



The Space Between

Author: *Stephanie Taylor*

Category: Romance

Description: At twenty-seven, Jeanie Florence is shattering glass ceilings and forging a new path for women in the 1960s. As a NASA engineer, the shy, studious Jeanie has never been in a real relationship, and the closest she's come to having real, adult feelings for a man is the way she feels about Bill Booker. But Bill is a married astronaut ten years her senior, and he is NOT a real prospect...if only Jeanie's heart would get that fact the same way her brain does.

The glamour and excitement of the 60s plays out as a backdrop to Jeanie's search for love and meaning, and as she dreams of going to space herself, she also wants to be the best engineer, daughter, sister, friend, and woman that she can. But is it ever really an option to have it all? Can one woman truly be all the things she wants to be while still doing the things she's supposed to do?

The women of Stardust Beach are strong and resilient, and they all want the same things: happiness, friendship, and love. As they support their husbands and raise their families in the shadow of Cape Kennedy, they share their love of sisterhood, they support one another through thick and thin, and they honor each other's unique stories and personalities.

The Stardust Beach series will be eight books long and will have intertwining stories and characters, both sad and hopeful moments, beautiful friendships, romance, and plenty of laughter.

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Prologue

NOVEMBER 1949

"You know why her dad never came home from the war?" Carol Fairchild was a girl of the blonde, button-nosed, steely-eyed variety. Her voice made her sound years older than the other twelve-year-olds at Elmwood Country Day School as she asked this question tauntingly.

The other girls stood around, eyes narrowed in Jeanie's direction as they waited for Carol to spit out the punchline. Mary Dillard blew a bubble with her gum and then chewed it loudly as she stared at Jeanie, clearly hoping for a reaction.

"He never came home," Carol said, folding her arms across her flat chest and bony ribcage, "because he was ashamed to have such an idiot for a daughter." No one laughed at this because it wasn't meant to be funny. Carol stared Jeanie down with her flinty gaze. "Did your dad know how dumb you were before he left you and your mom for good?"

Jeanie's chest tightened and her limbs stiffened like she'd just been hit by the fist of a champion heavyweight boxer, which—in a sense—she had. Carol Fairchild was the queen of insults, and her barbs were launched with purpose and intention, hitting their marks squarely on the bullseye ninetimes out of ten. When it came to Jeanie Florence, they landed ten times out of ten.

"Come on, Jeanie. I'm just kidding," Carol said in a tone that was decidedly not a teasing one. "Everyone knows that your dad disappearing meant that your mom could

finally marry Mr. Macklin and start having his babies." Carol smiled cruelly. "She was just waiting for that, wasn't she?"

There had been plenty of rumors and conjecture about Melva Florence taking up with Wendell Macklin a few years after her husband died in the war. Wendell Macklin was the girls' science teacher at Elmwood Country Day, and therefore Jeanie's mother marrying him and quickly getting pregnant with twins had been a hot topic of conversation amongst the students.

Jeanie was sitting on a cold metal bench on the playground, coat buttoned up to her chin, hands shoved into her pockets. Her back was against the brick wall behind her, and she kept her eyes focused on the yellow-painted lines of the concrete outdoor play area. November in Chicago meant cold air and gray skies, and with no leaves left on the trees that surrounded the lush green grass of the school's fields, the whole playground felt barren. Hopeless. Jeanie sighed.

"Come on, Carol," Mary Dillard said, trying half-heartedly to end the bloodshed. "Just leave her alone. She's too dumb to respond," she added, eyes still glued to Jeanie as she sat on the bench like a pitiful lump. Her school uniform, which consisted of a pleated navy skirt, knee-high socks, and a thin white cotton shirt beneath her woolen pea coat, wasn't enough to keep her warm as this group of mean girls surrounded her, and all she could hope for was that they'd grow bored with her silence soon and leave.

"You'll never be anything," Carol said plainly, as if she'd just realized this. "You won't even be Mr. Macklin's real daughter, and the rest of your siblings will actually have two parents."

This was the final straw for Jeanie; she'd taken all she could from Carol Fairchild, and she wasn't going to listen to her talk this way anymore. She stood up, hands in the pockets of her coat. Her breath puffed out in front of her in the cold air.

“I have two parents,” Jeanie said. “My dad didn’t come home because he died a war hero. And my mom loves Mr. Macklin—he’s a nice man.” The other girls looked shocked that actual words were coming out of Jeanie’s mouth. “I don’t care if he’s not my real dad, so I don’t know why you do.”

Carol blinked at her, but had no comeback.

“Mr. Macklin is nice,” Emily Finch said, speaking up for the first time. She looked at the ground.

Carol’s head whipped around to glare at her as if she’d broken ranks. “Mr. Macklin married a desperate widow,” Carol spat. “At least that’s what my mother says.”

Jeanie’s blood ran cold. “You know who is actually dumb?” she asked, feeling braver than she ever had. “You, Carol. You’re dumb. And no one cares what you think.”

That was obviously not true, as Carol had plenty of disciples to follow her around and back up whatever mean things came out of her stupid mouth, but it was true enough for Jeanie at that moment. She stalked away from the little group of girls, head held high.

For the next two years, Jeanie made a point of shooting Carol a hard look any time she caught the girl looking her way, and Carol said nothing else to Jeanie’s face. It was safe to say that they were sworn enemies, but they went about it silently and without further confrontation.

At least until the day that Jeanie found out why Carol really was the way she was.

* * *

February 1951

Eighth grade wasn't Jeanie's favorite year. Her little brother and sister were three, and they were always getting into her things. Her mother made her ride to school with her stepfather rather than letting her ride the bus with the other kids, and she started her period, which seemed like an unfair and unjust part of womanhood.

On Valentine's Day that year, when Jeanie was fourteen, she'd started bleeding in the middle of gym class. Her teacher had instructed her to get dressed and go to the health room, so she sat there outside the nurse's closed door, slumped down in a chair with her arms folded across her chest. Her cramps were painful, and her humiliation was complete. How was she supposed to go to her next class after the other girls had all seen her red face as she explained to Mrs. Blakely that she needed a sanitary napkin? She hoped that by playing up her pain, the nurse might call her mother to get her and she'd be allowed to go home early for the day.

When the door opened, Jeanie conjured a pained expression and made a tiny moan. But instead of the nurse coming out to get her, Carol Fairchild emerged with a tear-stained face. She was holding an ice pack to her stomach, and she looked at Jeanie with annoyance.

In an instant, Jeanie forgot all about her ploy to get sent home. All she could do was wonder what in the world had happened to Carol.

"Have a seat, Miss Fairchild," the nurse said, emerging in a white uniform. Her hands were clasped in front of her, and her face was serious. "Miss Florence," she said to Jeanie, "can I help you? Are you unwell?"

Jeanie stood up, but her eyes were still on Carol. "I..." she said, forgetting her Oscar-worthy performance and her desire to be picked up for the day. She looked at the nurse and lowered both her eyes and her voice. "I need a napkin."

The nurse pursed her lips and waved Jeanie into her exam room, where she opened a

drawer and pointed at a stash of feminine products. Jeanie took what she needed and slipped it into her book bag, which she immediately zipped.

“Thank you,” Jeanie said in a hurry, turning to go. She’d assumed she’d need to rush to catch up with Carol and ask her what was wrong, but as she walked out the door, she realized that Carol had taken the seat Jeanie had been sitting in.

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“Hi,” Jeanie said to her. “Are you okay?”

Carol’s face was stony. She moved her pack of ice around on her ribcage with a wince. “I’m fine,” she said, not meeting Jeanie’s eye.

“You don’t look fine.” Jeanie stood there, forgetting for a moment about the fact that the only thing standing between her and certain disaster was a wad of toilet paper shoved into her underwear. “Do you want to talk?”

Carol exhaled, sounding exasperated. “Why would I talk to you? We haven’t spoken a word to one another since sixth grade.”

“So.” Jeanie shifted her book bag from one shoulder to the other. “No one said we weren’t allowed to speak to each other. Just because we don’t doesn’t mean that we can’t.”

Carol considered this. “That’s true.”

Jeanie sat in the empty chair next to Carol’s. “Then tell me what’s wrong. I’m a good listener, and I promise I won’t tell anyone else.”

Carol cast a glance at the nurse’s open door. “Stuff at home.” She shrugged.

Jeanie stood up and held out a hand to Carol. “Come on.”

Carol frowned at her hand. “Where?”

“Excuse me, Nurse Heller?” Jeanie took Carol’s hand and pulled her to a standing position. “We’re going to the restroom.”

Nurse Heller was on the phone and she simply waved a hand at them, so Jeanie led Carol down the hall to the girls’ room.

Inside, she held a finger to her lips and then looked under the stall doors. Seeing that there were no feet, she finally spoke. “What’s going on at home?”

Carol turned to face the long mirror over the sinks. She stared into her own blue eyes absently, leaning forward so that her nose was nearly touching her own reflection. She sighed deeply. “My mother,” she said.

“Your mother...is she okay?”

This time, instead of sighing, Carol huffed angrily. “She’s fine. I’m not.” She removed the pack of ice she’d been holding to her ribs and then lifted the bottom of her sweater. There, across her skin, was a deep purple bruise.

Jeanie recoiled. “What happened?”

Carol let her sweater fall. “My mother kicked me. That’s what happens at my house when you don’t do what you’re supposed to do.”

Jeanie wasn’t sure what to say to this. She’d never been hit or kicked by anyone in her life. Her mother was as patient as the day was long, and her stepfather was somehow both distant and jovial. He talked to Jeanie and her sister and brother like they were all adult colleagues, and other than the twins’ squabbles or excited shouts, their house was almost entirely absent of any type of yelling. Certainly, there was no strife.

Carol made a face like she was deeply regretting their entire interaction. “What happens at your house when you don’t listen? Does Mr. Macklin make you write out the periodic table one hundred times?” She sneered, but seemed to lose the energy for it, and her face fell. “Sorry,” she whispered.

“It’s fine,” Jeanie said. They were quiet for a moment. “It’s not okay, Carol. No one should be hurting you like that—especially your mom.”

“Yeah, well.”

The only sound in the bathroom was of one of the three sinks, which dripped endlessly from the faucet into the porcelain.

“Anyway, I promised I wouldn’t tell anyone, and I won’t. Unless you want me to, and then I will.”

Carol reached out a hand and grabbed onto Jeanie’s wrist urgently. “No. Don’t. Please.”

Instead of letting go of Jeanie’s arm, Carol’s hand lingered, and Jeanie took her sworn enemy’s fingers in her own, holding her hand as they looked into one another’s eyes.

“Okay,” Jeanie said. “I won’t.”

And just like that, Jeanie Florence learned firsthand that sometimes the dogs with the meanest bites only snap at people to protect themselves. Later in life, she’d hear the phrase “Hurt people hurt people,” and she would remember this day in the girls’ bathroom, recalling how mean Carol had been, and how much she must have been hurting on the inside. But right then, all Jeanie was sure about was the fact that she no longer hated Carol Fairchild.

* * *

May 1954

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Jeanie had been daydreaming about Leonard Pickles for months. Even when she was engrossed in her astronomy books, or as she was carefully writing out answers to her homework, she was thinking of him. As a grown woman she would chuckle at the fact that she'd once loved a boy named Leonard Pickles so much that she'd doodled "Jeanie Pickles" all over her diary at home, but in May 1954, Leo Pickles was the apple of her eye and she'd told no one—not even her best friend Carol Fairchild.

In English class, Leo raised his long arm in the air and held up one finger to get the teacher's attention. "I believe that Fitzgerald used Jay Gatsby to help readers understand that the American Dream was attainable for anyone."

"Okay, let's use that as a jumping off point for this discussion," Miss Chambers said, turning to the chalkboard to write something in her neat, looping penmanship.

But Jeanie's attention was elsewhere: it was on the back of Leo's long neck. It was on his softly curved ears. It was on the way his shoulder blades were visible through the back of his cotton uniform shirt. And it was definitely on the strong bulge of his biceps as he leaned over to pull a book from the bag that rested at his feet.

In grade school, Leo had been a quiet kid with big ears. He was good at sports and nice to everyone. But by age seventeen, he'd become the tall, athletic, smart, kind boy who had grown into his ears—and everything else. And he made Jeanie swoon.

So sure was she that they would go to the junior prom together that Jeanie had picked out the dress she wanted to wear to the dance on a trip into Chicago one weekend with her mother and her six-year-old brother and sister. There it was in the window of Macy's on State Street: a gorgeous sky blue confection with shimmering flecks of

glitter sprinkled all over the tulle skirt. Beside her, in his tuxedo, Jeanie knew that Leo Pickles would be the most handsome escort at the prom. Together, they would stop traffic.

In the weeks leading up to prom, Jeanie did everything she could to make sure that Leonard noticed her: she was there after school, holding her books in her arms when he played a pickup game of basketball with the other boys, and she was standing around in the hall, re-shelving the same books in her locker over and over as she waited for him to come out of his classes. When he finally talked to her one day and offered to walk her home, Jeanie was beside herself with joy. Finally, Leonard Pickles had realized that they were meant to be together.

As they walked down the tree-lined streets on that early day in May, Leo bounced his basketball on the sidewalk, asking Jeanie questions and waiting for each of her answers like he really cared about what she had to say. By the time she got home, Jeanie's heart was full, and she was bubbling over with excitement.

Leonard Pickles. Leonard Pickles. Leonard Pickles. Her brain played his name on repeat as she helped her mother set the table for dinner. His face was burned into her mind's eye as she washed her face before bed. The long lope of his walk made her smile as she climbed into bed each night. No other boy had ever featured larger in her mind than the science books she loved, and never had she spent so much time just dreaming about a boy. For the first time in her life, Jeanie Florence was smitten.

If she'd dared to tell anyone, she might have even said she was in love.

"How was school today, my friends?" Wendell Macklin asked as he spooned peas onto his plate and passed the bowl to Jeanie's little sister.

Jeanie stayed quiet and let her siblings answer the question, because her mind was far too busy imagining what she and Leonard would look like as they walked into the

gym together on the night of the junior prom. Lately, this was all she did when she was at home: stay quiet, and daydream about Leo.

In the weeks that followed, Jeanie and Leo spent more time together. Nothing official—no dates—but they walked home, met up in the halls, and asked each other how things were going. It all seemed to Jeanie like the build-up to some sort of great and momentous romance, and she had nearly worked up the nerve to ask her mother to take her back into the city to see if the dress was still in the window at Macy's on the day she walked out the side door of the school building and into the bright afternoon sunshine.

There, beneath a tree, stood Carol Fairchild. She had her back pressed against the rough bark of the tree trunk, and her textbooks were clutched to her chest. She was laughing and looking up at a boy who stood almost uncomfortably close to her, and as Jeanie stopped in her tracks to watch, she realized that boy was none other than Leonard Pickles. Carol and Leo were gazing into one another's eyes in a way that sent a jolt through Jeanie's entire body.

Jeanie's heart stopped in her chest as she watched the dappled sunlight fall onto Carol's blonde hair. The wind lifted the edge of Carol's calf-length skirt as her joyous laughter rang out across the courtyard. Leo reached out and put a hand to the end of Carol's hair, extracting a single green leaf that had landed there.

Jeanie stood there, barely breathing. She couldn't make her legs move, and she couldn't stop watching them. At that moment, there was no question in her mind that Carol would be going to the prom with Leo. That they'd hold each other close on the dance floor in the gym that night, swaying to a love song as metallic stars swung on long bits of string overhead. By the end of the night, Leo would have kissed Carol, and Jeanie's future would be cemented: she would live the rest of her life without ever becoming Mrs. Leonard Pickles.

But the look on Carol's face was enough for Jeanie; after all that Carol had been through, seeing her smile like that and hearing her laughter did something to Jeanie that felt like someone was wringing water out of her heart. Her friend, who had spent most of her life angry and protecting herself from her mother's harsh treatment, looked happy. Really and truly happy. Despite Carol's good looks, Jeanie had never seen her with a boy (although boys were always looking in Carol's direction, always clocking her whereabouts), and seeing Carol now with Leo was just...right. They looked like they belonged together.

Jeanie harbored a deep sense of disappointment and loss, but she accepted this fate almost instantaneously. Soon, Carol would come to her gushing about Leonard Pickles and telling her that Leo had invited her to the prom, and she, Jeanie Florence, would be happy for her friend. She had to be, because that's how real friends behaved.

Jeanie wanted to escape as quickly as possible without either Leo or Carol seeing her, so she turned around and walked back towards the double doors, yanking at the handle roughly. It wouldn't budge; Jeanie was locked out. She rattled the door as tears sprang to her eyes and panic welled up in her chest. She was in no condition to speak to Leo or Carol, nor did she want to be seen.

She was about to give up on the locked door when suddenly it opened from within: Miss Chambers had heard the rattling from inside her classroom and come to see what the ruckus was all about.

"Thank you," Jeanie whispered as she rushed past Miss Chambers, books held firmly to her chest. She hurried down the shiny floors of the empty hallway, past lockers, past both open and closed classroom doors, and straight for the other side of the building.

When she reached the doors that led to the parking lot, she burst through them

without slowing down.

From that day forward, Jeanie wouldn't let herself be distracted by a boy again. Or by anything else.

CHAPTER 1

June 1964

JEANIE

Working for NASA is everything Jeanie dreamed it would be. It is also a crash course in gender relations, sexism, and the way some (most) men simply cannot look at a woman and see anything but thighs and breasts and a pair of hands that should be making dinner and changing diapers instead of calculating fuel consumption and space landing parameters.

"You ready for the weekend, Florence?" Peter Abernathy, a fellow engineer, climbs into the elevator with Jeanie and punches the button that she's already pressed. She squashes the instinct to roll her eyes at this.

"I most definitely am," Jeanie says pleasantly. "How about you?"

As the elevator doors slide closed, Jeanie is treated to a long-winded monologue on Peter's golf game, his favorite Scotch, the woman he's currently dating, and the project he's working on with the Aeronautics Research Mission team. Not once between the time the elevator car starts its ascent and the time it stops does Peter ask Jeanie anything about herself; she'd known instinctively that "You ready for the weekend?" was simply code for "Let me tell you all about my weekend."

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"Have a good one, Peter," Jeanie says, stepping off the elevator as he holds the door open for her. Thank goodness the men she works with have all been raised with the barest of manners; Jeanie can hardly imagine what would happen to civilized society if the men stopped holding doors for women or being polite. It would certainly make the workplace entirely unbearable, as Jeanie knows instinctively that there will never be such a thing as an office or a company where the women are treated like and paid the same as the men. Men holding doors is hardly compensation for all of that, but at least it's something.

Back on the floor where she works, Jeanie crosses the giant open space, winding her way between cubicles and stopping every so often to lay a manila folder on the desk of a coworker. She's been tasked with overseeing the copying of their latest findings, collating it into a report, and delivering the reports to each of the men on her team. It's not lost on Jeanie that, as the only woman on her engineering team, she's frequently asked to do things like secure meeting rooms, make copies, and disseminate documents that they all need. Rather than letting it frustrate her, she accepts that because she's the youngest person on the team, she's simply paying her dues.

However, during a phone call with her mother just the weekend before, Jeanie had realized that she was, in fact, not the youngest member of her team; that distinction goes to Todd Roman, who turned twenty-seven just two months after Jeanie. That had blown her comforting theory out of the water.

Much to Jeanie's surprise, her own mother has been the person in her life who has most questioned what it means to be a woman, and what sort of limitations her gender puts on her life. The first time they'd had the discussion, over the Christmas holiday

when Jeanie went back to Chicago following JFK's assassination, it had come as a shock: after all, what did Melva Macklin, mother of three, housewife for her entire adult life, know about the challenges of being female in an almost entirely male engineering program at Northwestern? What experience did Melva have with earning the respect and attention of her male coworkers? But, much to Jeanie's shock, her mother was well-versed in the topics, and her questions were insightful, thought-provoking, and encouraging. Jeanie had ended the holiday with the realization that other women did understand how hard it was to find your footing in a predominantly male workplace, and that her own feelings were real, and not imagined.

Still, she'd come back to Cape Kennedy after the new year invigorated and ready to tackle her job, only to find that one of the men in her group, Ed Maxwell, had been chosen to join a special project in Seattle without her ever hearing a word about the project or the selection process.

Jeanie has found that so much goes on right under her nose that she simply isn't privy to simply because someone is always asking her to run a little errand or complete a menial task and she misses the information.

"Hiya, Jeanie," Bill Booker says, looking up from his desk as she sets a file down in his wire in-box. "How are you?"

Unlike Peter Abernathy, Bill's eyes hold a spark of real interest. His question isn't meant just to spark a one-sided conversation.

Jeanie pauses, holding the remaining files in front of her as she hugs them to her chest. She's wearing a boxy A-line dress of yellow gingham that hits about an inch above the knee, and her long, brown hair hangs straight down to about the halfway point of her back. Jeanie wears no more than a swipe of mascara and a hint of frosty lipstick, and in her ears are small gold studs. She's gotten progressively more tanned during her time in Florida, and her legs are the same color as her suntan nylons, but

she'd still never show up at work with bare legs. That just wouldn't do.

"I'm doing alright, Bill. Thanks for asking. How are you?" Jeanie tilts her head to one side as she waits for Bill's reply. They've become friends, she and Bill Booker, but even though he's a terribly handsome man, Jeanie refuses to let herself imagine the way he looks at the end of the day when he's at home and relaxing. She doesn't let her mind wander to the way Bill unbuttons the cuffs of his sleeves and rolls them, revealing strong, tanned forearms. She doesn't like to imagine the way his profile looks when they're standing around talking about life and space and the moon. And she never (okay,almostnever) goes back to the early morning they'd shared in the office, watching the sun come up together as they drank coffee and enjoyed the peace and quiet of the still-empty office.

Jeaniewantsto think about all those things, but Bill Booker is a married man. In fact, he is a happily married man with three children and a wife whom Jeanie has met. Jo Booker is someone she likes and respects, and therefore Jeanie needs to respect that Jo is his wife, and she--little Jeanie Florence from Chicago--is merely his coworker. Bill Booker is the senior member of their team, and his salt-and-pepper hair, his broad shoulders, and his lopsided grin occasionally creep into Jeanie's subconscious, making her life far more difficult than it needs to be.

So now, standing there at his desk, Jeanie hugs the files to her body even more tightly, keeping her thoughts in check as she watches Bill's blue eyes dance with amusement.

"I've got nothing to complain about," Bill says. His gaze stays on Jeanie. "But I'm really asking—how are you? Last time we talked, you said there was something going on with your brother, right?"

Jeanie is touched that he remembers, as she'd only mentioned in passing one day during lunch in the cafeteria, that her little brother, seventeen-year-old Patrick, had

been struggling lately to make good choices.

"He's alright," Jeanie says. She scratches one arm anxiously, thinking of Patrick and the way he'd been caught drinking with his friends and driving dangerously down some country back roads while hanging out of the car and playing mailbox baseball as his buddies cheered him on. "I'm just worried that he'll mess up his future by doing stupid things right now."

Bill leans back in his chair and folds his arms across his chest. "Ahhh. The issue that young boys everywhere must face: have fun now, but still try to make decisions that won't land you in jail." He chuckles softly, as if remembering his own youth.

"Did you ever do anything dumb like, oh, say, riding around at night with your drunken friend driving a car so you could lean out the window and hit mailboxes with a baseball bat?" Jeanie lowers her chin as she delivers the question with complete disapproval.

Bill roars with laughter and a few of the people in their vicinity turn towards him. "Oh, I shouldn't be laughing at that—not at all. It just took me back for a moment." He shakes his head. "When I was seventeen, right before I enlisted, I thought it would be great fun to climb the water tower in my little town and paint my initials on the side of it. So did my buddies, only we were—as you might imagine—somewhat inebriated. My best friend, Rob, fell off the ladder from about twenty feet in the air. Broke his collarbone and had to sit out during the football season. Probably would have gotten a scholarship to play in college if we hadn't been doing dumb kid stuff."

"That's what I worry about," Jeanie admits. "The dumb kid stuff having long-term ramifications."

Bill watches her with earnest interest. "What about you, Jeanette Florence?" He lifts his chin in her direction; his arms are still folded across his chest. "What kinds of

dumb kid stuff did you do at seventeen?"

Jeanie leans against the low cubicle wall that surrounds Bill's desk. Around them, phones ring and the sound of typewriter keys clacking fills the air. A conversation in a nearby cubicle results in polite laughter.

"Me?" Jeanie asks, letting her memory drift back to herself at that age. 1954. Perry Como and Rosemary Clooney had big hits that year. Marilyn Monroe Married Joltin' Joe Dimaggio. Hitchcock's "Rear Window" was showing in theaters. Jeanie and every other girl she knew wore poodle skirts to school, and the Supreme Court ruled in favor of desegregation in the Brown v. Board of Education landmark case. It's only been a decade since then, but so much has changed, with JFK's assassination and the rising tensions in Vietnam; Jeanie sometimes feels like she closed her eyes in one world and opened them in another.

"Yeah, what were you like when you were your brother's age? I bet you were ditching classes to smoke cigarettes with your girlfriends."

Jeanie can't tell if he's joking, but her face immediately bursts into flames. "Me?" she says in shock. "No. No way. I've never smoked a single cigarette."

Bill slaps his desk. "Not even one?"

"No..." Jeanie shakes her head—she can't imagine herself sharing a smoke with Carol in high school; they weren't the kind of girls who would have looked cool leaning against a car with a cigarette in hand, eyeing everyone knowingly. "Not even one."

Bill stands up. He yanks open the top drawer of his desk and pulls out a pack of nearly full cigarettes and a lighter. "Come on."

"What?" Jeanie is blinking and staring after him. She's never seen Bill with a

cigarette. “You smoke?”

Bill doesn't break his stride, just puts one hand in the air and waves for her to follow without turning back to look at her.

After taking the stairs instead of the elevator, they're outside in the hot June sun. Bill leads them to a tall overhang that gives some shade, then slips a single cigarette from the pack and puts it to his lips. Jeanie has been silent this whole time.

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A man is driving by on a NASA vehicle that looks like a golf cart and a small tank had a baby, but when he sees them there he brakes suddenly, coming to a halt. “Got one to spare?” he asks Bill, nodding at the cigarette.

Bill steps out of the shade and into the harsh sunlight, where he taps another cigarette out of the pack, offers it to the man, and then gives him a quick light. The man takes what looks to be a grateful drag on the cigarette, exhales, and salutes Bill. “Thank you kindly. Trying to quit because the wife doesn’t like the smell of it, but it’s hard.”

“Indeed it is, soldier,” Bill says, saluting the man back. It’s clear to Jeanie that they know one another and have discussed their respective military service histories, but she isn’t sure who this guy is, or what branch he’d served in.

“Ma’am,” the man says to Jeanie with a tip of his imaginary hat. “Have a good day.” He puts his foot on the accelerator and drives on.

“So,” Bill says, stepping back into the shade. “Let’s initiate you into the club.”

“I’m not sure, Bill.” Jeanie shakes her head. “All I ever hear is how hard it is to quit. I don’t want to become a smoker,” she lowers her voice, whispering the words like it’s a profanity.

Bill chuckles. “You won’t,” he says. “You’re not the type. But it’s time to live a little, Jeanie Florence.” Bill hands her a cigarette of her own, showing her which end to put in her mouth, and then he lights it for her. “Inhale,” he whispers as the flame catches the end of the filter. “There you go.”

Immediately, Jeanie starts to cough. Hard. It's disgusting. The taste is horrid, and the smoke burns her lungs. "Bill," she says between coughs. "Why does anyone do this?"

Bill is still laughing. "Well, the nicotine relaxes you. And it's social. Some people do it because it gives them a good excuse to leave work for a few minutes every couple of hours—hence the term 'smoke break.' People gather together, share a smoke and some laughs, and then get back to their work day."

Jeanie takes a small, tentative puff and coughs again. When the fit passes, she looks Bill in the eye with a touch of mistrust. "But it's horrible," she says hoarsely. "Is that why you smoke?"

Bill tilts his head from side to side. "Yeah, mostly." He narrows his eyes and looks out at the smooth, flat ground that stretches out for acres around them. In the distance are parked cars, more half-breed golf cart/tanks driven by men in aviator sunglasses and short-sleeved button up shirts, the launch pads, and, farther out, the tree line. "I smoked in Korea," he says softly as he looks at the toe of the shoe that he drags across the pavement. "And then I quit for a while. Jo hates it."

At the name of Bill's wife, Jeanie gets a strange pang in her chest. She'd met Jo the night of Frankie Maxwell's dance performance at the Cocoa Beach Performing Arts Center, and Jo had been lovely. She'd even invited Jeanie to dinner, which hasn't happened yet, but sounds like it could be fun.

"If she hates it, then why do you do it?" Jeanie asks. When Bill roars with laughter, Jeanie's cheeks go red. "What? Is that a dumb question?"

Bill wipes his eye roughly with a knuckle as he holds his lit cigarette in the other hand. "No, it's not dumb. It's just...sometimes it's the things our spouses don't want us to do that we most want to." Bill looks at the confusion on Jeanie's face and goes on. "I don't mean you set out to do something that your wife wouldn't want you to do

just to be unkind, but when you get married, you lose a certain sense of autonomy. Which is fine,” he adds hurriedly, putting up the hand that's holding the cigarette. “You know what you’re signing up for when you say ‘I do,’ but there are moments when you feel like...you know, the old me didn’t have to ask permission to have a smoke or go for a drive or stop for a beer after work.”

Jeanie nods. Her experience of marriage has only been through observation. She remembers her mom and Wendell sitting side-by-side on the couch in the evenings after dinner, him grading papers, and her reading a book. Or them seated at opposite ends of the table at dinner, listening as the kids all talked about their day. Jeanie suddenly realizes that she has no idea what sorts of concessions either of them had to make in order to have a happy and successful marriage, which, by all appearances, they did and still do. Did Wendell ever roll down the windows of his car and just keep driving after a long day of teaching middle schoolers at Elmwood Country Day? Did her mother ever sneak out at night to have a cigarette under the stars and think about the boy she’d loved and married—the one who’d gone to war and died, leaving her with a daughter and a mortgage to pay? Jeanie has no idea. It has never occurred to her to ask.

“What do you suppose Jo does to hang onto that ‘old’ version of herself?” Jeanie asks this innocently enough, but as Bill’s eyes grow serious, she realizes it’s possible that he’s never considered it.

He takes a drag on his cigarette and then flicks the ashes. “I’m not sure. She probably doesn’t have any bad habits, like smoking.” He frowns. “I guess she goes out for evening walks with Frankie Maxwell, Ed’s wife. Yeah, they do that quite a bit.”

“Maybe that’s when she smokes her cigarettes,” Jeanie says. “Either literally or metaphorically.”

Shaking his head and smiling, Bill puts his cigarette between his lips again and

inhales. “You’re a smart cookie, Jeanette. And you’re right: maybe it is where she smokes her cigarettes, so to speak.” Bill drops his butt on the pavement and grinds it with the sole of his shoe. “And you don’t need to finish that,” he says, reaching out for her cigarette and dropping it to the ground where he crushes it just as he’d done with his own. “But I’m honored to have been your first.”

Jeanie’s face gets hot again. The fact that she still blushes at her age infuriates her, and she’s sure that it makes her seem like an inexperienced and naïve little girl. “My first?”

“Smoking buddy,” Bill clarifies, putting his hands into the pockets of his pants. “I doubt we’ll be out here three times a day sharing a smoke, but hey, at least you can say you were a bad girl for a minute, and I got to see it with my own eyes.” He winks at her and pulls open the side door of the building, holding it for Jeanie so that she can go in first.

The door swings shut behind them with a click, shutting out the summer heat and encasing them once again in the air-conditioned hum of the office.

“Better get back to it,” Bill says, punching the button for the elevator this time so that they can ride it up to their floor.

They’re quiet on the ride up, but Jeanie stands there next to Bill, her shoulder just inches from his, as she thinks about Jo going out walking with Frankie Maxwell in the evenings. Jeanie needs more friends—she needs a social life. Being in Florida and working for NASA is like a dream come true, but truth be told, she’s lonely. After working all day, she occasionally stops at The Black Hole with a couple of her other female coworkers and has a drink with the guys, but that’s not the same thing as having friends to go to the movies or the beach with. It’s not the same as getting to know people and creating meaningful relationships.

Jeanie glances up at Bill and smiles self-consciously when he looks down at her. They both gaze straight ahead at the closed doors in front of them until the elevator stops with a loud ding.

Maybe she should take Jo up on that invitation to dinner after all.

CHAPTER 2

Jo

Stardust General Hospitalis bustling with gardeners. The hospital has received a grant to improve the grounds, and the administration has used the funds to create a huge garden with lush green shrubbery, mature palm trees, beds of tropical flowers, and a fountain with a paved path around it.

"This is quite the production number," Nurse Edwina says, putting a fist on one plump hip as she looks out the window of the third floor at the workers toiling in the hot midday sun. "What do you think of this garden, Josephine?"

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Jo, who has been working at the hospital as a volunteer for nearly a year, is standing beside Nurse Edwina, watching the men digging and planting as their shirts cling to their sweaty backs. More than one gardener has stopped to pour water directly over his own head, and that in and of itself is creating a mild ripple of curiosity amongst the female nurses on staff.

Jo turns to Edwina. "It's lovely," she says sadly. "I wish Mr. Dandridge could have seen it."

"Oh, honey," Edwina says. She puts a hand on Jo's arm and pats it in a motherly, concerned way. "Even a cat only has nine lives."

Of course Edwina is only making a joke, and without question, Douglas Dandridge had been a favorite of everyone--doctors and nurses alike--but he and Jo had been particularly close.

Jo wipes a tear as it escapes her eye. "I know. And he fought long and hard. No one expected him to see 1964, much less nearly make it to summer. But he was such a good, kind, funny man."

"And the world got to appreciate his sense of humor for ninety years, Josephine," Edwina says with a tilt of her head. "We should all be so lucky."

Jo shakes her head and wipes both cheeks resolutely. "You're right. I know it. And it's a rookie mistake to get so attached to a patient. This is my own fault, isn't it?" She laughs.

"Well, no," Edwina admits. "Not entirely. It was impossible not to love that old coot."

They turn back to the window and the goings on below. "Still, he would have enjoyed the garden." Jo points at the path that's being paved from the door all the way to the fountain. "I could have pushed him around on nice days."

"That would have been lovely."

"And I'll miss walking into his room with two or three romance novels that he would always read on the sly."

Edwina turns to look at her with surprise. "Romance novels? I swear he loved spy books!"

Jo shakes her head. "Nope. He loved ones about women who traveled and fell in love. I borrowed them from my girlfriends and brought him new ones every week." She steels herself for a moment. "I started writing with his encouragement, you know."

"You did? I didn't know you wrote, Josephine."

Jo nods. "I do. I started out with a few chapters of a book, but it wasn't going anywhere, so I wrote a short story instead."

"Well, huh! Some people just surprise you." Edwina shakes her head slowly from side to side. "And old Mr. Dandridge encouraged that?"

"Yes, ma'am. He did. He told me he'd stay alive to read my first chapter, but instead I was able to bring him my first published story in True Romance magazine. I got paid ten dollars for that," she says proudly.

"Josephine Booker," Edwina says with a big grin and a faraway look like she's

imagining something grand. “Famous author.”

“Actually,” Jo says. “I used my maiden name—Josephine White.”

“You did? How does your hubby handle that? Mine wouldn’t go for such a thing.” Shetsksa few times. “He’s fairly old-fashioned about things.”

“I never asked Bill what he thought, and he hasn’t read the story, so I guess it doesn’t much matter.” Jo’s spirits plummet as she recalls that Bill had been happy for her, but his pride and joy had felt lukewarm. “And I don’t think I’m going to bring it up—not yet, anyway.” She pauses and chews on the inside of her cheek. “I actually have the third installment of the same story coming out this month.”

“What?” Edwina looks really and truly shocked—she even puts a hand to her ample chest. “You wrote more than one story?”

“It’s kind of ongoing,” Jo admits. “I wrote part one about a couple named Maxine and Winston. Winston is an astronaut who is trying to get chosen to go to the moon.”

“Uh oh,” Edwina says, her smile fading. “I see why you didn’t want to tell Mr. Booker about this one.”

Jo shrugs. “Well. I don’t think he would be too upset—it’s not the story of our lives or anything.” She pauses and pulls a face. “Not entirely, anyway.”

“Oh dear.”

A voice crackles over the loud speaker right then: “Nurse Edwina to the third floor station, please. Nurse Edwina to the third floor station.”

“Well,” Edwina says, smoothing the front of her crisp, white uniform. “They’re

playing my song. I'd better get a move on."

Jo leans against the window with one shoulder and looks down at the men on the ground again, watching as they work together to drag a tall palm tree and get it set up right in the wooden brackets they've built to hold it in place.

"Hey, Jo?" Edwina stops halfway down the hall and turns to her. "Could I get a copy of your first story to read? And maybe the second one, too? I want to be all caught up when the newest installment comes out this month."

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A slow smile spreads over Jo's face and she nods. "I'll bring them next time I'm here."

It's gratifying to be able to say she has a story published, and sure, Jo is proud of herself. She was excited to get the acceptance letter, and the money is fun to receive, but if she's being perfectly honest with herself, Mr. Dandridge's face when he held the first published story in his hand had made it all worthwhile. Their friendship, which had started when Jo first began volunteering at the hospital, had been a gift to her that she'd never expected—never even knew that she needed. And his loss after his long and arduous cancer battle, while expected, was still hard. It's been a full month, but it's as still fresh to Jo as if it had just happened that morning.

With a final glance at the garden that's taking shape on the grounds of the hospital, Jo walks away to get her cart out of the closet where she stores it. Even without Mr. Dandridge to visit, she still has patients who look forward to seeing her smiling face as she comes in to offer them cookies, juice, or something to read. It's important work, in Jo's mind, and she can't discount the fact that having something of her own to do and to focus on has made her a much better wife and mother over the past year. In fact, finding her place at Stardust General has not only done that, but it's made this community and this state feel far more like home.

"Knock knock," Jo says softly, rapping on the door of a woman who she knows is in the hospital after having surgery on her arm. "Can I come in?"

With a smile, Jo pushes her cart into the room and starts her first visit of the day.

"Mommy!" Nancy says as Jo steps out the sliding door of their kitchen and onto the

patio that afternoon. Now that school is out, the kids are spending the afternoons that Jo volunteers at the hospital with her closest friend in Stardust Beach, Frankie Maxwell. Jo loves coming home from the hospital to find them all in the pool under Frankie's watchful eye, or running around the backyard spraying one another with the hose as Frankie pages through a romance novel and sips a glass bottle of Tab.

"Hello, everyone," Jo says tiredly, peeling off the cardigan she always wears inside the air-conditioned hospital. "How are we?"

Jimmy, her twelve-year-old son, is floating on his back in the pool, face to the sky, eyes closed. Jo can hardly blame him for shutting out his rambunctious younger sisters, and she watches him, noting that his skin has officially turned a dark, nutty Florida brown after a year of living in the sun. His upturned nose is speckled with freckles, and his hair has bleached out to a rusty blonde.

"Mama," eight-year-old Kate says, pulling herself out of the pool and standing in front of Jo with water running off her slippery little body. "Jimmy got into trouble."

Jo runs her hand along her youngest child's smooth cheek. "Oh, I'm sure everything is fine," she says. "Go jump into the pool and show me how you swim from one end to the other." Jo is a master at thinking up tasks that will wear the kids out by bedtime. Kate does as she asks, flinging herself into the water and starting a laborious doggy paddle across the length of the pool.

"So what happened?" Jo asks Frankie, slipping her feet out of her shoes and sitting in the chair next to Frankie's. She's still wearing nylons under her skirt and she'd much rather be in a bathing suit right along with Frankie and the kids, but first things first. "Was he being mean to the girls?"

Frankie puts a postcard between the pages of her paperback to hold her spot and sits up straight in the chair. She shakes her head and gives Jo a sheepish look. "No, he

wasn't being mean to the girls," she says, biting on her lip and casting a glance at Jimmy, who was still floating in the pool and absolutely ignoring everyone.

"Okay," Jo says, frowning. "Then what happened? Or is Kate exaggerating?"

"She's exaggerating in the sense that he didn't get into trouble, but...it's time Bill had a little man-to-man chat with him."

Jo's face burns. "Oh, sweet mercy," she says. "What happened? Just tell me."

Frankie leans towards Jo's chair. "Let's just say he forgot to lock the bathroom door and Nancy burst in there at an inopportune moment."

"Oh, no," Jo whispers, putting a hand to her chest. Jimmy is still her baby boy, and she hadn't yet thought that they might be hitting the point where he was becoming a young man, so to speak.

"Yep," Frankie says with a nod. "His 'private moment' involved the lingerie section of the Sears catalog."

"No," Jo mouths, her voice silenced. She's shaking her head. "I mean, I get it, but I'm not ready for it."

Frankie lifts one shoulder and gives a smile of resignation. "Ready or not, here we are. Nancy had no idea what he was up to, but she could sense his embarrassment, and I think that threw her off for a few minutes. But she recovered and hasn't said a word. It's Jimmy who seems mortified. He hasn't spoken to any of us all afternoon since it happened."

"This is definitely Bill's area, not mine."

“But it’ll be the girls’ turn soon—to talk about all the big scary things. How do you imagine you’ll handle that?”

Jo had not come home from the hospital prepared for any of this. She lets her arms fall to the armrests of the pool chair and her head leans back as she turns her face to the sun and closes her eyes. “I have no idea. I mean, I’ll tell them all about their monthlies because of course that’s just a part of life. My mother never breathed a word of it, so you can imagine my shock when that first happened.” Jo lifts her head and turns it towards Frankie. “Did your mother tell you what to expect?”

Frankie shook her head. “Nope. Not a word—about anything. I didn’t know where babies even came from until one of my friends got married at eighteen and found out she was pregnant soon after.”

“Same.” Jo rubs her lips together. “I want my girls to have more of an idea about all of that.” She nods decisively. “I do. I want them to know what happens with their own bodies because that’s important. They have that right to know, and then they can make better, more informed decisions.”

Frankie is watching Kate splash Jimmy in the pool. He continues to ignore her.

“That seems fair,” Frankie says mildly. “These young ladies are growing up in a different world than the one we grew up in. They’ll have choices and options, and who knows—maybe they’ll even get to choose whether they want a career and a family. Or neither. Or both.”

Jo watches the kids in the water and then her eyes land on Nancy, stretched out on a chair on the other side of the pool with a book held over her head so that she can read it while she’s on her back. Her little bookworm. Nancy’s dedication to reading nearly every waking moment makes her smile.

“Frankie, I know you’ve been here all afternoon, but would you mind watching them for ten more minutes while I change? I’m dying in these clothes.”

“Jo, of course! Go change.” Frankie waves her off and pulls the postcard out of her book. “I’ll be right here.”

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Inside the cool house, Jo pauses in the kitchen. Someone has set the offending Sears catalog on the counter next to the telephone, and she picks it up gingerly, dropping it into the trash can with two fingers. No need to keep the evidence right there on her counter.

A swim actually sounds like just the thing to Jo, so she slips off her nylons and drops her sweaty skirt and blouse into the hamper before picking out a flowered one piece suit and joining Frankie and the kids in the pool for the rest of the afternoon.

CHAPTER 3

Bill

Bill's morning and afternoon drives to and from work aren't long, but they are his time to think and clear his head. In the morning, he cranks up the radio and reflects on the day ahead and what he needs to get done, and on the way home, he occasionally stops off at The Black Hole for one drink only, then cruises slowly home with one arm hanging out the window of his Corvette, and the other on the steering wheel as he ponders whatever has happened that day.

On this particular drive to work, Bill is listening to Elvis on the radio at low volume, recalling the minor debacle he'd come home to the night before. Jo had waited until they'd eaten and then sent the kids to read or hang out in their rooms before telling him about the incident that Frankie had shared with her that afternoon. It had been difficult to keep the smirk off his face as Jo had used euphemisms and awkward hand gestures to explain the situation. Bill completely understands the natural urges and interests of a boy at that age, but to the boy's mother, this needed to be treated as a

gravely serious situation to be dealt with.

In the end, Bill had invited Jimmy out for a late drive, which in and of itself was unusual, but as they'd driven through the darkened streets of Stardust Beach with the top of the Corvette down to let the warm summer night surround them, Bill had kept quiet.

When they reached the beach, he'd parked and wordlessly gotten out. Jimmy followed. They wandered down to the water together and stood there, side by side, looking at the moon over the waves.

"Jim," Bill said in a mellow voice. "I understand that a boy feels things at your age, and I want you to understand that those things are all totally normal."

Next to him, Jimmy had exhaled softly but audibly, like he'd been holding his breath and expecting something along these lines. "Dad, I—" he started, sounding mildly defensive.

"No, no," Bill stopped him. "I'm not mad, and I'm not asking you what happened. That's personal business, son. You're a growing young man, and that means you need a certain amount of privacy in your life. From now on, all I'm asking is that you lock the door and be aware of your surroundings, do you understand me? No one is in trouble," he reiterated, "and there's certainly nothing wrong with those...feelings—nor in the expression of them," he said, clearing his throat lightly. "But the ladies in the house should be protected from such things. That's all I'm saying."

Jimmy remained silent and kept staring at the water. Finally, he'd nodded. "Okay, Dad."

They'd driven home afterwards without speaking, and Bill had cranked up the music

and let the wind blow their hair around wildly as he zipped around curves and took corners a bit faster than he needed to in order to amuse his son. Driving in that manner isn't something he'd ever do with Jo and the girls in the car and Jimmy knows that, so that simple bit of carefreeboyishness between them was his way of underscoring their solidarity following a seemingly serious discussion.

But is it that serious to Bill? Not really. Some things are just a rite of passage with boys, to be perfectly honest. Now will he respond as casually when Jo tells him that one of the girls has started menstruating? Ugh, the very thought of that actually makes him cringe a little. With luck, Jo will handle that herself and not involve Bill too much, though he isn't the kind of man who eschews all things pertaining to womanhood or anything barbaric like that. It's just that they're his baby girls...there's something about them growing into young ladies that makes him wistful and somehow uneasy at the same time. Heck, maybe that's how Jo feels about the whole Jimmy situation.

Bill swings his car into the lot at Cape Kennedy that morning and finds a spot near the building. He parks and turns off the car at the same time that Jeanie pulls into a spot just a row over from him. Without realizing it, they get out of their cars at the same time, closing their doors in quick succession. Jeanie hears his car door and turns, smiling at him with surprised happiness.

"Good morning, stranger," she says, lifting one hand in greeting. The strap of her purse is slung over one shoulder and her brown paper lunch bag is held in her other hand. "How are you this fine morning?"

Bill keeps his lunch in a metal pail and carries a briefcase in his other hand, so rather than waving, he just smiles and waits for Jeanie to catch up to him so they can walk into the building together.

"Glad it's Friday, that's for sure." Bill looks down at her as they fall into step

together.

“Plans for the weekend?”

“Nothing too crazy. You?”

Jeanie tilts her head to one side. “I might go to a baby shower for one of the secretaries here—Kathryn Michelin, do you know her?”

Bill shakes his head. “Can’t say that I do. But I tend to keep to myself. I would imagine the ladies mingle a bit more than the men. Maybe you all chat around the coffee pot in the break room?”

Jeanie laughs lightly. “Sure. We stand around and trade recipes and talk about who the cutest astronauts are.”

“Really?” Bill frowns. That’s precisely what he would imagine the women doing, but the way Jeanie says it makes it sound sarcastic on her end.

“No, definitely not.”

Okay, sarcasm it is, Bill thinks. “Then how do you all know one another? If she’s a secretary from another floor or something, how are you acquainted?”

Jeanie considers this as their heels click on the pavement in unison. “I think it’s more of a sense of we all need to band together. We’re the interlopers here—and everywhere—when it comes to work situations, and so we all get to know one another.”

“The interlopers?” Bill cocks an eyebrow disbelievingly.

“Sure. You remember how it was when I first started here. I was an outsider for sure. Getting to know other women in the building—even just saying hello in elevators or sitting at a table of women at lunch—gives me a tribe. It gives us all people to lean on.”

Bill holds the door open for Jeanie and she walks through it. “This is really how women are?”

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Jeanie nods and turns back to him, now that he's a step or two behind her. "Think about it: a woman's chance for survival alone in the wild is quite low. There's danger everywhere, and wearen't physically as strong as men. So what increases our chance for survival? Traveling in packs."

"Ahhh, is this why you ladies all use the restroom in groups?"

This makes Jeanie laugh. "No," she says, her long, straight hair swinging behind her as she shakes her head. "That's just so we can get away and talk about the men without you hearing us."

The rest of the morning is tinged for Bill with the leftover feeling of satisfaction from this interesting and humorous exchange with Jeanie. He goes through the motions of two meetings, a briefing, and an observation of a new piece of launch technology with her laughter still ringing in his ears.

What is it about having a friendly exchange with someone of the fairer sex that leaves such a pleasant residue behind? And Jeanie Florence in particular can change the whole trajectory of Bill's day. She's smart, funny, fascinating, and making her smile is like some kind of reward just for getting out of bed that morning. He realizes that he's grown to cherish and value their work friendship, and out of nowhere, he flashes back on Jeanie and Jo meeting at Frankie's house in the spring. Recalling this awkward interaction (well, awkward for him, anyway) sends a spasm of discomfort through Bill and his smile fades.

Jeanie—innocent, curious Jeanie—had walked over and introduced herself to Jo when Bill had frozen up and neglected to do so himself. And, in turn, his gracious

wife had chatted with Jeanie and even invited her to dinner. Now, that dinner had never come to fruition and Bill is actually quite grateful for that, but seeing the two of them together next to Frankie's swimming pool that night had made Bill sufficiently uncomfortable and had reminded him that there needed to be a separation between work and home.

"Booker," Arvin North, the head of operations for Bill's team at NASA, lifts a hand in the air as they walk towards one another in the hallway of the first floor. "Word with you?"

Bill gives him a crisp nod and follows North into his office. Arvin North motions at a chair for Bill to sit, and he does.

"I'd like you to head the three-man earth orbital test mission," North says without preamble. "You, Bob Young, and Derek Trager."

Bill is ready for this. He's been ready for this. Being asked to lead a small mission—even a test that never leaves the ground—is a sign that he's in consideration for one of the bigger missions. He needs to prove himself here, and he knows that he can.

"Yes, sir," Bill says with excitement bubbling up inside of him. "I'm ready."

"I know you are." North looks at him over the tops of his reading glasses as he skims a file on his desk. "Wouldn't have appointed you for this if you weren't."

Bill floats through the afternoon. At lunch, his head is in the clouds.

"The Senate just passed the Civil Rights Act this afternoon," Vance Majors says to the men at their table as he pulls a bologna sandwich from a piece of waxed paper and takes a bite.

“How the hell do you know that? You got a television hidden in your desk drawer that plays the evening news at noon?” Ed Maxwell laughs.

“Nope,” Vance says, chewing a big bite. “My older brother works at the Washington Post. He calls me with any big news when it comes across the wire.”

“Hey, how do you feel about the whole thing?” Ed asks the table at large. “I heard businesses can’t discriminate against people for anything—gotta hire people no matter their color, religion, or gender.”

“We already have women here,” Todd Roman says, elbows on the table as he leans over his own sandwich to take a bite. “And they’re not so bad. They kind of brighten up the scenery.”

The other guys laugh, elbowing each other and winking as they do. Bill smiles half-heartedly at their banter, but he understands what a big deal the Civil Rights Act is. How necessary progress is, not just for their country, but for all of them as citizens.

When Bill was in high school, around the time he started dating his first wife, Margaret, he’d been friendly with a boy named Jerome. Jerome was Black and wanted nothing more than to play football at the high school and then go to college and keep playing football. And with the talent that Jerome had in just one of his pinky fingers, he could have beat out any other boy in their county for a full-ride scholarship and a starring role on the football team. He should have beat them all.

Bill and Jerome spent hours and hours throwing a football around a field together, running, practicing passes, shouting with glee, and having fun the way that carefree kids do. The fact that they couldn’t attend the same school, couldn’t go into town together cruising on a Saturday night with their respective girls, couldn’t even go to the same church—none of that bothered the boys. When there was a ball in play, nothing else mattered.

But at the end of high school, as Bill was considering marrying Margaret and joining the Air Force, essentially putting his life in order and making the kinds of plans that a young person so cavalierly makes without regard to what else fate might have in store for him, Jerome went missing. One day he and Bill had met in the field and thrown a pigskin back and forth like it was nothing, and then the next day Bill showed up and Jerome didn't. It wasn't long before the whole town heard through the grapevine that Jerome had been found shot in an abandoned barn that belonged to a mean old man named Mr. Sanger. No charges were ever brought, and no one made any formal accusations, but Bill had always felt that a spat between Jerome and Mr. Sanger's grandson, Earnest, on a makeshift football field one Saturday had been the event that set the wheels of vigilante justice in motion. Essentially, Jerome had knocked Earnest over, and when Earnest had railed at him using all the ugly words and names he knew, Jerome had told Earnest that the University of Arizona had already recruited him for their football team, and what did Earnest think about that when it was Earnest who had always been crowing about playing football there?

Well, obviously Earnest didn't take too kindly to that piece of information, nor did his grandfather, Herb Sanger, and Jerome's life had ended in a dilapidated barn before it ever really started. Bill never forgot the way it felt to hear that a friend had died. It was shocking, it was wrong, and it was senseless.

"I think it's a good thing," Bill says now, setting his apple core on the table and wiping both hands on a napkin. "The world is changing, and if we play our cards right, we can change along with it."

"Optimistic," Vance says with an approving nod. "I like it."

"My wife wants to take a bus to Ohio and learn how to register Black voters in Mississippi," Jay Reed says, leaning back in his chair and lacing both hands behind his head. "I'm not sure how I feel about that."

"The part where she takes a bus to Ohio and then heads to Mississippi, or the part where she registers Black people to vote?" Todd asks as he sticks a spoon into a small container of fruit cocktail.

"The part where my wife hops a bus with a bunch of sweaty college kids and heads out on a humanitarian mission," Jay says. "I understand the purpose of the mission—and I wholeheartedly support it—but I'm not sure that I'm ready to be on my own with two kids while she's out there doing work like that."

The men all nod in sympathy. By and large, they are a group of educated, scientific men who have spent time in the military, fighting to make America the best, strongest country in the world. They believe in causes bigger than themselves, and it doesn't surprise Bill at all that Jay would support the cause but not necessarily his wife's desire to pack a bag and join the wagon train to Mississippi.

"That's a tough one," Bill says, chewing his sandwich thoughtfully.

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"Bit different from a wife wanting to hand out cookies to new moms at the hospital, isn't it?" Vance says, glancing in Bill's direction.

"But Jo is also a writer now," Ed adds. "Frankie tells me her work is being published on a monthly basis." The men all look right at Bill. "How do you feel about her doing all these other things?"

It's a big question, and to Bill, it's also indicative of the fact that, while the men are supportive of progress and change, they tap the brakes just slightly when that progress hits too close to home.

"At first I had questions," Bill admits regretfully. "When she told me she wanted to volunteer at the hospital, I was kind of an ass about it."

"That's hard to imagine," Ed says.

Bill shrugs. "Be that as it may, I assumed that it might be too much on her plate with raising the kids and keeping the house, and—yeah, it sounds horrible to say out loud now, but I selfishly worried that she'd be out of the house and that the things we all count on her for might fall by the wayside."

"And how has it gone?" Todd asks curiously.

"Things have been good on that front." Bill pulls the two pieces of bread apart to see if he's accidentally eaten all the cheese before he's finished the meat and mustard in his sandwich. He has. He puts the bread back together and bites into it anyway. "And she does her writing at night after the kids are asleep--usually after I am, too. So I

don't mind any of it too much."

"But that story," Ed says, shaking his head. "Frankie read it out loud to me one night after we finished eating dinner." He gives a low whistle. "Lots of details in it that could only come from one place, right?"

Bill chuckles along with Ed like he knows what Ed is referring to, but he's ashamed to admit that he hasn't actually read any of Jo's stories. It was something she wanted to do for herself and for fun, and while he's proud of her minor successes, it's not like the genre or the topic are really in his wheelhouse. And at ten dollars per short story, she's not exactly raking in the money or knocking his socks off with her financial windfall.

Rather than tell the other guys that he hasn't read Jo's stories, Bill gathers his lunch remnants in his pail and snaps it shut. "I should get back to my desk here, gents," he says, pushing in his chair with a perfunctory smile and walking away.

After putting his lunch pail away, Bill heads into the men's room and is standing at the sink, washing his hands, when he catches sight of himself in the mirror beneath the fluorescent lighting. Bill shuts off the water and pulls two paper towels from the dispenser, drying his hands as he looks deeply into his own eyes.

And what does he see there? He sees a man who is on the far side of the mountain and sliding towards forty. He sees someone who has put in what seems like a lifetime with the Air Force, someone who is now pursuing his dreams and making strides towards the moon. He sees a husband, a father, a son, an ex-husband...thinking of Margaret, Bill pauses, his hands going still as he holds the now balled-up paper towels between his palms. His ex-wife: lovely, troubled, flame-haired Margaret. Not being able to help her or fix her will undoubtedly be his life's greatest failure--actually, divorcing her while she was in a mental health facility might qualify as his biggest failure and regret--but having a first marriage that didn't stand the test of time

isn't something that feels good to him.

Still, if not for the fact that he'd realized he couldn't help or stay married to Margaret any longer, he wouldn't have met Jo. And if he hadn't met Jo, then his three children wouldn't exist, and they wouldn't be living the life they're living now, so...as with so many things, he has to simply chalk it up to things that were meant to be. This had to happen in order for that to happen, he had to cross over the same speed bumps to get to the place he is now, and would he do it all over again?

Yes, he would. Always yes. A resounding yes.

Bill throws the paper towels in the trash and walks back out to the third floor.

CHAPTER 4

Jeanie

Kathryn Michelin's baby shower is like being inside of a cone of cotton candy. There are pink and blue confections everywhere: tissue paper poofs hanging from the ceiling; fuzzy pillows in sweet pastel hues; miniature cupcakes frosted in both pink and blue; even two different kinds of cocktails—one pink, and one blue.

"Pink Lady, or sapphire martini?" asks a woman wearing a Pucci dress in swirls of—yep, you guessed it—pink and blue. She is clearly the grandmother-to-be, and with her clutch of pearls and matching pearl drop earrings, she is classy, refined, and as excited as a child on Christmas morning. "We're drinking the cocktail that indicates our guess for the gender," she explains breathlessly, reaching forward to clutch Jeanie's forearm with a manicured hand.

"Oh," Jeanie says. "Um, okay. Pink Lady, please." She accepts the drink and then trails into the living room, where all the other women are gathered on couches and

chairs, facing Kathryn and her enormous belly. Actually, she isn't that gigantic yet, and Jeanie tries to assess her furtively as she sips her drink. She's obviously known plenty of pregnant women, but in general, women stop working before they get too big, and so other than her mother when she was pregnant with the twins, Jeanie hasn't really spent much time around a woman who is close to giving birth.

On second thought, Kathryn is most likely still a couple of months away, but she looks big to Jeanie's eyes. How does the human body do that? How can it expand and grow a whole new person? Or two? Or three? It's both magical and horrifying to Jeanie to consider as she listens to the other women laugh and tell stories about their own pregnancies and deliveries. All she can do is nod and smile politely.

"How about you, darling?" the grandmother-to-be says, taking a seat on the couch right next to Jeanie. "Children?" She glances at Jeanie's bare ring finger and frowns. "Or not yet?"

"Not yet," Jeanie says with a small smile.

"Mom," Kathryn says, both hands absentmindedly rubbing her belly. "Jeanie is one of our female engineers at work. She doesn't have time for men and babies!"

The women's chatter quiets a few notches. All eyes turn to Jeanie.

"Oh, an engineer!" says a woman with a blonde bouffant and gold earrings. She blinks her eyes a few times like she's interested, but her blue eyes are slightly vacant. "I bet you had to go to college for a long time to get a job like that."

Jeanie nods and crosses her feet at the ankles. She smooths her skirt across her lap. "I did," she agrees. "And I'm fairly new at NASA. I'm honored to be there." She desperately wants the conversation to move on, but isn't sure how to make that happen now that everyone is focused on her. "But, you know, maybe someday I'll

have kids,” she adds in a tone that is supposed to sound firm, but instead comes out as wistful.

The other women are nodding with interest and sympathy. “You’re so young,” Kathryn says. Kathryn has clearly realized that the attention of the room has shifted to Jeanie and that it’s making her uncomfortable. “There’s plenty of time for all that.” Her eyes move to the doorway. “Oh, here’s Rebecca, one of our other female engineers!”

Every eye in the room now swings towards Rebecca, a woman Jeanie knows and likes. Rebecca pauses where she is with her sapphire martini in hand, looking like a deer in headlights. Jeanie meets her eye and gives an apologetic shrug.

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“We have all these brilliant women on staff now,” Kathryn explains, waving Rebecca into the room.

“Career women!” Kathryn’s mom says, standing up. “Here, darling, come sit next to Jeanie.” She gives her seat to a stunned Rebecca, who sinks down to the couch cushion with the alertness of prey amongst a herd of predators.

“What’s going on here?” Rebecca asks Jeanie from the side of her mouth as she shields it with the edge of her martini glass. “It’s like I walked into the room and suddenly there was a spotlight on me.”

Jeanie sighs. “There is. Apparently we’re the first women they’ve ever met who chose to go to college instead of jumping onto the conveyer belt and waiting for a man to pluck us off, marry us, and give us babies.”

Around them, the conversation has moved on to diapers, strollers, sleepless nights, and what Kathryn can expect from her husband in terms of help (short version: not much). Jeanie sips her disgustingly sweet drink and listens, wondering whether these are the highlights of motherhood, or the biggest gripes.

“Think you’ll ever jump on this bandwagon?” Jeanie asks Rebecca, turning to her. “Leave NASA to keep house and spend afternoons at the park with kids?”

Rebecca glances down at the hand in her lap and then raises it slowly, showing Jeanie the sparkling diamond on her ring finger. “I just got engaged a few weeks ago,” she admits sheepishly. “We’re having a winter wedding, and I’ll keep working until I get pregnant.”

Jeanie is stunned. She looks at the ring and then back at Rebecca's face. The girl had gone to Stanford, for heaven's sake! She'd devoted years to elbowing her way up the ranks and to earning the respect of her male peers at a top-notch university before landing the kind of job that most people dream of! And now she has a ring on her finger and a plan to leave it all behind for—for what? Jeanie looks around at the other women. For diapers and strollers and sleepless nights and no help from her husband?

Jeanie smiles widely at Rebecca and reaches for the hand with the ring, holding it so that she can turn it from side to side in the light and appreciate the glimmer. "It's gorgeous," Jeanie says, and she means it. "And congratulations. I hope he knows how lucky he is."

They spend the afternoon playing games (Jeanie wins the one where you cut a piece of string that you think is the length of the pregnant woman's stomach and then everyone takes turns wrapping their string around the giggling mother-to-be's belly as they measure to see how close they got). She eats two cupcakes, one pink and one blue, and then watches as Kathryn opens piles of gifts that include cute little clothing items, handy things for the nursery, and a collection of bottles and blankets.

By the time Jeanie gets back to her apartment she's exhausted. Her cat, Miranda, is waiting on the back of a chair with a view of the front door, and she meows impertinently at her mistress, as if to say, "And where have you been?"

"I'm home, I'm home," Jeanie assures her, setting her purse on the counter and reaching for a can of cat food to put out for Miranda.

Vicki, her roommate, is noticeably absent—there is a stillness in the air as Jeanie moves through the quiet apartment, turning on the radio as she goes.

She didn't mind living alone, and, in fact, had sometimes enjoyed the peace and quiet of having her own space after spending the day pretending to be an extrovert at work,

but having another person around is sometimes nice, too. And Vicki is...interesting. She's forty-five and divorced, with a grown son who lives in New Orleans and attends Tulane. Vicki and Jeanie's aunt Penny, her mom's younger sister, were friends back in Chicago, so when Vicki wanted to make the move to the Sunshine State, Penny asked her niece whether she might be interested in a roommate, andvoila, now Jeanie is living with a woman who walks around the apartment in her underwear, hangs out at bars looking for younger men, and polishes her toes at the kitchen table.

Jeanie sets Miranda's dish on the little rubber mat she keeps on the kitchen floor, then slides her feet out of her shoes. It's Saturday afternoon, and she has nothing planned for the rest of the weekend. There's a mimeographed sheet stuck to her fridge with a magnet that lists all the activities on offer at the Sunny Tides Condominium Resort, and Jeanie skims it, landing on the block of the calendar for that weekend.

She glances at her watch: at two o'clock there's a canasta game in the Tidal Wave Meeting Room in the main building, and at four o'clock there's a cocktail hour by the pool. Jeanie blows out a long breath and stretches her bare toes against the cool tile. She isn't sure about playing canasta or drinking martinis with the mostly retired crowd at Sunny Tides, but in the absence of anything else to do with her afternoon, she considers it.

"Hi, hi!" comes Vicki's cheerful greeting as her key twists in the lock. "You home, princess?"

Jeanie smiles at this. Though she pretends to be neutral on the nickname, she actually kind of loves living with someone who acts as a bit of a maternal presence. A slightly tipsy, mouth-like-a-sailor, questionable advice-giving maternal presence--but still.

"Hi, Vicki," Jeanie calls back. She meets her roommate in the front room, which Miranda has already vacated in favor of her food in the kitchen. "How are you?"

Vicki drops the sandals she's been carrying by the straps, and it's then that Jeanie notices her beaded and spangled party dress and the remnants of makeup from the night before. Vicki flops on the couch; her legs are bare, and she tosses her evening bag onto the cushion next to her.

"Oh, doll," Vicki says with wonder. "I met the most divineman last night. Wow. He's a former fighter pilot who lives on a boat. Fancy that, right? I mean--can you imagine? Traveling the world by sea...showing up in whichever port you please, having a good time, and then setting sail again." Vicki reaches for her purse and unclasps it, pulling out a pack of cigarettes and a gold-plated lighter. "What a night that was," she says in a scratchy voice as she flicks the lighter and holds it to the end of the cigarette that dangles between her lips.

Jeanie stands and carries a heavy blue glass ashtray over to the coffee table, setting it in front of Vicki.

"Thanks, princess. Now how about you? Any wild dates or anything?"

Jeanie sits down again. She's still wearing the white dress she'd worn to the baby shower. "Nope. Nothing like that. I went to a baby shower this morning, and I was considering going to the canasta game at the clubhouse meeting room."

Vicki exhales and makes a face like she's been jabbed with a hot poker. "Why? I mean, come on." She waves a hand through the air, indicating Jeanie's general self. "Looking like that, why in the hell would you spend your Saturday afternoon hanging out in a clubhouse with a bunch of people who are just about to knock on God's front door?"

Jeanie coughs lightly and waves a hand; it's been well established that she prefers Vicki to smoke outside their apartment, but in spite of her pleas and reminders, Vicki continues to lounge around on the furniture, smoking one Pall Mall menthol after

another.

“It sounded fun,” Jeanie says defensively. “I mean, kind of.”

Vicki stands up on her bare feet and her beaded dress swishes around her noisily. “Nonsense. Let me shower and drink a cup of coffee, and then we’ll go out and do somethingreallyfun.”

Jeanie looks up at her from the chair she’s sitting in, watching as Vicki smokes her cigarette and stretches her long, lean arms to the sky. Vicki has a kind of confidence that Jeanie isn’t sure she’ll ever have, and she isn’t even sure how to get it. For most of her life so far, she’s felt like the little girl whose father went to war and never came home, and now that she’s in her late twenties, it’s time to stop standing at the metaphorical screen door, watching and waiting. It’s time to realize that all the studying, all the job success, and all the achieving that she does will never bring her father home, and it will never be enough to fill her life.

It’s time to open up the door and walk out and join everyone else. To mingle in the fray of people; to say yes to life. Sitting home alone and protecting her heart doesn’t mean it will never get broken again, it will just mean that she never gets to put it to good use.

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“Okay,” Jeanie says quickly, standing up. “I’ll make the coffee.”

Vicki gives a whoop of joy. “There we go, princess! We’re gonna live a little.” She stubs her cigarette out in the blue glass ashtray and assesses Jeanie through narrow eyes. “Okay, this dainty white number is sweet, but it’s far too virginal.” She sweeps a hand over Jeanie’s white cotton baby shower dress. “You’re always as cute as a bug’s ear, but do you have anything that’s a bit...sexier?”

Jeanie flushes at the words *virginal* and *sexier*, but she knows what Vicki means: she dresses for the library, not the bar.

“Where are we going?”

“There’s a cute joint down by the marina where the drinks are cold and the men are hot,” Vicki says with a shimmy of her hips that sets her beaded dress to clacking again. “Here, let me give you something out of my closet.” She grabs Jeanie’s hand and tugs her down the hallway, pointing at the foot of her unmade bed. Jeanie sits.

“Let’s see what sort of costume we can cook up for you, my love,” Vicki says, sliding open her mirrored closet door with a flourish. “Let Auntie Vicki get you dolled up and ready to rumble.”

The bar at the marina is made of weathered wood and glass bottles: the bar itself has more bottles of alcohol behind it than Jeanie has ever seen, and on each table are various glass jars in different sizes and colors holding silver forks, spoons, and knives. The windows are big and round to mimic portholes on a ship, and the place is air-conditioned and cool. In stark contrast to the rustic wood and the communal

silverware jars are white linen napkins at each place setting, a baby grand piano in one corner, and waitresses in black cocktail dresses and red lipstick.

Jeanie stands in the doorway nervously, looking around. The men are all older—much older—than she is. And she feels conspicuous in the tight green dress that Vicki chose for her. It hugs her body and is a bit lower cut than Jeanie would choose for herself, and in order to make up for her lack of natural cleavage, Vicki had instructed her to go into her room and roll up two pairs of pantyhose to shove into her bra cups.

“Shhh, insider’s secret, princess,” Vicki had said, putting one finger to her lips. “If you ever find yourself in a compromising position with a man and you’ve got your falsies in, just excuse yourself to the restroom and pull them out.”

“Won’t he notice?”

Vicki had laughed—a deep, throaty chuckle. “Angel, once a man is horizontal, he wouldn’t notice if you left the room and came back with a whole new face. Trust me on this.”

So Jeanie had rolled up two pairs of suntan nylons and wedged them into the cups of her bra, knowing full well that she’d never find herself in a compromising position at The Hungry Pelican on a Saturday evening with a bunch of men who looked like they’d seen action in WWII. A couple of guys sitting at the bar might have even done tours in WWI.

“We’re going to get those two to buy us drinks,” Vicki says now, scanning the room. Her eyes have stopped on two tanned, middle-aged men in pastel polo shirts. One has a heavy gold ring on his pinky, and the other has a head of thick, wavy hair and a face like a newscaster. Vicki makes a beeline for their table.

“Are you two handsome men drinking alone?” Vicki asks as she sidles up to their table and leans one hip against the edge of it suggestively.

The man with the pinky ring drags his eyes up her body slowly, finally landing on her face. His friend is watching Jeanie, who hovers behind Vicki uncertainly.

“Look, she brought her daughter,” the newscaster says with amusement, tipping his head at Jeanie. “That’s cute.”

“Sit with us, ladies,” Pinky Ring says, standing up to pull out a chair for Vicki. Newscaster gets up and does the same for Jeanie, who sits down gingerly. Between the tight dress and the nylons stuffed into her bra, Jeanie feels like she’s acting in a play about a girl who dresses up like a woman. And she isn’t sure that her act is very convincing.

“What are you drinking?” Pinky Ring lifts a hand casually so that the waitress will come by.

“Sidecars, please,” Vicki says, setting her purse next to her elbow on the table. Jeanie watches her and follows suit.

"So are you actually mother and daughter?" Pinky Ring asks, his eyes grazing Vicki's ample cleavage.

"No, darling," Vicki says with mock scorn. "I'm not old enough to have a daughter this age. What kind of thing is that to suggest to a woman?"

"My apologies." Pinky Ring smirks at her. "I'm Patrick," he says. "And this is John."

"Victoria," Vicki says. "And this is Jeanette."

With the introductions made and the Sidecars ordered, Jeanie settles in, waiting to take her cues from Vicki.

"You gentlemen come here often?" Vicki asks, aiming her question at Patrick and his pinky ring.

"That's supposed to be my line," he says, sitting back as the waitress delivers the cocktails for the women. "'What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?' or something along those lines." He winks at Jeanie and holds her gaze. "Your big sister is a bit of a flirt, isn't she?"

Jeanie isn't sure what to say here; flirting and playing coy don't come naturally to her. In fact, far from it--she can't even remember the last time she went on a date, save for an ill-fated college romance, and so far during her time in Florida, she's been perfectly happy to work all day, come home to feed Miranda, and go for a swim in her condominium's pool before tucking in for the night with a good book.

Jeanie looks at Vicki quickly, and she sees an encouraging smile on her roommate's face. She glances back at Patrick. "She is," she says boldly. "An unapologetic flirt who flirts even harder with every drink you buy her."

There is a brief pause and then both men roar with laughter and John holds up his hand as if he's ready to order the next round.

"Oh, you're a little minx yourself," Patrick says, putting a hand encouragingly on Jeanie's shoulder. Under different circumstances it might have come across as lecherous, but in both of the men's faces Jeanie sees a little spark of fatherly amusement.

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"I don't know about that," she counters, taking a small sip of her Sidecar. It's her second cocktail of the day, and something about a lunchtime drink followed by an evening drink feels...decadent. Worldly. It's outside the bounds of Jeanie's usual sedate behavior. "I'm mostly here to keep this tigress under control." She tips her head towards Vicki. "You would be amazed at what she can get up to without supervision."

John looks at Vicki with fresh interest. "I bet this one can look out for herself."

"This one can," Vicki confirms, leaning in closer to John.

"How about a dance?" John offers, lifting an eyebrow as a man slides onto the piano bench and starts tinkling at the keys. He's playing Glenn Miller's "Moonlight Serenade."

Vicki takes the hand that John offers, leaving her handbag on the table for Jeanie to watch as she lets this tall newscaster of a man lead her to the small dance floor.

"So," Patrick says, picking up the tumbler of dark liquid in front of him. As he swirls the drink around, the lights catch on his chunky gold ring. He sips his drink, drawing out the moment. "You're a lovely young lady, Jeanette."

"Thank you," she says shyly.

"It's nice of you to come out for the evening to spend time with a bunch of old codgers here at The Hungry Pelican, when you'd probably be better off searching for viable prospects at a place like The Black Hole."

Jeanie smiles at the mention of her coworkers' favorite after-work haunt. The average age of the patrons there is decidedly younger than what she's seeing here, and the music that blares from the jukebox doesn't bring back wartime nostalgia.

"I'm not really looking for viable prospects," she says, taking a drink of her Sidecar. "I'm just having fun."

Patrick laughs lightly and shakes his head as he looks into his glass. "I don't think a girl like you is cut out for just having fun. I can look at you and see that you're made of more interesting stuff."

Jeanie frowns; more interesting stuff? She squares her shoulders and puts both elbows on the table as she leans in to listen. "I don't seem like fun?"

"Oh no, that's not what I said." Patrick wags a finger at her. "You're wonderful—at least from what I can tell. But you look like a woman with real desires." Jeanie's chest goes hot, and the sensation spreads up her neck to her cheeks. "And not just those kinds of desires," Patrick clarifies. "I can see it in your eyes that you're smart. You a college girl?"

"I graduated from Northwestern," she says.

Patrick nods. "Right. So not secretarial school then."

"No. I'm an engineer."

Patrick laughs softly. He shakes his head again. "In my day, a beautiful woman engineer didn't just stroll into a bar in a tight green dress. Have you found a job yet?"

Jeanie hesitates for a beat. "I work at NASA."

Patrick lets out a low whistle. “No wonder you’re here.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, Jeanette. Perhaps you’ll agree with me based on your own experiences, but I’m guessing that men your age might be a little intimidated by a woman as successful as you. We don’t always handle it well when we’re not the smartest person in a relationship, and certainly when our jobs don’t hold a candle to yours.”

Jeanie considers this. “I actually don’t date much, so I’m not sure if that’s true.”

“Do you figure that’s why you don’t date much? Maybe the men at work see you and think, ‘Pretty, but not interested in slowing down and having a family.’”

“Could be,” Jeanie admits. “Yeah, that’s possible.” Her mind instantly goes to Bill and then, of course, to Jo, who—in Jeanie’s mind, anyway—does it all. She volunteers, writes stories, raises three amazing kids, and keeps the house for the family. Jeanie isn’t even sure that she could do all those things. Or that she wants to.

“I’m not saying you should lie about who you are in order to snag a man or anything like that,” Patrick says, holding up a hand like a stop sign. “But I am saying you should think outside the box. Maybe the man for you isn’t...what are you, twenty-five?”

“Twenty-seven.”

“Right. I’d say he’s a bit older and has his own list of accomplishments. Maybe he’s already had a family and is looking for a second wife. A guy who doesn’t necessarily want to travel the same route again.”

Jeanie’s smile fades and she clicks a fingernail against her glass as she listens.

“You’re suggesting that I aim to be someone’s second wife?”

Patrick shrugs. “I’m suggesting that you consider something non-traditional. Like having a dance with an old geezer at The Hungry Pelican on a Saturday evening.” His smile turns into an impish smirk, and Jeanie can’t help but laugh with relief. She’d been taking his words as gospel, considering that an older man might know more about life than her, and that he was telling her she wasn’t marriage material. But really, he was just taking the long way around to ask her for a dance.

One dance? She can do that. Her mother always told her that she should say yes to a man who politely asks her to dance, because one dance with a man wouldn’t kill you, and it would do wonders for his self-esteem. She can do Patrick that kindness.

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“Sure,” Jeanie says now, putting both her own bag and Vicki’s purse onto her chair and pushing it in so that she can leave them behind while they dance. “I can do that.”

With surprising fluidity, Patrick sweeps her into his arms and they start to sway together like Fred and Ginger--or maybe more like a very smooth grandfather and his lovely granddaughter at a family function. But either way, all Jeanie remembers at the end of the night when the cab drops her off in front of The Sunny Tides Condominium Resort is that she laughed a lot and had a very nice time.

Vicki, on the other hand, stays true to form by being out with John all night.

She stumbles in sometime just after sunrise, and Jeanie hears her whistling “Moonlight Serenade” softly as she washes off her makeup.

CHAPTER 5

Jo

"Mom?" Nancy comes into the kitchen wearing a pair of lemon yellow shorts and a matching shirt that Jo whipped up for her on her Singer sewing machine. "I need to go to the library."

Jo, who has already put the chicken cutlets in the refrigerator to marinate for dinner that night, looks up from the spiral notebook she's been writing in.

"Oh? What's up, nanny-goat?"

Nancy, ignoring the nickname she sometimes refuses to answer to, holds up a book for her mother to see. "Finished this one. And also all the others I checked out last time. So can we go?"

Jo sets her pen on the notepad and unfolds the leg that she's had tucked beneath her. "What are your brother and sister up to?"

Nancy rolls her eyes. "Kate is making her dolls talk to each other, and Jimmy...who knows." Nancy has not mentioned the incident that occurred the day Frankie had stayed with the kids, and Jo sure as heck isn't going to bring it up. But there is a slight edge to Nancy's tone when she says her brother's name that Jo picks up on.

"I see. Well, let's get them rounded up and we'll all go, okay?"

"Can we walk?" Nancy asks hopefully. She's Jo's little sun goddess, always ready to be outdoors swimming, playing, or just wandering aimlessly regardless of the heat and humidity.

"Oh, no, baby--too hot, too hot!" Jo says, making a pained face. "It's July 1st and you could fry an egg on the sidewalk in this heat."

"Can we try it?" Nancy asks, glancing at the refrigerator.

"Hmm." Jo considers it. She's not opposed to doing something interesting to entertain or teach her kids, but she isn't sure that it's actually much more than a saying or an urban myth. "Actually, you'd need something metal to work as a heat conductor. Like, you'd need to crack it into a pan and set it on the ground in direct sunlight, I think."

"Well, can we do that?"

Jo stands up and opens the cupboard where all the frying pans are stacked neatly. "You could give it a shot. It's a science experiment that's worth one lost egg." She hands the pan to Nancy and then opens the refrigerator, taking out an egg that she hands to her older daughter.

"I'm going to put it out back," Nancy says. "And then can we go to the library while it cooks?"

Jo laughs. "Sure. I don't see why not."

Once the egg is cracked and cooking on high heat thanks to nature's broiler in the sky, Jo loads all three kids into the station wagon and backs down the driveway.

"I don't want any new books right now," Jimmy says, staring out the window. "I just wanted to stay home."

"It won't hurt you," Jo promises, glancing at her son in the rearview mirror. His profile is turned to her, and he's resting an elbow on the window ledge as he looks out. "You should be doing a bit more summer reading, anyway. Going into the seventh grade is a big deal, Jimmy."

"No it's not," he says glumly. "It's going to be just as dumb as sixth grade was."

"Jimmy." Nancy turns her head around from her spot in the front seat, as she'd claimed it before her brother and sister could. She lowers her chin slightly as she glares at him. "You got to go and see the president when you were in the sixth grade. Last year the best thing that happened to me was I got an award for reading the most books."

"I want an award!" Kate says. Her feet don't quite reach the floor of the car, and she's currently missing a front tooth.

"It was stupid," Nancy assures her. "They let me choose between a piece of candy and a pencil as a prize." She sniffs at the offense now, pursing her lips. "I read one hundred and forty-seven books last school year, and they wanted me to be excited about a piece of paper and a pencil."

Nancy turns back to look out the front windshield, folding her arms across her chest as if she's made her point.

At the library, the kids scatter to their respective sections: Nancy to the young adult books; Kate to the children's area; Jimmy to sports. Jo finds a librarian and sets her purse on the counter as she waits for the woman to finish a phone call.

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"Help you?"

"Maybe," Jo says, glancing around to make sure that no one is within earshot. "I'm actually looking for a book, but I don't have a title." She lowers her voice. "It's about romance."

The librarian suppresses a smile, lowering her own voice as she steps closer to the counter. "I think I know what books you're looking for, but we're not going to have them here, unfortunately. There's a bookshop in Orlando that carries them." The librarian takes a slip of paper and a short, stubby pencil from a box. She scribbles on the paper and slides it to Jo. "I particularly enjoyed *Any Man Will Do* and *Lust Can't Hide*," she whispers.

Jo glances at the slip of paper and sees the name of a bookstore. "Oh," she says as embarrassment washes over her. "No, not this kind of book."

The librarian blinks at her. "No?"

"Well," Jo says, folding the paper in half. She doesn't want to insult the librarian, who has immediately taken her into her confidence, but she has something else in mind. "Actually, I'm writing romance, and I hoped that there were some books on how to write--how to write short stories, books...I don't know. Something like that."

This obviously pleases the librarian. "A writer! I love that. And I'm intrigued." She comes out from behind her counter and crooks a finger for Jo to follow her. They walk back into the stacks as the librarian leads the way, chattering about her favorite books, her favorite authors, and how much she's always loved romance novels. When

she comes to a stop, it's in front of a long stack.

"Any book about how to write will be found here in the 800s," she says, running her long fingers over the spines of the books. "You can find out more about how to write poetry, how to work on exposition, narrative craft, plot..." She trails off and then smiles at Jo. "And if you're really interested in writing, then you should consider taking an evening class at the college. One of my neighbors is a professor there, and he teaches creative writing. Just an idea!" she says cheerily, putting her hands into the pockets of the smock she wears over her dress. "And," the librarian nods at the slip of paper she'd given Jo with the name of the bookstore in Orlando, which Jo is still holding in one hand, "you might want to check that place out anyhow." She winks. "Just for inspiration."

Jo smiles and slips the piece of paper into her purse. "Thank you for all your help."

"Anytime!" the librarian says, walking away and leaving Jo in the stacks alone.

She's never considered writing anything like that—not that there's anything wrong with it, and she's quite sure that there's a time and place to read it—but the stories in her heart are definitely more about emotional feelings than physical ones. She selects a book about mood and tone, and another on plot pacing and then goes in search of her children.

When they arrive home that afternoon, much to the delight of the kids, the egg has indeed hardened in the pan outside in the sun, but Jo forbids them from taking a bite of it to find out whether it's truly cooked all the way through.

She laughs to herself all afternoon at how easily amused they are by it being hot enough outside to fry an egg, and the kids regale Bill with the story all through dinner and up until bedtime.

Jo half listens, but her mind is already elsewhere as she thinks ahead to taking out her typewriter and getting down to business.

Winston put a hand to Maxine's cheek, cupping it gently as he looked into her eyes.

"I'm glad we're here," he said, his lips moving closer to hers. They were sitting on a blanket on the roof of their house, staring up at the nighttime sky together on a hot July evening. "I know it was a lot to uproot our lives, and I know you weren't happy here at first, but Maxine, you've given me the biggest gift: your faith. Your trust. Your support."

Maxine leaned her cheek into her husband's hand and let her eyes close, tears gathering on the fringe of her lashes as he pressed his warm lips to her forehead. "Home is wherever you are," Maxine whispered. "As long as you're happy and the children are happy, I can make a home anywhere."

Jo stops typing and picks up the book that's resting next to her typewriter. It's the one on plot and pacing, and she opens to a spot that's marked with a scrap of paper. She skims the paragraph and picks up a pencil, jotting down some ideas in her notebook.

It's late, and everyone else is sleeping, as usual. Jo is sipping ice water as she writes, and even with the air-conditioning on full blast, she's still sweating through the back of her knee-length, sleeveless satin nightie. She holds the cold, icy glass to one cheek, letting it cool her as she remembers the evening she and Bill had spent on the roof of this very house. She's trying not to simply recreate their lives together in her stories, but it's hard not to let the details of her own reality seep into her words. Winston and Maxine have two kids, and in the story, Jo has made Maxine a teacher who gives up her job in New Jersey to move south with her husband when he gets hired by NASA. And while Bill has an ex-wife who is in a full-time residential facility in Arizona, Winston has a wife who'd succumbed to cancer. It's all close to her life (close enough that Bill might not like it) but it's not exact.

Jo taps her pencil eraser on the page as she thinks. What can she do to make their story veer away from hers and Bill's? She knows he hasn't read any of her work and that he probably won't even ask questions, but if he ever did, she wouldn't want him to be mad. Or feel betrayed--after all, the details of their life together and of their marriage are sacred.

Jo stands and paces across the kitchen barefoot. Outside, the lights of the pool are on, giving the water an eerie glow. She stands in front of the sliding door, looking out at the water as it ripples ever so slightly.

An idea comes to her, and she rushes back over to the typewriter, gathering her nightgown around her as she sits and immediately gets back to typing.

"I have a question," Maxine said, pulling away from Winston and looking up at him. The stars behind him winked at her hopefully, though Maxine felt nothing but a pit in her stomach that wouldn't go away. "Who is that woman?" she asked, swallowing hard against the rising bile in her throat. "The one who called here for you."

Winston frowned as he looked at her, and Maxine could see a curtain fall behind his eyes. She knew her husband well enough to know when a lie was coming.

"She's no one," he said, shrugging and turning to watch as a car drove down the street below. "Just a data entry person in my department. I'd entered some numbers wrong, and they were trying to fix it."

"That late on a week night?" Maxine pushed, feeling as she did that what she was about to get was not an answer, but a stonewall.

Winston stood up and reached for Maxine's hand abruptly. "Here," he said, pulling her up. "Let's just go in."

The romance of the evening had been ruined; Maxine felt it, and from the way Winston snatched up the blanket and tossed it to the ground below, she knew that there was no hope of retrieving the same feeling that had been growing between them.

They went to sleep that night with an invisible divide between them, and Maxine was no closer to getting an answer to the one thing that was gnawing at her: who was that woman on the other end of the line? And why had she known, instinctively, that this faceless woman could cause her trouble?

Jo stops typing again, and this time when she looks out at the pool, she knows exactly what she's doing: she's using this story as a way to flesh out her own feelings and her own fears. She's introducing the worries and questions and dilemmas she faces in her own life, and using her characters like paper dolls to act out the story and help her to understand. Is that right or wrong? Is it something that other writers do? Jo doesn't have the answers to those questions, but she can see clearly that she's writing herself into a corner here—but she's also writing herself out of her own personal confusion and misery.

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Either way, she's going to have to reckon with the fallout of using her life as fodder for this story, and on the off-chance that Bill ever finds out what she's writing, she's going to need to come up with a damn good excuse for putting their lives on display.

The next day, Jo receives a manila envelope in her mailbox. She slides the flap open and pulls out a letter from the publishers of True Romance magazine asking her to commit to finishing the story of Winston and Maxine with installments that will run monthly. Along with the request on company letterhead is another, unsealed envelope. Jo pulls out a letter--it's fan mail. Her very first piece of fan mail, addressed to Josephine White, which is both her pen name and her maiden name.

Mrs. White--

Your stories have been thrilling me these last couple of months! The romance between Maxine and Winston is tangible, and how exciting it must be for her to be married to an astronaut--I can't even imagine!

Please keep writing this wonderful story, and I do hope that at some point I'll find a book in my library by Mrs. Josephine White!

Sincerely,

Mrs. Ingrid Nelson

Wichita, Kansas

Jo reads it and re-reads it, doing a little dance as she does and savoring the moment.

It's not every day that a person gets actual fan mail, and it's a feeling she never wants to forget.

Jo takes it back to her bedroom and tucks the letter into an empty shoe box at the top of her closet, pushing the box back into place gently and then letting her hand linger on it.

Ten dollars per story might not be anything worth writing home about, but getting a letter from a fan? That's priceless.

CHAPTER 6

Bill

Bill, who rarely smokes cigars, is standing at the round barbecue grill on his back patio in a pair of plaid shorts and a white t-shirt with a fat brown cigar wedged between his lips. He's wearing aviator sunglasses and flip-flops.

"Hey, champ," Bill says to Jimmy. "Can you grab me the bag of charcoal briquettes from the garage, please?"

Jimmy puts down the catcher's mitt that he's been oiling, leaving it on a chair by the pool to run the errand for his dad.

"Everyone should be here around six," Jo says, coming through the sliding patio door in a halter top that ties behind her neck. She's wearing shorts as well, but they're knee length and look more like culottes. "I told Frankie to bring cold pasta salad, Barbie is bringing dessert, Carrie is bringing a veggie platter, and Jude?—"

"Is bringing the booze?" Bill jokes, taking the cigar from between his lips and smirking.

“William Booker!” Jo hisses, swatting him on the arm.

Bill has heard all about Jo’s concerns for Jude and her drinking, and while he doesn’t think it’s funny that she fell into her swimming pool and ended up in the hospital after drinking too much one day, he has been known to make light of pretty much anything in a moment when it’s just the two of them.

“Okay, okay,” Bill acquiesces. “Tell me what she’s really bringing.”

Jo pouts. “No. Now you have to wait and see.”

At this, Bill laughs and jams the cigar back into his mouth. He nods and closes the lid of the barbecue.

“What time did you tell Jeanie to come by?” Jo asks. She, too, is wearing sunglasses, and this allows them both to talk without being able to see one another’s eyes. “And is she bringing something?”

“Don’t you ladies always bring something to a potluck?” Bill asks, sitting in a pool chair and stretching his legs out as he turns his face to the late afternoon sun. He crosses his feet at the ankles. It’s the Fourth of July, Bill’s favorite holiday, and he’s not going to let anything ruffle his feathers today.

“Generally,” Jo says with a frown that creases her smooth forehead like the faintest fold in a piece of otherwise perfect tissue paper. “But I want to make sure that we don’t have too much of one thing and not enough of another.”

Bill puffs on his cigar. “Well, the stores are closed, so I guess we’ll have to make do, won’t we?”

Jo unfurls a red-and-white checkered tablecloth on top of one of the wooden table-

and-bench combos that sit on the lawn. “I suppose so,” Jo says tersely.

Bill is watching her from behind his dark sunglasses. His wife is a bit of a mystery sometimes, but then, aren't all women? It's been a few months since Jo met Jeanie at Frankie Maxwell's house, and he was certain she'd all but forgotten about inviting Jeanie for dinner when, out of the blue, she'd told Bill to ask Jeanie over for cheeseburgers and fireworks. She'd even remembered that Jeanie has a roommate and had extended the invite to her as well.

“Where do you want them, Dad?” Jimmy asks, hauling a heavy bag of briquettes.

“Right there is great, son.” Bill points at a spot near the barbecue. “Thanks.”

From the houses surrounding theirs, Bill can hear children splashing in swimming pools and smell the burgers grilling. Though the sky will still be light for hours, the anticipation of darkness as a backdrop for the colorful explosions of fireworks thrills him. Ever since he was a kid, Bill has loved the feeling of getting together with family and friends, of eating picnic food, and of waiting for dark to put on his own little pyrotechnic display.

“Hi, hi!” Barbie Roman calls, parading through the house with her arms full of foil-covered dishes. Behind her is her husband, Todd, holding their littlest boy, one-year-old Huck, and on Todd’s heels are their other two sons, Heath and Henry, who are five and four, respectively.

“Hey there, Roman family!” Bill says, slapping his knee as he stands up and reaches out to shake Todd’s hand. “Welcome and happy Fourth of July.”

The kids immediately run into the grass and start to chase one another, and Barbie sets her dishes down on the picnic table.

“It’s too hot out here for brownies and cookies,” Barbie says, glancing up at the sky as she swats at a bug buzzing around her. “Should we set up the food inside and have people serve in there and then come out?”

“I think so,” Jo says, picking up one of the trays of dessert and carrying it inside. Barbie follows, closing the door behind them.

“Okay, the women will be occupied all evening now,” Todd says. There’s a red cooler under the palm tree that’s filled with ice and bottles of beer and soda. He flips open the lid and takes out a beer. “Grab you one?”

Bill nods and holds out a hand; Todd tosses the bottle and Bill plucks it from mid-air. They move to the table in the shade, leaving the pool area to the kids.

“I gotta keep my eye on the boys,” Todd says, nodding at his three as they tumble around in the grass. “The older boys are turning into decent swimmers, but little man here will just somersault right into the pool if I’m not watching.” As Huck toddles by, Todd snatches him up and perches him on one of his knees so that Huck can watch the big kids.

“So, how are things?” Bill asks amiably. He wants to let Todd to pick a topic, whether innocuous or not. Since it’s just them out there for the moment, he’s happy to talk sports or work or women—anything, really.

“Things are good,” Todd says with a nod. He lets Huck hold the bottle of beer and put the mouth of it between his lips. The baby gums the glass bottle, knocking into it every so often with the few teeth he’s got. “But I’m sure jealous of your three-man orbital mission.” He narrows his eyes slightly at Bill, who is older and had more time in the Air Force than Todd had. “Do you think they chose you because you’re the most experienced of the five of us?”

Bill shakes his head. “Not sure. I didn’t think to ask.”

“I hear that. Arvin North pulls you in and offers you an opportunity like that, you don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, right?”

“Sure,” Bill agrees. This is how it goes: the men are curious about the things the other guys are tasked with, and there is some envy and healthy competition between them,

but at the end of the day, Bill hasn't felt that any one of them is less than supportive of the others when push really comes to shove.

"I'm happy for you even though I'm envious," Todd says. As he does, Nancy and Kate slip out the glass door in their bathing suits and step right into the swimming pool as they plug their noses and go under. Once they emerge, their high-pitched little girl voices and laughter fill the backyard. "And I was happy for Ed when he got chosen to go to Seattle. I just feel like I need to start taking some big steps in the program, you know? I brought my wife and my kids down here for a dream, and now I'm ready to start seeing it come true."

"Isn't it already coming true just by being here?" Bill asks. He reaches over and lets Huck hold his forefinger; the baby squeezes Bill's hand. "I mean, think how many guys would kill to be a part of NASA in any way, and we're here, Todd. We wake up every day and go to Cape Kennedy and work with brilliant people who are trying to put men on the moon."

"I know, I know. I'm complaining," Todd says with a frown. "And that's not what I'm trying to do. I'm a lucky man. In so many ways." He glances at the little boy in his lap, putting a hand on top of his soft, downy blonde head. "But I need a sign that I'm doing the right thing with my life, you know?" His words could have come across as whiny, but instead, they ring a bell in Bill's own heart. He understands Todd entirely.

"I hear you, man," Bill says in a low voice as the kids play around them. He's struggled himself with his life decisions and how they affect his family, and there are times when the darkness has closed around him. Following his time in the Korean War, Bill has struggled intermittently with feelings of panic and terror, and the consistency of Jo and his children has really helped him to keep going, even in the darkest times.

Getting accepted to the space program has done wonders for Bill in terms of giving him new goals and focus, but certainly in his moments of reflectiveness—in the times when he feels somewhat less than capable in some area of his life—Bill has questioned what he’s doing and whether he even deserves to be an astronaut. Because does he deserve it? Is he strong enough and good enough to cut the mustard? Can he push aside his own inadequacies and do the best job possible for NASA? No, Todd is not alone in his feelings of being an imposter; Bill is willing to bet that they all question themselves when they’re left alone to ponder their own place in the program.

“All I can tell you,” Bill says, slipping into his role as elder statesman of the five of them, “is that you need to stay the course. If you were asked to come here, and assigned a role in this program, then you have something to offer. Do you hear me?” Bill keeps his eyes on Todd’s face as the younger man nods, still looking at his son in his lap. “You’re a smart and capable man, and no one would have hired you if they didn’t see a place for you at NASA.”

Todd is about to respond when the back door slides open and the rest of the families join them in the backyard, the kids jumping straight into the pool or running out to the grass to join the Roman boys as they kick a ball that they’ve found in the corner of the yard. The women are their own hive of activity, talking and pointing at the tables and shouting back to Jo about where they should put extra chairs and how they’ll arrange everything. Two of the women are carrying little folded fans in their hands, and they wave them in front of their faces as they search for shade. The men make a beeline for the cooler and extract their own bottles of beer.

“Hey!” Vance Majors says as he joins Todd and Bill at the picnic table. “Blazing hot Fourth of July, but happy Independence Day to the both of you.” He has a jovial smile as he pops the lid off his bottle and takes a long, thirsty sip of his cold drink.

“You watching Wimbledon?” Todd asks Ed Maxwell as he joins them at the table.

Ed laughs. “Nah, I’m not from Connecticut,” he teases. “I grew up watching real sports like boxing and football.”

The other men laugh.

“I’m watching,” Jay Reed says. “But I’ll watch any sport that’s on.”

Talk quickly turns to sports, as it so often does with men, and Bill relaxes into it.

The moment between Todd and Bill has passed with this onslaught of activity, but Bill hopes that his words have landed; self-doubt is a part of life, without question, but Todd needs to have the confidence in himself to push that doubt away when it crops up. His own success at NASA depends on it, and if he is chosen for a mission to space, then the safety of the entire thing rests on the competence and confidence of the men involved.

CHAPTER 7

Jo

The women closethe sliding door, leaving the men and children outside. “It’s too hot out there for me,” Barbie admits, fanning her face with her hand. “Truly.”

“I know. Maybe we can invent kitchen tasks to do all evening and keep ourselves in here where we’ve got air-conditioning,” Carrie Reed says. “There are enough of them out there to watch the kids anyway.”

“You don’t think the men will mind watching all the kids?” Barbie asks, peeking out the window to make sure that her older boys haven’t pushed the baby into the pool while the men talk sports and work.

“They’d better not,” Jo says with her head inside the refrigerator. She’s made potato salad and coleslaw for the barbecue, and she shoves them aside now looking for a bottle of Tab to open for poor, overheated Barbie. “It’s not like we got ourselves pregnant,” she adds drily. “Keeping an eye on the children twenty-four hours a day isn’t a job that rests solely on our shoulders.”

“It isn’t?” Jude Majors asks with a hint of sarcasm in her voice. She grabs a carrot slice from the platter of veggies andcrudités that Carrie has set on the kitchen table. It gives a loud snap as she bites into it. “Somebody better alert the men to that fact.”

“So,” Frankie Maxwell says as she leans her hip against Jo’s kitchen counter and looks out the back window. “We’ve got the lady engineers coming to this shindig?”

At the mention of it, Jo feels her stomach tighten. “Actually, just one. I met Jeanie

Florence at your place, Frankie,” Jo says, trying to keep her tone light. “And I thought it might be nice to invite her, since she’s the only woman engineer on our guys’ team. She’s bringing her roommate.”

The women busy themselves with little tasks like dumping a jar of baby pickles into a serving dish, fanning out paper napkins on the table, and setting stacks of clean glasses out for people to use.

“When is she coming?” Frankie asks. She’s by far Jo’s closest friend of the bunch, and she watches Jo with narrowed eyes, as if she can guess what Jo is thinking or feeling.

“Soon,” Jo says noncommittally. “But so is Dave Huggins.”

“What?” Barbie nearly shrieks. “No one told me. I’m not ready to be photographed. My kids aren’t in the right clothes. I didn’t pick out anything for Todd. Jo, you should have warned us!” Barbie has gone from sorting utensils to spinning out of control in under thirty seconds.

“Honey,” Jo says to her, reaching out a hand and grabbing Barbie by the wrist. She shakes her arm lightly. “Dave has taken a million pictures of us already. We’ve done the formal thing; this is just a casual, real-life shoot for the Cape Kennedy newsletter. He wanted to get some shots of us as families, celebrating America—eating potato salad, watching fireworks. No big deal.”

Barbie puts out a hand like she’s trying to steady herself. “Okay, I just want to make sure we’re not going to show up in *Life* magazine looking like a bunch of sweaty women who don’t care that their children come out of the pool looking like drowned rats.”

“I think you’re taking this way too seriously,” Carrie says with an amused frown.

“It’s Dave’s job to get pictures for NASA, and we don’t always have to look like we’ve been styled for a photo shoot, Barb. Sometimes he just wants to see us laughing and being ourselves. Maybe he’ll catch you eating a hot dog or something,” she jokes with a wink.

Barbie makes the sign of the cross. “Eating a hot dog! In a magazine! I will never?—“

“Sweetie,” Jo says, still holding Barbie’s wrist. “I promise I won’t let you anywhere near a hot dog, alright?”

Barbie nods gratefully.

“Let’s just be glad he wasn’t invited to that first party here,” Jude says as she shoves a cracker into her mouth. “Remember how your water broke over there,” she says, nodding at the front room. “And you almost had your baby on Jo’s new floors?”

Barbie’s face goes white at the very mention of America seeing her with amniotic fluid streaming down her thighs.

“Jude,” Jo says firmly, “stop scaring her.”

The doorbell rings then and Jo wipes her hands on a towel. “Keep her busy,” she says to Frankie with a glance at Barbie, who is tugging at the hem of her dress and smoothing her hair with both hands.

Jo walks to the door with a smile plastered on her face. It was her idea to invite Jeanie Florence, and she wants to be welcoming. She wants to get to know the girl who spends the entire work week with her husband, and to make a friend out of her. For some reason, this feels important to Jo: make a friend out of the woman who has slightly raised your hackles, and somehow avoid potential disaster. It's kind of like

encountering a big, scary dog in the wild: make a friend before it turns into a foe, and perhaps it won't bite.

She puts her hand on the knob and takes a deep breath before opening the door.

"Hi!" says a woman in a low-cut top and a tight pair of capri pants. She's got frosted blonde hair that's curled and sprayed to within an inch of its life, and her lips are a glossy pale pink. Her tanned chest--and most of it is visible--is covered with sun spots and a tangle of thin gold chains. In one hand she's holding a bottle of champagne, and in the other, a Polaroid camera--the kind that spits out peel-apart black-and-white prints.

Jo is speechless. She knows she's looking as stunned as she feels, and she isn't even sure what to say to this middle-aged stranger.

"Oh! Jo!" a voice from the end of the driveway calls out to her. Jo looks that direction, relief flooding through her as Jeanie closes the door of her Volkswagen Bug and walks towards the door with a covered dish in her hands. "This is my roommate, Vicki."

"Hiya, doll!" Vicki says this time, still holding up the champagne and the Polaroid camera. "The party has arrived!"

Jeanie and Jo exchange a look, and then Jo gets her wits about her. "I'm so sorry, please--come in," Jo says, stepping aside to make way for Vicki and her champagne.

"Thank you so much for inviting us. Our only plan for the holiday was going to be watching fireworks with the retirees at our condo and having a picnic at the pool, so this is way more fun," Jeanie says in a rush. She follows Jo through the front room, looking around at everything as she does. "Your house is so beautiful, Jo. You have exquisite taste."

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It's on the tip of Jo's tongue to tell the younger woman that she had, in fact, hired a designer to decorate the house when they'd first moved to Florida, but for some reason she holds that information under her tongue. "Well, thank you," Jo says, turning to take the covered dish that Jeanie hands her.

"I brought Waldorf salad," Jeanie says, keeping her gaze on the dish and avoiding the eyes of all the other women in the kitchen. Vicki has stopped short right behind Jeanie, and she looks around at the other ladies with open curiosity.

"Jeanie," Jo says, setting the bowl of Waldorf salad on the kitchen table with everything else. "I'd like to introduce you to Carrie Reed, Jude Majors, Barbie Roman, and I think you already know Frankie Maxwell, since it was her house where you and I met for the first time." Jeanie nods at each woman in turn, smiling hopefully. Behind her, Vicki gives a small cough.

"It's wonderful to meet you all. This is my roommate, Victoria Swanson," Jeanie says.

"Vicki," Vicki says, stepping all the way into the kitchen. "Thanks for letting an old gal like me crash your shindig here," Vicki says, still holding the champagne out like she's about to pop the cork and get the party started. "I came with bubbly, and I just got a Polaroid camera recently, so I thought I'd take a few snaps for posterity."

The women are nervous; Jo can feel it. Barbie is looking at Carrie, and Frankie is looking at Jo. Jude is eyeing the champagne.

"We're thrilled to have you--both of you," Jo says. "Please, make yourselves at home."

We have drinks in here, and also in the cooler out back. Bill will be barbecuing soon, and there are kids everywhere you look, so just let one of us know if they're being too wild and splashing pool water on you."

"Oh, kids are wonderful," Vicki says, setting the bottle on the table and flashing about a mile of cleavage in the process. The women all avert their eyes politely, and Jo can already sense that they're getting an impression of Jeanie and Vicki without really talking to them. Weirdly, Jo feels a little protective of Jeanie and doesn't want the women to lump her in with party girl Vicki.

"Do you have children?" Barbie asks Vicki politely.

"Or grandchildren?" Frankie asks with a touch of sweetness that Jo knows is a put-on.

Vicki laughs and shakes her head; she is clearly not the least bit offended by the women's questions. "I do have a son--Steven--he's a junior at Tulane. I'd love it if he were a few years older so that I could set him up with this gorgeous, brilliant lady." She hooks her thumb in Jeanie's direction and Jeanie's cheeks bloom red. "But I think she's into slightly older men, aren't you, princess?"

Jeanie's mouth opens and closes before she finally responds. "Not...really. No. I'm pretty focused on work at the moment."

"You should have seen her at The Hungry Pelican," Vicki says as she laughs. "She had men dragging her onto the dance floor left and right!"

Jeanie looks mortified. "It was just one guy, actually," she says, though she clearly isn't keen on explaining. "My mother always told me that I should say yes if a man asks me to dance—that accepting just one dance is polite."

"Good advice," Jo says, feeling the need to side with Jeanie, or at least to let her

know she's not hanging out here alone and defending herself in front of a bunch of women she doesn't know.

"Hey, let's get drinks for you ladies," Frankie says, barging into the conversation and steering it another direction. "Can I fix you something specific?"

"Could I do something simple like a screwdriver?" Jeanie asks, glancing at the sweating glasses in the other women's hands. "Or I can just have whatever the rest of you are drinking."

Frankie pulls the vodka out of the freezer and grabs a glass from the table.

"I think I'll head out back and get a beer from that cooler," Vicki says, pointing through the glass door to where Bill is bent over and extracting another bottle of beer from the container full of ice. "I think I'll make nice with those men out there and see if any of them know a nice, single astronaut they can set me up with." She wiggles her shoulders playfully and opens the sliding door carefully, making sure not to break her long, red nails in the process.

"Thanks again for inviting us both," Jeanie says with a clear apology in her voice. "Vicki is...she's a lot of fun," she adds, though her words sound like they're wilting. "She's a friend of my aunt's, and we've been living together since the beginning of the year." Jeanie pauses and accepts the screwdriver from Frankie with a smile. "Actually, I'm going to be honest: Vicki is forty-five, divorced, and loves to be the life of the party, but I can promise you, she's all heart."

Jo can tell that Jeanie feels like she needs to make excuses for her friend given the fact that Vicki is outside drinking beer with their husbands, but Jo wants her to know that it's all okay.

"Hey, she's fine," Jo says gently. "She seems like a fun lady, and you never know--

maybe one of the guys knows someone single from work who they can set her up with. It's a party, and we're going to have a good time." She puts an arm around Jeanie's narrow shoulders and gives her a light squeeze.

"Let's get the kids set up with food," Barbie says. "I think Bill and Todd are putting burgers on the grill as we speak."

The women start to corral the kids and wrap their wet little bodies in towels so that they can file them through the makeshift buffet on the kitchen table.

By the time everyone has plates of food in hand and has found spots to eat--in the grass or on the pool deck or at the picnic table--Jeanie has made her way over to where Vicki is sitting with the men and Jo sees her laughing reservedly at something that Vance is saying to everyone as he stands at one end of the picnic table, gesturing wildly.

"So?" Frankie asks as she stands next to Jo near the sliding door. She's standing so close that Jo can feel the heat emanating off her skin, and she's smoking, her cigarette held in the hand farthest from Jo, so that the smoke curls up and away from them. "What do we think?"

For a split second, Jo considers feigning innocence. But this is Frankie; Frankie knows her. Jo pretends to watch the kids cannon balling into the pool. "She's a sympathetic character," Jo says.

"A 'sympathetic character?' What, are you writing her into one of your stories, Joey-girl? She's not a character, she's the woman who sits shoulder-to-shoulder with our husbands all day, and she's fresh-faced and pretty."

"Okay, that's true," Jo says, trying to be objective. "But when I look at her, I don't see a woman out to poach our men. I see someone kind of...nice. She seems

inexperienced and like she's just trying to figure out life as she goes.”

Frankie lowers her chin and drops the hand holding her cigarette so that it's dangling next to her thigh. She turns to Jo. “Listen,” she says seriously. “That's the most dangerous kind of woman. She's smart, she's charming, and she is absolutely unaware of how appealing she is. She's like a beautiful lump of clay, just waiting for a more mature man to mold her?—“

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Jo cuts her off. “Frank, I don’t think so,” she says. “I mean, maybe men find her appealing—I can’t speak to that—but I think she’s just a nice girl. I like her.”

Frankie shrugs. “Well, go ahead like her if you want, but keep your eye on her. She’d look awfully cute next to an astronaut.” She lifts her cigarette to her lips and inhales. On an exhale, she tips her head at Vicki. “That one, though,” she says, “is nothing but trouble.”

Jo can’t argue with this. “I think she seems...” Jo trails off, looking for something nice to say about the older woman. “Okay, yeah, she seems like trouble.”

The women giggle together, and Frankie is leaning her sweat-slicked bare shoulder against Jo’s conspiratorially when Carrie comes over to them.

“What’s up, girls?” Carrie asks, sipping a glass of lemonade.

Jo takes Frankie’s cigarette from her and sneaks a quick puff; they generally have a cigarette or two while they’re on their evening walks, but Jo never smokes otherwise, and certainly not in the presence of her children.

“We’re clocking the competition,” Frankie says.

Carrie, a woman who is not given to any sort of artifice, turns to glance at them. “That Vicki is a hoot. She’s like a caricature of a middle-aged divorcee on the prowl. Fun though,” she adds nonchalantly. “And she’s got stories. Did you hear her talking about the time she accepted a date with a photographer in Chicago, fell asleep in his car, and woke up in Pittsburgh?”

Jo is stunned; this kind of behavior is entirely foreign to her. "I can't even imagine it."

Carrie clicks her unpolished nails against her glass. "I don't judge," she says firmly, lowering her voice. "Before I met Jay, I was dating a jazz musician and I can assure you, I saw somethings whenever I went to his shows and then out with the band afterwards."

It's funny; Jo hasn't really imagined her new friends' lives before they'd arrived in Stardust Beach, and for some reason, it surprises her that Carrie had dated a musician. All she can see her as is Jay's wife. As Marcus and Christina's mom. She knows a fair amount about Frankie's life, of course, but it's easy to forget that they were all other people before they became wives and mothers.

The doorbell rings then and Jo lets Dave Huggins in. He's toting a camera and a flash. "I'll just nose around and grab the shots I want," he assures the women. "I want you to pretend I'm not even here, alright?"

"Done," Jo says. "And please help yourself to anything you want. We have plenty of food here--enough to feed a small army."

Dave lifts a hand and heads out into the yard. The women continue their conversation like there'd been no interruption.

"Hey," Carrie says, looking at Frankie. "How are things at Mia Perla?"

Frankie had opened her own dance studio, Mia Perla, in downtown Stardust Beach earlier in the year, and now she stays busy nearly every day teaching tap, jazz, and ballet to the children in the area.

"You know," Frankie says, leaning over to put out her cigarette in the ashtray that Jo

has helpfully set on a small table on the patio. “It’s been incredible. I love seeing the kids come in excited to try something new. And Christina is quite the little ballerina,” she adds, glancing at Carrie’s six-year-old daughter as she plays with Jo’s youngest, Kate. “She’s good at taking direction.”

Carrie beams with pride. “Oh, thank you! She loves it. Every day she asks me, ‘Do I go to Miss Frankie’s today?’”

“That’s sweet,” Frankie says, folding her arms across her chest. “I love it. It’s given my life a whole new sense of purpose, if I’m being honest. And I’m starting two classes for adults, though of course I don’t have as many people signed up for those yet.”

“Ballet for grown ups?” Carrie asks, tilting her ear towards her shoulder. “I’m the most graceless person I know. Maybe I should join and work on my posture and movements. Do you think I’m too old to learn how to prance like a cat instead of stomp like an elephant?”

“Never,” Frankie says. “It’s never too late to start to learn about how you hold your body in the surrounding space, and to change how you move and breathe.”

“Breathe?” Carrie asks with a frown. “Am I breathing wrong?”

“Maybe,” Frankie says. “We work on breathing in and out slowly, and with intention. You might find that it helps you in other parts of your life, too. Like, when the kids are on your last nerve and you have a kitchen to clean, you can apply the slow, intentional breathing of a ballerina and bring yourself to an elevated place.”

“Whoa.” Carrie looks impressed. “Okay. Maybe I should try it.” She turns to Jo. “I’d beg you to join me for moral support, but between the hospital and your writing, I doubt you have a moment to spare!”

Jo is about to protest and say that, sure, she'd like to try grown up ballet too, but she realizes that Carrie is right. "At the moment, I do seem to have my hands pretty full."

As if on cue, Kate jumps out of the pool and comes rushing towards Jo, dripping water all over the concrete as she does. "Mommy! Mommy!" she shouts. "Can Christina and I help the daddies set off fireworks?"

Frankie chuckles as Jo and Carrie swoop in to explain to their daughters why little girls aren't allowed to play with explosives. Jo goes inside to find extra towels for the kids who have managed to get almost every single one sopping wet, and once the door closes behind her, she basks there in the silence for a moment, glad for the barrier between her and all the excitement outside.

As she stands there in her kitchen, looking at the half-eaten platters and bowls of food on her table, Jo feels a rush of joy. When they'd left Minnesota for Stardust Beach, she'd thought she was leaving behind friends and parties and true happiness forever; she'd been so sure that this new place would never feel like home. But now here she is, a year later, surrounded by people she likes and cares about. Her husband is happy, her kids are happy, and she feels happy. She's really and truly happy.

The moment lasts for nearly a full minute as Jo puts lids on things and sets covers over open dishes to keep them fresh. The kids are laughing happily outside, and she can hear the muted chatter of the adults, who are obviously enjoying the party. She's looking at everything with a small smile on her face, feeling pleased.

And then the phone rings.

CHAPTER 8

Jeanie

Vicki is just being herself:flirting outrageously, telling bawdy stories, laughing too loudly. Jeanie has grown used to the way Vicki is, and it doesn't even bother her anymore at home, but now that Vicki is here, amongst her male coworkers, telling a story about a time when she'd drunk so much vodka that two young sailors had to carry her out of a bar and watch her through the night while she slept it off on a park bench, Jeanie feels slightly embarrassed.

But not overtly so (she does her best not to judge other people or to feel any sort of shame on their behalf); it's more the kind of mild mortification that a teenager feels when her mother does something that embarrasses her, so she watches and listens with detachment as Vicki roars with laughter, slapping the table and then downing the rest of her beer. The men, as Jeanie observes them, seem tickled enough by Vicki. They listen to her tales with rapt attention, laughing in all the appropriate places. Not for the first time, Jeanie thinks that it might actually be nice to be a bit more like Vicki: open-hearted, open-minded, and easy with a laugh.Maybe it's something that will come with age,Jeanie thinks.Maybe someday I'll be able to tell stories to a table full of men and keep them hanging on my every word.

She glances over at the wives of her coworkers, who are knotted on the pool deck and seemingly always keeping one eye on the children as they talk intently. Dave Huggins is leaning against the fence, snapping shots of everyone as unobtrusively as he can, and after a bit, he slips out the side gate and disappears, most likely off to photograph another event where NASA employees are celebrating the holiday. Jo and

Frankie are sharing a cigarette, and every so often Jeanie feels the gaze of one of the women on her, which makes her think she should get up and go over to make conversation with them. However, that would entail leaving Vicki with the men, and she isn't sure that's such a great idea, either.

"What's on your mind, Miss Florence?" Bill asks her, leaning across the picnic table slightly to form their own little conversation inside the bubble of the laughter and talk from the others. Bill has already grilled up a big batch of burgers and the kids are happily eating by the pool, but the adults are still drinking, finishing their first plates of food, and waiting for him to grill another round.

Jeanie smiles. "Not much. I'm just enjoying being here. Thanks again for inviting us." Her eyes flick in Vicki's direction just as Vicki throws her head back and laughs again.

"Don't worry about her," Bill says in a low voice. "She's a hoot, and the other guys are entertained."

"Your wives aren't," Jeanie says before she can catch herself.

Bill looks in their direction. "They're fine. A party is a party, and you're going to bring in a few unknown elements every time you open the door and let people in, right? Sometimes a friend will drink too much and say things they regret later, or maybe someone brings a guest along who is new to the group." He glances at Vicki again. "It's all good. Makes things more interesting, you know?"

Jeanie looks at the red-and-white checkered tablecloth beneath her elbows. "You have a lovely home," she says, turning her eyes up to Bill's. "But I will admit, it's kind of weird to see where someone lives. You only see them at work, you know? So you only know a person in one context, and then all of a sudden you see them in the place where they eat and sleep, and it's like you're meeting them all over again for the

first time."

"Tell me about where you live," Bill says, lifting his chin just slightly at her as he rests his weight on his elbows. The conversation continues to flow around them as they lean in to talk over the table.

Jeanie laughs. "I live in a condominium community designed for 'active seniors' who enjoy things like bingo, sunbathing, and being nosy."

It's Bill's turn to laugh. "I think people are genetically programmed to be nosy as they get older."

"They're harmless," Jeanie says, lifting one shoulder. "For the most part. There are a lot of them who have grandsons they'd like me to meet, but other than that, I enjoy them. Several of the men drive golf carts around the community, and a few of the women know everything that's going on. If you stop to chat for long enough, they'll make sure you know it all, too."

"And do you enjoy that--partaking of the gossip?"

"Well, I guess if it's Mrs. Parsnip telling me how Mr. Axelrod gets confused and thinks she's his late wife and won't stop patting her on the behind when they see each other, I can live without it. But I do like to listen to them talk about life. A few of the older people have stories about the Oregon Trail. Their families crossed the country by covered wagon, and they were born just after Lincoln's assassination. It's fascinating to me when they reminisce."

"Sounds like it," Bill says, still watching her face as she talks. "People have the most interesting stories. I'm a big reader of non-fiction."

"Me too!" Jeanie says. "And biographies. Have you read the one on W. E. B. Du Bois

that came out right before he died?"

"The one that came out last year? Loved it." Bill's eyes dance with enthusiasm. "I think history and the understanding of it is the foundation of this country. We need to learn it, understand it, and see where we've fallen short. Otherwise we're?—"

"Doomed to repeat it," Jeanie finishes for him.

"Exactly." Bill takes a satisfied swig of his beer, and Jeanie can see that the armpits of his t-shirt are ringed with sweat from the humid July afternoon.

"What do you suppose Du Bois would think of what's going on today—with the Civil Rights Act last month?"

"Oh, wow," Bill says. He clearly relishes the idea. "I think he'd be a huge proponent of the changes that are underway in our country."

Jeanie is tugging on her earlobe as she thinks, turning and twisting her small diamond earring absentmindedly. "I know. Just imagine?—"

"Bill," Todd Roman interrupts. "Are we gonna throw some more meat on the barbecue? The natives are getting restless here, and I brought steaks. Want me to grab them from the fridge?"

"Oh, sure, sure," Bill says, standing up. He looks at Jeanie regretfully. "Sorry. I've been called into active duty. Pick this conversation up again later?"

Jeanie smiles at him. "Of course. No worries."

The smell of marinated steak on the grill fills the backyard within minutes, and the kids, who have finished eating, are back to hurling themselves into the pool and

asking how much longer until it's dark enough for fireworks.

Jeanie moves down the picnic bench so that she's closer to Vicki, who is talking to Vance Majors. Vance's wife, Jude, crosses the yard and sits right next to her husband, inserting herself between Vicki and Vance. It's a territorial move, enhanced by the way Jude puts a hand at the base of Vance's neck and strokes the hair that curls there as she looks right at Vicki.

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“Hi, there,” Vicki says to Jude. “I was just telling your husband that Stardust Beach must be the most perfect place to raise children. Your daughters are precious—twins?”

“Yes,” Jude says, taking a sip of her mixed drink and keeping her eyes on Vicki. “Hope and Faith. They’re identical. And a handful.”

“Oh, I can imagine,” Vicki says. “I just have the one boy myself, but he’s always kept me on my toes. I mean,” she says with a disarming smile, “less so now that he’s twenty, but they never fully grow up, you know?”

Jeanie listens to the whole exchange with amazement; until Jude had appeared there at the table, Vicki had been regaling Vance with a story that involved a bottle of tequila, two Navy fighter pilots, and less clothing than any of the kids are currently wearing in the pool. But as Jude had neared, the story morphed, as did Vicki’s posture and voice. If there’s one thing Vicki knows how to do, she clearly knows how to put a wife at ease.

“Tell me about your life in Stardust Beach,” Vicki says to Jude, her eyes scanning the woman’s face. Jeanie looks on, impressed with the way Vicki can work nearly anyone simply by assessing who they are, what they need, and how she can give it to them. Jeanie should take notes, really. This is a skill that could help her to come across as more polished and worldly than she actually is, but she doesn’t know if she has the self-confidence to pull it off. At least not yet.

Jude lets her hand fall from Vance’s neck. “Life here is lovely,” Jude says in a tone that doesn’t give away much. “It’s fun to have a house with a pool, and the girls are

really happy with their school.”

Jeanie’s mind wanders from this conversation and she glances at Bill. He’s turning over a steak with a pair of tongs, still holding a bottle of beer in one hand. He laughs at his son as the boy takes a running jump into the pool, and Jeanie can see a spark of boyishness in Bill. She can even picture him as a twelve or thirteen-year-old boy himself, and she wonders if he resembled his son at all at that age.

The door from the patio to the kitchen slides open and Jo steps out. Something about her face or her posture catches Jeanie’s eye and she watches Bill’s wife suspended there in that moment. There’s a blankness to her that reminds Jeanie of the instant you get a deep cut in your skin—that second between the slice and the blood rushing to the surface—when it seems like maybe things won’t be that bad. But the gush of red relieves you of this feeling, and suddenly you can see how deep the cut truly is. And then the pain starts.

“Bill,” Jo says feebly. Her voice does not carry at all over the children, the radio that’s playing, the sizzle of meat, and the laughter of Vicki and the men. “Bill,” she calls out again, but only Jeanie can hear her.

Jeanie looks from face to face; no one can hear Jo. Jeanie stands, tempted to go to Bill and point out the way his wife is just standing there, looking shocked, but instead, she cuts across the grass and makes her way to Jo.

“Is everything alright?” Jeanie asks her, grabbing Jo by the elbow. “Are you okay?”

There’s a moment when Jeanie thinks that perhaps Jo has hurt herself in the kitchen, or that maybe something is on fire. “Jo?” she tries again. “What’s wrong?”

Jo’s face turns to Jeanie, but her eyes are flat. “It’s Bill’s wife,” she says. This confuses Jeanie; of course Jo is Bill’s wife. Is she saying she wants Jeanie to refer to

her as “Bill’s wife” rather than as Jo? Jeanie is puzzling it through when Jo shakes her head, jarring loose the shroud that’s seemingly fallen over her. “No,” Jo says, closing her eyes tightly for a beat. “I mean, it’s Bill’s first wife.”

Jeanie is even more confused. Bill had a first wife? Jo is not his first wife? Is that even possible? Of course that’s possible, you idiot, Jeanie thinks. “His first wife is here?” Jeanie tries, looking around, searching for a newcomer.

Jo shakes her head again. “No,” she says as the sounds of the party continue on around them. “She’s not here. She’s dead.”

CHAPTER 9

Jeanie

It all comes back to her: the phone call. The tears. The shock. The silence. Everything about this moment gives Jeanie a shiver of familiarity, and a dark cloud falls over her as she’s thrown back in time, remembering the day she and her mother found out that her father had been killed in action.

Also familiar to Jeanie is Bill’s reaction to the news that Jo delivers to him quietly near the pool: he falls to his knees; he makes a keening sound like an animal in pain; he looks like a man who has been wounded and may not recover.

They all watch in horror as Jo tries to pull her husband to his feet and bring him into the house. She clearly wants to get him to safety.

After Bill goes inside, the backyard remains silent. Everyone looks at one another to decide what they should be doing. Even the kids have picked up on the change in the atmosphere. Vicki’s smile vanishes, and her wide, made-up eyes flit from face to face; as the biggest outsider at the event, she has no context, no idea what to do with

herself, no clue as to who the players are in this scenario.

In the end, everyone gathers their things and their children and leaves through the side gate.

Jeanie looks around now at the mess and thinks that perhaps she should stay and clean things up. After all, whatever trauma is going on inside the Booker home shouldn't be amplified by what looks like a party that ended in some sort of kidnapping or disappearance of the humans.

"Hey, Vicki," she says to her friend, who is sipping a beer at the picnic table as the first fireworks go off in the distance. The sky is still somewhat light. "Let's pick up a bit and then get out of here, huh?"

Vicki shrugs. "I mean, the party does appear to be over." She looks around at the paper plates, empty cups and bottles, and the inflatable ball floating in the pool like a lonely beacon of hope drifting across the water. "And the lady of the manor will be the one to clean all this up. That won't do." She pats the table with both hands and stands up decisively. "Yep. Let's whip this into shape for her."

Jeanie takes the barbecue, turning it off and removing the steaks that Bill had left cooking. She sets them on a tray and covers the whole thing with a piece of crinkled aluminum foil. Vicki walks around the yard collecting empty cans, bottles, and cups, tossing them all in a paper grocery bag that she found near the sliding door. Jeanie stacks the empty plates and cutlery into a pile, and then walks around gathering napkins that have blown away, as well as anything else that she can find that doesn't belong in a backyard. She puts it all in the center of the picnic table on top of the tablecloth, then folds the ends up around it so that it makes a neat pile of picnic trash.

Jeanie looks around, surveying the yard. It's the best they can do without going into the house, which is something she does not want to do. But hopefully Jo will come

out later and appreciate the fact that the entire mess hasn't been left for her.

"Let's get out of here, princess," Vicki says, slinging an arm around Jeanie's shoulders as the fireworks begin to go off in earnest.

They drive home in Jeanie's yellow VW Bug together with the windows down. Dionne Warwick is singing "Walk on By" on the radio, and the sky has suddenly dropped off into darkness, providing the perfect backdrop for the bright bursts of light that go off intermittently.

"The Fourth of July is magical," Vicki says. "Hot and sultry, with the added punch of explosives, a bit of alcohol, and the feeling that you're celebrating something real, but still completely intangible. I've always loved it."

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It's such a Vicki thing to say that Jeanie laughs. "I always think of it as hotdogs and scraped knees and falling to sleep on a blanket in the grass because I can't stay up late enough to watch all the fireworks."

"Well, it isn't over yet, darlin'," Vicki says. "Pull over here." She points at a spot on the street that runs parallel to the beach. "Let's get out and watch the big show from the sand, shall we?"

The women park and then look both ways, crossing the street hand-in-hand as they hurry across the pavement and down onto the sand. They both immediately kick off their shoes and find a spot on the hard-packed sand where they can see the lights of the fireworks shooting up into the sky all around them. Jeanie sits down and digs her toes into the cool sand.

"Tell me about it, princess."

"Tell you about what?" Jeanie asks, letting her head fall back as she plants her hands in the sand behind her and trains her gaze on the sky.

"Tell me why you looked white as a sheet when your friend Bill got that phone call."

Jeanie stays silent for a long time. When she finally speaks, she doesn't look at Vicki. "It was my dad. He died in the war. I was just a kid, but I'll never forget the look on my mother's face when she got the call. It came just minutes before we got a knock on the door, so that was unfortunate. The military apparently prefers to let a woman know to her face that she's just become a widow, but somehow the timing was off."

“That is unfortunate,” Vicki says softly.

“It was.” Jeanie chews on the inside of her cheek. “And I understand that Jo Booker wasn’t getting that kind of call tonight, but I think the shock of finding out that anyone has died kind of casts a pall over a party, doesn’t it?”

“Well sure.” Vicki blows out a long breath. “It’s a bit of a wet blanket.”

“And Bill’s face once he finally looked at Jo...it was like he knew instantly that she was going to tell him something horrible.” She shudders now at the memory of Jo standing there, stunned, and no one hearing her as she’d called out for her husband.

“Marriage will do that,” Vicki says. “You get to where you know someone so well that they barely need to speak, and sometimes they don’t need to at all. My husband and I were like that, once upon a time. He could glance at my face and know in an instant whether one of the kids was hurt, whether I needed him to stop what he was doing and just listen, or if something serious was going on. It’s just like that.”

Jeanie is quiet. She has no real clue what marriage is like, but she’d watched Jo and Bill this evening and the way they moved together in a dance that seemed almost coordinated, and all she could feel was...like an outsider.

“I remember my parents being like that,” Jeanie says. “But it feels like so long ago. I can hardly remember. Anyway, the whole thing just took me back to that time, and all I could remember was that palpable feeling of horror. Just knowing that someone was dead and that the news had arrived completely unexpected.”

Vicki puts an arm around Jeanie’s shoulders. “Hey, I get it. It brings back bad memories. I could see it all over your face.”

Jeanie leans her head on Vicki’s shoulder. “I’m okay, I just hated that for them.”

The women sit there for a moment as the people closest to them clap and cheer for a particularly bright and impressive fireworks display. Once it quiets down, Vicki jostles Jeanie slightly. “And what about you and the Lieutenant Colonel?” she asks softly. “You gonna tell me what’s going on there?”

Jeanie pulls away and looks at Vicki with wide eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, come on, Jeanette,” Vicki scoffs. “Anyone with eyes can see that the two of you have some sort of interest in one another.”

Jeanie does all the things that a person who is both surprised and caught red-handed might do: she blinks, she looks away, and she turns pink. “No...it’s not like that. I swear.”

Vicki tilts her head to one side, looking at Jeanie with amusement. “Honey, don’t swear too loudly to that, because it’s clear as day that you’ve got eyes for that man. Does he know? Have you told him?”

Jeanie puts a hand to her cheek. “No, of course not.” She turns to face the water, staring straight ahead. Had she ever thought about Bill in that kind of straightforward manner? Has she thought to herself I’m in love with Bill Booker? No, certainly not, because she isn’t in love with Bill. But is she interested in him as more than a friend? Is there a part of her that thinks about him as a man and not just a coworker? Jeanie thinks about this for a long, hard minute. And when she’s done contemplating it, she knows that Vicki is right.

“Oh, princess,” Vicki says softly. “You got it bad.”

Jeanie turns to look at her. “You think so?”

“I think so.”

Jeanie scoots in closer and puts her head on Vicki's shoulder again. She sighs. "That can't happen."

There isn't much to say to that, so the women stay quiet and watch the fireworks together until the show dies down and they make their way back across the street with their shoes in hand. They drive back to their condo barefoot and Jeanie falls asleep almost the second her head hits the pillow.

CHAPTER 10

Bill

When Bill wakes up on the fifth of July, Margaret is still dead. The woman from Desert Sage who'd called to talk to him had told him in no uncertain terms that his first wife had died. She had no pulse. There was no life left in her.

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That part of Bill's history had been erased. Margaret is gone, and with her their tiny wedding in a chapel in the desert.

With her, the fumbling, excited, nervous lovemaking of two kids in the back of a car.

With her, the baby girl who had never had a chance to take her first breath.

With her, the emotional strain of caring for a mentally ill ex-wife halfway across the country. Gone is the stress that Margaret's sheer existence put on his marriage with Jo. Bill is torn between feeling a guilty sense of relief and feeling extreme sadness.

"Hey," Jo says, carefully setting a mug of coffee on the nightstand next to Bill as he rolls over to look at her. His lovely second wife; the mother of his children. "Good morning. Did you sleep? I was worried you didn't." She strokes his bare arm with her hand as she looks at him worriedly.

Bill clears his throat. In fact, he did not sleep. He tossed and turned and dreamed of Margaret's face on prom night, and, repeatedly, of the haunted look in her eyes when he'd flown out to see her in Arizona last year. "I slept," he says hoarsely, knowing that Jo won't believe him.

She lifts the mug of coffee as he sits up in bed, handing it to him once he's leaning against the headboard with a pillow behind him. He takes it and blows on the hot liquid before sipping it.

Talking to Jo about this is hard. Her sympathy for the loss of his first wife is muddled by her nearly tangible relief that Margaret is out of their lives. It sounds callous to

think of his wife that way, but he knows Jo, and furthermore, he understands her feelings. How would Bill feel if Jo had been married before she'd become his wife? If she had a whole life and a whole other love story in her past? He isn't sure he could handle it even half as gracefully as she has.

"What do you need to do next?" Jo asks gently, swinging her legs up so that she's sitting next to him in bed, her legs pressed up against his, both of their backs against the headboard. It's early, and the children are still sleeping. They'd been confused the night before by the abrupt end to the party, the disappearance of their playmates, and the way their father had behaved. Wisely, Jo told them simply that Daddy had lost someone important from his past and that they needed to give him space. Bill knows that Jo has always been keen on telling them about Margaret—she believes that their history is also the children's history, though Bill has never entirely agreed about that—so he needs to decide how much he wants to share with his kids.

"Well," Bill says with a sigh, "I think I need more information. I need to call back and speak with May Ogilvy."

Jo nods slightly. May Ogilvy is the strong but grandmotherly woman in charge of running Desert Sage, where Margaret has been in full-time care for years.

"Did they tell you how it happened?" Jo probes gently. The night before, when the call had come in, the person on the phone had informed Jo of Margaret's death, thinking that they were simply speaking to an adult family member of the deceased. The person clearly had not been privy to the complicated relationship and feelings between Bill's first and second wives.

Bill's eyes glass over as he stares at the way his feet tent the sheets at the foot of the bed. Unbidden, the image of Margaret's still body lying beneath a sheet comes to mind. He blinks to make it go away, turning his head to look at Jo.

“She stole a bedsheet off a cart as it passed by and hid it beneath her mattress. They think she ripped it by hand and tied it into a—“ Bill’s throat closes and he stops talking for a moment, swallowing hard around the lump that’s forming there. “A noose,” he finishes. “They think she made a noose and tied it to a doorknob, then used it to choke herself until she passed out. No one found her until they came through for bed check, and by then it was too late.”

Jo laces her fingers through Bill’s and holds his hand. Her fingers are cold, and he can feel her shiver next to him as he delivers the details.

“God, Bill...” Jo moves her body just a bit closer to his, and the warmth of her skin beneath her thin nightgown is a juxtaposition to the temperature of Margaret’s skin as she lies in a morgue somewhere, waiting to be claimed by Bill.

The thought of this makes Bill pass his coffee to Jo hurriedly, sloshing it onto the white bedsheets by accident as she takes the mug with a surprised “Oh!”

Bill rockets out of the bed and rushes to the bathroom, dropping to his knees in front of the toilet just in time. The heaving and retching empties his stomach completely, and he breaks out in a cold sweat. His mouth tastes like acid and burned coffee.

Once again, Jo is there. She puts a reassuring hand on his shoulder and then goes to the sink, running a clean washcloth beneath the cold tap and then wringing it out so that she can place it on the back of Bill’s neck.

“Shh,” Jo says, guiding him back to the bed. “Just get back under the cool sheet, honey.” She tucks him in the way she might do for one of the kids in this situation, and Bill lets her. Without a word, Jo closes the curtains tightly, smooths the sheets over Bill’s body, and leaves with a quiet click of the door.

In the semi-darkness, Bill’s mind takes a trip back in time. He and Margaret had only

been married a short time when she'd gotten pregnant, and the very thought of a little human in his wife's stomach had both terrified him and filled him with joy—much like every other man on the planet, he would imagine. He'd stared at her in wonder, trying to see the ways she looked different, but at first he could find none. Her moods seemed not to swing as wildly, which he loved, but she looked the same. And then, one day, her eyes had shone just a bit differently, and her skin had seemed luminescent. Slowly, her stomach began to swell in a way that was only noticeable to him when he saw her stepping from the bath naked, or as she lay next to him in bed, with his large hand resting on her soft belly.

“Do you think I'll be a good mother?” Margaret asked one night as they curled against one another in the darkness. “Do you think I can do this?”

Bill couldn't lie: he'd had misgivings. Margaret's moods were ever-changing and not stable under the best of circumstances. But this pregnancy seemed to have calmed her in ways he hadn't anticipated, and he was beginning to think that perhaps she could do it. Maybe she could be a good mother, and with a little luck, somehow the baby or the pregnancy might change her internally, easing over her ragged edges.

“I think you'll be a wonderful mother,” Bill said honestly. “I think this baby is going to love you, and you're going to love him, and it will all be perfect.”

The words had seemed like the right ones as they'd crossed his lips: perfect. Perfect baby. Perfect mother. A perfect life. But Margaret sat up in the darkness, enraged.

“Nothing is perfect, Bill,” she said, pulling her body away from his. “Nothing.”

“Okay,” he said soothingly, reaching for her and finding her smooth skin. He ran a hand over her hip and pulled her gently until she was close by and stretched out next to him again. “It'll be okay,” he said. “And I know nothing is perfect, but to me, it will be. I'll have my wife, and our beautiful red-headed child,” he teased, tugging at

her long, red hair gently. “And I’ll be so happy.”

Margaret breathed in and out, her body relaxing slowly and melting into his once again. Finally, after several minutes of silence, her voice split the darkness. “Bill?”

“Mmhmm?” he said, his mind elsewhere.

“If anything goes wrong with this baby, I’ll kill myself.”

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His heart leaped in terror in the dark. Bill turned his head to face Margaret. It wasn't the first time she'd threatened to kill herself, but the other times had been over stupid things: girls she'd thought were interested in Bill; fears she had about the way people looked at her. He'd never truly believed that she would, but in her voice now he heard a steely resolve and he believed her—if anything went wrong with this baby, Margaret would kill herself.

Rather than debate it with her, he put one arm over her and rolled so that his naked body was pressed up against hers beneath the sheets. “Nothing will go wrong,” he said, putting his lips to her neck and kissing her there. “Nothing can go wrong.”

Famous last words, Bill thinks to himself now. Because things had gone wrong; things had gone very wrong. At six months of pregnancy, Margaret's body had stopped nurturing the baby they'd both wanted so badly, and she'd given birth to a little girl they'd named Violet. Margaret was catatonic, and he'd buried Violet alone because she wouldn't get out of bed. Or maybe it was that she couldn't get out of bed; the distinction had been lost on Bill at that point, as he was living in a hell of his own. Margaret had never really come out of it, and after a year or so and two vague suicide attempts, Bill had decided—along with Margaret's parents—that she needed more help than they could give.

Out in the kitchen, the children are going about their breakfast routine in relative peace and quiet, but Bill is restless. He gets up, showers, dresses, and goes out to the front room, where he sits on the couch quietly. Jo sees him and brings him a fresh cup of coffee. She's still in her robe over a nightgown, which is uncharacteristic for Jo at this hour.

“Sit with me?” Bill says, patting the couch next to him. Jo sits. “Kids?” Bill calls. Jimmy, Nancy, and Kate come into the room hesitantly. Kate has a smear of strawberry jam on one cheek. “I’ve got something I’d like to tell you.”

Next to him, Jo’s body stiffens. He can tell she’s on alert, but ready. The children sit on the shaggy throw rug in front of the couch. Nancy puts her elbows on the coffee table and rests her chin in her hands. She looks curious and a little afraid. None of the kids have ever seen their father in the state they’d seen him in the night before, because whenever he has one of the episodes that have plagued him since returning from Korea, he makes sure to hide himself in a quiet, safe place until it passes. The storm of the news about Margaret had been impossible to keepcaged, and they’d heard him rasping as he cried at the kitchen table. They’d seen Jo help him back to the bedroom and close the door tightly behind him. For once, they’d gotten ready for bed with very little oversight from Jo, and none of them had complained about being put to bed without a story or an extra hug.

“Your mom and I have been married for thirteen years now,” Bill begins, “but before I met her?—“

“At the dentist’s office!” Kate interrupts gleefully, glad to be able to interject some bit of knowledge.

“Yes, at the dentist’s office,” Bill confirms. “Before that, I was married to another woman.” He stops, watching the kids’ faces. They look intrigued, but not shell-shocked by the news. “I was married to the girl I fell in love with in high school. Her name was Margaret.” Bill puts an arm around Jo and pulls her closer, not because he needs to feel her there, but more because he knows she needs it.

Over the next half hour, Bill tells them as much as he thinks they need to know, including the baby girl who hadn’t lived, and then he ends with a cleaned-up version of the way Margaret had chosen to end her own life. It’s a lot for three young children

to process, but for the first time in their lives, Bill can see that the things that affect him will also be things that feature largely in their own lives. Parents in crisis can inadvertently thrust their children into crisis, and Bill doesn't want that for them. As he'd lain awake for parts of the night, he'd realized that by being more open and honest with them, Bill can essentially ensure that they'll be less confused about who they are and where they come from. It's hard to be open and to share these personal stories, but in the end, he wants his children to know where they come from. He wants them to understand their parents so that someday, God willing, they can be better parents themselves.

"Are there any questions I can answer for you?" Bill asks. This is hard for him; he wasn't raised in a family where the kids were invited to ask questions or to understand grown-up issues, but he can feel Jo's approval, and he senses it in the way she's turned herself so that she's leaning into him.

Kate raises a hand like she's at school. Her eyes are wide.

"Yes, Katie-bug?" Bill says tiredly, trying not to sound as exhausted as he feels.

"Can I give you a hug, Daddy?"

That's all it takes for Bill to break. Tears flood his eyes and stream down his cheeks as he nods, one hand over his eyes to shield them. His baby girl gets up and comes to him, wrapping her arms around his neck and whispering in his ear: "I'm sorry about the baby, Daddy. And I'm sorry about Margaret. You loved her."

Bill can't say anything, but fortunately he doesn't need to. He just sits there and lets his wife and children hug him, and somehow they get through the day just like that—together.

CHAPTER 11

Jeanie

Take file to Arvin North.

Work on complex equation that may or may not have different outcome on the projected trajectory from Earth to the moon.

Answer a phone call from a fellow engineer in a different department.

Eat egg salad sandwich that Vicki packed.

Jeanie's morning is busy all the way through lunch on the Monday after the Fourth of July holiday, and she keeps her head down and her mind focused. Bill is at work, but he looks distracted and preoccupied, and they never even make eye contact.

"Jeanie?" Vance Majors approaches as she stands at a tall, gunmetal gray filing cabinet, searching through the stacks for something very specific. "Can I talk to you?"

Jeanie closes the filing cabinet drawer and turns to him. She frowns slightly. "Sure. What's up, Vance?"

"I'm worried about Bill."

Jeanie folds her arms across her body and nods, wondering why Vance has chosen her to talk to and not, say, one of the other guys. "Okay. I'm listening."

Vance takes a deep breath. "Well, as you know, he's been chosen for the three-man orbital test mission," Vance says, "and I don't think his head is in the game."

A secretary holding a pile of file folders swishes by, head held high. Jeanie eyes the

folders—maybe the one she wants is in that stack? She turns her attention back to Vance grudgingly.

“He just lost someone important in his life a couple of days ago, Vance. Of course his head isn’t in the game.”

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Vance's smile is a quick flash; not even a real smile. "Sure," he says. "Right. But in order to be the lead on a mission of any sort, a man needs to have his wits about him, and Bill doesn't. We've all sat down and agreed that we need to talk to Arvin North about it."

The blood drains out of Jeanie's face. "All of you?"

"Well, Todd thinks we should just wait and see what happens, but the rest of us are on the same page. The mission isn't until the end of the year, as you know, but if we're going to reconfigure things, now is the time to do it. We need to be prepared."

Jeanie is wildly uncomfortable with this discussion, and she realizes she must look it when Vance reaches out and touches the crook of her elbow lightly. "Don't worry, Jeanie. We're not asking you to bring this up with Arvin North or anything, we just need your help in gathering some of Bill's latest work, and also maybe testifying to the fact that you were there at the party and saw how he fell apart under pressure."

Jeanie is shaking her head, but no words are coming out of her mouth. In no way does she want to be a part of this, whatever this is. It just feels wrong. A man lost someone important in his life just days ago, and now his coworkers—his friends—are trying to usurp his position as leader of the three-man mission so that one of them can potentially get assigned to it. As the sole woman on their team, she knows that her words won't necessarily carry weight with them, but she also knows that she has the only chance here to make them see how wrong this is.

"Vance," Jeanie says, leaning against the filing cabinet. "You can't do this."

This is clearly not what Vance has expected to hear, and his face falls.

“Bill is a good, strong choice for this mission, and he’s got months to pull himself together. We’re not even doing this until December.” She searches Vance’s face for awareness and understanding. “You have to let him have a moment here,” she says, trying a different tack. “Imagine if you were in his shoes, and you got a terrible phone call that someone important from your past had taken their own life. How would you respond?”

An angry flicker passes over Vance’s face as he realizes that Jeanie isn’t just going to roll over on this one. He lowers his voice. “First of all, I’d keep my shit together in front of other people. There’s no way anyone would see me lose it. And secondly, I would compartmentalize it and make sure I could still do my job. I’ve been through traumatic things, Jeanie, and I know how to keep moving ahead without having anything affect my work.”

Jeanie is listening, but she’s looking at Vance with a distance that she doesn’t normally allow herself. Rather than being the strong, self-contained, patient man she knows him to be, he suddenly looks desperate to her. Desperate and spiteful. Everyone on the team knows that Vance’s wife, Jude, potentially drinks too much, and they also know that she’d once fallen and hit her head on the side of the pool, slipping into the water and nearly drowning while drunk.

The guys might not tell Jeanie all of this directly, but she has ears. She listens. She observes what’s going on around her. And what she’s observing right now is complete nonsense. Jeanie’s arms fall. She’s been holding them across her body protectively as Vance talks, but now she’s lost her defensive pose and she stands up straighter, looking him in the eye.

“We all respond to things differently, Vance, and what you’re suggesting now is completely disloyal. I won’t be a part of it. I think we all have our weaknesses in life,

and maybe Bill had a particularly tough relationship with his first wife. But that's really none of my business. What is my business is being a part of a team, and a real team works together, not against one another. So you do what you need to do, but please leave me out of it."

Jeanie's heart is pounding in her chest so hard that her blood is rushing in her ears. It sounds like ocean waves crashing inside of her head. Without waiting for Vance to respond—mostly because she can't wait; she needs to be away from him—she walks down the hall, her strides long, her eyes focused on a distant point.

Outside the office space Jeanie lets herself relax, and she leans against a wall. The adrenaline coursing through her veins stops moving so quickly, and she begins to shake.

Bill has the right to have a moment of weakness, and he has the right to have it amongst his friends, who are there for him and who will have his back. And even if no one else agrees with her, to Jeanie, that's just a human right.

She puts the back of her head against the wall and looks up at the fluorescent lights above, blinking away tears. There is no way Jeanie will be a part of this plan to take Bill off the December mission, but she knows she needs to distance herself from him. Because a part of her response to Vance just now had been a very real one about loyalty and teamwork, but another part of it had come from somewhere much deeper in her heart.

The pool of the Sunny Tides Condo Resort is surrounded by men and women covered in tufts of white hair. The women have poofs of snowy hair styled into cotton candy clouds or sprayed bobs that they don't let touch the water. The men have thin wisps of it on top of their heads, and scrubby patches of fur on their forearms, chests, and bellies. They're laughing and browning together in the late afternoon sun when Jeanie and Vicki join them later that afternoon.

“Let me just process this,” Vicki says as they sit down. She places a cigarette between her pink-manicured fingers. A shirtless man stops right in front of her and flicks a lighter, bending forward to shield the flame with his age-spotted hand as Vicki leans into it. Satisfied, she takes the cigarette from her lips, exhales and smiles up at him. “Thanks, doll.” The man winks at her and walks on.

Jeanie is watching this whole scene with amusement; no matter where they go, men are at the ready to open doors for Vicki, buy her drinks, or light her cigarettes. To her eye, Vicki is a very pretty, rather well-maintained woman at the middle of a life that’s left her with laugh lines and a smattering of freckles across her ample chest, but she’s no teenage beauty queen. She has a laugh so gravelly that it turns heads, and she’s prone to wearing colors and patterns that Jeanie knows she herself could never pull off, but somehow Vicki does nothing but reel in male attention.

It’s mystifying, and Jeanie wants to understand what it is about Vicki that works on the opposite sex. It’s not that the men who approach her are necessarily ones that Jeanie herself would want, but it’s the very idea that one woman can trail a scent of sex appeal behind her that brings in the teenage bag boy at Publix (an eighteen-year-old recently asked her out as he took her groceries to the car!), but also invites every other man from ages thirty to ninety into her sphere.

“So,” Vicki is saying, seemingly unaware that most of the older gents in the pool are eyeing her hungrily (or at least with some curiosity and interest), “just so I have it straight, the guy with the flat buzz cut who I was sitting next to at the party, he came up to you today and said he wants you to help him overthrow Bill Booker’s mission?”

Jeanie leans back in the lounge chair in the warm yellow sunlight that still covers the entire pool area, even at five-thirty. She unknots the towel tied around her body and lets it fall to the sides so that her bikini is visible. “Not exactly,” she says, closing her eyes as the sun touches her face. “More like they want to overthrow him and not the mission. I think Vance wants Bill’s spot on the team, but he’s making it out like he’s

worried about Bill's mental health."

"Hmmm," Vicki says, crossing her long, tanned legs at the ankle and surveying the older people who are bobbing in the pool like apples in a cauldron on Halloween. "Devious. Underhanded. Interesting."

Jeanie shrugs and opens her eyes, turning to Vicki as she squints in the sunlight. "But this is all between you and me, okay?" she says pointedly, remembering how hard Vicki had lobbied at the party at Bill's house to meet an astronaut of her own. She can't have her private work dramas and office struggles turned into pillow talk between Vicki and some aging space man. "You swear?"

Vicki solemnly holds up the hand that's holding her cigarette like she's swearing to a judge before testifying in court. "I swear, Your Honor."

"Anyway, he reacted badly to the death of his ex-wife. You saw it. He doubled over. He lost it. And I think that not only scared the other guys a little but also gave them an opening. It's not the kind of job where you can show weakness, and for good reason. I know that someone who can't keep it together could compromise a mission—everyone knows that. But there's a balance, don't you think?" She's still watching Vicki's face as Vicki listens to her. "A person should be allowed to experience life and respond to it without their coworkers turning into vultures."

"You don't need to defend him to me, princess." Vicki blows a long stream of smoke up into the sky. "I'm on your side here, but I also think you need to just let things play out. Don't make your own life harder than it needs to be."

"What do you mean?"

Vicki holds her cigarette aloft; it makes her look like a forties film star. She levels her gaze at Jeanie. "I mean, if you stick your nose where it doesn't belong, you might lose

it." She puts the cigarette to her lips again and the tip glows orange. "Let the men sort this one out. If you go running to Bill and tell him about this conversation, then you put yourself in jeopardy with the other men. If you keep defending Bill to them as heatedly as you're defending him to me, they'll sniff it out immediately that you've got a crush on him. You can't win either way, baby girl. So you might as well just stay out of it."

The older man who'd given Vicki a light comes back holding two bottles of beer. "Drinks for you ladies? You're looking rather parched over here."

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Vicki sits up and reaches her hand out gracefully to take a bottle. "I do love a gentleman," she says with a huge, toothy grin. And Jeanie knows this isn't a put-on: Vicki does go in big for men who treat her like a queen. "Thank you ever so much."

"Can't tell if you're even old enough to drink, sweetheart, but I figure if your mom here is okay with it, then there's a cold one here for you, too." He hands Jeanie the bottle, and while she isn't thirsty for beer, she still takes it politely and says thank you.

When the old man is satisfied with the level of flirtation he's gotten back from Vicki, he turns and waddles away triumphantly. His friends are looking at him with envy.

Jeanie glances at Vicki, who is preoccupied with her drink and her cigarette. "He called you my mother, and you didn't even bat an eye. I would have thought that might get under your skin—like it did last time."

Vicki gives a throaty chuckle. "Nah. He's not wrong; I could be your mother. And besides, to a man that age, I'm still as young and sexy as a Pan Am stewardess."

Someone tosses a beach ball into the pool and a whoop of joy goes up amongst the older folks.

Jeanie watches as one of the women tosses it in the air like a volleyball and spikes it at a tall man wearing a fishing hat. "You're right," she says with a wry smile, knowing that she's about to get pinched on the thigh by Vicki. "Plus they probably all have cataracts."

CHAPTER 12

Jo

"Tell me everything you feel like you can tell me," Frankie says. She and Jo are on a late evening walk in the middle of July, and they're strolling through the humidity at a snail's pace. Frankie hands her cigarette to Jo, but for once, Jo waves it away.

"It's too hot to smoke," she says resignedly. "I'm not in the mood."

Frankie shrugs. "Suit yourself. Now tell me what's been going on."

Jo takes a long, deep breath. "Bill has been talking to Desert Sage, which is where Margaret has lived for the past thirteen or fourteen years. It's been kind of overwhelming for him. I think he blames himself."

"Wait. Back up." Frankie stops walking and Jo does the same. "We haven't really talked since the Fourth, so give me a play-by-play."

It's so hot that even walking feels like too much work. Instead, they sit on a patch of green grass at the edge of someone's yard and tuck their legs up beneath themselves criss-cross style. Jo pulls a few blades of grass and lays them across her bare knee.

"So they called and told me Margaret was dead, and you saw what happened when I went outside to tell Bill." They're silent for a moment, both picturing Jo's husband as he crumpled to his knees next to the barbecue. A nearly inhuman wail had emanated from him that had stopped even the children's raucous playing.

"Yeah," Frankie says. She's stubbed out the cigarette at this point, and she joins Jo in plucking blades of grass. "I saw. And I understand that he was upset, given the circumstances, but how could he possibly feel that any of it is his fault?"

Jo screws up her face for a moment and then relaxes it. "I always felt like he regretted putting her into a facility. Not that it wasn't necessary," she adds hurriedly, "but he regretted that he wasn't the thing that could 'fix' her, so to speak. And we were paying quite a bit of money out of our own pockets each month to keep her safe, so I think he's also mad that this happened in the first place. Like, how can a place that you're paying to watch over someone every minute of the day have turned their backs long enough for this to happen?"

"It is tragic," Frankie agrees.

A man comes out of the house behind them and the women scramble to get up because they realize they're sitting in the yard of a neighbor they don't even know.

"We're sorry!" Jo says, brushing the grass off her legs as she stands.

"Ladies," the man says, lifting a hand to stop them. "You're fine. I'm not a huge fan of other people's dogs using my grass as they please, but I don't mind beautiful women taking a rest here."

Frankie laughs and brushes the hair away from her face in a manner that's almost coquettish. "Thank you. It's just so hot, and we were out walking, and it looked so inviting."

"Sit, sit," he says, waving a hand as he gets into the driver's seat of a brand new, cherry red 1964 Mustang convertible. "My wife is inside if you get thirsty and need a glass of water."

Jo laughs as he starts the car and backs down the driveway. "Thank you," she calls out to him, sinking back down onto the grass.

"Have a good evening, ladies," the man says, giving them a small salute as he puts

the car in drive and presses the gas lightly.

“So,” Frankie says, sitting down again. “Let’s get back to the matter at hand: Bill is upset he paid these people a lot of money to watch over his ex-wife, and they didn’t do a good enough job.”

Jo hems and haws. “Well...kind of. I think partially, at least. Sure, there’s a part of him that feels like they didn’t do what they were supposed to do, and then I think there’s a part of him that...”

“What?”

“Well, I’m worried that I’m projecting my own feelings onto him, but maybe he’s a little relieved? Maybe we both are. I don’t know—would that be wrong?”

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Frankie looks at her long and hard before answering. “Are you asking me whether it’s wrong for you to feel relieved that your husband’s first wife is dead?”

“Maybe?” Jo squints her eyes, feeling the shame wash over her.

“I don’t think that’s wrong at all,” Frankie says simply. “In fact, I’d question you if you said that you didn’t feel that way.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. What woman enjoys the thought of a first wife out there roaming around, much less a first wife who needs her husband to still be involved, and to make expensive monthly payments for her upkeep?”

“Frankie,” Jo says gravely. “I need you to understand that this isn’t about the money. Not at all. I would have gladly gone on paying that than to have Margaret end her own life.” She blanches at the mere suggestion that she might intentionally wish for Margaret to be dead. But she does wish that it didn’t feel so wrong to be a bit relieved about that chapter of Bill’s life closing for good.

A car full of teenagers drives past, and one of the boys in the front seat shouts out the open window at Jo and Frankie. “You two gorgeous ladies looking for a lift?”

The women stop talking and look at the boys, who are all of sixteen or seventeen. “Sure,” Frankie calls back. “Give me a lift to your house so that I can tell your mother that you’re being disrespectful to a couple of grown women in their thirties.”

One of the other boys howls with laughter, and the driver hits the accelerator and races off down the road, the taillights of the car glowing like two red beacons in the near darkness.

“Like that was an offer we couldn’t refuse,” Frankie says with an eye roll. She turns her attention back to Jo. “Okay, so as for you feeling like you need to be sorry that you’re not one hundred percent remorseful about Margaret’s passing, I say get over it, Joey-girl.” Frankie reaches over and pats Jo’s knee a few times for emphasis. “You’ve got to toughen up. Life is full of twists and turns, and at some point, this was always going to happen—if not exactly this way, then in some other way. Some other trauma. Some other tragedy. Stuff like this just jumps up and bites you when you least expect it.”

Jo leans back on her elbows in the grass, stretching her legs out in front of her. The living room light of the house whose lawn they’re lounging on goes on, casting a yellow glow in the blue dusk.

“I suppose it kind of does,” Jo agrees, chewing on the inside of her cheek.

“Now, you’re dealing with this—I assume Bill might have to travel to Arizona again? To...close things out?” Frankie asks delicately, clearly indicating the claiming of a body or some such final details.

“Desert Sage has agreed with Bill that a cremation would be the best course of action, and then yes, I think he’ll go there and claim the remains.” Jo winces. Admittedly, the idea of Margaret’s final resting place being on top of her mantel has been haunting her dreams, but she hasn’t had the heart yet to bring it up with Bill and to insist that they consider scattering the ashes or perhaps burying them somewhere in Florida. Truth be told, Jo has no idea how to approach that. At thirty-three, she hasn’t yet had much interaction with loss and death, and she’s finding it all a bit heavier than she would have anticipated, particularly in this situation, where Bill’s feelings are so

much more complicated than hers.

“Mmm,” Frankie says, nodding. “That makes sense.”

They sit there as two more cars pass with their headlights on. Finally, Frankie nudges Jo’s foot with her own. “So what happened with whatshername?”

Jo frowns. “Who?” All she’s had on her mind of late is Bill, Margaret’s demise, and the logistics of handling the practical and emotional fallout of that.

“You know—Jeanie. She came to the Fourth of July with that stale Cape Cookie, and I wanted to know how you felt about her after really getting to meet her.”

“Frankie!” Jo says with disapproval. “You can’t call Vicki ‘stale’ just because she’s over forty.” She shakes her head, shooting her friend a look. “She was...full of personality.”

“Oh, is that what you’d call it?” Frankie lowers her chin and gives Jo a knowing look right back. “I swear she would have ended up in the lap of one of the men if that party hadn’t broken up.”

“I don’t know about that,” Jo counters. “She seemed like she just wanted to have a good time.”

“Yes, with one of our men,” Frankie intones as she swipes at a bug that’s landed on her shin. “But anyway, we digress.”

“Yes, we do,” Jo says with more than a little sarcasm. “As for Jeanie, I quite liked her. She was sweet, and there was something almost innocent about her. I’m not sure if that’s the right word.” Jo flails around, searching for a more apt description. “I mean, I know she’s an engineer in her late twenties, but somehow she also comes

across as the teenaged babysitter who refers to you as Mrs. So-and-so and bakes cookies with the kids while you're out, you know?"

"That's called a 'minx,' honey," Frankie says as she wags a finger at Jo knowingly. "She'll sweet talk her way in, and then she'll close the deal with your husband."

"Frankie, what has gotten into you tonight?" Jo is half-laughing, and half-shocked by Frankie's outbursts. "I really believe she's just a nice woman who hasn't made many friends here yet. And that would be hard, being childless amongst all these women who have kids—" Jo cuts herself off as the mortification over what's coming out of her own mouth creeps up her spine and starts to tickle her scalp. "Oh, Frankie. I didn't mean?—"

"No, no," Frankie says, shaking her head firmly. "I know what you meant. She's single with no children, and that's a different world than us old married gals." Frankie puts a hand on top of Jo's to reassure her. "Being married—with kids or without—is the great divide."

Jo feels somewhat mollified that her friend didn't take her words with any offense, but it still pains Jo to know that she'd so casually said something to Frankie that could have truly hurt her.

"Let's keep walking," Frankie says, standing up and offering Jo a hand. She pulls her to her feet and Jo swipes at her backside to brush off any stray blades of grass.

The women stop at every corner, look both ways, and then cross the streets together, still talking about Jeanie and Vicki.

"They stayed after the party and cleaned up my entire backyard, you know," Jo says, feeling as though she's trying to build a case in Jeanie's favor so that Frankie will see the younger woman as harmless and not at all minx-like. "I thought that was really

nice of them.”

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“It was,” Frankie agrees, looping her arm through Jo’s as they stride up the sidewalk together. They stop in front of Jo’s house. “That was very thoughtful, given the circumstances.”

Jo stands at the foot of her driveway, dragging her toe across the concrete. “I just want everything to feel normal again,” she admits to Frankie. “And I know that’s going to take time—for me and for Bill. I’d gotten to where I could pretty much pretend that Margaret didn’t exist, but of course her death puts her front and center in our lives. It’s almost like she—or her ghost—has moved right into our house. Even the kids are acting strangely.”

“They’re just worried about Bill,” Frankie assures her. “He’s acting differently than normal, and the kids are picking up on that. Trust me.”

Jo nods with a grim smile. “You’re probably right,” she says, looking at the front door of her house and the way the porch light spreads a pool of yellow illumination onto the walkway. “I’m sure things will calm down here soon.”

“They will,” Frankie says. “But in the meantime, how are you going to cope with it? You’re not a big drinker, you say it’s too hot to smoke, and we only get out for a walk about once a week now. So what is Jo going to do for Jo?” Frankie asks, poking her friend in the chest lightly to make her point.

Jo thinks about this for a long moment, letting her eyes rove across the yard, up the trunk of the palm tree that’s growing taller with each passing day, and to the first stars of the evening.

“I think I’m going to write about it,” Jo says, nodding affirmatively. “Yeah, that’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to write.”

CHAPTER 13

Jeanie

“And if we think about the chemical energy that morphs into kinetic energy through the combustion process, we can see how heavily space travel relies on thermodynamic principles. I mean, the heat transfer and the entropy increase, and within our spacecraft, we’re required to manage the heat generated by the engines in order to maintain optimal temperatures in our operating systems,” Jeanie says. She pushes her glasses up the bridge of her nose and turns to point at an image that’s being projected onto a screen behind her in the darkened room. “Ultimately, it becomes a mission to make sure that we’re always considering the extreme temperature fluctuations in space.”

The lights go on, and the men on her team are all sitting there, looking serious and thoughtful. From experience, Jeanie knows that at least half of them are in an after-lunch blood sugar slump, but she stands at attention, waiting for their questions. As she laces her hands together in front of her, her eyes travel to Bill. He’s looking out a window at the tree line in the distance, but he turns his head without warning and meets Jeanie’s gaze.

“Thermodynamics are obviously the basis for space travel,” Bill says without warning. “So I understand the implications, but I’m wondering if thermodynamics and equilibrium aren’t the most important combination of factors that we have to deal with.”

A thrill runs through Jeanie; she should have known she could count on Bill to bring something relevant to the conversation.

“Right. Of course, Bill. Thermodynamic equilibrium is—as we all know—a state where a series of properties remain constant over time. There is no net flow of energy or matter within the system, and we achieve a state of balance where the system is stable.”

Jay raises a hand hesitantly and says something that dovetails nicely with the discussion, but Jeanie’s still watching Bill, noting the way his hair has gotten slightly longer than it’s ever been since she’s known him. His profile is sharp, and there are dark smudges beneath his eyes that make him look like he hasn’t slept well in weeks. As she’s looking at him, his eyes flick towards her and their gazes connect. Jeanie looks away.

“Good info in there, soldier,” Vance says to Jeanie as they all file out of the conference room following her presentation. “And solid points. Buy you your first drink at The Black Hole this evening?”

Jeanie, who is a full head shorter than even the shortest of the men, looks up at Vance and tucks her long hair behind one ear. “Sure. I’d like that.”

Things have been a bit tense between Jeanie and Vance since he’d cornered her and asked for her help in getting Bill thrown off the three-man mission, but she’s taken Vicki’s advice so far and stayed out of it, which has been challenging for her to do. Jeanie knows what it feels like to be bullied, and while this isn’t outright bullying like she’d gotten from Carol Fairchild on the playground, it still smacks of that same behavior. And, unfortunately for Bill, it has potential career ramifications, not just social ones.

There’s only about an hour left of work, so Jeanie loses herself in a small project and then gathers her purse and heads out to her car. She gets to The Black Hole a few minutes after the guys, and true to his word, Vance lifts a hand in the air to flag her down and then asks her what she wants.

“I’ll take a Greyhound, please,” she says. Someone plunks change into the jukebox and “Love Me Do” by the Beatles comes on.

“How’s your friend Vicki?” Todd Roman asks as he leans across the table and looks right into Jeanie’s eyes. “She was a hoot.”

“Vicki is good, thanks.” Jeanie’s smile is watery, and she can feel her energy flagging. Sometimes hitting The Black Hole is relaxing, but other times it just feels like an extension of work for her; it’s simply another hour of keeping her game face on, of listening intently to the subtext of any conversation, and of being ready for the guys she works with to loosen up and chat freely about whatever comes to mind as they make their way through two or three rounds of drinks. Jeanie doesn’t have the luxury to let herself go quite that much, so she always nurses one drink and makes it last as long as possible.

“I think she and Hank Crowley might hit it off. What do you think?” Todd asks, still watching her face. “I saw him in the lunch room today and immediately thought of setting him up with Vicki.”

Jeanie thinks about Hank: tall, well into his fifties, distinguished, no wedding ring. “He’s single?”

“Widower,” Todd says, taking a long pull on his beer and then setting the mug on the table. “Kids are grown and flown. I hear he makes the rounds with the Cape Cookies a bit, but I’m not entirely sure that Vicki would mind.” He winks at her, and then catches himself and holds up a hand. “Not that I’m insinuating anything about Vicki—she seemed like a very fun lady. It’s just that she seemed like she might be up for anything.” Todd’s face falls further as he realizes what sort of hole he’s digging for himself. “Sorry, this is not sounding right—I’m not trying to be disrespectful.”

“You’re fine,” Jeanie says with a small laugh. “Vicki is pretty open-minded.”

"So do you think I should try to set them up?"

Jeanie isn't sure. From what she's observed so far in the seven or eight months she's lived with Vicki, the woman does pretty well on her own when it comes to snagging men. But she had asked them to find her a mature astronaut, so...

"I guess it could be fun for them," Jeanie acquiesces. "If you don't mind being the one to deliver the info, then I'll write our phone number down for you and you can pass it on to Hank so he can contact her. I don't really want to talk to him about it."

Todd slaps the table, clearly pleased with himself that he's done a bit of matchmaking. "Super," he says. "I think they'll have a good time."

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Jeanie has no idea whether Vicki and Hank will be a love match or not, and frankly, she's a bit preoccupied. Her eyes have landed on the doorway of the bar repeatedly since she sat down, and she doesn't want to admit to herself that it's Bill she's waiting for. She'd assumed on the way out of the meeting that he'd be joining them, otherwise she most likely would have begged off for the evening and just gone home to read with Miranda curled up in her lap.

"Hey," she says, trying to sound as off-hand as possible. "Is Bill joining us? I had something I wanted to talk to him about. Just thermodynamics and whatnot."

A slight flicker of amusement passes over Todd's face. "Yeah, of course. A little thermodynamics chitchat over beers." He picks up his mug and takes a long swig. The open-air bar is packed, and the only thing to cut the humidity are the ceiling fans and the cold drinks. "Uh, I'm not sure." Todd looks around, glancing back at the doorway over his shoulder. "I guess I figured he'd be here, but maybe Jo wanted him home." He shrugs noncommittally.

Jeanie drains her Greyhound and sets the glass on the table. "No problem," she says with a smile. "It can wait for work, I just thought while it was on the brain, you know?"

"For sure," Todd says with a lopsided grin.

"Thanks for the drink," Jeanie says, standing up and putting the strap of her purse over one shoulder. "See you guys at the office."

The other men are deep into their drinks and trading barbs about who knows what

when Jeanie strides past the jukebox, eyeing a girl in a flimsy yellow dress warily as the girl leans one narrow hip against the jukebox. Jeanie pauses with a hand on the doorframe, watching as the girl makes eyes at a young pilot in aviator sunglasses. It's an intricate dance of wordless flirtation that passes between them, and for about the millionth time, Jeanie feels like an outsider. Where did other girls learn these tricks? How do they seem to inherently know the ins and outs of being appealing and interesting and romantically available?

The pilot takes off his sunglasses and stands up, making his way to the jukebox as if drawn there by an invisible rope. Before Jeanie walks out into the early evening heat, he's placed a hand on the jukebox and is standing far closer to the girl in the yellow dress than is necessary, both of their lips curled into questioning smiles. Jeanie turns and walks out of the bar.

The evening sun sparkles off of chrome bumpers and glares off windshields as Jeanie sighs, holding her keys in hand. She puts the key into the lock of her yellow Bug and twists it, nearly jumping out of her skin when she feels a hand on her shoulder.

"Bill!" she nearly shouts, turning around in a defensive pose. "Jesus. You scared me."

He holds up both hands in surrender. "Sorry about that. I called your name as you were walking, but I didn't think you could hear me."

She hadn't heard him. The music from The Black Hole combined with the traffic on the street to block out Bill's voice, and, admittedly, Jeanie had been lost in her own thoughts. But now that he's standing right here in front of her, her heart begins to thump out a rhythm and she desperately wants it to stop.

"I didn't hear you," she admits with a smile. "Are you heading in?" Jeanie tips her head towards the bar. She's kicking herself for having left so early, and she instantly hopes that Bill invites her back inside for another round.

Bill shakes his head. "No, I was out here hoping you'd come out."

"Me?" The world nearly stops as Jeanie leans her back against the hot metal of her car. Her eyes search Bill's face. "Why?"

Bill shrugs and gazes out at the water beyond the parking lot. It's really quite beautiful in the evening light, and two boats criss-cross one another lazily with colored flags flapping from their masts.

"I wasn't ready to go home, but I didn't want to go in and talk about sports or politics or whatever," he says with a wave of his hand. "And it was you I wanted to see, anyway."

"Me?" Jeanie repeats dumbly. Polish up your conversational skills, girl, she says to herself, trying not to cringe at the sound of her own voice.

But Bill doesn't seem to notice. "Would you sit with me for a bit, or are you in a hurry?"

Jeanie pulls her key from the car door and drops it back in her purse. "No, I'm not. The only thing I'm going home to is a hungry cat."

Bill puts a hand on Jeanie's lower back and guides her towards the water, where a weather-worn bench faces the boats and the horizon. They sit, and Jeanie intentionally puts a two foot space between them.

"Things have been strange," Bill says. He's looking at one of the boats. It has Lady Luck inscribed across its transom, and a leathery old man chomping on a fat, brown cigar stands there, looking out at the water like he's just conquered a foreign land. "I can't go home right now."

Jeanie's attention is ripped away from the man on the boat and she turns her upper body to look at Bill. "What do you mean?" Immediately, she wonders if Jo has kicked him out for some reason.

"It's just hard to be there. The kids know about what happened, but it's like they expect me to be fine and just act like their old, dependable dad, and I can't. And Jo is worried about me, but she's also a little happy about Margaret being gone, and that's tough to process."

Jeanie doesn't say so, but she thinks she can understand Jo's position. "Right," she says, nodding in a way that she hopes is encouraging. "Okay."

"When I'm there, it's just: sit down, have dinner, play with the kids in the pool, watch tv with Jo, go to bed, wake up, do it all again."

Jeanie isn't sure how he wants her to respond to this, and she surprises even herself with the words that come out of her mouth. "It sounds like a pretty damn good life to me."

Bill's head snaps in her direction; he looks surprised. "Oh, it is," he says, leaning forward to put his elbows on his knees. "I don't mean to sound ungrateful, I'm just struggling, Jeanie. I'm having a hard time understanding how my life has traveled the roads that it has, and how I've ended up here."

The hot evening sun prickles against Jeanie's scalp and shins, and she shifts on the wooden bench. "Which roads are you wishing you didn't take?" She folds her arms across her chest and watches Bill's profile. She knows her line of questioning might sound forward, but he's the one who approached her and asked her to sit down to talk to him.

"I don't know if there are any that I regret," he says. "It's more that it's all gone so

fast, and some of the things that happen in life are out of your control. I think I did everything I could for my first wife, and yet we still ended up here." He spreads his hands wide, turning his palms to the sky. "Or, rather, I'm here, and she's gone."

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Jeanie nods as she breathes in and out a few times. "I understand that feeling. I watched my mom struggle after my dad died, and I think she felt utterly helpless sometimes. Like, if she'd done something different, maybe he would have lived. Which is--just as it is in your case--entirely untrue. Obviously my mother had no say over whether my father went to war and died there."

Bill is watching her now, so she leans her back against the bench, arms still folded.

"Can you tell me more about that?" Bill squints as the sun falls further in the sky, the light of it hitting his face directly. "If you don't want to talk about losing your dad, then that's okay, but I'd love to know more about your life. About you."

Jeanie blinks a few times; she's taken aback at his request. It's not often that she's asked to talk about herself. But she's also aware that maybe listening to her talk is a tactic of Bill's to get his mind off his own troubles.

"I'm from Chicago," she says. "Which you know. My mom, Melva, had me when she was twenty. She and my dad married young," Jeanie says, feeling the unexpected sensation of tears as she talks about her mother. "After he died, it was just us, and we didn't have much money. My mom didn't know, but I listened to her cry herself to sleep every night."

"Oh, Jeanie," Bill says. She can feel him watching her, but it's her turn to squint into the fading sunlight.

"It's fine. We were fine." Jeanie brushes her fingers against the end of her nose and keeps going. "I would sit outside her room as she cried, and then when she finally

stopped, I'd go to sleep myself. I swore then that someday I'd get a really good job and make sure I could take care of my mom."

"I bet she appreciates that."

"Well, in the end, it seems that I'm working a great job just to look after myself. Unlike my mom," Jeanie says, trying to sound nonchalant, "love has never found me, so I'm just a girl out in the world on my own. My mom remarried when I was still young--to one of the teachers at my school--and then they had twins right away. That would be my brother, Patrick, who I've mentioned to you, and my sister Angela. I adore them." Jeanie's eyes soften and she smiles at the thought of them; she's so proud of her brother and sister, even if Patrick is going through a tough time.

"You did mention Patrick," Bill says. "Is he still getting up to mischief?"

"Nothing that will land him in jail, I hope," Jeanie says. "But he's definitely a teenage boy." She pauses, thinking of her sister. "But Angela is something else. She wants to be a teacher, just like her dad--my stepfather, Wendell Macklin--and she's been dating the same boy for two years. They'll probably end up getting married." Jeanie sighs. "Sometimes I wish it had been that easy for me: find a nice boy, settle down, be happy. But it hasn't worked out that way."

"Well, I hate to break this to you, but sometimes settling down doesn't equal automatic happiness."

Jeanie glances at Bill. "You weren't happy when you got married the first time?" She clamps her lips shut for a moment, then puts her fingertips to her lips. "I'm sorry. That's none of my business."

"Oh, heck no, Jeanie. You're sharing with me and being honest, and I'm going to return the favor." He thinks for a minute. "You know, I was happy when Margaret

and I got married. We were young--so young--but it felt right. She'd always been the apple of my eye, but then we got married, and soon after that she was pregnant. I think the whole thing just went so quickly, and she was always prone to these...these moods, you know?"

Jeanie frowns. "Like she would get angry with you?"

"More than that," Bill says, shaking his head. "She would be raging one minute and then laughing the next. She was so unpredictable. And I never knew what might set her off. You have no idea how hard it is to maintain a balance when you don't know which version of your wife you're coming home to that day."

"That sounds hard to navigate."

"It was." Bill puts his hands between his knees and hunches his back so that his shoulders are rounded; Jeanie has the urge to put an arm around him, but she doesn't. "And I was so young that I don't think I did it well." He sighs. "After Violet came too early—Violet, that's what we named our daughter—Margaret just checked out. Actually, it's probably not even fair to say that, because I don't think it was a choice, like, 'Hey, I can't do this anymore!' but more like she just mentally couldn't do it."

"I can't imagine how she must have felt." Jeanie tries to put herself in the shoes of a woman who has lost a baby but can't. Her heart can imagine the pain, but it feels like secondhand trauma; she has no personal basis for understanding the kind of love a mother feels for a child. "I'm so sorry, Bill," she says quietly, finally reaching over and laying a hand on his shoulder gently for a moment. "For all of it."

Bill blows out a long, loud breath and stands up forcefully. He walks a few steps over to where the water laps against the wooden dock. "It's time for me to pack it all up and put it away, Jeanie, and I know that." He shoves his hands into the pockets of his gray work pants. "You can't go on forever whining about things that happened in

your past, and no one wants to be around someone who gets jumpy every time something reminds them of the bad stuff.”

There is real pain in Bill’s voice as he says this, and Jeanie wants to understand. She gets up from the bench, leaving her purse there, and walks over to stand next to him. “Do you think that’s you? Do you think you get jarred by reminders?” She dares a look up at him, and his eyes are steely and focused on the water again.

Bill is quiet for so long that Jeanie isn’t even sure he’s going to answer, but he finally speaks. “I have these spells, Jeanie.” He turns just his head and looks down into her eyes. “I have to shut myself away from everyone, and I never talk about them.”

A small and merciful breeze cuts through the humidity for a second, ruffling Jeanie’s hair and the edge of her skirt as she takes this in.

“Does Jo know how you feel?”

“I think so. She must. But we don’t discuss it.” He clears his throat. “It makes me feel weak, admitting that I can’t just handle everything. And it’s extremely dangerous to say it out loud, considering my job and the implications it would have if I cracked under pressure.”

There is a pleading look in his eyes, a look that’s begging Jeanie to understand that she needs to keep this to herself, and for a moment she remembers the way Vance was ready to prey on Bill’s weakness. She swallows, but doesn’t look away from him.

“I understand,” she says softly. “I get it.”

The water before them ripples and glitters with the light of the waning sun. Jeanie and Bill hold one another’s gaze. It feels like they’re standing on the edge of

something—a precipice of sorts—and Jeanie doesn't want to fall in. But Bill's eyes...they're so blue. And so questioning. He looks like a man who wants to be understood, to be heard, to be loved. Just like she'd wanted to wrap an arm around his shoulders, she desperately wants to reach up and put her hand to his cheek, brushing her fingers against the stubble he's grown by the end of the work day. It takes all her willpower not to.

“Hey!” comes a loud, cheery voice from the parking lot. “Jeanie! Bill!”

They spin around in unison looking as guilty as two kids caught stealing fresh cookies straight out of the oven.

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It's Todd and Jay, walking to their cars. "You two found each other," Todd says. "We weren't sure that you were coming, Booker."

Bill clears his throat again and Jeanie watches as he closes the shutters behind his eyes and puts a big grin on his face. "Hey, guys. I just got here, and I saw Jeanie leaving. Wanted to pick her brain a bit about today's lecture."

Jeanie nearly gets whiplash from how quickly he's able to shift gears, but she keeps up. "Good to see you all, and thanks for inviting me," she says, walking back to the bench and grabbing her purse by its strap. "But I should get home. See you all at work."

"Bye, Jeanie," Todd says, lifting a hand as she goes.

"See you tomorrow," Jay adds.

This time when Jeanie puts her key in the lock her hands are shaking and she fumbles for a second. When she climbs inside, she shuts the door quickly in spite of the fact that her car has trapped the heat inside for the past hour and it feels like a furnace. She breathes deeply in and out as she jams the key into the ignition and turns the car on. The engine rumbles to life.

With both of her hands on the steering wheel and her eyes on the road, Jeanie drives all the way home in a daze.

She can't feel the things she's feeling towards Bill. She simply cannot. Being in Florida is all about her career. Her future. It's about being a part of something bigger

than herself, and finding a way to touch the stars.

She swings into her spot at Sunny Tides and turns off her car, listening as the engine ticks and settles. The windows are down and she listens as two neighbors out walking their dogs in the green square at the center of the resort talk loudly about the weather, which never changes, so far as she can tell. Florida is just hot, hotter, and slightly less hot.

Jeanie puts her head against the steering wheel and closes her eyes. She came here to find a way to forge her own path, to become the newer, bigger, better version of the girl she's always been.

She didn't come here to fall in love with someone else's husband.

CHAPTER 14

Jo

In her heart, Maxine knew that something was bugging Winston, she just didn't know what it was, Jo writes. She's sitting on the floor of the living room late one night during the first week of August, and her back is pressed to the couch, legs tucked under her as she taps away at the typewriter on the coffee table. He'd been different lately; coming home from work late and with a faraway smile, and not telling her as much about what went on during his days.

But that was no crime, surely—a man had a right to leave work at work when he came home, and he also had a right not to have his wife prying into everything he did. Maxine would love to know who he ate his lunch with, who he talked to in the hallway as he walked from one part of the building to another, or who he sat next to at the bar on his way home from work, where he stopped a few times a week with the guys from his team. But as any smart wife would, Maxine gave him space.

“Here,” Winston said, standing next to Maxine one evening as she washed dishes at the kitchen sink. Her arms were submerged in the bubbles up to her elbows, and he was taking soapy dishes from her and rinsing them before he dried each one carefully and put it in the cupboard.

“If only,” Jo says aloud to herself, stopping to take a sip of water as she imagines Bill doing the dishes with her. That would be the day. She shakes her head and puts her hands back on the typewriter keys.

“I saw you,” Maxine said without preamble.

“You saw me what?” Winston stopped rinsing the glass dish in his hand and set it on the counter. He turned to his wife. “Where?”

“I saw you leaving the bar the other day. I was driving home from volunteering at the Red Cross, and I saw you standing outside of The Shuttle with...some woman.”

Winston frowned and took a beat. “Are you sure it was me?”

Maxine lowered her chin as she stared at the man she’d been married to for nearly fifteen years. “Yes. I’m sure.”

“Huh.” Winston picked up the dish, finished rinsing it, and dried it slowly. “I guess it could have been the day when I chatted briefly with Helen before I left to come home. I ran into her there.”

Maxine turned back to the sink. Helen Smithers was the only female engineer on Winston’s team, and while Maxine quite liked the woman, there was something she simply didn’t trust. She pursed her lips as she thought about it, realizing that it wasn’t Helen herself that she didn’t trust, per se, but more the idea that a man and a woman could truly just be friends. It seemed that any sort of work friendship was destined for

one of the parties—or both, heaven forbid—to decide they had feelings for the other.

“I see,” Maxine said after a long and drawn out pause. “And how is Helen?”

“Helen is...” Jo stops writing here mid-sentence, letting her hands fall into her lap. She isn’t sure where she’s going with this train of thought, and she wants to get it right. If she’s using her own life as fuel for her writing, and if she’s using her writing as some sort of catharsis—and she knows that she is—then she needs to at least get her feelings right.

It’s after midnight now, and it’s useless to keep writing a scene without a real purpose, so Jo pulls the page from the typewriter and puts it into the file where she keeps her work in progress. She tucks everything into the drawer of the credenza in the living room and leaves her typewriter where it is. It’s heavy and unwieldy, and banging around in the middle of the night as she puts it away is just an invitation for Bill and the kids to be woken abruptly.

Bill is snoring lightly in their bed when Jo lets herself into the room, and she steps out of her slippers and drapes her robe over the chair in the corner. The moonlight is casting enough of a glow that she can see her way to the bed, and she pulls back the covers gently, trying not to wake her husband.

Bill rolls over and his snoring stops briefly as Jo settles, but soon enough he’s breathing deeply again, oblivious to the fact that Jo is essentially writing the story of their current lives. She knows he wouldn’t be thrilled, but so far he hasn’t even bothered to read her stories, so in a way, it serves him right.

There’s also the small matter of Bill’s blossoming friendship with Jeanie Florence, and Jo had, in fact, seen them standing outside of The Black Hole together by her VW Bug one early evening as she’d driven home from the hospital. They were alone, and Jeanie was standing with her back to her car, looking up at Bill’s face. As Jo had

driven by, she'd been tempted for one brief moment to swing into the lot, but in the blink of an eye she'd driven right past the turn, so she simply kept going, stunned by the shroud of intimacy that seemed to have fallen over Bill and Jeanie as they'd stood there in the hot parking lot.

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Jo turns onto her back and stares at the ceiling before she puts one arm across her eyes and shuts them tightly. It actually does serve him right that I'm writing what I feel right now, she thinks to herself as she yawns. It really does.

CHAPTER 15

Jeanie

It's August, and Chicago is only marginally less unpleasant than Florida. Jeanie has flown up for a long weekend to attend the eighteenth birthday party of her younger siblings, Patrick and Angela. Being in the house she'd grown up in immediately restructures Jeanie's sense of self, and without warning, she forgets that she's a grown, capable woman who has been hired to work as an engineer for NASA, and instead finds herself saying "Yes, Mama," to her mother's every request, sleeping in the twin bed she'd occupied for most of her life in the same room as her sister, and asking permission to borrow the family car to make a quick trip to the pharmacy for aspirin.

"Just drink some water, sweetheart. You'll be fine," her mother says, swatting away the idea of buying aspirin.

"Mom, I've got a headache and cramps, and I really need aspirin. Water isn't going to cut it," Jeanie says, standing there with a hand out, waiting for the keys. She's finally reached her limit for obedience and daughterly behavior, and that limit happens to be menstrual cramps.

Melva Macklin blushes at her daughter's mention of cramps and wipes her hands on

the front of the apron she's wearing as she bakes her twins a birthday cake.

"Okay, Jeanie," Melva says. She ducks her head as she walks over to the drawer where the car keys are kept. "Here you go. Be careful."

As Jeanie drives through the lushly treed streets of their neighborhood, she thinks about her mother. Melva Macklin is truly a product of her time. Born in 1914, she'd grown up during the Great Depression and lived through both world wars. In Melva's framework of understanding, a woman needed a husband, because she was born to have children, to raise them, and to make a good home for her family. Her interests were demure ones: baking, knitting, possibly reading light fiction if—and only if—her other tasks had been completed. Her idea of a good life is Jeanie's idea of a simple, incomplete life, and the more time that Jeanie spends away from Chicago, the more she realizes that she's never going to be able to live the life that her mother expects her to live.

At the pharmacy, Jeanie browses the aisles, looking at the lipsticks and the cough syrups, and finally choosing a bottle of aspirin that she takes to the counter. When she realizes that the man in front of her, who is perhaps thirty, is trying to discreetly ask for a box of the prophylactics that are stored behind the counter, she pretends to busy herself with digging through her purse, searching for her wallet.

In addition to giving the man a bit of privacy, she is also trying to mask her own reddening cheeks, because for some reason, the mention of condoms has brought Bill to mind, and this makes Jeanie wildly uncomfortable. Why is it that the brain brings thoughts forward at the most inopportune times? And the things that one should be thinking about least become the things that hijack all thoughts and reason, refusing to let go?

By the time she's paid for her aspirin and gotten back into the car, Jeanie has wrenched control of her mind again, but not before wondering idly whether Bill and

his wife rely on male prophylactics, which of course means that she's now thought of Bill in the nude, and—oh God—Jeanie places both hands on the steering wheel of her mother's station wagon and lets her forehead fall against it lightly as she squeezes her eyes shut and tries to forget this entire train of thought.

Jeanie lifts her head from the steering wheel and starts the engine. "Birthday cake," she chants to herself. "Ice cream and balloons and music and grandparents," she says, turning the car out of the lot and merging into traffic. "Birthday cake, birthday cake, birthday cake," she tries again, watching for cars as she crosses through an intersection.

And the afternoon is filled with everything Jeanie has imagined: her mother frosts the cake with bright orange icing and sticks thirty-six small candles into the spongy dessert—eighteen for Patrick, and eighteen for Angela. Wendell's parents, who are actual grandparents to the twins and de facto ones for Jeanie, are there, and they ask her with appropriate interest and awe all about her job, her condo in Florida, and what it's like to work with people who fancy the idea of going to space.

"It's wonderful," Jeanie says, holding her plate in one hand and her fork in the other as she takes small bites of the orange frosted cake. Patrick has put on a Beatles album, and Angela is sitting on the floor near a stack of vinyl records, sorting through them as she chooses the next one. "The idea of traveling to the moon is so inspiring." She looks out the window dreamily as she says this, but realizes quickly that Wendell Macklin's parents, who had been born in the late 1800s, most likely view the entire prospect of space travel as so fantastic, as such complete science fiction, that they can only smile with amusement at the very notion. After all, these are people who first saw the automobile when they were in their thirties, and for whom Lincoln's assassination and the Titanic's catastrophic voyage are anything but ancient history.

"Well, Jeanette," Mrs. Macklin says, patting her gray hair, which is pulled back in a bun. "Life is a wonder and a mystery. We're so proud of you."

“Thank you, Grandma Macklin,” she says, using the moniker that Wendell’s mother had insisted she use the moment her son had married Jeanie’s mother. They’ve always been so good to her, and Jeanie loves them both, just as she loves Wendell. She looks over at her mother and Wendell now, and they’re standing proudly in the center of the room, talking to Wendell’s brother and his wife, who have come to town from Milwaukie for the occasion.

These people are my family, Jeanie thinks. And they’re good people. Maybe none of them understand what I do, and maybe most of them don’t approve of a woman doing the job that I do, or maybe they don’t support a woman who wants to go to space at all, but they’re still my family.

After she helps her mother get the entire house back in order following the party, Jeanie flops down on the couch between her brother and sister.

“What’s going on with you two?” she asks them, folding her hands across her overly-full stomach. In addition to the cake, she’d eaten more than her fair share of spaghetti and garlic bread.

“We’re eighteen,” Patrick says dully. “In case you hadn’t heard.”

“Oh, I heard, smarty-pants,” Jeanie says, reaching over to swat his thigh. “And I’m still your big sister even though you’re a grown up now, so show some respect.”

Angela laughs. “Honestly. He should show everyone more respect.”

Jeanie can feel some friction between the twins, but they are and have always been a closed unit, so she glances back and forth between them, unsure what might have caused Angela to deliver this particular directive.

“Let’s go out,” Jeanie says, slapping the couch with both hands and then pushing

herself up so that she's standing. "Let's get a drink."

"We're only eighteen, Jean," Angela says with a sigh. "Remember—they changed the drinking age last year from eighteen to twenty-one."

Patrick runs a hand through his short hair. "Dumb," he proclaims. "Everyone drinks anyway."

"Oh. Right. The drinking age—of course. Let's go out and get a Coke then. I want to take my brother and sister out on the town."

Patrick huffs a laugh. "Is getting a Coke considered going 'out on the town' in Florida?"

"Get your stuff, Patch," Jeanie says, using the nickname she'd given her little brother as a baby. "You too, Angelina," she adds, throwing in Angela's nickname for good measure.

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The summer night is hot, and it took some convincing for Melva to let the kids take the car out, but now they're driving with the windows down and the radio blaring, and Jeanie happily sits in the passenger seat, letting her brother drive.

"So," Patrick says, one arm hanging lazily out the driver's side window. "How do you like it down there, Jean? Is it good?"

Jeanie looks ahead at the cars on the road, watching their red taillights. "It is good," she says. "I live in a condo where everyone is over seventy except for me and Vicki, who is Aunt Penny's best friend?—"

"We met her once," Angela says from the backseat. "She wears a ton of makeup and talks about men a lot, doesn't she?"

This makes Jeanie smile. "Sounds like her." She points at a diner on the corner. "Let's go there."

They carry on the conversation as they slide into a booth next to a window that looks out at the busy street. "Anyway," Jeanie continues, "Florida is interesting. It's so humid that it feels like you could cut the air with a knife in summer, and it's totally flat. All you can see for miles is the line of trees—no mountains, no hills. And the beaches are amazing. White sand and warm water...sometimes it feels like paradise."

"But don't you miss Chicago?" Patrick asks.

They pause to order Cokes and a basket of fries to share, and as they're handing their menus back to a tired-looking waitress, Jeanie laces her fingers together and puts her

elbows on the table, resting her chin on her hands.

“Yeah, I miss it. There are big cities in Florida, of course, but even Miami doesn’t hold a candle to Chicago. I miss snow in winter, and being able to go into a city where you have choices between museums, theaters, and parks. But my job makes it worthwhile. I love NASA.”

Angela’s eyes widen. “Do they let you do the same things that the men do there?”

Jeanie’s gaze travels to her sister’s face and she searches it for a moment. Angela has always been sweet. She is the quietest of Melva’s three children, and she has never once done or said anything that would alarm anyone. Sometimes Jeanie wants to shake her and ask her if she knows that there’s more out there. The world is so big, and the opportunities endless, and she doesn’t want her baby sister to pigeonhole herself so early in life.

“Have you always wanted to be a teacher?” Jeanie asks instead of giving a straight answer.

Angela shrugs. “Yeah. I always played school with my dolls, remember?”

“I do,” Jeanie agrees. “But you know women can be more than teachers or nurses, right? There are so many choices, Angelina.”

Angela’s forehead creases slightly, in the way that smooth, unlined eighteen-year-old foreheads do when their owners are mildly puzzled or chagrined. “I didn’t even know women could work for NASA until you did it.”

Jeanie draws in a breath and holds it. She releases and puts her palms flat on the cold tabletop. “Look, Angelina, the world is not fully ready yet for all the things that women can do, but it’s opening up to us. Think of how much it’s changed since Mom

was young. When my dad died, she was a woman with a child, and she'd never been to college. She had no work skills. Her choices were really limited."

"So she only married Dad because she couldn't do anything for herself?" Patrick asks, sounding offended.

"No!" Jeanie turns to look at her brother, who is seated next to her in the booth. "Oh, Patrick—no. She met your dad when I was in his class, and right away it was clear that they loved each other very much. That has never been in question." Jeanie pauses here. This is all true; she knows that, in fact, her mother had fallen hard for Wendell Macklin straight away, but privately she's always thought that a need to survive and care for her only child might have sped things along. She will not, however, share that thought with her siblings. "Your mom and dad are very much in love and happy."

"So you don't think I should be a teacher?" Angela presses. "You think I should do something else—maybe leave Chicago?"

This is not going the way Jeanie had expected, and when the waitress drops off their sodas and fries, she reaches into the basket to grab one, grateful for a distraction.

"That's not what I'm saying at all, Angela. I just want you to know that you can dream bigger. Picture other things than a life here where you marry and settle down at twenty."

Angela blinks at her as if she's speaking a foreign language. "You don't think I should marry Andy? I mean..." She suddenly looks panicked, and she hasn't even touched the Coke in front of her. "We've been together for two years, Jeanie. We want to get married. I've worked hard to keep this relationship going, but now I feel like you're telling me that I'm limiting myself if I marry Andy and become a teacher here in Chicago."

For once Patrick is quiet as a mouse, nibbling on the fries as he looks back and forth between his twin and his older sister.

"That's not what I'm saying at all!" Jeanie nearly shouts. She glances around to see if she's disrupted anyone else, then lowers her voice. "Please, you're taking this the wrong way. I just want you to have the option to think through what you want out of life. That's all."

"I have thought it through," Angela says with passion as she balls up her napkin and tosses it on the table. "And I want to marry Andy. I like my life, and I like my plans." She stands up, looking down at Jeanie as she fumes next to the table. "I just wish you were proud of me, too."

Jeanie's mouth gapes open like a fish as she watches her baby sister walk through the diner like she's on a mission. With a shove, she pushes open the door to the ladies' room and disappears inside.

"Well, you pissed her off," Patrick says with a shake of his head. "Good luck coming back from that." He gives Jeanie a knowing smirk as he glances at the basket of fries between them. "Hey, you gonna eat those?"

Jeanie pays the check at the diner after Angela rejoins them. It's awkward, to be sure, but she does her best to redirect the conversation, and Angela plays along, mercifully, catching her big sister up on what's been going on in her absence. Her best friend is engaged, two of her classmates have enlisted in the military, and one of the teachers at Elmwood Country Day just found out that she has cancer.

It's completely dark out when they slip into the car, and Jeanie is exhausted by the long, hot day. The party had been nice, but she'd ended up making small talk for hours, and now she's mildly frazzled by the way she'd gone into this talk with her siblings thinking that her sister might feel empowered but instead ended up angry.

She's getting settled into her seat when Patrick slips a flask from under the front seat of the car, takes a swig, and recaps it, and he's tucked it away completely by the time Jeanie turns to look at him.

"Shall I escort you ladies home before I head out for the evening?" he asks, turning the key and causing the engine to rumble to life.

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"You're going out after this? Is Mom okay with that?" Jeanie holds her purse in her lap. She sincerely doubted that at eighteen, her mother would have been thrilled with her starting her evening at nine-thirty p.m., and she'd bet dollars to donuts that Angela isn't allowed to head out with friends this late, either.

Patrick shifts gears on the steering wheel, backing out of the spot with one long, strong arm resting on the back of the seat as he turns to look behind him. "Of course," he says, shifting into drive and pulling forward. "I'm a man, sis. I can come and go as I please."

And it's this, this right here, that infuriates Jeanie. She turns to look out the window as they drive. They've left the busier city streets of their suburban enclave and are now winding through less traveled roads, speeding along on their way back to the house. Jeanie glances at her brother's profile in the darkness; he's a young man now. He's growing up and finding his way, and no one but her has bothered to question Patrick being allowed to come and go as he pleases—which, she might point out, is the way that he's been able to carouse and get into trouble with his friends—and by the same token, no one has bothered to sit Angela down and talk to her about what she might truly want for herself.

This bothers Jeanie.

"You know," Jeanie says, once the feelings of injustice have bubbled up inside of her to the point that they boil over. She's worried about her siblings, but she wants them to know it all comes from a place of love. "I really hate how?—"

But she never has the chance to tell her brother and sister what she's thinking, and

she never gets to lecture her brother about the choices he's making. Furthermore, Jeanie never sees the flask that Patrick has tucked between his thighs, because what she sees instead is the stop sign that he blows through, one arm still hanging casually out the open window as he turns to look at Jeanie. Patrick never sees the giant pickup truck that has also, against all odds, barreled through the stop sign that should have given its driver pause, and so the two vehicles collide at full speed in a sharp, screeching crash of metal.

The last thing Jeanie sees as she lays in the field where she's been thrown is the blinking light of the flipped truck's turn signal, which flickers methodically in the darkness, illuminating Angela's broken and bent body as it lies just feet from Jeanie.

CHAPTER 16

Bill

The guys are in a huddle in the office, talking quietly as they hold cups of coffee or keep their hands shoved into their pockets. Their faces are serious.

“Morning, gents,” Bill says, swinging his briefcase around and setting it flat on top of his desk. “How was the weekend?”

Silence. Some eyes land on Bill, and others drift and shift in avoidance. In addition to their little group, Bob Young and Derek Trager are there, and the addition of two more men to their small unit makes it feel as though they’re swarming around Bill’s desk.

“Hey,” Todd Roman finally says, stepping away from the other men and clapping a hand on Bill’s shoulder. It seems a bit early in the morning for this kind of physical contact, and Bill startles. “We have some bad news, and we thought you should hear it from all of us.”

Bill is not a fan of bad news. He does not like it on the phone, he does not like it in person, he prefers not to receive it at his own Fourth of July barbecues, and he's not keen on receiving it first thing on a Monday morning. But he's also the kind of guy who faces things head on, so he inhales deeply, turns his full body to Todd, and waits.

Todd glances back at the other men before going on. "They're restructuring the mission. We just heard."

"What does that even mean?" Bill frowns. He knows immediately that they're talking about the three-man mission scheduled for December—the one he's been tapped to lead.

"We're not sure yet," Bob Young pipes up. "North is about to call us all into a meeting, and we wanted to walk in as a unit."

Bill runs a hand over his freshly shaven jawline. The face of his silver watch glints under the overhead lights. "Okay," he says simply. He has no idea what kind of news they might be getting, but he does appreciate going in to deal with it as a team.

The men file into the conference room and sit around the table, each of them thinking their own private thoughts as they wait for Arvin North to join them.

"What do you think about us bombing North Vietnam?" Jay Reed says to Derek Trager. They're seated right across from Bill, and he glances their direction as they lean in closer to one another, carrying on their side conversation.

"Had to be done," Trager says firmly. "A necessary response to an unprovoked attack on our Navy ships."

"True." Jay is nodding and about to say something else when Arvin North enters the

room. He drops a file on the conference table and sits down with a sigh.

“I wanted to talk to you all about the Gemini orbital mission.” North clears his throat and rests both elbows on the arms of his chair, steeping his hands. “There has been some internal reconfiguring, and some necessary changes are being made. I know you’ll have questions, but I’m not sure I can provide the answers, and frankly, none of it really matters. Things have changed, and we go with the flow.”

Bill can feel his stomach clench and he intentionally relaxes his hands, his face, his chest. He takes deep breaths.

“Anyhow,” Arvin North says as he flips open the file. “Our new date is December 13, which is moved up from December 19. From this point forward, the Gemini orbital mission will be headed by Derek Trager.” Trager’s face changes as Bill glances his way, but Trager is a seasoned pro and he quickly wipes away any glimmer of elation. “And Trager will be assisted by Bob Young and Murphy Hendricks.” North’s eyes flick in Bill’s direction. “Booker, you’ll be our mission project lead outside the capsule.”

The meeting ends after this announcement, with different groups breaking out and huddling together all over the building as they discuss the changes in hushed tones. Bill walks directly to the lunch room and plunks a dime and a quarter in the coffee vending machine, then waits for the paper cup to fill with hot, dark liquid.

"Hey, buddy," Todd says, walking in with his own mug of coffee. "Big turn of events. You doing alright?"

Bill forces a smile that takes all the effort he can muster. He's fully aware of his own stiffness as he puts a hand into the pocket of his trousers and jingles his change, turning to look at Todd. He nods, trying to summon the words. "I'm good," he says, wondering whether it's even necessary to lie to Todd. "I'll be curious to hear what

necessitated the changes, but I'm here to work as a team, and whatever we need to do to make this successful is fine by me."

The stream of coffee starts to peter out and Bill punches the button for creamer, which drips into the cup. He picks it up and holds it in one hand, still smiling woodenly at Todd.

"Sure, sure," Todd says, glancing around to make sure they're alone. "But it's still a shock to the system to have the rug pulled out from under you."

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Bill sips his coffee and nods, hoping that the action of drinking hot coffee will spare him from having to respond.

Todd goes on. "It's just, you were such a good friend to me at your house on the Fourth, giving me a pep-talk and all, and I want you to know that I'm here for you, too." Todd puts a hand on Bill's shoulder and looks into his eyes with such sincerity that Bill actually feels a bit better--even if only momentarily.

"Thanks, Todd," Bill finally says, willing his voice to stay strong and firm. "I appreciate that. I'm just processing right now, to be perfectly honest."

Todd pats Bill's shoulder and then lets his hand fall. "Okay, I'll see you back in there."

When Bill is alone again in the break room, he wanders over to the window, holding his paper cup of coffee. With one hand on his hip, he watches the goings on outside in the shimmering August heat. Men sweat as they whip around the black tarmac on open Jeep-type cars, stopping here and there and vanishing into the giant doors of open hangars. The sky is blue, but by afternoon, summer storms will have rolled in, as they do almost every day in August, and thunder and lightning will keep everyone inside until the lashing rain and bolts of electricity have passed.

The summer storms in Florida have become one of Bill's favorite things about the place. Something about the way the darkness rolls in out of nowhere, taking over and changing the course of everything for an hour or two, reminds Bill of the storm that brews inside himself. He can often feel that coming, too—an electric energy that crackles under his own surface. It sends him somewhere to hunker down, to hover, to

hide, to simply wait for calm skies to return.

Sipping his coffee, Bill squints out at the blacktop and swears he won't let it happen today. No matter what Arvin North's reasoning is for pulling him from the active lead position on the three-man mission, he will not sink into himself and hide today. He needs to own up to whatever he might have done to make this happen.

But first, he needs to find out what that is.

"Sir? May I have a word?" Bill raps lightly on North's door, and the man looks up from the papers on his desk, glancing at Bill from over the top of his glasses.

"Come in." Arvin North waves him in with two fingers, still holding a sharpened pencil in his hand as he does it. "Close the door."

Bill does as he's told and then stands there until North nods at the chair across his desk. Bill sits, and North leans back in his own chair, watching Bill appraisingly.

"Sir. I understand that protocol and need sometimes dictate a restructuring of a mission, but I have to know if it was something I did wrong. I've been looking forward to heading up the Gemini orbital mission, and...I guess I just want to know if it was something I did, or if there's anything I need to do differently."

North stays quiet for an almost uncomfortable amount of time before taking off his glasses and rubbing his eyes. "Bill," he finally says in his deep, rough voice as he puts the glasses back on and looks right into Bill's eyes. "Here's the thing. A man has a lot going on in his personal life at any given time—I know that. I even expect that. But a man who is going to head any sort of space mission, one that leaves the ground or not, needs to be fully present. Fully in his own head." North pauses here, swiping a hand over his lower face as he considers his words carefully. "You've had a lot go on this past year with the ex-wife, and I'm very sorry for your troubles." Arvin North

holds Bill's gaze. "But I understand you may have had some real trouble processing this loss, and I want you to be able to fully get to the other side of those emotions before we put you in a high-pressure situation of any sort. Are you hearing me?"

Bill feels like someone has dropped a boulder on his chest. Of course he knew that Arvin North knew about Margaret's death, though he's worked hard to keep all of that away from work and even out of his mind during work hours, but he truly can't see how it affects his ability to lead a mission. Unless...but no. There's no way that anything he'd told Jeanie at The Black Hole had gotten back to Arvin North. No way. He can't imagine Jeanie gossiping with any of the other guys on their team. There's no way she would have divulged the things he'd told her in confidence. But there's no other explanation, really.

"Sir," Bill says, pulling himself out of the endless thought-loop he's stuck in. "Respectfully, I have to disagree. I've been fully present at work, and while the death of my ex-wife was certainly a shock, it hasn't interfered with my work here at all."

North nods understandingly. "Booker, you're a fine man. Someone I respect, admire, and enjoy having on the team. I do think you should possibly talk to someone professional. I have a recommendation for you, and I think if you make an appointment with this doctor, you might get something out of it."

Bill tries not to shrink back in horror. "A doctor? You think I've got something going on...mentally?" Doctors who help people with mental problems are only necessary for people like Margaret, in Bill's mind. What kind of man goes and sits down with a perfect stranger and divulges all the thoughts in his head? The very idea of it sends spasms of horror through Bill.

No way. Not happening.

Arvin North is quiet. Serious. He never looks away from Bill, which is an important

move. To look away would be to indicate discomfort or disapproval. "I think we all have things going on mentally, Bill. Nothing wrong with that," he says in a tone that's gentler than normal. "You just have to get hold of them so that they don't affect work and life. You know?"

No, Bill thinks. I don't know. But he knows that he can't defy North on this, so he nods curtly. He also knows, deep down, that Arvin North is correct: his dark moods can and do affect his work and his life, he's just done a pretty damn good job of keeping them to himself up until now. Up until he made one of the biggest mistakes of his life and told Jeanie Florence about them.

Well, he's not about to sit here and delve into his own problems with Arvin North. That will lead to nothing but disaster and the destruction of his career. So instead, he stands up, smooths the front of his pants with both hands, and looks right at his boss.

"Thank you, sir," Bill says. "I appreciate your time and the advice."

North looks at the papers on his desk and shuffles them a bit, giving Bill a moment of non-eye contact to compose himself. "I'll get that recommendation for you. Have it put in your box by the end of the day."

Bill says nothing more, but he nods once, then walks out the door.

CHAPTER 17

Jeanie

The hums and beeps of the machinery keeping Angela alive fill the hospital room, and Jeanie sits in a chair in the corner, staring at the unmoving body of her teenage sister beneath a stark white sheet. Her neck is stiff and her shoulder black and blue, but otherwise Jeanie was incredibly lucky: she got up and walked out of the hospital the

same night as the accident. Patrick, who'd lost consciousness after hitting his head on the steering wheel and spent one night under doctor's care for observation, is now awake and stricken with guilt. He can barely be in the same room as Angela, and Jeanie has taken up the charge to sit bedside as many hours a day as the nurses and doctors will allow her to.

"Hi, honey," Melva says, entering the room quietly with her purse over one arm. She's been there almost as much as Jeanie, keeping a watchful eye over her younger daughter, but has just taken a break to speak with the doctors. Melva comes to sit next to Jeanie, and she sighs deeply.

"Where is Wendell?" Jeanie asks. She has the gut feeling that this is a conversation for which her stepfather should be in the room.

"He'll be here soon," Melva says. Her eyes are tired and red-rimmed, and she looks like she hasn't slept in days, though it's only been about thirty-six hours since the accident.

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Jeanie reaches over and laces her fingers through her mother's. "What did the doctor say?"

Melva puts her free hand to her face and sobs quietly, covering her eyes. "They think she's going to live, but we have no idea what things will be like when she wakes up."

A chill runs down Jeanie's spine. "Like, they don't know what her brain function will be? Or they don't know whether she'll walk again?"

Melva makes a small, strangled sound. Angela is her baby; the second-born of her twins. Her last child. And, to be fair, the one most destined to live a perfect, solid life. Seeing her mother in such despair nearly wrecks Jeanie.

"Mom..." she whispers, putting one arm around Melva and then curling her body over the top of her mother's like a shell. "She's going to be good. This is Angela. She's strong, and kind, and good, and she'll wake up here soon. She has to." But Jeanie has no idea whether this is true. She knows science, but not this kind of science. All she has here to rely on are her own hopes and prayers, which need to be fervent enough to bring her sister out of this.

They sit there for a long time in silence, listening to the machines, and ignoring the hot August sun outside the hospital window.

"Can I get you more chicken?" Jeanie asks her stepfather tiredly, walking around the table with a platter in hand. She sets another piece of fried chicken on her brother's plate next to the one he hasn't touched, nudging him as she does to encourage him to eat. Patrick has been despondent, and he is refusing to eat like he's staging some sort

of protest.

“I appreciate it, Jean, but I think I’m good.” Wendell puts up a weak hand. He’s been doing his best to hold everyone together, but the fact that his daughter still hasn’t woken up after the accident is clearly breaking him down.

Jeanie walks the platter back into the kitchen and sets it down before putting her hands on the edge of the counter and letting her head fall forward, eyes closed tightly. There’s so much pain in the house, it’s overwhelming. It almost hurts to breathe the same air as Patrick, who has stopped talking or meeting anyone’s eye. His decisions the night of the accident will no doubt haunt him for the rest of his life, but Jeanie wants him to understand that they all need him—that Angela needs him—and that he has to pull himself together right now in order to be the man she knows he can be.

Pushing away from the counter, Jeanie looks up at the bright light over the kitchen sink to dry her wet eyes, then wipes both hands across her face to catch the tears. She takes a deep breath and walks back into the dining room.

“Okay,” she says, hands on hips. “Let’s get this cleaned up. We all need to be at the hospital. Sitting around here while Mom holds Angela’s hand isn’t doing anyone any good.”

Patrick and Wendell both look at Jeanie in surprise; she hasn’t lived at home for years now, and hearing her speak authoritatively, like a real adult, shocks them both a bit.

“Isn’t it too late?” Patrick asks.

“Nope.” Jeanie looks at the thin, gold watch on her wrist. “Visiting hours are for another hour and a half, and if we’re already there and we’re quiet, I bet the nurses will look the other way and let us stay longer. So let’s go.” She waves both hands like she’s sweeping them up, up, and away from the table. “I’ve got this stuff, so go

and get your shoes.”

The men stumble out of the room in a daze, doing as they’re told (which in and of itself surprises Jeanie, but it’s the response she’d wanted, after all), and she quickly puts the leftovers into containers and stashes them in the fridge. The dishes will wait for later.

It takes four days, but Angela finally wakes up. She has no idea what day it is, why she’s in a hospital, or why she can’t feel or move her feet, but she’s alive.

She knows her parents, her brother, her sister, and who the president is. “Lyndon Johnson,” she says in a raspy voice that hasn’t been used in days. And then the next thing she says is: “Where is Andy?” as she searches the faces in the room for that of her boyfriend.

Melva breaks into tears. “Oh, sweetheart. He would have come, but the doctors were only allowing family. Can her boyfriend come now?” Melva turns to the doctor, looking at him imploringly.

The doctor gives a serious nod. “It would be good for her to start seeing more faces, and for us to assess any sort of deficiencies in memory or thought process. But so far this is all very encouraging.” His stern face softens into a half-smile. “You’re a very lucky girl,” he says to Angela, touching her foot through the sheet on the bed. “We still need to figure out what’s going on with your legs and feet, but you’re here, you’re alive, and your family is so happy.”

Patrick looks like he’s about to faint from the joy of hearing his twin sister's voice, and Jeanie walks over to him, wrapping both arms around her younger brother, who is now at least six inches taller than she is.

Angela looks at Patrick and he reaches out a hand to her, which she takes. "I'm

sorry," he says in a raspy voice that cracks with emotion. "I'm so sorry, Angela."

Melva, Wendell, and Jeanie leave the twins together to have their moment, and they step into the hallway with the doctor, who closes the door to Angela's room so that they can talk privately.

"She's still not out of the woods," he says with a worried frown. "And I have some very serious concerns about whether she'll walk again, but my most immediate concern is her being awake, and us having the opportunity to assess her brain activity and her memory. So far so good, but let's keep an eye on that, and tomorrow we'll do some reflex tests on her legs and feet, okay?"

Wendell is holding Melva to him like one or both of them might collapse if they let go, and Jeanie stands to the side, her arms wrapped around herself for lack of anyone else to hold her.

Angela has Patrick--and soon, Andy will join them--and her mother has Wendell. Everyone has someone, but Jeanie stands there in the cold, institutional hallway of the hospital as she realizes that, as always, she only has herself.

"Jeanie!" Carol Fairchild steps out of her car and immediately puts both of her hands to her lower back, stomach thrust forward.

No, correction:giantstomach thrust forward. Jeanie's eyes go wide at the sight of her old friend's pregnant belly.

"Hi, Carol," Jeanie says, stepping down from the front porch of her childhood home. She lifts a hand as Carol waddles her way. When Carol had called the house to say she'd heard about the accident (Oh, she was so sorry to hear!), she'd also asked whether it might be a good time to stop by and say hello to Jeanie, who rarely made the trip up to Chicago anymore.

The women meet in the middle of the walkway and embrace awkwardly around Carol's baby belly. Jeanie laughs as she feels a kick from inside Carol's stomach. "Wow!" she says, taking a step back and placing both hands gently on either side of Carol's abdomen. "Do you feel that all the time?"

Carol chuckles. "All. The. Time. You have no idea!" She's perspiring in the August heat, and Jeanie leads her up to the shade of the front porch, where she's placed a pitcher of lemonade and two glasses. With Angela in the hospital, Melva hasn't had a chance to dust or keep up the house, and she'd made Jeanie promise to meet with her old friend on the front porch so that Carol wouldn't see the unwashed coffee cups on the breakfast table, or the way the rug is rolled up on one side of the living room so that the floor can be swept and mopped.

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"Sit. Please," Jeanie says, fluffing a small pillow for Carol's back and then holding her hand as she sinks into the chair with a loud exhale. "You look glorious, but I don't want you to get overheated. Let me pour you a drink."

Despite the fact that she hasn't slept more than four hours a night since the car accident, and ignoring the fact that her own back and neck have been giving her constant trouble, Jeanie feels okay. She'd gotten a gash on her forehead in the crash which she feels a little self-conscious about, but this is her old friend Carol--she can put aside her feelings and not worry about that for the moment.

"How are you?" Carol asks, accepting the cold glass of lemonade and taking a sip immediately. She slips her swollen feet out of her sandals. "And how is your sister? My mother heard about the accident at church, and she was beside herself."

Jeanie takes a deep breath as she pours her own glass of lemonade. There's a jade plant in a pot on the railing of the front porch, and a wind chime on the house next door tinkles gaily in the light afternoon breeze.

"Angela is awake, and she's doing fine. We're hoping to find out more about when she might get the feeling back in her feet, but...I don't know, Carol." Jeanie bites on her lower lip and narrows her eyes for a moment, willing the tears to stay put. "She's so young. She has her whole life ahead of her, and to think that she might not walk again."

Carol leans across the tiny round table between them and puts her hand on Jeanie's arm. "She will, Jeanie. She'll walk," she says so fervently that Jeanie almost believes her conviction. "God wouldn't do that to a girl like Angela."

Jeanie nods and pats Carol's hand, but she isn't so sure that she can buy into that idea as readily as Carol does. After all, she's a woman of science now, and while believing in the stars and the planets doesn't mean a person can't believe in God, it has made Jeanie question life and existence and meaning far more than she ever has before.

"I have all the faith that she'll be fine," Jeanie says as a compromise. "Now tell me about you. When is this baby due? And are you sure it's only one?"

Carol laughs. "Only one heartbeat, so far as we know. And I'm due on September second, but I'm ready now."

Jeanie steels herself; she's never ready to say his name, but over the years, she's been forced to whenever she speaks to Carol. "And how about Leonard?" she asks, trying to keep her voice neutral. "Is he ready for baby number three?"

"Oh, Leonard," she sighs, waving a hand. "He's as ready as any man ever is, I suppose." Carol smiles and looks out at the yard as a man walks by with a large dog on a leash. "He loves the older two, but they're boys, so that's easy. I have a sneaking suspicion that this one is a girl."

"That would be fun," Jeanie says, imagining what it would be like to have three kids at twenty-seven. She can't even picture herself with children at all, much less with three of them. "And how is work going for Leonard?" She sips her lemonade, willing her face not to turn red each time she says his name.

Carol shrugs. "Fine, I guess. He always wanted to be a police officer, but it's so dangerous, you know?" She wrinkles her nose. "I kind of wish he worked in an office somewhere."

Jeanie smiles, but her mind goes back to the Leonard Pickles she'd known in high school. The one who'd played basketball and walked home from school with her. The

boy whose named she'd doodled all over her diaries. Mrs. Leonard Pickles, she'd written, not knowing then that Carol would be the one to walk down the aisle at the church in their neighborhood and accept the ring that would make her Mrs. Leonard Pickles, and not Jeanie.

But by all accounts, Carol and Leonard have been happy. And they have two little boys with another baby on the way. How can Jeanie fault that or question the rightness of how things have turned out? She can't. She most definitely can't.

Jeanie looks at Carol with tenderness, remembering all the years where she thought this woman was her nemesis—when this woman was her nemesis. Mean little Carol Fairchild on the playground, who'd tormented her about her dead father, who'd made fun of her for her mother marrying Mr. Macklin, who'd secretly been suffering at the hands of her own cruel, abusive mother, had turned into a whole other Carol Fairchild. By middle school, she'd become the kind of girl who reached out to other girls and offered a hand, and by high school, she was able to catch the eye of Leonard Pickles and keep it. Jeanie had seen her whole evolution, and although she'd knowingly stepped away from Leonard to let Carol flourish under his attention, she harbors no bad feelings about it. After all, maybe Carol and Leonard were always meant to be, and she, Jeanie, had just been a nice girl for Leonard to walk home with occasionally. That wouldn't be such a bad thing.

Jeanie leans back slightly in her chair and watches as a station wagon full of kids drives slowly past her parents' house. Maybe all she's ever been destined for is to be the nice girl that guys sometimes talk to while they're waiting for someone else. Maybe she'll spend her whole life working at NASA and never get to the moon herself. Maybe she'll end up living with Vicki and they'll just be a couple of old gals who accept free drinks from old geezers at The Hungry Pelican on a Saturday night. She has no idea, but she has to accept that life has its own way of working out.

Jeanie reaches over and tenderly puts a hand on her old friend's stomach, looking into

her eyes. “I’m so happy for you guys,” she says to Carol, feeling the baby roll inside of Carol’s stomach like a tiny gymnast. “Everything is working out just perfectly.”

CHAPTER 18

Jo

It’s big and ugly, and it doesn’t match her living room. From the corner of her eye, Jo glares at the ornate vase that rests on her bookshelf as she runs the vacuum across the rug. Her sweeps back and forth on the carpet get angrier the more she stares at the damn thing until finally, she stops, switches off the vacuum, and leaves it plugged in and sitting upright.

“Why do I need to be looking at this every day?” she mutters to herself, standing in front of the vase with her fists on both hips. She shakes her head as she reaches out one tentative hand and lets her fingertips rest on the cool ceramic. The swirls and lines of the gold artwork on the vase feel like veins as she traces them with her fingers. “You’re never going to truly be gone, are you?” she asks the vase in a whisper.

“Mommy?” Jo spins around to find Nancy standing there, looking at her with concern. “Who are you talking to?”

Jo’s face snaps into an automatic smile. She feels like an idiot. “No one, honey. I was just cleaning, and I stopped for a minute. I was lost in thought.” She walks over to Nancy and puts a hand on her middle child’s shoulder, steering her towards the kitchen. “Doesn’t that ever happen to you?”

Nancy is still frowning. “Sometimes. Like, when I’m reading, sometimes I say things out loud to myself.” She holds up the book in her hand as proof.

“Well, it’s like that,” Jo says, pointing at Nancy’s seat at the table. Without asking Nancy whether she wants it or not, Jo pulls the glass bottle of milk from her refrigerator and pours some for Nancy, which she sets on the table with three Fig Newtons. “Sometimes I talk out loud to myself, too. Now,” Jo says, leaning against the back of one chair, “why don’t you keep reading here for a bit and have a snack, and I’ll finish my cleaning.”

Back in the living room, Jo eyes the vase again, but turns the vacuum on and resumes her chore with just one shake of her head. Bill had flown to Arizona and back in twenty-four hours on a weekend to retrieve his ex-wife’s ashes, and now they sit in a maroon vessel lined with gold etching, watching over the house and—at least in Jo’s mind—glowing like a nightlight while they all sleep. When Jo is home alone, she feels Margaret’s presence, and though the kids have no idea what’s in the vase, she imagines Margaret sitting on the couch in the middle of her house, watching them as they run past, listening to their squabbles, and clicking her tongue disapprovingly as Jo carries out all of her motherly and wifely duties.

Why, in her mind, has this woman become such a phantom? Why does Margaret, who, by all accounts, wasn’t well enough to ever run a household, get to haunt her this way? Jo is still sad for the way the woman’s life turned out, and she does have empathy and sympathy for her, but why does she now have to incorporate Margaret into the decor of her home? Margaret gets to be there when Jo is awake late at night writing, and Margaret gets to stand sentry as Bill sips his morning coffee and kisses Jo on his way out the door.

She gets to be there, front and center, for everything now, and Margaret doesn’t match the couches or the drapes.

Jo sighs and yanks the vacuum’s plug from the wall. Bill could have at least asked her what her opinion was on the urn so that she could have chosen something that fit the rest of the room. This thought stops her in her tracks and Jo actually laughs out loud

to herself as she's winding up the vacuum's cord. Because, honestly, she's Jo Booker from Minnesota! Jo, who loved to can her own peaches, to fall asleep beneath the stars on camping trips, and Jo, who never gave one thought to whether her summer dresses were in fashion or not.

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But look at her now: she's Jo Booker of Florida. Jo, who has more bathing suits than she has shoes. Jo, who meets up with her best girl friend not to walk in the woods, but to stroll around a modern-looking neighborhood and share a cigarette. Jo, who hasn't canned a single thing since moving to Stardust Beach because she's been so busy volunteering at the hospital and writing the stories that she's gotten published in True Romance magazine.

There is a long, drawn-out moment where Jo just stands there. This transformation has occurred right under her own nose. Has she become someone she doesn't even know? A woman more worried about writing her stories, and about the fact that the ugly urn in her living room is watching her do her housework than she is about making strawberry preserves and collecting wood for the winter? Have her priorities shifted wildly and eroded her solid Minnesota substance? Has she turned into a mere shell of her former self, more concerned with glitter and jazz and sunshine than she is with being a good mother, a solid wife, and a true friend?

No, Jo thinks. I haven't changed that much. I've changed some, but I'm still me. I'm me, but in a new setting.

She glances at the kitchen, where Nancy is slowly nibbling a cookie and turning the pages of her book. Suddenly, without warning, Nancy looks up and her eyes land right on Jo.

"Mommy?" she says. "I think you're the best."

Jo's heart melts instantly, and she snaps out of her own thoughts. This unsolicited gift from her daughter is just the reminder she needed that her real work is raising her

kids, and that she's doing the very best she can—just like every other mother she knows.

“Thanks, sweetheart,” she says to Nancy. “I think you're the best, too.”

“Josephine.” A woman named Irene, with frosty lipstick and a fair amount of sun damage on her still-young face, smiles at Jo as she extends a hand. “It's so lovely to meet you.”

Jo shakes her hand. “And you as well, Irene.”

“Come in. Sit, sit,” Irene says, sweeping a hand grandly at the office inside of Cape Kennedy. Jo chooses a squishy chair covered in red vinyl and sits, still clutching the handle of her purse with both hands. She can feel her knuckles clenching, and she takes a deep breath, letting it go with intention. “We're so happy that you're here.”

Jo looks around; so far it's only her and Irene in the office, but she assumes that the woman means her whole department, perhaps. “Thank you.”

“Can I get you something to drink? Coffee? Tea? Water?”

“No, thank you.” Jo can feel that her posture is making her come across as uncomfortable and expectant, so she tries to relax her arms and shoulders as she exhales with a smile.

She's been called in for a meeting at NASA, and Bill had seemed curious about it, but also distracted when she'd told him about the phone call from Irene in the public relations department.

"Maybe they want to do another photo shoot with you and the kids?" Bill had offered, shoving the last corner of his buttered toast into his mouth and washing it down with

coffee that morning. "Or possibly something about the hospital. Didn't you say that they're opening a new wing there or something?"

"A garden," Jo said. "And that really has nothing to do with me, Bill. I didn't design it or plant any of the palm trees." Her tone was exasperated enough to get his attention, and he stopped sipping his coffee long enough to look up at her.

"It's today at ten?" he'd asked. "In the public relations office?"

"Yes." She chewed on the inside of her cheek nervously, one hand on her hip and one slippered foot resting on top of the other as she stood in the middle of the kitchen, leaning against the counter. "I guess I'll just have to show up and see."

And now here she is, sitting across from Irene and wearing a brown-and-white striped silk dress that's making her feel far sweatier than she'd imagined it would. To go along with the new, less Minnesota-like Jo, she's slowly been obtaining a whole new wardrobe, starting with trendier cuts and colors, and now she can choose from any number of sleeveless pastel dresses that hit about two inches above the knee.

"Let me get right to the point, Josephine," Irene says, sitting down on her side of the desk and leaning one elbow on it as she strikes what looks to Jo like a dramatic pose. Irene looks out the window of the fourth floor office, and the blue sky is reflected in her blue eyes. "You've been writing a monthly column for a magazine called True Romance, correct?"

Of all the things Jo had been expecting, this had been last on her list. In fact, it hadn't even made the list.

"Yes?" It comes out sounding like a question.

Irene spins in her chair and looks right into Jo's eyes. "It's garnering some attention."

Jo remembers the letter she'd received from Mrs. Ingrid Nelson of Wichita, Kansas, and she wonders how on earth Irene might have found out about her fan letter when not even Bill knows about that. Instead of asking, Jo says nothing, waiting to hear what else Irene might say.

"Some of the women on staff have read it, and, like any other office, gossip spreads here, Josephine. It spreads rather quickly. I read the story myself, and I have to say that I'm intrigued." Irene picks up a sharpened pencil and taps the eraser against her desk as she gazes off into space again. "I like the angle of the astronauts, I like the position and point of view of the wife. And the fact that Winston has been toying with the notion of a work-place romance is definitely keeping us on the edge of our seats as readers."

Jo almost wants to laugh; this is so bizarre, listening to a woman she has just met talk to her about the characters in her stories as if they're real. But as much as she wants to laugh, she also wants to be defensive, because her characters are not her, and they're not real.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that Winston is thinking of engaging with this woman, exactly," she says, trying to hold her emotions at bay. "I think he might find her attractive, but he's a busy man with a lot on his plate."

"Exactly!" Irene says, giving the desk a good, hard tap with the pencil. "He's got a lot on his plate. He's distracted. His attention is elsewhere, and now Maxine is seeking validation from anywhere she can find it."

"Oh." Jo shakes her head. "No. I mean—not exactly. I think Maxine is trying to get Winston's attention back. I think that he's the man she wants, and that she's trying to understand why a man who has such a demanding and potentially rewarding and fulfilling career would also consider embarking upon a flirtation with some other woman. It just doesn't make sense." Jo's face heats up as she starts talking. She's

nearly emphatic as she speaks, and all of a sudden, she realizes that she's gotten far more emotionally involved in this description of her characters and their love lives than she'd ever intended to.

“That’s good,” Irene says, eyes narrowed. “She’s working to win him back. A woman who has to put her whole heart into re-winning the affections of her own husband...” Irene presses her lips together and shakes her blonde head back and forth slowly. “So relatable, Josephine. So relatable to so many women.”

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Jo takes a deep breath and laces her fingers together. This whole conversation has quickly gone off in a direction that Jo wasn't expecting, nor could she ever have anticipated it.

"Anyhow," Jo says, "I'm thrilled that people are enjoying it." She pauses here, inserting a silent "but" to let Irene know that she's aware the other shoe is about to drop. Jo lifts one eyebrow with expectation.

"Right." Irene drops the pencil back into the cup on her desk with finality. "Okay, so I asked you in here today because people are enjoying it, and I think that, frankly, this would be an amazing opportunity for NASA."

Jo sits with this for a long moment. "How so?" she finally asks. Never in her wildest dreams has she thought that her little ten dollar a month payday and the tiny thrill she gets from seeing her name in print would get her called in to NASA to discuss some shared opportunity.

"Publicity, my dear," Irene says, leaning back in her chair grandly and crossing her legs. She sits back and puts her elbow on the armrests as she swivels back and forth in the chair. "Can you imagine the publicity for Cape Kennedy over one of its own?—"

"But I'm just a wife," Jo interrupts.

"You're one of ours, Josephine," Irene counters. "Don't doubt that for a minute." She pauses and holds Jo's gaze before going on. "It's great for us that one of our own is doing something creative, and capturing the imagination of thousands of readers each

month.”

Jo has truly not imagined in her mind the number of people who might be reading about Winston and Maxine—all she knows is that Bill isn't reading the story that so closely mirrors their own, and now her very real fear is that he might. She's actually at a loss for words.

“We'd love to set up an event here to showcase your writing, Josephine. I'm thinking that another couple of months of stories should come out, and then maybe during the holidays, when we've got five or six months of Maxine and Winston's story to work with, we could do a reading.”

Jo nearly chokes at the thought. “A reading? As in--you want me to read my little romance story to people? Out loud?”

Irene throws her head back and laughs theatrically. “Yes, Josephine. Yes—out loud!”

Jo inhales and holds her breath as she tries to imagine herself reading her words to a crowd like a serious author who might be promoting a book would. “I don't know. That seems kind of far-fetched.” Jo knows her face looks as dubious as she feels. “I'm sorry. I don't mean to be offensive or anything,” she says, shifting around in her chair and finally setting her purse on the floor next to her feet. “But I'm just a housewife who wrote a little story. I only get paid ten dollars a month for it.”

Irene's eyes flash, and Jo realizes in an instant that the woman is far more than she seems. She's got a grander vision, and Jo is about to hear it.

“Listen to me here, Josephine: I know someone in publishing. Someone high up. I'd like to send your stories on to him, with your permission of course, and I'd like to see what he thinks. I feel like there's a book in here somewhere, don't you? An astronaut with a family is on track to go to space and leave them all behind, and on the way

there, he meets another woman who turns his head—someone who catches his eye, if you will—I just think this could really be something.”

Suddenly, and without warning, tears are stinging Jo’s eyes and her throat feels tight. She isn’t sure if it’s the surprised shock of finding out that someone believes in her this way, or whether it’s hearing her own life and marriage boiled down to a simple tagline like this.

“I’m—“ Jo pauses, blinking away the tears as quickly as she can. She focuses on the hem of her dress for a moment, smoothing it as she gathers her thoughts. “I’m incredibly flattered, Irene. I am. I’m just not sure about making a big deal of this one story. I wrote it kind of on a whim, and I’m not sure it’s at all indicative of what it’s like to work at NASA, or that it even represents what it’s like to be the wife of an astronaut.”

Irene spreads her hands widely. “But who would know better than you?”

“Well, true,” Jo says, nodding slowly. “But it’s fiction.”

“Of course. And we’d market it that way.” Irene leans forward and lowers her voice like someone else might be listening. “But I need you on board, Josephine. I’m thinking a cocktail party during the holidays. You in a pretty dress—maybe red—standing up in front of a gathering of women, because let’s be honest: it’s going to be women who read your work, right?”

Jo nods helplessly. “I would imagine.”

“We’ll get Dave Huggins to take the photos, and we can get a local news station here to cover it. ‘Wife of Astronaut Turned Author: Is It Her Truth, or Is It Just Fiction?’” Irene says, making it sound like she’s writing a headline with her words.

Jo nods diplomatically. “Maybe we could work on that part together,” she says with a watery smile. The idea of people gathering together to listen to her read her stories aloud is daunting, but it’s quickly growing on her. After all, who writes without some desire of acknowledgment or accolades? Who ever commits word to paper and hopes that no one will appreciate it? But the idea of approaching a bigwig in publishing still seems a bit grand to Jo.

As if reading her mind, Irene pulls the pencil from the cup again and scribbles something on a notepad. “I just need you to give me the go-ahead to speak to my friend in New York, and I’ll pitch my idea to him.” She glances up at Jo and most likely sees terror on Jo’s face. Irene laughs softly. “It’ll be okay, Mrs. Booker,” she says. Her eyes crinkle with a blend of kindness and determination. “I could have just sent your stuff on to him and let him contact you when he realizes that your writing is wonderful and that you have a story to tell, but I thought asking you first was the right thing to do.”

Jo puts a hand to her cheek. Irene is right; she could have easily just sent the clippings on to her friend without saying a word, so she’s done Jo a real favor by asking. Finally, she nods. “Okay,” Jo agrees. “Yes to all of it.”

Irene slaps the desk as her face breaks into a grin. “Fabulous. I knew you’d be on board.”

But how had she known? Jo wonders. They’ve never even met one another until today. Her next thought is about Bill: will he be alright with this? He’s never been one to suffocate her with rules or demands, and in no way does Jo see herself as a woman chained to the oven, nor is she a woman without a voice (and she has known women in her life whose husbands have given them far less freedom than Jo enjoys, so she’s aware that marriage is a whole spectrum), but whether or not Bill will see her giving a reading at a cocktail party at Cape Kennedy as a positive for his own career is not something she can know for certain.

Jo leans over and picks up her purse again, setting it on her lap. “I apologize for seeming reticent about this,” she says to Irene. “I just had no idea what you were calling me in for, and I wasn’t expecting this. Truly.”

Irene stands as Jo does, and the desk takes up the space between them. “I understand, Josephine.” Irene smiles at her pleasantly. “I do. But I think we could work together on this and do a really nice publicity piece for NASA. I’m excited about this.”

Jo straightens her shoulders, finally feeling the sense of pride that she supposes she was meant to feel all along. After all, she’s been called in by the PR department to talk about being the star of an event, all based on something that she sits around late at night doing in her robe and slippers. The things she dreams up in her own head have earned her recognition, and she should give herself more credit for that.

Irene walks her to the elevator and sees her off with a promise to call as soon as she has any news, or to pick a definite date later in the year. As the doors slide closed, Jo allows herself a moment of pure, unbridled excitement.

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Her story! Not only has it been published each month, but potentially thousands of women have read it, and now NASA wants to recognize her and showcase her work. She squeezes her eyes shut tightly and smiles so hard that she feels like her face might break.

It's only when the elevator chimes as it reaches the first floor and the doors open that Jo remembers Bill.

At some point—and sooner, rather than later—she's going to have to tell him about Maxine and Winston. And Bill, smartman that he is, will realize instantly how close her characters' names are to Josephine and William. It will all feel somewhat familiar to him, and he'll definitely have feelings about what she's written.

There's no way that he won't.

CHAPTER 19

Jeanie

In early September, Robert F. Kennedy resigns as Attorney General, The Animals top the charts with "House of the Rising Sun," and NASA launches its first Orbital Geophysical Observatory from Cape Kennedy, which will orbit around the Earth and send information back for the next five years.

Jeanie is back at work, and Angela is in Chicago, making a slow, uphill recovery. Her plans to start college in the fall have been postponed, but her wedding plans with Andy have seemingly been moved up, as he'd panicked following the accident,

fearful that he could somehow lose the girl he loves, and gotten down on one knee in the hospital room to propose. Jeanie is grudgingly happy for her little sister, though she knows that the chances are good now that Angela will marry and have children before she ever finishes college and becomes a teacher.

Bill, who has been inexplicably distant since Jeanie's return two weeks after the accident, smiles at her guardedly and has avoided any and all one-on-one contact with her. For some reason, and not one based in any sort of realistic universe, Jeanie had hoped the entire time she was in Chicago that he might call to check on her. It was a crazy and wildly fantastical daydream, but every time the phone had rung in her mother's kitchen, Jeanie thought that maybe she'd answer it and hear Bill Booker's voice. That maybe he would have heard about the accident and been so worried about her that he would get her parents' phone number from Vicki and then call to check in. But that didn't happen.

Now, he sees her, gives a brisk nod, and walks on, a stack of files tucked under one arm as he keeps his eyes ahead on his destination. Jeanie isn't sure why he's been so distant, but even when she'd first come back, all he'd done was say, "Glad you're back, Miss Florence. And I'm happy to hear that your siblings are on the mend as well."

She'd given Arvin North permission to share the details of the accident when she'd called to arrange her extended absence, and the women on staff had sweetly organized a fund to order and pay for flowers to be sent to her house in Chicago. Jeanie had opened the card eagerly, hoping for a list of names of those who'd contributed (naturally, she was looking for Bill's name), but it had simply said: "We miss you—come back soon. The Team."

Jeanie sighs now as she gathers up a stack of papers that she's dropped on the carpet, and as she taps them against the edge of a desk to organize them, Jay Reed pauses nearby.

“Hey, Florence,” he says to her. “Are you coming to the birthday party at four?”

Jeanie looks at him. “Whose birthday?”

“Peter Abernathy,” he says, referring to one of Jeanie’s fellow engineers. “He’s turning thirty.”

Jeanie remembers riding with him in the elevator earlier that summer, and the way Peter had gone on and on about his weekend, his dates, his life, never once pausing to ask Jeanie anything about herself. She sighs.

“Sure,” she says with a tired smile. “If there’s cake, you can always count on me to be there.”

Jay taps the desk with two fingers and grins at her. “Great. See you there.”

At four, Jeanie is standing with a clutch of other female employees, holding a paper plate and a plastic fork and staring at a generic lump of cake from a bakery, its icing thick and sugary. She has two letters on her slice—a P and an E—which are undoubtedly from the name portion of the “Happy Birthday Peter” message that’s been piped onto the cake in blue frosting. She picks up her fork and carves off a tiny bite to be polite.

“I was so sorry to hear about the accident.” Rebecca, who Jeanie had been seated next to at Kathryn Michelin’s baby shower, is looking at her sympathetically. “My best friend and I were in a terrible accident in high school.” She visibly shivers at the memory. “So bad.”

Jeanie nods and puts the forkful of cake in her mouth to buy herself a moment before speaking. “It was bad,” she says after she chews. She’s exhausted. That’s been one of her biggest complaints since the accident—just feeling physically depleted at all

times. Most days she works until five, then goes home and collapses onto the couch, where she lets Vicki (if she's home) choose what to watch on television. If she's lucky, Vicki also heats up a can of Campbell's soup and sets it in front of Jeanie with a small pile of crackers and a bottle of Tab.

"Is your sister doing any better?" Rebecca asks her now.

"She is. Thank you for asking. She's still not walking, but the doctors are hopeful that they'll figure out what's going on here very soon. She was allowed to go back home this week, and I think it's going okay. My mom is with her all the time, and they're using the long days to plan my sister's wedding next spring."

"Wow! Good for her," Rebecca says. Her eyes light up at the mention of a wedding, and Jeanie remembers that Rebecca herself is newly engaged. She glances at the sparkling ring on Rebecca's left hand at the same time that Rebecca does.

"How are your wedding plans coming along?" Jeanie asks politely, though she's not in the mood to talk about anything celebratory. Across the room, one of the men tells a joke whose punchline ends in a loud roar of laughter from the other men, and she looks over just as Todd Roman thumps the birthday boy on the back.

"Things are good," Rebecca says. "The wedding is set for December twenty-third. I really want the church to be decorated for Christmas, and also you save money that way. Let the church do the flowers and decorations for you." Rebecca winks at her. "How about you—are you seeing anyone special?"

"I am seeing no one," Jeanie says flatly. "I go home to my cat and I read a lot." As the words are coming out of her mouth, she wishes she were saying something that sounded less pathetic, but she also doesn't care. There isn't room in her life at the moment for artifice, and there definitely isn't time to worry about dating. "I'm busy with work and my family, and I'm good with that right now."

Rebecca is staring at her unguardedly, and in her eyes, Jeanie sees pity. Rebecca clearly feels as though she's talking to someone who has no life and who has zero idea about how to get one, and she is undoubtedly thinking some variation of "There but for the grace of God."

"But I'm fine," Jeanie says, forcing a smile. "Seriously. I want my sister to walk again, and I want to get back to work here. I feel like I missed a lot, and I don't want that to happen again. Ever." Rebecca is nodding now, but looking only slightly convinced. "Hey," Jeanie says, taking a heartier bite of cake as if this will telegraph to Rebecca that she's A-OK. "How is Kathryn doing? She had the baby, right?"

Rebecca's face is awash in relief; finally, the topic has shifted to something that makes her feel less uncomfortable than Jeanie's apparently chosen life as a twenty-seven-year-old shut-in with a cat.

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“Yes!” Rebecca says, tearing up slightly. “A little girl. They called her Lisa. So sweet. I’ve seen photos.”

“Well, that’s wonderful,” Jeanie says genuinely. It is wonderful. A little girl. Imagine that. Her eyes lose focus for a moment as she pictures herself pregnant, then holding a swaddled newborn. Being a mother to someone who will soon walk, talk, cry, and turn into a fully formed human. The very idea seems more outlandish to Jeanie than being chosen right here, today, to be on a mission to the moon. “That’s really something.”

Some of the men go for second slices of cake, but Jeanie notices that most women don’t even finish a first piece before trickling away, leaving their plates and forks in a large garbage can that’s been wheeled in for the occasion. Peter is standing beneath a twisted blue streamer that someone has pinned over his desk, and the only guys left over there chatting with him are two or three men from mission control.

Jeanie tosses her own uneaten cake into the trash and walks out into the hallway alone. It’s almost quitting time, and she’s ready to head home to her usual Thursday night lineup of Donna Reed, My 3 Sons, and Bewitched. If she can stay awake late enough, she might even watch Peyton Place. Maybe.

The sound of men laughing fades into the distance as Jeanie walks back to her desk to gather her things.

CHAPTER 20

Bill

Peter Abernathy is an alright guy, but Bill isn't much for birthday celebrations at work. He never has been. Still, Peter is turning thirty, which is a big deal, so he joins in, accepting an oversized slice of cake from the Stardust Beach Bakery.

"Howdy, Lieutenant Colonel," Derek Trager says, sidling up to Bill with his own plate of cake. The office space has been transformed into a watered-down attempt at a party, with one sad string of streamers hanging over Peter Abernathy's desk. But the younger man seems thrilled by all the hullabaloo, so Bill plasters a smile on his face and elbows Derek as he takes a bite of cake.

"Hey, Trager. How are the wife and kids?"

"All good. Yours?"

"Never better," Bill replies. It's a typical exchange for guys who haven't launched into sports or work talk yet, and after they've covered the niceties, they eat cake in peace for a couple of minutes as the other men tell loud jokes. Bill laughs in all the right places, then passes on a second slice of cake as one of the secretaries comes around offering more.

"I see Jeanie's back and mingling again. Good to see her up and at 'em. Couldn't have been easy on the kid to be in an accident where her sister almost died," Derek says, lifting his chin in Jeanie's direction. Across the office space, Jeanie is standing with Rebecca Short, and they're both picking delicately at their slices of cake as Rebecca looks at Jeanie with something that appears to be disbelief and concern.

"Yeah, it sounded pretty rough," Bill says. "And it is good to have her back. She's been pretty quiet, and I know she was hurt in the accident, so I admire her for getting back to it." It's about all he can say about Jeanie without his emotions getting the better of him.

Ever since he'd been taken off the orbital mission that's set for December, Bill has turned every interaction he's had with his coworkers over in his mind, and the only thing he can come up with is his conversation with Jeanie in the parking lot at The Black Hole. He'd revealed things to her in that moment that he'd never revealed to anyone—even Jo—and while he hadn't regretted it then, he sure as hell regrets it now. Somehow she must have thought it was okay to share that information, whether with someone else on the floor, or with Arvin North directly, because not long after, Bill had been yanked off the mission.

"I heard a rumor that Pete here might ask her out," Trager says, glancing at Abernathy with his pink cheeks and boyish flop of hair. Bill groans inwardly. He's not a huge fan of Pete's, and he can't imagine that the goofus is good enough or interesting enough for Jeanie Florence.

"Huh," Bill says noncommittally. Ed Maxwell is standing about ten feet away, and Bill suddenly remembers something he wanted to talk to Ed about. "Hey, will you excuse me?" he says to Trager.

Without waiting, he walks over to Ed and starts talking about Mickey Mantle's home runs, trying to keep a serious look on his face so that Derek Trager won't know that he just walked away mid-conversation to talk about baseball.

At the end of the day, much to his chagrin, Bill finds himself sharing an elevator car with none other than the birthday boy. He holds his briefcase in one hand and keeps the other in the pocket of his trousers as he watches the floors light up above the door.

"Have a good day, Abernathy?" Bill asks him out of politeness.

"You know, not bad for thirty," Peter says. Bill can hear the grin in his voice. "Feels like a real milestone. I bet you remember."

This grates on Bill's nerves; it's not that Peter is wrong—he is well beyond that milestone now—but it's the presumption that Bill is some old, crotchety geezer that annoys him.

“Sure, I remember,” Bill says, turning his head, so he's looking right at Peter Abernathy, with his rusty brown hair, his clean-shaven face that doesn't yet grow a five o'clock shadow, and his eager eyes. “When I turned thirty, I had a wife and three kids, and a long military career behind me.”

Abernathy's face falls slightly. This has quickly become a competition between the men, and Peter needs to decide whether he's going to accept the challenge or not.

“Good on you, Booker,” he says, his smile charging back to life as he himself turns to look at the numbers above the elevator door. “I kind of like being single at thirty, myself. There are a lot of, shall we say, desperateladies out there looking for love. Imagine: a woman gets to her late twenties, and no one has ever proposed, she starts to get anxious. She wants to settle down. She's grateful when a man asks her out.”

Bill suppresses the urge to punch the guy. Abernathy sounds like a teenage boy who has never dated a woman before.

“In fact,” Peter says, “I was thinking of asking Jeanie Florence to go out with me. What do you think? You two seem pretty chummy—want to put in a good word for me?”

Bill's blood instantly boils. It rushes through his veins and to his face, and he doesn't trust himself to look right at Peter Abernathy. Instead, he flares his nostrils slightly and rocks back on his heels. “Interesting choice.”

“Do you know if she has a boyfriend?”

Bill squints his eyes, willing the elevator bell to ding for the first floor and for the doors to open. He holds his breath, and when the doors finally part to reveal the shiny floors of the quiet lobby, he gives Peter one last look.

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“She does,” Bill says with a nod. “I think she does.”

Pete reaches over and holds the elevator door open with one hand. “Wait, you think she does, or you know she does? I don't want to make an ass of myself.”

Too late, Bill thinks spitefully. Something about Abernathy just really grinds his gears.

Bill steps out of the elevator and then pauses, turning to look back at Peter as he stands in the elevator car waiting for a response.

“She does have a boyfriend,” Bill says with a curt nod. “She most definitely does.”

CHAPTER 21

Jeanie

Miranda jumps from her perch on top of the refrigerator the minute Jeanie closes the front door. The condo is quiet for the moment, and Jeanie takes advantage of it to slip her feet out of her shoes and pick up her cat.

There's a screened-in lanai off the living room, and Jeanie carries Miranda out there with her, inhaling the still-humid air of mid-September. She sits in a chair that overlooks the green grounds two floors below, watching as two older men in golf carts stop driving past one another in order to have a chat from behind the respective wheels of their carts.

"Hon? You here?" Vicki calls out, her keys jingling as she drops them on the coffee table.

"Outside," Jeanie calls back. She's got Miranda curled in her lap, and her bare feet up on the glass table where they normally sip their drinks while enjoying the lanai.

Vicki is breathless. "Hey, princess. How was work?"

Jeanie shrugs. "Work was work. I'm tired."

"I'm worried about you." Vicki flops down in the chair across from Jeanie and shoots her a look of concern. "It's not that I mind mothering you a little, hon, and I don't mind that you're still recuperating from the accident, but I'm still worried that you're in a funk."

Jeanie tries to laugh it off, but it comes out sounding false. "Yeah," she finally admits. "I guess I am in a funk."

Vicki takes off her own sandals and curls her feet up under her. "So what can we do to fix that?"

"Not The Hungry Pelican," Jeanie says quickly. "Please, not that. I'm not in the mood."

It's Vicki's turn to laugh, but hers is real, and she flips her hair off her face with one hand. "Okay, sweetheart. I promise I won't try to drag you out for drinks at a bar where all the men were born around the turn of the century."

"Or before," Jeanie adds.

This makes Vicki laugh again. "Right. Or before." She folds her arms over her chest

and looks at the golf carts below as the men finish talking and drive on. "But how about we go out to dinner with my son? Steven and his friend are here from New Orleans for a few days, and they asked me to go out for seafood tonight. Come with. It'll do you some good to be around other young people." Vicki leans over and slaps Jeanie's thigh lightly, teasingly. "And Steven is a handsome boy, if I do say so myself."

"But that's exactly what I don't want," Jeanie says. "I'm not looking to be fixed up with anyone, especially, and I mean no offense, a college boy."

Vicki holds up both hands in surrender. "No offense taken. I know you're a successful, grown woman, but being around cute young men and letting them fawn over you a little might do you some good."

Jeanie is less convinced about this, but she grudgingly lets herself be guided through an after-work cup of coffee, a quick makeup session at Vicki's hands, and a change into a pale blue sundress with one-inch thick straps that zips up the back.

By the time Steven and his friend, Dale, arrive, Jeanie has the buzz of caffeine flowing through her veins and a game smile plastered on her face. She runs her hands down the sides of the dress nervously.

"You look gorgeous, princess," Vicki says, stubbing out her cigarette in the ashtray on the coffee table. She holds out her arms and does a quick spin for Jeanie's approval. "How do I look? Gotta be sure I'm making my boy proud."

Jeanie eyes her from head to toe, and, as usual, Vicki is color-coordinated and dressed for a good time. "You look beautiful," she says honestly. For the first time in quite a while, Jeanie actually feels a little burst of energy. It's Thursday night, she's dressed in something other than a nightgown with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, and she's saying goodbye to Miranda rather than letting the cat curl up

next to her on the couch at six-thirty in the evening.

Steven and Dale are waiting for them at a charming restaurant known for its crab cakes and fettuccini with lobster. Dale is short and freckled with a face that makes him look a bit like an overgrown Boy Scout, and Steven is tall, dark, and handsome. But young, Jeanie reminds herself. Oh. So. Young.

The guys pull out the chairs for Jeanie and Vicki, and the evening gets off to a good start as Vicki tells them all stories about raising Steven on her own after her divorce when her son was ten. It sounds to Jeanie like Vicki is exactly the sort of mom she would have imagined her to be: fun, great sense of humor, and always the one showing up places on the wrong day or at the wrong time or wearing the wrong dress.

“But I love her,” Steven says, looking at his mom with open adoration and the kind of love that makes Jeanie stop in her tracks. There’s a bond between them that’s enviable, and every time Steven says something that makes his mother throw back her head and give a throaty laugh, Jeanie thinks of her own mother—she can’t help it.

The waiter drops off plates of shrimp and scallops and fried grouper for the table to share, and Jeanie’s mind wanders. When her dad had died, rather than becoming a ballsy, “let’s get this done” kind of single mom, Melva had retreated into a shell that had forced Jeanie to grow up quickly. She’d checked out piles of books at the library and brought them home so that she could entertain herself while her mom slept or cried, and she’d learned how to cook basic meals at an age where most children weren’t allowed to even touch the stove.

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When Melva met Wendell at Elmwood Country Day School, making Jeanie the ridicule of all her classmates who accused her of making her mom marry a teacher so she could get good grades, Melva had slowly come out of her shell-shocked state, then quickly given birth to Angela and Patrick and refocused her attentions on raising twins. Her hands had certainly been full, but as Jeanie watches Steven and Vicki, she feels a pang of envy that she'd never really gotten her mother to herself. Would they have become friends like this? Would they have a million stories to share about the way they'd plowed through life together, as a team?

"So your aunt Penny is my mom's good friend," Steven says to Jeanie from across the table. He's sitting next to Dale, and she's seated on the same side as Vicki. "That's wild. Penny is great."

Jeanie snaps out of her private thoughts about her mother and comes back to the present. "Aunt Penny," she says, nodding. Jeanie reaches for a scallop and sets it on her appetizer plate. "Yeah, she's a kick." In truth, it's been several years since she's seen Penny, but she always has been fun and carefree.

"When I was a kid," Steven says, as if childhood were so far in the rearview mirror that he can barely remember it, "Penny and my mom took me to Coney Island."

"And you ate all those hot dogs and threw up," Vicki says, laughing at the memory.

"Penny told me that if I rode the Wonder Wheel ten times in a row, she'd give me a dollar."

Jeanie is listening as she cuts into her fried scallop. "And did you do it?"

“I did,” Steven says, grinning. “And she paid up. Unfortunately, I took that dollar and spent it all on cotton candy and popcorn, which did not help the stomach situation whatsoever.”

Dale is laughing along with them, and he talks for a while about his own childhood. There’s a moment for Jeanie as Dale talks where she feels like she’s actually inside the moment, appreciating it all: the flickering candles in hurricane lamps; the way the white wine Vicki has ordered sparkles in the clear glasses; the rosy glow of everyone’s cheeks against the warmth of their laughter. It’s like she’s committing the whole thing to memory so that she doesn’t forget how nice it is to be out with people. She wants to pull this memory from her pocket the next time she rolls up in an afghan and turns on the television instead of going for a walk to watch the sun set behind the palm trees and the mangroves.

After dinner, Vicki sees a man she knows at the bar. He’s sitting with his back to the restaurant, shoulders hunched as he works his way to the bottom of a glass of bourbon.

“Will you young people excuse me for a bit? Why don’t you go out and take a walk on the pier and I’ll meet you out there in an hour?” Vicki says.

By this point, Jeanie has had at least half the bottle of wine that Vicki ordered, and she’s feeling warm and relaxed. Her limbs are loose, and when the evening air hits her, it feels like stepping into a warm bath. She sighs with pleasure.

“I love Florida,” she says to Dale and Steven. “I really do. I thought I’d miss Chicago, but I’m never cold here, you know? And everything is just so sunny and pleasant.”

“Sure,” Dale says agreeably, hands in his pockets as they walk away from the restaurant and its weathered exterior. Like The Black Hole and The Hungry Pelican,

they're situated near water, and can easily listen to it lap against the wooden planks of the dock as they stroll.

The guys keep Jeanie between them, but neither walks close enough to touch her.

"Want a sip?" Steven asks, pulling a flask from the inner pocket of his sport coat. He uncaps it and hands it to Jeanie to sip from first.

"Chivalry is not dead," she declares, taking it with a smile. It's not like her to drink half a bottle of wine on a work night and then to follow it with drinks of some unknown alcohol from someone she's just met. She feels like a whole new Jeanie. She tips her head back, and the liquid slides down her throat.

Well, first it slides, and then it burns.

Jeanie passes the flask on to Dale as she cringes and tries not to gag. "What is that? Ethylene glycol?"

The boys laugh and Dale wrinkles his nose at her. "So you really are a scientist."

Jeanie hadn't talked much about herself at dinner, preferring to just listen as everyone else told stories about their lives. The closest she got to sharing anything personal was when she talked about her aunt Penny.

"Sure. I am," she says now, accepting the flask as Dale passes it back in the other direction. Without thinking, she sips it again, and this time it goes down easier. She hands it on to Steven. "I work at NASA. I'm an engineer."

Dale gives a low whistle. "Impressive."

Jeanie turns on him unexpectedly. "Is it though? Would you ever want to date a

woman who had a master's degree and worked for NASA? Because, to be perfectly honest, I'm finding it quite difficult to get out there and meet someone who doesn't think that I'll want to 'settle down' and raise kids as soon as I possibly can."

Steven and Dale stay quiet as Jeanie reaches for the flask that's in Steven's hand and sips from it again. She's starting to feel like her thoughts are coming out of her mouth without pausing to get her permission, and that's a feeling she's entirely unfamiliar with.

"I mean, I want to find love," Jeanie goes on, gesturing wildly at the sky and its varying shades of lavender, gold, and carnation pink. It's so beautiful that her eyes tear up unexpectedly. "I want to settle down and get married, too. But I also want to travel, and I want to go to space, and I want a career. I don't think I can sit at home all day and push babies around the block in a pram," she says, feeling a strangling desperation to be understood. Jeanie nearly reaches over and grabs Dale's arm to shake him, but she doesn't. "Do you want to marry someone who can't even imagine herself staying home with children all day?"

Dale's eyes are wide, and he lifts one shoulder helplessly. "I mean...I'm only twenty. I'm not sure."

"That's it exactly!" Jeanie says, turning back and forth between the boys to see who's holding the flask. Steven wisely caps it and slides it back into his pocket as they stroll. "When men are young, they think they want a woman who is strong and smart and can keep up with them, but then when they get old enough that they feel like settling down, they realize that all they really want is a woman who will take the place of their mother. Someone to cook, to make the house nice, and to put the babies to bed while they read the paper."

"Can't they want both?" Steven asks innocently.

Jeanie whips her head in his direction and realizes immediately that fast head movements make her feel like the world is spinning. She reaches out and grabs Steven's elbow, which he fashions into a crook so that she can hang onto it for stability.

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“Well, that’s novel, isn’t it?” Jeanie says indignantly. “You want a woman who can do it all and compete in a man’s world, but then you want her to come home and turn into a soft, nurturing mother-type? In what universe are there enough hours in the day for that?”

Steven’s eyes flick to Dale and they exchange a look that Jeanie registers, but doesn’t parse for meaning.

“I think Steven is just saying that some guys might like a woman who is smart and driven, but also feels the urge to have children?” It comes out like a question and Dale shrugs helplessly as he raises his eyebrows. The boys have obviously fallen down a rabbit hole and are now escorting a more-than-mildly inebriated female engineer down a dock as the sun sets.

"Maybe," Jeanie scoffs. "But I never get asked out! Not by men my age, anyway." She turns to Steven. "Your mom took me to a bar here and the only guy who talked to me was about seventy years old," she says, remembering the evening at The Hungry Pelican. "How come guys my age don't ask me out?" Jeanie looks back and forth between the two twenty-year-olds imploringly. "Am I ugly?" she asks them. "Am I?"

"No," Steven says quickly.

"No, ma'am," Dale says when Jeanie turns to him. "You're the prettiest girl I've seen on this whole trip."

Jeanie would argue with his statement, but the sincerity on his face is so sweet that it cuts through her drunkenness and touches her heart.

"Thank you, Davy," she says.

"Dale," Dale corrects her.

For some reason, this makes Jeanie break into a giggly laugh that's like champagne bubbles in her throat. "Right!" she says, slapping his bicep playfully. "Dale. I'm sorry." Jeanie grows serious again, the laughter quickly forgotten.

They walk on in silence for a bit, and then Jeanie stops, forcing Steven, whose elbow she's still hanging onto, to stop as well. Dale follows suit.

"It's just...I feel like one of those 'always the bridesmaid, never the bride' kind of girls, you know?" Steven and Dale shoot each other confused looks. "I mean, I once loved a guy--his name was Leonard Pickles, if you can believe that--and he ended up marrying my best friend. They're having their third baby together, and I'm alone. And my best friend was also the girl who tormented me so much when we were kids that I could hardly take it. But that's another story." Jeanie frowns at her own jumbled thought process before picking up a different thread. "And my sister almost died last month," she says seriously, looking out at the dark water as it bobs and waves under the sky that's turning from plum to indigo.

Her eyes suddenly feel heavy, and she lets go of Steven's arm, swaying slightly as though they're standing on a boat and not a pier.

"Should we sit?" Dale suggests, putting a hand on Jeanie's lower back. He guides her to the edge of the dock, where she sinks down, legs dangling over the edge and hanging towards the water. Dale and Steven sit on either side of her, watching her closely to make sure she doesn't pitch forward and fall into the water.

"My brother was driving us and I didn't even know that he'd been drinking--oh, Lord! Look at me now, drinking here like an idiot!" Jeanie's face flames red and she puts

one hand to her cheek, looking around as if someone might be watching her and taking notes on her behavior. "This is so irresponsible. I shouldn't be drinking at all."

"Hey, you're out to dinner with friends, and we're looking out for you. We'll make sure you get home safely, just as soon as my mom comes out to meet us," Steven promises her earnestly. "But please, go on. Your brother was driving."

"Yeah," Jeanie says, remembering the accident in full detail, which she hasn't really allowed herself to do for weeks. She's tried her best not to wade into the murky waters of her mind and to remember what Angela had looked like, tossed into the field, the overhead light winking at them incessantly. It's been easier to sleep and to function by forgetting the whole thing as much as she can. "We collided with a truck and my sister and I were thrown from the car. She's still not walking," Jeanie admits solemnly. "But she's still getting married. Is it wrong that it makes me jealous?"

"Of which part?" Steven asks.

"That she can't even walk, but her boyfriend is so excited to marry her that he came and proposed while she was still in the hospital. They're only eighteen."

Jeanie is making herself feel worse with every word she's saying. She really is. Of course it's terrible to be jealous of Angela, whose whole life has been flipped upside down. It's not good at all to feel anything but concern and empathy for her baby sister, and she really needs to put all of her own selfish, immature, ridiculous thoughts aside. She knows this, and yet here she is, a few drinks in and spilling her guts to two boys who probably figured that dinner out with Steven's mom just meant a free meal and the chance to possibly meet a cute, slightly older girl. There's no way they'd bargained for spending their evening babysitting a drunk woman whose emotions are a mess.

"Eighteen is young," Dale agrees. "But if they're happy..."

“They are!” Jeanie says, wiping at her nose, which has started to run. She’s now crying and there’s no way it’s anything less than ugly. “They’re happy, and so are Leonard Pickles and my best friend Carol.” Jeanie gives a shaky exhale as she tries to fight off the onslaught of tears. “Even Bill and Jo seem happy, but he does—or he did—spend a lot of time talking to me.”

Dale sounds almost afraid to ask, but he does anyway: “Who are Bill and Jo?”

“Bill is the guy I think I might be in love with.” She pauses, sobering up as the words hang in the air. “We work together.”

“At NASA?” Dale prods. “Is he an astronaut?”

“He is. And he’s married.”

Steven lets out a low whistle. “To Jo? Or maybe Josephine?”

“Yep,” Jeanie says. She nods and as she does, her head drops lower and tears fill her eyes, spilling over. A few escape and land on her bare knees. Her feet are hanging into the darkness over the water, but she can see the pale skin of her knees and thighs in the emerging moonlight, and she tugs at the hem of her light blue dress as she nods some more. “That’s right. I’m in love with a married man.”

“Seems risky,” Dale ventures. “Has his wife caught on yet?”

“Oh!” Jeanie looks up abruptly. The tears halt. “Oh, no. No no no. Jo doesn’t know anything because there’s nothing to know.”

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When Jeanie looks at Steven, he's frowning like he's trying to understand. "You mean nothing has happened between you?"

"Of course not!" Jeanie says, sounding as outraged as she feels. "I would never. No way. I mean, feelingsomething for him is one thing, but acting on it is another. It's just—why can't I find someone who likes me? Someone who wants to be with me and no one else? And why is it that the only real feelings I have are for someone who isn't and can never be mine?"

The boys are quiet for so long that Jeanie knows they're treating her questions as rhetorical ones—which they are. But then Steven speaks up, clasping his hands together in his lap as he swings his legs out over the water.

"Maybe it's easier to like guys you can't have right now," he says hesitantly. "Sometimes what we think we want isn't actually what we do want. Do you know what I'm saying?"

Jeanie is just drunk enough that she doesn't really see where he's going with this. She shakes her head as the streaks of tears dry on her cheeks. "No."

"Okay, what if what you're supposed to want right now is a husband and kids? Everyone else does, and you probably feel some pressure to settle down, right?"

Jeanie tilts her head to one side; he's not entirely wrong. "Go on."

"But what if what you really want is to be an engineer? What if you don't want the things that everyone expects you to want? I mean, maybe you do love this Bill

guy—I'm sure he's great. But he's also a safe person to love, because you can't have him right now. Or, if you can, it won't be in the way you're supposed to have him. So it's easy to focus your attentions and your feelings like this. It's safe. At least, relatively speaking. Are you getting what I'm saying now?"

Jeanie nods slowly; she is picking up on his message, and it's absolutely worth considering. "I think so. And there are certainly parts that you're right about: I love being an engineer. I don't want to be alone, and I do want love, but I don't know that I want to give up the things I'm passionate about in order to get that love. I think I want children at some point, but I don't want them now, so it's far easier to love a man who isn't asking me for that than to love one whose expectation will be to move rapidly in that direction. You're not wrong about any of that."

"Steven is the emotional wizard of our group," Dale says with a chuckle. "At school, whenever someone is going through something, he's the one you want to listen and offer advice."

Steven puts his palms together and closes his eyes, bowing his head slightly with a beatific smile on his face. "At your service," he says jokingly.

"No, you're really onto something here," Jeanie says, pushing herself up to a standing position. She wobbles a bit and both boys reach up to steady her, jumping to their feet immediately in order to escort her back down the pier and to the restaurant, where Vicki will most likely be emerging soon.

"I appreciate you guys listening to me," Jeanie says as she loops her arms through both boys' elbows this time, letting them guide her back over the wooden planks. "I don't know what I'd do without friends like you." Her eyes fill with tears again and she realizes that she's being unnecessarily sentimental with two young men who she'll most likely never see again. But in that moment, she does appreciate them. Steven has crystallized so many of her thoughts and feelings in just a few statements,

and she can't thank him enough for his unvarnished opinions and wisdom.

"Everybody needs friends," Dale says.

"I just—" Jeanie is about to go on, but as she's walking, her stomach clenches and a wave of nausea overtakes her. "Oh no," she says, lurching towards the edge of the dock.

The boys are right behind her and they each grab an arm as she leans over the water and retches. Jeanie empties her stomach repeatedly and the hot bile mixes with tears as she chokes and splutters. When she's done, Steven pulls a clean, white handkerchief from his pocket and hands it to her.

"You can keep it," he says generously.

"Thanks." Jeanie's throat is raw from the acid in her stomach and she wipes her mouth with a shaking hand. She's suddenly feeling almost entirely sober and wishes desperately that she could just blink her eyes and be in her own bed rather than on a dock at night in the middle of September with two college boys.

"Let's get you back to Vicki," Dale says, taking her arm again the way he might take his grandmother's arm to help her cross a street. Jeanie can feel the pity radiating from both boys, but it doesn't even offend her. In fact, it feels nice to have them looking after her when she's messed everything up so badly.

"I'm sorry," Jeanie says as she starts to cry. Her tears come out in little hiccups. "I'm so sorry that I ruined your night."

"Nah," Steven says, rubbing her back in slow circles as they walk at about half-pace. "Don't even worry about it, Jeanie. You're a nice girl."

Jeanie starts to cry more at these words, because they hold so much meaning for her. She is a nice girl in the sense that she's made all the right choices, and that she holds herself to a high standard. She loves her family, and she even loves Vicki, who has come to feel as much like an aunt to her as her own Aunt Penny. But she's not nice because she's been coveting another woman's husband now for months. It's time to remedy that, and as soon as she sobers up, she will.

She's ready to put Bill Booker behind her and move on.

"You're a nice girl, Jeanie," Steven says again soothingly. "And you deserve all the good things that life has to offer."

Dale walks along quietly on her other side, and when the two young men deliver Jeanie to Vicki, they do so without a word about Jeanie being drunk or her vomiting.

They all say their goodbyes at Vicki's car in the lot and Jeanie climbs in, resting her head against the headrest.

Outside the car, in the parking lot, Steven and Dale wave at them before getting into their own car to head back to the house where they're staying with a friend whose family lives in town. Jeanie is happy for them that they're so young and carefree.

It must be nice to just live and to not worry about anything, which is kind of an unfair thing for her to think, because how is she to know whether Steven or Dale have any troubles of their own. They probably do—everyone does.

As she drifts off to sleep in her bed an hour later, Jeanie counts the hours in her head until her alarm will go off in the morning. She rolls over in her sheets, winding them around her body like a cocoon. If she falls asleep now, she'll get five and a half hours of sleep before she needs to be up for work, at which point she'll confront everything and put herself on a straight path forward.

No more begrudging anyone their happiness—even silently. No more envy of Carol and Leonard and their three kids; no worry that Angela is marrying too young or that her kid sister is showing her up by getting engaged so early; no daydreaming about Bill Booker in any way.

Starting first thing in the morning, Jeanie is ready to look at everything with fresh eyes.

CHAPTER 22

Bill

Bill has had enough of seeing Jeanie and Peter Abernathy together. They've been eating at the same table during the lunch hour nearly every day since shortly after Peter's thirtieth birthday party in the office back in September, and he's seen them together at The Black Hole on more than one occasion, which frays his nerves in a way that he can't—or refuses to—define. It's been nearly two months of watching them sit near one another at meetings and conferences, of overhearing them talk about plans to golf or play tennis on the weekends, and of having the other guys elbow Peter and say something jokey about the fact that a female engineer is a real catch because she must know how everything works—wink, wink.

Bill has had more than his fair share of these kinds of comments, thank you very much.

“You got plans for Thanksgiving?” Todd Roman asks him a few days before the holiday as Bill snaps his briefcase shut and heads for the stairwell. He's hoping to avoid the elevator and get out of the building without running into Peter and Jeanie discussing their dinner plans or making eyes at one another that they think no one else can see.

“Jo and I considered taking the kids home to Minnesota for a long week, but in the

end, her mom and dad wanted to come down here and get a break from the winter weather. So they'll be here tomorrow and stay for a week. How about you guys?"

"Barb wants to stay here," Todd says with a shrug. "Connecticut feels more like the holidays to me, but she's gotten on board pretty quickly with the tropical winter months. I'm fine with it, to be perfectly honest. Traveling with three little boys is a lot of work."

"Sure, sure," Bill says as he bangs the handle of the door that leads them to the stairwell. It opens and the men take the steps down in rapid succession, the sound of their shoes echoing all around them.

With just as much gusto, Bill yanks the handle to open the door on the ground floor, and in the blink of an eye, he and Todd cross the lobby and end up out in the bright November sun.

"You headed to The Black Hole?" Todd asks him, swinging his own briefcase as he cuts a path to his convertible Corvette.

Bill stops in his tracks. He's tempted to just head home and start the weekend on this sunny Friday evening, maybe jump in the pool with the kids, or sit down and have a drink with Jo before dinner—something they rarely get the time to do—but a part of him wants to take the edge off before he hits the door of his own house.

"Yeah," Bill says. "I'll stop by for one beer."

The Black Hole is jumping with the excitement of an upcoming holiday, and someone has put Bing Crosby on the jukebox in spite of the fact that it's only November 20th. Bill has left his briefcase on the passenger seat of his Corvette, and he's taken off his necktie and loosened the top button of his collared shirt. A beer is just what he needs to start the weekend, and he orders one on his way in, carrying the

bottle over to the usual table on the side of the bar where he and the other guys always congregate.

“Booker,” Jay Reed says, looking up at Bill as he points a finger in his direction. “Settle this bet for us: Packers and Browns, or Packers and Chiefs in the next Super Bowl?”

Bill, who loves sports as much as the next guy, immediately starts running stats and figures and scores in his head as he pulls out a chair and takes a long pull on his beer.

“Packers and Browns,” he says decisively, setting his bottle on the scarred wooden tabletop. “No question. And I have Packers for the win.”

“Bold assertion, given that we’ve still got months to go,” Ed Maxwell interjects. He launches into a detailed description of the last three games, which Bill easily joins in on. This is the kind of mindless talk he needs on a Friday—sports, games, predictions on who will throw the ball farthest. “But I like your conviction.”

The talk meanders to the week behind them, the week ahead, and the fact that it’s already been a year since JFK was shot.

“Goes too fast,” Bill says. He has his elbows on the table, and he shakes his head at the memory of that day. “I really thought things would change after that. For us, I mean. I wasn’t sure that LBJ would be as pro-NASA as he is.”

“He never hid that he was,” Todd counters. “He always came out on our side.”

“Sure,” Bill agrees with a shrug. “But politicians lie. All the time. It just wouldn’t have surprised me to find that he forgot about the things that Kennedy cared about.”

“I guess we’re lucky on that front,” Ed says. “But he’s kind of taking his time with

jumping in on the Vietnam front. We need stronger action there.”

“Now, Ed,” Jay says, ever the peacemaker of the group. He goes on to counter every argument Ed poses, and their discussion of the U.S.’s potential role in Vietnam takes some twists and turns that Bill isn’t interested in following.

He drains his beer and stands. “Alright, gents. Time for me to get home and see what the missus has in store for me this weekend.”

“See you Monday, Booker!” comes the chorus from the table, and then the men turn back to their beers and discussions.

Bill slides on his aviator sunglasses halfway through the bar, ready to step out into the golden light of early evening. But his smile falters as he has to step aside to let Jeanie and Peter enter the bar. Rather than take off his sunglasses, Bill moves out of the way with a nod and a close-lipped smile, and once Jeanie and Peter are inside, he walks around them and right out of the bar without another word.

“So this is...”

Bill can hear his mother-in-law’s hushed question coming from the front room on Thanksgiving morning. Jo rushes in to change the topic.

“Yes. Mmhmm. This is the urn,” Jo says in low tones, undoubtedly turning her mother away from the vase that holds Margaret’s ashes.

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Bill has gotten used to seeing it there, and even though Jo has asked a number of times about possibly relocating it or even scattering the ashes—Perhaps at the beach? Maybe during a nice sunset ceremony?—Bill has brushed off all discussions about it and insisted that he’s not ready to do anything just yet.

“Hey, Billy,” Jo’s father says, stepping inside from the pool area, where he’s been taking turns tossing the three children into the pool—even thirteen-year-old Jimmy. “You got an extra towel or two? I’m afraid these kids have gotten me soaked.”

“Sure, Pop,” Bill says, using the name he’d adopted for Jack White when he’d first married Jo.

Bill hums as he hunts through the linen closet for towels, and as he does, he can hear Jo talking to her mom from down the hallway.

“He’s doing okay,” Jo is saying. “Honestly, it was such a shock the way it happened. We still don’t have all the details, and I think he needs to accept that maybe we never will. Margaret made a choice to end her life without warning, and that’s possibly all the information we’ll ever have.”

Mrs. White makes atsk-tsk sound and Bill imagines her shaking her head in disapproval, her hair smooth and combed into a graying flip. “But will you just have to live with this woman in the middle of your marriage forever, Josephine? I mean, come on, that’s not even reasonable. First it was her and the financial and emotional toll of her existence, but now it’s her presence in your home.”

“Shhh, Mama,” Jo warns. “It’s fine.”

“Honey, I’m a practical woman,” Mary White whispers—and Bill knows this to be true. Mary has always been a kindly, grounded, pragmatic person. “But your husband needs some help to move past this. He lost a baby, and then he effectively lost his first wife when he decided to put her in a facility. And then he lost her again when she died. Sometimes people need professional help to move past all of that.”

Jo makes a sound that Bill recognizes as dismissive. “He would never. Bill? Psychotherapy?”

Mary White takes a long pause here, and all Bill can feel from where he’s kneeling on the tile floor in front of the closet is the weight of his wife’s words: Bill would never...But maybe he would? Maybe he could sit down to talk to someone about all the dark thoughts that claw at the edges of his mind. Maybe he needs to. This is the second time someone has said as much in the past few months, and while he took Arvin North’s suggestion to heart as something that might help or work in his favor in terms of his career, now he takes his mother-in-law’s words as a suggestion from someone who knows and cares about him on a personal level.

“I think you need to talk to him, Jo,” Mary says to her daughter. “He looks like he’s not sleeping.”

Jo lets out an audible exhale. “He got pulled off a mission shortly after Margaret died, and I didn’t want to connect the two things. I’m sure he has, but I didn’t want to. Don’t you think NASA does stuff like that all the time? Rearranges missions and changes things?”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Mary says. “I wouldn’t know. But if you think one thing might be related to the other, then I think it’s worth sitting down and talking to him.”

“I would,” Jo says, “but sometimes he’s hard to talk to.”

Mary gives a quick, short laugh. “Just like every other man who ever walked the planet, Josephine.”

Jo is quiet for a moment. “Right. I guess so.” She sounds unconvinced. “Maybe after the holiday I will. I’ll try to find a time to just sit down with him and see how he’s feeling.”

“Yes, do that,” Mary says. “You spend so much time doing all the things you do...” She goes quiet here, and her words are laced with so much meaning that even Bill can pick up on it. “You’re at the hospital all the time volunteering, which is wonderful, or you’re writing your stories, but your first priority is to your marriage, Josephine. I don’t want you to forget that.”

Bill winces—both from crouching on the cold tile with his bare knees, and from his mother-in-law’s words—and then pushes himself up to standing. He can’t take listening in on this conversation any longer, so he closes the cabinet door loudly.

“Jo?” Bill calls out as if he hasn’t heard anything that’s gone on. “Where can I find more pool towels for your dad?”

Jo’s shoes come click-clacking down the hall, and Bill walks away, leaving her to the task of digging up more towels.

It goes on like this over the course of Thanksgiving, and Bill can feel the distance between himself and Jo as they move around one another. There are no harsh words, and there are no deep discussions, but he can feel the slight tension as he reaches past her to grab his toothbrush from the cup on the counter while she wipes off her cold cream. He can sense that she’s lost in her own thoughts when he leans over to put a kiss on her cheek in the kitchen while she rinses dishes at the sink. He can see the faraway look in her eyes as she watches her parents with the children.

But this too shall pass, Bill knows. They'll have a chance to sit down and talk, and maybe he'll even tell her that he thinks Jeanie Florence is the one who shared the information that got him taken off the mission. It's high time that he starts opening up to Jo the way he used to, and it's definitely time for him to start treating his wife as his confidante, as talking to Jeanie as if she were his close friend certainly came back to bite him.

Soon, Bill thinks. We'll talk just as soon as we get the chance.

Early December at Cape Kennedy is a whirlwind. Planning for the Gemini orbital mission is in full swing, and everyone is so focused on that project that for Bill, it seems that nothing else is going on at NASA. He'd underestimated his own involvement in the mission after being moved off the three-man roster for the physical part of it, and while being the lead for Gemini in mission control isn't nearly as exciting as suiting up for it, Bill is up to his eyeballs in facts and figures, last-minute crises, and all-hours discussions about every tiny detail of the mission.

Talking to Jo keeps getting pushed back as Bill barrels straight ahead towards December 13, and at this point, he imagines them sitting poolside at Christmas, Gemini behind them, and nothing but time to talk and reconnect ahead of them.

For her part, Jo seems occupied with shopping, gift-wrapping, meal-planning, the hospital, and the damned story keeps her tapping away on the typewriter well into the night. Of course, there are worse things a man's wife could be doing, but now she's got an event she's cooking up with PR at NASA, and Bill can only devote so much of his energy and brainpower to staying on top of what's going on there. As far as he knows, there's a cocktail party of some sort planned, and Jo will be sharing some of her stories with a crowd of women while Dave Huggins takes photos and the public relations specialists orchestrate some sort of PR blitz about astronaut wives doing exciting things.

At least that's what he's gathered in the slivers of time that he's at home and awake.

"North needs you to look at these right away," Jeanie says late in the afternoon of the 11th, setting a file on Bill's desk as he crunches numbers and makes notes on something that's been bugging him. "Can you sign off on this as soon as possible?"

Bill, caught off guard, looks up from his notepad, pencil still in hand, and locks eyes with Jeanie. "Is this the re-figuring of the geosynchronous orbit?" He frowns, reaching for the file in her hands.

"Yep," Jeanie says. Of late, she's kept her smiles soft, but distant, but here she is now, letting her gaze linger on his as if she's about to ask him a question. "Bill," she starts.

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Rather than saying anything, Bill waits, file in hand, hoping that she'll make it quick so that he can get back to the task at hand.

"I was wondering," Jeanie says. She stops, her eyes dancing to one side so that she's not looking at him. This has the effect of making her look like a nervous school girl, and Bill has to resist the urge to reach out and touch her arm to make her feel at ease. "I thought maybe you and I could eat lunch together today. I have something I want to talk to you about."

Bill isn't prepared to eat lunch with Jeanie, or to talk to her about how her dates are going with Peter Abernathy, or to act friendly and to ignore the reality of the way she's dropped a grenade on his career by sharing his private admissions with their superiors.

"I'm actually working through lunch today," Bill says as he makes a big show of stacking her file beneath his other papers. "Could you just debrief me on it here?"

Jeanie looks around nervously, tucking a long strand of hair behind one ear. "Um. I'd rather not."

As if on cue, Bill's phone rings and he reaches for the receiver as he glances Jeanie's way. "Sorry. I'm kind of tied up today. If it's related to Gemini, then we just need to squeeze in a conversation here at my desk. If it's anything else, let's push it until after the thirteenth, okay?"

Bill doesn't wait for her to answer before putting the phone to his ear. "Bill Booker," he says gruffly. He listens as the caller starts talking, but his eyes are on Jeanie as she

walks away, looking mildly dejected. The curve of her narrow shoulders tugs at his heart and Bill almost wants to set the phone down and follow her to wherever she's going, but he can't.

For so, so, so many reasons, he just can't.

CHAPTER 23

Jo

Due to bizarrescheduling and circumstances that Jo doesn't even pretend to understand, her event was scheduled for the evening of December thirteenth, which is the same evening that Gemini has been shifted to. The idea of shepherding in people who want to listen to her read from her romance stories as an actual orbital test mission is taking place elsewhere on the NASA property almost seems incongruous, not to mention difficult to execute. Jo had felt certain that someone would have pulled the plug on her event in order to preserve the secrecy and safety of whatever was happening on the launch pad, but in the end, Irene, in her infinite public relations wisdom, has insisted that they go ahead as planned.

At Frankie's urging, Jo had gone to the beauty parlor that very afternoon and gotten her hair trimmed and blown into a chic, flipped bob, and as she'd sat at Frankie's vanity table, she'd been transformed into a doe-eyed beauty with a swipe of black liquid eyeliner and a dusting of pale eyeshadow.

Even Jo has to admit that she feels glamorous, and the pale pink organza of her tea-length dress makes her feel as light as air.

"Okay, Josephine," Irene says, thrusting a flute of champagne into Jo's hand. "How are we feeling?"

Jo looks around at the small hangar space that's been filled with rows of folding chairs facing a small podium. There's a makeshift bar in one corner, a twinkling Christmas tree in another and several tall, bistro-style tables where people can mingle during cocktail hour. A rectangular table with one chair sits at the side of the room, and next to it is a large black-and-white photo of Jo taken by Dave Huggins when they'd first arrived in Florida. He's cropped it so that it looks a bit like a headshot, and now it's affixed to a large piece of hard poster board and it sits on a wooden easel. Jo takes in the room and the expectation of so many empty chairs as her stomach does a nervous flip-flop.

"I feel kind of overwhelmed," Jo admits, sipping the champagne daintily as she tries not to mess up her pink lipstick. "I mean...all I've done is write a little love story, and now people will, hopefully, show up here tonight to hear me read some of it."

Irene's muscled arms and legs are on full display beneath a sleeveless black shift. Her ashy blonde hair is piled on top of her head, and her nails are painted a glossy red. "Damn straight they're showing up to hear you read, Josephine." Irene looks at her with a determined smile. "You are them, Jo. And by that I mean you literally are some of them—the wives of the NASA employees, anyway—and for the rest of the women who have been invited to come, you're aspirational." A young member of the waitstaff walks by with a silver tray full of champagne in flutes, and Irene reaches out to pluck one for herself. "Just think of it: a woman who keeps a beautiful home, raises three kids, and is a supportive wife to an astronaut. In your free time you not only volunteer in a hospital, you set up fundraisers to help a toddler get heart surgery, and now you write romance for a national magazine. It's impressive, and it's intriguing. So quit selling yourself short."

Jo knows that she's right, but it's strange to hear all these things listed out like some sort of resume, and if she can take a step back from the fact that it's her Irene is talking about, even Jo feels mildly dazzled by her own accomplishments.

Maybe the champagne is already going to her head.

“Let’s get the stack of magazines all set up on the table there, and that way you’re ready to autograph them as people filter in.” Irene’s heeled shoes click across the concrete floor of the hangar as she walks over to a giant box that rests on top of the table by Jo’s picture.

“Autographs?” Jo whispers to herself, watching as Irene uses a box cutter to pop open the flaps of the box. She starts to take out stacks of True Romance magazines and sets them on the table next to three brand new pens.

“The magazine sent these over,” Irene says loudly, her voice carrying in the cavernous space. Once there are more bodies in the hangar to absorb the sound, it won’t feel quite so massive. Or at least Jo hopes that’s how it works. “They thought it would be good advertising if you gave free copies to all the attendees.”

“You’ve really thought of everything here, Irene,” Jo says with wonder. Just then, she hears voices and the clacking of several pairs of high-heels on the floors and she turns to see Frankie, Jude, Carrie, and Barbie coming in together.

“It’s our star!” Frankie calls out, throwing her arms wide as she looks around the space. “Wow, Joey-girl, they did you right here. Look at this place! And a full-sized photo of you like that? I’m impressed.”

Irene gives the women a big, open smile. “Ah, I know these faces,” she says, setting down the magazines that are in her hand and striding towards them. “Irene Powers—Public Relations.”

The women look her over from head-to-toe, but they do it surreptitiously, and Jo recognizes the brief flash of curiosity mixed with distrust that so many wives feel when they meet the women their husbands spend their workdays with.

“Hello,” Frankie says first, extending a hand. “Francesca Maxwell.”

“Ah, Francesca,” Irene says, shaking her hand firmly. “The Rockette. The dance studio doyenne.”

Barbie blinks in surprise. “Do you know all of us this well?”

Irene turns to her, eyes flashing with mirth. “It’s my job to know as much as possible about all of our employees and their families. It helps us to arrange positive public relations opportunities.” Irene drops her voice as she looks around the empty hangar theatrically. “And it also helps us when we have to fend off negative PR or kill stories before they get out there, if you know what I mean.”

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One of Barbie's blonde eyebrows lifts slightly. "Oh," she says in a breathy voice. "Right."

Irene narrows her eyes at Barbie. "Barbara Roman, mother of three. Wife of Todd Roman. Daughter of Senator Hal Mackey of Connecticut."

Barbie laughs, and it echoes throughout the hangar. "Wow! You came up with all of that quickly." She looks around at the other wives. "Do we have our own trading cards or something?"

"Dave," Irene says as Dave Huggins walks in with a camera around his neck. "Could you please get some photographs of Josephine before things get started?" Dave nods and sets up his lights as Irene turns back to Barbie. "And we don't have trading cards of you ladies yet, but that's a fabulous idea, Mrs. Roman. I'm adding that to my mental list of possibilities." Irene taps her temple with one manicured finger. "It's all filed away up here, girls!"

Before she knows it, Jo has been stationed at the table so that Dave can take photos of her signing magazines, and real guests have begun to stream in. She looks at her watch: five-thirty, and still no sign of Bill. She knows that he's tied up with all things Gemini, and while she's hoped and prayed that the test mission comes off without a hitch and that it all happens in a timely manner, she's still nervous about whether Bill will be able to make it from wherever they're doing the mission so that he can be there to support her.

"Any sign of Bill?" Jo asks Frankie with an edge to her voice. They'd intentionally timed the mission to start with only about two hours left of daylight (why, Jo did not

know), so things had to be winding down. “I was really hoping he’d be able to stop by.”

Frankie smiles at the people gathering around the table who want to talk about the story and get an autograph, then takes Jo by the elbow and steers her aside.

“Listen, Jojo, I don’t want to upset you,” Frankie says through a forced smile. “But there was a little delay with the mission, and I just heard that they were set back a full hour.”

“An hour?” Jo says, trying not to sound whiny. She needs to pull it together, and she knows it. Whether Bill shows or not, she’s going to get up behind that podium, read some of her work aloud, and smile and make small talk with every woman who approaches her.

“Okay, so he might miss it,” Frankie says with a wave of her hand, “but you need to put your game face on, girl. You wrote these stories, and you got all these ladies to show up here based on your talent alone. So enjoy this moment, and just know that I’m right here to cheer you on, even if Bill gets tied up somewhere else. Got it?”

Jo takes a long, deep breath and nods as she spots Dave Huggins from the corner of her eye. He’s on one knee, snapping photos of women holding champagne flutes as they talk in small groups. “Got it,” she says to Frankie. She smiles and turns back to the ladies gathered at the table.

“Hi,” she says to the next woman in line. “I’m Josephine Booker. I’m so glad you could make it tonight.”

CHAPTER 24

Bill

There is no part of Bill's brain that is nagging him about Jo's reading event. None whatsoever. He's completely forgotten it. In fact, every fiber of his being is completely focused on the task at hand, so much so that if someone interrupted his thought process, he most likely wouldn't even be able to name his children in order, or answer basic questions about who he is and where he comes from.

"Booker, this is urgent," one of the engineers says, rushing in with a memo that he hands off to Bill. Bill skims it quickly and then balls up the memo and tosses it halfheartedly.

He's behind the controls at mission headquarters, monitoring a half-dozen screens that are spread out on the console in front of him. Bill stands up and puts his hands on his hips as he frowns at the television screen overhead that shows the three-man orbital spacecraft as it sits on a launch pad. He has a stopwatch on a string looped around his neck and tucked into the breast pocket of his short-sleeved shirt, and a sharpened pencil tucked behind one ear.

"You think this is a go, or do we scrap it?" Bill turns to Arvin North, who is sitting in a chair nearby, one ankle crossed over his knee, arms folded over his chest. He's also monitoring the screens and data, and he's acting as Bill's second-in-command, though they both know that North has the final say on everything.

Bill does not want to scrap this. He absolutely does not. This is his mission to lead from the ground (even though the spacecraft won't be launching into the atmosphere on this particular mission, the astronauts are still fully suited up and prepared the same way they would be for a launch). He wants to show everyone that he's done his work and that he's fully prepared for this mission to be a success, but he doesn't want to make stupid mistakes because of his own bravado. A line of sweat beads on his forehead and Bill resists the urge to brush it away.

"We've already been pushed back an hour," Arvin North says gruffly, turning to look

at Bill. “And we’re losing daylight here.”

Bill pauses as he considers his next words carefully. “There’s been some talk about this particular spacecraft. It’s clunky. It’s kind of barebones, and there are some things about it that I think we could see as flaws. It might be in our best interest to?—“

“Clunky?” Arvin North repeats with a sharp laugh. “You want me to call off a mission because you think the technology is inelegant, Booker?”

Bill’s eyes shift to the side for a moment and then he drags them back to North and holds them there. “Yes,” he finally says with a nod. “I think that’s exactly what we should do. Running a mission of any sort—even one that doesn’t involve actual space travel—when you’re unconvinced about the technology is a bad idea. It just is.”

The screens around them beep and chirp. There are voices from other parts of the floor as various engineers carry on conversations and take turns pointing at the windows, the monitors, and at Bill. He looks around at everyone; they’re clearly waiting for him to make a call, but something is really bothering him, and he knows he should have spoken up to Arvin North sooner—much sooner than the day of the mission.

With a conviction that he pulls together from everything he knows and feels about this particular mission, Bill stares at Arvin North. “I don’t feel comfortable with this,” he says in a low, firm voice. “I think we should postpone.”

Arvin North holds Bill’s gaze for what feels like an eternity, then he stands up slowly, clapping his hands to get everyone’s attention. Conversation slows to a trickle and then stops. “I’ve considered all the elements here, including the delay we’ve already encountered, and I’ve decided that this mission is a go,” North says.

The faces around the room remain mostly placid, save for a few men who show the slightest flickers of disapproval. Still, no one speaks up.

“We’ve got our men suited, and ready to board Gemini. I’ve heard all the issues and I’ve considered the factors, and we’re going to run this mission tonight. Right here, right now. I want everyone in their places. We’ll begin countdown in—“ North glances up at the giant clock on the wall of mission control, watching its sweeping hands for a moment, “—twenty minutes. If we don’t, we lose our window for today, and for the foreseeable future due to projected weather conditions. Am I clear?”

No one says a word.

“Fabulous,” North says. “We have twenty minutes.” He strides over to the side of the room and pours himself a paper cup of black coffee from a silver urn, sipping it calmly.

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When he returns, he stands next to Bill, facing the same direction and looking at the same monitors. “Bill,” he says. “I’m relieving you of your duties on this mission. There’s no room for second-guessing here, and I’m going to ask you to step away without making an issue of this. Do you hear me?”

Bill isn’t at all sure that he’s doing the right thing, but he’s doing what he thinks is right, and sometimes that’s the very best you can do. He wants to prove himself, and to show that he’s able to consider both his own findings and determinations, as well as to weigh the possible dangers and successes of the mission itself. He’s in a tough spot, and he knows it. His entire career could be in jeopardy if he says or does the wrong thing.

Bill can feel the eyes of nearly every man in mission control watching him furtively as he stands shoulder to shoulder with Arvin North, and so he nods, casting his gaze to the floor. “I hear you, sir,” he finally says, confirming it with another nod. “I do.”

Arvin clears his throat next to Bill and then claps Bill on the back once. “Next time,” he says in a voice that’s laced with regret and understanding. “We’ll give it another go next time.”

Bill walks off the floor of mission control then, not making eye contact with anyone as he does, and when he pushes the latched door handle with both hands, it swings open wildly and nearly knocks Jeanie off her feet.

“Bill!” she says with surprise. She’s been asked to stay and watch the mission from the viewing deck, and while he knows that he should follow her directly up there and watch and learn right alongside her and the other engineers and astronauts who are

non-essentials on this particular mission, he knows that he can't do it. He just can't.

Without a word, Bill pushes past Jeanie and makes a beeline for the stairwell, where he yanks open another door and starts taking the steps two and then three at a time.

"Bill!" Jeanie calls after him, standing in the doorway as she looks up at him ascending. Her voice echoes in the concrete stairwell, and there's a plaintive note in her cry that forces him to stop in his tracks. He stands there, one hand on the railing, his back to the bottom floor where Jeanie waits. "What happened?" she asks.

Her voice reverberates off of everything and fills his ears. Bill can feel the hum of her words in his chest. He stands there, still saying nothing, but not running away.

"Can you come down? Can we talk?" she pleads. "Or can I come up?"

Bill knows that everyone will either be watching or taking part in the mission, and the chance of anyone happening onto their conversation is low, so he turns around and sits—slowly. He rests both elbows on his knees and then puts his head into his hands, letting it rest there.

Carefully, as if approaching a wounded animal, Jeanie climbs the stairs. She walks on the balls of her feet, which keeps her heels from clicking on the concrete, and soon she is standing just beneath Bill—two steps down—and looking right at him.

"Bill," she whispers imploringly, putting her hands on his shoulders but not shaking him. "Hey."

Bill stays inside of himself. He can't unfurl physically or emotionally right away, and so it's better for him to stay curled up and to keep to his thoughts tucked away until it feels safe to speak.

“I don’t know what happened in there,” Jeanie says, keeping her hands on his shoulders. Bill can feel her moving closer until her upper thighs are touching his knees. If he lifts his head, he knows they will be face to face. “I’m here to listen, Bill. Or I can just sit next to you and we can be quiet.”

As if to prove this point, Jeanie lets go of his shoulders and shifts so that she’s sitting next to him on the hard step. “Ooh,” she says to herself as she settles her body, tucking her thin skirt beneath her. “Cold.”

Bill can feel the faintest hint of a smile as listens to her, but he’s still too far inside himself to be able to interact, so he doesn’t. They sit quietly for a long while.

“I’ve missed talking to you,” Jeanie says softly. “I’ve missed your friendship, and I don’t know what happened between us to make things weird, but I’m still here, Bill.”

Finally, Bill lifts his head and looks at her raggedly. “You don’t know what happened?” he rasps. “You really don’t?” Rather than launching into his real feelings and his deepest accusations, Bill reaches for the surface answer, the lightest punch. “You and Abernathy are always together,” he says, feeling like an idiot and a child as the words come out. “You seem pretty preoccupied there.”

“Bill,” Jeanie says, but then doesn’t go on.

“No, seriously. Everywhere I look, you and Peter are together, and I don’t want to interrupt.”

“Oh, come on,” Jeanie says, but now her voice sounds exasperated, and Bill’s head whips in her direction. He hadn’t expected exasperation. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Bill waits a beat, and as he watches her face, he can feel a vein pulsing in his

forehead.

“Why did you tell Peter I had a boyfriend?”

There is no good answer for this, or rather, there is no good answer that won't make her upset. Bill shrugs. “I'm not sure.”

Hot, angry tears appear in Jeanie's eyes and he looks away. “That was wrong, Bill.”

“I know,” he says instantly. He feels guilty, and he has ever since he'd lied to Peter in the elevator, though clearly it hadn't stopped the guy from making his move. “But he asked you out anyway, so all's well that ends well, right?”

“Not exactly,” Jeanie says, sniffing and tossing her head back as she fights off the tears that had threatened to fall. “We got to talking one day in the lunch room and he mentioned that he was having a party and wanted to know if my boyfriend and I might want to come.”

“Oh,” Bill says.

“Right,” Jeanie agrees. “Oh.”

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“I’m sorry. That put you in an awkward position.”

“It sure as hell did,” she says emphatically. “I sounded like a moron—and a liar—as I told him I had no boyfriend. He said you’d been so sure I did when he asked, so he’d just assumed.”

“And then he asked you out?”

“Well, he invited me to the party, and I went, and then we found out we both like golfing and swimming, and we’ve become somewhat...friendly.”

A dark cloud passes over Bill’s heart and he tries to ignore the way this makes him feel. The idea of Jeanie being “friendly” with a jackwad like Peter Abernathy is almost more than he can take. “I’m really sorry,” he says, trying to actually be sorry.

“Well, what’s done is done,” Jeanie says. She sounds tired. “It’s not a relationship or anything, if that’s what you’re thinking,” she admits as she smooths her skirt over her thighs. “But it’s nice to have someone to go out with occasionally other than Vicki.”

This actually makes Bill smile—at least partially. “How is old Vicki?”

Jeanie laughs softly. “First of all, don’t let her hear you calling her ‘old’ anything,” she says with a wry smile. “But she’s fine. She’s dating a guy or two?—“

“Of course she is.”

“And she seems happy. She’s good company, and I’ll be honest, I’ve been glad to not

be alone here while my brother and sister recuperate up in Chicago.”

“Oh, jeez,” Bill says, feeling ashamed of himself. “I haven’t even asked you how they are.”

“Yeah, well...you’ve been busy ignoring me.” Jeanie bumps him with her shoulder in a slightly more aggressive manner than is strictly necessary. “My brother is doing alright. He still hasn’t forgiven himself for the accident. And Angela still isn’t walking, but she can feel some sensation in one of her feet, and she’s the most optimistic person I know. She really is.”

“That’s great,” Bill says, feeling actual relief. The idea that two eighteen-year-old kids nearly lost their life—not to mention the fact that Jeanie could have lost hers—had troubled him immensely. “I’m so happy to hear that.”

Jeanie lifts one shoulder and tilts her head towards it shyly. “I’ve really struggled with all of it. My mom and stepdad have done the lion’s share of the work when it comes to Angela’s recovery, obviously, but I had some really dark moments.” She bites her lip and drops her shoulder. “I needed to confront the fact that my life is working out differently than anyone else I know, and that a part of me likes it this way.”

“What does that mean?” Bill frowns as he watches her profile.

Jeanie looks ahead at the scarred, vanilla-colored paint of the stairwell in the dim wattage of the lightbulbs that illuminate the space. “It means that, as a woman, I should be settling down by now. I’m twenty-seven, Bill. I have no romantic prospects on the horizon.”

“You have Peter.”

She turns to look at him pointedly. “I have no romantic prospects on the horizon,” Jeanie reiterates, “and I’m nowhere near getting married and having children. I mean, what if it never happens for me? What if the bulk of my life is spent working as an engineer and not as a mother?”

Bill has never had direct insight into a woman’s thought processes as they pertain to such things, and he isn’t sure what to say. For him—as he would imagine it is for most men—it was just another stepping stone on the long path of his life: get married. Have kids. Go back to work as the wife raises the kids. Carry on. But for Jeanie, as for all women, it’s a real “either/or” question, and the notion of whether they will or won’t find love and marriage and family carries a very real and very heavy weight. Bill has never had a conversation with another man that’s laced with longing for these things. No man in his orbit has ever expressed worry that he might regret not having these things.

“I’m not sure, Jean,” he finally says. He feels for her, and as he watches the way her eyebrows knit together, he wants to put an arm around her shoulders and take some of the burden from her, to at least let her rest against him for a bit. But he doesn’t. “I really don’t know.”

“Yeah, there are no answers,” she says, standing again and brushing her skirt flat against her front. “But anyway.”

Bill looks up at her, noting the faux toughness in her voice. It’s definitely for show, and it pains him even more than her vulnerability. In order to give her something in return, he tells her the truth. “You caught me coming out of mission control after North took me off the mission.”

Jeanie sucks in air loudly. “What? Just now?”

Bill nods once and looks at his hands; he’s still sitting on the step and now Jeanie is

looking down at him. “I disagreed with doing it today. I don’t think the spacecraft is right yet, and I had this feeling that we needed to push it out, but North felt otherwise.” Bill glances at his watch. “Countdown starts in about seven minutes. We should probably go and watch from the observation deck.”

“But Bill...” Jeanie shakes her head as she stares at him. “I’m so sorry. I think you did what was right in this case though, because you had some misgivings and you spoke up. Ultimately we’re reaching for the stars here, but we’re still accountable for our own instincts and gut feelings, and we’re still accountable to each other. I think you were right to say something.”

Bill laughs drily. “Well. We’ll see, I guess. In the end it might have been exactly the wrong thing, but I’m willing to stand by it.”

“Then I’m willing to stand by you,” Jeanie says with conviction.

All the emotions Bill has felt for the past several months come rushing back in one tidal wave that hits him now on the stairs and nearly knocks him down, metaphorically speaking.

“Now you’re willing to stand by me?” he asks, trying to squelch the angry tone in his voice. “Why now?”

Jeanie takes a step away from him, blinking in surprise. “What do you mean?”

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“Remember that time we talked at The Black Hole? Down by the water?”

Jeanie’s eyes are darting around like a scared rabbit’s. “Yes,” she says hesitantly. “I remember.”

“And how I told you that I have these...episodes? Where I need to shut myself away from the world and just cope?”

“Okay,” Jeanie says carefully. “Yes. I remember.”

“So? You had to have taken that directly to North. Why did you do that?”

“What are you talking about?” Now Jeanie looks mad. He’s accused her, and her face is flushed bright red with frustration. “Why would I ever do that? I wouldn’t ever do that, Bill.”

“You’re the only person who I’ve ever told about those episodes,” he says hotly. “It had to be you.”

“Well, it wasn’t!” Jeanie says with venom. “It most definitely wasn’t.” The color drains from her face as realization dawns. “Oh, Bill,” she says, her voice dropping to a whisper. She puts her fingers to her lips. “I’m so sorry. I should have come to you with this, but I thought it wasn’t my place. Oh, no.”

Bill’s heart nearly stops. Whatever she’s going to say, he needs to hear it now, without delay, but he also doesn’t want her to tell him at all. “What? What happened?”

Jeanie closes her eyes and holds them that way for a long breath and then opens them. “It was Vance Majors.”

“What was Vance Majors?”

Jeanie blows out a fast, hard breath that makes her cheeks puff. “Vance came to me a while back and said we should talk to North about the way you kind of lost it on the Fourth of July. I’m so sorry, Bill. I didn’t do it, and he never brought it up again. I assumed he just dropped it.”

“But...why?” Bill is asking the question, but not really asking it of Jeanie. “Why would he do that?”

Jeanie’s eyes are wide. “Jealousy, maybe? I’m not sure.”

Bill runs a hand through his hair and then looks at Jeanie’s worried face. It’s clear that she feels terrible about this situation, but it’s obviously not her fault. He isn’t even sure what he might have done in her position, so he can’t fault her for the way she handled it.

“Bill, you don’t know how sorry I am. If something I did or didn’t do got you pulled off this mission, then?—“

“No,” Bill says, reaching out with both hands and cupping her shoulders gently. “This is not your fault. Not at all.”

Jeanie’s eyes fill with tears. “I would never want you to get removed from a mission, and I didn’t think you handled things badly on the Fourth. That was terrible, shocking news,” she says, not meeting Bill’s eye as he continues to hold on to her with both hands. “I’m on your side, Bill,” she says, finally lifting her gaze so that it meets his. “I’m on your side because I think you’re smart, and good at what you do. I think

you're dedicated, and amazing, and..." Her voice trails off as Bill's eyes land on her soft, pink lips. He watches them move as if in slow motion. "And I care about you."

There it is: the truth. It's been the truth in Bill's heart all along, and now he knows it's been the truth in Jeanie's, as well.

He cares about her.

And she cares about him.

CHAPTER 25

Jeanie

The words are out of her mouth before she can stop them: "And I care about you."

Jeanie's heart leaps into her throat and she feels that familiar fluttering of nerves, adrenaline, and the tiniest touch of fear. Because now that she's spoken the words to Bill that she could only stand to say out loud to Steven and Dale while she was drunk, she has to live with them. They exist in the world, and they're hanging there in the stairwell between her and Bill Booker like a cloud in an otherwise clear blue sky.

"I'm sorry," Jeanie says, trying to move away from him and down the stairs. Given the chance, she'd turn and bolt for the door without looking back, but he doesn't let go.

"Don't be," Bill says firmly. "Don't ever be sorry for how you feel, Jeanie." He looks into her eyes with a burning intensity that makes Jeanie's knees buckle; she's never been this close to a man who has made her feel this way.

"I guess I'm not sorry for how I feel, but I am sorry that I said it. It complicates

things for you.” Jeanie blinks in astonishment that she’s finally admitted her feelings to Bill. “It complicates things for me, too.”

There is the sound down below of someone taking the stairs from the first to the second floor—in through the bottom floor, up a flight of stairs, and out again—and once the door has slammed shut, they stand again in the echoing silence.

“Would it complicate things less for you if I told you I feel the same way?” Bill asks, finally letting his hands run from her shoulders, down her upper arms, and to her elbows, which he holds lightly. “Would it make it easier for you to know that we’re in the same boat?”

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Jeanie doesn't have an easy response to this, because of course it feels better to know that she hasn't imagined the entire thing in her head, but it also makes her feel worse because she can handle her own feelings quietly, but what she can't handle is both herself and Bill. It's enough of a challenge to stay busy and occupied and to keep her mind off Bill, and she's gone as far as spending most of her free time with Peter Abernathy in order to do it. She'd even tolerated a handful of kisses with Peter—one of them quite long and heated, on his end—but she'd realized quickly that there was no fire between them, and after their third kiss, Peter had sort of realized it too.

“Bill, you have a lot going on. I don't want to be just a response to the confusion or the trauma in your life. I'm a woman with feelings, and I can't bear to think that I would simply be some sort of distraction for you.”

Bill's eyes darken and grow serious. “That would never be the case. It most definitely is not the case,” Bill protests. “You are singular, Jeanette Florence. You are brilliant and interesting and funny, and in no way should I be as attracted to you as I am, but be that as it may, the facts of the situation still stand: I am attracted to you, and I think of you far more often than I should.”

It is in these words that Jeanie finds solace: that he thinks of her perhaps as often as she thinks of him. Something about it makes her feel less crazy, less alone. Her long lashes fan out over the tops of her cheeks as she closes her eyes, breathing in the scent of his aftershave. He's so close that she can feel the heat radiating off his body, and as if he can read her mind, Bill moves his hands to her waist tentatively and pauses there. When Jeanie doesn't open her eyes, doesn't protest at all, he slides his hands around her waist, placing them on her back as he moves a step closer.

Finally, Jeanie opens her eyes, and she's looking directly up into Bill's as they stand there on the stairs. There is a moment that feels infinite as they both seem to consider where they should go next.

Should Bill release her and step away? Most likely.

Should Jeanie pull away and head for the bottom floor? Absolutely.

Do either of these things happen? No.

Instead, Bill leans closer, bringing his face towards hers until their lips touch. Neither of them closes their eyes, instead looking at one another with a million unanswered questions as the thrill of contact courses through Jeanie's body.

Rather than pulling away, Jeanie lets her arms drift up to Bill's neck, and she wraps them around him, deepening the kiss. Other than Peter, she'd kissed two boys in college, and neither of them had been very adept. Either that, or there had been nothing between Jeanie and the boys in question that would make the kisses memorable.

This kiss, however, is memorable. Jeanie's body relaxes into Bill, and they both close their eyes as their lips part.

These are sensations that Jeanie has never had in the arms of a man, and she's stunned at the pleasure that feels like a jolt of electricity in her core. She presses herself—the entire length of her—to Bill, and he responds by gripping her dress in both hands, pulling the fabric tighter across her back as if he's holding onto a life preserver.

Just as Jeanie thinks she might burst into flames right there in the concrete cell of the stairwell, the door bangs open below them and a loud male voice screams, "Fire! Fire

on the launch pad!”

For a moment, Jeanie feels as though the heat of her own body has caused this, but as Bill jerks away from her she can see the panic in his eyes. Something serious is going on. She needs to push the haze of passion away and clear her head.

“Fire?” Jeanie croaks, wiping a hand across her bruised lips. “On the launchpad?”

Bill’s eyes go wide and it only takes him a split-second to lurch into action.

“We need to go,” he says, reaching for her hand. Together, they race down the flights of stairs to the ground floor and out into the hallway outside of mission control.

Everywhere Jeanie looks, people are fleeing, some in headsets, and others with looks of terror on their faces. Without realizing it, Jeanie is still gripping Bill’s hand tightly.

“Booker. Gemini is on fire,” Todd Roman says as he rushes up to them.

“No,” Bill says, shaking his head. “Oh, God. No.”

Bill tugs her hand and pulls her out the doors and into the cool night air. The sun is almost gone, and the first stars are poking through the blue velvet curtain of darkness. People are gathered off to one side, anguish on their faces as a fire truck screams across the tarmac in the distance, racing towards the spacecraft.

“Bill,” Jeanie says, clasping his hand tightly. “You knew this wasn’t safe, and they didn’t listen to you.”

Bill is clearly in a state of shock, his hand limp in Jeanie’s as he watches the giant ball of fire that had once been their three-man spacecraft. His head is shaking back and forth as if he can hardly believe what he’s seeing. All around them, people

are gasping, exclaiming, or covering their mouths as they cry. It is truly a horrifying vision.

“The men,” Bill says slowly. “The men are inside. They’re trapped.”

He says this though they cannot see across the distance to know whether the door has opened amidst the flames to release Derek Trager, Bob Young, and Murphy Hendricks. There is no way for Bill to know that the men are trapped for sure, though they must have been getting down to the wire with the countdown.

“I didn’t like the shoddy door latch,” Bill says, eyes still trained on the fire that lights up the darkness in the distance. “I wanted us to consider readdressing some of the spacecraft’s weaknesses, but I wasn’t sure how to do that until tonight, when I told Arvin North I didn’t think we should do the test.”

Jeanie is hanging onto his hand and looking up at his profile against the night sky. The ball of fire in front of them is reflected in Bill’s shining irises. “You tried, Bill,” she says softly. His shock is reflected in her own, but even with the fire raging and the astronaut’s fates unknown, Jeanie finds herself feeling tender and concerned about Bill. He looks distraught. Emotionally drained. Terrified. “You tried to tell North.”

But she knows it doesn’t matter; Bill will add this event to the mental compartment where he stores the things he cannot cope with. The only thing Jeanie knows for sure is that she has to be here for him, and that she has to have more of him. In the moment, she’d desperately wanted the kiss they’d shared to last forever but also to be their only kiss, their single recognition of the spark between them so that they could both go on with their lives.

Watching him now she knows that’s not how things will play out. For as long as he needs and wants her to, Jeanie will be his confidante. She will be a steadying force in

his life, and she will help to walk him through the dark forest of his mind. Jeanie Florence will follow this path and see where it takes her, just as long as it takes her there with Bill at her side.

She has to.

CHAPTER 26

Jo

“I’m terribly sorry to interrupt,” Irene says, stepping up to the podium as Jo is in the middle of reading an excerpt from the latest installment of Maxine and Winston’s love story. Jo covers the microphone with one hand as Irene motions for her to step aside. Confused, Jo moves away from the podium.

“Hi, thank you so much for coming,” Irene says into the microphone as a sea of confused faces look back at her. The room is filled with women in smart dresses and coiffed hair, most of them holding signed copies of Jo’s magazine stories. “I apologize for interrupting the evening, but there’s been an incident here at Cape Kennedy, and I’m told we need to vacate the premises immediately.”

A rush of chatter tears through the crowd at the word “incident.”

“If you could please gather your things quickly and exit through that hangar door,” Irene says, pointing at the open door with the first and middle fingers of both hands the way a flight attendant points at airplane exits, “we have a bus right there to take you directly to the parking lot. You will need to get directly into your cars and exit the premises without making any stops. Again, I am so sorry for this interruption.”

Irene steps away from the podium as women get to their feet and make their way to the open hangar door. Just outside, Jo can see a bus that’s pulled into place, headlights cutting into the darkness.

“What’s happened?” she asks Irene. “Is it the test mission? Is everything okay? My husband is involved.” There is a rising sense of panic in Jo that she cannot fight off, and she starts to quake like a leaf. Her hands go numb and she shakes them both, trying to get the feeling back. “Is it Bill? I need to know if he’s alright,” she says wildly, turning around to see that no one is lingering nearby, not even Irene.

As the PR specialist shepherds women out into the night, Jo turns to look for her friends, only to see that they’re following orders. With no one to tell her not to, Jo reaches for her own purse and flees in the other direction, aiming for a hallway that might lead her to a different part of the building. She has no idea where she’s going, but her instinct guides her anyway.

Bill might be in trouble, and she needs to find him.

The halls are empty and no one stops Jo as she takes off her kitten heels and holds them in one hand. She starts to run.

Through one doorway and into a new hall that’s lit only by a flashing red light at one end, Jo runs, seeking out her next direction based only on what’s available.

In one hallway she tries every door, taking the only one that’s unlocked. It leads her into a cavernous space and she searches around, but sees no one. Nothing familiar. She keeps running.

By the time she finds a door that leads out into the darkness, Jo realizes that she’s cut through the building and ended up on the other side, where a line of trees in the distance is visible during the day. Between the building and the tree line is the launch pad, and now, as Jo comes to a halt and the door slams shut behind her, she sees that the launch pad is alive with flames. A dancing, roaring fire has claimed the spacecraft and a half dozen firefighters are on hand, trying to control it.

Jo’s hand flies to her mouth and a sob escapes her. Bill would have been in this

spacecraft, if he hadn't been moved to mission control. "Oh," she whimpers. "Bill."

Wandering away from the building and towards the crowd of onlookers, Jo fights her tears, still holding her shoes in one hand and her purse in the other.

"Bill?" she calls out into the crowd as she wanders, feeling lost and displaced. She has no idea how this has happened. Any of it. "Bill?" Jo calls again, her voice lost in the din of sirens, fire, and activity.

Finally, as if lit by a crackling bonfire on a beach, Jo sees her husband. She very nearly runs to him, but instead stops where she is, stunned.

Bill is there, watching the fire along with everyone else, a haunted look on his face.

And at his side—holding his hand as she looks up at him with loving concern—is Jeanie Florence.

Jo lets her shoes fall to the ground.

Epilogue

December 14, 1964

The Orlando Sentinel

A fire aboard a three-man test mission at Cape Kennedy claimed the lives of two astronauts last night. Astronauts Robert Young and Derek Trager were trapped inside the Gemini capsule as a fire overtook the launchpad, and while firefighters rushed to the scene to stop the blaze, the loss of life and the destruction of the spacecraft were catastrophic for the space program.

"We are devastated by the loss of two of our own," Arvin North, Head of Launch

Operations at NASA, said when contacted late last night. “At this point, we know that there was a dramatic increase in the crew’s biomedical readings in the capsule, and that their oxygen flow was off the charts. We think a power surge potentially caused the fire, and at this point, all we know is that the latch would not release on the door in time for all three men to escape unharmed.”

A third astronaut, Murphy Hendricks, was pulled from the flames unconscious and is reportedly suffering from potentially life-threatening fourth degree burns.

“We are committed to former President Kennedy’s mission to reach the moon before the close of this decade,” Arvin North said. “And though this terrible tragedy will give us temporary pause as we reevaluate our technology and our spacecraft, we will not give up. With great reward often comes great risk, and no man attempts to reach space without that knowledge.”