to be mothers. We get to soothe and nurture everyone around us, if we have those inclinations. And we get to have soft curves and tender hearts.

Everywhere you go you'll find someone who tells you that something about you isn't okay, or that you've done something wrong, but all you have to do is shut out that negativity. Be you. Accept that life is hard for everyone, and be kind to people no matter what--especially yourself."

"Good advice," Ruby says with a firm nod.

"Now, as for your mother." Sunday turns to Ruby. "Patty was a tough lady who did amazing things everywhere she went, but maybe a part of her toughness was the fact that she tucked her own soft spots away from everyone--including you. So I think you have to respect that."

"I do," Ruby says sincerely. "She had every right, I just wish she'd felt like she could have told me."

Athena, the older and wiser of her daughters, shrugs and reaches for the carafe of iced tea to refill her glass. "She knew she could have, Mom. You're totally the kind of person that people tell their secrets to. It was just that she wanted you to live your own life without having to carry the weight of hers on your back."

Ruby and Sunday look at one another, eyes wide.

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"Out of the mouths of babes," Sunday says.

"Out of the mouths of babes," Ruby repeats as she shakes her head.

Her girls never cease to amaze her, and she can only hope that neither of them ever feels the need to carry the weight of her life on their backs.

Ruby

"Let's skip the book this time," Marigold Pim says as she embraces Ruby in the middle of Marooned With a Book. "No one cares about Hemingway when we need to talk about you."

This makes Ruby laugh. "We don't need to talk about me! I'm just glad to be home and to see all of you."

As Marigold picks up a plate on a side table and inspects the variety of pizzas that Ruby and her girls baked and brought to the book club meeting, she winks at Ruby. "It hasn't been the same without you."

"I've been reading your Instagram posts," Ruby says to her. "It sounds like you're about to get a book deal? Did I read that right?"

Marigold makes a zipping motion across her mouth with one hand. "I can't say too much, but apparently an editor follows me on Insta, and she loves my stance on aging gracefully. They're offering a deal for a book that's not just a beauty book, or a how-to manual, but more of a real look at what it means to age as a woman."

"So a series of essays?" Sunday asks, picking up a plate and unceremoniously putting a vegetarian slice and a pepperoni one on it. She tucks her curly hair behind one ear as she glances at Marigold.

"Yes, that's what we're thinking. I have tons of stories, and I'm even thinking of writing about us—our little group here." Marigold gestures at the other women as they greet one another, hug, fill plates with pizza, and sit down in chairs that have been loosely pulled into a circle. "Having close, supportive friendships with other women is part of what makes aging bearable, don't you agree?"

"One hundred percent." Sunday chooses a chair and Marigold sits next to her. "And honestly, it just makes living better. I wouldn't have gotten through my time in D.C. without Ruby, and our friendship ultimately brought me here. I wake up every day feeling grateful for that."

"I'm listening to this whole exchange, and I have to agree." Ruby sits on Sunday's other side, resting her own plate of pizza on her knees. "We go through so many things in life alone, but we process them all with our women friends, and for me, that's where I get my clarity. After talking with you all, I always feel less alone."

"Hi, hi, hi!" Heather Charlton-Bicks sweeps into the bookstore, waving both hands as she greets everyone. "We missed you, Ruby!"

Ruby beams at her. "I missed all of you. It feels so good to be back on the island, and to be in my bookshop." Ruby looks around at the shelves of Marooned With a Book, feeling a thrill of pleasure at the tiny business she's created for herself. The bookstore isn't really making her any money, but it brings such unfettered joy to her life that Ruby would spend a million dollars a year, if she could, just to keep the doors open.

"We don't want to ask too many questions," Vanessa, one of Ruby's bookstore employees, says as she nibbles the end of a piece of pizza. "But we want to hear

anything you feel like telling us.”

“Well.” Ruby sits back in her chair, forgetting all about her pizza for a moment. “I went everywhere and I saw everything,” she says. “I almost feel like I met my mom again for the first time, which sounds crazy, but I learned so much about her life, and about her as a person.”

“Your mom was one of a kind,” Marigold says. She reaches over Sunday’s lap and touches Ruby on the arm. “She lit up a room, and she told the best stories.”

“Apparently she had them to tell.” Ruby smiles. “I guess, like anyone, you know someone in the capacity that you know them, but there’s this whole other angle that maybe you never get to see.”

“Particularly with your own mother,” Athena pipes up. Everyone turns to look at her and her cheeks go pink. “What? It’s true. I know my mom as my mom, and you all know her as a friend, and the whole world knows her as a First Lady. Plus there’s a ton of stuff she’s done in her life that I know nothing about.”

Ruby has to agree with this, though she feels as if she’s always been pretty transparent with her girls. She truly has nothing to hide from them.

“I bet she’s got secrets,” Harlow says as she chews on her pizza crust. “Mom was probably totally wild when she was our age.”

Ruby smiles. “Actually, I wasn’t,” she protests mildly. “I think I missed out on the urge to be wild and unchained. I met Jack in my twenties and we settled down pretty quickly, then I became a mom. I don’t even think I’ve had any terribly unusual friendships, and I found out that my mother had plenty of those—the kind of unexpected friendships that I actually really admire, because they stood the test of time and defied explanation.”

“Well, I think the friendships we’ve made here have been the most rewarding of my life,” Molly says as she sits down in the lone empty chair. She’s got a can of Diet Coke in one hand and a plate of pizza in the other. “You ladies have been the biggest surprise I could have imagined, if I’m being perfectly honest.” Molly, widowed in her twenties, is the owner of The Scuttlebutt and the elder stateswoman of the group. In her mid-sixties, Molly has traveled the world, lived alone, had several big love affairs, and is the most pragmatic of the group.

“For me as well,” Heather adds. “I’ve been married five times and have found and lost love over and over, but having a core group of women in my life has been such a solid feeling. I can’t imagine going through life without you girls.”

“All I can say about losing my mom and then taking this trip to discover more about her life is that it makes me even more grateful for having had her as a mother. She surprises me, even in death, and I’m pretty sure that she’s not done throwing me curveballs yet.”

The other women all look at one another and smile. “May we continue to throw each other curveballs just like Patty would have,” Sunday says. She raises her can of Diet Coke in the air in a toast and everyone joins her, holding up their various drinks.

“To Patty,” Marigold says, raising her arm high.

“To Patty,” everyone chimes in as they lift their cans. Ruby grins through her tears at this impromptu moment of remembrance. “To Patty,” she whispers quietly to herself.

The women eat and talk and catch up on island gossip for the next two hours, but one thing they do not do is discuss the book they’re reading. For as much as they all love to read, they’ve quickly come to realize that the novel they choose is just a tool to bring them together, and being together is the most important part.

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The women have left the bookstore and Ruby has locked up behind them. The trash bag is full of paper plates and napkins, and another is tied up and full of soda cans. Their first meeting back together after Ruby's trip has been a success and more fun than she'd even hoped. With Thanksgiving and Christmas right around the corner, the women had lots to talk about and plan, and they'd all decided together to throw a giant holiday on Shipwreck Key, inviting everyone they know and love to come down to the island for Christmas. Ruby can't wait.

But now that she's alone, she's trudged up the narrow staircase to her second floor office, passing the memorabilia she's got on display from her time in the White House—mostly gifts from foreign dignitaries and their wives—and looking at each item absentmindedly as she passes it. That whole time feels like another era of Ruby's life, and in fact, it is another era. A time gone by. A slice of her life that she's almost fully boxed up and put away. Sure, she still gets noticed and recognized everywhere she goes, but her drama is less current. Jack has been gone for more than two years. Her girls are grown women now, and she's living a whole new life out of the public eye.

Some habits have been hard to break: no matter what the day might bring, Ruby always finds herself dressing as if she might end up in front of the paparazzi or might be needed for some official photo. She never leaves her beach house without brushed hair, makeup, and tasteful jewelry—even when she's just in a matching shorts and tank top set with sandals or Converse. She still walks and runs almost daily, staying fit and tan from the sun. There are no professional beauty experts on hand to groom her brows, cover her grays, and choose her outfits, but Ruby has been on display for enough years that she knows how to present herself no matter the occasion.

Her desk at the top of the stairs is tucked away under a slanted roof, and it faces a blue and white stained glass window that looks out onto Seadog Lane. Ruby sits, staring out at the dark evening as she switches on the lamp on the edge of her desk. She opens her laptop and pulls up an email to Dexter.

Hey, Dex?—

For some reason talking about the book feels more like an email conversation than a text one, so just indulge me here. I read the first five chapters, and they're brilliant. What else can I say? You found a way to capture Jack's early years by incorporating some of his journal entries, and you really approached him as a whole person by doing that. As I read it, I didn't think, "Oh, here's a play by play take on my late husband's presidency," but rather, "Wow, Jack lived an entirely human existence before we even met. He entered the White House not as a lump of clay to be molded by the political machine, but as a man who'd grown up in the 70s, informed by that era. He'd played baseball, gone camping, loved his parents, gone to Disney World the year it opened, and he loved banana splits and hot summer nights. He was a father, a friend, a husband, and someone who appreciated books and long discussions. He was a person." And Dexter, that makes the book so much more accessible. You have no idea how much I wanted to keep flipping pages beyond the first five chapters in order to see his entire presidency—and the rest of his life—unfold.

I wish I could thank you for leaving and taking the time to write this as you have, but thanking you for leaving is like thanking you for leaving ME. And yet I know you needed to do that. I understand now that the book is better for it. You wrote some things through my eyes that I think I would have tried to edit if you told me you were using them, but now that I see it all on the page, I think this story couldn't possibly be told any other way. You're a genius, and I CANNOT WAIT to read the rest!

But now...on to our next topic: you and me. We talked in NYC about seeing each other during the holidays, and I'm holding you to that. Can you come to Shipwreck

Key for Christmas? I just had a book club meeting with all the other ladies, and we're thinking of inviting our families to all come here so that we can have a giant island party. Harlow and Athena will be here, I'm inviting Helen Pullman and her husband and daughter, and I really want you—more than anything, Dex, I want you here. Will you come?

Yours—always,

Ruby

She isn't ashamed to be so bold with Dexter; after all, they already discussed the holidays when they were together in New York, but more than ever, Ruby is ready to lay her cards on the table. She wants Dexter to come to the island, and she wants him to stay. If he decides to keep his apartment in Manhattan or his tiny home on Christmas Key then she'll understand, but she'd really like for Dexter to make Shipwreck Key his home base. If there's anything Ruby has learned this year—between turning fifty and losing her mother—it's that time is short. The years pass quickly. Existence is impermanent, but real love should be indulged and cared for. And she's ready to care for Dexter, to be his right hand, to be his home base.

If he'll let her.

With a sigh, Ruby closes out of her email and opens up a list she's been keeping of items to complete for her mother's memorial. It's only two weeks away, and though it could potentially dampen the holiday, she's decided to honor Patty on the Saturday of Thanksgiving weekend anyway. After all, her girls will be on the island, and her friends will be there too—if they want to join. In order to keep things low key, she's only invited Carmela and her kids (and offered to pay for their airfare), and Ellen as well, who readily agreed to fly in from Seattle in time to join them for the actual Thanksgiving holiday as well.

There are certainly hundreds of other people she could invite: people Patty sat on boards and committees with; former colleagues and law firm partners; neighbors from Santa Barbara; perhaps even close friends that Ruby hasn't yet uncovered. But the only people she really wants there have already been invited.

Ruby checks a few items off her list: flowers—ordered; wine and food for the dinner she'll serve at her house—chosen; playlist of music that Patty loved—being prepared by Harlow; poems and readings for the actual memorial—in Athena's hands.

She closes her laptop and turns off the desk lamp. It's been a busy afternoon and evening, and while she wants to sit there and stare at her computer screen until Dexter replies and tells her that he's on his way to Shipwreck immediately, she's promised her girls that she'll head home as soon as she's done at the bookstore so that they can cuddle up on the couch together and laugh through several episodes of *The Golden Girls*. Ruby knows that these moments are fleeting, and that being with her girls isn't a given, so she won't pass this up.

As she locks the front door of the darkened bookstore behind her, Ruby can hear the ocean rolling onto the shore just across the street. The stars are out and starting to twinkle overhead. She climbs into her golf cart, which is parked at the curb, and makes the short drive home to her brightly-lit house, where her girls are waiting.

Ruby

Thanksgiving is warm and full of candlelight and good food and laughter. Ellen stays at Ruby's house with her and the girls, and on Friday night, Dexter arrives by boat, dragging his duffel bag up Ruby's front steps tiredly.

"Wish I could've gotten here yesterday," he says, leaning in close to kiss her on the lips as he sets his bag on the floor at the entry to the house. "But I couldn't find another flight."

“I know,” Ruby says as she wraps her arms around his waist and lays her cheek to his chest. “You aren’t in charge of the weather.” Dexter laughs as he squeezes her back. “I’m glad you’re here now, though.”

“Dexter!” Athena calls out from the living room, waving at him. “You made it!”

Ruby lets go of him reluctantly and they exchange a meaningful look.

“Let me get settled and then maybe we can take a walk on the beach?” he offers.

Ruby smiles up at him. “Of course.”

She brings out a fresh bottle of wine and another glass for Dexter as he settles in the front room with Ruby’s daughters and with Ellen, who she introduces him to right away. Dexter is full of questions for everyone, and he gives thoughtful, thorough answers to anything that’s asked of him. He’s just so damn good at talking to anyone that Ruby can’t help but lean back, cross her legs, and listen in to the way he discusses New York City with Harlow, talks politics and current events with Athena, and discusses the way Seattle’s changing laws have left Ellen’s hometown a far different place than it was even a decade ago.

Finally, once everyone has grudgingly gotten up and wandered to the kitchen for another round of Thanksgiving leftovers, and after Dexter has demolished a sandwich that Ruby makes for him out of the turkey, cranberry sauce, and stuffing from the holiday, he grabs her by the hand and pulls her closer.

“Walk with me now?” he asks. Ruby nods and follows him out the kitchen door.

“It’s brisk tonight,” Dexter says. He’s wearing a thick fisherman’s sweater, and Ruby has put on a Pendleton wool wrap that ties around her body to fight off the late autumn chill.

“It’s almost December.” She slips her hand into his and they fall into step beneath the moon, which reflects off the water.

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They walk in silence for a moment, and the months that they've spent apart sit between them.

"I'm glad you came," Ruby says, tugging on his hand for emphasis.

"It's your mom's memorial. I wouldn't have missed it, Rubes."

"I appreciate that."

"Should we wait until after the event to talk about us? I'm still willing to wait if the timing is off," Dexter says. He glances down at her, and she looks up at him. Their eyes connect meaningfully and Ruby shakes her head.

"No, I want to talk now," she says. "I feel like we've been waiting for a long time, and I'm ready."

"Well, so am I." They keep walking as Dexter gathers his words. "I'm ready for us to be clear about what we want from one another. Actually, you've been clear, Ruby, and I'm grateful for that. So it's time for me to be clear."

Her heart pounds uncontrollably in her chest as she waits for him to say what it is he wants from her—from their relationship. The waiting is almost too much, and it takes all of her willpower to just keep walking and not to say anything.

"I need you to hear me when I say this, Ruby," Dexter says. He stops walking, but he holds her hand tightly. Ruby turns to face him. "I've given it a lot of thought, and I've done all the soul-searching I'm going to do on this. I know myself, and I know my

own heart. It's you that I want, Ruby. I don't feel that by not becoming a father in this lifetime I'll be cheating myself out of anything. However, if I left you and tried to find my happiness elsewhere, I would definitely be cheating myself out of a huge, passionate love affair. I feel..." He pauses, looking out at the water wistfully. "I feel so many things for you. I see a long and happy future ahead of us, and like you said in your email a couple of months ago, it can be a traditional future with rings and vows, or it can just be a commitment between the two of us to always show up for one another. I honestly feel like the only thing I can't live without, Ruby, is you."

Dexter stops talking. There are tears flowing down Ruby's cheeks. She's grabbed his other hand without even realizing it, and when he stops talking, an audible sob escapes from her lips.

"I want you too. I've missed you so much, Dex. I don't want you to leave again."

He pulls her to him, tucking her head neatly under his chin as he holds her close. "I can't promise that work won't ever take me away from you for a few days here and there, but I can promise that it won't be some open-ended thing. That we'll always be able to decide if we travel together or spend a few days apart. Our future is ours to decide," Dexter says. "From this point on, we decide everything together. If you want."

"I want!" Ruby says, pulling her head from his chest and looking up at his face. "That's definitely what I want!"

Her pleading tone makes Dexter laugh. "Then we've settled this," he says, his eyes and face softening. "I feel like a huge weight has been lifted. Being without you these past couple of months has been rough."

"For me too," Ruby says. She takes a deep breath, holds it, lets it out. In her heart, she's always imagined that Dexter would come back, that he would want her as much as she wants him, that he would stay. These have been tumultuous months without

him, but even though they were apart, she never felt like he was truly gone, which has been yet another reassuring thing about loving Dexter North.

They stand there for several more minutes, just holding one another by the light of the moon. Finally, Ruby steps away and takes his hand. “I think we should go back,” she says gently. “And say goodnight to everyone. I’m exhausted, and tomorrow morning Carmela and the kids get here.”

“Tomorrow is a big day,” Dexter agrees.

They start to walk across the sand together, and Ruby feels a chill run up her arms as she remembers stepping outside her house in early September to call her mother in from this very beach so that they could eat dinner together; it was the night Patty told her she was sick.

The house is brightly lit as they approach, and Ruby can hear the sounds of Ellen and her girls talking and laughing, but there’s a heaviness inside of her despite the fact that Dexter has given her exactly what she wanted to hear. Tomorrow Ruby has to wake up and say goodbye to her mother. Not literally, and not in her heart, but for all intents and purposes. She’s done the traveling and the discovering, and now it’s time to acknowledge that her mother’s life is truly over.

It’s time to let Patty go.

Harlow and Athena have created a beautiful sitting area near the water by Ruby’s house. As she gathered Carmela and her three kids from the dock, Harlow and Athena had spent the morning setting out white wooden chairs with bows made of netting tied on the backs of each seat. They’d set up a huge display of tropical flowers, and just for fun, they’d spent the past two weeks gathering every shell they could find, which sat now in a bucket near the chairs.

“Girls,” Ruby calls out, walking across the sand with Ellen, Dexter, Carmela, and her

children in tow. “I want you to meet your grandmother’s other family.”

There are tears and hugs as Carmela and Marcos, Felix, and Valeria meet Harlow and Athena, and as Athena points out the chairs for everyone to sit in, Harlow leads the three small children over to the bucket of shells and tells them that they can use the shells to build things, spell out their names, or to play games with while the adults are giving Patty the memorial she deserves.

Before long, Marcos has his younger siblings engaged in a creation made of the shells, and Ruby is standing in front of everyone else, her hands clasped together in front of her.

“I’m so happy we could all be here together,” Ruby says over the sound of the ocean crashing onto the shore. “It means the world to me to see you all here, and to know that the people my mother held closest to her heart could all be together in a place she loved.”

Valeria squeals happily as she kicks off her sandals and lays on the sand. Marcos is carefully placing shells up and down her arms and legs, and Carmela looks as if she might stand and put a stop to the merrymaking during such a serious event.

“Please,” Ruby says to her, holding out a hand. “You knew Patty—she would have loved having them play and be happy right now. I promise you.”

Carmela has risen only a few inches and she sits down again, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. “You’re so right,” she agrees, a small laugh bubbling out of her as she wipes away her tears. “She would have.”

“My mother lived a long, rich, and full life,” Ruby says. The wind lifts the netting on the back of the chairs and tosses the women’s hair around as the sun warms their skin. “She was a successful lawyer, an amazing mother, grandmother, wife, and friend—to so many. I had the pleasure of getting to travel around and meet some of

the people who touched her life, and whose lives she touched in return.”

Everyone’s eyes well up as they look around at one another; Ellen is sitting next to Athena, holding one of her hands, and Carmela is on her other side. She reaches over to touch the woman she’s just met, and as Ruby watches, she feels her chest constrict with pride. All of these bits and pieces of Patty’s life are sitting here, on her beach, together as they honor the friend, mother, and grandmother they’ve lost.

“I did not know until setting off on this journey that my mother had a lifelong friend in Ellen,” she pauses, smiling at the older woman, who blinks back her tears as she throws Ruby an air kiss, “and I had no idea what I would find when I set foot on Jekyll Island or landed in New York City or Austin. But what I found in each of these places was that my mother had left a piece of her heart there, and it was my good fortune to stumble into these worlds and, ultimately, to find out that she was so much more than what I’d known her to be. In short, she was a surrogate mother and grandmother,” Ruby says, looking at Carmela and then at the kids, who are still playing happily in the sand, “and she was a friend to Lyle, who unfortunately could not join us because his health isn’t good enough. Perhaps most impactful to me was finding out through my time on Jekyll Island that Patty was also—unbeknownst to me—the mother to a little girl who died over fifty years ago. I never knew about my sister Trixie, and I firmly believe that had my mother lived another decade or two, she still might not have talked about that time of her life. And I’m okay with that. I have to be. Each person gets to hold their own secrets close, and to decide which bits of their heart to share with others, and while my mother loved big and shared big, that bit of her heart—Trixie’s portion—was hers to keep tucked away. I respect that.” Ruby goes quiet for a long moment, and all they hear around them is the ocean.

“So today, I have all of the pieces of her puzzle that I could gather here with me to bid her farewell, and I’m so grateful for that. In each of us, she lives on. In each of the things she did, the people she loved and touched, she lives on. And here in the Gulf of Mexico, she’ll live on.” With that, Athena stands and reaches beneath her own chair, lifting up a small glass bottle that’s corked and tied with a tiny piece of

netting. “I’d love to ask each of you to take the bottle that’s beneath your chair and join me in setting Patty free today to float in the ocean, which was always one of her favorite things to do. I hope it’s not too forward of me to ask you to take part in such a sacred and personal ritual, but I’ve realized that my mom doesn’t just belong to me—and she never did. She belonged to all of us.”

There isn’t a dry eye amongst them—even Dexter’s—as they all take their bottles and walk to the edge of the water. Ruby looks down the small row of people holding glass containers of her mother’s ashes, and without any sort of verbal cue, she uncorks her bottle and holds it out over the water. Carmela follows suit, as do Dexter, Ellen, and Athena and Harlow, who are shoulder to shoulder and crying openly.

Each person tips their bottle at approximately the same time, and Patty’s ashes drop onto the wind, which carries them out over the sea. Ruby watches as the ashes drift and settle on the water, then she closes her eyes and holds them that way, feeling warm tears on her lashes.

“This isn’t goodbye, Mom,” she whispers to herself. “It’s just me setting you free. I know we’ll see each other again someday.”

The tide rolls in with one big wave as if in response, and the cold water grabs Ruby and the others around the ankles. There are squeals of surprise and Ruby’s eyes fly open as the freezing water shocks her; she laughs out loud. “Okay, Mom,” she says, still laughing. “You’ve got my attention. I’m still listening.”