

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE ROSE CODE*

KATE
QUINN



A NOVEL

THE
BRIAR CLUB

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE ROSE CODE*

KATE
QUINN



A NOVEL

THE
BRIAR CLUB

THE BRIAR CLUB

A NOVEL

Kate Quinn



WILLIAM MORROW

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

Dedication

For all the women in my life who make up my Briar Club, the ones who bring each other food and wine and counsel whenever it's needed. The ones who wouldn't bat an eyelash at a corpse on the floor. You know who you are.

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Dedication

Prologue

Four and a Half Years Earlier

Chapter 1: Pete

Interstitial

Four Years Earlier

Chapter 2: Nora

Interstitial

Three Years Earlier

Chapter 3: Reka

Interstitial

Two and a Half Years Earlier

Chapter 4: Fliss

Interstitial

Two Years Earlier

Chapter 5: Bea

Interstitial

One and a Half Years Earlier

Chapter 6: Claire

Interstitial

Nine Months Earlier
Chapter 7: Grace
Chapter 8: Arlene
Chapter 9

Epilogue
Historical Note

Acknowledgments
About the Author
Also by Kate Quinn
Copyright
About the Publisher

Prologue

Thanksgiving 1954
Washington, D.C.

If these walls could talk. Well, they may not be talking, but they are certainly listening. And watching.

Briarwood House is as old as the century. The house has presided—brick-fronted, four-storied, slightly dilapidated—over the square below for fifty-four years. It's seen three wars, ten presidents, and countless tenants . . . but until tonight, never a murder. Now its walls smell of turkey, pumpkin pie, and blood, and the house is shocked down to its foundations.

Also, just a little bit thrilled. This is the most excitement Briarwood House has had in *decades*.

Murder. Murder here in the heart of sleepy white-picket-fence Washington, D.C.! And on Thanksgiving, too. Not that the house is terribly surprised by that; it's held enough holidays to know that when you throw all that family together and mix with too much rum punch and buried resentment, blood is bound to be shed sometimes. But the scene that erupted tonight and splashed gore from the threshold to the attic . . .

Goodness, but it's a doozy.

There's a corpse on the floor of the second attic apartment, spilling a lake of blood from a throat cut nearly to the bone. In the front hall below there's a detective scribbling in his notepad. In the kitchen, seventeen people are milling around in varying stages of shock: old and young, male and female, some crying, some silent. And almost all of them, the house knows—having

watched the whole thing explode from shocking beginning to even more shocking end—are nursing reasons to fear that they will end the night in handcuffs.

The police detective comes into the kitchen to talk with Briarwood House's owner and landlady, but she's busy having hysterics. The house flutters its curtains, rattles a door or two, takes another peek into the murder scene on the top floor. The green walls of that particular apartment are painted over with a vast, intricate flowered vine, but you'd be hard-pressed to tell what kind of flowers under the blood splatter. This was a very enthusiastic murder, the house muses. Not one moment's hesitation from the hand swinging *that* blade.

"We have not yet identified the deceased, Mrs. Nilsson," the detective is saying to the landlady when the house's attention flits back to the kitchen. "No identification was found on the body."

"Well, I hope you don't expect me to look at it! My nerves being what they are—" She pushes away the glass of water being urged on her by her lanky teenage son.

"We have preliminary reports that the death occurred between six and seven in the evening. I understand you weren't at home at the time, Mrs. Nilsson?"

"I was out at my bridge club. I'm always out at my bridge club on Thursday nights."

"Even on Thanksgiving?" The detective sounds dubious. *If you'd seen as many holidays turn nasty as I have*, the house wants to tell him, *you'd be surprised everyone isn't ducking them*.

"Shocking waste, Thanksgiving. I provide a turkey lunch for my boarders, but that isn't enough for *some* people." Mrs. Nilsson sniffs, eyeing her son, who still hovers with the water glass. "This one won't lift a finger for his mother in the kitchen, but the moment That Woman says she's making a whole turkey in *my* Stratoliner oven—"

Briarwood House doesn't like Mrs. Nilsson. Hasn't liked her since she first crossed the threshold as a bride, complaining before she'd even shaken the rice out of her hair that the halls were too narrow (*My halls! Too narrow!*), and still doesn't like her twenty years down the road. No one else in this kitchen does, either, the house knows perfectly well. People aren't *that* hard to read.

“The body was found in the fourth-floor apartment, the one with green walls.” The detective is looking down at his notes, so he misses his first clue: the tense glances that pass shadow-fast among the other sixteen witnesses. Or would *suspects* be a better word? the house wonders. Because it knows something the detective doesn’t.

The killer is still very much in this room.

“Can you tell us who rents that top-floor apartment, Mrs. Nilsson?” the detective persists, oblivious.

The landlady gives another sniff, and the house settles in happily to listen. “Mrs. Grace March.”

Four and a Half Years Earlier

June 1950

Chapter 1

Pete

Dear Kitty,

*Does the name “Briarwood House” sound auspicious? We shall see!
I wish you were here.*

—Grace

June sunshine poured over the street, the sounds of a jazz saxophone drifted over from next door, somewhere on Capitol Hill Senator McCarthy was waving lists of card-carrying American Commies, and a new guest had come to the Briarwood boardinghouse. Her shadow fell across Pete where he knelt on the front stoop banging a nail into the flapping screen door, and he looked up to register a tall woman with a red beret over a tumble of golden-brown hair.

“Hello there,” she said in a soft midwestern drawl, nodding at the sign in the window. “I see you have rooms to rent?”

Pete scrambled upright, dropping his hammer. He’d thought he was being so alert: watching the street over his toolbox, eagle-eyed for any signs of a rumpus. Not that the square ever had much in the way of rumpus, but you never knew. What if some dirty no-good louse from the Warring gang shot up the Amber Club just off the square, making off with a bag of the long green? If that went down and the feds came sniffing, the word on the street would point to the shadowy figure across the way. *You want the long and short, you talk to the shamus at Briarwood House. Nothing gets past Pistol*

Pete. And then Pete would rise, flicking his cigarette and straightening his battered trilby . . .

But instead a woman had walked right up to him while he was tacking down a screen, and he'd nearly dropped his hammer on her ribbon-laced espadrille.

"Mickey Spillane," she said, nodding at the paperback copy of *I, the Jury* he'd set aside on the front stoop after his mother swooped in with a reminder about the screen door. "Your favorite?"

"I, uh. Yes, ma'am. I'm Pete," he added hastily. "Pete Nilsson."

Her wide mouth quirked, and she stooped to pick up his hammer. "Then maybe you could tell me how a lady can get a room here, Hammerin' Pete."

Just like that, Pete fell in love. He been falling in love an awful lot since turning thirteen—sometimes with the girls in his class at Gompers Junior High, mostly with Nora Walsh up in 4A with her soft Irish vowels, occasionally with Arlene Hupp and her bouncy ponytail in 3C—but this dame in the red beret was something special. She was maybe thirty-five or something (old enough to have an interesting past), with a worn suitcase swinging from one hand and a camel coat belted around the kind of figure Detective Mike Hammer (Pete's hero) would have described as a mile of Pennsylvania highway.

And she'd called him *Hammerin' Pete*. He junked *Pistol Pete* on the spot, wishing he could cock his trilby back on his head and drawl *Let me show you the joint, ma'am* but unfortunately he wasn't wearing a trilby, just an old Senators cap, and from inside the house his mother's voice snapped "Pete, who are you gabbing to? Have you finished with that door?"

"Someone's come about the room, Mom. Mrs.—" He looked back, realizing he hadn't asked the woman's name.

"March." Another of those slow, amused smiles. "Mrs. Grace March."

Pete's mother popped out, face pink and irritated over her quilted housecoat, and she gave the newcomer a once-over even as she introduced herself. "*Mrs.*, you said?" Clearly trying to appraise if there was a wedding ring under Mrs. March's white glove. "I run my boardinghouse for ladies only, if you and your husband—"

"I was widowed last year." Mrs. March sounded remarkably composed about that fact, Pete thought.

"Children? Because it's a small room, no space for more than—"

“No, only me.” Mrs. March stood swinging her suitcase, and Pete could tell his mother didn’t much like being half a head shorter than this prospective tenant.

“Well, I suppose you can leave your luggage in the kitchen and come up to see the room.” There was a tone in his mother’s voice that Pete heard quite a lot, halfway between grudging and avid—grudging because she didn’t trust new people, avid because new boarders meant money—and he knew he shouldn’t have uncharitable thoughts about his mother, but he wished she would sound a little more . . . well, *welcoming* when she asked someone into their home. *Don’t you want the boarders to like you, Mom?* he’d asked once, hearing her harangue the renter in 3B for leaving water spots in the sink, and his mother had tutted, *Only patsies worry about being liked, Pete. The only thing that matters is whether they pay their rent on time.* He hadn’t really had an answer to that—or rather, he knew better than to voice one. If he did, Mom would just let fly with a tight-lipped *Well, don’t you sound just like your father when you take that tone.* Hammerin’ Pete was a match for any hard case in the District, but one *just-like-your-father* from Mom and he shriveled like he’d been slapped in the puss.

“Would you like a cup of coffee, ma’am?” he asked, opening the door for Mrs. March, and his mother shot him an irritable look.

“How kind”—another smile from the new arrival—“but I believe I’ll just see the room.”

It’s not much of a room, he wanted to tell her as she followed his mother up the stairs. A storage closet up at the top of the old brownstone, off the fourth-floor landing: Pete’s mother decided this year that she could cram a boarder in there, and Pete had spent his last break emptying out the junk, nailing down loose floorboards, and lugging up the tiny icebox so she could advertise there was a kitchenette. But he couldn’t honestly believe anybody would want to live in such a shoebox.

“She’ll take it,” his mother said ten minutes later, sailing down the stairs flushed and jubilant. “Six months paid up front, too, and she looks like a lady. Not that you can tell, these days. Here, before you take that up . . .” Popping the clasps on Grace March’s suitcase.

“Mom!” Pete hissed, feeling his ears burn. “I hate it when you do this—”

“Don’t be squeamish. You want a dope fiend or a floozy in the attic? Or a *Communist*. Better to snoop now before she digs herself in.” Mrs. Nilsson flipped through the tidily folded blouses and skirts with rapid, expert

fingers, poked at a big glass mason jar apparently stuffed with nylons, examined the toiletries. Pete stood gnawing his lip, remembering how the English teacher at Gompers Junior High had said that the Latin root of the word *mortification* was “to die” and Pete could see why, because he was so mortified right now he wanted to drop dead here on the worn linoleum of his mother’s kitchen. *Please don’t find anything*, he prayed, watching her sift through the new boarder’s underwear (silky pink and peach stuff, he couldn’t help but notice with a burn of shame). The fourth-floor room had already nearly been rented out to a pleasant-looking spinster with a Jersey accent, but when Mom rummaged through *her* suitcase she found a package of what she called Those Things (the kind of rubber things the boys at Gompers boasted about stealing from their older brothers) and there had been an ugly scene before the woman from Jersey was kicked out, all before she even moved *in*, and without getting her just-paid deposit back, either.

Pete was already hoping Mrs. Grace March would be sticking around for a while.

“Well, take it on up.” Mrs. Nilsson closed the suitcase, looking vaguely disappointed there hadn’t been anything more sinister than a pink needle case. “Hurry back down, now. I need you to weed the tomato patch after you take your sister to the library.”

“Yes, Mom.” Pete sighed.

“You’re a good boy,” she said, giving his ear a pinch as he hauled the suitcase toward the first of three flights of stairs.

The door off the right side of the tiny fourth-floor landing stood ajar, but Pete knocked anyway. “Mrs. March?”

“Oh heavens, drop that *Mrs. March* business,” her voice floated out. “I keep looking around for my mother-in-law, and not having a mother-in-law anymore is one of the few advantages of being widowed.”

“Yes, Mrs. M— Um, Mrs. Grace.” He hauled her suitcase inside, embarrassed all over again by just how *tiny* the room was. A narrow twin bed against one wall, a rickety little bureau that doubled as a coffee table, one shabby armchair . . . and his mother might call it a *kitchenette*, but it was really just an icebox the size of a packing crate, with a hot plate balanced on top. Worst of all were the walls: chipped, tilting inward under the slanted roof, painted a faded but still bilious green. *You agreed to live*

here? he thought—but Mrs. Grace was ignoring all that. She'd hung up the camel coat and unlaced the espadrilles, padding about in an old floral-printed skirt and what looked like a man's shirt tied up at the waist, and she was heaving up the sash on the window at the end of the room so she could look out at the square below.

"Did my suitcase pass inspection?" she said without turning around, and Pete wanted to die all over again, but she aimed a mischievous smile over one shoulder. "There's a glass mason jar in among my unmentionables. If I haul it out, can you tell me where to fill it up?" She was glancing around the room, which conspicuously lacked a sink.

"The bathroom's on the landing. Sink and, um, toilet, anyway." He felt his ears go red again, saying *toilet* to a lady. "If you want a bath, you'll have to go to the third floor." Where three women already competed for the tub and mirror between seven and eight in the morning. "A word of advice," he found himself saying. "You do *not* want to get between Claire from 3B and Arlene from 3C when they start going at it over whose turn it is for the bathroom."

"I'll keep that in mind." Mrs. Grace, having unlatched the suitcase, shook the mason jar free from a jumble of nylons and blouses. "Would you mind filling that up for me? Hot water, please."

When he came back lugging the sloshing jar, she had unearthed a handful of tea bags, which promptly went into the water, along with the contents of a dozen little sugar packets clearly scavenged from a diner. "Sun tea," she explained, seeing Pete's puzzled expression as she carried the jar to the window and pushed it carefully through to sit on the sunny stone ledge. "Let it steep on a hot porch or warm windowsill for three hours, and you'll never taste anything better. Old Iowa farm recipe."

"Is that where you're from? Iowa?"

"Originally." She stood back, admiring the sun tea sparkling in its jar, but didn't volunteer anything else. "Who's the musician?" she asked, tilting her head as a mellow sax riff on "Sentimental You" waltzed through the window on the warm breeze.

"That's Joe Reiss, next door. He plays at the Amber Club down the street—he's always practicing."

"How many boarders live here altogether?"

"Eight, if Mom's got a full house." He stuck his hands in his pockets, trying a tentative smile. "You'll meet the rest at breakfast. That's between

seven and seven thirty every morning,” he recited. “Breakfast comes with your rent. Though a lot of our boarders prefer to get breakfast at the Crispy Biscuit on the other side of the square,” he felt compelled to add, in all honesty. His mother tried her best, of course she did, but her leathery scrambled eggs and undercooked bacon (slapped down on the dining room table at seven on the dot and removed at seven twenty-nine and fifty-eight seconds) weren’t exactly . . . well, the pancakes at the diner on Briar just couldn’t be beat, that was all.

“You’re quite the man of information, aren’t you?” Mrs. Grace took out a pack of Lucky Strikes and shook one out.

“My mother doesn’t allow smoking,” Pete couldn’t help saying.

“I know.” Calmly, Mrs. Grace struck a match, lit up, took a long inhale of smoke, and blew it out the open window. “What she doesn’t know won’t hurt her.”

“My mother knows everything,” Pete said feelingly. You could never hear her coming; in those house slippers she could pop out of the shadows like a jack-in-the-box. *Always when you’ve left your coat on the floor, or are just thinking about putting your feet on the sofa*, Pete had heard one of the boarders say. Nora Walsh from 4A, the pretty one with light-brown hair that gleamed in the sun. And Nora wasn’t wrong: a coat on the floor or a shoe print on a sofa was the kind of thing Pete’s mother couldn’t stand—ate her nerve ends raw, Mickey Spillane would have put it. “My mother’s had a difficult life,” he said loyally. “She just gets a little tense about rules. You know, times being hard and all.” Times *were* hard: the war only just receding into the past and the atom bomb waiting to blow the world to kingdom come and now Commies running all over making trouble. At least Senator McCarthy said so.

“It’ll be our secret.” Mrs. Grace tapped ash out the window, smiling. Even her eyes got in on the smile—golden-brown eyes, like her hair, and they had a way of staying half-lidded, as if she were looking at everything with sleepy amusement. “So, why is this place called Briarwood House?”

“Because we’re on the corner of Briar Avenue and Wood Street.” *It sounds more refined*, his mother had said when she hand-lettered the sign: BRIARWOOD HOUSE: BOARDING FOR LADIES. *We’ll get a better class of boarder that way*. But the house was just a house, Pete thought—a tall narrow brownstone on the nicer edge of Foggy Bottom, not some country manor

out of a book like those Lord Peter Wimsey mysteries he'd read last summer.

"How long have you had boarders here, then?"

Pete looked at his shoes. "Since my dad left." He waited for her to pounce on that. Adults always did. But Mrs. Grace just took another long drag off her Lucky Strike, looking around her new home: the lime-green paint, the slanted ceilings, the postage-stamp-size window seat. "It's not much," Pete felt compelled to apologize, but she shook her head.

"All of this"—she gestured with her cigarette, encompassing the sunny windowsill, the skeins of jazz, the clatter of feet on the stairs—"it has potential."

"It does?" Pete felt like he heard that word a lot, generally when adults were telling you why you couldn't do something *now*, maybe *later*. Look at your peach-fuzz chin in the mirror, and imagine the potential that one day you might need a shave; look at the cars cruising past and imagine the potential of someday driving one. To Pete, the word *potential* really just seemed to mean *a long way off*. Maybe *never*.

"This whole house has potential," Mrs. Grace said, sounding very definite. "And so do you, Hammerin' Pete." She gave another smile, stubbing out her cigarette on the stone window ledge beside the mason jar. "Now scoot. Come back in about three hours—I'll be unpacked, and you'll get a glass of sun tea that'll make you swear you were in heaven."

But Pete was pretty sure he was already there. He swung out of 4B whistling, and he didn't stop even when he looked through the half-open door of the landing bathroom and caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror over the sink. *Hammerin' Pete* . . . maybe when he was the toughest gumshoe in town, he'd carry a hammer through his belt: the hammer that took a smash to the Warring gang, brought down the biggest crime family in the District. By then he'd be thirty, not thirteen; he'd have a dashing blue growth of stubble instead of pimples; he'd have a battered trilby slashing across a cruel cliff of a brow, not a Washington Senators baseball cap.

Yes, he could almost see it. Because he had *potential*. The new boarder said so.

Grace's Sun Tea

6 to 8 bags of your favorite tea

Honey or sugar

1 lemon, thinly sliced

1. Fill a glass jar with 1 gallon of cool water, preferably boiled.
2. Add the tea bags, cover, and set the jar on a sunny porch or windowsill. Leave in direct sunlight for 3 to 5 hours.
3. Discard the tea bags, then sweeten the tea to taste with honey or sugar. Add the lemon slices, then refrigerate.
4. Enjoy on a summer day with a new friend, while listening to “If I Knew You Were Coming I’d’ve Baked a Cake” by Eileen Barton with the New Yorkers.

Dear Dad, Pete wrote. He was supposed to be doing his homework at the hall table, not to mention helping his little sister with her reading—his mother planted him there every evening to hand out the mail as the boarders came home—but Lina kept wriggling away from her book, and under his math exercises Pete was scratching out a letter to his father. Trying to, anyway. *Lina won’t stop listening to The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet on the radio at top volume. Is that why you won’t come home?*

He scratched that out. *Lina’s listening to Ozzie and Harriet and practicing her reading. She’s getting pretty good!*

“What’s that say?” Lina pushed her grubby finger at the third line of her book.

“Sound it out, Lina-kins. H-o-p— What does that say? And then the rest: s-c-o-t-c-h.”

She stuck her lip out. Nine years old, and she read at the level of a seven-year-old. It didn’t help that she had a lazy eye—*strabismus*, Pete reminded himself to call it—but it wasn’t *that* severe, the slight wander of her left eye off-center. There were glasses that could help, their doctor told them, but Mom said no. Too expensive.

“I’ll give you a hint,” Pete coaxed as Lina continued to pout. “It’s a game, and you play it all the time. Come on: *hop*. Now what’s the rest?”

“I don’t knooooow . . .”

“I hear we’ve got a new boarder!” Felicity Orton from 2A waltzed in with a swish of crinoline under her rose-pink skirt, balancing a mixing bowl on one hip and baby Angela on the other. Their newest boarders; Pete’s

mom had sniffed that they must have practically moved here straight from the hospital maternity ward. “4B finally rented out?”

“Yes, Mrs. Fliss.” *Fliss* was the English nickname for *Felicity*, she’d told Pete her first day here, English accent burnished a little after nearly seven years in the States, but still very princessy and exotic to Pete. *At least now it’s Mrs. Fliss—Miss Fliss was just frightful!* Pete had stood there trying to remember that quote about a rose by any name smelling just as sweet, but by the time he pulled it together in his head, she’d been gone. “Would you like your mail?” Pete asked now, passing over the packets he’d sorted earlier. “Letter from San Diego.”

She smiled to see her husband’s handwriting on the envelope, juggling the baby so she could tuck it into her pocket. “What I’d like is to use your oven!” Everything she said seemed to be painted up with exclamation points and deep dimples. “I thought I’d make a welcome plate for the newcomer—you think she likes sugar biscuits? Cookies,” she corrected herself. “You Yanks say *cookies*, not *biscuits*.”

Lina popped her head over her book. “I like sugar cookies,” she volunteered, eyes glommed onto Mrs. Fliss as sticky as Elmer’s Glue.

“First cookie’s for you!” Mrs. Fliss promised, but Pete heard the slight sigh behind the bubbly cheer. If you got Lina stuck on you, she was apt to *stay* stuck for the rest of the day, glowering and sulking if you tried to peel her off. But Mrs. Fliss smiled brightly, dimples reappearing to bracket her pink-lipsticked mouth. “The dough’s all mixed, I just need ten minutes at one ninety. No, three seventy-five,” she corrected herself with a sigh. “All these years and I still think in Celsius. May I—”

Technically, boarders weren’t allowed to use the kitchen, but Pete’s mother relaxed her rules sometimes for Fliss, who was neat as a pin and always left cookies in thank-you. “Go on in,” Pete said, blowing a raspberry at tiny Angela to make her gurgle. The baby was always so pink and pretty in her little lacy caps; Mrs. Fliss was even prettier with her perky flipped hair and swishy skirts . . . She was married, of course (her husband was an army doctor finishing his stint out at the base in San Diego, which was why she was in a boardinghouse), but she smelled like sugar and cinnamon and she was always nice to Pete, so he couldn’t help but gaze after her wistfully as she clicked past into the kitchen.

Dear Dad—Would you come home if Mom were a bit more like Mrs. Fliss? Bouncy and sweet-smelling and never yelling?

Scowling, Pete pushed the letter aside for the time being and turned to his algebra homework. What did he need algebra for, anyway? Did Mike Hammer spend his time worrying about $a + b = c$ when some sniveling louse did him dirty? No, he did not.

Something in the kitchen behind him went *crash*. “Just back up a little when we open the oven door, Lina—”

Pete heard his sister mutter, “It wasn’t *my* fault, Mrs. Fliss . . .”

“I hear the house bagged a new victim.” Claire Hallett from 3B breezed in, handbag thrown over one arm. Claire worked the secretarial pool at some senator’s office in the Capitol: sharp-eyed, sharp-tongued, big and brassy, bust straining her prim blouse, hips straining her prim skirt, bright red curls straining to escape their prim hairpins. “Who’d your mother con into that shoebox on the fourth floor?”

“Nobody got conned,” Pete said loyally. “Mrs. Grace says it has *potential*.”

“Potential what? Fire hazards?” Claire hooted.

“Don’t go racing your motor,” Pete grumped, pushing her mail at her, and she breezed off past old Mrs. Muller coming down the stairs from 2B. The old woman with the moth-eaten skirt and the face like an angry fist took her mail with a grunt, clipping off a curt *Nem* when Pete asked if she’d had a good day. That was Hungarian for no, Pete knew by now—Reka Muller rarely said a word in English, and any word she said in Hungarian was usually *no*. Then Arlene Hupp from 3C, who worked for HUAC and always had the latest gossip about who was sweating on a witness stand naming names.

“Communists, Pete.” Arlene shook her head, ponytail bouncing, latest issue of *Counterattack* poking out of her handbag. “Hollywood is just *infested* with them. You should *see* the report that just came out in *Red Channels*; I’ll leave a copy for your mother. Goodness, is someone making cookies? I’m on a new regime: no sugar, no dinner rolls—”

A crash of pans in the kitchen as Arlene took her mail and bustled off. Fliss’s voice, sounding a bit impatient: “It’s all right, Lina, we’ll just reroll that batch . . .”

Lina’s sulky mumble: “It wasn’t my fault!”

The front door opened again, and glory be, here she was. Pete sat up straight, repressing the urge to smooth his hair. Claire Hallett was thirty and Mrs. Fliss was twenty-four and even his new crush, Mrs. Grace, had to be

nearly thirty-five, but Nora Walsh from 4A was the youngest boarder in the house: just twenty, and a seven-year age gap wasn't *really* such a difference, was it? At some point in the next few years his skin would finally clear up, and then Nora—who worked for the National Archives and glided dove-quiet and movie-star graceful through Pete's life in a series of slim tailored suits—would realize he wasn't just Mrs. Nilsson's Pete who hoofed the ice upstairs for the boarders' iceboxes—that he was, in fact, a *man*. “Call me Nora,” she would breathe . . .

What would happen after that, Pete was less clear on. Females had recently become infinitely fascinating, but they were more to dream about than to throw down on a sofa like Detective Mike Hammer was always doing. (How to proceed, after the throwing?)

“Hello, Pete.” Nora took off her summer straw hat, giving that smile that made Pete's toes curl. She didn't have Fliss's deep dimples or Claire's bright coloring—she was a tall girl with sort of quiet brown eyes and quiet brown hair—but her smile had a soft impishness that melted him like butter. And that hair, always in a neat French twist at the back of her head, had glints of gold like gleaming beach sand when a wave combed it smooth. “Algebra homework? In summertime?”

“I got behind last year,” Pete confessed. “My teacher said I should do some exercises over the summer to practice.” Nora made a face, and he dared ask, “Did you hate algebra too?”

“With the fire of a thousand suns.” She lowered her voice. “The new boarder, Mrs. March—she's right across the landing from me on the fourth floor—you know she's got a television set?”

“No!” Pete was agog. The house had an antenna, but Mom wouldn't hear of having a television set. Too costly, she said.

“A television?” Lina popped her head out of the kitchen, nose smudged with sugar. “C'n I see?”

“You've need to finish your reading, Lina-kins,” Pete reminded. “Quit bothering Mrs. Fliss, now.” Sullenly, Lina thumped down beside him, flipping her book open. “Sound the words out one at a time,” Pete encouraged, but Lina just gave him her blankest look, limp hair falling out of its plastic barrette.

“Keep up with that algebra, Pete,” Nora said with another of her smiles as she swept up her mail. “You might end up an engineer someday—I saw

you build that garden fence for your mother in the backyard, not to mention setting up Lina's swing. You've got an eye."

Pete flushed. First Mrs. Grace said he had potential; now Miss Nora thought he had an *eye*. He wished she'd stay and chat more, but the object of his affections was already heading up the stairs on those long slim legs . . . Mrs. Fliss rushed out of the kitchen soon afterward, distractedly juggling the baby, two plates of cookies, and the letter from her husband. He nearly asked her what was wrong, but she was already putting down one of the plates and bouncing off again. "A dozen for your mother, Pete, just as she likes!" A clipping from a San Diego newspaper fluttered out of the envelope she'd just jammed into her pocket, and Pete picked it up: "Northern, Southern Koreans at War," the headline blared. "U.S. Sponsored State Invaded by Red Forces . . ."

"Mrs. Fliss," Pete began, but she was already disappearing up the stairs. He sighed. He'd been hoping to play pat-a-cake with baby Angela and ask if Fliss's husband had seen any movie stars in California—a question much more interesting than Korea, wherever *that* was. But Mrs. Fliss was already gone, and Pete sighed again, folding three cookies absently into his mouth. None of the boarders ever lingered to talk. Hellos in the corridor, a good-morning over the breakfast eggs, but otherwise it was all just ships passing in the night. Briarwood House didn't seem to be the kind of place where people got *chatty*.

Another hour and his mother came clipping in with the shopping. Three pork chops; Pete noted wistfully how small they all looked. Mom was scrupulous; she and Lina and Pete all got exactly the same amount on their supper plate, and that was fair, of course. But he was just so *hungry* all the time ever since he'd shot up three inches in the last three months. He felt like he could eat all three of those pork chops. Mom would say he was being greedy; of course she was right. He'd somehow managed to eat half the cookies without even noticing.

Dear Dad—Do you still make your Swedish meatballs? I remember when you used to make up a huge pot every Thursday night when Mom went to her bridge club, and we'd spoon them over buttered noodles . . . Of course, there had been nights with his dad that weren't so nice. The nights he sat staring out the window and couldn't be roused to look at the newspaper or Pete's homework or anything at all. *It wasn't always good when he was*

home, Pete reminded himself, but somehow all he could think about right now was Dad's Swedish meatballs night.

"Pete, did you weed the cabbage patch?" His mother counted the cookies on the plate, making Pete shift guiltily. "Only six? Usually she leaves twelve—"

"I picked half a basket of cabbage," he broke in hastily. "Can we have cabbage soup?" He didn't like cabbage so much, but it might fill him up enough to make the claw-rake feeling in his stomach go away.

"Don't be ridiculous, I want you to take that basket down to the deli and see if Mr. Rosenberg will buy them. He's not above stocking the occasional bit of produce, and good garden-grown cabbages go for six cents a pound. Make sure he doesn't jew you down to five. After that, swing past Moonlight Magnolias," Mrs. Nilsson added, unpacking her shopping bag. "I've spoken to the florist there about a job for you."

"A job?"

"Sweeping up, delivering flowers, that sort of thing. They'll have to cut your hours once you start school"—regretfully—"but it'll bring something in for the house."

Pete looked down at his algebra exercises, which an hour ago he'd been dying to shove aside. "I won't have time to finish this before supper if I have to go to the deli and then the florist," he mumbled.

"Well . . ." His mother shrugged. "So?"

"I might need algebra someday." Because maybe he *would* be an engineer. Pete wasn't an idiot; he knew he wasn't really going to be the toughest shamus west of the Potomac when he grew up, and he probably wasn't going to play second base for the Washington Senators, either (his other fantasy). "Dad always said when I went to Johns Hopkins like him—"

"Oh, sweetie. You aren't going to *college*." Seeing the look on his face, his mother came over and rubbed his shoulder. "You think I could afford that? A woman alone? Times are hard."

"Dad worked his way through. I could . . ." Pete fumbled. Dad had *always* said he could do that. That he could do anything.

"We'll need you here, Pete. Around the house, helping with the boarders. I rely on you." His mother pecked his cheek with a kiss. "Thank goodness you can leave school at sixteen. Or is it fifteen?" she wondered, turning back to the kitchen and cutting off Ozzie and Harriet on the radio. Lina started to whine. "Lina, you are getting on my *last nerve*—"

Pete sat for a while, and then he quietly packed up his homework half finished. *Get going*, he told himself in his toughest Mickey Spillane voice, *or I'll slap your fuzzy chin all around the block*. He went to get the cabbages, but not without scrawling a last line on his letter.

Dad—Are you ever coming home?

June was heading for July, Senator McCarthy was still waving lists all over the capital, and Pete was lugging ice up to the fourth floor, his last chore of the night, pondering if trading Steve Nagy to San Francisco for Elmer Singleton was a good move for the Senators' postseason chances, when he heard a noise: the blat of a television set.

"Mrs. Grace? Miss Nora?" The doors to the two apartments stood open, and both women stood before the television set in Mrs. Grace's room. She'd wedged it on top of the minuscule bureau, and President Truman was on the screen suited and serious, glasses flashing. *On Sunday June 25, Communist forces attacked the Republic of Korea . . .*

"Come in, Pete." Absently, Mrs. Grace waved him in. Her hair was tied up in a scarf, she wore dungarees and an ancient Iowa State shirt, and she was frowning at the television. "You might have already read that we're at war, but the president just made it official."

"We're not at war exactly," Nora objected, sneezing into a handkerchief. "Aren't they saying it's a police action." She'd been home from work all day with a cold; normally Pete would have been thrilled to see her in her cotton wrapper with her soft brown hair loose, but he couldn't take his eyes off President Truman. Just a neat little man with glasses, the man no one really wanted because for so long the word *President* went automatically with *Roosevelt* . . .

By their actions in Korea, Communist leaders have demonstrated their contempt for the basic moral principles on which the United Nations is founded . . .

"He can call it a police action if he likes. We all know a war when we see one. People are just as dead whether it's a war or a police action that kills them." Mrs. Grace took a tumbler off the shelf over the bureau and drew a glass of sun tea from the mason jar. "Drink that, Nora, it'll knock the sniffles right out of you—"

"Is that the television I'm hearing?" a voice called up from the third-floor landing. "What's Truman gassing on about now?"

“Come on up,” Mrs. Grace called, and soon red-haired Claire Hallett was standing next to Nora and frowning at the television, and so was Arlene Hupp with her drilling eyes and ribboned ponytail, and even old Mrs. Reka Muller stumped up the stairs to join them, swathed in paisley shawls, her gray hair scraped into a straggling knot.

The Communist invasion was launched in great force, with planes, tanks, and artillery. The size of the attack, and the speed with which it was followed up, make it perfectly plain that it had been plotted long in advance.

Pete shivered. He vaguely remembered seeing headlines about Korea over the last few weeks, but he’d been more concerned with the Senators’ pitching roster, with his new job sweeping up fern fronds and snippings of baby’s breath at Moonlight Magnolias, with dodging his mother’s endless list of summer chores. He wasn’t sure where Korea even *was*, and now the president stood on television looking worried about it. Pete had a sudden vivid memory of hearing about the Pearl Harbor attack on the radio—he’d been just four years old; he didn’t really remember what the announcer had said, only that it interrupted a show his father was listening to. How horribly pale Dad had gotten, sitting there in his chair gripping Pete so hard Pete remembered squirming. Dad had been gone with the Marines just two weeks later, Mom saying *He couldn’t wait to leave us! If it hadn’t been the war, it would have been some other excuse . . .*

Pete shivered again, and Nora laid an arm around his shoulders but he was too queasy to enjoy it.

The Soviet government has said many times that it wants peace in the world, but its attitude toward this act of aggression against the Republic of Korea . . .

“Soviets,” Arlene sniffed. “Of course the Reds are in the middle of this!”

Mrs. Grace shushed her, drawing glass after glass of sun tea and passing them down. Mrs. Fliss knocked at the open door, baby Angela crying fretfully against her shoulder.

“I brought jammy dodgers,” she said in her English clip, presenting a plate heaped with some kind of jam-filled cookies, and then the whole room was full of the Briarwood women, all gulping sun tea and munching cookies as they watched the light gleam off President Truman’s glasses.

The American people are unified in their belief in democratic freedom. We are united in detesting Communist slavery . . . President Truman

intoned, looking resolute, and the lump in Pete's throat grew.

When it was finally over and some studio music replaced the presidential broadcast, they all stood looking at one another.

"*Szar*," old Reka Muller said suddenly and concisely, and Pete had no idea what that meant, but he thought he could guess.

"I quite agree," said Grace. Fishing under her narrow bed, she came out with an unopened bottle of gin. "Given the occasion," she said as she dumped about half into the mason jar of sun tea.

Everyone filled up, even Arlene Hupp, who always told anyone who asked (and anyone who didn't) that she never *touched* liquor. It was Arlene who tossed her head now and said with presidential confidence, "The Russkies will use this as an excuse to invade."

"Oh, yes." Claire rolled her eyes. "Ivans and Pyotrs just dropping out of the sky, all over Foggy Bottom."

"You laugh, but they've been making preparations for years. They've got the Bomb and they're itching to use it. Once Korea goes red," Arlene said ominously, "they'll set their sights on us."

"We have no way of knowing that," Nora objected, sneezing into her sodden handkerchief.

"You may have your nose buried in fusty old documents over at the National Archives, but I work for HUAC—"

"Oh yes, you work for HUAC," Claire snorted. "You and Senator McCarthy are bosom confidantes, I'm sure."

"—and you wouldn't *believe* the things I hear," Arlene finished, ponytail bobbing. "If I was allowed to repeat what the men at work tell me . . ."

"I make it a policy never to believe more than a third of what men tell me," Mrs. Grace said with her amused, half-lidded smile. "At work or anywhere. Who wants a sandwich? Paranoia really works up the old appetite."

"You won't call it paranoia when poor Pete's having to do duck-and-cover drills in school this fall," Arlene protested.

But somehow Mrs. Grace shoveled her into the tiny kitchen area to slab day-old bread together with peanut butter and jelly, and Pete was eyeing the last of the jammy dodgers (what kind of name for a cookie was that?) when Mrs. Grace came back to press a stack of handkerchiefs on Nora and turn to Mrs. Fliss. "You're looking quite pale there; let me take the baby."

“What if my Dan gets posted to Korea?” Fliss burst out. “He’s getting out in four more months. We’re supposed to go bloody *house hunting*—”

“No sense borrowing trouble.” Pete couldn’t help but be impressed by how calm Mrs. Grace was, burping Angela against one shoulder, removing the bottle of gin from old Mrs. Muller, who was sucking it down right from the neck. “Reka, really, that’s enough.” How did she already know everyone’s names, speak with such easy authority? She’d only been here a few weeks.

“*Kurva*,” the old woman mumbled, glaring at Mrs. Grace, but she released the bottle. Lina came clumping up the stairs then, getting into Pete’s way as he reached for the last jammy dodger. His head was all buzzy and he didn’t know why.

“I wanna cookie,” Lina whined the moment she saw the plate, opening the icebox at just the wrong moment and spilling ice everywhere. Pete remembered he’d left the bag of ice on the landing outside, probably melted by now. His mother would skin him. His eyes burned.

“I want a *cookie*,” Lina persisted, knocking the loaf of bread to the floor. “Can I ask Mrs. Fliss? Can I, can I, can I, can I, can I—”

“Lina, maybe you didn’t notice that *war just broke out*,” Pete snapped. His little sister glowered at him and went to glom herself onto Mrs. Grace.

“—all being *entirely* too casual about this,” Arlene was tutting, ferrying sandwiches out of the kitchen area. “You really think the Russkies won’t invade? The Commies have been making preparations for *years*. They’re in our schools, they’re infesting Hollywood so they can put their propaganda in our movies—did you see the list that came out in *Red Channels*? If Orson Welles and Leonard Bernstein are Communists, *anyone* could— Oh no, I’m not taking a sandwich. I’ve sworn off bread, a girl has to watch her figure.”

“Oh for god’s sake,” Claire muttered, cramming down a peanut butter and jelly. Mrs. Grace was fixing Fliss a glass of sun tea one-handed as she juggled the baby; Nora had turned the radio on to the sound of Red Foley warbling “Chattanooga Shoe Shine Boy”; Mrs. Muller was scattering sandwich crumbs and Hungarian curses; and baby Angela had stopped crying in Grace’s arms. It was the kind of gathering Pete had always wistfully imagined happening here at Briarwood House, but never did.

And he couldn’t enjoy it, not a bit.

“Goodness, Pete, you don’t have to do that,” Mrs. Grace exclaimed when the last crumb was eaten, the last bit of sun tea drunk, the last boarder trailed off downstairs to her own room. Pete had carried all the dishes into the bathroom on the landing and was washing up in the tiny sink. “I don’t believe in doing dishes right after a party. Kills the mood too quickly.”

“Funny kind of party,” he mumbled, bringing in a load of wet plates. “Watching the president declare war.”

“Police action.” Mrs. Grace gave her sleepy smile, spreading out a towel for the plates to dry. “And you’re quite wrong, Pete—it’s times of crisis that produce the *best* parties. Who knows if I’d ever get all my fellow boarders up here without a television set and Mr. Truman? Goodness, that little Arlene Hupp is snippy, but if she’s one of those women who’s always on a diet, I can see why. Swearing off bread, that’s enough to put anyone in a temper . . .”

To Pete’s horror, he burst into tears. Stood there in the middle of Mrs. Grace’s tiny green-walled shoebox and *bawled*, hands over his face like a baby.

If she’d tried to hug him, he’d have flat-out died. Sunk through the floor and died. But she just pressed him gently toward the single armchair, and then she withdrew back to the kitchen area where he dimly heard the icebox opening. When he finally stopped bawling and was able to lift his shame-flushed, tear-wet face up toward hers, she was standing with a cigarette in one hand and yet another plate of sandwiches in the other. “Here,” she said. “Boys your age are always hungry.”

She’d made about twelve sandwiches. He hadn’t managed to eat at the impromptu party, but suddenly he was ravenous. He took the plate, muttering, “Mom says I’m greedy.”

“You’re not greedy, you’re growing. Eat up.” He hoped she wouldn’t start probing—when an adult nailed you with that look of piercing concern, you knew you were really in for it—but she turned away, taking a drag off her cigarette as he plowed into the sandwiches. It felt like the first time he’d really been able to fill his stomach in months. But once the food was gone he’d have to look up, probably explain himself, and he felt his cheeks flush dully again.

“‘M sorry,” he mumbled through a mouthful of tuna.

“For what?” Mrs. Grace replied, apparently examining the green wall by the window.

“Detective Mike Hammer never cries.” Pete swiped at his eyes. “Even when his best friend is gunned down in cold blood.”

“Mmm. I don’t think Detective Mike Hammer is the *best* example to follow, you know. In more ways than one. Contrary to what the good detective thinks, a great many women don’t really like being called *dames*, and a man is still a man if he sheds the occasional tear. Maybe take a break from Mr. Spillane, and try Monsieur Dumas?” She tapped a paperback copy of *The Three Musketeers* that lay on her tiny bureau, then stood back, still examining the wall. “These green walls wouldn’t be so dreadful with a bit of decoration. You know I trained as an artist? I’m no Monet, but I can sketch—thought I’d be an illustrator for children’s books or something. I wonder if I still have my old drawing pencils . . .” She stubbed out the cigarette and went rummaging under the bed. “I don’t think you’re crying your eyes out because of the Communist menace in Korea,” she said over one shoulder. “What’s eating you, Hammerin’ Pete?”

He stared down at the empty plate. Somehow he’d crammed down that entire enormous heap of sandwiches. “War ruins everything.”

“How very wise of you to realize that. Most boys your age are only a few years removed from playing Nazis and Allies with imaginary guns.” She fished some artists’ pencils out of a shoebox. “What did war ruin for Pete Nilsson of Briarwood House?”

“My dad,” Pete said softly.

Mrs. Grace came to the narrow strip of wall by the window, settled on the floor cross-legged, and began to sketch right onto the bilious green paint near the baseboard. The sound of a saxophone drifted through the window—next door, Joe Reiss was playing jazz riffs again, despite the late hour.

Pete found himself going on, chasing a few crumbs around the plate. “Dad was wounded at Saipan . . . He got better after the war, but not really. He’d sit staring out the window, and if he wasn’t doing that he was missing work. He and Mom were always shouting, and finally two years ago he left. Just left and got a job in New Jersey. And everything started going wrong.”

Mrs. Grace’s pencil never stopped moving, flick-flick over the green wall, outlining something long and sinuous. “Like what?”

Pete didn’t even know how to put it into words. Breakfast turning from bacon and pancakes around a family table to those horrible rubbery scrambled eggs at a table full of strangers. A list of chores in Mom’s sharp printing, never getting any shorter no matter how many he ticked off before

school. Lina turning from a sunny little girl to a sulky, clingy lump who could barely read the label on a can of Campbell's Tomato Soup, much less a book. His mother's plan for him to drop out of school in a few more years so he could be the Briarwood House handyman—no high school varsity baseball, no Johns Hopkins.

No Thursday nights in the kitchen helping Dad make Swedish meatballs.
No future.

He tried to say some of that, talking down to his lap, halting voice barely rising above the saxophone scales. Mrs. Grace never looked at him, thank God. Just kept drawing on the wall, rising to her knees as the sketched lines worked their way higher, then to her feet. "You're very young to be concluding you have no future," she said eventually, when he stuttered to a halt.

"I don't," Pete said. He didn't say *Mom will make sure of that*, but he thought it, all right. Briarwood House handyman, assistant florist, probably a third job in there as soon as he dropped out of school—he could see it all, and guilt roiled in his stomach because he wanted to love his mother, and sometimes what pulsed through him came horribly close to hate. "Mom keeps planning our lives out like everything's set in stone and we're already old and we've already lived here forever. And that's okay for me," he managed to say around the lump in his throat. "It's Lina I keep thinking about. She doesn't have friends at school—with that lazy eye of hers they all call her Cross-Eyes, and she's struggling in all her schoolwork, and people don't like little girls who aren't cute. If they aren't cute, they have to make it up by being smart or charming or—" Trying to put his finger on it. "But she isn't. She just sulks and scowls and clings so hard to people, they want to scrape her off like a wad of gum. She wants a proper family, an Ozzie and Harriet Nelson family, and she doesn't have that—so she *needs* school. She needs people who care, and all she has is me because Mom's too busy. And when Lina drops out of school, too, because Mom thinks she can save money if Lina makes all the boarders' beds and does the scrambled eggs in the morning, she'll just . . . fall. Right through the cracks. And I don't know if I'll be able to catch her. And I have to, right? Because that's what big brothers do. But what if I can't?"

And what if the world blew up because of the atom bomb? Because that was the world they lived in now, where everything could disappear into a mushroom cloud at any moment. And somehow Pete kept thinking that it

could all get fixed—Lina, Briarwood House, the bomb—if Dad would just come back. Stupid, because did he really want the version of Dad that sat staring out a window and got into shouting matches with Mom?

It would be better than nothing, Pete thought, or maybe just hoped. But there was no point, because Dad hadn't answered a single one of Pete's letters in two years, hadn't made a single telephone call, and Mom was quick to tell him and Lina that there hadn't been any money sent either. "Your father doesn't care," she said over and over, and in this at least, Pete had to conclude she was probably right.

He swallowed, still staring down at a plate strewn with sandwich crumbs, and he finally let himself say it out loud. Let himself say the thing he'd been dreading to even think. "Dad's never coming home."

"Maybe not," said Mrs. Grace.

He cried again for a while, softly. Mrs. Grace kept sketching up the wall. It was a vine, Pete saw through his tear-blurred eyes—a sinuous, fantastical vine winding vertically alongside the window, then traveling along the edge of the slanting ceiling beside it. Mrs. Grace had to stand on the bed to draw that high.

"I'll extend the vine clear to the other side of the room," she decided. "Get some watercolors, do a cascade of flowers in all colors . . . Life really hasn't been very fair to you, Pete. I'm sorry about that."

"Mom says life isn't fair and that's all there is to it."

"Your mother says that to justify the fact that *she* isn't being fair to you," Mrs. Grace said calmly. "Which is mostly what people mean when they say 'life isn't fair.' It isn't, which is why people should endeavor to be *more* fair to one another, not less."

Pete puzzled through that one. Mrs. Grace went on, outlining a curly leaf on the sketched vine.

"It isn't fair that your father left, that you've been saddled with too much work in a house full of strangers, or that you're apparently willing to let your own life land on the rubbish heap as long as the same doesn't happen to your sister. It's not fair—but it's what you've got."

"Thanks," said Pete rather flatly. As far as pep talks went, this one was a real dud.

"But I will point out one thing."

"What's that?"

Grace March looked down at him, smiling. "You aren't alone."

“I feel alone,” Pete said, the lump coming up in his throat again. “I feel alone all the time.” And maybe that was the worst of it. He was going to high school soon where he’d be a minnow in a big unfriendly pond, a freshman with pimples, fit only for getting stuffed into lockers and ignored in the cafeteria—and here at Briarwood House he was the only boy in a house full of strangers who didn’t even notice one another most of the time, much less him. “No one ever *talks* to each other here.”

Mrs. Grace stepped down off the bed. “Maybe we can fix that.”

Every Thursday night for as long as Pete could remember, his mother went out to her bridge club at six. The ladies played for nickels, and his mother was a demon at cards, so she never missed the chance to bring home a small sackful of change. He raced through the front door at 5:48, sprinting down the street from Moonlight Magnolias—the florist liked to keep him till the very last minute, wrapping up bouquets and sweeping up leaf clippings. “You’re late,” his mom snapped, already in her coat and hat. “There’s a casserole for you and Lina; for heaven’s sake, try to heat it up without burning it this time. I’ll be back by nine. What’s that?” she asked, looking at the little nosegay of slightly wilted carnations.

“Mr. Winston let me make it up out of the day-old flowers.” Pete had tied it all together with a scrap of ribbon in his mother’s favorite mauve. He didn’t think he’d been a very good son lately—downright resentful and ungrateful, really, even if just inside his own head. So he offered her the flowers, smiling. “For you, Mom.”

“Oh. Well, that’s nice.” She regarded the flowers, then thrust them back at him. “Find a vase or something, I’m going to be late—” And out she went, heels clicking. Pete sighed, found his dad’s old Washington Senators beer mug to jam the flowers into, opened the oven to give the casserole a poke—it practically hissed at his touch—and dug Mrs. Grace’s copy of *The Three Musketeers* out of his back pocket. He’d just gotten to the affair of the queen’s diamonds, and who knew how *that* was going to turn out with Milady de Winter scheming around, when Mrs. Grace popped her head into the kitchen almost as if she’d been waiting for the door to close behind Pete’s mother.

“I’m afraid I need your help upstairs, Pete. I’m in a terrible fix.”

He raced upstairs, longing to be the man of the hour who solves a terrible fix. But when he got to Mrs. Grace’s apartment, all he saw was a pile of

ingredients—packages of ground meat, a pint of milk, a massive onion—and a man standing over it. Lanky, wide-shouldered, maybe thirty, with ash-fair hair and laugh crinkles at his eyes. “No idea what we do with all this, Gracie,” he said as Grace brought Pete in. “You the expert, sport?”

“Um,” Pete said, recognizing Joe Reiss, who lived over Rosenberg’s Deli next door. Pete’s mother always sniffed at Joe, because he went around in worn-out blue jeans and threadbare T-shirts (common!), because he played in a jazz trio at the Amber Club with a Negro drummer and a Negro bassist (unnatural!), and because the three of them were always practicing with the windows open (noisy!). But Pete liked the jazz, which he could imagine Detective Mike Hammer enjoying with a dame on his arm, so he smiled tentatively at Joe before remembering. “Um, no male visitors allowed, Mrs. Grace. Not in the upper rooms—only in the parlor between the hours of five and six thirty,” he recited.

“Right. We know the rule, now we’re going to ignore it.” Mrs. Grace passed Pete a wooden spoon and turned to the heap of ingredients. “So . . . Swedish meatballs. We’re throwing a dinner party, and you’re the chef.”

Pete blinked. “I have a casserole to heat up downstairs.”

“What kind?”

“Tuna, potato chip, and mushroom soup.” Fast and cheap, one of his mother’s specialties.

Mrs. Grace stared, those sleepy golden-brown eyes opening up all the way. “Pete. The Founding Fathers did not create this great nation of ours so that we could let them down by combining canned tuna with instant mushroom soup. That is not a casserole, that is a war crime. Go downstairs and dump it in the trash this instant, and bring Lina back up. Tonight you’re both eating Swedish meatballs—if you can show us how it can be done on a hot plate.”

“I can’t—” Pete began. But he *did* remember how to make Swedish meatballs—hadn’t he watched Dad do it every Thursday night for years? *Start with a finely minced onion*, he could hear Dad saying. *A finely minced onion makes just about everything better, Peterino, unless you’re baking a cake. That’s what your mormor used to say, and she was making this back in Malmö before I was born . . .* Slowly, Pete picked up a knife, clumsily chopping up the onion and then some garlic. Mom didn’t use any spices but salt and pepper—“That’s for foreigners,” she’d sniff—but Mormor had sworn by garlic, or so Dad said.

“Jesus Christ on a crutch, who’s cooking?” Nora put her head round the door, still in her trim slate-gray suit from a day at the National Archives. Pete was now adding butter to the pan on the hot plate, and Mrs. Grace was mashing a bowl of diced bread scraps and milk into a slurry at his direction.

“Come in,” Mrs. Grace called. “We need someone to combine the beef and the pork. Just do whatever Pete tells you.”

“Your servant, sir.” Nora grinned, padding into the room in her stocking feet, and Pete’s heart did a flip-flop. Joe squeezed out into the hall to make room, taking up the guitar he’d stashed on the landing, and started strumming something that sounded like Gershwin’s “Summertime.” Lina had glued herself to his elbow, eyes as big as saucers.

“Who’s that playing?” Mrs. Fliss’s English voice floated up. “And what’s that smell?” By now Nora was combining the spiced meat with the soaked bread under Pete’s shy direction, and somehow the room was full. Claire with red hair exploding over her plump shoulders, the widow from 3A who Pete hardly ever saw, Fliss with Angela in her arms begging Joe “Please don’t stop playing, the baby’s been grizzling for hours and now she’s finally nodding off!” He grouched “Thanks a lot!” but amiably, Gershwin changing to Duke Ellington. Soon pretty, peevish Arlene was poking her head around the door exclaiming “You aren’t *supposed* to have men up here, I could tell Mrs. Nilsson!” but Mrs. Grace waved her inside anyway.

“I thought you didn’t like Arlene,” Pete whispered, rolling ground meat into balls and adding them to the sizzling skillet, and Mrs. Grace just whispered back, “A successful dinner party needs just one person all the others loathe, Pete—it gives everyone something to unite against.” Pete found himself grinning when Arlene broke off sniping about house rules and moaned, “What is that *smell*? I can’t have red meat, not on my new regime—”

“Diets might be good for the waistline but not for the temperament,” Grace advised. “Eat the red meat, sugar pie.”

“Well, maybe just this once . . .”

Three cheers for Mormor’s recipe from Malmö. Ancient Mrs. Reka Muller stumped up bearing a bottle of schnapps, and Mrs. Grace opened a little tray of watercolor paints and began dabbing blue flowers rather carelessly onto the sketched vine, which now stretched the whole length of the room. “There now, don’t you feel pretty?” she asked the wall, then

handed the paintbrush to Nora. “Add a flower, why don’t you—” and the Irish girl started swirling some petals onto the wall.

Maybe it wasn’t the most natural of crowds—none of the women except Mrs. Grace looked entirely easy with one another; Mrs. Muller’s face could have soured milk; Arlene and Claire were crabbing at each other—but the air popped and snapped the way the atmosphere at Briarwood House rarely did. It *jived*, full of the smell of the Nilsson family Thursday-night meatballs.

“This sauce needs to simmer,” Pete announced, cracking a lid over the pan on the hot plate. “Fifteen minutes—” And he flapped his dish towel at the chorus of female groans protesting they *could not possibly* wait that long.

“Hush, you folks,” said Mrs. Grace in her Iowa drawl. “Hammerin’ Pete is the cook *and* the man of the house, so as far as dinner tonight is concerned, what he says goes.”

Pete blushed, slipping out onto the landing where Joe Reiss was still noodling about on his guitar. “I thought you played saxophone?” Pete ventured.

“Sax, guitar, clarinet, I play everything.” He finished up with some kind of fancy run. “Always tenor sax for the Amber Club.”

“Is it true that’s a mobster club?” Pete couldn’t help asking. Everyone knew the Warring family ran Foggy Bottom—ran a lot of the District—and you heard things about where (and how) they did business. The numbers business, the racketeering business, illegal liquor . . . Pete had a long-running fantasy where he cleaned up Foggy Bottom with a lot of cold iron and hot lead and saw all the Warring brothers into a cell to wait for Old Sparky. This fantasy usually ended with him and a dame who looked like Nora out on the town with her in a mink and him in an arm sling from his final shoot-out.

Joe shrugged. “Mobsters tip better than senators, and I’ve played for both.”

Pete felt himself going bug-eyed. “You’re the luckiest, Mr. Reiss.”

“Jesus, call me Joe. I hear *Mr. Reiss*, I start looking around for my dad telling me to stop being a jazz bum and sell sump pumps at the hardware store in Fort Wayne, Indiana. And you’re the lucky one, sport.” Joe nodded into Grace’s tiny green-walled room, thick with the smells of meatballs and hot coffee. Claire was lighting a Lucky Strike, old Mrs. Muller was sourly

rocking baby Angela on her lapful of shawls, the widow from 3A was adding a misshapen yellow flower to the painted wall vine. “Growing up in a houseful of women? You are going to know *everything* about the fairer sex by the time you’re old enough to date.”

Pete blinked. He’d never thought of it that way before.

“Got a harmonica?” Joe’s long-fingered hands did a swift ripple over the guitar strings. “Thought I saw you noodling on one this summer.”

“I can play a bit.”

“Bring it next door sometime; we’ll jam. Some tunes need a bit of harmonica.”

“My mom won’t—”

“Learn to sneak around,” Joe advised. “That’s the other thing you’ll need to know by the time you’re old enough to date.” He began to play again, improvising on “Now’s the Time.” Pete went back inside, rather dazedly. Just go jam with a jazz trio, anytime he liked. Mom wouldn’t like it . . . Well, Mom didn’t have to know, did she?

“How was everything?” his mother asked a few hours later, taking off her coat. She looked around with her usual sharp eyes, but the house was hushed, the kitchen immaculate, Lina gone up to bed.

Pete, stuffed with meatballs and jazz and conversation, thinking of the uncooked casserole he and his sister had buried joyously at the bottom of the trash can, gave a wide, innocent smile. “Quiet as a tomb, Mom.”

Pete’s Swedish Meatballs

3 cups diced stale bread, preferably sourdough

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup whole milk

1 pound ground beef

1 pound ground pork

1 pound ground lamb

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon allspice

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon garlic powder

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon nutmeg

1 tablespoon ground thyme

Pinch of salt

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup finely minced white onion

1 egg

1 egg yolk

3 tablespoons freshly ground black pepper

2 tablespoons flour

4 tablespoons unsalted butter

1 cup white wine

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup heavy cream

1 teaspoon soy sauce or anchovy paste

1. Place the diced bread in a large mixing bowl, slowly add milk, and mix thoroughly, mashing until a slurry is produced. If necessary, add a dash of cream to achieve a smooth, porridge-like consistency.
2. Add the ground beef, pork, lamb, allspice, garlic powder, nutmeg, thyme, and salt to the bowl with bread/milk mixture and stir to combine. Add the onion, egg, egg yolk, and pepper, and sprinkle on 1 tablespoon of the flour. Beat together until the texture is smooth and you can form meatballs with your hands without the mixture falling apart. Add a little more flour to bind if necessary, then refrigerate the meat mixture for 20 minutes.
3. While the meat chills, melt 3 tablespoons of the butter in a large skillet over medium-low heat. Reduce heat to low to prevent burning. Remove the meat mixture from the refrigerator and form it into 1- to $1\frac{1}{2}$ -inch meatballs, using a large baking sheet as a landing zone.
4. Place about 10 meatballs into the skillet and cook on medium-low, rotating meatballs in the butter to ensure browning on all sides. Once meatballs are browned and retaining their shape, cover the skillet with a lid and cook for an additional 20 minutes—uncovering every 5 minutes to stir briefly and add a splash of

white wine if the skillet is looking dry, then re-cover. This will help the meatballs to steam and cook all the way through.

5. Slice a meatball in half to test for doneness. If it's firm to the touch and lightly pink inside, remove the rest from the skillet to a serving bowl and repeat steps 4 and 5 with the remaining meatballs. Meatballs will continue cooking after being removed from the heat.
6. Once all the meatballs are cooked and transferred to the serving bowl, reduce the heat under the skillet to low. Scrape the bottom to remove browned bits, then add the remaining white wine, remaining butter, remaining flour, the heavy cream, and the soy sauce. Stir until smooth, cooking over low to medium-low heat until the sauce coats the back of a spoon.
7. Eat as a dinner party appetizer with lingonberry jam and plenty of toothpicks, or serve with buttered egg noodles or mashed potatoes as a main course, while listening to "I Wanna Be Loved" by the Andrews Sisters.

"You can take these home with you, Pete," the florist at Moonlight Magnolias grunted, nodding at the enormous sheaf of peach-gold roses lying on the counter in a white paper cone. "They're for that Irish girl at your mother's house, Miss Walsh."

Pete peeked at the card, but it was blank except for a big, slashed X. For a moment he was tempted to junk the card and give the flowers to Nora himself, but Athos from *The Three Musketeers* would never do anything so underhanded and dastardly, so Pete lugged the roses home and watched Nora blush clear to the tips of her ears when he handed them over. He'd have given a kidney to know how to make a girl look that dreamy, because he knew it was more than just a sheaf of expensive roses. Maybe that was something he'd figure out, if he really was going to grow up knowing everything there was to know about women. He figured he had a few years before he'd be asking girls on dates, so he'd better start applying himself.

There was the usual list of Do This, Do That from his mother—weed the garden, sweep the front stoop, mop the kitchen, wax the banisters—but he had something else to do first. Something he'd been putting off. Taking a

deep breath, he pulled up at the hall table with a fresh sheet of paper and wrote:

Dear Dad,

I won't be writing to you anymore. I guess you aren't interested in hearing from me, since you don't write back. I wish you'd come home, but I guess you aren't interested in doing that either. Thirteen's a little young to start being the man of the house, but that doesn't mean I can't do it. It's not fair, but I can do it. I'm not alone here.

Pete tried to think what else to write, but there didn't really seem to be anything else to say. So he signed his letter and sealed it, wrote the New Jersey address out for what he figured was the last time, and put it out for mailing. His heart was thumping like he'd just run a fast block, but he also felt oddly, grimly satisfied. He didn't know what to feel. He just knew that he was finished with it.

"Peeeeeeete—" Lina ran out of the kitchen with oven gloves on her hands and something on a baking sheet billowing smoke. "What did I doooooooo?"

Pete inspected the scorched lumps. "Lina-kins, I don't think peanut butter cookies need to be broiled."

"I thought it would make them done faster," she wailed.

"Why are you making cookies, anyway?"

She scuffed one foot along the floor. "I volunteered to bring them for Sunday school, because . . ."

"Because?"

"Nobody likes me there," she whispered. "They call me *Cross-Eyes* and *Wall-Eyes*. I thought maybe if I brought cookies . . . But I can't read the recipe so good, and if I ask Mom she'll just say she doesn't have time and I should give up the whole idea. And then they'll *really* hate me in Sunday school."

Rage went through Pete like one-eyed Rochefort's rapier in *The Three Musketeers*. All right, so his sister didn't read so good. And their mother *would* tell her to give up the whole idea, and those Sunday school brats would call her names even more. And she'd start believing it, and that was the first step toward her falling through the cracks—the thing he hadn't realized he dreaded till he fumblingly articulated it to Mrs. Grace.

"Lina-kins," he said, jutting his jaw at an angle that was hopefully resolute and Musketeer-ish. "Mix up another batch and turn the oven down

to three fifty.” He had no idea if that was the correct temperature or not. Why didn’t they have a proper cookbook like houses were supposed to have, with the smiling lady on the cover? Betty Somebody. “We’re going to make perfect peanut butter cookies if it takes us all day. And while they cook we’ll practice your reading,” he bargained, seizing the opportunity. “Because if you can’t read recipes, how are you going to learn to bake?”

He hoped for a smile, but she just whined, “*Peeeeeeete*, you’re *bossy*.” Yet she was lumbering back into the kitchen and reaching for the oven dials, and he’d take that—he’d take it any day. Maybe Dad was never coming home and maybe the world could end in a mushroom cloud at any moment, but Lina was trying again and he was going to see to it that this time things panned out for her. Pete grabbed the second bouquet he’d brought home from Moonlight Magnolias and hoofed it upstairs. “Can Lina bring dessert to the next supper club night?” he asked when Mrs. Grace answered his knock.

“Of course. Fliss is making us all some British specialty called *bubble and squeak*—I didn’t dare ask what on earth it was. I’m sure it’ll be as perfect as her jammy dodgers. How a woman with a baby keeps herself so pretty and crisp *and* bakes up a storm *and* keeps her room looking like a bandbox, I have no idea.”

“Just so we’re clear, Lina’s cookies are going to be awful,” Pete said. “We need to help her get better. We *have* to.”

“We’ll have her fit for the Pillsbury Bake-Off in no time, Hammerin’ Pete.” Mrs. Grace gave a little salute. She was wearing one of Joe Reiss’s shirts tied up around the waist over her floral skirt, and Pete realized, *They’re lovers* with a certain thrill of mixed shock and laughter. Shock because he could just hear his mother trumpeting *TRAMP*, and laughter because skinny Pete Nilsson had done a bit of changing in the nearly two months since Mrs. Grace March had moved into Briarwood House. He was not only having all kinds of sophisticated realizations about things that went on between men and women (in his own house!), he was already realizing that he wasn’t going to rat Mrs. Grace out to his mother about it. Because he didn’t think Grace March was a tramp, and his mother would disagree and kick her out, and he knew this absolutely: that his mother was sometimes utterly, meanly, completely wrong, and he didn’t have to agree with her when she was.

He didn't have to fight her about it, either. He could just . . . get around her. He was already trying to figure out how to do that—not just on the little things like chores, but on the bigger things, like those special prescription glasses that Lina needed. Maybe he could find a way to get them for her. And he could make sure Lina finished school, somehow. He might not be able to get around Mom's determination that *he* drop out as soon as possible, but he was damned if she'd do the same when his sister came of age.

"Lina can bring whatever kitchen horror she likes," Mrs. Grace was saying. "We'll all bill and coo." She sniffed the air. "Is something burning?"

"Probably." Pete brought out the nosegay he'd been hiding behind his back: three red carnations, only slightly wilted, in a sheaf of ferns. "For you, Mrs. Grace," he said, sweeping an imaginary feathered hat from his head, bowing over one foot extended in its imaginary lace-topped musketeer's boot. "'Tell me what queen has a servant more ardent,'" he intoned in Dumas's best style.

"Goodness," Mrs. Grace said, taking the flowers and bringing them to her nose. "You *are* learning fast."

And Pete raced down the stairs, hollering "Got that oven hot, Lina?" and grinning fit to beat the band.

Interstitial

*Thanksgiving 1954
Washington, D.C.*

Briarwood House remembers the moment Grace March dabbed that first painted flower on the green wall of Apartment 4B. *There now*, she'd asked, *don't you feel pretty?* No one had asked the house a question in such a long time. It had taken a rusty moment to shake off the decades of inattention, stretch a bit through long-settled foundations, squint at that attic wall which had been bilious green since 1900 when those same foundations had been poured, but which no one—not one person in all the decades since—had ever tried to decorate.

Yes, the house had thought in some wonder, examining the wall vine. *Yes, I do feel pretty.* And had made a point of paying attention ever since, whenever it felt the friendly tickle of that paintbrush in Grace's hand.

That was the moment at which, you might say, the house began to wake up. Just like people, houses go to sleep if bored, and things had been boring at Briarwood House for so long—nothing for the last decade but bleach and the stale smell of Campbell's soup and the trudge of dispirited feet, and what house worth its baseboards and chimney bricks is going to stay invested in *that*? But things had started getting interesting again, sounding interesting, smelling interesting. The house hadn't realized how much it missed *smells*, proper smells like Swedish meatballs and peanut butter cookies. You can't call yourself a proper home without the regular smell of good food . . .

The smell currently making its way through Briarwood House is blood. The house isn't entirely displeased by that—a dash of blood on the floorboards adds a certain *je ne sais quoi*, as those snippy French *chateaux* across the water would say, those castle-y types who boasted a few centuries under their foundations, not to mention the odd siege or revolution to add spice. *No one can say Briarwood is boring anymore*, the house thinks with a certain flip of its curtains as the police prepare at last to move the body from the crime scene.

In the kitchen below, seventeen people look up at the ceiling as a series of thumps and creaks announces the corpse's progress, carried down three endless flights of stairs. Seventeen faces, many with blood on them—that green-walled apartment is so small, the arterial spray from the murder had gone *everywhere*. The house knows every one of those faces by now, and it certainly knows which are hiding guilt, but the detective doesn't. He's all eager eyes, watching to see who looks sickened or nonchalant or trapped as the murder victim leaves Briarwood House forever.

“Which one of them do you like for it?” the detective's partner asks, and the house settles in to hear the answer.

“One of the men,” the detective replies. “Victim's throat was slashed from the front. Killer's eyes and victim's eyes locked together at the moment of death, that's a certain kind of murderer. That kind of throat-slitting—most women don't got it in 'em.”

Whenever a house laughed the lights flickered, just an instant's twinkle in the bulbs as the prisms in the dining room chandelier gave a momentary crystal dance. Briarwood House is laughing so hard now, it has to calm the light bulbs and chandelier down or else people will think there's a poltergeist. A few of the Briarwood women look up, sharp-eared, but the detective is too busy evaluating the few men in the room. Eyes lingering longest on the stocky dark-haired man leaning against the sink, the only person watching the detective back.

The things I could tell you about that one, the house thinks. *Since you aren't interested in hearing what the ladies are capable of.*

“You know who he is, right?” the detective's partner mumbles.

The stocky dark-haired man lights up a Lucky Strike, still not removing his calm gaze from the two policemen. The detective lowers his voice to a whisper. “How long has someone like *that* been coming here?”

First time? The house thinks, sending a chime through the dining room chandelier again. *Four years ago, end of '50. And wasn't that a night to remember!*

Four Years Earlier

November 1950

Chapter 2

Nora

Dear Kitty,

Apparently there's a lair of gangsters down the street from Briarwood House! Irish mob—I sit in my window hoping to see machine guns and getaway cars. My window overlooks the whole square; the best place for people watching. Though my housemates offer plenty of diversion! Will old Mrs. Muller ever crack a smile? Who on earth is sending Nora Walsh all these sumptuous flowers?

I wish you were here.

—Grace

Thanksgiving had come and gone, everyone was buzzing about the upcoming Rosenberg trial, and Nora Walsh was moving up in the world.

“You look very smart.” Grace March, wrapped in a threadbare robe embroidered with Chinese dragons and waiting on the fourth-floor landing with her toothbrush, looked admiring as Nora hurried out of their shared bathroom. “That suit’s new, isn’t it?”

“Hecht Company, sale rack.” Nora gave her smoke-blue gabardine jacket a pleased tug. It took a lot of scrimping and sale hunting to look expensive on a budget as limited as hers, but it was worth it. There were those at the National Archives who thought Miss Walsh was entirely too gauche, too *Foggy Bottom* to have been promoted out of the file room to personal secretary of *the* Mr. Harris, executive officer of the Archives. Miss Walsh had decided that even if she hadn’t been raised to be elegant, college-educated, or top-drawer, no one was ever going to know it by looking at her.

Maybe she lived in a boardinghouse room the size of a soup can and waitressed at the local diner on weekends, but the moment she headed to the National Archives her lipstick was flawless, her clothes up to the minute, and her voice ironed of every Irish vowel.

“Very nice, Tipperary.” Grace had nicknamed Nora that since hearing her family had originally made its way over from Tipperary County in the old country and it made Nora grin every time. “Quality gabardine always shows,” Grace continued, rubbing Nora’s cuff between her fingers. For a small-town Iowa widow, she had a very sharp eye for clothes. “Coming to dinner tonight?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.” Nora’s usual supper was a cup of soup heated on her hot plate; part of the aforementioned scrimping. Thursday dinners were the best meal Nora had all week, may all the saints bless Grace March and her Thursday night Briar Club. (So dubbed by Pete, with an adorable solemnity that had all the women biting their cheeks in an effort not to laugh. Well, except Arlene Hupp, who giggled out loud just to watch Pete’s face fall. “So sorry, Pete, you’re just *too* funny!” Claire Hallett had promptly dumped a cup of scalding sun tea down Arlene’s cashmere twinset, which Nora thought a bit excessive but Claire was inclined to overflex her claws at times.)

“I saw you writing a postcard yesterday, Grace,” Nora went on, snatching up her handbag. “Want me to drop it in the mailbox on my way out, so Doilies Nilsson won’t snoop?” *Doilies* was what Grace had dubbed their landlady (when Pete wasn’t in earshot) for all those horridly starched little antimacassars she was always crocheting and draping over every blessed surface.

“I’m not done writing it out yet, thank you.” Grace smiled her sleepy half smile and disappeared into the bathroom, tousling her hair. Nora hadn’t seen Grace get any letters in the five months she’d lived at Briarwood House, or post one either, or mention a single family member back home. For a woman who had such an easy listening air as she welcomed other people’s life stories, she was remarkably unforthcoming with her own.

Nora appreciated that. She didn’t talk about her family, either.

The square was just waking up as she walked out the front door of Briarwood House, pulling on her pristine darned-at-the-fingertips gloves. The drugstore across the street was already open, clerk sweeping off the steps; Dave’s Barbershop on the opposite corner already had a fellow

rushing in, barking “Neaten up the sides and leave the top!” Next door, Mr. Rosenberg was out on the front steps of his deli, affixing a small sign in the window: NO RELATION TO JULIUS & ETHEL ROSENBERG. “Think that’ll do the trick?” he asked Nora as she swung past. “The way people are looking for Reds these days, I don’t need any baloney about being the Rosenbergs’ Commie cousin.”

“Ah, no one could think that, Mr. Rosenberg. No one who makes bagels like yours could ever be a spy.” Nora waved and kept walking, round the corner and past the Crispy Biscuit where she hoofed out weekend shifts, past the Amber Club across the street where Joe Reiss played six nights a week until three in the morning. The sunlight was golden, the air crisp and cold, and block by block the slightly shabby streets of Foggy Bottom picked up their hems and put out their lace curtains until Nora hit Washington Circle and veered onto Pennsylvania where suddenly the nation’s capital began taking itself very seriously indeed. Maybe her hometown didn’t have the bustle of New York or the glitter of Hollywood (not that Nora had seen either), but where else could you find a city with the drawling charm of a small southern town, and the electric sense that everything really important in this country was happening right *here*? Nearly three miles’ walk to work every day, but Nora wouldn’t give it up for anything: the sense every morning that her city was unfurling around her, bright with promise.

Just like her own life finally was, after that horrendous series of bumps that had hit like grenades when she graduated from high school.

Down Pennsylvania Avenue past the White House, where Nora sent silent well-wishes to Mr. Truman, then a nip down Ninth to Constitution—and there it was: the National Archives, granite-grand, history breathing quietly from every pillar and pediment. Nora had been coming here since she was a fresh-minted eighteen, the newest of the file girls. It still made her catch her breath, stand a little taller in her glossy black-patent pumps.

If she had time, she liked to come through the front entrance and into the Rotunda, past the case where the Bill of Rights was reverently displayed—but her feet slowed today as she reached the top of the steps, and all her morning goodwill curdled. Because leaning against one of the massive columns was a man in crisp policeman’s blues, hair gleaming the same soft brown as Nora’s.

“Hello, *deirfiúr bheag*.”

“Nearly twenty-one is really too old to be *little* anything, Timmy,” Nora said coolly, feeling her heart start to thump. “And I don’t think of myself as your sister anymore.”

Sergeant Timothy Walsh clapped a hand to his heart as if she’d shot him. “Come on, darlin’, how long are you going to hold a grudge?” He hadn’t ironed the Irish out of his voice the way she had—didn’t have to, when half his precinct resonated with accents from Cork, Mayo, and Meath, and when the name *Walsh* had already paved his way because their father had made it from the beat to a detective’s desk. No one had paved Nora’s way.

“Did I ever say how proud I am of you, working at a place like this?” He tilted his head to look up at the vast stretch of columns. “Little Nora from Foggy Bottom, hobnobbing with all the bigwigs at the Archives . . .”

As if you even know what an archive is or bothered setting foot in a library since high school. Nora took a harder grip on her pocketbook, exhaling. Her brother knew exactly how to get under her skin, he always had, and there wasn’t any use getting steamed up because it would just entertain him. “Timmy, I’m late for work.”

“If you could see your way to loaning me a bit . . . Catriona’s birthday is this week, and Timmy Junior’s got to see a doctor about his ears. I’ve got expenses.”

“No,” Nora said flatly. He made a good salary, and there was no reason for empty pockets except that he liked the cards and the ponies and the extra dram at Dailey’s over on New Hampshire and Virginia. “I am not giving you a dime—”

But he’d already nipped her pocketbook off her shoulder, fast as a pickpocket. Nora yanked back, hissing “*Tim—*” but he was rummaging through it, and she didn’t dare make a commotion. Which was why he’d braced her *here*, right on the front steps of the National Archives where people would give them curious looks. The doorman, who was the biggest gossip in the building, and Mrs. Halliwell, who headed up the file room and had been the loudest voice opposing Nora’s promotion to Mr. Harris’s office—what did they see, a jumped-up file girl talking to a beat cop, or a couple of micks who didn’t belong? What would they think if Nora shouted at Tim and yanked her wallet back?

Nora *had* made a scene before, the first time her brother hit her up on the way to work and yanked her bag off her arm. She just ended up with a

broken handbag strap as well as an empty wallet. Tim was bigger; he was always going to win if it came to a struggle. He knew it, and Nora did too.

"I'll pay you back. Next week, I promise." He never did, and every dollar from her bag had already disappeared into his pocket. He leaned in and kissed Nora's cheek, or tried—Nora took a step back. "You're a gem. I won't forget this."

"I won't either," said Nora, feeling her blood pound in impotent rage. "Hard to forget it when your brother *steals* from you."

"Don't be like that, *deirfiúr bheag*. We miss you back home, you know. Mam wishes you'd visit. So does Siobhan."

Siobhan misses me because now there's no one to watch the kids for her, Nora thought uncharitably and accurately of her brother's wife. That was what an unmarried sister-in-law was for: watch the babies, tend the mother-in-law, iron the police uniforms, be grateful. Not move out to a swank job in the capital and start wearing pencil-slim suits and talking above herself.

"I'm working a new thing, you know," he went on, flicking a bit of invisible dust off his badge. "The feds are looking to wrap up the Warring brothers, the Foggy Bottom gang, the numbers racket—"

"Good luck prying the District away from the Warrings, Tim. They've been here longer than Prohibition. And don't you play poker with Rags Warring every Saturday at Dailey's?" While he collected his weekly payoff, Nora could have added, but didn't bother. Half the local cops were on the take.

Tim shrugged, grinning. "Doesn't mean I won't help the feds roll 'em up if it gets me a nice promotion."

Cops and robbers, Nora thought. Every kid in Foggy Bottom played cops and robbers. If you were from a family like Nora's—Mass every Sunday and First Communion photographs in the parlor, and a good amount of police blue running through the family tree—you were on the cop side in those games. If you came from a family like the notorious Warrings, where the numbers racket was passed down from father to son (and so was the backyard still and the juggled moonshine back in Prohibition days), you played on the robber side. What most people hadn't figured out was that both sides were utter rackets. Both sides, in Nora's experience, understood the game.

"Get lost, Timmy," Nora managed to say evenly and moved past her older brother into the National Archives, heels stabbing the ground like

knives. By the time she was seated at her desk, sorting the mail with efficient speed, preparing her boss's cup of coffee ("Good morning, Mr. Harris—don't forget your ten o'clock and here's that report you asked for on the new preservation case for the Bill of Rights—"), Nora's inner calm almost matched her outward poise again.

So you still get the occasional family hand shoving its way into your pocketbook, she thought, taking possession of her glass-smooth desk. *You're still on the right track.*

And she didn't ever—after what had happened at eighteen—intend to get knocked off it.

The flowers were waiting for Nora on Mrs. Nilsson's hall table by midmorning Saturday: a mass of fragrant lilies sent over from Moonlight Magnolias on the other side of Wood and Briar. No note, as usual. Just the card with its big scrawled X. "Not cheap," Mrs. Nilsson said, assessing the blooms.

Nora smiled. The bouquets were always expensive, and always different—he never fell back on the old tired standard of a dozen red roses. It was always something unusual: yellow sunflowers mixed with purple sea lavender; freesias in wild oranges and reds; a single enormous pink amaryllis drooping on its stem. That told Nora he picked the flowers himself, rather than telephoning a quick order in. She buried her smile in the lilies, inhaling the fragrance. Just the thing to refresh her stuffy little room; he must have remembered her ruefully complaining how the closed-up house got to smelling like cooking fat and old socks in the wintertime . . .

"How nice," Arlene Hupp cooed in her Texas drawl, eyeing the lilies as she came clicking out of the breakfast room. Her smile was big and sweet, and her eyes sharp and drilling. Anytime The Hupp got flowers from a date, she flaunted them around the house until they withered down to stems. "Just *who* is this mystery admirer, Nora?"

"I didn't say he was a mystery," Nora said blandly, whisking the flowers upstairs. By the time she came back down in her freshly ironed uniform for her shift at the Crispy Biscuit, Arlene was gone but Mrs. Nilsson was waiting to pounce.

"I don't like to press, dear, but the rent—"

“Is due in two days, Mrs. N.” Nora kept her smile in place, all too aware her rent money was now residing in Timmy’s pocket, bound for the weekly precinct poker game. “I promise you’ll have it then.” If the tips at the Crispy Biscuit were good.

“Well, then. I know you’re good for it.” Mrs. Nilsson smiled. “A lady to her fingertips, like you! Even if you do work that waitressing job. Most office girls would think that beneath them, but not you! Saving for that hope chest, are we?” Eyeing the flowers.

“Ah, there’s no keeping anything from you, Mrs. N!” Nora snatched her coat and dashed before she had to dodge any more questions. Far better to be on Doilies Nilsson’s good side along with Arlene (neat, pretty) and Fliss (neater, prettier) than to be lumped with Claire (messy, no better than she should be), Mrs. Muller (foreign, unpleasant), or, replacing the widow who had been in 3A, the new black-haired woman who had her knee in a brace (thumping, loud). Being on Mrs. Nilsson’s good side meant the occasional day’s grace on the rent.

Jesus Christ on a crutch, let the tips be good today.

Nora worked noon to midnight at the Crispy Biscuit on weekends, ferrying biscuits and gravy, hamburgers and fries, root beer floats and banana splits. Keeping her eye, the entire time, on the corner booth with its red vinyl. Everyone knew to leave that booth empty after two thirty.

She was up to her elbows cleaning out the soda fountain when he came in—by the time she came out from behind the counter he was already seated, one arm stretched along the back of the banquette, calmly sipping a cup of black coffee. His eyes were steady over the rim. Nora let her smile blossom in return, wiping her hands on her apron, holding his gaze as she called his order in without bringing a menu over. He always took a bacon and tomato sandwich with sweet potato fries and a separate saucer with a single hamburger patty, and Nora was always the one to bring it to him. That was the unspoken rule.

“Your usual,” she said, bringing the plates.

“Join me?” he asked. He always did. She smiled, put down his sandwich, then leaned down and placed the saucer in front of the massive Great Dane reposing under the diner table with the dignity of a diplomat. Dogs weren’t allowed at the Crispy Biscuit, but Mr. Byrne’s Duke was the exception. Nora spent a while tousling his ears and asking if he was a good boy. (He

was.) Then she straightened, took off her apron, and slid into the other side of the banquette.

That was the other unspoken rule: Nora took her lunch break when Mr. Byrne arrived, and Nora's lunch break lasted as long as Mr. Byrne stayed at the table.

He pushed a cup of coffee across, already doctored with two sugars the way she liked it. "Want anything else?" he asked as he always did.

"No, thank you, Mr. Byrne."

"Call me Xavier." He always asked that, too.

She smiled. "No."

"Miss Walsh, you're a trial to me."

"Mr. Byrne, you should eat before your sandwich gets cold."

He never began eating until she'd invited him. It was a greasy spoon joint and he'd paid for his lunch, but he always behaved like it was her table and he was a guest who wouldn't dream of beginning without a signal from his hostess. Nora sipped her coffee as he ate, slipping her foot from its flat shoe and rubbing her foot along Duke's broad back under the table. The dog's master finally pushed his plate back, and they regarded each other. She felt his dark eyes go over her—the stray tendrils of hair that slipped out of her ponytail, the places she nibbled at her cuticles when she was worried about money—and she let her eyes go over him. Xavier Byrne: thirty years old, broad-shouldered and stockily built, dark hair that came to a peak on a tall forehead. Sharp-planed, slightly swarthy face—black Irish, her mother would call him. Xavier Byrne in a flawless three-piece suit of gray worsted that draped like a million dollars and probably cost it. Xavier Byrne with his hawk nose and unsmiling mouth, his Great Dane and his seemingly bottomless stillness, who had been sending her flowers for four months.

"How are the National Archives?" he asked and listened as she told him about the efforts to halt deterioration to the parchment of the Bill of Rights, the reports she'd been compiling and reading for her boss about whether helium-filled glass cases would provide the best preservative. She caught her hands starting to wave in enthusiasm and laughed. "Does this really interest you, preservative gas effects on centuries-old parchment?"

His eyes were steady. "It interests you, so it interests me."

"You know, most people ask how someone like me"—gesturing at her waitress uniform—"landed a job at the National Archives. Local girl, no college . . ."

“I didn’t do college either.” His speech wasn’t precisely rough, but it was pure Foggy Bottom. “So what?”

“I would have liked to go to college,” Nora admitted. “But there’s something that’ll get you up the ladder faster than a college degree, and I know that because I jumped over a few Bryn Mawr girls when Mr. Harris picked me as his personal secretary.”

“And what’s that?”

Nora grinned. “Be the kind of person who only has to hear it once to learn.”

Xavier hardly ever smiled—when they’d first met, Nora thought him grim. Now she knew to look for that very faint flick at the corner of his mouth. “Give me six people like you, Miss Walsh, I could own the District.”

Under the table, Duke rested his massive head on Nora’s shoe. She leaned down to tousle his ears, and Xavier rotated his coffee cup in the saucer. “What’s on the menu at the Briar Club?” He knew all about Grace March and her Thursday night suppers. He never forgot anything Nora told him.

“It’s Joe Reiss’s turn to cook next, which means it comes out of a can. Bachelor cooking, you might call it. The kind that only tastes good when eaten very late at night with a lover, Grace says.”

The flick disappeared. “Is that what Joe is?”

“Of course.” Nora let her eyes sparkle over the rim of the coffee cup. “Grace’s lover, that is.” She watched the flick reappear. “And how’s the club?”

“Some drama. Also to do with Mr. Reiss.” Xavier owned the Amber Club across the way; after he took his late lunch every day at the Crispy Biscuit, he’d cross the street and run things from six until two in the morning. “A gentleman from Mississippi objected to our jazz trio. Didn’t like seeing whites and Negroes playing the same stage.”

“And you—?”

“Told him to go to hell,” Xavier said calmly. “I pay the best musicians I can find, black, white, brown, or green. They stay.”

The first day she’d met Xavier Byrne, he’d been saying nearly the same thing—specifically, to Nora’s boss here at the diner. She’d been the new waitress, still learning the ropes; when she went to fill the coffee cup of the very silent gentleman with the Great Dane (*Mr. Byrne*, the whisper had

been, *he always leaves a dollar tip on an eighty-five-cent lunch!*), the rushing manager had jostled her from behind, sending scalding hot coffee all over Nora's wrist. Mr. Byrne's broad hand had shot out with surprising speed, caught the coffeepot before it could upend over the table, then caught Nora's arm. He was calling for ice before she'd even finished her first gasp of pain. Nora's manager had ignored the ice, rushing up with apologies for the coffee that had splashed Mr. Byrne's expensive suit and hissing under his breath to Nora, "Any girl this clumsy on her first day is fired."

"She stays," Mr. Byrne had said, not raising his voice in the slightest, but somehow everyone in the diner heard it. "Your coffee is too hot, and she's lucky she doesn't have second-degree burns. Get the goddamn ice." Nora had finished her shift at Mr. Byrne's banquettes with a dish towel of ice pressed to her wrist and a fifty-cent raise in hourly wages. He'd asked for her the next day, because he apparently came in every day at three for lunch, and when she sat down he said without preamble: "Have lunch with me. Tomorrow, Martin's Tavern."

The restaurant in Georgetown where senators and presidents and visiting ballplayers routinely ate. Nora smiled. "Can't, sir. I'm always working through lunch—here on the weekends, the Archives Monday through Friday."

"I can't take you out for dinner; I work nights." That was when she'd found out he owned the Amber Club and inwardly raised an eyebrow. Somehow he saw that. "What, it's not respectable to own a bottle club?"

"I'm not sure I know exactly what a bottle club is." All she knew about the Amber Club was that people came from all over the District—sometimes in sequins and black tie, in *very* swank cars—for the music, and that Doilies Nilsson was tight-lipped about the noise that sometimes drifted through the square when things closed up at two in the morning.

"No liquor license at a bottle club," Xavier answered Nora's question. "Guests bring their own drink, if they like—we provide ice, glasses, the mixings, the best jazz in town, and tables to sit and listen to it. But anyone gets drunk, hassles my people, they're out on their ear. That's the advantage of a bottle club: the music, the company, the dancing, but not the drunks. More interesting than a restaurant, less trouble than a bar."

"And you never take a night off from your bottle club?"

"No. I support a lot of people; that means long hours. You never take a day off from the Archives?"

“No. I only support myself, but I’ve got no one to help with that. Means even longer hours.”

“Too bad. I’d like to buy you a mink and take you out on the town.”

“Would you, now.” He’d been examining her still-bandaged wrist; through the gauze, Nora felt the pressure of a ring on his left hand. “I think there might be a Mrs. Byrne who would object.”

He raised his hand. She saw the ring was on his little finger rather than the ring finger, and he twisted the band around to show a big round stone. Definitely not a wedding ring—it looked almost like a woman’s solitaire. “My mother’s,” he said. “She made me promise to wear it till I found a girl to give it to.”

“And you wear the stone on the inside?” That was four or five carats’ worth of diamond, if Nora was any judge. Arlene Hupp would have sized it immediately to the quarter-carat.

“Only a Vegas street pimp flashes a diamond on his little finger,” Xavier had said calmly, twisting the ring back around so the stone was hidden. “If I can’t take you to dinner, and you aren’t available for lunch, can I have your address to send you flowers?” And the first bouquet had arrived the next day, sunny yellow roses with the card scrawled simply *X*.

More than fifteen bouquets later, here they were. He’d never touched more than her hand, never tried to cop a feel. Just looked at her the way he was looking now, quiet, absorbing everything.

“Come away with me for a weekend,” he said. “I got a cottage on Colonial Beach. A dock, a boat. Come see it.”

Nora felt her heart thump. “What do you need a cottage for, when you’re always working?”

“I got the cottage, but I don’t have a girl to take there. If I did, I’d go more often.”

“Ah, but do I look like the kind of girl who goes away for the weekend to a man’s cottage?”

“I know the kind of girl you are. Class, top to bottom. Doesn’t matter where you spend your weekends.”

Jesus Christ on a crutch, Nora thought. What she’d give to say yes. Her room on the fourth floor of Briarwood House could be so dingy, so *ringingly* silent. “Four months, and I still hardly know you,” she said instead, trailing a fingertip around her coffee cup. “You know nearly everything there is to know about me—you remember the names of all my

nieces and nephews when I only mentioned them once; you could list all my boardinghouse neighbors, you know all the projects I'm working on at the Archives. But you hardly say anything about yourself."

He shrugged. "Not much to say."

"There you go, deflecting. Makes a girl wonder if there really might be a wife somewhere . . ."

"There isn't. I don't lie. Not to you." The waitress came to take the plates; he ignored her, holding Nora's eyes. "You can take that to the bank, Nora Walsh."

"Maybe you don't lie, but you don't tell me much." Nora rested her chin in her hand, returning his gaze. "What do I really know about you?"

"Xavier W. Byrne, thirty years old. Marines in the war, Sicily campaign. No wife. No kids. Big Foggy Bottom family, uncles and cousins all over. I own a bottle club, I do well enough, I want you to come to Colonial Beach for the weekend." His gaze was steady. "What else do you need to know to make it a yes?"

Nora let out a breath. "Dinner somewhere," she said. "Take a night off. Let me ask you questions. Answer them."

That flick of a smile again. "Okay."

"Do you think Mr. Rosenberg at the deli is related to *the* Rosenbergs?" Arlene wondered.

"Sugar pie, there's more than one Rosenberg in the United States," Grace pointed out. Nora had observed before that Grace only broke out *sugar pie* when charming people she disliked. Arlene was always sugar pie.

Mrs. Nilsson was sometimes sugar pie, when Grace needed to use the oven downstairs. Nora was never sugar pie; neither was Fliss, or even the annoying little Lina.

"I'm just *saying*," Arlene said primly. "There is a significant crossover between Jews and Reds, you know. Harland says—you know, Harland Adams from the bureau . . ." A pause here so they could breathlessly ask who was *Harland*, that name she'd been dropping for the last month. No one asked. Arlene went on a little peevishly. "Harland says—"

Nora climbed over Pete's gangly legs to get to the hot plate and tip a little more corned beef hash into her bowl. Astounding how much food Grace could get out of that single hot plate balanced on the dinky icebox, and how many people she could feed in this tiny apartment. Right now they had ten

in a room barely bigger than a closet: Fliss and baby Angela between Claire and Grace all sitting on the narrow bed with their backs to the wall, Pete on the floor up against the rickety bureau, Joe sitting cross-legged in the doorway, old Mrs. Muller planted scowling in the single armchair like the crone of death, Arlene perched on the window seat, the black-haired girl newly moved into 3A standing by the radiator since she claimed it hurt her bandaged knee to sit. She looked like she was enjoying herself at her very first Briar Club supper—Grace’s mismatched dishes littered everywhere, the smell of corned beef hash and potatoes permeated the air, and the painted vine on the green wall now flowered the entire length of the room. Periodically someone broke out Grace’s little tray of paints and added a flower to a branch. The quality of the flowers varied considerably, Nora thought. Grace’s were artistic, as graceful as she was. Nora’s were all tulips, the one flower she could reliably draw. Pete’s were big enthusiastic blobs. Fliss’s were always, *always* pink.

“Ready for Victoria sponge?” Fliss asked in that bubbly English voice. “No, you sit right there, I’ll get it!” and soon she was bouncing through the room handing dessert plates around. Everything about Fliss was perky, full of pep: her perfectly curled hair, her perfectly fluffed skirts, the perfectly swirled whipped cream on her cake. It made Nora tired just to look at her—how could any woman with a baby less than a year old look so neat and full of enthusiasm? Nora had endless memories of the various mothers in her family—Tim’s wife, all the cousins—and her old friends from high school, and they tended to run to lank housedresses and irritated expressions. Fliss looked like she’d stepped straight out of a Doris Day movie: freshly applied pink lipstick, clothes exquisitely ironed, all that eagerness to *help* . . . It was all Nora could do, at the end of every day, to crawl out of her slim suits into a cotton robe, shake her hair down, and curl up on her narrow bed with a cup of Grace’s sun tea. “What?” Fliss asked, seeing Nora’s tilted smile.

My family wishes they had a daughter more like you, Nora thought. *Even if you are a Sassenach.*

“Take the rest of the hash, Nora,” Grace said at the end of the night after the others had trailed back to their own rooms. The black-haired girl from 3A—Bea, that was her name—had been last to make it down the stairs, hopping on her one good leg, waving off help. “Far too much left over here just for me,” Grace went on, proffering the dish.

Nora took it, wondering if Grace suspected just how empty her neighbor's cupboards were. She was a woman who noticed things. "Do you have children?" Nora asked suddenly.

"Goodness, why do you ask?" Grace laughed.

"You're always feeding people. It's something mothers do." Even Nora's mother, forever urging everyone *Just a little more colcannon*.

"No, no children for me," Grace said. But Nora wondered. She'd believed Xavier when he said he wouldn't lie to her; there was that streak of iron running through him that didn't seem like it would lend itself to a liar's endless pliability. But Grace March looked like she could lie right to your face and smile sweet as cream while she did it.

Nora admired that. It was hard to be a workingwoman with a past and not know how to spin a good lie when expedient. Nora had spent her childhood in the confessional booth at St. Polycarp's agonizing if even the mildest fib passed her lips—now, if backed into a corner, she could lie like a rug.

"Good night, Grace."

"Good night, Tipperary. Your turn to cook next Thursday, remember."

"Sure, and I hope you like poundies and soda bread." Nora exaggerated her gran's broad brogue as she grabbed her coat and headed down the stairs into the December chill.

Just a quick walk around the block to the Crispy Biscuit—the manager didn't mind handing out paychecks Thursday night if you were willing to pick them up after the dinner rush ended. Nora shivered around the corner of Wood and Briar, thinking of Xavier's offhand remark about buying her a mink. Not that she'd ever accept such a thing, but how warm *was* mink? Never mind; if she gritted her teeth till spring, she could snap a new coat off the sales rack when the winter clothing was slashed down to nothing . . .

Nora had forgotten how fast, how *frighteningly* fast violence could happen. Across the street the double doors of the Amber Club swung open and a man stumbled out, blood flying from his nose. He hit the curb and stumbled again, right off it and into the street, and as the yellow glare of the streetlight caught his narrow olive-skinned face, Nora's entire world tilted. *George*, she thought, really quite lucidly, all things considered. George, whom she hadn't seen in over a year. For a moment she heard the low croon of his voice in her ear, felt the sharp snap of the blow against her forehead, and it took a long inward shriek of a moment to realize he wasn't coming for her. He hadn't even seen her. He was too busy being beaten to a pulp.

A dark-haired man in his shirtsleeves came out of the Amber Club after George, walking unhurriedly, followed by a stream of waiters and curious patrons holding bottles of beer and tumblers of whiskey. The dark-haired man ignored them, seized George's flailing hand just as he was rising, and broke it with one fast, efficient yank of the fingers in opposite twisting directions. George yelled, falling back, and his assailant put a fist in his face. He went to one knee and kept sinking punches—*applying* punches, Nora thought dizzily. This was a beating being applied, like paint being applied to a wall. The man paused at one point to turn a ring around on his finger, and she saw the flash of a diamond before he used it like a knuckle-duster to sink George Harding's nose back into his face in a shatter of cartilage. That was when her blurring eyes registered that yes, it was Xavier Byrne. Xavier, who bought a hamburger patty every day at lunch for his dog; Xavier, with whom she was supposed to be going to dinner at Martin's next week when he had a night off from the club. Xavier, who had risen now at the edge of the street, George Harding bleeding on the ground at his feet, and was speaking in that quiet voice that carried with effortless authority across the street.

"George," he said, one foot resting on the other man's outstretched wrist, "get the fuck out of my club. No Warring is ever going to employ you again. And if you pull one more marked deck at any card table at any Warring club in town, you're done." And he pulled a revolver from his waistband at the small of his back—a .22, the frozen thought stuttered across Nora's mind; she was a policeman's daughter; she knew her firearms—and he calmly snubbed the barrel up against the little finger on George's uninjured hand and fired a single shot.

He shrieked.

"You'll lose the finger," Xavier said, stepping back. "Be smart about this, and it's all you'll lose."

George Harding kept on shrieking. There was so much surprise in his voice, Nora thought. He didn't ever expect to feel pain. He was the one to dish out pain, never the one on the receiving end. But he was in agony now, clutching both hands to his chest and writhing, and Nora should have rejoiced at that. There was enough of the old fear and rage locked away deep, more than enough to want to see George Harding suffer. But the shock still gripped her, blurring her eyes, her ears, even as little answering cries went up from the crowd and people began to melt away at the sound

of the gunshot, even as Xavier cleaned off the revolver with a handkerchief and tucked it away at the small of his back.

“Boss—” A man was tugging at his elbow, and Nora hadn’t fled yet; her feet seemed rooted to the icy pavement, so she heard every word.

“Someone called the cops. Get on out of here. We’ll clean him up, put him in a cab.”

“Get him to a hospital,” Xavier said. “He swings at any of you, put him in the river.” Nora heard that too.

“We got it. Just clear out, okay?” The witnesses were already melting away; clearly no one wanted trouble. “We’ll tell the cops it was a firecracker or something. Guys, get a hose, spray it all down—”

“I got nothing to hide.” Xavier was turning to go back into the club, looking perfectly calm, and that was when he saw Nora. Something complicated went over his face in a ripple as they stood there, and then he was crossing the street in swift, noiseless strides. There were already police sirens sounding in the distance as he took her elbow and spun her away from the Amber Club, back toward Briarwood House. “We’d better talk,” he said. “Take me to your place.”

She should have refused, Nora realized belatedly. She should have yanked her arm away and told him to go to hell. But it all happened too fast: by the time her voice unlocked in her throat and her ears stopped ringing, they were through the back door of Briarwood House, hustling fast up the stairs even as Mrs. Nilsson came noisily through the front door, bustling and buzzing about the four dollars and thirty-eight cents she’d won at tonight’s bridge game. And by then it was too late, Nora knew, because if she started shouting at Xavier here, she’d be out of the house on her ear for sneaking a man in after hours. She didn’t really think *I don’t actually want him here, Mrs. Nilsson, it’s just that he shot someone and needs to lie low* would hold much weight as far as excuses went.

So she pulled Xavier Byrne up the stairs as quietly as possible, praying none of the doors would open. *Jesus Christ on a crutch, if Arlene pokes her poisonous little head out her door right now . . .* But no one did, and Xavier blew unseen into Nora’s fourth-floor room, noiseless as a snowfall. He stopped in the middle of the floor and put his hands on his knees, letting out a long breath, and she could feel the tension coming off him in waves. His

knuckles were bloody, and so was his mother's diamond. If it really was his mother's. If anything he'd ever said was true. If—

Mechanically she turned the bolt on the door, letting out a breath of her own before she turned around, arms tightly folded across her chest. She spoke low-voiced, spitting out the words like crystal bullets. "Who the *fuck* are you?"

He blinked to hear her swear. *Still think I'm class from top to bottom?* Nora thought. *Well, neither of us is exactly who the other thought.*

"I said I don't lie," Xavier said eventually. "I don't. Not to you."

"How do I believe that?" Nora gave a sharp bark of a laugh. "Right now I'm not putting much stock in my ability to spot liars."

"I'm still Xavier W. Byrne. Thirty years old, Marines in the war, Sicily campaign—"

"I think you left a few things out." Nora shucked out of her coat and stalked over to the radio, switching on the music to cover their voices. If anyone listened, all they'd hear was Sammy Kaye singing "Harbor Lights." "Like what the W in your name stands for. Like this big Foggy Bottom family you said you had, uncles and cousins all over—" She heard her voice rising, gulped it back down. "*What* family?"

"The Warring family." She could feel the pressure of his gaze on her back. "I take it you've heard the name."

The Warrings, who had been running the rackets in the District since before Nora was born. In her dad's day it had been bootlegging. Now it was the numbers game. Two brothers on top running things, an army of cousins and nephews taking care of business. "The Warring brothers, are they—"

"My uncles."

Nora blinked hard, trying to clear her eyes. "Related to the men at the top, how nice for you."

"I'm sorry." His voice was quiet. "I thought you already knew."

"Your name is *Byrne*. How would—"

"My mother was a Warring. It's no secret. You're a Foggy Bottom girl, a cop's daughter. Christ, your brother's on our payroll. I thought you knew."

I try not to talk to my brother, Nora tried to say. *He takes my money and I shut my ears*. But the words stuck in her throat. She couldn't stop staring at Xavier Byrne, looking entirely the same yet utterly different from the man in the corner banquette at the Crispy Biscuit. The same charcoal-gray suit, only the jacket and vest were gone and his blinding white cuffs were turned

back to show hard wrists and work-corded forearms. The same hands that rested gently on his dog's head and had held ice to her burned wrist, only now those hands were battered and blood-smeared. The same air of quiet force, only now it crackled like a downed power line. He looked like the man who had sent her flowers for four months. He also looked like a gangster.

He finally seemed to notice his own bloodied knuckles. "Do you have any water?"

"Get it yourself."

"Your bathroom's out on the landing. You want me going in and out where your housemates might see?"

Nora took a bowl from her cupboard, stamped out to the bathroom to fill it at the sink, stamped back in. He'd taken the chair by her rickety table, filled a dishcloth with cubes from the icebox—she set down the bowl, he dumped the ice in, then sank his swollen knuckles in. He leaned back in the upright chair, fishing in his pocket for the familiar cigarette case. "Mind if I smoke?"

"Go ahead." Nora heard her voice come out eerily polite. "I only mind when you shoot people."

He lit a Lucky Strike one-handed, dexterously, and offered her the case. Nora shook her head, pulling up the chair across the table and sitting down straight-backed, as if a teacher was going to call on her in school. Xavier exhaled a long stream of smoke, and she heard the sickening crack that had resounded across Wood Street when he shattered a man's nose. "Why did you beat up G—that man?" Barely avoiding the name in time. "Why did you shoot the little finger off his *hand*?"

"To make him think twice before he tried cheating at any card table in the District again," Xavier answered. "I hate cheats."

"Is that what you really are, a card sharp? Is that what the Amber Club is a front for?"

"It's not a front for anything. It's a bottle club with some of the best jazz in town. I also run a poker game there every night from nine to two." His voice was even. "I run a straight table, and poker's legal."

"And so is everything else you do?" She raised her eyebrows, expecting to see his gaze flicker, but his answer came unhesitatingly.

"You want to know what I do? I run the club; my uncles get a cut. I run the game, high stakes. Every afternoon I pick up the day's betting receipts

from the numbers game. I do things for my uncles when they need doing. It's not sinister. You think I'm a gangster? This isn't New York or Vegas, and the Warrings aren't mob. We just provide services, services people want. It's business."

"It's *illegal* business." The sound of the gunshot resounded suddenly in Nora's head, and she flinched. "Why did you shoot him? You'd already beaten him to a pulp; you'd proved your point. Why did you lose your temper and take a finger off his hand?"

"I didn't lose my temper at all. If I ever get angry, you won't have to guess at it. Tonight, I was teaching a lesson."

"You already *taught it*. His nose was shattered, his other hand too—"

"Not enough on a man like George Harding. Mean as a snake, more temper than sense. I leave it at a couple cracked bones, he'd come back for me with a knife. Tonight I made sure he couldn't."

Nora couldn't deny George was mean as a snake, but saying so would give away that she knew him. She gripped her teeth around that particular fact, shifting course. "Have you ever killed anyone?"

"Sure. On the Sicily campaign, wearing Uncle Sam's uniform."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it."

He started to say something, then looked at his cigarette. "You got an ashtray? I'm not dropping ash all over your rug."

Nora pushed a saucer from this morning's cup of coffee across the table. Grace's casserole dish sat beside it—had it really been just an hour since the Briar Club broke up and Grace sent her back to her room with the leftovers?

"Nora." Xavier tapped ash into the saucer, not taking his eyes from hers. It was the first time he'd used her name. "People want things, they're going to get them no matter what the law says. Prohibition came around and made booze illegal. Shouldn't have, because no law stops people wanting a drink. My uncles provided something the law should have never outlawed in the first place. Same thing now with the numbers racket. No law stops people from wanting a flutter on a lottery game. It's not hurting anybody, so we provide it."

"What else do you provide?" Nora knew about *other* kinds of rackets. Weapons, drugs, whores. "Can you say no one gets hurt in the other sidelines?"

"My family doesn't touch those. And I've never killed anyone outside the war. Because I'm not a gangster."

“Then what are you?”

“A businessman. What I do might not be legal, but it’s not wrong. It shouldn’t be illegal in the first place.”

“You can’t put yourself over the law that way.”

“You say that like the law is never wrong.”

“I know the law is sometimes wrong. But there are ways of changing the law, and those ways should never involve a gun.”

He took the .22 out from the small of his back, laying it on top of the radio, which was now crooning Nat King Cole’s “Mona Lisa.” “I wish you hadn’t seen that.”

“So do I,” Nora heard herself say. “I liked it better when the man courting me wasn’t a criminal.”

“I’m not a criminal.”

“You bribe cops, you run an illegal lottery, and you just *shot a man*.” Her hand hit the table, hard. “Yes, you are a criminal.”

“It bothers you so much, me beating up a cheat? Someone who likes hurting innocent people?” He paused. She looked away. “I’ve never spent a day behind bars, Nora. This changes nothing.”

“It changes *everything*. Why were you even trying to . . . win me over? Did you think I could, I don’t know, give you information? Tell you what cops you could bribe?” All those lunches, the way she knew her face glowed when he asked her to join him. What a *fool* she’d made of herself. She could feel her cheeks burning scarlet.

“I already know what cops to bribe. I was trying to win you over because I wanted you. I still do.” He tapped ash off his cigarette again. “And you want me.”

“It doesn’t matter what I want.” Nora rose. “I don’t date gangsters.”

“I’m a businessman.” His voice was even, but something in it was rising, too. “What, that’s not enough for a cop’s girl? You want a good boy in blue?”

“A lot of the good boys in blue are crooks too. I don’t want anything to do with any of you.” Nora walked past him to the window, parting the curtains. Her window overlooked the alley behind the house; she couldn’t see all the way through to Wood Street, but there were definitely blue lights reflected and flashing off the roofs. Police cars.

“They gone yet?”

“No.” She let the curtain drop. “Won’t the cops be looking for you, even if you aren’t there? A whole crowd of people saw the owner of the Amber Club fire that shot.”

“A whole crowd of people saw absolutely nothing. George was hustled away long before the cops got there, and the people who saw everything know better than to rat.”

“You sound very confident of that.”

“Confident enough.” He took his hand out of the bowl of ice water. “But if you want me gone, I’ll leave now.”

“You get caught sneaking out of here, I’ll be thrown out of the house for having a man upstairs. Frankly I don’t care if you get caught by police or not—” She didn’t know if that was true, but she said it anyway, her voice hard. “But I can’t lose my room, so please stay until the house is asleep.”

“I lose you this room, I’d be doing you a favor.” His eyes traveled around the tiny apartment, and Nora saw with another acute burst of humiliation how shabby it was. The cramped space barely big enough for the rickety bureau and narrow bed, the hot plate and icebox, the narrow table. The one beautiful thing in the room was Xavier’s bouquet of lilies, scenting the stale air with their delicate fragrance. “You could live better than this. I know what salary you make at the Archives.”

“How do you know that?” Nora put her chin up.

“I inquired. I wanted to know they were paying you what you’re worth. They are.”

“And if they hadn’t been, what would you have done?”

“Asked nicely that they give you a raise,” he said mildly. “People tend to do things when I ask nicely.”

That faint flicker of a smile was back at the corner of his mouth. Nora felt something twist in her gut like a hook. She didn’t examine the feeling. She was afraid to.

“You got anything to drink?” He twisted the diamond ring back around so the stone was on the inside, flexing his bruised hand.

“No.”

“Christ, Nora.” He shook his head. A fine silver chain about his neck caught a gleam from the light. “Do you let yourself have one single creature comfort in this sardine can?”

“I work. I save. I eat dinner every Thursday at Grace’s. That’s my life. I’m sorry a gangster doesn’t find it adequately luxurious or exciting.”

“Businessman. You got no one to take care of you?”

“Does it look like I’m drowning?” Nora picked up her kitten-heel pumps from where she’d set them aside for buffing, fetched a cloth from the ragbag. “I take care of myself. I always have.”

“That there? That’s why I want you, Nora Walsh. Quiet little thing you are, and underneath it’s steel all the way down. Saw it the first day.” That smile in his voice again. “That, and my dog loves you.”

“Dogs love anyone who gives them a pat. I’m no dog.” Nora sat on the bed, shoes in her lap, and began buffing the toes.

He sounded amused. “Why are you polishing your shoes?”

“I’m killing time until you can leave.” Nora examined the heels. Worn down. “And I’ll make you a bargain. I won’t tell anyone what I saw outside the Amber Club, because I don’t want trouble. You’ll stop talking to me at the Crispy Biscuit and go pick up some . . . I don’t know . . . showgirl.”

“You’ve seen too many movies. I don’t want showgirls, I want you.”

Nora made the mistake of glancing up. Looking at her unwanted guest, sitting in his shirtsleeves on her straight kitchen chair, elbows balanced on his knees, cigarette smoldering between two blunt fingers, saucer of ash at his elbow. That direct, dark gaze.

“Let me take you to dinner this Saturday,” he said. “Martin’s Tavern like we planned.”

“No.” She went back to her shoes, buffing harder and harder.

“You want somewhere quiet, I’ll take you to my place on Colonial Beach. You want to scream and hit me, you can do it there.”

“I don’t want anything to do with you. I don’t date gangsters.”

“I’m not a gangster. I’m a businessman.”

“Oh, shut the *fuck* up,” Nora snarled.

“It’s true. I’ll say it till you believe it.”

“That won’t happen.” She held the shoes up, looking at the new shine, not really seeing it. “You know why?”

“Why?”

“I told you I was the kind of person who only has to hear it once to learn.” She put her shoes aside, rising. “You’re the second bad man who said he wanted me. I learned from the first one.”

“I’m not a bad man,” Xavier said quietly. “I got a bottle club, I got a dog, I pay my taxes. I’ve never hurt a woman in my life.”

“That’s what he said, too. With a smack to back it up.”

Xavier stubbed out his cigarette in the saucer, rising. He'd taken over the entire room; the whole space hubbed around him like a black sun. "Who was he?"

A slim build, a handsome olive-skinned face—Nora blocked it out, fast. "No one," she said, going to the window and peeking through the curtains. No more reflected glow of police lights. She watched awhile, until she could be sure. "Cops are gone."

"House is quiet."

She had to pass him to get to the door. He didn't try to move in her way, didn't try to touch her arm as she passed. Their sleeves brushed. The Andrews Sisters were crooning "I Can Dream, Can't I?" *No*, Nora thought, *do not dream, Nora. Keep your eyes open and keep them on the track in front of you. Don't fall off now.*

She put her hand on the doorknob, listening through the door. Nothing but silence outside. He could leave, sneak down those stairs and out the back door with no one the wiser. She could lock it behind him. Quit her job at the Crispy Biscuit. Not have any reason to see him again. Except he'd still know where to find her . . .

"Nora." He was standing behind her, close enough for his breath to stir her hair. "Listen to me. You tell me to go, I'll go. You tell me not to look you up again, I won't. You want me gone, I'm gone."

Her lips parted, but the words wouldn't come. Her hand was on the doorknob but it wouldn't turn.

"Every ounce of how I am in your life is up to you. Tell me to go."

She could not get the words out.

His fingertip touched her side, gliding down the line of her ribs. "Tell me to go."

She bit the inside of her cheek hard enough to sting. *Keep to the track. Turn the knob. Just say it.*

"Tell me to go." His fingertip passed the edge of her skirt, grazed the bare skin of her thigh, then reversed and slid upward beneath the hem. "Tell me to go." Higher.

She wasn't saying it. She was slamming her free hand against the door, keeping herself upright as she trembled, as he took her to pieces with one slowly circling fingertip. Saying with every stroke, "Tell me to go."

She managed to swallow the cry that came out of her at the end, with the final burst. Managed to wrench her hand off the brass doorknob, distantly

surprised her fingers hadn't left dents. Turned, setting her back against the door, looking at him. He stood gazing back at her, dark eyes bottomless. She could still feel the words: *Get out*. If she said them, even now, he'd go. She knew that as sure as she knew true north.

"Xavier," she managed to say.

He stilled, then took a half step back. She felt the hook twist in her stomach again. The twist had been fear when she saw him put a bullet through a man's finger outside the Amber Club, but even then, there was the twinge of something at the bottom that wasn't fear. Something that had been stirring since their earliest lunches at the diner, something that had blossomed as they waited the hours away in this tiny room, something that had grown monster-size and insatiable the moment he put his gun aside and said *That's why I want you, Nora Walsh*.

She reached out, tangled her hand in his unfastened collar. "Stay."

One step and he crushed her against his chest, spearing her mouth on his. And Nora tumbled off the track.

Under the curtains, the sky showed charcoal gray. Dawn. Nora's swollen mouth burned. Xavier sat on the edge of the bed, getting dressed in quick, precise movements. She sat up, hugging her sheeted knees against her chest, and watched him. He had a huge Celtic cross tattooed on his back from nape to waist, the short arms spanning his burly shoulders. He shrugged into his shirt, and Nora saw the round shape of a saint's medal on a chain around his neck. She'd felt it earlier, dangling against her collarbone when he sealed his mouth to her throat, tasting metallic under her own lips as she kissed her way across his chest.

"What saint?" she heard herself asking. Everything they'd done over the course of the night—against the door, on the floor, in the narrow bed—you'd think she'd know everything about him. But he was foreign territory.

"St. Jude." He tucked the chain beneath his collar. "I got a weakness for lost causes."

"Is that what I am?"

"You?" He grinned, a full outright grin, and it rocked Nora to the core. "You're the last thing from a lost cause. You're a winning thoroughbred leading post to post."

I think I'm lost now, Nora thought. At some point around three in the morning she'd had the thought that maybe this one night would call it done:

get it out of her blood, burn it away so she could climb, clear-eyed and hollow-veined, back onto her track. That was when Xavier had flung back the covers and padded naked to her icebox, tipping the dish of leftover corned beef and potato hash into a pan on the hot plate with the neatness of a longtime bachelor. “You learn anything in the Warring family, it’s how to dress up day-old hash,” he said, dexterously frying a couple of eggs on top, then bringing the whole hot delicious mess back to bed where he fed Nora right out of the pan. “No one looks after you,” he’d said gruffly, kissing a dab of runny egg yolk off the corner of her mouth. “That’s about to change.” And Nora had felt something tighten inside, a whisper along her nerves that meant *danger*. Xavier Warring Byrne could work a lot more damage with a three A.M. breakfast and a steadfast gaze than he could work with a kiss, or even with the rough, devastating flick of one fingertip under her hem.

He crossed the room now, fastening his cuffs, and picked up the .22 where it lay atop the radio. He tucked it at the small of his back, saying, “You could move out of here. I can put you up somewhere nice.”

“I don’t want to be put up anywhere,” Nora said. “I’m staying here.”

He nodded, not arguing. “I don’t want you getting in trouble with Doilies Nilsson because of me, though. Next time we go to my place.”

He’d remembered the jokey nickname for her landlady. She’d probably only said it once, but he remembered it. He remembered everything. Nora pulled the sheet around her shoulders. “Xavier, no next time. At your place or anywhere.”

“Okay. But I’m going to show up outside the National Archives today, because it’s a free country. You say you don’t want to see me, I’m gone. Anytime you say no, I’m gone. But you got to tell me no.”

She hadn’t said no all night. She’d said yes, over and over. She squeezed her eyes shut.

He came to the bed and tilted her face up, kissing her eyelids and her temples and her mouth. “See you later.”

“No,” Nora said. But she didn’t manage to say it until he’d left her bedroom. And she knew she was sunk.

Xavier’s Corned Beef Hash

1 can corned beef hash, or leftovers from a corned beef and potato hash dinner

2 eggs

1. Place the hash in a skillet and heat thoroughly over medium heat.
2. Make two indentations in the hash, fill each with an egg, and cook until the eggs are set to desired doneness.
3. Enjoy in bed with a lover, with plenty of extra napkins, while listening to “Goodnight, Irene” by Gordon Jenkins and The Weavers

“You’ll be coming home for Christmas, Nora.”

Mam didn’t ask questions; she issued statements and then sweetly dared you to contradict her. Nora sighed, turning against the paneled wall of the telephone nook in the hallway. Her eyes were gritty from sleeplessness. “I’m not coming home, Mam. Even for Christmas.” She’d managed to stay firm on that since moving out—no visits, not for so much as a cup of tea. She hadn’t quite managed to draw the line at no telephone calls. She knew she should just hang up when Mam called, but Irish daughterly guilt had a way of kicking in.

“What about Christmas Eve Mass?” Behind her mother’s voice, Nora could hear the clamor of the house she’d grown up in: her brother banging around looking for his freshly shined boots, his wife, Siobhan, shouting at the kids. The air probably still smelled of overboiled coffee and starch from Mam’s frantic ironing of Timmy’s police uniform. “Are you attending Mass regularly, Nora? Father Dominic says he hasn’t seen you at confession.”

I certainly won’t be going today, Nora thought. Just imagine babbling *Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned* to doddering old Father Dominic with her pocketbook full of all the tissue-wrapped condom packets she’d scavenged out of her wastebasket this morning to sneak out of the house so Doilies wouldn’t find them . . .

“I never see you,” Nora’s mother went on, sighing. “Not once you’ve dropped in since moving out! Even to say a rosary for your father or help me make bread like we used to.”

“You know why,” Nora stated.

A sticky pause. “Have you been following the Rosenberg case?” her mother asked brightly. *You have to give her credit for persistence*, Nora thought. “They say the grand jury will hand down indictments after the new year.”

“Mam, I have to go.”

“That man is guilty, you can see it in his face. Russian Jews can’t be trusted, everyone knows that. The wife, though, what kind of woman is involved in *spy rings*? Women don’t do things like that, even Jewesses. What this world is coming to, spy rings and the atom bomb and Reds—”

Nora flattened herself against the wall as a stream of her housemates flooded down the corridor: Claire with blouse untucked and red curls flying, headed for her senator’s office; Fliss annoyingly perky and bright-eyed for eight in the morning, clicking off for the park with cooing baby in baby carriage . . . And Pete with his schoolbag, tugging Lina along, stopping to give Nora an elaborate bow with an imaginary feathered hat. (Pete was still on Dumas, bless him—*The Count of Monte Cristo*.) “Mam, I’m hanging up—”

“If you’re not coming for Christmas, could you pop a little something in the mail?” Nora’s mother dropped her voice. “Your brother came up a bit short this month. He has to contribute to so many police charities. And the children need new shoes—”

“Tim already nicked my month’s rent right out of my wallet,” Nora cut her off. “Though I doubt it went to any widows or orphans.”

“You’d deny your own brother?” The hot, protective flare of the Walsh family temper. They all had it, women included. “He’s family. It’s your Christian duty.”

How often had Nora heard that? *He’s your brother. He’s family. It’s your Christian duty*. And then—

“You don’t need rent, anyway, Nora love. A girl shouldn’t be living on her own before she’s married, not when she has a loving family. Just come home where you belong.”

Nora closed her eyes tight. And hung up.

Mr. Harris kept his office so overheated, Nora headed outside the moment noon rolled around. “Are you quite all right, Miss Walsh?” Mr. Harris called out absently as she took her leave. “You seem distracted.”

“Fine, Mr. Harris,” Nora reassured. *Just wondering what to do when a gangster comes to pick me up from work this evening*—only to see Xavier already standing outside the staff entrance, cigarette between two fingers, hat brim slashing across his forehead, and overcoat stirring around his knees in the cold breeze. “You said you were coming tonight,” she ended up saying.

“Couldn’t wait.” He admired her up and down, from French twist to the hem of her soft chocolate-brown worsted suit. “You’re a sight. I like your waitress uniform fine, but duded up like this you’re a long cool drink of water.”

Nora touched the high collar of her cream silk blouse, which she’d snatched off the hanger that morning because it would hide the marks he’d put on her neck last night.

He went on, nodding up at the big pillared edifice behind her. “All you’ve told me about this place, and I’ve never been. It occurred to me, I keep asking you to dinner, asking you to the cottage, trying to walk you into my world. Why don’t you walk me into yours, Miss Walsh? Where do you go to lunch every day?”

Cut him off and go back inside, Nora thought. But she was already answering. “You might be disappointed, Mr. Byrne. Usually I take five minutes eating a sandwich sitting out on the steps here, and then I visit the Rotunda.”

He flicked his cigarette butt away. “Show me?”

Xavier’s polished oxfords made no sound at all on the marble floor when they entered the round, hushed space of the Rotunda: the coffered ceiling arching above, the massive pillars, the two vast murals rippling across the walls. “That’s John Hancock hearing Jefferson report the Declaration of Independence,” Nora said, nodding to the bewigged men painted along the northwest wall. “And on the northeast side there is James Madison submitting the Constitution to George Washington.”

“Read about them in school.” Xavier strolled along, head tilted back to look at the painted figures. They had the Rotunda almost entirely to themselves; everyone else in the District seemed to be out Christmas shopping this afternoon rather than sightseeing. “They didn’t interest me much. Didn’t have much to do with me.”

“Ah, that’s where you’re wrong.” Cuban heels clicking, Nora led him to the display case at the Rotunda’s apex. Just a single, fading piece of

parchment with its proud header: *Bill of Rights*. “There’s talk that the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution will be brought from the Library of Congress and displayed here too,” Nora said, feeling the rush of excitement that always warmed her whenever she helped draft a memo on the matter. “New cases, helium-filled to preserve the parchment . . .”

“They’re dusty old pieces of paper,” Xavier said. “Why get excited about that?” But his voice was curious rather than dismissive.

“They aren’t just dusty old pieces of paper. They’re the only things Americans have in common as a people. We come from everywhere—” Thinking of Jewish Mr. Rosenberg at the deli; of Swedish-named Pete Nilsson and old Reka Muller with her Hungarian epithets; of the dark-skinned drummer and bassist who played with Joe Reiss; of her own big Irish clan. “Our people all spoke different languages and maybe still do; we look different; we live in every possible location from cities to towns, mountains to plains. But”—she waved at the Bill of Rights, including its sister documents off in the Library of Congress—“this unites us. A government established for an articulated principle, not tribal allegiances or lines drawn on a map.”

“Has it made us any better?” Xavier’s eyes were intent. “We’re the ones who got ourselves an atom bomb and dropped it—twice.”

“You were a marine. I’d have thought you agreed with that decision.”

“I did,” he acknowledged. “Doesn’t mean it feels good now, living in a world where a push of a button could end things in one big mushroom cloud. Hard not to wonder if we took a wrong turn somewhere along the line. If we could have done better.”

“We can always do better,” Nora said. “These papers acknowledged from the beginning that we weren’t good enough yet. ‘A *more* perfect union’—it’s right there in our foundations that we aren’t perfect, that we have more to strive for.” She grinned. “I know, I know. I sound preachy. But isn’t it fascinating, when you really think about it? Most kingdoms or nations just say, ‘we rule because we’re strongest’ or ‘we rule because a god threw a thunderbolt and willed it so.’ We’re the country who said, ‘Here we are; let’s live by these principles and keep getting better at living up to them.’”

Xavier cocked his head. “Why did you get so interested in all this?”

“Two reasons . . . First, just luck. I landed here in the steno pool at eighteen”—Nora turned a circle in the big space, drinking it in—“and I wanted to know everything about the place, what it stood for. So I kept

asking questions, reading books from the library, pulling public documents out of the archives . . .”

Usually Nora noticed people start to yawn when she began rattling on about the importance of archival preservation and historical documents. Or they thought she was being funny: *Look at you, Miss Patriotic!* She’d never quite been able to explain that patriotism should be more than just a simple wave of the flag without thought behind it. Her pride in this building, being part of it with everything it protected—it was all wrapped up in hope, not complacency. Hope, and a dose of shame: *Look at me, a girl with some bad things in her past, but she got past them. Bettered herself, so she could be part of something bigger than herself. So she could live up to something more.*

The nation could do the same. It was 1950, the beginning of a new decade. She hoped it would.

“You said there were two reasons you got interested in all this.” Xavier was still watching her. “What’s the other?”

The harder reason. Nora found herself examining the faux-pearl button on her cuff. “My family,” she said quietly. “Beat cops for four generations, backbone of the precinct. My dad even made detective. And so many of them stand for *nothing*. So many of them just scratch each other’s back, cover up for each other, play the game. Not all of them—” Nora knew there were good cops; she could even tell you which ones in her family they were: generally, the ones who didn’t get promoted. “But there are so many on the take, the good ones often as not find their hands tied.” She gulped a breath. “When I was little, I eavesdropped on my grandfather getting drunk with a crony late one night, and they were reminiscing about burying something out at a construction site. I was too young to realize they were talking about a *body*. I don’t know where, I don’t know who. I wish I remembered enough to do something, but I don’t. I just remember them talking about how *hard* it had been, and what a relief nothing ever rebounded on the department.”

She looked up at Xavier and saw absolutely no surprise. “My family are all police blue, but so many of them are crooks. They stand for the law—the law that *needs* good police—and so many of them wink at it. I wanted to find something that wasn’t . . .”

“Crooked,” said Xavier.

She lifted a shoulder, smiled too brightly. He took her arm as they walked another circuit of the Rotunda, and she nodded to the guard on duty.

“So that’s your world,” Xavier said as they strolled out. “This place.”

“I love it.” Nora trailed her fingertips along a bit of marble scrollwork along the wall. “Someday, maybe, I could be promoted to chief of Building and Grounds . . . my boss already says I know as much about the place as men who have worked here for a decade. They’ve never appointed a woman to the position but who knows? Let’s go out the Penn Ave. entrance,” she added, directing them. “It’s the research entrance, but they’ll let you through with me. There are four allegorical statues by the entrances—on the Constitution Avenue side the statues are *Heritage* and *Guardianship*. I like the ones on this side better.”

They walked out slowly into the winter afternoon between *Future* and *Past*. Xavier stopped to look up at *Future* as she loomed over the passersby: a young woman in carved limestone, gazing outward over a blank book where the future had yet to be written. “I got a place there?” Xavier asked Nora, pointing at the book. “In yours?”

That hook twisted in Nora’s gut again. *No*, she knew she should say. What she said was “Perhaps.”

“I took a walk in your world,” he said, extending a hand. “Come walk in mine.”

The night nearly began with a disagreement. “I can’t take that from you,” Nora protested weakly in the front hall of Briarwood House.

“So throw it in a gutter if you want. I like to give you things. What you do with them is up to you.” Xavier draped the chinchilla wrap around Nora’s shoulders and she couldn’t help rubbing the sumptuous silvery fur between her fingers, feeling the satin lining caress her bare skin. It was gorgeous, it was entirely too much, and Nora already knew she was going to give it back at the end of the night but she also knew she was going to enjoy wearing it all evening, first. “Let’s go.” She sighed, feeling Mrs. Nilsson eavesdropping around the stairwell—she couldn’t forbid her boarders from going on dates, but she could hover disapprovingly.

Nora had never been inside the Amber Club. It seemed to bloom as they came in: low-ceilinged and intimate, amber-shaded lights turning the air golden, amber velvet curtains glowing behind the stage where Joe Reiss and his bandmates were already lilting a sultry rendition of “I Wish I Didn’t

Love You So.” Women in sequins listened from small tables through a purplish haze of cigarette smoke; men brought out their own bottles of vodka and whiskey as waiters glided back and forth with martini glasses and soda water. A raised section at the back, bigger tables heaped with poker chips, whispers and clinking glasses and the flick of cards . . .

“Miss Walsh gets what she likes,” Xavier told the nearest waiter, pulling out a chair for Nora at the high table. She pulled the chinchilla wrap close, feeling suddenly shabby in her blue rayon frock—she spent her clothes budget on work suits, not evening dresses, and all these sequins and satins would have been putting her to shame if not for the fur. Maybe he’d known she’d feel that way. “I won’t stay long,” Xavier was saying, hand lingering at her wrist. “It’s boring, watching someone play cards. A few hands and we’re out. I just want you to get a feel for it all.”

Oh, I am, Nora thought. The way everyone here rippled as Xavier entered. “Boss,” said the head waiter. “Boss,” called the dealer at the back, raising a hand. “Boss,” rumbled the thickset man by the door. They all turned toward him like sunflowers, waiting for his nod. She couldn’t hear what they said to him at the back table, but they waited as he took off his jacket, turned back his cuffs, called for a drink. “I’ll have whatever Mr. Byrne is having,” Nora told the waiter, curious, and her brows shot up when she sipped at the amber fluid served in a brandy snifter. “*Apple juice?*”

“Mr. Byrne never touches a drop at work, miss.”

“I see.”

She sipped her juice, watching him focus fiercely through a few rounds of poker. He didn’t look up once, but he was somehow watching everything: he gestured without looking up when her drink needed refreshing; when two men at the next table started getting rowdy, and the bouncer rumbled forward to issue a warning. “Look at you, Nora Walsh,” Joe Reiss said, grinning from the stage between sets, ash-fair hair gleaming. “All dolled up like a proper moll.”

“I’m nobody’s moll,” she fired back. “Is that what they’re *saying?*”

“Can’t hear you,” he said innocently and waltzed into “The Lady Is a Tramp.”

That’s how they see me, Nora thought, an entirely different kind of hook twisting in her gut. Not Miss Walsh of the National Archives, buttoned to the gills and stuffed with knowledge. Just a gangster’s girl in chinchilla,

appraised up and down by the men here and enviously side-eyed by their overlipsticked girlfriends.

“I’m done.” Xavier materialized back at her elbow, shrugging into his jacket. “Normally I play until two, but there’s something else I want to show you. Mind a quick cab ride?”

“Not at all.” She took a welcome gulp of frosty night air as they left the club. “Did you win?”

“Won four.” He saw a cab, raised a finger.

“Four dollars?”

“Four hundred.”

Nora gulped. Sliding into the cab, she couldn’t help but think of her brother, Tim, how much he liked a flutter at the precinct poker games. Usually those were the months he came round to dig into her pocketbook.

“I don’t play for the rush,” Xavier said, reading her mind as he slid into the other side of the cab. “That’s gambling, not card-playing, and I don’t gamble. I play the numbers, count the cards. You do that, treat it like a job and not a game, you don’t lose much. Macomb Street,” he told the cabbie.

“And where’d you learn to count cards?” Nora persisted.

“The sharks in Vegas, after the war. I’m one of the better poker players on the Strip.”

He said it matter-of-factly, no boasting. Nora supposed that when you’d won four hundred dollars in less than an hour, without turning a hair, you had the right to call yourself that good. He took her hand, lacing their fingers together on the seat, and Nora realized the cab had left Foggy Bottom behind. A more upscale neighborhood, bigger houses with swaths of lawn, porch lights shining on Cadillac convertibles and Chevrolet Bel Airs. “Where is this?” she asked as the cab pulled up in front of a neat white picket fence.

He flipped a few coins at the cabbie and handed her out onto the driveway. “My home.”

“*This?*”

“What, you thought I lived in some mobster’s lair over the club?”

Nora looked up at the house, slightly stunned. “I didn’t think you lived in a classic brick four-bedroom between Wisconsin and Massachusetts.”

He laughed, pulling her up the drive onto a gray slate porch and then through the door. Nora heard the padding of enormous paws, and then the Great Dane was capering around them in the entryway, tail lashing. “Duke,”

she greeted him, bending down to ruffle his ears, and couldn't help laughing when the huge dog reared up, placed his paws on Xavier's shoulders, and proceeded to give his master's face a thorough washing. Xavier withstood it patiently, reached for a towel, then moved through the house switching on lights. A quiet, gracious house with a walnut bar, a bachelor's kitchen, a den with deep leather armchairs. Xavier let Duke out into the backyard where Nora saw tidy flower beds. "I put roses in," Xavier's voice sounded behind her. "I like pruning them myself. Getting my hands in the ground."

She turned, seeing him on the porch in his shirtsleeves, hands in his pockets.

"This is me," he said simply. "How I live. It's cards and clubs and late nights, yes, but it's nothing bad. I play with my dog, I prune my roses, I know all my neighbors."

"And you do other things," she said steadily. "You run errands for your uncles, you pick up the take for the numbers racket every day, you walk around armed—because the other things aren't legal."

"I'm not a crook," he said. "This is my life, and I want you in it."

She pulled the chinchilla stole off her shoulders and piled it over the nearest chair.

"Stick around awhile is all I ask." He came closer, slipped his arms around her waist. "Talk is cheap, so let me show you I am what I say I am." He held her lightly; she could have tugged away in one step. Reaching up to her neat French twist, he pulled a pin out. "Stick around, Nora." Another pin. "Stick around." One more, and her hair slithered down around her shoulders. "Stick around."

Can I get a picture of my girl? Xavier asked after the New Year turned, so Nora took herself to Huckstop's Photography just up the street and got a portrait done. A few days later she went to pick up the prints and bumped into Grace March.

"I'd have thought you'd be at Trinity Presbyterian," Nora teased, knowing her neighbor's love of Sunday lie-ins. "Teaching Sunday school and bringing a casserole for the minister!"

"Oh, honey, no church would have me." Grace laughed. It was the kind of crisp, cold January morning just made for sleeping late and avoiding all the neighbors headed to St. Polycarp's or Trinity Presbyterian, all squabbling over whether Catholics or Presbyterians had the right to the

single parking lot. “You got your picture taken? Oh, that’s lovely. You could be the queen’s cousin, Tipperary.”

Xavier will like it, Nora thought. His proper Miss Walsh in her studio pose, faint smile and French twist and the string of pearls he’d given her for Christmas . . . contrasting with his not-so-proper Miss Walsh who came to Macomb Street with her hair shaken down, sliding over his sheets naked except for the pearls.

“You’ve got a certain glow,” Grace said, still scrutinizing the picture. “The glow a woman gets when she’s been very thoroughly . . .”

Nora raised her eyebrows. Grace looked innocent.

“Appreciated,” she finished, handing the picture back.

Nora couldn’t help laughing. The way Grace just *said* things that everyone else let hover unspoken. “What brings you here?” she said. “To change the subject, please! Mr. Huckstop isn’t normally open on Sunday, so —”

“I asked if I could drop by with a special project.” Grace dug out a black-and-white photograph of her own: a girl of perhaps ten, crooked teeth, huge smile. “I lost the negative, but I wonder if he can do a fresh print of this somehow.”

“She’s beautiful. Your niece, or your sister, or—” But Grace cut her off, calling hello across the street to Fliss, who was clipping off toward the park with her baby carriage. Limping in the other direction was the new Briarwood House boarder, Bea something, the one with a knee brace and short black hair.

“I keep forgetting her last name,” Grace mused. “Verotto? Veretto?”

“Verretti.” Nora waved at Bea, who waved back. “Did you see she keeps a baseball bat just by the inside of her door? I saw it when she came out asking to borrow my toothpaste. A baseball bat . . .”

“Goodness. Who would have thought?” Grace smiled and disappeared inside Huckstop’s—without, Nora noted, mentioning who the little girl was in the black-and-white photograph. The new boarder named Bea wasn’t the only one at Briarwood House with a secret, not that Nora was one to throw stones.

Except everybody seems to know your secret, she thought in some chagrin. Arlene had been dropping pointed comments ever since clapping eyes on that chinchilla wrap; Mrs. Nilsson had remarked how *often* Nora was staying overnight with family lately. And just yesterday Mr. Rosenberg

had been putting up a new sign in his window with even larger lettering—ABSOLUTELY NO RELATION TO JULIUS & ETHEL ROSENBERG!—when he beckoned Nora to ask in a low voice if she couldn't convince her Mr. Warring to get people to stop harassing his deli. *The schmucks who say I must be a Commie spy. He could put a stop to it with a word.*

"His name isn't Warring," Nora had said sharply. "And he's not *mine*, and he's just a businessman." Flushing to hear Xavier's own words shoot out of her mouth, only to get a raised eyebrow in turn from Mr. Rosenberg.

"**R**osenberg? Best chopped liver in town?" Xavier was still in his bathrobe when Nora arrived at the house on Macomb Street, sipping his first cup of coffee of the day though it had gone noon—he didn't get to sleep till after three on Saturday nights. "Sure, I can put in a word."

"And how exactly does that work?" Nora stepped out of her shoes, taking the cup of coffee he poured her. "Does he pay you for the favor?"

"No. It's being a good neighbor." Xavier, Nora knew by now, took being a good neighbor to a slightly obsessive degree. He habitually watered the next-door widow's petunias. He took note of which cars on the street needed new tires, and as often as not a new set would quietly appear in the driveway. When the boy across the street had his BB gun confiscated by a bad-tempered cop, Nora heard Xavier make a brief call and the BB gun was hand-delivered back within twenty-four hours. Another set of contradictions about the man who had been calling her *his girl* since Christmas. "Being a good neighbor builds up goodwill," Xavier explained, seeing her dubious look. "You do things for people, things the cops won't do without getting their backs scratched. Means the people who matter don't want us in jail or run out of town."

"And the cops don't interfere?" Nora scratched Duke behind the ear as he came to drool on her skirt.

"Not since my uncle made friends with the chief of police," Xavier said, smiling at the look on her face. "Are people on the block really thinking Mr. Rosenberg is *a* Rosenberg?"

"A few idiots."

"Same idiots who think Reds are a threat, I'd bet."

"They aren't?" Nora sipped her coffee.

"Communism is the stupidest system on the planet." Xavier refilled his coffee. "It ignores the biggest urge people got, which is that they want to

build something. First for them, then for their kids. Ignore that urge, you'll get in trouble fast. Maybe Communism is perfect on paper to some economist, but it doesn't account for the fact that humanity thrives on imperfection."

"It seems to be working all right for the Russians."

"Maybe because Russians don't got that urge—I don't know; I've never met a Russian. But if I were a betting man, I'd say they want the same things as us, deep down. Which is why I'd lay odds the Russkies won't stay Commie forever, and the rest of the world won't go tipping Red, either, no matter what Joe McCarthy has to say about it."

"Xavier Byrne, political philosopher," Nora teased. "President Truman should hire you."

"He could do worse. That your picture?" Xavier spotted the package under her arm, pulling her against him. "Let me see, Miss Walsh." He whistled. "You're a dish. Huckstop make you an offer?"

"What do you mean?"

"He's got a side business under the counter, different kind of pictures for sale. Pictures where the girls aren't modeling pearls, or much of anything else."

"Mr. *Huckstop*? How on earth do you know that?"

"My uncles get a cut," Xavier said, which made Nora blink. Every time she forgot that he wasn't precisely *just a businessman*, every time she thought *This could work; it could*—some casual remark like this brought her up short. Xavier went on, setting his lips just under her ear. "I'm going to Vegas next weekend. Business. Go with me?"

"No, thank you." She'd been to Sunday dinner at his sister's house with about five hundred Warring cousins, not so different from Nora's own batch of relations; she'd been out with him to Martin's Tavern in Georgetown where she'd watched him shake hands with a U.S. representative and two district judges; she'd spent the week after Christmas (lying through her teeth to Mrs. Nilsson) at his cottage in Colonial Beach, the two of them talking endlessly as they watched Duke ramble the frosty shore. But she hadn't been back to the Amber Club, or to any of the other places he worked. Some deep unease still twitched in her stomach at that. "I still don't entirely know what I'm doing with you," she said candidly, running a finger along the saint's medal at his throat. "You bring out my bad side."

“You don’t have a bad side. What’s your biggest sin, returning a library book a day late?”

“Skipping Mass the first Sunday of the year to stay in bed with you all day.” She’d successfully dodged *all* her mother’s calls about when she would be dropping by. No overheated parlor; no fighting children or endless church gossip; no motherly hints about moving home; no need to hide her pocketbook from Tim . . . Just Xavier’s big bed, a hamper from Rosenberg’s unpacked over the foot of it, “Auld Lang Syne” on the radio, and Duke gnawing a bone on the floor.

“I’d pull you off to bed”—Xavier kissed her, something that still scattered her thoughts as if a shotgun had gone off—“but Louise is coming to clean in twenty minutes.” The doorbell rang, and he put his cup down. “She’s early.” He took a look through the peephole in the front door, heard his housekeeper’s *Just me, Mr. Byrne*, and swung the door wide.

But when Louise stumbled wide-eyed through the door, she wasn’t alone. “Mr. Byrne—” she managed to gasp, and the man who shoved in behind clubbed her casually with the butt of his revolver.

“Hey, boss,” grinned the slender, olive-skinned man with the little finger missing on his gun hand, two bigger men filing in behind him with revolvers of their own, and even as Duke began to bark and Xavier’s hand went for the small of his back, Nora froze as though her blood had turned to ice. “Don’t you reach for that piece,” George Harding warned, still grinning as his friends fanned out across the room.

Xavier’s hand came slowly back into view, empty, his eyes blazing. “Nora,” he said levelly, not looking at her. “Louise. Stay calm. No one’s going to hurt either of you.”

“I don’t know about that. Hey, Nora—” George mugged at the sight of her, though Nora knew he wasn’t at all surprised to see her here. “You screwing this one now? You always liked the bad boys.” He gave her a casual cuff on the temple that made her whole head ring, and Nora knew then. How it would go, if George was stupid enough to leave Xavier alive.

He was.

“I know you got a safe,” he said, after Xavier had been roughly disarmed of his .22. “It’s upstairs, I hear you got at least fifteen thousand in there—look, shut that fucking dog up, or I shoot it.”

“Nora.” Xavier spoke softly under Duke’s barking. “Take Duke to the basement and—”

“No. Your bitch stays.”

Xavier exhaled. Nora had never seen him so still. He looked like a waxwork, hands taut and open-fingered at his sides. “Louise,” he said even more softly, looking at his housekeeper, who stood against the wall with blood on her temple and tears running down her brown cheeks. “Please take Duke to the basement and lock him in.”

Lock yourself in with him, Nora thought in a silent shout. George didn’t like Negroes; he thought they were taking jobs away from hardworking Irishmen everywhere. Louise took Duke by the collar, the big dog whining and barking, and led him off to the basement. She must have thought the same thing Nora did, because she hurried in after him and shot the bolt from the other side before any of the men could move. George’s revolver twitched, and Nora felt it in her whole body like a scream. How well she remembered watching for that twitch of his, afraid he’d *snap*—

“George,” Xavier began, but the revolver snapped back.

“Shut up. Walk upstairs to that safe I know you got in your bedroom, and open it up. You get to pay me back for costing me a job and a finger. You pay me today, or else I’ll blow your fucking brains out.”

“Go ahead,” Xavier said calmly.

Wrong answer, Nora thought.

George shrugged, swinging the revolver toward Nora. “So I blow her brains out. Your call.”

Xavier made a tiny movement forward, making all three intruders tense. “Tie the bitch up,” George ordered one of his friends. “Stay down here with her, while Mr. Boss Man and the rest of us go upstairs.”

Nora barely felt her hands being roughly tied behind her back with a dish towel. She just looked at Xavier, even as they stuffed a rag in her mouth, and thought at him as hard as she could: *Don’t*.

She didn’t think she was the only one who felt some unimaginable pressure in the room ease, as though a volcano ready to erupt had just rumbled and vented a plume of smoke. He gave a tiny nod and let himself be shoved upstairs.

It seemed to go on forever: the footsteps in the bedroom above; the sound of George’s hectoring voice. The man George had left to stay with Nora didn’t even look at her; he wandered through the room looking for

valuables, shrugged in disappointment, and opened the icebox instead. “You got any Coca-Cola?” he asked her, seemingly not remembering she had a rag in her mouth. Nora just stared at him.

Upstairs, George laughed. He was high; Nora could tell just from the note in his laughter. High enough to let a grudge get the better of him; let a spectacularly bad idea like this—like *robbing a Warring in his own home*—seem like an entirely plausible course of action. He said something else inaudible, taunting. Xavier must have answered sharply, because he came back downstairs with his nose and temple bleeding freely. George was crowing, admiring the six-carat diamond ring now sitting on his own little finger, and his friend had a bulging knapsack. “Put that down,” George snapped to the man with Nora, who obediently parked his Coca-Cola bottle on the counter. “Tie up Mr. Boss Man here too.”

Xavier made no protest at having his arms roped. He was back to being a waxwork. Nora felt herself shivering.

George came over, pulled the rag out of her mouth, kissed her. She smelled Brylcreem, whiskey, something sharp from whatever had his pupils so dilated. She kept her lips sealed in a line. *Put that tongue in my mouth, I’ll bite it off.* But he just pulled back, gave her cheek a pat with his revolver’s barrel. “I’d take you with me if I could, Nora girl,” he said, yanking the string of pearls off her neck with a snap and slipping them into his pocket. “Best lay I ever had.”

He went out chuckling, and his friends with him, someone saying “That finishes that.” And Nora thought, *Oh, you idiots, it’s just the beginning.*

It felt like their first night in her Briarwood House apartment: the two of them on opposite sides of the room, the air sparking. Louise had gone—as soon as Xavier got himself out of his bonds, unroped Nora, absorbed her silent headshake to his sharp “You hurt?” he called his housekeeper and his dog out of the basement, rubbed Louise’s back awhile as she cried, rummaged among the spice jars for a roll of cash, and pressed it into her hand. “Go get that cut on your head looked at,” he told her. “Then head home, take the week off. The cops come, you don’t know anything.” He’d walked Louise out and hailed her a cab, handing her into it like she was made of porcelain and handing another wad of cash to the cabbie. “Take her to the nearest hospital that will see Negroes, wait till she’s done, and then you take her home, understand? However long it takes, you wait.” When he

came back inside he bent over and took Duke's big head between his hands, burying his face for a moment in the dog's shining neck.

When he straightened, the look in his eyes made Nora's entire spine shrink. He didn't say anything. Just wrapped a handful of ice in the dish towel that had bound his hands and gently held it to the swelling on Nora's temple.

"I'll do that." She took the ice pack. "Get one for you."

He ignored the blood at his nose, going to the side table and pouring two big tumblers of whiskey. Pushing one in front of Nora, he sat at the barstool with the same slow control, and Nora once again had the impression of a dormant volcano venting pitch-black smoke.

"Those men with George," she asked. "Who were they?"

"Out-of-town muscle, probably. They're nothing."

"How much did you lose? From the safe—"

"About twenty-five."

"Dollars?"

"Thousand."

"Sweet Jesus," Nora said faintly. Under the counter, Duke whined and pressed against their legs.

"It doesn't matter."

"Twenty-five thousand doesn't *matter*?"

"It's not all I've got. And money's recoverable." Xavier bolted half his whiskey in one swallow. "I need to know something, Nora. Did George Harding hurt you before today?"

"You want to know if what he said was true." Nora's lips felt numb. "If I screwed him."

"I don't care about that. I had women before you; it doesn't matter to me if there were men for you before me. I know who you are, what you are—"

"Class top to bottom?" Nora's voice was bitter.

"That's right." Xavier's gaze was unblinking. "I don't care if he slept with you. I need to know if he hurt you."

Nora exhaled, feeling the bump on her head throb. He waited. He'd wait forever, she knew. And if she wouldn't tell him, he could find out. It wouldn't even be that difficult—it had been in the goddamn *papers*.

"I was eighteen, just out of high school." She fortified herself with a sip of whiskey that burned all the way down. "Trying to find a job, trying to dodge my mother setting me up with all those nice young police sergeants

my brother kept bringing home. Me knowing I'd rather die than be a cop's wife, so what do I go and do but run straight for a bad boy. George 'Mad Dog' Harding, how do you like that name, a cliché right out of one of Pete's Mickey Spillane books. George, new in town with his sharp suits and his emerald cuff links, turned up at Dailey's one day when I was dragging my brother out of a card game. I dated George for six weeks, and I liked every bit of it. I liked him taking me out on the town, I liked rolling in the back seat of his convertible, and, oh, did I like how mad my mother was." Nora took the ice pack away, not looking at Xavier. "Stupid girl. Not as stupid as I might have been, though. George slapped me just once, after a big loss at the track, and that was enough for me. I told him never to call me again."

"And?"

"George doesn't like hearing the word *no*." She felt her mouth twist. "The day I came home from my interview at the National Archives, walking on air because they said they'd start me in the file room, George pulled up in that convertible and dragged me into it. For the next three hours he drove me all over the capital, drunk, rambling about how he was going to marry me, and smacking me in the forehead with his gun butt whenever I argued." Nora bolted the rest of the whiskey. "I was dizzy enough at the end, he dropped me off at the hospital. Such a gentleman. They admitted me with a concussion, and he came back that night with candy and roses. I woke up to find him holding my hand . . ."

Breathe. Breathe. Xavier didn't seem to be breathing at all.

"I pulled away shouting that I was going to press charges against him. The noise brought the nurses in, and he ran. Couldn't run from the charges, though. The newspapers even reported it: 'Caveman Wooing Tactics Lead to Indictment.' He ended up getting a stretch for assault and carrying an unlicensed weapon." Finally, she made herself look up at Xavier. "I didn't even know he'd been released until I saw you throwing him out of the Amber Club."

Xavier sat statue-still, big rough hands laced around his tumbler. She remembered him saying before that if he ever really got angry, she wouldn't have to guess it—she could feel his anger now, filling the room in slow, icy rolls, making the air thick. "That all of it?" he asked at last, neutrally.

"That's it," Nora lied, looking him right in the eye.

Xavier moved closer, cradling her head in his hands. He kissed the bruise on her temple and then he kissed her mouth, and Nora trembled because it

felt like something was being set in motion. A boulder tipping over the verge of a cliff and hovering before a long fall; a mountain rolling its shoulders.

“You should go home,” he said, pulling back, hand still cupping the back of her neck. “Call in sick from the Archives tomorrow; take some time to rest. You need a doctor, have him bill me. Cops come around, you don’t know anything.”

“Just like Louise?” Nora rose, Duke pressing against her legs. “Xavier —”

“I won’t see you for a while,” he broke in. “I’ll keep you clear of it. You’ll hear from me.” And she was being walked out the door of this house where she had her own key and her own drawers for her nightgown and makeup, Xavier’s fingertips at the small of her back light as butterflies, his steady breath stirring her hair like a wind made of pure rage. Just an ordinary winter day in an ordinary Washington neighborhood, but the air in the hall crackled and Nora smelled blood.

She turned in the doorway, wrapped her arms around him, spoke directly into his ear. “The bed on New Year’s Day,” she said. “Bagels and lox and champagne, Duke snoring on our feet. Don’t throw that away. Don’t do this.”

He didn’t say anything; just hailed a cab and then held her till it was time to put her in it. His breathing was very even. He was, Nora thought, already gone.

The delivery came to Nora three weeks later: January 31, 1951, the day the headlines were full of the news that the Rosenbergs had been indicted. A slim fellow in a sharp suit was waiting outside the steps of the National Archives on her lunch break, a fellow she was pretty sure she’d seen calling Xavier “Boss” inside the Amber Club. “Miss Walsh,” he said, passing over what appeared to be a handful of wadded-up newspaper.

She smoothed out the wad and found herself looking at the *Evening Star*, page 1, headline so fresh it had to have just been printed: “George ‘Mad Dog’ Harding Slain in Gun Attack at After-Hours Club.” Nora’s vision tilted as she saw the page had been wrapped around a very familiar six-carat diamond ring. A scrawl of pencil ran along the margin of the screaming headline.

I kept you out of it.

Marry me when I get clear of this?

Nora raised her eyes to the man who'd made the delivery.

"Mr. Byrne passed the package to his lawyer for you," the man said.
"He'll be charged with first-degree murder."

"Are you following the trial?"

Nora started violently at her desk. "What?"

"The Rosenberg trial!" said a dizzy brunette from the National Archives steno pool. "Did you hear Julius Rosenberg will be testifying in his own defense? I can't *wait*—"

"That trial," Nora said, forcing her fingers to relax around the file she had fetched for Mr. Harris. "No, I hadn't heard." Being a bit too preoccupied with another trial that was set to begin at the end of March.

I won't go, Nora promised herself. But she'd absorbed details about it anyway: that Xavier had pleaded not guilty, that the Warring clan had hired Charlie Ford to head his defense, and that the saying in Foggy Bottom went *If Ford's your lawyer it's 3-1 you're guilty and 6-5 you'll be acquitted*. Nora had spend long, tossing nights wondering if 6-5 odds were good enough when the penalty was the electric chair. And wondering if she had the right to hope a man would be acquitted when he was guilty as sin.

But she pushed that aside, heading to her boss's office. "The report you wanted on the effects of helium on parchment in preservation cases, Mr. Harris. And though there hasn't been any official word from the Library of Congress as regards the transfer of the Declaration—"

"That can wait, Miss Walsh." Her normally cheerful boss looked suddenly serious, almost stern. "Please close the door and take a seat."

It was a very brief exchange. Four minutes at most. Nora walked out mechanically, not really feeling her feet underneath her. She aligned a pencil on her desk and pretended to transcribe a stack of shorthand, but her fingers kept fumbling. "Are you all right, Nora?" asked Mrs. Halliwell, who had opposed Nora's promotion, and who had an avid gleam in her eye now. As if she knew that no, Nora wasn't all right, and exactly why. Ordinarily Nora would have chirped *Ah, you know everything's right as rain, Mrs. H!*, but today it was all she could do to keep the tears out of her eyes. She could not manage to *chirp*.

“Nora, hallo!” bubbled Fliss, knocking on Nora’s door that evening. Did all Englishwomen *bubble* like her? “It’s Thursday—surely you heard us all trooping up the stairs? Grace made stroganoff and we’re all working on the wall vine; Pete brought the ladder up so we can take it up across that slanted bit toward the ceiling. Lina’s bringing brownies—”

Fliss rattled on, dimples gleaming, hair gleaming, even the baby on her hip gleaming. Across the landing behind her was the usual spill of music and laughter from the half-open door of Grace’s room. Nora pulled her threadbare robe closer around herself, feeling dreary, drab, dour, and worthless. “I’m not coming to dinner tonight,” she managed to say, starting to close the door.

“Oh, you poor love, are you sick? Shall I bring you a plate? I brought a shepherd’s pie—”

“No, thank you. I don’t want to trouble you.” Still trying to close the door.

“It’s no trouble! Let me just cut you a piece—”

Nora heard herself shouting, “I don’t want any goddamn *pie*, Fliss, go away!”

Fliss’s smile blinked for a moment like a light bulb flickering, then winked back on. “I’ll just wrap something up for later,” she said, as Nora slammed the door.

She wasn’t sure how much later it was when Grace’s voice floated in from the landing. “They’ve all gone,” she called. “Care for some sun tea? It’s about half gin.”

Nora found herself opening up, less for the gin than for the smile in her neighbor’s voice. Grace stood in her old robe with the faded Chinese dragons; it was too light for this chilly March night, but she never seemed to feel the cold. “Come on, you,” she said, offering the glass. “Add a flower to my much-extended wall vine, and I’ll tell you all the gossip you missed tonight.”

“I hurt Fliss’s feelings, didn’t I?” Nora said resignedly, trailing across the landing.

“Mmm, hard to tell with the English. The outward shellac of good manners runs a mile deep. More like two miles on that one.” Grace closed the door behind them both, her tiny room in its usual state of confusion after a Thursday night supper: glasses scattered about, cigarette butts in an old saucer for an ashtray. “Actually, the gossip tonight was all about you.”

Nora tensed.

"It was really very kind of you not to come, because poor Arlene could finally drop the subject of her latest diet regime and talk about your ring. It's nearly killed her, having to be in the same room with a diamond that size and not talk about it. Especially since her Harland, whoever he is, hasn't given her one yet."

Self-consciously, Nora turned the diamond around to the inside the way Xavier usually wore it. "I'm not engaged. I just—he's not around for me to give it back, and I can't just leave it lying about."

"A rock like that? Certainly not." Grace gave her sleepy-looking smile. "You don't have to wear it on that particular finger, though."

Nora was silent.

"Did I tell you I have a new man in my life?" Grace turned to the window, raising the sash. "He's a bit of a loner, but he should be in the mood to drop by now . . . Yes, here he is."

A bony ginger cat came winding along the ledge outside and through the window, flowing down to the floor in one practiced jump. "Doilies Nilsson will skin you," Nora warned. "No pets allowed."

"But this house needs a pet. All houses do, if they're to become real homes." Grace stooped to stroke the cat, who was winding around her ankles with a rusty *mrow*. "To hell with Doilies. What she doesn't know won't hurt her."

"Is that your motto for life?"

"It's worked so far." Grace poured out a saucer of milk for the cat, who lapped it up briskly and then sashayed back out the window without a backward glance. "I do like a man who lets himself out without leaving a mess behind," Grace mused. "Rare in the male sex. I thought I'd call him Red, what do you think?"

Nora sat down rather suddenly on the edge of Grace's narrow bed. "I'm eating my heart out over a gangster, and I have no idea how to stop."

Grace took the glass out of Nora's hand, refilled it from the jug in the icebox, tipped in another slug of gin, and brought it back. "Ah," she said, curling up in her worn armchair rather like her cat.

"You don't exactly look surprised. Does everyone know?" Nora couldn't help saying. "Fliss? Mrs. Nilsson?"

"No . . . I put one or two things together. That lovely wrap you picked up, and all those overnight visits to family. And Pete said something about the

gentleman who came into Moonlight Magnolias to pick your flowers. ‘*He’s got a cruel cliff of a brow*’ was how Pete put it, sounding a bit wistful. He still has a crush on you, of course.”

“He won’t for long, once he knows. My *boss* knows,” Nora burst out. “He called me into his office today . . . I don’t know how he found out, Xavier kept my name out of anything in the papers, but Mr. Harris knew. Government men, they all talk. He’d had a word from a lawyer or someone in the police. He *knew*.”

Grace’s voice was quiet. “Have you been fired?”

“I will be,” Nora said raggedly, “if I cause any embarrassment to the National Archives.”

“Goodness, can they do that?”

“Of course they can. Even though my work and my conduct have never been anything but exemplary. Even though it’s none of their business who I see in my private life. Even though they’d never dream of asking a man who he dates on his own time.” Fury smoldered in the pit of her stomach, remembering Mr. Harris’s censorious face as he delivered his lecture. Her *potential*; her *responsibilities* to the Archives. How badly she’d wanted to stand up and tell him she wasn’t some wayward teenage daughter who needed to be slapped on the wrist and sent to her room, that she was a grown woman and he could take his lecture and shove it.

But the job. The job she’d worked so hard to get—the job that was levering her slowly but surely out of Foggy Bottom.

“I could lose it all,” she said, voice so low she could barely hear herself. “Because, yes, it will be seen as *embarrassing* if the personal secretary of the executive officer of the National Archives continues a known relationship with a man on trial for first-degree murder.”

And when you said it like that, Mr. Harris’s lecture sounded entirely warranted, didn’t it? The facts were so stark, when they weren’t muddled up with the way Xavier could melt her heart hunkering down to wrestle with Duke—the way he listened when she talked, as if memorizing every word—the way he took her to pieces just slowly running a thumbnail up her spine. None of that mattered. He was a man on trial for murder, and she was wearing his diamond on her left hand, and she didn’t know how she’d gotten in so deep.

“I was so careful,” she whispered into her glass of sun tea. “I got burned once—I said never again. And here I am, right in the middle of another

goddamn bonfire.”

“You must like the heat,” said Grace.

“I feel like I’m drugged,” Nora said. “He walks into the room, and it goes through my veins like smoke. Even though he’s a murderer.”

“Men commit murder for many reasons.” Grace’s scarlet-polished fingernails tapped her glass. “Did he at least have a good one?”

“Someone hurt me. But that excuses nothing. What *he* did, taking the law into his own hands, that hurts me too.”

“You’re a great believer in law.”

Nora thought of the Bill of Rights, which she saw in its case every day. “The law is not perfect, but it is perfectible. Scorn that and we’re spitting on our foundations.”

“Don’t be pompous, Tipperary. You’re far too young.”

“All right, maybe that sounds pompous. But it’s still what I believe. Because if we don’t have the law, then all we have is might makes right. And then women *always* get hurt, instead of just *often*,” she finished bitterly.

“So—your gangster is sometimes a violent man. But is he a bad one? A weak one?”

“No,” Nora stated. “If he was, I could walk away without a backward glance.” The way she had from George. Who was now dead, and she couldn’t manage to be sorry. Only about how it had happened. She squeezed her eyes shut before they spilled over. “You don’t have to pretend you aren’t disgusted with me,” she managed to say. “I’m disgusted with myself.”

“I’d be more inclined to disgust if you were head over heels for a *weak* man,” Grace said. “Men of violence, well, they have their uses. Nations tend to begin with violent men.”

“They do not—”

“Yes, they do,” Grace retorted. “Foundations of law like the ones you prize; who are they laid by? Men who aren’t afraid to bloody their knuckles or hurl tea in harbors. Now, this nation of ours decided to lay aside a violent beginning—in some ways, at least—and try to ground our future in something more rational . . . But that doesn’t mean violent men didn’t kick off the American experiment to begin with.”

Nora admitted she might have a point there. “Are you a history professor now?”

“Merely a woman who’s given a lot of thought to her origins. Both my own, and my nation’s, and violent men played a part in both. And I can tell you—” Grace ran a finger around her glass’s rim. “Violent men who are also smart and strong are not completely lost causes. They can learn different ways, if they choose. It’s the *weak* ones who cause the most damage. Nothing wreaks havoc like a weak man—because they never learn, so they just go blithely on, leaving pain and wreckage behind them.”

“My brother is like that.”

“Interesting.” Grace tilted her head, a handful of curls slipping down one shoulder. “You told me you were in love with a gangster before you told me you even had a brother.”

“Because I despise him,” Nora said quietly. “My brother and most of my family.”

“Why?”

She hadn’t told Xavier this part. Hadn’t dared. She didn’t know why she was telling Grace now. Maybe it was the gin in her sun tea, which was starting to build a glow in her stomach . . . but the words were coming out, halting, rusty. George Harding; the affair at eighteen. The *caveman wooing tactics* that landed her in the hospital ward. “There was worse waiting when I got home,” Nora said in a monotone. “My mother waiting for me, Timmy next to her. She wanted to know if George had knocked me up. I didn’t think so—I was stupid, getting involved with him, but not stupid enough to let him in without using, you know.” She wasn’t much of a good Irish girl anymore, but she still didn’t know how to get any of the words for *condom* out. Rubbers, raincoats, sheaths.

“Good for you,” said Grace.

“I told Mam I’d been careful, but she didn’t believe me. And she didn’t want to wait to see if I missed my monthly, because then morals came into it.” The knee-jerk recoil; mortal sin. “So her loophole was that we’d make sure now, before anything was certain—make sure I wasn’t pregnant, that I wouldn’t disgrace the family. And she parked a mug of some disgusting tea in front of me, and when I wouldn’t drink it, Timmy started shouting. Telling me our father was rolling in his grave, telling me I was a whore and a disgrace. I asked which was the bigger disgrace, being a whore or being a crooked cop who goes to whores behind his wife’s back, and when Mam started flying to his defense and saying I had no morals, I said at least I wasn’t preaching the sacredness of life while shoving miscarriage tea down

my daughter's throat. And that's when Mam said if I didn't drink that mug down she'd put me out of the house that night, and Timmy backed her up."

Grace was silent. Nora concentrated on breathing. In, out. In, out.

"I had nowhere to go," she said softly. "No money, no friends who would side with me over my family. So I drank it. I wasn't pregnant, I knew I wasn't, so it just made me horribly ill for a week. I spent that whole week planning how soon I could move out. Mam didn't understand when I came down with my suitcase a few months later, when I'd scraped up just enough from my National Archives salary to pay a month's advance rent on this room. She kept asking why I was making a fuss—hadn't she and Tim stood by me? I said I never wanted to speak to her again, but she still phones and lays on the guilt. And every month or so, Tim comes round and helps himself to my rent money when his wallet's light. That's fine in his eyes, and it's fine in Mam's, too, because 'girls help their brothers, *deirfiúr bheag*.'"

In, out. In, out.

"You know the funny thing?" Nora bolted the rest of her tea. "I could tell Xavier this, and he'd take care of it. He'd get my family out of my life in a heartbeat. He'd beat Tim to a pulp and threaten to send him to jail for corruption if he or Mam ever contacted me again." She finally let herself meet Grace's calm golden-brown gaze. "And Mother of God, but sometimes I've been tempted."

"You were betrayed by a weak man on the right side of the law, so you ran to a strong man on the wrong side of it." Grace tilted her head. "Why *not* let him take care of your brother for you? At least scare him off."

"Because a belief in the law shouldn't only be maintained when it's convenient." Nora leaned back, trailing a fingertip along the painted wall vine. "And because Xavier is like an atomic bomb—once he's set off, I have no idea what the damage might be. I need a scalpel here, not a bomb. I need to take out my own dirty laundry."

"Your dirty laundry is currently stealing your rent money," Grace pointed out.

And my lover might be going to the electric chair, Nora thought.

As if reading her mind, Grace said, "He might be acquitted. Get off scot-free."

Nora looked at the huge diamond on her finger. "But he's *guilty*, Grace."

"You still don't want him dead."

“No, I don’t want him dead. But I don’t know what *else* to want. I’m such a roil inside.” Nora looked at Grace, sitting there so calm. “I wish I was more like you,” she heard herself saying. “All self-contained and self-sufficient.”

“It took a good long while to get myself this way, Tipperary. I’ve done my share of roiling.” Grace drew up a knee, resting her elbow on it. “What will you do if he gets off?”

The question echoed inside Nora’s skull. “I don’t know.”

“When does he go on trial?”

“The end of March.”

“Well,” Grace said, rising. “You’re hardly a ditherer, Nora Walsh. I strongly suggest you have a decision by the time the jury comes out with theirs.”

Nora set her empty glass aside, unable to help wondering aloud, “Why doesn’t any of this shock you, Grace? Does *nothing* shock you?”

“Very little.” Grace smiled over her shoulder, a tilted smile. “In the days when I wasn’t quite so self-contained and self-sufficient, I, too, mixed with my share of weak men—and violent ones.”

Nora felt sorry for the Rosenbergs, truly she did. Even if they were guilty, no one could see their pinched, frightened faces in the newspapers and not feel a certain swell of pity. But at the same time, she was grateful the trial consumed every paper in the District, day after day. Because on the day the jury returned a verdict of guilty against the Rosenbergs, eight men and four women were filing into a different courtroom to hear the charges against Xavier Warring Byrne . . . And no one, thank god, was paying attention.

I won’t go to the trial, Nora had promised herself, and that held the first seven days. It wasn’t page one news; that was all saved for speculation about what sentence the judge would levy on the Rosenbergs, but back pages of the *Evening Star* and the *Washington Post* held enough updates to get a picture of the trial’s progress. “Jury Told Shot Killed Harding at Point Blank.” And “‘I had to do it,’ Byrne says; Threat Made by Harding Told by Waitress.” And finally “Byrne Murder Trial Expected to Continue Through Next Week.”

I won’t go, Nora chanted—but the morning after she read “Byrne to Testify in His Own Defense,” she found herself claiming gastric flu at the

National Archives, looking pale and sick enough that even Mrs. Halliwell didn't look skeptical, and making her way to the courthouse.

She was glad it was packed—it meant she could slip into the very back, in the shadow of a woman in an enormous hat. Around the brim she saw a phalanx of dark-suited men at the front, some familiar faces from the Amber Club . . . As for the two stone-faced men at the front, she had no trouble identifying Xavier's uncles.

The judge, bald, fierce as a bantam; the jury, twelve faceless sketches in their box—everything was a blur until Xavier took the stand. And Nora had to lower her face swiftly and gulp down the visceral tug in her gut that the sight of him still yanked out of her.

He was taking the oath; he was swearing to tell the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth, so help him God. *You liar*, she thought. He looked leaner, inscrutable, no hint of a smile in the corner of his mouth. He took his seat in his blue suit, leaning back, at ease.

"The jury has already heard that George Harding followed you upstairs to the second floor at one fifty in the morning of the day in question," Xavier's lawyer began at last, looking avuncular. "Can you tell us why you went upstairs?"

"I'd seen George Harding walk into the club, and I'd heard he was looking to kill me." Xavier spoke with perfect ease, laying it all out one question at a time. No mention of the robbery on Macomb Street; all that had been swept under the rug. Just a man acting in self-defense, pulling a gun when an ex-employee with a grudge drew on him first.

"How many times did you pull the trigger?" the lawyer asked.

"Three."

"Why three?"

"In the Marine Corps, we're taught to aim for the center and shoot till the target's down."

Xavier sounded like he was asking for a bacon and tomato sandwich at the Crispy Biscuit. Calm as ice water. No one on that jury would ever believe a man like this could throw a tennis ball endlessly for his dog, or read the morning paper with his girlfriend's head in his lap, absently playing with a lock of her hair . . .

There was a break before cross-examination, and the matron next to Nora looked indignant. "They'd better not come after him too hard. Mr. Byrne is

somebody down in Foggy Bottom, you know! Wouldn't be the same without him and that dog around, keeping an eye."

"Isn't he—" Nora nodded toward the block of Warring men at the front. "You know."

"Maybe, but he's done more for the neighborhood than any of those prosecutors and judges." The woman sniffed. "I'm not saying it's right, breaking the law, but some of those that do are better men than those frauds in double-breasted suits who don't drink, don't smoke, don't gamble, but wouldn't give you a dime out of their pocket or a minute of their time. Just because a man ain't lawful don't mean he can't be good. *And vice versa.*"

Nora thought fleetingly of Timmy in his police blues, rummaging wrist-deep in her pocketbook.

Cross-examination. The questions fired like bullets. Wasn't it true Mr. Byrne had carried a pistol long before the night in question? "Yes. But I never had any intention of shooting George Harding."

"Yet you did shoot him, didn't you?" the prosecutor barked.

"Yes." There was the smile, the knife edge of it at the corner of his mouth, there and gone so fast you'd have to know him very well to see it. Nora saw it. "I did."

And the next day—the day when all the headlines blared "Rosenbergs Sentenced to Death; Julius & Ethel Face the Electric Chair"—Nora found the page four headline that stated "Jury Acquits Byrne of Murder; Convicts on Secondary Charge."

Nora's Colcannon

6 russet potatoes, cut into 1-inch pieces

6 tablespoons unsalted butter, plus more for serving

1 cup heavy cream

$\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ cup cooked and chopped thick-cut bacon (optional)

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

3 cups chopped cooked kale

3 green onions, minced

1. Place the potato pieces into a large mixing bowl, cover them with water, and let them sit for at least 1 hour to remove starch. This will enhance the texture.
2. Fill a large cooking pot (at least 8 quarts) with water and bring to a boil. Add the potatoes and boil for about 15 minutes. Once the pieces can be easily pierced with a fork, remove the pot from the heat. Let sit for 2 minutes, then drain. Return the potatoes to the pot.
3. Add 3 to 4 tablespoons of the butter and a splash of cream. Mash potatoes with a masher or mixer, slowly adding the remaining butter and cream until the desired consistency is reached. Add bacon, if using, reserving some for garnish, then season with salt and pepper to taste.
4. Add the kale and half of the green onions. Whip hard with a wooden spoon, incorporating as much air as possible into the mixture.
5. Transfer the mixture to a serving dish and make an indentation in the center. Top with 1 to 2 knobs of butter, the remaining green onions, and the reserved bacon, if using.
6. Enjoy alone on a bad day, with nips of Jameson, while listening to “If” by Perry Como.

St. Patrick’s Day was the biggest holiday in the Walsh family. This year it was celebrated late: chicken pox had swept from Tim’s children through all the cousins, so the huge family lunch, the keg of green beer, the party streamers and shamrocks were postponed until everyone stopped scabbing and scratching. Two days after Xavier was sentenced to a year in prison for carrying a deadly weapon, Nora set off for her family home with a big pot of colcannon.

She’d pondered wearing Xavier’s chinchilla wrap and the reddest lipstick she could find—look like a moll, since her family had undoubtedly Heard Things. In the end she shrugged into her old green-sprigged dress and saddle shoes, looking like her mother’s daughter—like Timmy’s *deirfiúr bheag*.

“Nora!” Tim’s wife, Siobhan, greeted her at the door. “I haven’t seen you in an age. Take the baby, won’t you?”

“Sorry,” Nora said, juggling the pot. “Hands full!” She slipped through the mix of aunts and uncles, cousins and cousins and more cousins, back to the table already groaning with food. Except for the sheer number of police badges, it looked very much like a Warring family lunch.

Nora got herself a glass of the green beer her brother had brought in from Dailey’s and found a corner to sit, legs crossed. Normally a Walsh daughter would be expected to make the rounds on St. Patrick’s Day: pay tribute to all the relations and let them ask her why she wasn’t married yet; play with any babies anyone thrust her way; ferry whatever dirty dishes any male Walsh handed her to the kitchen. Nora sat back in her corner this time like Xavier, sipping her beer, returning the various curious gazes with his cool, slow-lidded blink, watching the eyes flit away. Like Xavier, she was waiting for her target to come to her.

“Nora, darlin’, you’re finally back!” Tim came at her with open arms, a whiskey flush already on his cheeks. He looked so delighted to see her. He always did. Nora wondered if he really didn’t remember the names he’d called her. *Slut, whore, tramp*. If she brought it up, he’d probably look wounded and say something like *Water under the bridge, right?*

Tim gave her the family gossip, and she nodded and smiled, waiting until he started dropping hints about when she’d move home, give Siobhan a hand with the kids—only until Nora married, of course. “I don’t suppose you’ve got a proper lad to bring round to Sunday lunch, do you?” Tim asked finally. “Because we’ve heard things . . .”

“Nothing to hear, Tim,” Nora said. She’d said the same thing yesterday to Mr. Harris, telling him there was nothing and no one in her acquaintanceship that would bring embarrassment to the National Archives. Said it with a hint of frost so he flushed. So he’d think twice about poking in a subordinate’s personal affairs again.

“Look, Nora—” Tim looked down into his green beer. “Since you’re here . . .”

Nora looked up at the stairs, twined with green crepe paper and cutout shamrocks. “Kids did a grand job decorating this year.”

“They did, didn’t they? Look, spot me a bit till my next payday? They passed the hat at the precinct for a pal laid up with a broken leg; can’t stint at times like that—”

“Or when it comes time to lay five-to-one on a horse still running backward somewhere at Pimlico?” Nora set down her beer.

Tim grinned that charming lopsided grin. “Never could fool you, *deirfiúr bheag*. Come on with you, just a few dollars, a fiver if you’ve got it . . .”

Nora waited until he reached into the handbag she’d left open on her lap. Then she snapped the metal clasp shut on his fingertips, hard.

“Ouch—” He yanked back with a surprised *huff*. “Come on, Nora—”

“Shut up. You’re going to listen for once, Timmy. I’m never giving you another dime, hear me? You will never show up outside the National Archives again, or Briarwood House. If you do, I won’t hesitate to make a fuss.” There were worse things, Nora had learned, than a public fuss. “You will never steal from me again. Or sweet Jesus help me, you will rue the fucking *day*.”

Her language clearly shocked him more than anything else. “What’s gotten into you?”

Nora smiled Xavier’s smile, like the gleam off a knife’s edge in winter. “Say it. Say you’ll leave me alone. Or—”

“Or what? That mobster in your pocket will—”

“I don’t have a mobster in my pocket, Tim. Be afraid of *me*. Because I can get you kicked off the force all on my own. All the things you’ve done, the payoffs and the kickbacks? You try to stick your hand in my pocket again, I’ll hang your dirty laundry out for the *world* to see.” Threats like this wouldn’t have worked on George Harding, who would have promptly backhanded Nora across the room, and they wouldn’t have worked on a great many of the other Walsh men, either—the ones who didn’t mind taking a hand to their wives and a belt to their kids.

But threats would work on Tim. Because he was weak, and Nora had learned something about weak men—weak men, and how to be terrifying.

“Jesus, Nora.” He looked so hurt, his eyes full of *how could you?* “I’m family. Doesn’t that—”

“Mean anything?” Nora rose, feeling a little lightheaded. “It means absolutely nothing, Timmy. You made sure of that.” She slid her handbag over one arm and headed for the door without a backward glance. She could feel him staring after her.

“Going so soon, Nora?” Mam cornered her by the groaning kitchen table, looking flushed and reproachful. “I was counting on you to help me get the roast out, and then sit down with your cousin Deirdre’s new baby. Speaking

of babies, Timmy Junior is bursting out of his clothes again, and your brother could use just a little bit extra for—”

Nora smiled Xavier’s smile at her mother, watched it hit, and lowered her voice. “Mam, get off my back. Stop telephoning, stop nagging, stop *all* of it. And if you or Timmy ever try to help yourself to my rent money again, I will report him to the *Washington Post* for being on the Warring family payroll.”

She stepped past the table, but not so fast she didn’t see her mother’s face drain. “You don’t have any proof,” Mam hissed, hand shooting out to catch Nora’s elbow. Not shocked that Tim took payoffs; everyone did that. Just shocked it might come out. “You don’t have anything!”

Nora looked her in the eye. She couldn’t lie to Xavier, any more than he could to her, but she had no problem lying to her flesh and blood. And Tim might forget what she’d said today, but Mam never forgot anything. “I do have proof, Mam. And I don’t care if he goes to jail. So keep out of my life.”

Nora took her seat at the visiting-room table, folding her hands precisely before her. She’d jumped through all the hoops, heard all the rules from the guards outside. Xavier’s eyes drank her in from French twist to French slingbacks, lingering on the diamond on her finger. He smiled, then pointed silently at the ceiling. She nodded. Foolish to assume no one would be listening. “I assume one of your uncles set up the private visit,” she said. “The one who drove me here?”

Xavier nodded. He looked just as relaxed in prison garb as he had in one of his expensive three-piece suits. “What did you think of him?”

Short, lean, brisk, hard as granite, asking her no questions on the brief drive. The uncle Xavier described as the brains of the family, the one who ran everything. “I think he’s a tolerable preview of you in a few years.” Low-voiced, considerate, loyal. At least one prison term behind him. No softness at all. The man who ran the District, or at least the shadowed parts. “He told me you’ll serve your whole sentence here,” Nora said, managing to clear her throat. “A year seems like a lot just for carrying a deadly weapon.”

“Judge made sure I got the maximum.” Her lover didn’t sound angry or resentful. *He’s the kind that can really do time*, Xavier’s uncle had said on

the drive, approvingly. *It won't make a dent in him.* Nora didn't imagine it would.

"The Rosenbergs will get the electric chair," she said. "I'm . . . glad you're not."

"You came to hear me testify."

"You saw me?"

"Always." Xavier hesitated. "I'm sorry you had to hear it."

"Hear you lie?"

"I don't lie. Not to you." His face was impassive. "I said I had no intention of shooting George Harding, and I didn't."

You just put out the word he was a dead man so he'd make a run at you, Nora thought, looking her lover right in the eye. *You didn't have to intend anything. Just arrange things so you could shoot him in self-defense.*

That's right, Xavier's eyes said back. But he changed the subject. "I'll be home in a year. Maybe less, with good behavior. I arranged for Duke to stay with my sister, but she's not so fond of dogs. I'd rather leave him with you."

"Mrs. Nilsson doesn't allow pets."

"She will if I send her a wad of cash. But he's a lot of dog for that little room of yours." Xavier paused. "You could stay in my house on Macomb Street. The bills are paid, Louise would keep house for you. My family, they'll check in—"

"Xavier—"

"—and in a year I'd be back." He reached across the table, touched her ring finger. The lightest touch. "Then we'd make it official."

"And you'd go back to the Amber Club."

"It's where I work. I'm a businessman."

Nora tilted her head. "And if—*this*—comes up again, something like this? Would you do it again?"

No answer.

"You're not just a businessman, Xavier." She took the big round diamond off her finger, laid it down on the table. "I love you. But I wouldn't ever lie on the stand for you. I don't have it in me. And can you tell me it would never come up, while you're in this business?"

He was silent.

"I appreciate your honesty." She slipped the ring into her pocket to give to his uncle, rose, headed toward the door.

"Nora."

She turned back. Dark eyes in battered sockets, still making her spine prickle. Still the hook in her gut. She didn't think it would go away, ever. She still felt him filling her veins like a drug.

"I'm out in a year," he said. "Let me try to change your mind then."

"Our first night, you said you'd go the moment I told you to go. And you said you had a thing for lost causes." Nora opened the door, spoke over her shoulder. She had to gulp the words, but they came out steady. "I'm no one's lost cause. And I'm telling you to go."

"Mrs. Muller," Nora said when she got back to Briarwood House, nearly bumping into the old woman in the hall. "Will we be seeing you at Grace's on Thursday? Maybe you'll add a flower to the wall vine—"

"No," Reka Muller said, speaking English for the first time in Nora's recollection. "No, absolutely not, never."

"Well. All right," Nora said, startled, and headed up, planning a solitary dinner of leftover buttery mashed potatoes and green ribbons of kale eaten straight out of the pot. Solitary, but not lonely. She was Miss Walsh of the National Archives, possibly the future chief of Building and Grounds, first woman ever promoted to such a position. She was going to watch someday soon as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were brought into the Rotunda: six pages of parchment encased in helium-filled glass cases, escorted from the Library of Congress by the Army Band, the Air Force Drum and Bugle Corps, an armored Marine Corps personnel carrier, down Pennsylvania and Constitution. She'd end up exchanging a look of complicit, dizzy delight with a young Negro servicewoman in proud dress uniform who'd been part of the escort cordon on the library steps; she'd listen to President Truman speak as the documents were enshrined; she'd wait until the Rotunda was empty and she could look at the glass cases by herself, gazing at her foundations. Everyone else's foundations, too, but also just hers. Stroll out of the Rotunda, nailing a smile over that tug in her gut, the beguiling smoke in her veins.

Miss Walsh. Heartsick—but her own woman.

Interstitial

*Thanksgiving 1954
Washington, D.C.*

Briarwood House is getting impatient. The body has been removed from Grace's apartment and transported to the morgue; the police have tramped around taking pictures of everything; the witnesses have been rounded up in the kitchen—when on earth are things going to get interesting? This has not been at all like *Dragnet*, the house thinks disapprovingly. Sergeant Joe Friday would have had a theory by now, would have said, “Just the facts” at least once. (The house has become addicted to *Dragnet* since Pete started tuning in on Grace's set last year.) But this balding detective and his partner are clearly no Joe Friday and Officer Smith.

Maybe that's all to the good, the house thinks. There's a lot at stake tonight, after all. It's not just about who gets hauled off in handcuffs. It's much, much more.

“I'm betting on the ex-con,” the detective is telling his partner, still eyeing Xavier Byrne where he leans against the kitchen sink, looking around him with perfect calm. He isn't calm, of course; the house knows this and throws a little cooling breeze through the stifling-hot kitchen in reassurance. Briarwood House hadn't gotten much in the way of vicarious passion till Xavier came along to knock Nora out of her Cuban heels—goodness, that first night up in 4A had gotten the house so steamed up, the boiler overheated for a week. “The rest of 'em are too scared to cross him,” the detective goes on. “That's why they're not talking.”

The house would roll its eyes if it had any. Joe Friday wouldn't be focusing on Nora's ex-lover or why he's here tonight or why he isn't as calm as he pretends to be. No, Joe Friday would be more interested in why the crowded group settled around the kitchen still looks so tense, and not because Xavier Byrne is in the room, either. Joe Friday would be asking why so many of the women in this room have dried blood droplets on them, as if they had ringside seats to the murder upstairs . . . and yet, not one of these same women is shrieking or pointing fingers.

"Okay, time to split 'em up," the detective is finally saying. "Get some answers, get 'em talking." He moves into the kitchen, at once the object of all eyes, and just to be spiteful the house rucks the edge of the carpet so he trips. "All right now, folks—"

Grace's ginger cat is hiding under the kitchen table, ears flattened. The house gives a noncorporeal stroke down the cat's spine. Grace had been right when she said this place needed a pet. The padding of a cat's paws on kitchen tile, the thump of a dog's tail against a banister: that's another of those things, like the smell of a good meal in the oven, that really *makes* a house. Makes it more than just a set of foundations and walls. The house whispers a suggestion to the cat, and cats aren't always accommodating (not being impressed by plaster and chimney bricks, or in fact much of anything), but Grace's Red gives a yawn and strolls out from under the table as the detective drones overhead. Winds out of the kitchen, across the hallway, pads across Reka's cane where it had fallen in the struggle and now lay forgotten (poor Reka), and nudges open the door to the parlor . . .

Where a certain familiar smell immediately begins wafting.

The house sits back, pleased, as the nearest cop on duty pokes his head around the door and promptly turns white. Another set of tense glances ricochet bulletlike between the sixteen suspects in the kitchen. The detective breaks off in his lecture. "What's in that parlor?" he snaps.

The second body, thinks Briarwood House. And braces itself.

Three Years Earlier

October 1951

Chapter 3

Reka

Dear Kitty,

A year recovering from the late unpleasantness is long enough: I have a job! Shelving books at the Smoot Library down the street, alongside old Mrs. Muller. I thought I might get to know her better, but she ignores me except to call me a floozy in Hungarian when I shelved Karl Marx under Fairy Tales.

I wish you were here.

—Grace

It was a special kind of hell, Reka Muller often thought, to be as old as she was and have to live among all these young women. Old women were largely invisible in the wide world, and for the most part she didn't mind. If you were invisible, you were ignored, and that meant you could do whatever the hell you wanted. But young women *noticed you*. Often with a kind of superstitious, anticipatory distaste that made Reka want to cackle like iron-nosed *Vasorrú bába* and hiss dramatically *Beware! As I am, you will one day be*—yes, you, *Arlene Hupp*. You, too, *Nora Walsh*. Old, wrinkled, and creaky-kneed!

If it wasn't distaste, it was compassion: *Oh, the poor thing, why do you think she never smiles?* Fliss Orton, who lived in 2A across the hall from Reka, was especially prone to that kind of look; there was nothing for it but to be so unpleasant in response that compassion turned to dislike. It had taken a solid year to achieve dislike from Fliss. If people didn't like you, they left you alone.

But even though Reka disliked almost everybody, she couldn't quite dislike Grace March, who never looked pitying, never wrinkled her nose in distaste, and wasn't nosy. That is, she asked questions but wasn't put off if she didn't get answers. And Reka rarely answered anything.

"Going on a visit?" Grace asked as the two of them shelved books. Working as a page; that was all Reka was qualified for. *With no proper degree or anything, it's all I can offer you*, the librarian had said when she hired Reka five years ago. "I noticed you brought an overnight bag to work this morning," Grace went on. "And the clerk said you'd taken a half day today."

Reka grunted, standing on tiptoe to push a volume of Proust onto the top shelf. Proust, now there was a cream puff for you. Couldn't write without sitting in a cork-lined room to calm his fear of germs! Philosophers ought to toughen up, Reka thought, or their philosophy wasn't worth much. Life wasn't going to coddle most people in a cork-lined room while they worked out their demons.

"We'll miss you at the Briar Club tonight," Grace went on, reaching easily over Reka's head. "Arlene's hinting she'll bring that beau of hers. I believe he's a junior FBI agent . . ."

Chat, chat. Reka tuned it out, not bothering to listen, either, when the head librarian came over and began twittering about story hour. "If you can take it today, Grace? Reka can finish these books, can't you? Finish—up—books," the librarian repeated, miming. Five years Reka had worked here, and the woman still behaved as if Reka barely spoke the language. She had lived in this city over ten years, but she'd never lost her Berlin-Budapest clip no matter how hard she tried, and Americans made a lot of fuss about "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses," but most of them definitely preferred a certain kind of immigrant: the kind with no accent.

And gratitude. Plenty of gratitude.

"See you tomorrow," Grace said as they reached noon, with another of her easy smiles. "I hope!" Reka grunted, picking up her frayed bag and stumping off toward the door. Her heart was thumping in her chest, and she almost smiled. *Home*, she thought, *going home*—or at least the nearest thing she had to it, after leaving Berlin.

No one looked twice at Reka as she boarded the train. Just a woman in her seventies with a wrinkled nut-brown face, a knot of straggling iron-gray

hair, bent shoulders, and a little potbelly she couldn't get rid of even on the lean weeks when she was only eating once a day. An old woman with an ugly coat the color of a dirty sidewalk and a carpetbag sitting on her feet like a tired dog. Sometimes people dropped coins at Reka's feet, thinking she was a panhandler, and she could imagine Otto shaking his head disapprovingly when she picked them up. "What?" she asked him now in the warm, rattling Hungarian they'd always spoken at home. "A dime is nothing to sneeze at. That's a cup of soup at the Crispy Biscuit."

The woman across the train compartment eyed Reka warily over an armload of baby blankets, clearly thinking *Now the old foreign lump is talking to herself*. Reka bared her tea-stained teeth and said in Hungarian, "Say one word, and I'll eat your baby." The woman looked hurriedly away.

Just over three hours, riding from Washington to New York City. Reka got off at Penn Station, using her elbows. Normally she'd limp over to the flophouse hotel where she'd be renting a room for the night, but today she was too eager. She went straight to the ladies' washroom and lifted the one piece of finery she still owned out of her carpetbag: a jade-green velvet hat, a twist of a thing with a narrow swooping brim and a rhinestone clip. Otto had bought it in Vienna nearly thirty years ago; he said it set off her hair. Of course her hair had been russet back then, falling past her waist . . . Gently, Reka settled the hat over her gray bun, slanting the brim across one eye. It was a warm fall, too warm for her coat's detachable fox-fur collar, but she took that out of her bag and fastened it on anyway. It wasn't as lush as Nora Walsh's chinchilla stole (*How on earth had she gotten it?* Reka wondered—a priss like that wasn't letting a man into her *bugyi* for a fur stole, but what else got a man to shell out for chinchilla?), but the reddish fox fur still brought a glow to Reka's cheeks. It made her step out with something of her old swagger.

"Professor Muller," Leo Castelli said as Reka took a catalog at the door of the decrepit storefront on Sixtieth East and Ninth Street. "I knew we'd be seeing you."

"I hear you forked over seventy dollars to mount the showing here." Reka peered up at the crumbling flophouse that currently housed the most revolutionary art show in New York. "I'd say they overcharged you by sixty-five."

"So would I. And every single one of those lousy *bastardi* bitching about not getting the right lighting for his lousy painting. Why'd I get mixed up

with artists again?”

“Not for the money. Any sales?”

“A sniff or two around the Pollock.”

“Jackson’s been insufferable since that *LIFE* piece. ‘Is He the Greatest Living Painter in the United States—’”

“He certainly thinks so,” Leo said, letting her in. Reka took a deep breath and held it. The smell of a gallery: the fizz of old lighting fixtures, the tang of oil paint, canvas, turpentine, cheap wine. Fancier galleries smelled of expensive perfume and Cuban cigars and hundred-dollar bills, but Reka preferred impromptu galleries like this: derelict buildings a step from condemnation where the plaster dust had to be swept out every morning and the mice shooed out of the storerooms. Galleries like this didn’t smell like patrons; they just smelled like *art*.

Early evening in the middle of the week—she had the space almost to herself, bare unshaded light bulbs glowing harshly overhead. She wandered among the paintings in a hush, drinking them down. A Kline, *Study for Ninth Street*, bold black brushstrokes like a Japanese kanji. Just a modest thing on cardstock, but rumor was he was reproducing it in large on a big canvas. Kline’s stuff was all speed and spontaneity; even in oil he worked like he only had moments before it dried; Reka could see the dash and certainty of the brushstrokes . . . Jackson Pollock, of course; *The She-Wolf*, the wolf snarling across the canvas in heavy lines, overlaid in hieroglyphs. Oil, gouache, and plaster. Reka had never worked in plaster herself—never liked the heaviness of it, but texturally Jackson had something here, no doubt about it. Even if the man *was* insufferable . . . Ah, one of Lee Krasner’s murals, overlapping blocks of color like an optical illusion . . . Reka leaned in close to see the layering of the paint stipples.

“There you are, Professor Muller.” The affectionate rasp of Betty Parsons’s voice sounded behind her. “When are you coming back to *my* gallery? I haven’t seen you since my Rothko exhibit.”

“I’ll come back when you show someone more interesting than Rothko.” Reka straightened, patting her fox collar. “Get that fellow from North Dakota back, Clyfford Still. Never seen anyone take a palette knife to a canvas quite like that. North Dakota’s finally produced something besides corn and cows.”

“Until Still came along, I wasn’t entirely sure North Dakota *existed*.” Betty Parsons laughed: a gallerist with a chin-length bob and the sharpest

eyes in New York, Reka judged. The two of them had met in '48, when Reka had come to a showing of some young artist expounding earnestly on why his work wasn't *cubism*, it was *revolutionary cubism*—when Betty politely asked the old woman in the green hat what she thought of his work, Reka had answered, "He doesn't know cubism hasn't been revolutionary for a long time now, and he can't draw." Betty had retorted, "But what he lacks in skill he makes up in pretension," and friendship bloomed.

"Anything new on the scene?" Reka wanted to know. The question she asked on every trip to New York. The art world was like a shark; it kept moving, always moving, or it died.

"Helen Frankenthaler's experimenting with oils. Thinning them out with turpentine; says it'll *melt* into the canvas."

"Or right off it."

"She lays everything flat on the workspace, lets it soak and pool. Says it makes for a cloudy effect, bonds with unprimed canvas . . ." The conversation turned technical; by the time both women were waving their hands and tripping over each other's words, Betty checked her watch. "Spot you a beer at the Cedar Tavern?"

The Cedar was the best watering hole in New York for Reka's bet—the drinks were cheap, the ambience horrendous, the art-world gossip top-notch. She and Betty slugged a ten-cent beer apiece in a sticky booth, happily trading the latest: Had Pollock really torn a bathroom stall door off its hinges and hurled it at Kline here last week? Had de Kooning urinated in an ashtray? Was Peggy Guggenheim coming back from Venice to reopen her gallery? Reka could feel her veins singing, paint running through her valves rather than blood. "You're wasted in the District, Reka," Betty said, signaling another round. "Sleepy little city full of Klan-minded southerners and crooked senators. Otto's gone; what's holding you there?"

Reka rubbed two fingers together, the universal gesture.

"You can be broke in New York just as well as in D.C.," Betty said, laughing. "You said you taught in Berlin—you could teach here."

"I was a lousy teacher." Too quick-tempered, too inclined to go on tangents. She'd always put too much into the students with talent, not enough into the ones slouching in late with tepid pencil sketches reeking of their daddy's money. *You'd be teaching at Bauhaus if you could keep your temper*, Otto scolded, but fondly—he'd been the one who got sacked from two successive newspapers for telling his editor he was a noodle-head runt

who ought to stick to the society page. No, Reka had never made it to Bauhaus, but she'd taught nearly two decades at one of those explosive little offshoot art schools sprouting everywhere in the heady Weimar Republic days. Good times.

Not so good, she reminded herself. It hadn't been funny or picturesque, those days you needed to wheel a barrow-load of marks to the baker to buy a single bag of sesame seed *Kartoffelhörnchen*.

But my god, the *ideas*. The color, the paint, the dizzy joy of the new. It had run red and riotous through the city like a torrent. Reka would *eat* a barrow-load of those worthless Weimar marks just to have a whiff of that torrent again.

She finished her beer, wanting another, knowing she shouldn't have it. She wasn't the woman she'd once been, downing a bottle of absinthe and a bottle of vodka at a cabaret and waking up the following morning bright-eyed and ready to rip apart thirty-plus Dadaist student still lifes. She could get drunk on three beers now, and when she got drunk, she brooded. *Don't brood*, röslein, she could hear Otto saying, but he'd done plenty of brooding at the end, hadn't he? "I should go," Reka told Betty, waving off the inevitable protests. If she left now she could catch the last train back to the District, save the meager cost of a flophouse room for the night. "I got what I came for, and that was a look at the exhibit."

Six hours on a train in one day, all for a single art exhibit—Reka paid that price every month she could afford it.

"And when am I going to get what I came for, you old bat?" Betty asked, grinning. "Otto used to brag about your work, back in the day. Color block portraits, wasn't it? I'd be happy to take a look, if you've got anything up your sleeve."

"Cheap Picasso knockoffs," Reka said dismissively. "Haven't held a brush in years—" And she got out of the Cedar Tavern before she started crying, or before she had to admit she couldn't afford canvases, or oil paints, or anything.

The train back was freezing cold, dark, smelling of urine. With her jade green hat and fox collar back in the carpetbag, Reka could feel her back hunching into its snail shell curve, that second beer churning in her empty stomach. "Watch the old lady, she's drunk," Reka heard a couple of boys snicker as they barged toward their seats. No more *Professor Muller*; just *the old lady*. Otto had started growing old the day he realized a degree from

the University of Pécs wasn't worth the paper it was printed on here; that a journalist with three decades' discourse on political philosophy under his belt was going to end his life emptying dustbins in a janitor's overalls.

If we'd just had the sketches, Reka thought, but she shut that line down before it could plume into rage. No good. No good.

"I really can't have you breaking curfew like this," Mrs. Nilsson sniffed, patting her curlers as Reka rang the bell at nearly midnight. "Did you fall asleep in the park like a tramp?" If Reka had been young, she'd have caught hell; old Doilies would have assumed she was out with some man and up to no good. But no one ever thought an old woman was up to no good. *You should have seen me in my prime*, Reka thought, catching a glimpse of herself in the hall mirror. Her own reflection infuriated her—when would she stop being surprised that so much time had passed? When would she stop thinking *What the hell* happened?

What had happened to lithe, russet-haired Reka Takács who could eat her own weight in *haluski* and argue politics all night over ink-black Budapest coffee and French cigarettes, who had oil paint under her nails and kissed painted boys who danced in corsets and fishnets on cabaret stages? *Where did you go?* Reka sometimes wanted to shout. Where did that girl go, and who was this iron-nosed old witch?

It wasn't the supple skin she missed, necessarily, or even a set of knees that didn't creak. It was the blithe, oblivious stride of the young, skipping down a wide velvety path toward a future they assumed was all peaches and cream. Headed for a meat grinder, more like, but they didn't know it—and they looked at Reka like all she'd ever been was old and sour, like she'd never skipped down a wide velvety path, too, with exactly the same blithe assurance.

Wait till you hit the meat grinder, Reka thought, hobbling up the stairs on swollen, aching feet, passing Fliss's closed door, hearing Claire and Arlene clattering around one floor up. *Just you wait.*

Reka refused to admit she attended the Briar Club supper nights every Thursday for the laughs, the gossip, or the music. *I only go for the food*, she told herself. One can of anything—beets, corn, tuna—was the unofficial price of admittance, and that was cheap for a full plate of something home-cooked. Reka's icebox in her second-floor room tended to be as bare as a gallery full of minimalist art.

The next Thursday, the usual bustle and clatter filled Grace's green-walled room and spilled out onto the landing. Nora curled up on the floor with her back against that gigantic dog she'd somehow acquired, the one who took up nearly the entire rug and ate like a horse (although at the last Thursday supper, he'd utterly refused to touch the remnants of Arlene's Red Crest Salad of chopped tomatoes and pickles in strawberry Jell-O, much to Reka's delight). In the doorway, the Italian girl Bea stood talking to Pete about the Giants' chances in the World Series. Reka elbowed past so she could add her can to the bright-labeled pyramid Grace had stacked atop the icebox, labels all faced out and dusted off. Something a bit obsessive about Grace March and food, Reka thought. These dinners, the cans, the way she'd box up even the smallest crumb of leftovers . . . though it was hard to tell when a woman had gone strange about food, and when she had just read too many diet tips in women's magazines, like Arlene, who was always swearing off dessert and eyeing everyone else's slice of pie with slitted eyes. One advantage of being old: no more squeezing into some fashionable silhouette, turning down dinner rolls and cursing at a girdle.

"I'm afraid Arlene is cooking tonight," Grace murmured to Reka. "I think she's trying to prove she's a domestic angel—the elusive Harland is coming to dinner at last! Not that she'd normally break house rules about gentlemen callers, but Claire got just a little too loud last week wondering if Harland was imaginary . . ."

"He is imaginary," Claire snorted, pushing a glass at Reka. "Bet you a dollar she tells us he had to work late."

Reka tuned her out—Claire Hallett was a loud, annoying *kurva*, and she'd slopped sun tea on Reka's sweater—and looked at the painted vine flowering across the wall. It now climbed clear to the ceiling, and the first painted tendrils had started spilling onto the wall of the landing outside, where Grace had replaced the old bare bulb with a soft-shaded new light. Every week there were more flowers on the vine, pretty little daisies and clumsy rosebuds, fit for a candy box, and Reka disapproved. If you were only going to slap paint on a surface to make something *pretty*, you might as well be in advertising slopping those flat little flowers on Carnation Instant Milk labels.

"Coconut Clusters," little Lina announced, thrusting into the crowd with a plate of unappetizing brown lumps. Everyone reached for one, chewing heroically. Reka thought she felt a molar crack.

“ . . . just a little more sugar next time, Lina-kins,” Pete said, swallowing with an effort.

“A little less time in the oven,” Nora reassured Lina’s scowl, dusting off her hands to hide the fact she was deftly feeding the other half of her cookie to the Great Dane.

“Maybe more coconut,” Grace said, tousling Lina’s lank hair.

Reka kicked the discarded cookie out from under Duke’s nose into the middle of the floor, since the dog refused to eat it. “Or just give up,” she grunted, getting a little spurt of spiteful pleasure at Lina’s answering pout. Burned cookies and saccharine painted flowers and annoying children—Fliss’s baby was squalling again—sometimes Reka could shrug these things off, the things that annoyed her, and sometimes they racketed around her skull till she couldn’t help but snarl.

“Oh, Mrs. M, you didn’t mean that,” Fliss said, that blond flip of hers bobbing over her pink blouse. “Be nice, now!”

“Why?” Reka said rudely. *Why* did she have to be nice? Russet-haired Reka Takács had never been nice—she’d been unabashed, untethered, unmaternal, and bold. Why did she have to become nurturing, sweet, *nice*, just because she was now old? Wasn’t being old hard enough without having to dredge up a saintly smile when Claire was a bitch and Fliss was annoying and Bea droned about the Red Sox?

“This bevy of feminine pulchritude must be the Briar Club ladies,” a man’s voice drawled from the doorway, and it turned out Arlene’s beau wasn’t imaginary after all, because here he was: Harland Adams of the FBI, ducking through the door hat in hand, lean and sharp-featured, a hint of Virginia honeying his voice. Reka studied him with an artist’s squint. Faces had always been what fascinated her, back when she was painting. Her work had mostly been abstract portraits, the intricacies of human faces rendered tilted or fantastical with a few twists of perspective. Every person had one feature that summed them up, one thing you could bring out while letting the rest of the features recede. Claire’s was that loud red hair springing out in wiry curls; Nora’s was that delicate chin pointing hard as a flint arrowhead under her soft skin . . . Arlene’s G-man had a foxiness about his eyes; something watchful. Reminded Reka of a colleague in Berlin, a sharp-faced little sculptor from Potsdam who drank French champagne like milk and could work cast bronze into the most delicate shapes imaginable,

like he was plying wind between his fingers and not stubborn metal. Was he the one who'd been beaten up in the street by Brownshirts, or . . .

Stop, Reka told herself, *stop*.

"Just in time, Harland!" Arlene sashayed over from the kitchenette area, decorative apron over her candy-striped skirt, so she could steer her beau around the tiny room like a show dog. "This is Mrs. Muller," Arlene enthused, dialing up the Texas vowels. "Reka, darlin', let me get you a shawl, you're sitting right in that draft!" Fussing in that way girls do when they're trying to impress men: *See how caring I am, how I'll wait on your mother hand and foot when she's my mother-in-law?*

"My mother-in-law told me I was a Magyar floozy who couldn't make *schnitzel*," Reka told Arlene in Hungarian. "I told her her son screwed divinely and knew exactly what to do with a woman's nipples."

"So you're a bureau man," Nora said when Arlene vanished coyly toward the icebox with a parting squeeze of Harland's hand. "Is it true Mr. Hoover has a room full of John Dillinger memorabilia?"

"The anteroom to his office." Harland smiled, brushing a hand across his brilliantined hair. *Never trust a man with hair oil*, Reka thought. "A plaster copy of Dillinger's death mask, the cigar in his pocket the night the FBI shot him down—"

"Is the cigar just a cigar?" Claire smirked, waggling a little finger. "Or is it representing something else to Mr. Hoover?"

Harland frowned. "Mr. Hoover is a great man. There's a great deal of work to be done in this country if we don't want it going to the dogs."

"Better the dogs than the Reds," Fliss said, rocking the ever-present bundle of pink blankets. Thank god the baby had stopped squalling. "Isn't that what Mr. Hoover says?"

"He does, and so do I." Harland sipped at his glass. "You wouldn't want Commies on your school board and in your neighborhood watch, would you?"

"I wouldn't mind a bit," Reka said and had the pleasure of seeing Arlene's beau choke on his sun tea.

"I don't think you know quite what you mean by that, Mrs. Muller," Harland said. "The threat to our children—"

"Oh, who cares about the children?" Reka cut him off, and she took pleasure doing it. The trouble with men like Harland Adams was that they hadn't been interrupted enough whenever they started holding forth about

the country, the law, *the children*. “Stop hiding behind the children. Children are in no danger from Communists, because most Communists are about as dangerous as garden snails. Just college boys who think quoting Marx and drinking vodka makes them rebels. Lock ’em up for boring people to death, but don’t lock ’em up for *the children*.”

“I assure you, Mrs. Muller, that Communists *are* dangerous. If you had any real experience of their insidious practices—”

“I did,” Reka said, knowing she shouldn’t, not especially caring. Sometimes she got tired of sitting like a bump on a log at these dinners, just waiting for the food to come so she could eat up and leave. “I was a card-carrying member of the Communist Party in Germany before the war, young man.” She saw him blanch and wanted to roll her eyes. It hadn’t been a *crime*, for god’s sake. It hadn’t even been unique. Half of Berlin flirted pink in those days; Marxism had been fashionable. “A lot of it was pretentious idiots quoting Lenin and talking about the proletariat while waiting for someone else to pick up the check,” Reka said. “But it was also a lot of young people who thought maybe *the children*, the ones you’re flag-waving about now, the ones who were starving in gutters back then, deserved more of a slice of the pie than they were getting.”

Frankly, Reka still didn’t know what was wrong with that idea. It hadn’t all been cabarets and absinthe, cubism and boys dancing in tights back in those Berlin days. It had been hunger, real hunger, and real fury at those who weren’t hungry but refused to share.

Fliss and Nora looked anxious, the way they always did when voices rose. Claire leaned back on her elbows; she always enjoyed verbal fencing.

“Goodness, Reka.” Grace chuckled softly, not sounding derisive, just amused. “Look at you. A firebrand at heart.”

“That’s an arrestable offense these days, if men like Mr. Adams here have his way,” Reka retorted.

“Goodness, I hope not. Firebrands are good for the country, or so I’ve always thought,” Grace mused, ignoring Harland’s sputtering. “Firebrands ask questions, and a nation where you can’t ask questions is one that is going downhill.”

“Questions that make allowances for Communists are a different matter.” Harland looked *quite* red in the face now, to Reka’s enjoyment. “The threat the Communist Party poses—”

“You know who we really posed a threat to? Herr Hitler,” said Reka. “Who do you think were some of the first people he rounded up and arrested? The Communists and Socialists, that’s who. The ones telling everyone he and his Brownshirts were a threat back when boys like *you* were saying *America First* and *At least these fascists make the trains run on time!* A little history for you, Mr. Adams.”

“I know my history,” he said stiffly.

Reka was willing to bet he hadn’t known that part of it. Socialists and Reds arrested and beaten up, shipped off to camps alongside the Jews and the Romani and the homosexuals. And somehow the Socialists and Reds were *still* the enemy here in the land of the free, still the ones being arrested and hauled away by clean-cut young men like Harland Adams.

“You’re not still a member of the Party, are you?” he asked, as if Reka was going to reach under her cardigan and whip out a hammer and sickle.

“If I wanted to be a Communist in America, I’d just join a church.” Reka enjoyed his double take. “What kind of principles do you think Christ and his disciples are embodying? Living together in communal spirit, sharing everything equally between all—Lenin would approve.”

“Jaysus Mary and Joseph,” Nora said in the broad brogue she trotted out to make them all laugh. “I should tell my mam that, just to hear her screech.”

She was trying to deflate the tension in the room, Reka knew. Herself, she didn’t particularly feel like letting Arlene’s beau off the hook. “Put that appalled look away, Mr. Adams, I’m not a Communist Party member *or* a church member these days. Live as long as I have and you’ll realize that whether the organization you put your faith in brandishes a Bible or a copy of *Das Kapital*, the *haves* in that organization are rarely interested in sharing with the *have-nots*.” Besides, being a Party member meant meetings, and if there was anything Reka hated, it was meetings. Almost as much as she hated complacency—at least she’d knocked that plastic smugness off Harland Adams’s sharply handsome face tonight.

And then he surprised her: “Is that why you left Germany, Mrs. Muller? Your . . . political beliefs?”

“I left so I wouldn’t be shot.” Left, fled, emigrated . . . lots of words for it, that panicked rush to leave your maddened country before the bullet, the cattle car, the camp did to you what it was already doing to your friends, and turned you into a much simpler, starker word: *dead*.

“You left, and this country took you in,” Harland continued, rotating his glass between his hands. “So maybe a little less scorn for our values would be appropriate, Mrs. Muller.”

“This country did take me in,” Reka acknowledged. “And she’s my country now, yes. But does that mean she gets a pass on criticism, forever, even when she’s wrong? Wouldn’t that go against freedom of speech and all that?” After enduring Hitler’s Berlin, Reka was never going to let a thing like freedom of speech go unappreciated, or unused, even if it did make her a firebrand.

“You are twisting my words,” Harland began.

“Oh, go put a few more movie stars in jail,” Reka snapped. “Maybe you’ll win a medal—” and Arlene swooped in then with a big false smile and eyes that screamed murder.

“Goodness, you really *are* feelin’ feisty today, you old sweetie. Let’s hope you’ve got an appetite to match!” and soon a series of Grace’s mismatched plates came out, Arlene placing the biggest into Harland’s hands with a flourish. “Candle Salad,” she cooed. “My specialty.”

For a moment, they all stared at their plates: a lettuce leaf on each one, a pineapple ring with a halved banana standing upright from the center, a cherry at the tip trailing a runnel of whipped cream . . .

Grace’s mouth twitched, Reka saw distinctly, and Nora’s face went perfectly blank in the way that meant she was suppressing a giggle. But it probably would have passed—Arlene was already nattering about how cute presentations like Candle Salad got children to eat their fruits and veggies; trotting out her credentials as a perfect mother to the future Harland Adams Jr.—if Reka hadn’t just thought *hell with it* and given in to the bellow of laughter that tore all the way up from her stomach. “It’s a *pöcs*,” she choked, remembering Otto’s *pöcs* wagging between his legs when they went swimming naked in the icy blue Grundlesee on their honeymoon. The banana even had a slight curve to the left like Otto’s had, and Reka was really howling now.

“It is a *candle*,” Arlene said, red-faced. “The banana is the candle, the cherry is the flame—”

“Definitely a circumcised candle,” Claire snickered, and that did everyone in. You couldn’t find a more different batch of women than the Briar Club, Reka often thought, but after so many suppers together they had somehow acquired a shared funny bone, a way of setting each other off that

made the laughter contagious when the right joke caught fire. Fliss was barely managing to contain her giggles, choking out *I'm sure it's scrumptious, Arlene!* but Nora had fallen on Pete's shoulder in mirth, and the black-haired girl named Bea had turned to the wall with her shoulders heaving. "It's a *candle*," Arlene kept hissing, and that just set everyone off all over again.

At last, Reka got up. "I'm too old to eat *pöcs* for dinner," she said, plunking her plate in Harland's lap. To do him credit, he was doing his best not to laugh at his girlfriend's embarrassment, or the culinary pornography she'd whipped up. "Nice to meet you, G-man—" Reka said and hobbled back down the stairs to her own room, still cackling.

By the time she boiled herself a cup of instant Sanka, nibbled a few stale Crax out of the cracker box, and settled into her dilapidated armchair, it was nearly nine and Arlene was banging on the door. Harland must be gone by now; she'd never unleash that rusty-spike screech if there was an eligible man around to hear it. "You old *bitch*, how *dare* you talk like that to Harland, he probably thinks I'm some *pinko slut* now—" Reka didn't bother opening the door, just cackled and sank deeper into her chair, folding her wrinkled hands around the chipped mug. And after a while the cackles faded, and she was left staring at her barren room.

Twenty-year-old Reka Takács might have found it romantic. A narrow bed, an icebox, and some dingy walls didn't matter when you were young, when everything had a sheen of bohemian glamour and it was all just a stepping-stone to greater things. When you were old, it just looked grim. When Otto was alive, spaces like this had seemed unbearably cramped, two of them trying to maneuver their aging bodies around each other and the roaches. Trying not to miss their flat in Berlin with the burgundy red curtains and the Chinese screen, the smell of ink from Otto's midnight scribbling, turpentine and linseed oil from Reka's easel in the corner; eighteen minutes' walk to the Opernplatz where they queued to see the premiere of *Wozzeck*—where, eight years later, they'd stood hand in hand like two mute, terrorized children and watched as the books burned. Knowing in that moment that it was done, their time in Berlin.

"We got out, Otto," she whispered, barely aware that Arlene had stopped banging outside and clicked away in a huff. "We got out." Maybe it wasn't much, this life—the room and its smell of stale cooking fat from the kitchen below, her occasional cheap treat of bad beer and a scrimped-for train ticket

to New York to remember there were galleries with color and life and that much-missed smell of oil paint and acrylic. But it was a life, and any life was better than being dead. If she could walk back through the doors of those old Berlin cabarets now, they'd be peopled by ghosts: the less fortunate, so many of whom had died under pink triangles, red triangles, yellow stars, and all the other badges of hatred.

Still, at some point on the way to becoming an old woman, gratitude began running side by side with despondency. So she wasn't dead—so what? She was shelving books for pittance wages when she'd once taught a generation of artists how to push their boundaries clear off the edges of their canvases. Sleeping in an empty bed because the firebrand journalist who used to share it had died of frustration and shame as much as from old age, withered into uselessness the moment he realized life in America held nothing for him but a janitor's mop.

At least you got out. Those words had been hurled at Reka before, in bitter grief by Berliners who had lost whole families into the swastika's maw. But the question she couldn't help but contemplate now, staring into the future: *What did we get out for?* No one had an answer for that. Not a slick young G-man who believed in his God, his flag, and his badge; not Grace March and her sun tea and her weekly suppers; not this country with its copper-green Lady Liberty and her false promises of *Give me your huddled masses*.

No, Reka thought, not willing to be unfair even inside her head. *Not false promises.* Lady Liberty had taken her in, after all—and many others—and Reka would never lose the bone-deep thrum of thankfulness for that. She just wished that so many of the huddled masses this country took in hadn't found themselves treated like a resource: stripped of what little they'd brought with them so it could be given to someone else, someone better off. Communism in reverse. *I wasn't asking to be given everything on a silver platter when I came here*, Reka thought, still thinking of Lady Liberty. *I was always willing to pay my way, earn my share. So why did you have to welcome me with one hand and take everything I had left with the other?*

Reka, édesem, she heard Otto chiding. *Don't think about the sketches. There's no point.* Not unless she wanted another sleepless night chewing on her own rage, gazing at the place on her wall where her future should have hung. The future that had been stolen out of her hands.

Don't think about it, Otto said again.

But the rage was always there, always simmering—and tonight, her belly empty, she thought she might as well welcome it.

Arlene's Candle Salad

Iceberg lettuce

Canned pineapple rings

1 firm banana for every two dinner guests

Whipped cream

Maraschino cherries

1. Arrange a lettuce leaf on a salad plate, and top with a pineapple ring.
2. Cut the bananas in half widthwise, and fix one banana half in the hole at the center of the pineapple ring, sticking up.
3. Add a dab of whipped cream at the top for the “candle wax,” and a cherry at the tip of the banana for the “flame.”
4. Eat without snickering, if you can manage it, while listening to “The Thing” by Phil Harris.

October had turned to November, Halloween had come and gone (that big damned dog of Nora's had howled bloody murder when the boys down the street set off some firecrackers), Mrs. Nilsson's autumn haul of parsnips and beets ripened in the Victory Garden under her NOT FOR BRIARWOOD HOUSE BOARDERS! sign, and Reka stood on the top step of the Smoot Library with her jaw hanging slack. “Fired?” she repeated stupidly.

“That's right, Mrs. Muller,” the chief librarian said with pursed lips. She hadn't even let Reka step over the threshold; just zipped straight out the doors with her hand outstretched like a traffic cop the moment she saw Reka hobbling up the steps. “I'm afraid we cannot employ *your kind* at the T. Nealey Smoot Library.”

“My kind?” Reka repeated, at a loss. What kind was that, ugly old women? *You're not exactly a comely spring chicken yourself, Miss Sexton.*

“It has been brought to our attention that you have”—Miss Sexton's voice dropped—“*Communist sympathies*. You understand that as a sanctum

of American ideals, a place where *children* congregate—well, we cannot employ such a person.”

“I have not been a member of *any* party for nearly twenty years,” Reka said, but she could tell it was useless, the way Miss Sexton’s cat’s-eye glasses glittered like knife blades. “Who told you I had Communist sympathies? Mrs. March?”

Grace, who also shelved books here, who had heard her pick a fight with Harland Adams over the Candle Salads. Grace had seemed more amused than appalled by the notion that her neighbor had waved a flag for the Reds a few decades ago . . . but if there was anything Reka had learned from Hitler’s Berlin, it was that you never knew which of your neighbors would turn you in.

“Never you mind, Mrs. Muller.” A shoo of Miss Sexton’s hand like she was getting rid of a stray cat. “You’re lucky we don’t report you to the authorities! The T. Nealey Smoot Library would be entirely within its rights —”

She won’t do that, Otto snorted. Neither HUAC nor the FBI will concern itself with a hired page at a third-tier branch library, édesem. But there was a deep-seated fear in Reka that got her feet moving anyway, had her hobbling back down the steps with her heart thumping sickly. The ingrained fear of the refugee, which never quite disappeared—the feeling that you might be asked to show your papers, to justify yourself, to *leave*. A feeling that sent her scuttling away from the library, head down, the taste of copper in her mouth.

How her younger self would have jeered.

Shut up, Reka told her younger self. Being jobless at twenty-one was a lark. Mornings to sleep in, making jokes about spending your last marks on schnapps, always confident another job was around the corner. At seventy-one, the thought sent her reeling sickly into Prospect Park beside the library, breath coming in gasps. No job. No money, even the pittance library pages were paid by the hour. She had maybe two months’ rent in an envelope under her mattress, squirreled away coin by coin for a rainy day—well, on a clear-skied afternoon where sunlight shone down on the absurd bronze statue of Councilman T. Nealey Smoot beaming across the duck pond at his namesake library, storm clouds had gathered over Reka Muller’s head.

Two months of rent. Then what?

Who was going to hire a seventy-one-year-old woman? She couldn't put in ten-hour shifts at the Crispy Biscuit like Nora; didn't have the typing skills to join a steno pool like Claire; couldn't teach junior high like the Italian girl Bea.

Two months of rent. All the savings Reka had.

It would be a lot more. If—

Otto warned her not to think about that, but she couldn't hear Otto over the roaring in her ears. She stumped across Prospect Park and down Briar Avenue, knowing exactly where she was going, knowing she shouldn't go there again. *You promised yourself you wouldn't. You promised Otto.* But her feet kept moving as she pulled her coat tight against the sharp November breeze.

Astonishing how close Georgetown was to Foggy Bottom—how close the *haves* really were to the *have-nots*. Just a trudge across the C&O Canal, over to M Street, N Street, the alphabet falling, the incomes rising. Sutherland lived in a gracious redbrick town house, all gables and pillared porticoes and wrought-iron lacework swirling up the steps. "I'm here to see Mr. Sutherland," Reka gritted out to the maid who answered the door. Sweat was running down her back under her blouse despite the chill; her feet screamed, and she had a stitch in her side like a dagger. Even a mile or so was too long to walk on a cold autumn day, when you were over seventy. Unless you were so angry you cared nothing at all for pain. "Mr. Barrett Sutherland."

"He's at his office, Mrs.—?"

"Senator Sutherland, then." The father had a gracious white-pillared place in Virginia, but weekdays he'd be found more often than not at his son's house—closer to Capitol Hill *and* the martinis at Martin's Tavern, he'd been known to joke. Years of concentrated hatred for the whole Sutherland clan had taught Reka a lot about their movements. "I'll see the senator, if he's in."

The maid looked wary. She must be new; the previous maid had known to just shut the door in Reka's face. "Do you have an appointment, ma'am?"

"He stole from me." Reka peered past the maid to the familiar strip of luxurious Persian carpet, the crystal chandelier. Sometimes she'd gotten as far as the sitting room, but usually that imposing brass-knocker door shut in her face before she got a toe inside. Reka saw someone move at the end

of the foyer and raised her voice. “The senator stole something from me. I want what is *mine*—”

Reka, Otto begged, but she couldn’t stop. Maybe once a year she got angry enough to come make a scene. Useless, stupid. She still couldn’t stop.

“I want what is mine,” she repeated, voice rising, trying to elbow past the maid, peering into the shadowy foyer. Was that the senator back there, or his son? She hadn’t seen either for years, except at a distance. The son with his Clark Gable jaw, his patent-leather hair, his pin-striped suit; the father the same but older, the dark hair grayer, the paunch behind the same vest and the pocket square now solidified into hard, complacent prosperity. “He took what is mine and I need it back.”

Need. That was why she was here, she supposed. It wasn’t just a matter of ownership and justice anymore; it was a matter of rent and food.

“Trudy?” A woman’s voice drifted from the foyer—young, light, a British accent. “Who’s at the door?”

“Just a tramp, Mrs. Sutherland.”

“I’m not a *tramp*,” Reka gritted out. “You ask the senator or his son if they know the name *Professor Muller*; they know. They know—”

The maid flapped at Reka like she was flapping at a housefly, starting to close the door. Reka wedged one foot in the way, raising her voice to a shout again. “*I want to see Mr. Sutherland—*”

“He’s not here.” The maid fell back as a slim, beringed hand opened the door back up, and Reka blinked up at a tall young woman. Elegant, black-haired, endless neck roped with pearls and endless silk-stockinged legs under the trim mint-green skirt of what Reka guessed was a Chanel suit. “Thank you, Trudy,” she continued in her soft British-accented voice. The maid disappeared, and the woman turned back to Reka. “I’m afraid my husband is chairing a committee meeting until late this evening, and my father-in-law is away in Virginia. Can I help you instead?”

The wife. Reka had never seen her before, though she knew that the younger Sutherland had a wife and son. Methodically picked up somewhere after Yale Law School, from wherever it was politicians’ wives were cooked up in some sterling silver incubator so the family picture would be complete when it came time to run for office. That was how these Washington families did it. Reka looked at the big square diamond on the woman’s hand, resting on the door, and said bluntly, “Your father-in-law is a thief, and your husband knows it.”

The fastest flicker on the woman's face, there and gone before Reka could parse it. "What is it you think the senator took from you?" she asked, as if this was a perfectly normal conversation to have on a Georgetown front stoop.

"I don't think he stole. I know he did. From Otto and me. From who knows how many others." Reka caught a ragged breath, forcibly calming herself down. "Could I trouble you for a glass of water?"

"Of course. Trudy, if you don't mind—" And Reka found herself on a cushioned bench in the foyer, sipping from a cut-crystal glass. Once you were in, it was much harder to get you out—she didn't waste time, looking up at the elegant lady of the house who had so far been more receptive than any of her menfolk.

"Your father-in-law— Does Senator Sutherland boast about how many he helped save from Germany? How many he sponsored, to make their way from Berlin to America in the thirties?"

"Yes, he's very proud that—"

"Does he tell you he stripped them of anything they had? Anything of value, that is. He let us keep the scraps."

The woman's face changed again. Probably wondering if Reka was Jewish, if that was why she'd fled Germany. Or wondering why she'd left it so late that she needed American help in the first place. The question Reka had heard over and over: *Why didn't you leave sooner?*

Such idiots. *Do you know how hard it was to leave?* she wanted to scream. *Do you?* Every week there was some new piece of paper you needed to emigrate, some new permission a smug faceless bureaucrat didn't want to grant you, some milestone you weren't meeting. Even if you could get all the bits of paper, it was near impossible to come to America without someone to sponsor you. An American sponsor: such a thing was like getting touched by the wand of a fairy godmother.

Or in their case, a fairy godfather.

And when your fairy godfather said you should send your valuables in advance, because you'd likely have to surrender anything precious on the way out of Berlin—did you question that? You did not. You were too used to Hitler's thugs and how they helped themselves to whatever they wanted. You were too numbed and grateful to be getting away from the country that was no longer your home, the place where your friends were disappearing

and you knew that any day you'd be next. So you sent your things ahead, the most precious ones, the things that would help you build a new life.

Including that one slim, irreplaceable package.

Let's not send the sketches ahead, Reka had argued at the time. *They should travel with us. I'll tie them around my legs, under my stockings.*

And see you stripped and beaten at the Lehrter Bahnhof if the guards catch even a crinkle of paper? Otto had demanded. *We can't risk it.*

She wished they had. Those three flimsy pieces of paper could have bought them a new life in America. Maybe not prosperity, but some measure of ease. Could have salved, at least, the utter shock of realizing there were no valuables waiting for them when they arrived in Washington. That they had their visas, and they might be on the right side of the Atlantic at last, but that everything of value—the silver from Otto's Viennese grandmother, the emerald earrings from Reka's great-aunt in Debrecen, the embroidered wall hangings she and Otto had bargained for in Istanbul when they'd fulfilled a much-scrimped-for dream of riding the Orient Express—was gone. Removed from the packed clothes and sundries, which had been carelessly stuffed back into the crates without even the smallest effort to make it look like everything hadn't been rifled.

You got your passage and your papers, they'd been told—the one meeting Otto had managed to obtain with Senator Sutherland. Barely a junior senator then, a sharp Capitol Hill climber with his eye on the main chance. *Be grateful, hey?*

That was the day her Otto had started to look old.

"Mrs.— What did you say your name was?" The young Mrs. Sutherland was looking down into Reka's face with concern. "You don't look well."

She thinks you're crazy, Otto said. Reka opened her mouth to shout, but felt herself sagging instead, suddenly exhausted. The Sutherlands weren't here—father or son. If they were, she'd have been escorted firmly down the steps by now. "They stole from me," she repeated, but her voice sounded feeble in her own ears.

"Would you like a cup of tea? Or—"

"I don't want your charity. I want what's mine. They stole from me when my husband and I were fleeing for our lives. When we were so thankful to have reached the land of the free. Who does that?" But Reka didn't have the strength to crane her head up at this woman, with her impossibly glossy hair and her impossibly expensive skin, and keep arguing. She rose, setting

down the crystal glass, and turned for the door. The maid leaped forward to open it.

Polished alligator pumps clicked behind her. "I'm calling you a taxi," Mrs. Sutherland said, taking Reka's arm as she reached the front steps.

Sure, Reka thought, leaning on that costly worsted sleeve that smelled like Shalimar. *You'll insist on paying for the ride, and probably slip me a five-dollar bill at the door.* That was how the rich could pretend they'd done everything they possibly could.

The woman insisted on riding with her in the taxi, which surprised Reka. "Where do you live, ma'am?" but Reka wasn't letting the Sutherlands know where to find her. "Leave me at the corner of Prospect Park," she grunted, seeing Fliss come clipping through the park gates with her baby carriage, and she was surprised again when the senator's daughter-in-law insisted on helping her out of the cab.

"Of course, Mrs. Sutherland," the startled-looking Fliss said then, finding herself deftly roped in. "Haven't I seen you and your son at Trinity Presbyterian on Sundays? I'll see Mrs. Muller home safely. I can look after her, I used to be a nurse. . . ." And the bill Reka found in her coat pocket later wasn't a five, it was a fifty.

But it was still what the rich did, wasn't it? What the *Sutherlands* did. Threw a few scraps, patted themselves on the back, and went home to their Georgetown mansion stuffed with what wasn't theirs.

"Reka, is that you?"

Reka looked up in the doorway of the Briar Rose Beauty Shoppe, still unbuttoning her coat, and saw Grace March beckoning across the double row of women reading old issues of *Photoplay* and chattering under beehive hairdryers. "It'll be at least an hour's wait—every woman in the District wants a rinse and set in time for Thanksgiving."

"So I see," Reka said gruffly. "I'll come back later."

"Nonsense, come keep me company—" And Reka found herself picking her way past the housewives with their fresh manicures and the beauticians with their drilled curls, clear to the back where her housemate waved her into some sort of storeroom.

"I've been hired to repaint their sign," Grace explained, waving at the paint-splattered smock she was wearing over an old pink paisley skirt and ballet flats. Her curls were tied on top of her head with an old scarf, and she

moved a tray of paint so Reka could sit on a packing crate. “The owner here saw the mural I painted last month in the children’s section at the library—that was after you left. Fairly insipid, cartoon children skipping hand in hand under a smiling sun, and of course Sexless Sexton didn’t pay me for it—it’s *for the children, Mrs. March!* But at least it got me this job here.” Grace waved at the sign, which was propped high against the wall on a trestle, its old lettering showing ghostlike under a coat of primer.

“Were you the one who got me fired from the library?” Reka asked bluntly, not sitting. She hoped to shock a response out of her neighbor, but Grace only gave that sleepy, amused smile.

“No, I’m fairly certain it was Arlene Hupp. She really was *quite* irked after that fight you picked with her Harland.”

“That wasn’t a *fight*. If a Hungarian picks a fight with you, all the plates end up broken and knives are sticking out of walls.” Reka sank down on the packing crate, not taking off her coat. The back room was chilly without the rosy-walled cheer of the main shop space with its framed prints of coiffed movie stars and stacks of *LIFE* and the *Ladies’ Home Journal*. Here there were only boxes of rollers, brooms and buckets and old dishrags, the chatter of the main shop a beehive buzz through the door. “So it was Arlene who told,” Reka mused, thinking it sounded like the truth, rather surprised how glad she was that it hadn’t been Grace. “That *kurva*.”

“I’ve started calling her the Huppmobile. The way she motors around, all efficiency and no soul . . .” Grace paused, delicately. “Do you have another job?”

Reka grunted. She did not. That fifty from the young Mrs. Sutherland had bought some breathing room, she was ashamed to say. She’d be able to get through Christmas, but she was already scrimping miserably. She was only here for the cheapest possible wash and trim, and *that* only because she’d so badly botched trimming her own hair, she looked like she’d backed into a lawn mower. She wasn’t going to get hired anywhere if she looked crazy as well as ancient.

“You know, you should come up to my room Monday nights as well as Thursdays. Lina and Pete come every week since that new show *I Love Lucy* started, and you know how that boy eats, so there’s always sandwiches and cake.” It was Grace’s way of slipping her another free meal each week; Reka felt her cheeks heat. But she couldn’t afford to turn it down, so yes, she’d probably be clumping upstairs next Monday to sit grimly through

goddamned Lucille Ball and goddamned Desi Arnaz, all for a sandwich and a piece of cake.

“Mind you,” Grace added, probably reading Reka’s thoughts, “Lina provides the cake, so it’s a mixed blessing. I don’t think last Monday’s Pineapple Upside-Down Cake started out upside-down.”

“Did you ask her?”

“Goodness, no. I said it was wonderful. That child is starving for praise.” Grace reached out and dabbed a finger at the sign, testing the primer.

“Nearly dry . . . One more coat, and I’ll be ready to start.” She unrolled a tube of paper from the pocket of her smock. “What do you think?”

Reka examined the sketch for the new sign. *Briar Rose Beauty Shoppe* had a rose blooming in the loops of the *A*’s and the *O*’s, and a vine curled out from the tail of the *Y* to underscore the whole thing. Predictable; pretty. But the lettering was meticulously blocked and the petals prettily done.

“Commercial but competent,” she judged.

Grace laughed, not offended at all. “Commercial pays the bills, Attila.”

“*Attila?*” Reka’s brows rose.

“Attila the Hungarian.”

Reka heard herself laughing, rustily. “I’ll take it over Sexless Sexton or the Huppmobile.” She’d always wondered what Grace had nicknamed her.

Grace nodded at the signboard, sitting there like a new canvas. “What would you paint there? If not my commercially competent little rosebuds.”

Reka lifted herself off the crate with a grunt, going over to the tray where a brush rested next to a container of turpentine and a can of primer sat open. And some charcoal sticks . . . Not letting herself think too much about what she was doing, she picked one up and made a long sinuous line on the blank, primed board.

Painting and drawing were muscle memory as much as they were eye and mind. Her muscles were old, rusted—she couldn’t have done anything new, but the figures in her mind’s eye were as familiar as the face in her mirror. No, more familiar: the face in the mirror changed over time, but the images in her mind were sharp-edged and eternal. Even if she hadn’t seen them since they’d been boxed up and sent to America.

She didn’t make any particular order out of them. A woman like a pillar, headdressed in flowers, a cup in one hand and her other arm draped with the sinuous curling lines of a serpent . . . A naked man, his head drooping, gaunt shoulder blades and wrinkled haunches etched in harsh lines . . . A

scatter of stars like a cosmos, swirling into a face neither male nor female . . .

Crude. God, it was crude! She'd lost her touch along with everything else. But she kept going till she'd covered the entire board and her fingers were gloved black in charcoal dust, and then she stepped back and her heart clutched.

"Sorry," she told Grace, because it was appalling, an artist muscling in to take over someone else's canvas. That was the kind of thing that saw blood and palette knives fly in studios. "I shouldn't have presumed."

"Not at all. It's between coats of primer; do whatever you like with it." Grace came closer, examining the woman with the snake. "I hate to paint over it. You're good, Reka."

"I was," Reka said without conceit. She *had* been, back in the day. She wasn't Gustav Klimt, she wasn't Max Ernst, but she was good.

Grace reached out to touch the charcoal serpent. "How did you come up with such ideas?"

"I didn't." It was faces Reka had usually painted; portraits, not abstract philosophical concepts. She grimaced at the figures she'd just dashed off, so rough they embarrassed her. Nothing like the sinuous, smoky lines of the original. But those had been sketched by a genius, not an old art professor who hadn't touched paint or charcoal in years.

Still. It had felt *good* to get them out. Sometimes she saw them pressing on the backs of her eyelids till they writhed.

"If you didn't make them up, what are they?" Grace asked, examining a woman's face half covered in swaths of what might have been black hair or might have been smoke.

"The preliminary sketches for a triptych of paintings by Klimt," Reka said. "The Faculty Paintings: *Philosophy, Medicine, and Jurisprudence*."

Klimt. People thought of his *Woman in Gold*, his famous *Kiss*. Reka revered his stranger work, the unflinching nudes and abstract swirls and monstrous beasts. The stuff that wasn't so pretty, that flirted with the obscene and the nightmarish, the reality-bending and the taboo. *You didn't marry me for my haluski or my red hair*, Otto had sometimes teased her. *You married me for my Klimt sketches*.

Your haluski and your hair come in a very close second, Reka had assured him, laughing.

Three sketches, the pride of Otto's family, passed down to him when his grandfather died. Three charcoal drawings by Klimt himself—studies in preparation for *Philosophy*, *Medicine*, and *Jurisprudence*. Valuable enough in their day, but now . . .

"The Faculty Paintings?" Grace frowned. "I've never heard of them."

"You wouldn't." Reka dropped the charcoal back into the tray. "They're gone."

Grace raised her golden-brown eyebrows.

Reka wiped her blackened hands off on the canvas drop cloth, trying to sound matter-of-fact, failing. "You know how much degenerate art Hitler burned?"

"The paintings these sketches were based on—they were destroyed?"

"Confiscated first. From a Jewish family." The Lederers; with the greatest Klimt collection in Europe. "Sent to a castle in Austria, Schloss Immendorf." Reka took a long, shaky breath—she had seen the books burn in the Opernplatz, but she could only imagine that wealth of canvases, panels, and paint crisping and curling in their frames under the licking fires. The image burned her mind, far more obscene than anything Klimt had painted in his life and heard denounced by prudes as *degenerate*. "The Germans put the castle and everything in it to the torch."

Which made Reka and Otto's trio of charcoal sketches, purchased for a song at the turn of the century, suddenly a great deal more significant than just an artist's experimental early drafts. A very great deal more, with the originals lost forever.

"That makes me even less inclined to paint this over," Grace said quietly, looking at Reka's charcoal daubs.

Reka turned, picked up the brush beside the can of turpentine, and dipped it in primer. She splatted a wide arc across the woman with the snake (the Greek goddess Hygeia, supposedly, turning her back on mankind) and watched the white droplets obliterate the cup in the goddess's hand. "A Jackson Pollock touch," she said harshly, dropping the brush into the can. "Truth be told, I don't know if I'm a fan of drip technique. *He* can pull it off, but now we'll have every young idiot who can splatter a brush thinking he's a genius, too."

"You say the paintings were destroyed." Grace was still studying the splattered figures. "What about the sketches?"

“Decorating a millionaire’s house in Georgetown. My tax for entering this country.” Reka picked up her handbag. “I’d better go see if I can get my wash and trim. Surely a few of those old bats next door are out from under the dryer by now.”

“Don’t let them talk you into any blue-rinsed curls, Attila. You need a sharp bob.”

“I’m too old for a bob. What is this, nineteen twenty-seven?”

“You’re not old enough for permed blue curls, that’s for sure. A bob,” Grace said, clearly visualizing it. “Let the gray shine, just shape and edge it so it looks like it’s been cut by a razor.”

“I’ll think about it.” Reka turned to go, wrinkled hand stealing self-consciously to the nape of her neck. She felt oddly—well, not naked. *Seen*.

“Reka.” Grace waited until Reka turned back. Standing there in her paisley skirt, swirling the turpentine in its can, her gaze thoughtful. “Be careful.”

“Why?”

“Whatever it is that’s eating you up . . . It’ll poison whatever time you’ve got left, if you aren’t careful.” She took up the brush, reached for the primer. “Let it go.”

It was Fliss—annoying, perky, pink-cheeked Fliss—who gave Reka the idea.

“Have you been watching the Christmas decorations go up around the square?” she chattered in the hallway when December came rolling around. Reka had come down for her mail, glower fixed firmly in place so Pete at the hallway table knew better than to say *Good afternoon*. But Fliss, wheeling the baby carriage through the front door, was impervious to glowers. “Angela just loves the Father Christmas in the drugstore window—Santa Claus,” Fliss corrected herself. “What are you doing for Christmas hols?”

“I hate Christmas,” Reka stated. In Berlin, she and Otto had stayed in bed all day drinking *pálinka* and eating *stollen*, getting powdered sugar on the sheets and exchanging presents at midnight, utterly ignoring the world outside. She’d at least kept up with the last part of the tradition.

“Why don’t you come to Christmas Eve church service with us?” Fliss reached down to rearrange the fluffy pink blankets around her daughter.

“The candles at Trinity Presbyterian are always so pretty. Grace and Claire and Pete and Lina are coming—”

I'd rather be drowned in pálinka, Reka nearly said, but the idea hit then like a bolt. Fliss's voice, not today but weeks ago, addressing Mrs. Sutherland when the woman escorted Reka home in a cloud of Shalimar: *Haven't I seen you and your son at Trinity Presbyterian on Sundays?*

The Sutherlands. A churchgoing family; all politicians were. Nothing like a little public piety in this land of God, country, and McCarthy. And even if most politicians were too busy sleeping off their Saturday martinis to make every Sunday service, all politicians would be front and center in that pew on Christmas Eve. A night when all servants were off, when all families went to church, when almost every house from Foggy Bottom to Georgetown would be empty.

Otto considered this train of thought a very bad idea. *Reka*, he said sternly as soon as she made it back to her room on the second floor, having left Fliss midsentence in the front hall. *Reka, don't.*

“Did I ever pay attention when you told me *don't* in real life?” she scolded aloud, tossing her mail aside. Nothing but advertising circulars, anyway.

Or not . . . A letter with a New York postmark. Reka ripped it open, ignoring Otto, who was now sputtering in Hungarian, and saw a familiar decisive scrawl on Betty Parsons Gallery stationery. *Jackson's fifth show with me*, Betty wrote. *Better get a look before it closes on the 15th!*

“I can't go to Jackson's show, Otto,” Reka said, addressing the worn armchair in the corner as if her husband were actually sitting in it, glaring at her. “I can't afford it. I can't afford one ticket to New York, one admittance fee to the gallery, one lousy ten-cent beer at the Cedar. That's what life is now, Otto. Every last small pleasure being stripped away one by one.”

No excuse to do what you're planning, he said inexorably. Reka put down Betty's card, thinking oddly of a voice that wasn't Otto's. Grace March's voice, Grace's golden-brown eyes. *Let it go, whatever it is that's eating you up.*

“It is eating me up, Otto,” Reka whispered, feeling the ache deep in her throat, her swollen feet, her arthritic hands. It felt like her entire body, every joint and fold of it, was holding back tears. “I know it is. But I need to try—one more time. After that?” She blinked, and this time she almost *could* see

him there in that armchair, black-haired and vigorous, young and still unembittered. “After that,” Reka said slowly, “if I fail, I let it go.”

She’d made promises like that before. Broken them. But she thought she meant it this time.

One more disappointment was all this bitter old woman had left in her.

Christmas Eve, a faint lace of snow frosting the sidewalks. Reka stood in her old coat, watching the postcard-perfect families parade inside Trinity Presbyterian for the evening service. Little girls in velvet holiday frocks, fathers with a sprig of holly in their buttonholes, mothers in Christmas pearls . . . Reka didn’t dare get too close, but she was positive she saw the Sutherland men in a swirl of flunkies and expensive overcoats. The senator would have passed out Christmas bonuses and cigars; his son would have finished his holiday brandies with all the important Capitol Hill people, both of them making plans for the new year when the son would run for his first term in office. Prayers and politics, the one flowing into the other. It was the District way.

Stille nacht, heilige Nacht . . . Humming the carol as the first strains of music wafted out from the church, Reka crammed her green hat down over her tightly permed curls (she hadn’t had the energy to talk the beautician into any kind of bob) and set off for Georgetown, her biggest handbag swinging over one arm. Even if your goal was a spot of burglary rather than a church pew, one should look appropriately festive on Christmas Eve.

You could go to jail, Reka, Otto warned, but it was a feeble thrust. He’d already said everything there was to say on the subject; Reka was going anyway. Could she walk into the Sutherland house on Christmas Eve, the holiest day of the year, and walk out again with her Klimt sketches? Probably not. She had no guarantee she could get in; she had no guarantee she would find the sketches hanging on a wall or if they’d long since been sold. She only knew she had to try one last time, that it was running through her like a madness. One last try—and this time she wouldn’t try begging for what was hers.

She’d just try to fucking *take* it.

So this time Reka didn’t come to the front door but headed to the back where the staff came and went. Locked, but she put it at a coin toss there was a key under a mat or a flowerpot nearby . . . Still, she knocked first with a story prepared about collecting for a Christmas charity if the

Sutherlands (bastards) really had made that poor maid work on Christmas Eve.

No answer, no sound from the darkened house. Reka exhaled and began searching under the mat, along the sill, among the flowerpots for a key when she heard footsteps inside. Her heart barely had time to sink when the door opened.

But it wasn't the maid.

"Can I help you?" slurred the young Mrs. Sutherland.

Reka forgot her story about the Christmas charity and stared. Normally she would wonder why an ambitious political hopeful would leave his wife home for the Christmas Eve service, when you wanted future voters to see you looking like a devout family man. But Reka wasn't wondering at all. No woman with a swollen cheekbone, a cut lip, and a black eye like this could show her face in church, probably not until after New Year's.

"I know you," the senator's daughter-in-law said, squinting. She wore an old cardigan over a silky lilac negligee, woolly socks showing incongruously below, black hair hanging lank in her face. "Don't I know you?"

Reka stiffened. She'd counted on the maid not recognizing her—not with her smart hat and fox-trimmed coat, unlike the snarling woman in the old sweater who'd come to the front door weeks ago. But Mrs. Sutherland had ridden in a taxi with her, talked with her . . . "Sorry to bother you on Christmas, ma'am," she began, doing her best to tamp down her German accent, edging away. This had all gone wrong; her last try was done. But Mrs. Sutherland's next words froze her.

"You're the one who said my father-in-law stole from you."

Reka froze. Half turned away, then turned back. "He did," Reka heard herself answering, looking dry-mouthed into those bruised, puffy eyes.

"Sounds like him." Mrs. Sutherland turned back into the house. "Want a drink?"

However Reka imagined the night going, she had not imagined this. But she found herself following the younger woman into the empty, echoing house. Not a servant here; all the lamps turned off; a Christmas tree dark and silent in a huge drawing room as Reka followed the other woman's unsteady footsteps past the archway. Mrs. Sutherland reached for a crystal decanter on a side table and sloshed out a generous measure of whatever was inside. "Whiskey suit you?" she asked, pushing the glass over. That

British accent was a good deal less crisp, with her perfect mouth so swelled up on one side. “Or maybe it’s bourbon, I don’t know. What’s the difference, anyway?”

Who could hit a face like that? Reka couldn’t help but think. She’d have bristled to see any woman so battered, no matter what she looked like—but the artist in her felt an additional pang to see anything beautiful damaged. It would be like taking boxing gloves to the *Mona Lisa*.

She expected Mrs. Sutherland to slosh out a measure of whiskey for herself—judging from the slurring, it wouldn’t be her first—but the woman stoppered the decanter without pouring more. “I don’t drink,” she said, seeing Reka’s glance. “I hate it. All those cocktail parties we have to go to, I end up pouring my martini into the nearest plant. I’ve killed potted palms all over the District.” She looked up, and Reka revised her opinion that the slur came from drink. Her dark eyes were all pupil, dilated black.

“What did they give you?” Reka heard herself ask. “A few slaps, or more than a few, then call the doctor for a little pick-me-up?”

“Oh, no one has to call the doctor for chemical assistance around here.” Mrs. Sutherland pushed a lock of hair behind her ears—she wore huge amethyst earrings like chunks of purple glass. “We have tablets on hand for these occasions. My little boy thinks I fell down the stairs this afternoon. Mummy’s so clumsy. It’s part of the family lore by now.”

“I’m sorry.” Reka had no idea what else to say.

Mrs. Sutherland pushed a floppy cardigan sleeve up her slender arm. “I asked the senator about you, you know. Or not *you*, but a woman with a German accent, saying something about theft.”

“Is that why he did this?” Reka’s hand fell away from the whiskey glass before she’d even touched it. If she was to blame for this . . .

“Oh, no. My father-in-law wouldn’t hit me. He’s a thief, but he’s a gentleman. He just told his son, *You keep your wife in hand, she’s getting mouthy*, and Barrett did it for him. That wasn’t this, though—” She made an unsteady gesture at the black eye, the split lip. “Normally Barrett’s very good at hitting me where people won’t see the bruises. No, *that* time it was a cracked rib. Right before Thanksgiving. Made it easier not to eat too much. He weighs me every week, see, so I always get tense around holidays. All that pie sitting around . . .”

Reka’s spine did its best to shiver its way right out of her skin. She’d never given the younger Sutherland much thought—just a junior version of

the man she really hated. “Leave him,” she heard herself saying harshly. “Just leave. Surely—”

The woman looked bitterly amused. “Aren’t you adorable,” she said in a Virginia drawl just like the Sutherlands and dismissed the whole subject with a chop of her hand. “What did my father-in-law steal from you, anyway?”

“Three sketches by Klimt.” This had to be the most surreal conversation Reka had ever had in her life, and she’d done opium *and* absinthe at the Moulin Rouge with a group of surrealist painters in Paris. “Studies for the Faculty Paintings, *Philosophy, Medicine, and—*”

“Oh god, not those horrible things.” Mrs. Sutherland turned away from the side table, reversing across the shadowed hall for the staircase. Reka hovered, unsure whether she was supposed to follow, and then that British voice floated: “Are you coming or not?”

Into the lion’s den, Reka thought, hobbling up the stairs. Not a lion’s den, though; just a private study with blue watered-silk walls. “Mine,” Mrs. Sutherland said, carelessly throwing lights on. “Though why I need a study when I never write more than the occasional thank-you note is beyond me.” The desk was heaped with creamy stationery and crystal paperweights, but Reka only registered those things in shadowed glimpses—because on the wall very nearly behind the door, she saw them.

Three charcoal sketches, each no more than eighteen inches square, carefully framed and held behind glass.

“I can’t stand them.” Mrs. Sutherland shuddered. “All those eyes and those tortured faces. My father-in-law doesn’t like them, either, but he says they’ll *appreciate in value*. Just the kind of thing to give a bride at her wedding: pictures of nasty creeping eyes that follow you around a room, and a son who splits your lip if you tell him maybe he shouldn’t have quite so much bourbon before church on Christmas Eve.”

She lurched across the room, so suddenly Reka put out a hand to stop her from tripping, but she didn’t fall. She just pointed at the pictures in their frames. “Take them. Just . . . take them.”

“I can’t.” The words flew out of Reka’s mouth. She wanted Otto’s sketches but she wasn’t taking them at the cost of this woman’s bruised flesh.

“Barrett never comes in here. Neither does my father-in-law. It’ll be months before they notice.” Mrs. Sutherland shrugged. “If they notice at

all.”

She lurched forward again as if to wrench the sketches off the wall. More in alarm than anything—envisioning broken glass shredding fragile paper—Reka flew forward and lifted Klimt’s work down, moving carefully. The weight of them, after all these years . . . *I can’t*, she thought again, but her arms were already locked around the pile of frames. “Have a story if they notice the bare spots on the wall,” she said instead.

“I’m sure they’re insured against theft. I could report some of my jewelry stolen too,” Mrs. Sutherland mused. “Hock it later.”

“You should,” Reka agreed, ludicrously polite. “Every woman needs money of her own. An escape fund.” Because even if her own situation had been entirely different, she still knew what it was to bristle defensively when someone advised you *Just leave*. It was hard to *just leave* when you didn’t have money. Reka took a deep breath. “If they hurt you for this—”

“They hurt me anyway.” Mrs. Sutherland coughed out a laugh. It clearly pained her ribs. “Look, take the sketches or don’t. They’re yours, aren’t they?”

“Yes—”

“You want them back, don’t you?”

Yes, Reka thought. She could keep them a little while, just enough to cherish what she’d lost . . . then she could find them a home in a museum. And, yes, money was a part of that decision, money that would make her old age a little easier, but it was more than that. The sketches, with their originals consigned to the flames by Nazis, deserved to hang somewhere the world could see.

“So stop arguing.” Mrs. Sutherland turned away before Reka could reply, wandering out of the study. “You’re welcome,” she called over her shoulder, “Mrs.— I don’t remember your name.”

Better you don’t, Reka thought, wrestling the three frames into her big bag. They didn’t really fit, but it would have to do: if she cut the sketches out of their frames the delicate charcoal was at risk of smudging. Was she really going to walk out of here with what was rightfully hers? Her heart was thumping painfully.

This could still be dangerous, Otto warned. Reka knew he was right, but she was still moving down the stairs. What was that saying the senator had thrown in her husband’s face? *Possession is nine-tenths of the law here in America*. Well, if she was in possession of the sketches, the game changed.

Even once the Sutherlands realized they were gone, they'd have no proof she was involved.

They could beat it out of that poor woman, she thought. Your name—she might remember. And after they're done with her, they'll beat you into a pulp as well.

But Reka couldn't stop, not when she was so close to having it back—the piece of Otto, the piece of their past, the piece of their future taken away by a bureaucrat's smug smile. She just kept going, toward the back door. Had she touched anything here tonight except the sketches? No, not even the glass of whiskey Mrs. Sutherland had poured her. She'd followed from room to room, but her hands hadn't so much as grazed a doorknob . . .

She was almost free, almost through the back door, when light footsteps sounded behind, almost running.

"Wait!"

Her stomach lurched as she swung around.

"I need to bolt the door behind you," Mrs. Sutherland said, slurring even more now. "If Barrett finds it unlocked, he'll fire poor Trudy. She'll never work again in Georgetown, and she's so *nice*, she has a grandmother in Mobile and she sends money home—"

"Good idea," Reka said gently. "You lock up behind me. No one needs to get fired on Christmas."

"My god, it's still Christmas." Mrs. Sutherland opened the door, waving her through. Tall and beautiful under her bruises, but looking like a sad little girl. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," Reka called over her shoulder, clutching her bag. And walked up the street humming *Stille nacht*.

Christmas Day. *Time to celebrate*, Reka thought, somewhat determinedly.

Too late to do much decorating, but she snagged some tinsel Grace had cajoled Mrs. Nilsson into letting her festoon all over the Briarwood House banisters and parlor and draped it over her radiator as though it were a mantelpiece. She thought about making a pot of *haluski*—Otto's favorite—but she was out of energy. She turned on the radio instead and heard Bing Crosby: *It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas* . . .

"Merry Christmas, Otto," she said aloud, voice echoing in the empty room. Maybe more festive feelings would sink in once she arrived in New York tomorrow. Too late to catch the Pollock show at Betty's, but even in

the slow time after Christmas there were little out-of-the-way galleries with a gem or two on display.

And while she was there, she would take out a safe-deposit box, one large enough for three glass-paned pictures. Until she decided what museum would be the best home to approach for her Klimt sketches (price was a consideration, but more so was visibility, and a complete guarantee of anonymity), she didn't want them in the same city as the Sutherland family.

Maybe that was why the giddy jubilation of her Christmas Eve victory last night had slowly seeped away as morning dawned.

Reka got down to her knees—hurting even more than usual, it felt like—and pulled the sketches out from under the bed for the dozenth time. A few sweeps of charcoal; Hygeia's face was little more than a smudge . . . but you could see genius in those sweeps. Or at least Reka did. And even with Bing Crosby warbling and the sounds of merriment floating through Briarwood House, she couldn't help a single, hard, dry sob pushing out of her throat as she thought of Klimt's lost originals. *Philosophy*, *Medicine*, and *Jurisprudence*, licked by flames, curling and crisping as Nazi eyes jeered.

So much destroyed. So much lost.

Reka, Otto chided. *No tears. You got our sketches back—everything you wanted!*

But she couldn't stop. She kept weeping, sobs tearing out of her throat in ugly surges. Because it *wasn't* everything she wanted, was it? She had the sketches; justice had been done; precious art would be restored to the public, and there would be a little money now to ease her last years.

She still didn't have Otto.

She still had the memories of him at the end, so bitter and beaten down.

She still lived old and alone.

And she had a sudden mad urge to pound her fists on those glass-paned frames until they shattered and the frail paper beneath tore into shreds. Because what use was art in the end? What use was *anything*?

"Merry Christmas, Attila," Grace March's voice called from the other side of the door. "Are you in?"

Reka was sobbing too hard to tell her to go away.

"Reka?" The door pushed open and there was Grace, looking festive in a dark green skirt and scarlet sweater snuggled over her full figure, holding a

ribbon-wrapped bottle in one hand. “What on earth is wrong?” she said in her soft voice, coming in.

“Go away,” Reka choked.

Grace ignored her, nudging the door shut with one heel. “Maybe what you need is a dose of your Christmas gift,” she said, holding up the bottle. “*Pálinka*—that brandy you Hungarians like, or so I’m told. Took me a while to hunt it down.” The sounds of rummaging issued from Reka’s little kitchenette, and then she came back with two glasses. “A touch of the Christmas blues?” she asked, then her gaze went wide as she got close enough to see the sketches on the floor. Framed, unmistakable, the same figures Reka had drawn on the Briar Rose Beauty Shoppe’s half-primed sign.

Reka made an ineffectual, far-too-late motion to push them under the bed.

“Oh, honey,” Grace said. “I hope you didn’t kill someone.”

Somehow that arrested Reka’s tears. It might have been a labored joke, a bit of hyperbole. But Grace’s eyes were calm, her gaze taking in the rest of the room in a single pragmatic flick as if checking for blood or some other sign of violence. “What would you say if I *had* killed someone?” Reka blurted, half horrified and half fascinated.

“That it generally takes two to hide a body.” Grace curled up on the floor beside Reka, neat as a cat. “Do you need help?”

You wouldn’t bat an eyelash if I did. This woman, Reka felt suddenly certain, understood something about violence. Understood enough to contemplate the prospect of it without turning a hair. *This* was the other side of Mrs. Grace March of 4B, behind the Iowa vowels and sun tea. Reka felt a flicker of admiration. If there was anything she appreciated in a person, it was unshockability.

Szar, was that even a word? It should be.

“I haven’t killed anyone,” she told Grace at last. What else she’d done, she wasn’t going to say.

“That’s good,” Grace said calmly, sipping *pálinka*. “So what on earth has you sobbing along to Bing Crosby on Christmas Day?”

Reka bolted a swallow of her own drink, wanting the burn. “I have these,” she said, indicating the three charcoal sketches. “But what else do I have?”

Grace made a gesture at the four walls, Briarwood House around them. “All this?”

“It’s not enough,” Reka cried out, knowing she sounded ungrateful. She was here, alive, when she could so easily be dead back in Berlin . . . But she still hurt. She hurt so much.

“What would be enough, Attila?”

Reka opened her mouth. Closed it. Opened it again, as the last thirty years flashed through her head. “Grace, I never thought I’d *make* it this far.”

They sat in silence as Bing Crosby gave way to Nat King Cole’s “Frosty the Snowman.”

“I think I hate Frosty,” Reka said, mopping her eyes. “I always hope someone will start chasing him around with a hairdryer.”

“I think I hate *pálinka*,” Grace replied. “It tastes like rubbing alcohol with a touch of apricot.”

“It’s an acquired taste.”

“So is happiness, to some people.” Grace tilted her head, her gaze assessing, and Reka’s fingers suddenly itched for a stick of charcoal. The eyes were the feature to bring out, if you were drawing Grace March: a smudge of a face, a tumble of indistinct curls, all focusing around that tiger-cool gaze. “Try it,” she said at last.

Reka blinked. “Try what?”

“Happiness.” Grace rose, smoothing her skirt. “It’s a choice as much as anything. Or you could choose to be angry, and if you stay angry long enough, it will become comfortable, like an old robe. But eventually you’ll realize that old robe is all you’ve got, and there isn’t anything else in the wardrobe that fits. And at that point, you’re just waiting to trade the robe for a shroud—or at least, that’s what I’ve always thought.”

Reka stayed where she was, staring at the sketches. She was, she thought, a little bit hungry after all.

“Merry Christmas,” Grace said, and let herself out.

Reka’s Haluski

1 package egg noodles

8 strips thick-cut bacon

1 small green cabbage, sliced

1 medium onion, sliced
4 garlic cloves, minced
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

1. Cook the egg noodles according to the package directions in salted boiling water until al dente. Drain and set aside, reserving 1 cup of salty pasta water.
2. Set a large skillet over medium heat. Cook the bacon until crisp, then remove from the skillet and chop into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces. Drain off a tablespoon of bacon fat if the skillet is very greasy.
3. Add the cabbage and onion to the skillet, and sauté for 5 minutes. Add the garlic and sauté for another 5 minutes. Once the cabbage is tender, add the cooked egg noodles and bacon to the skillet. Stir well, adding a dash of reserved pasta water to combine the flavors.
4. Season with salt and pepper, and eat on a cold winter day after the holidays, while listening to “Because of You” by Tony Bennett and His Orchestra.

“Hey, Mrs. Muller,” the tall Italian girl named Bea said as Reka came up to the fourth-floor landing. The usual Thursday-night noise spilled out of Grace’s apartment: Joe noodling at his guitar, Grace leaning out the window to call the stray cat named Red, Claire and Nora with their feet resting on the Great Dane as they debated whether Kirk Douglas or Stewart Granger was handsomer. “We didn’t think you were back from New York yet,” Bea continued, ruffling her short black hair.

“Back this morning,” Reka said, juggling a big steaming pot against her hip. “Is it brighter in here?” The landing had always looked dark and unwelcoming, but Grace had strung the new hall lamp with Christmas holly, and the walls looked lighter . . .

“I volunteered to repaint the hall,” Grace said, edging around Joe onto the landing behind Bea. “It turns out Doilies Nilsson doesn’t object to house improvements; she only objects to paying for them.”

“It’s pretty,” Reka admitted. A soft buttercream instead of stained off-white, and the flowered wall vine had climbed out of Grace’s apartment and was now making its way clear across the landing. “How’d you get her to agree to the vine?”

“I pointed out the flowers hide the cracks in the wall. She’s keen to cover up the fact that the house needs a carpenter.” Grace gave the wall a playful thump, and nodded to the pot on Reka’s hip. “What’s that?”

“Dinner.” Reka handed the pot over. “My turn to cook for the Briar Club.”

“I believe this might be the first time you’ve cooked for us, Attila,” Grace said, and Reka winced. It was, wasn’t it? Usually she just brought her one can of food in payment and ate as much as she could pack away.

Well, she was going to start taking her turn. Maybe even start adding her share of flowers to that vine, too. “I can’t stay tonight, but I thought I’d cook anyway. *Haluski*,” Reka added gruffly. “Not quite the version you’ll find in Budapest, but still a fine meal for a cold night.”

“Aren’t you a five-tool neighbor after all, Mrs. M.” Bea beamed as Grace smiled and took the pot inside. Reka started to ask what on earth she meant, but Fliss squeezed into the doorway.

“Has anyone seen my pink scarf? I just put it down and now it’s disappeared— Oh!” the Englishwoman exclaimed. “Reka, you cut your hair!”

“In New York.” Reka smoothed the sharp-clipped ends of the bob swinging just below her ears.

“Well, it looks marvelous.” Fliss had the baby in her arms as usual, rocking and joggling. *It’s the baby that would be her feature in a portrait*, Reka thought. Somehow Fliss herself—her blond flip, her fluffy pastel skirts—disappeared behind that bundle of blankets in a pretty smear of maternal anonymity.

“Thank you.” Reka’s eyes landed on the smudgy yellow daisies someone—probably Bea, she always painted daisies—had dotted all over the wall vine in the hall. How was it that all those painted flowers, however badly daubed on by the Briar Club amateurs, seemed to harmonize somehow into the whole? Some magic there.

Maybe some of it would rub off on Reka.

Her room downstairs smelled of *haluski*, and it looked different. Every bit of furniture was shoved away from the windows, and she’d rolled the rug back. Reka had gone to New York with her three sketches, and they were still there, snuggled up in a safe-deposit box taken out officially by Betty Parsons so nothing would show in her own name—and Reka had come

back with something else. A few things, in fact: a low-slung easel, some artist's pencils and chalk, some proper paper.

She stood looking at the easel. "This is a stupid idea, Otto."

Maybe so, he agreed. Better than cocooning yourself in blankets and old bitter memories, édesem.

But bitterness, Reka thought, would be a hard habit to shed. She was still brimful of it, but she was feeling an *itch* as well—the itch to draw, to create, to make something even if it was only a badly sketched mess. She even knew what she wanted to draw: portraits, always her specialty. Start with her neighbors' familiar visages, maybe linked by Grace's wall vine . . . instead of blooming into flowers, it might bloom into abstract, color-blocked faces.

She stood there before the easel, sweating in the cold, terrified. Inspiration wasn't enough; her painting muscles were old and atrophied. Useless, probably. She looked down at her newly sharpened pencils.

"Come on now," she grunted, and prayed for a little courage.

Interstitial

*Thanksgiving 1954
Washington, D.C.*

The smell of blood is hanging in the air again, and the tension inside Briarwood House has grown thick enough to cut with a knife. A second body discovered—the police are rushing about hysterically, wringing their hands and getting in one another’s way (no surprise there, the house thinks), and all the women in the kitchen who had been dismissed at the beginning of the night as too emotional to be interviewed yet are still sitting there, cool as cucumbers.

That’s my ladies for you, the house thinks, fanning the smells of burnt turkey and blood into the hallway and away from their noses. When exactly had the house started growing fond of the boarders here? For decades it had barely bothered noticing the people who tramped in and out over the threshold. One set of feet feels much like another. But around the time the wall vine started growing down from the fourth-floor landing, around the time holiday decorations and tasty dinner smells started to be the rule and not the exception—well, the house had begun paying attention to the different footsteps skipping up and down its worn stairs. Each set different, after all. Each footfall treading heavy or light, depending on the worries they carry with them.

Right now, the feet resting on the kitchen floor are all braced for disaster.

“When I say things like *clear the house*, that means *check every goddamn room*,” the detective is hissing meanwhile at his crestfallen team. “That

means every goddamn nook, every goddamn closet, every goddamn cranny! For Chrissake, how did you clowns miss *that*?" He jabs a finger through the open door to the parlor and the slumped, bloodied figure clearly visible on the rug.

Everyone immediately begins mumbling *I thought someone else* and *Not my fault!* "Who do we like for the second murder?" the detective's partner asks, sounding ingratiating, but only gets a glare in return. "I mean, this isn't the same work as the upstairs killing, right?" the man persists. "Up in 4B there was blood everywhere. Things overturned, the walls a mess—"

My wall vine, the house mourns.

"The scene down here, it's cleaner," the detective's partner goes on. "More calculated. Corpse in the middle of the floor, bashed on the head, one blow with a blunt object. That seem like the same person who went into a slashing frenzy four floors up?"

Back in the kitchen, Mrs. Nilsson is shrilling, "My parlor rug!" *Good riddance*, thinks the house, who has been trying to get rid of that horrible hooked rug (spilled cups of coffee, mud helpfully coming off shoes) for absolutely years. No more hooked rug, and after all these tramping official feet, the hideous hallway runner is probably a goner, too—but the house can't quite manage to rejoice yet. Not with the way the tension just keeps rising and rising among the people in the kitchen; all these covert looks of fury and grief and helplessness flying back and forth . . .

"Murder weapon on the second killing certainly can't be the same," the detective says grudgingly, looking around the parlor. The weapon upstairs has already been noted and logged: a short-handled garden sickle Pete sometimes uses to cut weeds out back. The house had thought about hiding the sickle, whisking it off between some loose floorboards, but that might have raised more problems than it solved. "This one doesn't look—" The detective breaks off: the engorged silence in the kitchen has finally shattered, and an earsplitting wail carves the night. "Dammit, will someone shut that kid up?"

"She's very upset!" All the women have clustered around the little girl; the house can't tell which of them is speaking up. "Angela, honey, stop crying—"

The house sends a lot of soothing little flurries toward Angela in her frilly dress, the best it can manage in the way of an incorporeal *there, there*. But there's very little even a half-century-old sentient house with three wars and

ten presidents under its belt can do when a child decides it's Had Enough, and Angela Orton has very definitely Had Enough, wailing exhaustedly with a face gone red as a tomato. The tension has finally boiled over and she isn't stopping anytime soon.

"Give her to her mother," the detective snaps, getting red in the face himself as the women all simply stare at him. "Come on, now. Where is her mother?"

Two and a Half Years Earlier

February 1952

Chapter 4

Fliss

Dear Kitty,

*Fliss Orton's baby is shrieking again; I doubt anyone in Briarwood House slept a wink!
Definitely a case of the Terrible Twos, but Fliss sails above it all serene as a sailboat, if a
sailboat wore a pink sweater set and an Alice band.*

I wish you were here.

—Grace

B*ad mother*, Fliss thought, tying a satin ribbon around a packet of ginger biscuits. This one for Bea Verretti, who roomed upstairs on the third floor. *Bad mother*. She wrapped another stack of biscuits in fluffy pink netting, this one for Reka across the hall . . . It was Valentine's Day, and Fliss had baked ginger biscuits for each of the women at Briarwood House who didn't have someone taking her out to a romantic dinner. (*Cookies*, Fliss reminded herself. Biscuits were called *cookies* here; you'd think she'd remember that by now.) Every Miss Lonelyhearts deserved something nice on Valentine's Day. February fourteenth was not only for lovebirds.

On the floor, Angela sat in her ruffled romper bashing two blocks together and roaring. The pitch of her roars changed octaves abruptly, jerking Fliss across the room like a fishhook. "You fancy a bottle?" she asked, bending down with a determined smile. Smile, smile, always smile. "A biscuit?" But Angela just screamed, scarlet as a London telephone box. "Maybe a nap," Fliss said, trying to scoop her daughter up, but Angela resisted being scooped, arms and legs stuck out rigid as a starfish. She was

a collection of stiff limbs surrounding an open howling mouth, and no, she did not want a bottle or a biscuit or a nap. *Bad mother*, Fliss thought: the chant that yammered day and night, never stopping, never letting up, whether she was brushing her teeth or rolling out cookies or shining Angela's little shoes. *Bad mother*. A good mother would know what her child wanted. A good mother would have figured it out by now.

"All right," she said wearily, "you feel like roaring, go ahead and roar." She pushed a curl under the blue Alice band in her hair and went back to the biscuits. Seven packs wrapped in pink netting, with pink ribbons. Mechanically Fliss fluffed the bows, made sure the ends hung exactly even. Fluff, fluff. There was no excuse for it not to be perfect. She didn't have to work, after all. She was so lucky. Fluff, fluff.

A knock at the door brought her startling upright as if she'd been electrocuted. Had she lost time again? She kept doing that, settling herself determinedly to some task, then looking up and realizing somehow she'd lost fifteen minutes, thirty, an hour. How long had she been standing here fluffing the ribbons on a packet of ginger biscuits? What if Angela had toddled over to the dresser and pulled a drawer out onto herself? *Bad mother*, the inner voice howled, sending Fliss stumbling away from the table toward her daughter, but Angela was still bashing blocks around the floor and yowling. Another knock sounded, and Fliss knew exactly who it was.

"Mrs. Nilsson!" she said brightly, smiling wide as she swung the door open. "What *can* I do for you?"

"That baby's been crying all afternoon," her landlady said crossly, folding skinny arms across her bilious housecoat. "Don't you know she needs a nap?"

"I'm afraid she's refusing a lie-down." Fliss managed to sound rueful. "She's at a difficult age."

"Nonsense, my two always dropped right off when I put them down for a nap. You said when you moved in, the baby wouldn't be any trouble—"

I didn't think I'd still be in this bloody flat when Angela was about to hit two years old, Fliss thought. It had all gone wrong, so very wrong. "I'll get her calmed down, I promise."

"Hmph." Mrs. Nilsson's eyes darted over Fliss's room, looking for something to criticize. There wasn't anything, Fliss knew. During the day she could hardly keep her eyes open, but at night she couldn't sleep, so as

soon as Angela dropped off, Fliss got up and cleaned. Last night she'd scrubbed the bathroom tiles with an old toothbrush, getting between each and every one, moving on to the kitchenette and falling asleep around four A.M. with her head against the icebox. "I must say you keep things neat," Mrs. Nilsson allowed, as her eyes landed on the pink-wrapped packets. "Cookies? Did you use my oven?"

Pete had given Fliss the heads-up when his mother went shopping, waving the smell out with a towel as she whisked baking sheets in and out of the oven. Fliss sighed internally, picked up one of the beribboned packages, and pressed it into her landlady's hands. "Happy Valentine's Day, Mrs. Nilsson."

She lost some more time after closing the door, coming back to herself maybe ten minutes later when Angela's howl changed key again. "Sorry, sorry," she said, absently wiping away the tears that were somehow falling, coming to pick her daughter up. This time Angela allowed herself to be lifted, though she held her little body stiff, fists braced against Fliss's shoulder. "There you go," Fliss mumbled as Angela's roars died off to hiccups, maneuvering one-handed to blot a handkerchief under her eyes. The tears always seemed to stop as easily as they started; she just never knew when they were coming. "There you go. Shall we deliver some biscuits?"

"Cookies?" said Claire, stubborn red curls of just-washed hair springing out from a towel turban. "Sure. I don't like Valentine's Day, but I'll take cookies. Thanks." And shut the door again just as Fliss was chirping "Happy Valentine's Day!"

"Cookies?" said Bea, back on crutches again after a whole winter off them. "You're a real MVP, Mrs. O." And crammed two into her mouth at once with a grin, while Fliss wondered what on earth an MVP was. (Mad Vicious Parent?) "Happy Valentine's Day!" she cried instead, smiling even wider.

"Cookies?" said Nora, still dressed in one of her slim National Archives suits when she answered the door. "Ah, you're a saint, Fliss." Fliss expected to see Duke put his regal head round the door as he usually did, but there was no sign of the Great Dane in Nora's little room. "He's gone back where he came from," Nora said when Fliss asked. "His owner's out of— Well, he's home, that's all."

Fliss didn't ask who *he* was. Nora didn't look like she'd welcome the question. Her eyes slid to one side, and Fliss saw a stunning bunch of flame-orange roses upended in the bin, unopened card on top. She didn't ask about those, either.

"I do miss having a dog around the place, even though Duke took up half the room," Nora said, smiling a little too brightly. "I'll have to make do with cuddling Grace's cat on Thursday nights."

Red wasn't in evidence when Fliss went across the hall to knock on the door of 4B. But someone else was certainly in evidence behind Grace's half-opened door: Fliss smelled a man's cigar, and Grace's loosely knotted dragon-embroidered wrapper told its own story. "Cookies," she said warmly, taking the package. "Just the thing to nibble in bed on a cold night."

I doubt you'll eat them alone, Fliss thought. When Dan was in medical school, he and Fliss used to spend entire afternoons in bed with plates of buttered toast and mugs of tea, Fliss unabashedly tearing through some Hollywood scandal rag, Danny head down in some medical tome like *Gray's Anatomy*. "*The plantaris is placed between the gastrocnemius and soleus*," he would read aloud in a Mickey Mouse voice, face perfectly grave. "*It arises from the lower part of the lateral prolongation of the linea aspera, and from the oblique popliteal ligament of the knee joint.*" *Gee whillikers, Minnie, this is fascinating stuff.*

Stuff it, Dr. Dan, Fliss would giggle, hitting him with a pillow, and generally *Gray's Anatomy* ended up on the floor along with the leftover toast crusts. They'd created Angela on one of those long lazy afternoons . . .

"Grace, *chère*—" A man's bass sounded from the other side of 4B, lazily accented with a Louisiana drawl. "You comin' back to bed?"

Grace put a conspiratorial finger to her lips, and Fliss made a zipping gesture. How Grace never got caught was beyond her—two years at Briarwood House and she whisked men in and out past Mrs. Nilsson's curfew like a sorceress. "Happy Valentine's Day," Fliss said, managing to leave off the exclamation point. She knew she exclaimed! Too! Much! And smiled too much—Reka had once asked if her molars had fused. Fliss wondered sometimes if they had. Coming to the States, she'd made a special effort to be bubbly because otherwise people thought she was cold, reserved, English. Now she wondered how she could turn it off.

“Cookies? Aren’t you just the sweetest thing!” cooed Arlene, waltzing past on the landing as Fliss left a pink package on Reka’s doorstep. The old woman was definitely in there; Fliss could hear the sound of footsteps and smell linseed oil, but she was on one of her painting binges again and wouldn’t hear the roof come down much less a knock at her door. “Oh, none for me, I’m on a new regime—no desserts, no butter, no cream in my coffee. Careful, you’ve got just a bit of baby spit right there—” Arlene’s sharp nail flicked Fliss’s collar. “*So nice of you to do something on Valentine’s Day for all the old maids.*”

“Reka’s a widow,” Fliss pointed out, juggling Angela, who was reaching for Arlene’s jangly rhinestone earring.

“Well, she says she’s a widow. Awfully convenient that she never had to actually produce a husband, isn’t it? Who’d ever want to marry that?” Arlene wrinkled her perfectly powdered nose, dressed to the nines in a bubblegum halter cocktail frock under her winter coat, hair drilled into perfect waves. “My Harland is picking me up,” she purred, swishing the crinoline under her skirts. “He got us a table at Longchamps, you know. I really think tonight might be *the* night. He has been gearing up to ask a *certain question*, if you know what I mean—”

“Good luck!” Fliss said, not sure what else to say, then “Angela, no—” as her daughter made another swipe at Arlene’s earring. *Bad mother, bad mother.*

“Want,” Angela said. It was the only word she said with any regularity lately, aside from no.

“Aren’t you precious?” Arlene cooed, even though Fliss didn’t think Arlene liked Angela all that much. Fliss wasn’t sure Arlene even liked *her*, for all the smiles and the cozy us-girls confidences. *What she likes is your ring*, Grace had said once, smiling that sleepy, amused smile. *You got a handsome young doctor to give you a diamond—the Huppmobile wants to know what you’ve got, and if some of it can rub off on her.* And sometimes Fliss saw Arlene’s beady gaze land on the wedding band under Dan’s diamond, sharp as a hungry magpie: *How’d you do it? How’d you do it?*

“Maybe when your Dan comes home, Harland and I can double-date with you two,” Arlene said now, flitting down the stairs. “Must be off!”

When Dan came home. When would that be? He was in Japan; he’d been there nearly since Angela was born. “It’s just a police action, not a war,” he’d said over the telephone from San Diego, when he’d gotten the news

his reservist status was being activated, that he was going to the hospital base in Tokyo. “Hopefully there won’t be *that* many grunts from Korea for me to patch up.”

“It’s not fair,” Fliss had erupted, bursting into tears. She winced every time she thought of that—it had only been two months after Angela’s birth; even a toothpaste commercial on the radio could reduce her to bawling. But she’d wailed without thinking, clutching the phone to her ear: “It’s not *fair!*”

“It is fair, honey. They paid my way through med school—they call me up, I’ve got to go.”

It’s not fair to me, Fliss had wanted to howl. Taking a man away from a wife and a two-month-old daughter? What was fair about that?

But—

“Oh, Fliss, I’m sorry,” her husband had repeated, sounding so *helpless* over the crackling phone line that her tears had dried up at once. Was this any way to send a man to war? At least he wasn’t going to the front lines; his orders would keep him at one of the big army hospitals far from danger. She should be counting her blessings, not racketing on about what was *fair*. “You’re right,” she’d managed to say, forcing that note of cheer into her voice that she’d gotten just! So! Good! At! In the two years since. “It won’t be long, and think of the money we’ll save, Ange and me renting here till you’re back. Enough to afford a house by the time it’s all over!”

Only here they were, nearly two years later. His tour should have been up, but he’d gone in for another one. *They’re so short on doctors*, he’d written despairingly, even as they were both counting down the days till he was supposed to be done. *I’d be leaving everyone in such a lurch if I go. It’s killing me to be away from you and Ange, but my guys are drowning here.* He’d asked three separate times if Fliss was *really* sure about the second tour, if it was *really* all right, and what could she reply to that except “Of course! I’m sure it’ll be just a few more months! Time will fly!”

Time wasn’t flying, not at all. But still: *We’re lucky*, Fliss reminded herself, hauling Angela back to their two rooms on the second floor. *We’re so lucky.* A healthy daughter; a savings account tidily accumulating; a husband serving his country but not in danger. *Lucky!*

She sat down at the tiny card table she’d turned into a desk, spread with a yellow-checked cloth she’d ironed last night at three in the morning when she couldn’t sleep, and one-handedly fished out a fresh sheet of pale blue

stationery. “Put a kiss into the letter for Daddy?” she asked Angela, but her daughter was thrashing to be set down, so Fliss let her toddle back toward the blocks. *Dear Dan*, she penned determinedly in the pretty looping penmanship that started lurching downward like a drunk when she was tired. *Angela sends you a kiss, and I have a new picture of her—enclosed. Huckstop’s Photography gets half their business from us, I swear! Tears started falling again; Fliss absently wiped them away before they could blot her letter. She wrote about the funeral of King George VI, which would be taking place tomorrow in London, and how Princess Elizabeth had decided to take the name Elizabeth II. I know I’m more of an American now, but Princess Elizabeth still feels more mine than President Truman. She certainly has better hats!* Angela was fully toilet-trained; not a single accident for two months! Fliss would be sending a care package soon . . .

Angela’s roar changed to a howl, and Fliss’s head jerked up to see her trying to climb her way up the front of the dresser. “No, no—” Running across the room, plucking her off. Angela tangled her little fists angrily in Fliss’s hair, dislodging the Alice band. Her face looked like a pomegranate, red and furious—Fliss found herself staring at it dispassionately, even as she crooned and joggled. *Bad mother*, she thought, settling Angela down with her blocks again. She dragged herself back to her writing table, picking up the pen, but after a line or two about the weather she realized she was just scrawling *badmotherbadmotherbadmother*, lines listing drunkenly down across the page. She stared at her ruined letter, and for a moment wondered if she should just *mail* it. Let him see. Didn’t a man have a right to know when his wife was such a failure?

Bad mother.

Feel it, Fliss thought, training her eyes on Angela. Pretty Angela in her pink ruffles and lace-trimmed ankle socks, that pomegranate rage already drained away into her usual rosy cherub’s face. *Feel it.*

But there was no rush of maternal love, no sweep of adoration. Fliss remembered what it *had* felt like, that tidal wave of exhausted joy that had swamped her when they laid Angela in her arms, a howling slimy frog of a newborn. The happiness. She could remember it; she just couldn’t feel it *now*. All she could feel, gazing at her adorable daughter, was a desperate gray fog of nothing.

She looked down at her spoiled letter, crumpled it up, reached for a fresh sheet. Tears again. Blot, blot, blot. *Dear Dan, don’t you worry about your*

girls! We're all just fine!

Fliss had been skipping church lately, but today she had business after the service so she spent fifteen minutes wrangling Angela into her frilly Sunday frock. Angela submitted to the frock agreeably enough but balked at the precious patent-leather Mary Janes that Fliss's mother had sent in her Christmas package from Buckinghamshire. Fliss had written her that Angela would not wear shoes lately, absolutely *would not*, but her mother wrote back *You just have to be firm with her* and Fliss did her firm, smiling best for another ten minutes. At that point, with the service beginning in a quarter hour and a tiny Mary Jane whizzing past her ear, Fliss gave up on the shoes, shoved Angela into her pram, and flew down Wood Street toward Trinity Presbyterian.

Mrs. Sutherland was already there, causing a stir as usual as she settled into her front pew with her little boy. "*The Sutherland family*," a woman on Fliss's right whispered. "They say she's from Bermuda—looks a bit *dusky*, doesn't she—but she modeled in London before Senator Sutherland's son came along and swept her up. Did you know her over there, you being English too?"

Fliss wanted to point out that England wasn't *that* small an island, and it wasn't precisely close to Bermuda, either—but knew she'd only get a blank look. "No, I didn't."

"My, I wish I had a Lanvin coat like that . . ."

Fliss didn't go up to Mrs. Sutherland after the service. Later was better, over the cake and coffee in the church hall. She'd munched her way through a gelid slice of banana cake and smiled her way through two admonishing church matrons ("Why isn't that child in shoes?") by the time Reverend Poolstock released Mrs. Sutherland's hand from his big paws (he was angling for a new stained-glass window for the nave) and Fliss could slide her pram through the throng of gossiping parishioners. "Mrs. Orton," the senator's daughter-in-law greeted her. Nearly a head taller than Fliss in her plum shawl coat, head crowned by a black pillbox hat pinned with an amethyst brooch. The picture of a young Washington society wife, today absent her handsome husband with his square jaw, his pin-striped suit, his red tie, his assured future as the third Sutherland to serve the state of Virginia in the Senate. At least Fliss thought it was Virginia. Nearly ten years in the States and she still couldn't name all of them.

“How nice to see you,” Mrs. Sutherland went on in that crystalline accent that made her sound like a duchess. Almost aggressively so, as if some iron-souled nanny had smacked every possible Bermudian lilt out of that voice long, long ago. “Wasn’t it a lovely service?”

I didn’t hear a word of it, Fliss thought. Too busy trying to keep Angela from wriggling and yowling. In the end she’d just let Angela tug as hard as she wanted on her pearl earring, and now her right ear burned like a hot coal and was probably an inch longer than the left one. “Yes, wonderful service!” she said brightly. “Mr. Sutherland couldn’t join you today?”

“He’s at a committee meeting.” Blandly, as if they both didn’t know she’d never have approached Fliss if her husband was here looming at her elbow. “No rest even on a Sunday, not when you’re working with HUAC.”

“Such important work,” Fliss agreed, wondering why Americans got in such a strop about Communists. England had a Socialist Party, and she couldn’t remember anyone back home getting quite so lathered up.

The two of them stood watching Mrs. Sutherland’s little boy sneak around the tables, angling for another piece of cake. He was older than Angela, old enough for tiny pressed shorts and a bow tie. “Barrett Junior looks bigger every time I see him.” This American habit of calling little boys *Junior* was another puzzler. “Would he like some treats for later? I made extra.” Passing over a packet of her ginger biscuits, which just happened to have a certain small paper-wrapped tube tucked inside.

Mrs. Sutherland slid the packet into her patent leather pocketbook. “Thank you,” she murmured, not meaning the biscuits.

“Not at all.” Fliss didn’t think she and the senator’s daughter-in-law would have become acquaintances, in the normal course of things—they’d first met here at church, of course, Reverend Poolstock booming “You ladies must know each other already, both being British!” and the two women had traded a certain amused look as Fliss murmured, “Bletchley, Buckinghamshire” and Mrs. Sutherland said, “Hamilton, Bermuda” and knew that they had never, *ever* crossed paths no matter what Americans thought about how two Englishwomen in the same room must automatically know all the same people. Fliss’s upbringing had been village fairs and pub lunches; Mrs. Sutherland’s had clearly been island breezes and then expensive London boarding schools—even now that they were both young mothers living in the same city, they were still worlds apart. They’d only bumped into each other in a setting outside Trinity

Presbyterian because of Reka, Mrs. Sutherland delivering the old woman back to her own neighborhood after finding her in Georgetown, confused and angry. *I'll see Mrs. Muller home safely*, Fliss had assured. *I can look after her, I used to be a nurse.*

Reka hadn't needed any care; she'd just mumbled something in Hungarian and slammed her door in Fliss's face once they got home. But Mrs. Sutherland had come up to Fliss at the first church service after the new year, hands strangling her expensive kid gloves, and in an awkward voice murmured: *Mrs. Orton, if you're a nurse—*

Used to be, Fliss had corrected. The youngest nurse in the fertility clinic at the Free Hospital for Women in Boston, newly graduated from the Cadet Nurse Corps, but the steadiest hand with an IV needle and no squeamishness about bodily fluids, either. Of course, she'd given all that up after conceiving Angela.

If you used to be a nurse, Mrs. Sutherland had asked, *can you help me get something?*

"You're going through it quickly," Fliss commented now, moving Angela out of the pram to her hip before she started fussing.

"I never know when Barrett will want to—" A shrug. "So I use it every night."

"If you can, give me more than a week's notice next time. I have to get it across town." Because if Fliss bought spermicidal jelly at the drugstore on the corner, it would get around the neighborhood in about fifteen minutes flat: Mrs. Orton was stepping out on her husband, and him serving his country, too. She could kiss her room at Briarwood House goodbye; Mrs. Nilsson would probably hurl all her things straight out the window into the yard below.

"I know you think I should just go to a drugstore across town myself," Mrs. Sutherland said. That was exactly what Fliss had been thinking. "I would but my husband—I have to account for every nickel I spend. If I don't have receipts that match up, and if I can't show what I paid for . . ."

She trailed off, looking awkward. Fliss looked at her shoes, doubly awkward. *Plenty of husbands don't approve of limiting families*—Uncle John had told her that during her first week at the clinic, his Boston clip warm rather than forbidding. *But the women are our patients, not their husbands, which is why we need to be discreet with what they tell us.* Dr. John Rock wasn't her uncle, he was Dan's, but Fliss had adored him

since he first took her under his wing as a brand-new nurse, and it wasn't as if she had any family of her own in the States. Fliss absolutely knew what Uncle John would tell Mrs. Sutherland now.

"The jelly isn't infallible," she said. "You want to limit your family's size, you need something more reliable."

"It's all I can get." The woman gently tickled Angela's little fat foot in its lacy sock. "You probably think I'm unnatural. Playing with this darling baby of yours and telling you I don't want any more."

Bad mother, clicked the automatic yammer in Fliss's mind. "No," she said. "It's not unnatural."

They stood in the middle of all the church chatter, so many women in their flowered Sunday hats balancing cups of stale coffee and plates of cake crumbs, watching the children swirl through the room in starched organdy frocks and sailor suits. So many children. "My husband wants four at least," Mrs. Sutherland said. "He and my father-in-law worry there's something wrong with me, think I should see a specialist."

You must have no friends, Fliss thought, *or else you wouldn't talk this way to someone like me*. Strange that this glossy, beautiful woman draped in Lanvin and pearls had no one to reach out to but a woman from church with whom she had nothing in common but an accent . . . But sometimes that could be enough. There were times Fliss ached for fish and chips, for afternoon tea, for traffic that went the *right* way on the road—just talking to someone who understood those things could feel like old home week. It was so lonely sometimes, being the Foreign Wife—and Mrs. Sutherland would be even more *foreign*, wouldn't she?

"You should see a doctor." Fliss kept her voice noncommittal, flicking a speck of dust off Angela's ruffled collar. "I could introduce you to my husband's uncle, Dr. John Rock—he's a fertility specialist in Massachusetts, and he's done wonders for his patients. You could see him for an examination—"

"I said I didn't want—"

"That's what you tell your husband the examination is for. While you're there, you could get measured for . . . you know." Mutely, Fliss let her fingers form a circle, like a certain small rubber device. You couldn't say a word like *diaphragm* in a church hall with Reverend Poolstock not ten feet away talking about the Christlike Lessons for the Deserving Poor.

Mrs. Sutherland gave a quick shake of her head. "Any doctor might tell my husband. I know I sound silly and paranoid, but it *happened* to me before—I asked my doctor for something to help me sleep, and he was ringing my husband almost before I was out of the office. Barrett was so angry with me for not asking his permission first . . ."

"Dr. Rock would never do that." *Doctors like him*, Fliss thought, *are more precious than the Hope Diamond*.

"Massachusetts, though . . . is he Catholic? Wouldn't it be against his religion, helping to limit families?"

"Uncle John says he believed that for a long time, but that a man changes his mind after forty years treating women worn to the bone by eight, nine, ten pregnancies in ten years." Fliss remembered those women, too, from her time at the clinic. Women missing teeth at thirty-five, haggard to the bone, trying to work up that expectant glow when Fliss had to tell them that yes, they were pregnant again. Saying *Well, lucky me!* and looking like they wanted to heave themselves in front of a train. "You go to the clinic at the Free Hospital for Women in Boston, Mrs. Sutherland. Dr. Rock will measure you for what you need, *and* he'll keep it quiet."

The other woman chewed her dark red lipstick. "My husband would never let me go to Boston alone—" She broke off as her little boy came hurtling into her side like a missile. "Is it time to get you home?" she asked, ruffling his hair. "Your father said he'd be home after lunch, in time to play some catch. Go get your coat—" and as Barrett Junior careened off for the coatrack, Mrs. Sutherland smoothed out her crumpled gloves. "You must have been a very good nurse, Mrs. Orton," she said, her voice light again. "You have a reassuring way about you."

"It's all I ever used to want to be," Fliss said. How she had fought for it, fought to get into the Cadet Nurse Corps when they said they were only taking American girls . . .

"Used to want?"

Now I can't imagine wanting anything at all. Fliss felt a moment's dizzy exhaustion coupled with a sincere desire to reach out and tip the nearest tray of coffee cups to the ground just to hear it all go smash, but she hitched her smile on and locked her molars at the back to keep it tightly in place. "I'd better get my little angel home, Mrs. Sutherland. Happy Sunday!"

Fliss couldn't say she had a favorite day of the week—they all blended together into an endless river of weariness—but Thursday night was a bright spot. “There you are, Bubble and Squeak,” Grace greeted her as she slipped into the green-walled room. Grace had called her that (“You’re Bubble, and your little one’s Squeak!”) after Fliss made the mistake of *making* bubble and squeak for the Briar Club and realized there were some things you just shouldn’t try to serve Americans. “You look fresh as a daisy. Let me take your little goblin there—” and Angela was whisked away. Grace juggled her first, and then passed her off to Nora and went to mix drinks, and Fliss sank down on the narrow bed that doubled as a couch. For two blessed hours she could just *sit*, without sticky childish hands clinging to her limbs, without loud childish babble demanding her eyes, her ears, her every morsel of attention. She could eat a meal without jumping up after every bite to keep Angela from falling off something or smashing something. She could have a drink without Angela cartwheeling past and sending it spilling to the floor. Grace pushed a Manhattan into her hand, saying, “Sorry it’s in a teacup, I’m out of glasses,” and Fliss nearly burst into tears. She could just sit and know that her baby was all right, that the Briar Club women had closed around Angela in that blessedly breezy, automatic way they always did, passing her from one set of fresh arms to another while Fliss’s arms got a little bloody rest. “No,” she could hear Angela shouting peevishly in the background, but she was saying it to someone *else*.

Things certainly hadn’t used to be like this: before these Thursday night suppers came along Fliss had barely known the names of her neighbors, much less been able to count on them taking the baby out of her arms for a spell one night per week. It had been like ships passing in the night here, until Grace. “Who’s cooking tonight?” Fliss asked now, taking a gulp of her Manhattan and coughing. Grace had a heavy hand with the rye.

“Joe Reiss’s bandmate, Claude Cormier,” Grace said. “Have you met? He’s on drums when they play the Amber Club.”

Fliss blinked at a tall, very dark-skinned man in shirtsleeves and suspenders, stirring a pot over the hot plate. “Grace, *chère*,” he called out in the Louisiana drawl Fliss remembered hearing in the background when she dropped off cookies, “you have any chili powder?”

Chère. My goodness, thought Fliss. She whispered, “Grace, I thought for a while, you and Joe . . . Does he mind, you and his bandmate?”

“Goodness, what is this, junior high? We’re all adults. Joe, tote that saxophone somewhere else, you are getting underfoot—”

Joe grinned, not looking at all jealous, and slid into a jazzy version of “Cold Cold Heart,” jostling Reka, who cursed absently in Hungarian. She was adding a flower to the painted vine that now covered Grace’s apartment, the landing outside, and was making its way down the staircase wall—*flick* went Reka’s brush, finishing up something surreal and orange that would somehow in the way of Grace’s wall vine manage to blend in with the rest. Fliss took another slug of Manhattan from her teacup, squeezing into the kitchenette area. “What’s on the hob, Mr. Cormier?” she asked Joe’s drummer (Grace’s lover?!), nodding at the pot after introducing herself.

“Gumbo, Mrs. Orton. A Louisiana specialty.” He sounded cordial and just a bit reserved, and Fliss couldn’t blame him. Maybe Grace had invited him here but Arlene was shooting him *looks* across the room, and Mrs. Nilsson would pitch an absolute fit if she knew. *I don’t have Negroes in the house unless they’re delivering*, she prided herself on saying. *And even then, never through the front door.*

“Gumbo, is that some kind of stew?” Fliss guessed, looking at the mix in the pot.

Claude smiled. “Not quite. Gumbo starts with a good roux plus the holy trinity—onions, bell peppers, celery. Then you add chicken, sausage, sometimes shrimp—” Rattling off another half-dozen ingredients. “My *tante* Irene would skin me for making it without proper Cajun sausage, but . . .”

“*Gumbo*,” Arlene sniffed from the other wall. “Sounds unsanitary.”

“I think it looks marvelous,” Fliss said. “May I have a taste, Mr. Cormier?”

“If you’ve got the palate for some heat, most Brits don’t—”

Angela yelled, and Fliss’s gaze jerked across the room, but Claire was taking her daughter over now. Claire was sharp-tongued, but she was unexpectedly good with Angela. “Come over here to Auntie Claire, you little monster, and I’ll show you a game . . .”

“Didn’t think you liked children.” Arlene nudged Grace’s cat, Red, away with one T-strap pump. Her Valentine’s Day date had evidently not produced a proposal from the sainted Harland, Fliss thought, since Arlene’s ring finger was still bare. She kept staring at it balefully, as if it had

betrayed her. “I didn’t think you had a maternal bone in your body, Claire Hallett.”

“I like kids,” Claire said, showing Angela some complicated game of pat-a-cake. “If only they didn’t grow up to be horrible adults . . . Try again, Ange.”

“No,” said Angela automatically, but she kept on pat-a-caking.

“I keep thinking you’re too young to have a child of two *and* a nursing degree, Fliss.” Grace squeezed into the kitchenette area, looking at Angela over one shoulder. “How on earth did you do it?”

I never slept, Fliss thought, taking a spoonful of piping hot gumbo from Claude. *And I still don’t*. But that wasn’t the answer people wanted when they gushed *How on earth do you do it?* They wanted the answer to be simple, for a woman to flip her (fluffy, perfectly starched) skirts and smooth her (fluffy, perfectly curled) hair, and say, *Oh, it was nothing!*

“Just luck,” she told Grace now, swallowing a spoonful of spicy, savory deliciousness. “In England they’d have made me wait till I was twenty-one to train as a nurse, but the Cadet Nurse Corps here in the States will take you at seventeen. My mother married an American; he brought us over in ’43, and by July that year I was queuing up in uniform and fainting at my first needlestick!”

I never fainted at a needlestick in my life, she thought. *Why do I say these things?* “Delicious,” she told Claude instead, handing the spoon back.

“I never see your mother visit,” Grace observed. “Most women have to pry their mothers out of their hair once the grandbabies come along.”

“Mother and her husband settled back in Buckinghamshire after the war. She wasn’t happy here.” *Would I be happy here now, if she was?* Fliss sometimes wondered. The way she’d grown up, her mother and all her aunts were constantly in and out of one another’s lives, juggling each other’s babies and doing each other’s errands. Not entirely happily, no. There was a fair amount of squabbling and resentment—Fliss remembered the way Aunt Beth had gone completely round the bend in the middle of the war and washed her hands of the whole family, just moved out and flatly refused to do even one more round of nappy-washing or errand-fetching for *any* of her sisters. But mad Aunt Beth aside, all the nets of women in Fliss’s family could be relied on when babies came around. She’d never seen her mother or her aunts weeping into their laundry tubs or scrubbing kitchen tiles with a toothbrush at three in the morning. Was it because they all knew

how to keep up appearances? Or was it because they had nets of people to *help*?

You could ask the Briar Club for a hand, Fliss told herself. Grace had a way of nudging everyone into helping each other, just by quietly pitching in until everyone else did too. A week of fetching Bea's mail for her so she wouldn't have to limp down the stairs, and now Claire or Nora had picked up the habit of grabbing it when they collected their own. A month of Grace correcting Mrs. Nilsson every time she called Mr. Rosenberg next door "that Yid," and now they all corrected her. *I could ask for help*, Fliss thought again, looking at Nora discussing the latest *I Love Lucy* skit, looking at Claire tickling Angela and Grace quietly getting out her sewing scissors to clip a fraying thread on Reka's shawl . . . But the Briar Club weren't family, were they? Maybe they were all a good deal friendlier than when she'd first moved in, but a weekly supper didn't give Fliss any right to lean on them. She tipped her teacup back and drained it to the dregs.

"Supper's up!" Claude called, slinging a kitchen towel over one shoulder.

"Surely he's not *eating* with us," Arlene whispered to Grace, low enough so Claude wouldn't hear over the clatter of bowls, but not quite low enough to escape Fliss's ears. "Because really, I'm as broad-minded as they come, but—"

"Sugar pie," Grace said, "if you don't care for the company, feel free to eat downstairs."

"I'm just saying that this is *our* country—"

"Claude's, too. He flew with the Tuskegee Airmen during the war; what did you do? Collect war bonds?" Grace gave one of her long, cool looks. "I'll thank you not to be rude to *my* guest under *my* roof, Arlene."

"Mrs. Nilsson's roof!" Still whispering, casting a glance back at Claude, who was dishing steaming white rice into bowls. "And I wonder what she'd think if she knew the kind of company you—"

"I'm sure she'd be interested to know you brought Harland here for dinner just last week, and long after visiting hours, too. Also a breach of house rules."

Arlene opened her mouth, but the door creaked then and Bea limped in with her arm slung around Pete's bony shoulders. "Sorry I'm late," she said breathlessly. "Slipped on the steps, and Pete swooped in with an outfield assist—"

“Anytime, Miss Bea.” Pete looked like he was about to faint, having his arm around the waist of an actual living female.

Bea smacked a kiss on his cheek, grinning to see it go completely scarlet. “You’re a good one, rookie. Put me down in a chair somewhere—”

Lina tramped through the door after them, calling, “I made chocolate cream squares! Only I added too much Jell-O—” Everyone jumped in with the usual flood of assurances that her oozing chocolate blisters looked wonderful, positively mouthwatering. Grace’s cat gave a hiss and jumped to his windowsill, Grace was showing Arlene the door, and Fliss saw the faint curl of Claude’s smile as he spooned gumbo over bowls of rice. “Can I help serve?” Fliss asked.

“I’d appreciate it, ma’am.”

“Goodness, you don’t have to *ma’am* me,” she joked.

Claude gave her a certain look of wintry amusement, as if to say *Sure*. “Enjoy your dinner,” he said, and Fliss started passing bowls out, cheeks flaming like Pete’s. He started shoveling down gumbo like he hadn’t eaten in a year—of course he was; that mingy Mrs. Nilsson didn’t feed him enough for a growing boy; all the boarders were indignant about this—waving his spoon and enthusing about an article he’d read in *Collier’s*, “Man Will Conquer Space Soon.” “Can you imagine a colony on Mars? We could have lunar surface exploration in ten, twenty years—”

“No,” said Angela at the spoonful Nora was trying to feed her. “No—” Fliss sat beside her, taking the spoon, noticing how careful Claude was even in this close space not to brush near any of the women, wedging down instead between Joe and Pete. “Pete, you bring that harmonica back over for a jam sometime, what do you say?” Keeping his elbows and knees in, wary not to brush so much as a skirt hem. The kind of wariness that was long habit, probably taught to Claude Cormier by his *tante* Irene right alongside the recipe for this perfect, savory gumbo.

And you think you have any right to complain about anything, Felicity Orton, Fliss told herself, as Angela flung a spoonful of rice down the front of her dress and began to shriek. *You ought to be ashamed of yourself.*

Claude’s Gumbo

2 sticks unsalted butter

2 cups all-purpose flour
2 red bell peppers, chopped medium fine
1 white onion, chopped medium fine
4 celery stalks, chopped medium fine
3 cups chopped okra
2 tablespoons good Creole seasoning
1 tablespoon freshly ground black pepper
1 tablespoon red pepper flakes
1 tablespoon chili powder
1 teaspoon dried thyme
2 to 3 tablespoons minced garlic
4 bay leaves
1 jalapeño, minced
1 to 3 serrano peppers, minced (optional; add if nuclear-level spiciness is desired)
Salt
2 quarts chicken stock
1½ pounds andouille sausage, cut into ¼-inch-thick slices
6 to 10 ounces clam meat, with its liquid
3½ pounds boneless skinless chicken thighs, pan-seared, browned, and cooked through
1 pound shrimp, shelled, deveined, and pan-seared
Hot sauce
White rice, cooked according to package directions

1. In a large saucepan, melt the butter over low heat. Once the butter is melted, add about ½ cup of the flour, stirring vigorously for 1 minute to make a roux. Slowly add the remaining flour ½ cup at a time, stirring constantly to ensure a smooth consistency. Continue cooking for 25 to 35 minutes, until the roux is deep

brown, adding more butter or flour if necessary to maintain the consistency.

2. Once the roux is ready, add the bell peppers, onion, celery, okra, Creole seasoning, black pepper, red pepper flakes, chili powder, thyme, garlic, bay leaves, jalapeño, and serrano peppers, if using, and a generous pinch of salt. Stir till well combined.
3. Begin adding the chicken stock 1 cup at a time, stirring well. When all the stock has been added, the sauce should thickly coat the back of a spoon but not be porridgelike.
4. Add the andouille sausage, clams with liquid, and chicken. Stir thoroughly, reduce heat to low or medium-low on the smallest burner, and simmer at least 60 minutes, stirring periodically. Add water or additional chicken stock if the gumbo boils too low or starts sticking to the bottom of the pot. The gumbo should have the texture of a thick soup and pour easily from the spoon.
5. About 10 minutes before serving, add the shrimp and stir well. Add hot sauce to taste and additional peppers (ground or fresh) if more spiciness is desired, and serve over rice.
6. Eat when the spirit is raw and the eyes are overflowing, while listening to “Cry” by Johnnie Ray.

“Flissy!” Uncle John’s voice boomed down the telephone line, and Fliss smiled. The only man on earth who could call her *Flissy* and get away with it. “How’s my favorite English niece?”

“I’m your *only* English niece.”

“More of my nephews should go looking for wives in the mother country. Hold on, I’m just in the door back from church . . .” His voice muffled for a moment; Fliss imagined him crooking the telephone receiver under his chin as he shrugged out of the tweedy overcoat he wore to Mass every morning: Dr. John Rock, a lanky, square-faced man in his sixties, hair gray white but his brows still bushy and dark over keen, sympathetic eyes. No wonder women patients flocked to him: one look in those eyes and you knew you weren’t going to be flirted with, patted on the head, or dismissed out of hand. Those were eyes that saw you, eyes that said *I’m here to listen*.

“When are you going to come visit with one of those Victoria sponges of yours?” her husband’s uncle went on.

“Soon, I promise.” Fliss lowered her voice, angling the pram to block Mrs. Nilsson hovering in the passage and undoubtedly trying to eavesdrop. Angela was passed out like a little drunkard; she’d run herself ragged at Prospect Park, round and round the duck pond like a dervish. “Uncle John, can I send a friend to you to get measured for a diaphragm? Discreetly?”

“Behind the husband’s back, you mean?”

“She has to sneak just to use spermicidal jelly on the sly. Her husband wants a litter and thinks limitation methods are against God.” Fliss blew out a breath, watching raindrops patter against the panes—a late-April rain shower was coming down hard; she and Angela had barely beat it home. The gray light should have been dreary, but the windows had new curtains, sunshiny yellow and crisp—Grace had made them up, cajoling Mrs. Nilsson into letting her replace the faded ones their landlady had always said were *good enough*. Briarwood House needed a little more cheer, Fliss thought.

“I wouldn’t mind a word with your friend’s husband,” Uncle John was saying on the other end of the line, disapproving. “He ought to be putting his wife’s health over religious doctrine.”

“Would your priest approve of your saying that?” Fliss teased.

“Wouldn’t dream of telling him. Religion, Flissy, is a very poor scientist.” Rustling at the other end of the phone. “If your friend can’t get fitted for a diaphragm, maybe she’d be interested in the trials of something new I’m working on. Groundbreaking stuff—a pill for women, controlling ovulation.”

Fliss’s ears perked. “Is that possible?”

“No messy device insertions or jellies, just a pill every day with your morning coffee, and no worries about the next baby coming until you stop with the pills. Early trials in rabbits look very promising . . .” He went off into some excited monologue about *Dr. Pincus theorizes and funding from Mrs. McCormick* and Fliss lost a bit of time there. Wondering if it was possible: a pill every morning, and then no worrying after.

“I could use you, you know,” he concluded, snapping Fliss’s attention back. “If we start patient trials soon, and I think we will, I’ll need good nurses, and you were always one of the best at handling the nervous

patients. That English voice of yours, they all thought you were Mary Poppins come to shepherd them through. Spit spot, spit spot—”

“I wish I could, Uncle John,” Fliss said with a sigh. “But I have to go now.” Mrs. Nilsson was tutting; she didn’t approve of long telephone calls.

“You send that friend of yours to me, Flissy.”

“I know you’ll take care of her.” Fliss rang off with a smile.

“Take care of who?” Mrs. Nilsson asked immediately.

“Angela!” Fliss said the first thing that came into her head. “My uncle Dr. Rock, he says he’ll take care of her next round of shots—” And she steered the pram down the passage, hastily scooping up her mail.

A letter from Dan; Fliss tore it open upstairs as soon as she got Angela down for a nap. Dan’s letters were so much better than the ones she managed to eke out. Hers always came out like they’d been penned by an exceptionally cheerful robot from one of Pete’s pulp science-fiction magazines, but Dan’s actually *sounded* like him: funny, informative, affectionate. He always enclosed little odds and ends to show what his life was like there: a ticket stub from going to see the Yomiuri Giants play baseball (*the crowds here are much more polite than back home—if a slugger had whiffed in the ninth like that in Boston, Fenway would have bayed for his blood!*), a silk cherry blossom he’d bought from a street vendor (*I’ll pick you a real one when they’re in season*), a set of painted cards for Angela (*Japanese kids love ’em here!*). He described the other doctors on base with funny nicknames: *Dr. Dandruff’s rotating out, thank god, but Dr. Jug-Ears is a gem; I don’t know when that man sleeps . . .* Fliss could *see* Dan, hair sticking up from the end of his night shift, yawning hugely but folding his long limbs over a too-small desk to scratch out a few lines for her.

Those long limbs—the first thing she’d noticed about him, the medical student dropping in on his uncle John in Boston. “What a stork,” the nurses giggled softly, but not without a great deal of primping and sashaying past the young Daniel Orton, soon-to-be MD. Those endless limbs and lanky shoulders and the cheerful face that hid nothing, absolutely nothing—Dan was an open book, wide-open and joyous. *Hi*, he’d said to Fliss when they were introduced, enclosing her entire hand in his big bony one. *Uncle John says you’re the sharpest nurse in the place.* But his whole face said *I like you. I don’t even know you, and I already like you. Can I get to know you, please?*

A squall from the crib; Angela was declining her nap. “A letter from your daddy,” Fliss tried to tell her daughter, but Angela wanted nothing to do with the letter, either; she wanted out of her crib and set off toward her blocks at full sprint. “*Daddy*,” Fliss persisted, showing her the photograph Dan had enclosed: himself in civvies on a Japanese bridge, hands in his pockets. Those hands had so much delicacy. He liked to trace her spine in bed, counting her vertebrae one by one: “You have the most graceful back in the world.” But he could wield a scalpel just as well: *The things I’m doing here with amputees*, he wrote now. *Christ, Fliss, we’re leaping ahead by lengths and bounds. I’m never going to say this war is any kind of good thing, not after patching together so many kids who aren’t ever going to run again, but with the advances we’re making in surgery, at least they’ll walk again. And a decade ago, they mightn’t have lived at all . . .*

Fliss found herself crying; absently wiped the drops away.

Loved the last picture of Angie. She’s getting so big, I can hardly believe it. It’s killing me missing so much of her childhood—you know that, right? I don’t want you hearing me go on about the work and the Yomiuri Giants and the cherry blossoms and thinking I don’t miss my girls every second, because I do. The Yomiuri Giants and the cherry blossoms and all these hours in surgery, they’re the only things keeping me from going crazy missing you. I wake up at night thinking that Ange won’t even know me by the time I come home. Was I wrong to take the second tour, Fliss? I can’t say they don’t need me here, there’s more patients than we can handle, but I’m missing so much—a man’s supposed to serve his country and serve his family, so what in hell do you do when the two are in conflict? I can’t serve here without feeling like I’m letting you down . . .

A smudged spot on the paper. Fliss touched it, thinking she wasn’t the only person trying to keep teardrops from spoiling a letter.

It’s not that I can’t get to know Angie again, win her over when I get home—I’ve got a way with pretty girls, after all. Didn’t I win you over, the prettiest girl in Boston? It’s just what I’m missing out on, while I’m stuck out here cutting off limbs. What we won’t get back. I promise you I will be there for every second when Orton Baby Number 2 comes around, honey.

Fliss lost time then. Lost quite a worrying amount of time, really. When she finally came back to herself the tears had dried on her cheeks; the sun was slanting through the window at a completely different angle, Angela was bawling at a pitch that had for the first time utterly failed to yank Fliss out of herself and onto her feet—and a knock was sounding on the door. “Mrs. Fliss?” Pete’s voice floated through. He sounded like he’d been knocking for a while.

Mechanically, Fliss rose. She picked up Angela, settling that small angry weight into the saddle of her hip, and tried to fix her face but it felt like a mask. All she could hear was Dan's earnest voice, saying *Orton Baby Number 2*.

"Mrs. Fliss!" Pete was fairly bouncing on his toes—in the last few months he'd abruptly shot past Fliss in height; it was startling to look *up* at him, this boy of fifteen, when she remembered the skinny kid who had helped her move in. She braced herself for Pete to ask what was wrong, why had she left Angela crying for so long—*bad mother, bad mother*—but instead he just burst out, "Are you coming up to Mrs. Grace's to watch?"

"Watch?" Fliss blinked.

"The televised nuclear test, Mrs. Fliss!" Pete managed to shout over Angela's howling. "In Nevada?"

"That's today?"

"You're not going to miss it, are you? Maybe it blows up the whole West Coast!" Pete tried to look appropriately worried about this possibility, but he was fairly simmering with that teenage boy glee that couldn't wait to see a great big *boom*, no matter how potentially disastrous. "C'mon, Mrs. Fliss!" And Fliss jerked herself after him, up the stairs toward Grace's room, because why not? Why the bloody hell not? *Orton Baby Number 2 . . .*

Grace was fiddling with the television set's knobs, an announcer flickering in and out. Black-haired Bea was there, massaging her bandaged knee—"Doctor's appointment today," she explained, "so I'm off from work." She taught physical education at Gompers Junior High, Fliss knew, although Bea would tell you frankly enough that she hated it. Of course Nora was at the National Archives this afternoon, while Arlene typed away for HUAC and Claire took dictation for her senator on Capitol Hill . . .

"You'd think a nuclear test would have us all home and huddling under the bed," Fliss said. "When did everyone get so blasé?"

"I'm not sure blasé's the word. You know people take bomb watch vacations in Las Vegas these days?" Grace stood back as an announcer reported he'd be beginning the countdown any moment. "Drive hundreds of miles to drink Atomic Cocktails and boogie-woogie to the Atomic Bomb Bounce as they watch mushroom clouds go up from the test sites. What an age we live in." She looked amused.

What an age, Fliss thought, clutching Angela.

Pete was bouncing again, chattering statistics. “—heard the bomb will be dropped from a Boeing B-50 Superfortress, from a distance of thirty-three thousand feet. It has a projected explosive yield equivalent to thirty-three kilotons of TNT!”

“Don’t yike,” said Angela.

I don’t yike it either, Fliss thought, in agreement with her daughter for once. Her stomach was roiling too much for a glass of Grace’s sun tea; the four of them stood back as the announcer (far too cheerfully, in Fliss’s opinion) began the countdown.

“Thirty-six seconds till impact,” Pete said, voice cracking from treble to baritone as it had begun doing lately, but for once he was too absorbed to blush in embarrassment. “Thirty-five seconds—”

The explosion came on *twenty*. Fliss flinched, expecting a burst of fiery light, a huge cloud of smoke, but there was only a flash of darkness.

“That’s it?” Bea sounded disappointed.

“Don’t yike,” Angela yelled, wriggling against the sudden steel trap of her mother’s arms. Fliss couldn’t take her eyes away from the black screen, broken only by a tiny pinpoint of white light.

“Looks like a homemade roman candle at the end of a country lane.” Grace bent to pick up the cat named Red as he wound through the window with an inquiring *mrow*. “Not very impressive for thirty-three kilotons.”

Fliss couldn’t say how long it was until the announcer came back, breathlessly saying “—beautiful, tremendous, and angry spectacle here—” and began going on about the mushroom cloud the camera was stubbornly not showing. The mood seemed more excited than apprehensive. *Beautiful?* Was that the word for a nuclear test?

“That’s a real rainout of a game if I ever saw one,” Bea grumped, limping for the door. Pete went to help her down the stairs and Fliss stumbled out in their wake, not entirely sure how she made it down to the second floor. She didn’t entirely seem to be connected to her feet in their polished baby-doll pumps. *Orton Baby Number 2. Thirty-three kilotons of TNT. . .*

Her legs gave out as soon as she shut the door of her apartment. Fliss sank down with her back against the door, letting Angela squirm away from her. Dan’s letter was still on the desk. Fliss really should answer it. *Dear Dan, there will be no Orton Baby Number 2, because we are living in a world of bomb watch holidays and no one should be bringing babies into*

this world. I'm sorry I brought even one into this world. Have I disappointed you enough yet?

Bad mother. Bad mother.

Fliss couldn't see any reason to get up, so she just kept sitting. Angela knocked over an end table and Fliss watched the leg crack off without getting up. She'd never liked that bloody end table anyway. Some flimsy thing she'd bought secondhand, when it became clear she and Dan wouldn't be buying their house just yet, and there wasn't any point putting money into furnishing a rented apartment. *It'll only be for a few months, a year at most!* Just a year, then eighteen months, then two years, and and and . . . Angela began howling for her lunch; Fliss roused herself enough to get a package of Nabisco Sugar Wafers, tossed the entire packet at Angela, and sat back down. Dully she sat there watching Angela eat biscuits straight off the linoleum. *Ohhhhhh, bad mother.* She laughed. Now it was official!

Sun beginning to slant. Angela toddled over, took a nap on Fliss's skirts. Woke up, began running around shrieking. Mrs. Nilsson came knocking: "Mrs. Orton. Mrs. Orton, are you going to put that child to bed?" Fliss couldn't get up, couldn't answer the door. Could not do it. Eventually her landlady went away. Eventually Angela came over and fell asleep on her skirts again. Fliss dozed with her head against the icebox. She was so tired, tired for two years straight, tired *all the time*, why couldn't she do more than doze? Kept waking up every twenty minutes, hand on Angela's back, watching the light through the shades change from pink to blue to black. Angela crying again, fretful, frustrated. Another knock on the door.

"Fliss?" A voice floated through. Grace. Fliss didn't answer. But instead of her neighbor just going away, the knob began to jiggle, the tumblers turned, and Grace came straight in, her yellow-striped shirtwaist dress a bright spot in the darkened room.

"The door was locked," Fliss heard herself say, stupidly.

"Was." Grace waggled a hairpin in a lock-picking motion and slid it back into the knot of her hair, switching on the nearest lamp. She looked down at the howling Angela, at Fliss's crumpled skirts and twisted stockings—the same clothes she'd been wearing upstairs at noon to watch the nuclear test—and her mouth crimped. "Oh, my."

Fliss cringed, waiting for the contempt.

BadmotherbadmotherBADMOTHER—

“So you’re human after all, Bubble and Squeak.” Grace reached down, picking up Angela with a soothing pat. “Let me mind the goblin. You change into something comfortable.”

Fliss didn’t think she had the energy to get up, but it seemed like it would take more energy to resist Grace. She managed to wash up and pull on a pair of pale blue pedal pushers and a checked blouse, then tied her limp blond hair up in a bandanna and came out to see Grace feeding Angela some cut-up strawberries, or trying to. “It’s early but I’m betting she’ll sleep if we put her down,” Grace said. “All tuckered out from yelling, this one is.”

Fliss took Angela, flushing dully as she noticed Angela had on a fresh romper and knickers. Of course she’d wet herself; Fliss hadn’t taken her to go potty for hours. “Just . . . just say it, Grace.”

“Say what?”

“I’m not fit to be a mother.” Finally it was out. Finally people *knew*. It was almost a relief.

“Oh, honey. She’s alive, she’s plump, and she’s got lungs to tell the whole world how much she hates strawberries. You’re doing fine. I don’t know what lofty ideal of motherhood you were sold, but let me tell you: there isn’t a mother born who doesn’t want to drop her two-year-old out a window from time to time.”

She sounded so unworried, as if it were nothing for a mother to have such thoughts. Grace never seemed to worry about anything—even if everyone else was irritated or snapping, even if there was a literal nuclear blast on the television, she just calmly carried on. *I wish I could be more like that*, Fliss thought, taking Angela back. *I wish I could have a gift for not worrying*. But she worried all the time . . .

“Don’t yike,” Angela said as Fliss carried her to the white-painted cot with its fluffy pink blankets and wriggled her into a tiny nightdress. “Don’t yike,” she insisted, but fell asleep almost midword. Fliss looked down at her, peevish and tossing, clutching the stuffed elephant Dan had bought her right before shipping out to Japan. *Feel something*, Fliss begged herself, looking at her daughter. *Feel something. Feel anything*.

Still that gray, endless nothingness.

“When does your husband come home?” Grace asked.

It burst out of Fliss, nearly a shout. “I don’t *want* him to come home.”

Grace steered her out of the bedroom, shutting the door carefully. "Like that, is it?"

There was a whole host of questions behind those noncommittal words. The kind of unspoken questions Fliss had thought herself when the beautiful Mrs. Sutherland said her husband made her account for every penny he gave her and expected her doctors to report to him about her appointments. *Like that, is it?*

"I want Dan to come back. Of course I do. He just *can't*." Fliss clawed a curl of hair out of her eyes, retying her bandanna. Retying it just right, so the ends fell perfectly even. "I can't bloody keep this up in front of him." The satisfaction of saying *bloody* was visceral, violent. Americans thought it was so cute when she said that; they didn't know it was real swearing in England. Fliss's mum considered it just a step removed from *fuck*. "I can barely keep the act up in front of the *Briar Club*," Fliss said tiredly.

"Keep what act up?" Grace asked.

Fliss opened her mouth, closed it. Flapped a hand around the room, the ironed tablecloth and the baseboards she'd scrubbed at two in the morning and the row of Angela's perfectly sterilized jars of homemade applesauce. The stack of flawlessly ironed skirts and blouses with their starched Peter Pan collars. The letters neatly addressed in her curly script, to Dan in Tokyo and her mother in Buckinghamshire, assuring them she was really! Just! Fine!

She could only keep up the act of really! Just! Fine! if there was an ocean between her and the people who knew her best.

"All of this," she finally screamed, only in a whisper, because Angela was asleep and she'd really explode if her daughter woke up. She whisper-screamed again: "*All! Of this!*"

Fliss expected Grace to click her tongue, tell her she was exaggerating. Or tell her to buck up; did she realize how lucky she was, handsome husband and beautiful baby and everything in the world to be grateful for? *Bad mother*. But Grace just looked Fliss over thoughtfully, letting the moment stretch, and Fliss's eyes filled with tears.

"Do you know what you need?" the older woman said at last.

Oh, marvelous. *Advice*. Just what she absolutely did not want, which so many people seemed determined to give her anyway. "What?" Fliss snarled, scrubbing at her eyes.

“A night off,” Grace said, surprising her. “A night off, away from babies.”

“Are you sure this is all right?” Fliss asked.

“The dress? No. You look like you’re going to the final of the Pillsbury Bake-Off, not out for a night of martinis and dancing.” Grace shook her head at Fliss’s kitten heels, string of pearls, and dress of fluffy yellow dotted swiss. “But it’ll do,” she concluded, unbuckling the broad red patent-leather belt from around her own red sheath dress and whipping it around Fliss’s waist. “Better.”

“Not the frock. Leaving Angela for the night.”

“Nora said she didn’t mind babysitting.”

“Yes, but—” Fliss looked back up the steps of the house. *I can’t leave my baby*, she knew she should say, but the words wouldn’t come out. They just wouldn’t. She gulped instead, letting Grace snag her arm. “Let’s go.”

“Good girl,” said Grace. Fliss was used to seeing her neighbor padding about Briarwood House in print skirts and straw wedges, but in her snug red sheath with her hair set in waves, Grace looked unexpectedly glamorous. Fit for Hollywood rather than Foggy Bottom. A pale blue Studebaker Starlight coupe made the turn onto Briar, and Grace waved at the driver.

“Your date?” Fliss said, trying not to pat her upswept hair.

“That depends on the state lines.”

Fliss was about to ask what that meant when she saw the Studebaker’s driver: Claude Cormier, looking very sharp indeed in a gray fedora. “Grace, *chère*, you didn’t say you were bringing your English friend,” he said in his Louisiana drawl.

Fliss looked at Grace uncertainly. “Where are we going?” Because mixed couples were one thing in a private home, but going out in town . . . Where on earth could Grace and Claude sit down together in this city, much less get served?

“You’ll see.” Grace slid into the Studebaker’s back seat. “Best sit in back with me, if we want to arrive without getting pulled over.”

“. . . Right.” Fliss slid into the back beside Grace, thinking that there were some things about the States she would *never* get used to. Though really, could you say it was only the States? Look at Crazy Aunt Beth back home: one of the things that had firmly cemented her as the family black sheep was when word went round that she’d taken up with what Fliss’s

grandmother called an *Ay-rab*. “Have you seen him?” all the younger women in the family had whispered, goggle-eyed. “He looks like a film star!” But that hadn’t stopped the nasty whispers when they went by . . .

“Where *are* we going?” Fliss ventured, looking back up at Briarwood House, already worrying that Nora would let Angela have too many sugary biscuits. *Cookies*, she corrected herself.

“Just over the District Line to Capitol Heights in Maryland.” Grace lit up a cigarette as the Studebaker pulled out into the square. “The Chickland Club.”

A long, gleaming bar, a row of pinball machines, small tables clustered together under low lights, the sound of Leroy Anderson warbling “Blue Tango” over the jukebox—none of that surprised Fliss as they entered the Chickland Club. What surprised her was the crowd: Negro couples, white couples, and a few mixed like Grace and Claude. “Chickland is one of the only unsegregated establishments around here,” Grace explained, winding her way easily to one of the small tables, Claude’s arm around her waist. “Try not to look like you’re at a church social, Bubble and Squeak. And don’t you dare order a lime rickey.”

A Negro couple were dancing on the tiny dance floor, and a mixed couple joined them—Fliss saw mutterings from the men jostling around the bar when the Black woman began a jitterbug with her white partner. Some of those glances came Grace’s way, too, when she leaned in close to Claude to laugh at something he said. “Is there going to be trouble?” Fliss asked uneasily, doing her best to cram her full skirts under the tiny table as she eyed that cluster of men and their beers. There had been a crowd around the club entrance, too, restless and shoving.

Claude threw his head back and laughed. “If I wanted to stay out of trouble all my life,” he said as if speaking to someone Angela’s age, “I’d never leave the house.”

Fliss flushed again, looking down into her martini glass. Claude’s fingers were tapping out a rapid rhythm on the edge of the table as if he had his drumsticks in hand—“You musicians,” Grace laughed. “Aren’t you ever off the clock?”

“Never.” He grinned, a quick flash of white teeth. “We are what we do. You see books around here, you’d start shelving.”

“I would not. Shelving books and painting the odd sign, that’s what I *do*, not what I am.”

“Same thing,” Claude decreed. “What do you say, Mrs. Brit? Are we what we do?”

“I think we are. I always ended up fixing people even when I wasn’t on shift as a nurse.” Funny, Fliss had forgotten that—forgotten whole slabs of her life that came before Angela, as if exhaustion had wiped everything clean like an eraser over a chalkboard. “People know you’re a nurse, they’re always running to you with their bloody noses and scraped knees.”

Grace studied her, as Claude rose and sauntered off to pick a tune at the jukebox. “Seems a messy profession for someone as pristine as you.”

“When I was fifteen, I used to volunteer at the local clinic near Bletchley,” Fliss heard herself saying. “The war, you know. I didn’t do much more than stock supplies and clean floors, but I liked seeing the way the nurses could come into a room where everyone was having fits, and just—impart order.”

Grace smiled. “So what pushed you to do it? Nice English girl like you, surely you were supposed to settle down, not get a degree overseas.”

Fliss began her usual answer about being lucky enough to come to the States with her mother and new stepfather and realizing she could apply to the Cadet Nurse Corps. But Grace waved that away. “That’s the opportunity, not the push. In my experience, if a girl attempts a career, she needs more than the opportunity. She needs someone giving her a nudge.” A smile. “Quite often another woman.”

Fliss blinked, realizing she was right. “I suppose mine came when I was sixteen.”

“You’re Edna’s oldest, aren’t you?” Aunt Beth had said after church in Bletchley village one sunny morning while the war was still raging. “Felicity?”

“Yes,” Fliss said, trying not to gape too much at this aunt who was only ten years older than she, but who had so comprehensively thrown the traces over and sent the entire extended family into a tailspin. This was before she’d taken up with the Ay-rab, but the fact that Aunt Beth had told her own mother to go to hell, moved out, and got an actual *job*—not something seemingly like serving in a wartime canteen or rolling bandages, but night shifts working on something unbelievably secret at nearby Bletchley Park—was quite enough to send the family into hysterics. “Yes, I’m Fliss. We

don't see the rest of the family often, being one town over. Not that it's far away, but . . ."

Fliss trailed off. Aunt Beth didn't really do small talk, or even eye contact. She just nodded and stood there, nibbling one of those rocklike wartime scones, staring absently into the distance. She and Fliss had the same blond hair. "You're the one who put a stitch in the knee of Helen's youngest when she tore it open on the swings?"

"Yes!" Pleased her aunt remembered that. "I wish I could be a nurse, but that won't happen."

"Why?"

"The war will be over before I'm old enough. And Mum thinks only fast girls become nurses in peacetime."

"Don't ask her," Aunt Beth advised, already wandering away. "Just do it. That's what I did."

"I think I'd like your aunt Beth," Grace said with a laugh, hearing this memory.

"Yes, well, I won't say it was much in the way of an inspirational chat, but it lingered in the memory." Fliss shook her head, sipping her martini. "And when my mother brought me over to the States, I had the application in to the Cadet Nurse Corps before she realized a thing."

"Who knew you had it in you?" Grace perched her chin on her hand. "Do you miss it? Nursing?"

"I-I don't know." Fliss didn't seem to have the energy to want *anything* these days.

"Go back to it," Grace said, "because that Fliss, the one who sneaked around her family to get herself a career? I like that Fliss. She interests me." A grin and Grace got up to dance with Claude as he came back snapping his fingers to a Glenn Miller riff.

Fliss ordered another martini, the world getting pleasantly numb. At least when you were staring into a glass you were *allowed* to be numb, she thought. You could permit the smile to slip. There was something very refreshing about letting that persistent smile swirl away down the drain . . . One of the young men at the bar weaved over to ask her to dance; she refused politely and was startled by his answering glare. "Think you're too good for a white man, like your friend there?" he demanded, jerking his chin out at Claude and Grace, who were cutting a rug with considerable panache.

“I know I’m too good for a bloody drunk,” Fliss snapped back, using her most clipped British tones, the voice that really cowed pushy Yanks. He glared again before stamping off back to his friends shoving around the bar.

Claude and Grace came back from the dance floor, laughing. “—picked up since Mr. Byrne’s back at the Amber Club,” Claude was saying. “You’d never think he spent a year in the clink, he’s back at the poker table raking it in, cool as a pitcher of iced tea.”

“Still eating his heart out over—”

“Oh, he’s got it bad. She quit the Crispy Biscuit and now he comes back from every lunch in a foul mood—”

The bar crowd was definitely getting rowdy now, not to mention bigger. Forty deep, at least. A firecracker went off somewhere outside, making Fliss jump, and the men around the bar cheered. An ugly sound to it, like dogs baying. “Should we be going?” she whispered. It had to be past eleven now. She saw the Negro couple at the next table exchange wordless glances and reach for their coats.

“Why?” Claude took a long, slow swallow of his beer, eyes also fixed on the bar crowd. “Not doing a thing wrong.”

A florid-faced man in a checked suit pushed his way toward the end of the bar, backed by a couple of beefy policemen, and started haranguing the restless, milling crowd. Fliss couldn’t hear his words, but she saw some of the rowdy drinkers toe the floor and reach for their jackets, especially when the police started smacking the bar with meaty palms and jerking thumbs toward the door. The man who’d asked Fliss to dance slunk out with a half-dozen friends, and Fliss could feel the tension start to seep out of the room.

Then came the high, splintering sound of glass breaking.

She was never sure afterward which came first: the beer glass being swept off the bar and hitting the floor, or the shatter of the front door being kicked in. The roar of cursing and name-calling surged at once, drowning out Kay Starr crooning “Wheel of Fortune,” and the men at the bar heaved like a single massive organism, shoving and punching. More men were thrusting in from the street—one had a *baseball bat*, Fliss saw with horror, and he promptly brought it overhead in a short arc and smashed a pinball machine. The man who had been trying to restore order at the bar legged it for the street, followed by jeers and a flying beer bottle.

Claude and Grace were on their feet, no smiles now. “The kitchen,” Grace said, “get out through the back—” and Fliss found herself pushing

after them through a crowd of dancers who all seemed to have the same idea. Her heart hammered sickly, then stopped altogether as the lights went out. Grace's fingers locked around her wrist, yanking her so hard through the blackness that she nearly stumbled out of her kitten heels. Flashlight beams bounced across the walls and ceiling; Fliss caught a roar of *Police!* Somewhere a woman screamed. A man swore. Her hip bounced painfully off a stove's edge; they were in the kitchen now; she smelled old frying oil and grease. "*Fuck,*" escaped very clearly from Claude up ahead, along with a meaty thud as though he had been hit. The lights came back on and Fliss saw two white men tussling with Claude, pulling him to the ground. A police sergeant manned the door out into the alley, pushing the white customers through; Fliss fell toward him shouting, "Get those men off Mr. Cormier, he's down—" The sergeant pushed her away, hard-faced.

Grace ignored the policeman altogether, grabbing one of the fellows aiming a kick at Claude and winding her hand deep into the man's hair. A jab of her other fist to his throat and a swift yank of her arm, and she'd brought the side of his head down on the corner of the nearest counter. Fliss caught the cool shield of her face: no fear at all as she hammered her elbow down on the man's temple, just a kind of rageful composure. He fell at her feet like a load of bricks. That brought the policeman in, scowling, but Grace turned her smile on like a switch as she collapsed soft and helpless against his arm. "Officer, if you might escort us to safety, this is just terrifying—" Reaching down to pull Claude to his feet, her lips trembling. Reluctantly the officer corralled the three of them, as well as the other mixed couple who'd been dancing earlier—a white man and his dark-skinned girlfriend, now crying—and escorted them out toward the alley.

Fliss had never said the words *Bloody hell* in her life, but she whispered them now. The crowd outside was shouting, surging, slinging firecrackers that lit the night up like a ghastly Fourth of July. The word *COMMUNIST* had been daubed across the club's windows in dripping red letters—for a split second, before she realized it was paint, Fliss thought it was blood. A Chevrolet coup with a cluster of Black passengers slowed in the street, seeing the commotion, and received a hail of beer bottles. The windshield shattered in a starburst of glass; the car veered with a smash into a parked Packard, and Fliss had a crazily clear image of a young girl raising a hand to a cut on her brown cheek, blood running through her fingers. Police pushed in around the car before the crowd could swarm it.

“There’s one of ’em, get him—” A red-faced man pointed at Claude, who stood groping for his missing fedora and swearing in Louisiana French around a bloody nose, and Fliss and Grace yanked him back into the mouth of the alley behind the Chickland Club. He crouched hastily and Fliss fluffed out the big skirts of her dotted swiss frock to hide him from sight. “Nothing to see here, my good man,” she sniffed as the men came round the corner, hauling out her Queen of England tones again, blood throbbing so hard in her temples she wondered if her veins would burst. Two of the men veered off, running toward another car that had paused at the ruckus, but one kept coming and Grace seized him by the collar and hit him three times straight under the shelf of the jaw, three stinging little jabs, and Fliss thought she saw the gleam of something metallic in Grace’s fist before the man doubled over with a scream, blood pouring down his shirt.

“Let’s go,” Claude said, low voiced. “Police are getting out the tear gas and the hoses, *go*—” and the three of them pelted down the alley, around the corner, any direction they could find as long as it was *away*.

“Shoes off,” Grace panted, running out of her pumps and collecting them in a scoop in the next stride, and Fliss did the same with her kitten heels, struggling in her stocking feet to keep up with Grace’s and Claude’s longer strides, until they rounded a corner and the ruckus was behind them: the sound of police sirens just a distant hooting.

“Shoes back on,” Grace told Fliss. “Smooth your hair, catch your breath. Claude, pop your collar, face down. Fliss, take his other arm. Just three people out for a nighttime stroll, nothing to see here . . .” And they walked along more sedately, putting distance between them and the club. Fliss could feel Claude’s arm tense at every flash of light, every siren.

Finally the commotion faded out of earshot and they stopped on a street corner, well-lit, traffic whisking past in orderly lanes. Fliss’s galloping heart caught up with her and she nearly vomited, but she held herself back from whimpering as she saw Claude’s swollen nose and set face. She wasn’t the one who had been punched and kicked tonight; she could bloody well keep from falling apart.

“May I see that nose, please?” she asked Claude, rather surprised to hear her all-business nurse voice come out, and he must have heard it, too, because he nodded. She pinched the bridge, took the handkerchief Grace handed her, cleaned away the blood as best she could without hot water. “Not broken,” she judged. “Ice it when you get home. I’m more worried

you have a cracked rib or two.” She saw the way he’d run with his hand at his side.

“Not broke,” he said briefly.

“If I could take a look—”

“I’ve been kicked by an angry drunk before,” Claude said sharply.

“They’re not broke, and I don’t want a white woman feeling me up on a street corner, all right? Took enough chances tonight.”

Fliss fell back, chastened. Grace laid a hand quietly on Claude’s, fingers linking with his in the shadow between their bodies, not saying anything. He gave a squeeze back, jittering like one of his cymbals, nearly throwing off sparks of anger and energy. “You ladies better get a cab,” he said finally. “I’ll catch a different one, next block.”

“Your car—”

“I’ll come for it in the morning. Not heading back in that direction now.” With a tip of his lost hat to Fliss and a last squeeze of Grace’s hand, he turned abruptly and headed around the corner.

Fliss opened her mouth, but Grace touched her arm. “He’d rather hail a cab in a district where more people look like him. Besides, he doesn’t particularly want to be around a couple of white women right now.”

“Because the taxi won’t stop for the three of us?”

“And because he’s worried we’ll start wailing about *what we’ve been through*, and let’s be honest—” Grace’s smile was tilted. “We haven’t been through a thing, comparatively.”

Fliss shivered, wrapping her arms around herself. She’d managed to keep hold of her handbag, but lost her wrap. “Why . . . why did someone paint COMMUNIST over the club windows?” she found herself asking inanely. “It wasn’t a socialist club.”

“Because *Communist* is the ugliest insult we Americans seem to know right now,” Grace said. “Thank you, Senator McCarthy.”

She shook her head, and Fliss looked up at her suddenly. “What did you have in your fist? When you hit that man under the jaw?”

“Nothing.” Grace looked puzzled, showing her empty hand. “I know how to throw an uppercut, that’s all. Bless my older brothers, growing up.”

Fliss thought of that little metallic point she could have sworn she saw between Grace’s knuckles. “I have brothers, too, Grace. Men don’t start gushing blood just from a jab or two.”

“There wasn’t any blood. Just shadows.”

Fliss looked at the cuff of Grace's dress, stained dark past the wrist. Grace saw her gaze, but just calmly drew her handbag strap up and looped her other arm through Fliss's.

"Come on. Let's go home."

It was nearly two in the morning by the time they got back to Briarwood House. Angela was long asleep in her crib, Nora dozing on the couch. "Your little goblin was good as gold; hope you had a nice night out," she said and gave Fliss a hug before trudging off yawning. Grace had gone upstairs to her green-walled room, but Fliss wasn't entirely surprised to hear her knock softly on the door twenty minutes later, holding a bottle of rye.

"I thought we could both use another drink," she said as she padded around Fliss's little kitchenette in her dragon-embroidered wrapper, making two hot toddies. "I feel I should toast the end of an affair—I doubt I'll be hearing from Claude for awhile."

"It wasn't your fault that—"

"No, but a man like him takes his life in his hands, tangling with a woman like me. That's a high price for a little fun. He may be thinking right now that it feels a bit *too* high." Grace handed Fliss a mug. "And I don't blame him a bit."

"Is that all it was for you? Fun?" Fliss supposed she sounded like a dreadful prude, but Grace didn't look offended.

"What's wrong with fun? Claude's lovely, and we had a lovely time. He's been talking about the jazz scene in New York lately; I have a feeling he might head out of town and check it out. Whatever he does, I wish him well." Grace raised her mug to her absent lover. "I like taking things lightly, Bubble and Squeak. You've made a very nice nest for yourself, but not every woman has the nesting urge. Though I might change my mind someday for the sheer luxury of having more space than a broom closet," she added, looking around Fliss's immaculate two-room apartment.

"I'd never have gotten this place if Dan hadn't met with Mrs. Nilsson and convinced her I really did have a husband. Until then she didn't quite believe me. Woman alone with a new baby . . ." Fliss trailed off, listening to Angela's soft sleepy sounds coming through the half-open bedroom door. Abruptly she heard the meaty thud of a man's boot going into Claude's ribs and flinched. "I hate this country sometimes."

"I love it dearly." Grace sighed. "But we are dreadfully backward and wrongheaded in some ways."

“I don’t really hate it,” Fliss amended, feeling rather ashamed. It was here in the States that she’d found her calling, after all. Found her career, her husband, her home . . . “It’s just that—since I wasn’t born here, sometimes I notice things that stop me in my tracks, things no one else here seems to blink at. I mean, if Claude Cormier came to England, I’m not saying he wouldn’t hear ugly things, but . . .” *There was plenty of ugliness in England—just remember the nasty comments about Aunt Beth and her Ay-rab.* “But he wouldn’t hear the kinds of things he hears every *day* here,” Fliss finished.

Grace looked thoughtful. “I sometimes think this country is an eternal battle between our best and our worst angels. Hopefully we’re listening to the good angel more often than the bad one.” She sighed. “We do that, and change will come.”

“Not fast enough.” They both took a slug of their hot toddies. This time Fliss didn’t flinch at Grace’s heavy pour on the rye—maybe it was the whiskey, but she heard herself saying out loud: “Dan wants another baby, but I don’t want to bring one into this.”

“Into what?” Grace curled up in Fliss’s desk chair.

“*This.*” Cafés going up in a riot of broken glass and tear gas because a few mixed couples had dared dance to Kay Starr; mushroom clouds blooming like hideous roses over Nevada test sites as tourists sipped Atomic Cocktails. “*Any* of this.”

“Does Dan know that?”

“No.” Fliss closed her eyes tight, burning. She didn’t mean to say it, but somehow it came out. “He doesn’t even know I didn’t want Angela.”

BAD MOTHER BAD MOTHER BAD MOTHER. The words were shrieking inside her skull this time, not whispering.

It was as if Grace could hear them. “You’re a good mother, Bubble and Squeak. Far better than you think you are.”

Fliss huddled on the edge of the narrow bed, hands folded tight around her mug. “I loved her the moment she came out”—rushing to say that, rushing to get past the fact that all she felt now when she looked at Angela was blankness—“but I wasn’t *ready*. We were going to wait until we were more settled. We were careful, only . . .” A broken sheath, one night. Just one time. “I was going to keep working,” Fliss whispered. “I *wanted* to keep working. I loved my job.”

“I know. You should go back to it.”

The mere thought required so much energy it made Fliss want to fold on the floor and weep. “I can’t.” Even for Uncle John and his beguiling offer to help with the patient trials of the new miracle pill, the one that prevented ovulation. “I had to stop because of Angela, and now . . .”

And now this: endless exhausted days, sleepless nights. Maybe it would have been better if Dan were here to share the load. Maybe it would have been better if her mother were still stateside to share the load. But they weren’t. *Dan, I miss you . . .*

“You’re a nurse.” Calmly, Grace sipped at her mug. “Surely you knew a way to take care of things, early on. Were you tempted?”

Fliss didn’t even pretend not to know what she was talking about. She should have been shocked, but somehow she wasn’t. “No, I wanted her. Just not *yet*. I tried saying that once—before I was pregnant, to my doctor in San Diego. Asking if there was something a bit more fail-safe than a diaphragm, or rubbers.” Something like Uncle John’s proposed pill, something she could take and forget about without worrying. “But the doctor just gave me a lecture that I’d have to take whatever God sent me. *Why?*” Fliss burst out. “Women have to plan out every moment of their lives, from *wash on Monday, iron on Tuesday* all the way through to *rest on Sunday*. So why aren’t we allowed to plan *this*? Something that derails our whole lives, all the other plans . . .”

Her eyes swam. She fixed them on the floor, breathing unsteadily, focusing on Angela’s dreamland tossing and turning in the next room. “And now Dan wants another,” she said softly. “*Orton Baby Number Two*.” She gulped down the rest of her hot toddy, then rose. “I need to cook something,” she muttered and headed into the kitchenette. A small pot, a wooden spoon, sugar—she threw things on the tiny counter, hardly knowing what she wanted to make, or even if she was hungry. It hardly mattered if she was hungry or not. Mothers always had to be feeding people. Their children, their husbands, their families, always before themselves.

Grace came to lean against the counter, hands cupped around her mug, Chinese dragons whispering about her legs. “My mother had a change-of-life baby,” she said, sounding reflective. “My, wasn’t she mad about it. I was already grown; she didn’t want to start all over again with diapers and bottles. Kitty came along, and I ended up doing most of the mothering for a

while. Mama just sank into a haze—staring into space, couldn't hardly look at the baby."

Fliss flinched, covering it with a quick turn to switch on the burner. Watched the pot warm.

"It lasted awhile, Mama not being able to deal with the baby. Felt like a long time to me. Probably felt like an eternity to Mama." Grace sipped. "But she came out of it eventually, and Kitty didn't remember. Why would she? Didn't hurt her any. Babies don't remember when their mothers aren't perfect."

Fliss fumbled in the icebox for the cut-up strawberries Angela refused to eat. Dumped them into the pot, threw some sugar in after.

"She wasn't a bad mother, my mama. Just tired."

Fliss turned the heat down, stirring the mixture of softening strawberries. Stirring, stirring. She realized the tears had started up, pouring gently down her cheeks as if a spigot had turned on. Grace didn't comment on them. *You can be so kind*, Fliss thought. *In fact, you're always kind*. But she couldn't help but think of Grace's focused, rageful face as they fled the club, when she caught a man's hair and slammed his head with a *crack* on the corner of a countertop.

You frighten me a little, Fliss thought. But when Grace put the mug down and laid an arm around her shoulders, Fliss closed her eyes and sank into the hug as though she were drowning. Because the hug said *I will not let you drown*.

"What are you making, Bubble and Squeak?" Grace asked eventually, handing Fliss a handkerchief.

Fliss stared down at the pot, mopping her eyes with one hand and stirring the bubbling fruit with the other. "Strawberry fool," she said once she could trust her voice to stay steady.

"What on earth is *strawberry fool*?"

"Stewed fruit folded into custard or whipped cream . . . It's an English thing."

"You don't say." Grace watched Fliss fumble in the icebox for cream.

"I lose time," Fliss heard herself say, taking the strawberries off the heat, finding a mixing bowl, dumping the cream in. "I look up in a daze and twenty minutes have gone by. Or an hour. Or more."

Grace said nothing, just sipped at her mug.

“I don’t feel anything.” Fliss found her hand mixer and began turning the crank over the cream. *Beat until soft peaks form*, the cookbooks always said. *Beat until your arm falls off*, that was what they *should* say. “I don’t feel anything. I look at her when she sleeps, I look at her when she’s screaming, I look at her when she smiles at me and it doesn’t matter. I just don’t—I don’t—I—”

Silence.

Turning the crank. Turning, turning. Cream splattered. “. . . What if I don’t love her?” Fliss whispered. “*What if I don’t love my daughter?*”

“Would you die for her?” Grace asked.

Fliss blinked. “Of course.”

“Well.” A tilted smile, gently downturned. “Why on earth doesn’t that count as love?”

Fliss’s Strawberry Fool

3 cups hulled and chopped fresh strawberries, plus whole strawberries for garnish

6 tablespoons sugar

2 teaspoons fresh lemon juice

2 cups heavy cream

1. Place the chopped strawberries and sugar in a small pot and cook over medium-low heat, stirring frequently. Remove from the heat when the berries have softened and thickened, about 5 minutes. Stir in lemon juice, then chill the mixture completely.
2. In a medium bowl using a hand mixer, beat the cream until soft peaks form. Spoon the whipped cream into bowls or decorative glasses and gently fold in the chilled strawberry mixture, adding more cream to make decorative layers. Garnish each serving with a whole strawberry.
3. Eat with a fussy baby, while listening to “(It’s No) Sin” by Eddy Howard and His Orchestra, without fear of making a mess, because at least the baby is eating.

“Telephone for you, Mrs. Orton.”

Fliss nearly groaned as Mrs. Nilsson popped up like a jack-in-the-box in front of the pram. She was going to be late to the train station; Angela had screamed her lungs out when Fliss stuffed her into the blue romper rather than the lavender one, Fliss’s last pair of stockings had snagged, and her cloisonné earrings had gone missing. Angela was still grizzling, that fretful whiny sound she could keep up effortlessly for hours, and Fliss looked down at her with a bracing internal reminder: *Even when you’re being horrid, I would still die for you.* She’d been clinging to that thought rather hard since hearing Grace say it.

And now here was Mrs. Nilsson, brandishing the telephone receiver. Fliss was *definitely* going to be late for her train.

“Yes, hello?” Wedging herself between the wall and the pram as Claire and Arlene flew down the corridor on their way to work, sniping about who had hogged the bathroom that morning. “This is Mrs. Orton,” Fliss said impatiently, hoping whoever it was wouldn’t take too long. She barely managed not to overturn the vase of yellow daisies Grace had set out on the hall table.

There was a crackle of static, and then a tinny voice swam into her ear from what sounded like the end of a very long tunnel. “—hear me, honey?”

Suddenly every muscle in her body pulled taut, singing. “*Dan?*”

More crackling. “—goddamn line,” he said. “—hear me, Fliss?”

“I can hear you. I can hear you—” Fliss was half shouting; Mrs. Nilsson frowned but she didn’t care a jot. “Keep talking, please!”

“—can’t talk long, honey, I only got the phone for two minutes because I said it was an emergency—”

“An *emergency?*” Fliss’s pulse spiked. “Are you hurt, or—”

“No, no.” His voice, that dear voice. She hadn’t heard that voice in nearly a year; he could so rarely phone all the way from Japan. Her vision blurred as he went on. “I got your letter, Fliss. I was worried.”

The strength went out of Fliss’s legs all at once; she sat down in the middle of the corridor, pale blue skirts and layers of crinoline sinking around her. “My letter?” The one she’d written what felt like forever ago, after a three A.M. dinner of strawberry fool and whiskey. *I don’t know how to say this to you, Dan, so I’m just going to say it. You talk about Orton Baby Number 2, but I don’t want another baby. I just don’t. Everything is so hard, and the thought of making it any harder makes me want to die.*

She shouldn't have mailed it. She should never have mailed it . . .

"I didn't know you were feeling so bad. Your letters are always—" More crackling; his voice disappeared for a moment and then came back shockingly close, right in her ear as though his cheek was pressed against hers. "—so cheerful, I felt bad if *I* sounded low. I didn't want to bring you down." His voice wobbled. "Jesus, it's been hard, Fliss. I miss you so much."

"I miss you too," she whispered. Tears pouring, not the absent slipping drops that started and stopped on their own accord, but a hot violent flood.

"And the baby thing, Fliss, don't worry. I just want my two girls back; that's all I need. You don't want another little Angela, that's fine."

Fliss put her hand over the receiver, cried two hard, gulping sobs that he couldn't hear, then took her hand away. "Dan, *nobody* would want another little Angela," she managed with a shaky laugh. "She's a terror. There's only one of her, but she still has me outnumbered and surrounded."

"Then we'd better not give her any allies, or we're sunk." A beat. "Honey, *tell* me if things are hard. Just . . . tell me. Okay? You don't have to be cheerful for—" He cut off for a moment. "Goddammit, we're almost out of time. I love you—"

"I love you. I love you—"

"—a thousand times—"

They managed a few more half-shouted phrases through the crackling, and then the line went dead and he was gone. Fliss gripped the receiver and wept into it, shoulders heaving, not caring that Mrs. Nilsson was goggling.

"Hey there, let's get you up." Bea came limping in from the breakfast room, bending down to boost Fliss up with a surprisingly strong grip. Fliss went on crying into her shoulder, and Bea patted her back. "Beat it, Nosy Parker," Bea said to their landlady, who sniffed and went off to begin Hoovering ostentatiously down the hall. Fliss went on crying, but it felt more like relief than sadness. *The baby thing, Fliss, don't worry.*

Don't worry. *Don't worry!*

"I thought you were catching a train?" Bea asked when Fliss finally stopped crying and wiped at her eyes. "Or are you calling a rainout on that?"

"Oh, I'm going." Fliss felt her smile break, not the smile that locked behind her molars, but a huge, watery beam. "I'm taking a friend to see my uncle in Boston—I'll be back tonight." She picked up her handbag, almost

knocking over the vase of yellow daisies again—how *beautiful* they were, a shock of color that nearly dazzled her eyes. Mrs. Nilsson didn't approve of flowers, but Grace had somehow gotten around her, just like she'd done with the sunny yellow curtains at the window, and now this hallway that had been so drab and cheerless looked like one big splash of sunshine. Fliss plucked a daisy out of the vase and threaded it through her own buttonhole.

"Sure you want to lug the little rookie here all the way to Massachusetts?" Bea cast a look into the pram, where Angela was still voicing her general displeasure at the state of the world. "I can watch her today if you need it."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly—" Fliss started to say, then stopped. *The Briar Club aren't family*, she'd spent so much time telling herself, *so you don't have any right to lean on them*.

But hadn't things changed since the days when she'd first moved in and no one said anything to her but the occasional indifferent *hello* in line for the loo? Hadn't a lot of things changed?

"Actually, I *could* use the help," she said now, feeling the sheer relief of saying it. "Are you sure you don't mind watching Ange until tonight?"

"I like the occasional bout of babysitting," Bea said cheerfully. "Reminds me why I don't want any little rookies of my own, and I need reminders because my mother, good lord, she wants grandchildren and she could wear down a stone."

Fliss burst out laughing. An unsteady laugh, but a laugh. "Then my little goblin's all yours. My advice is to take her to the park and let her run until she falls over unconscious."

"Anytime," Bea said casually—casually! Like it was nothing!—as she popped the pram back on two wheels. "Come on, kid, let's run some drills . . ."

"Bless you." Fliss flew for the door, but not before stopping to throw her arms around lumpish little Lina, who had just trudged out of the kitchen with a mixing bowl. "Lina, want to help me make real English shortbread tonight?" Three ingredients; even Lina couldn't muck that up.

"Really?" Lina gave a tentative smile. Goodness, that lazy eye of hers was getting worse; Fliss thought she'd better talk to Grace and see if they could cook up a scheme to get Lina those corrective glasses her mother refused to pay for.

“Really,” Fliss promised and dashed out the door to hail a taxi. Bea was already heading the other way, toward the park with Angela. Recipes and smiles and assistance with the baby . . . could she have had more help all this time from the ladies of the Briar Club? Had she just not been letting herself *ask*? Angela stood up in the pram to wave at her mother, showing every one of her gapped and pearly teeth, and Fliss’s heart squeezed all at once.

“Mrs. Sutherland, I’m so sorry,” Fliss said breathlessly, skidding to a halt on the platform at Union Station. “I didn’t mean to be late.”

“Not at all.” The senator’s daughter-in-law looked a picture of serenity in her pale green traveling suit, her ivory lace blouse, her pillbox hat with its wisp of veiling, but she was twisting her gloves between her hands as if trying to throttle them.

After the two women had settled into a private compartment on the train—nothing but the best for a Sutherland, of course—Mrs. Sutherland said in a low voice, “Your uncle . . . He won’t tell anyone about . . .”

“He is a noted fertility specialist and he will fully examine you for fertility issues during your appointment,” Fliss said, taking her seat. Her pale blue skirts were crumpled, and she found she didn’t care a jot. “It’s just that he will take the opportunity, during your appointment, to measure you for a contraceptive device as well. Which is no one’s business but yours.”

The young Mrs. Sutherland exhaled shakily. “That was a very good idea you had.”

Fliss rather thought it was. “Do you think you might be able to come back and forth to Boston, in the future? Late this year or early next?”

“Will I need to? I thought the fitting was just a onetime—”

“It is, but my uncle told me about some patient trials for a new pill . . .” Explaining it all out as the train rocked smoothly into motion, pulling away from Union Station. “He’ll need patient volunteers.”

“I couldn’t be part of a *birth control* study.” The other woman dropped her voice, strangling her gloves again. “My husband—”

“It won’t be a birth control study, it will be a fertility study.” Which Fliss thought was sheer genius, when Uncle John explained how they were sliding it past Massachusetts state law banning all forms of contraception. “It’s just quantifying the effects of progesterone on fertility. As far as your husband or anybody else knows, the study examines chances of conception.

Which side of conception, for or against—well, that’s a detail nobody needs.”

Mrs. Sutherland’s dark eyes went positively molten. “No, they don’t.”

“I’ll have my uncle talk to you about the trials, then.”

And maybe she’d help with those trials, Fliss thought, leaning back in her seat as the suburbs of Washington, D.C., rolled past. Maybe she could go back to work at the clinic. She didn’t think Dan would mind. And Angela wouldn’t, either—she was so young; was she really going to remember if her mother was by her side every single moment of her babyhood? Fliss lost some time then in another slate-wipe of weariness, but only about five minutes, and that wasn’t so bad. She was still exhausted, and her eyes were verging on tears again, but Fliss found herself giving a small, shaky smile.

Interstitial

Thanksgiving 1954
Washington, D.C.

There are two whispered arguments going on in Briarwood House, one over a murder weapon and one over something much more important. The house has been eavesdropping avidly as one of the policemen rummages under the couch in the parlor, calling out: “Looks like the second murder weapon, sir, it’s all covered in gore—” but then another conversation sends the house’s gaze spinning back toward the kitchen.

“I could make you some tea, Mom,” Pete is saying, patting his mother’s shoulder where she sits a little ways from the rest of her boarders, but she just smacks him off.

“Tea! As if anyone could drink tea with blood *drying on the walls*; aren’t you just the most tactless, brainless—”

“I thought it might help your nerves,” Pete says valiantly, but precious little thanks he’s going to get for being thoughtful, the house thinks.

“The only thing that would help my nerves is getting out of this house!” Mrs. Nilsson hisses. “And let me tell you, we *are* getting out of this house. As if I’ll stay in a place where two murders have—”

“We should stay in a hotel for a few days,” Pete agrees. “Good idea—”

“A hotel? A *hotel*, do you think I’m made of money?” Mrs. Nilsson draws herself up in her straight-backed kitchen chair. “No, no. We’re getting rid of this place altogether, the moment we can. I’ve had offers before, but now I’ve a mind to—”

“What?” Pete sounds as appalled as the house feels. “Mom, you can’t sell up, this is our home.”

“—there was an offer from McTurney & Sons last month, you know, the furniture men, they’re looking for store frontage. Gut the place and make a showroom, and I told them I wasn’t interested but now I’m inclined to give them a call. The trouble I’ll have finding boarders willing to live in a place where two murders have happened, I’d have to *lower the rent*—”

A whole cluster of policemen and detectives have gathered in the parlor now around the second murder weapon but the house barely notices, thoughts spinning like the crystals in the dining room chandelier. No more Briarwood boardinghouse for ladies?

Five years ago you wouldn’t even have noticed, it thinks. Too sunk in slumber for too long, too indifferent to pay attention to who comes and goes through these doors. Now the house feels its blinds shuttering, its walls creaking and wanting to hunch inward. No more Mrs. Nilsson, that wouldn’t be so bad: no hectoring voice, no bleach bucket putting dings in walls, no rubbery casseroles making the whole kitchen smell like burnt cement. But no Mrs. Nilsson also means no Pete—no Pete putting a fond shine on the parlor mantel, no Pete taking his conscientious hammer to the screen door whenever the mesh needs to be tacked down. No Lina making the kitchen smell of sugar and butter. No boarders, no endless lighthearted tramp of footsteps up to the fourth floor every Thursday night. No debate about the latest episodes of *Dragnet*; no flowers being added to Grace’s wall vine . . .

The wall vine would be painted *over*, the house realizes with a recoil that makes the windows rattle. Everything would be ripped out, modernized, made into a box of a showroom where stiff living room sets were arranged, but no one actually . . . lived.

A house that doesn’t contain a family anymore, but a store instead—well, it can’t really call itself a house.

“We can’t just kick out all the boarders in the wake of something like this,” Pete is arguing with his mother, indicating all the police commotion, but she hisses, “*We’ll talk about it later*,” and the house feels suddenly, strangely sick. Abruptly the stakes of this endless Thanksgiving day—the question of who will be hauled away in handcuffs and who will not; the even bigger question of *why* two bodies lie dead and bloodied on the floor tonight—have just been raised so much higher.

Don't let me go, Briarwood House thinks, hunching protectively around its kitchen-full of ladies. *Please don't let me go*.

But they can't hear.

The house barely pays any attention as the detective comes into the kitchen, feeling sick all the way down to its foundations. But the ladies sit up straighter, every whispered discussion dying away as the second murder weapon is produced—covered gruesomely in sticky, drying gore.

The detective aims a piercing look around the room. “Anyone want to tell me who in this house owns a baseball bat?”

Two Years Earlier

January 1953

Chapter 5

Bea

Dear Kitty,

I may actually expire of curiosity: nearly two years I've lived at Briarwood House with Bea Verretti, and I still have no idea why she keeps a baseball bat by her door! On the run from the mob? Living in fear of a violent husband? Afraid of the dark? Will I ever know? I wish you were here.

—Grace

Bea slipped on a patch of ice the day after President Eisenhower was inaugurated, and as she hit the ground—as a spike of pain bolted through her bad knee, and every nerve from the crown of her head to the ends of her toes shrieked—she realized what she should have probably realized years ago: she was done. She was never, ever coming back.

“Is Miss Verretti crying?” whispered the girls in her eleven A.M. physical education class, but they soon wandered back inside the gymnasium. Bea had been trying to cajole them outside for a game of basketball, but *It's coooooold, Miss Verretti and I'm having my time of the month, Miss Verretti*, and now here she was on her rump on the cracked asphalt, crying, as her class went inside to file their nails and chatter about the last episode of *I Love Lucy* where Lucy gave birth at the *same time* Lucille Ball gave birth, and hadn't it all just been to die for. People said more viewers had tuned in for “Lucy Goes to the Hospital” than for the presidential inauguration the next day, Bea remembered hearing on the radio. Certainly her batch of thirteen-year-olds had, these snotty little misses who refused to

break a sweat in their gym slips and apparently had their periods three weeks out of every month.

I am never getting out of here, Bea thought, wiping her eyes, massaging her knee, which was still shrieking at her like a postseason umpire with a hangover. *I am never going back where I belong. I will be the PE teacher at Gompers Junior High until I rot.*

You could come home and get married, her mother's voice chimed immediately. *Artie Aliberti broke things off with Rosa Conti, and he's always had an eye for you!* Oh yes, go home to the North End in Boston and start churning out babies while reminiscing with all the other women about the time the altar had been set up in North Square for a procession in honor of Saint Rosalie, *che bellissima*. Bea would rather take a bat to her own temple.

She managed to limp inside as the bell rang and her class clattered off to the locker room. Lunch hour—Bea had a ham sandwich wrapped in wax paper but she ignored it, heading for the principal's office. His secretary had the desk outside, and the woman was off getting her hair done (*the only thing that would shift her ass out of that chair*, Bea thought), so the telephone was unattended. Bea put the call through to a suburb in Kalamazoo, smiling despite herself as the forthright voice came down the line: "Bea Verretti, you lazy tramp, how are you?"

"Not bad, you slack-jawed cow." She could almost hear Elizabeth's answering grin on the other end. Elizabeth Bandyk, who'd come up with Bea at Chicago tryouts in '43, both of them eighteen years old and ready to chew up nails and spit out carpet tacks. Elizabeth Bandyk had been known as the South Bend Bandit, and Bea Verretti the Swinging Sicilian, by the end of their first season. "Getting ready for spring training?" Bea asked, perching her hip on the desk to take the weight off her knee.

"Keeping the arm loose, working on my slider. Still drops like a deck chair over home plate, but I have to ice my elbow afterward for an hour." Elizabeth laughed that big raucous laugh, the one that sounded so incongruous coming from such a delicate little blonde. It was Elizabeth's looks as much as her killer fastball that got her onto the South Bend Blue Sox with Bea that first year in '43, where she'd stayed as Bea moved on through various other teams. The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, the AAGPBL, wanted its players to *look* a certain way, as well as play a certain way. Bea and Elizabeth hadn't cared; they were just there for

the game. “When did we get old?” Elizabeth demanded now. “Every spring I see these rookie girls hardly dry behind the ears, all their joints brand-new off the factory floor . . .”

Bea looked down at her swollen knee. Just a twenty-eight-year-old knee; how could it have failed her like this? Twenty-eight wasn’t old! “Liz, I’m not going to be there at spring training.”

A pause on the other end. Not, Bea thought, a surprised pause.

She gripped the telephone receiver harder. “You don’t seem shocked.”

Elizabeth sighed. “Bea, that break was bad.”

“No, it wasn’t.” A late-season game against the Rockford Peaches, a hard slide into second on a short hopper—Bea had run a play like that hundreds, thousands of times, from sandlot ball as a kid all the way to her years in the league with the South Bend Blue Sox, the Racine Belles, the Fort Wayne Daisies. Why had that one slide been different, her left knee giving way with an audible *crack* as loud as a curveball connecting with a bat’s barrel? “I should have been playing by the next season.”

“You thought that, Bea.” Quietly. “Everyone else knew you were done.”

Bea flinched. “Don’t be a bitch.” People would be surprised, hearing how the league women swore. They knew how to present themselves—carefully curled hair under their baseball caps, red lipstick, crisply skirted uniforms, and demure handshakes right out of Helena Rubinstein charm school—but on the field and in the locker room they could cuss like sailors.

“I’m not being a bitch. I’m being a realist. I tried to tell you then, so did the doctor, so did your manager. You didn’t want to hear it.”

Bea ruffled a hand through her hair—the black hair she’d started growing out again in preparation for spring training; league players had to have long hair. “I thought for sure I’d be back this year,” she said softly. The Swinging Sicilian, back in the game. She wasn’t even Sicilian, but the nickname still stuck. Because with a bat in her hand she was unstoppable; she could put the best fastball in the league on the goddamn *moon*.

And now her bat stood leaning up against her apartment door in Briarwood House.

“You had eight years, Bea. It was a good run.”

It wasn’t enough, she wanted to scream. “I was hoping for one more,” she managed to say, trying to make a joke out of it.

“One more might be all any of us gets.” Elizabeth hesitated on the other end of the line. “The crowds aren’t what they were. There’s talk of shutting

the league down.”

“They’ve been saying that from the beginning,” Bea scoffed.

“Well, this time it feels serious. It’s not just the old *girls shouldn’t play* griping, it’s cutting down on equipment, it’s cuts in the budget . . .”

She went on, and Bea forgot all about the throb in her knee. No AAGPBL? Even if it had been agony these past two seasons, knowing her friends were playing without her, at least she’d known they were *playing*. Were the higher-ups really just going to send all those women home?

No league. No cramped locker rooms, wandering around in brassieres and the uniform undershorts, icing bruises and gossiping about the opposing team. No infield chatter as you bounced from foot to foot waiting to shovel up a grounder. No team bus rattling them between away games, no darning knee socks and sponging stains off uniform skirts in makeshift hotel rooms, no sneaking around the chaperones to go out drinking after curfew. No easy identity: “I’m a Daisy” “I’m a Peach” “I’m a Belle.”

If she wasn’t any of those things, what was she?

The door to the principal’s office creaked, yanking Bea’s roiling thoughts back to the present. “Gotta go,” she whispered to Elizabeth. “Keep working that slider, long as they’ll let you throw it—” and she got the receiver down just in time.

“Beatrice,” breathed Mr. Royce. “What *can* I do for you today?” The Gompers principal put a hand on her shoulder the way he always did, so he could stand just a bit too close for comfort. His eyes were bright with dislike. Bea couldn’t figure out which he wanted more—to get his hand down her blouse, or fire her.

“Nothing at all, Mr. Royce.” Sliding out from under his hand and stretching to her full height. Bea was nearly a head taller than her boss, and she knew he hated it. “Just stopped by to borrow something from your secretary.”

“A lipstick?” Mr. Royce chuckled. “You ladies and your beauty products!”

“A Band-Aid. I was showing the girls how to throw windmill style for softball”—demonstrating, with just enough of a whip in her elbow to force him back a step—“and I caught my thumbnail and tore it halfway off. Blood everywhere, look—”

“That won’t be necessary.” Edging back some more.

“Nothing like what I used to get in my league days! I tell you about the time I broke my bat against a fastball from a Kenosha Comet pitcher, and one of the splinters went clear through my forearm? Ran all the way to third with a stand-up triple, spraying blood the whole way—”

“I hope you don’t tell these gruesome stories to your students. And really, softball doesn’t need to be part of the curriculum for the young girls of Gompers. Something more ladylike. Tennis, perhaps.”

Have you heard the way tennis players grunt? Bea thought. *Ladylike as all get-out!* “Yes, Mr. Royce,” she managed to say.

“I’ve told you before, you may call me Eugene,” he chided. “At least when there are no pupils around! And you need to change back out of shorts into a skirt after class, Beatrice, I’ve spoken to you about that. The dress code for our staff’s females—”

“I’m in physical education, Mr. Royce. I need to be able to demonstrate anything athletic.”

“Well, now. How *athletic* do we really want our young ladies to be?” Chuckle, chuckle. Bea just looked at him, wishing she could cram his tie clip up his nose. If she did that she’d be fired for sure, but how much did she want this job anyway? And how far *could* she get it up his nose? Three inches at least, before she hit the wind tunnel he had for a brain?

You aren’t qualified to work anywhere else, she reminded herself. She hadn’t even finished her senior year of high school when she’d quit to play shortstop for the AAGPBL. No, if she lost this job it was back home to Boston and her mother’s matchmaking.

“Oh, and Beatrice?” Mr. Royce’s hand descended on her shoulder again, damply. “We’ll be needing you to fill in for Miss Ferguson’s afternoon class, now she’s quitting to get married. You ladies, running for the hills as soon as you get that ring on your finger!” Chuckle, chuckle. “I can’t deny she’s left us shorthanded, but you’ll do fine for the spring semester.”

Bea blinked. “Me, teach a class?”

“Relax, my dear.” A squeeze of her shoulder, fingers now draping over her collarbone. “It’s not like I’m asking you to teach algebra!”

Bea’s heart sank. “. . . What’s the class?”

“**H**ome economics?” Grace paused a moment, glass of sun tea in hand, then burst out laughing.

“It’s not funny,” Bea objected, but too late: the Briar Club’s collective funny bone had been set off. Nora giggled into the neck of Grace’s cat, Fliss buried her laughter in Angela’s ruffled romper, even Arlene tittered against her fingertips. Claire flopped all the way onto her back from where she’d been sitting on the floor.

“Kill me now,” she announced. “Bea Verretti, teaching home ec!”

“You’re all dead to me,” Bea said, and that just set everyone off again.

“I’m sure Miss Verretti will do just fine,” Arlene’s sharp-faced FBI boyfriend, Harland, called over from the kitchenette area in his Virginia drawl. Arlene hadn’t gotten a ring out of him yet, but she still had her hooks in somehow—Bea couldn’t think of any other reason a man would come over and *offer* to cook for his girlfriend’s housemates. He stood at the hot plate now, jacket discarded and sleeves rolled up, frying chicken with surprising dexterity. “You took home ec in high school, didn’t you?” he asked Bea.

“I didn’t pay attention. I barely *went*.” Too busy ditching class for batting practice, or sneaking off school grounds to watch the Red Sox at Fenway. “What do people learn in home ec, anyway?” Bea asked, somewhat desperately. She was supposed to start filling in for Miss Ferguson on Monday.

“Sewing, of course,” said Nora. “How to run up a simple blouse or skirt on your Singer—”

“Housework,” Claire said with a dramatic retch. “How to get stains out of things, polish silver—”

“Household accounting?” Grace suggested. “How to shop on a budget?”

“What is there to learn about not having any money?” Bea wanted to know. “You don’t have any, you buy what little you can afford, it’s not complicated. Why is there a *class*?”

“Oh, sweetie, home ec is where you learn the *refinements* of being a wife,” Arlene cooed. “How to dress nicely, host a party, set a proper table. How embarrassed would you be, not knowing where to set the bread plate and the cake fork if you had your husband’s boss coming for dinner?” Sidelong glance at Harland: *Look at me! Excellent wife material over here!*

Bea groaned, pulling a bottle of Schlitz out of Grace’s tiny icebox. “Just put me on the DL now. I’m finished.”

“You can do the cooking part at least, can’t you, Miss Verretti?” Harland lowered the last floured chicken drumstick into the pan of hot oil with a pair

of tongs. “What with this supper club you ladies have had going for what, nearly three years?”

“You know what the Briar Club eats when it’s my turn to cook?” Bea bashed the cap off her bottle. “Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. I can’t cook a lick.”

The saintly Harland looked disapproving. He probably thought all females emerged from the womb knowing how to cook. Bea grinned and took a swig of beer right out of the bottle, knowing he didn’t really approve of that, either. Or her slacks, or her short hair—a man who wore such unbelievably starched shirts and spoke so respectfully of J. Edgar Hoover undoubtedly liked his women cute and curly. But what was the point of having a straitlaced young FBI agent around if you weren’t going to shock him? “Tastes good, G-man,” Bea said, stealing a crispy fried morsel from the plate of chicken pieces already sitting golden and mouthwatering beside the hot plate. “Maybe you should teach home ec instead of me.”

“Bea,” Arlene said with that *don’t you dare mess this up for me* edge in her sweet Texas drawl. Bea poked out her tongue, feeling childish, and wandered over to the window. Grace had it cracked open despite the cold; the green-walled room was always warm on Thursday nights with so many of them crammed in. On the walk below, Mrs. Nilsson was bustling out for her Thursday bridge club, stopping to click her tongue disapprovingly at the mellow sound of the saxophone drifting down from Joe Reiss’s window next door. Joe sneaked over for most Briar Club dinners; he must have gotten lost in a new jam. *Woodshedding* it, he’d say: *Gotta woodshed a new tune.*

“What?” Bea had asked the first time she heard that.

“You know,” he answered with a shrug of his lean shoulder. “Take it to the woodshed and do some work on it.”

“I didn’t know music was work.”

“You got paid to play a kid’s game, and I’m betting that still counted as work.” Joe was the only one who knew she’d played with the AAGPBL. At first she hadn’t spread it around because Mrs. Nilsson was the type who thought women baseball players were tramps, girls no better than they should be who pranced around fields showing their bare legs to crowds of men—that was what Bea’s own *mother* had thought—and it seemed better to just introduce herself as the Gompers Junior High gym teacher rather than the former shortstop of the Fort Wayne Daisies with a career batting

average of .282. And Bea hadn't thought she'd be here very long anyway, just long enough for her knee to knit itself together and then back to spring training she'd go . . .

And now she'd been coming to dinner with these women for more than two years, and they didn't even know her. Bea Verretti, the team spark plug who had known every last bruise and heartbreak and secret of every one of her teammates while she was playing.

"—waiting for Reka tonight?" Nora was asking, helping herself to more of Grace's sun tea.

"Reka's spending a week in New York." Grace pinned up a loop of golden-brown hair that had escaped her blue-checked bandanna. "Some business with a museum—she went off in a nice new coat."

"I'd like to know where she could afford a coat with a mink collar," Arlene speculated.

"I'm just glad she's got a little money again," Bea said. Collectively the Briar Club had worried quite a bit about Reka's finances—Fliss kept finding excuses to make her pots of soup, and Bea had rigged her window sash so her room wasn't so cold over the winter. But Reka had a real spring-training bounce in her step these days, and she'd put a fiver into the pot for Lina's new corrective glasses without looking at her wallet in that worried way you did when bank accounts were lean. "You should be glad things are looking up for her, too, Arlene," Bea added. "Since you're the one who got her fired from the library in the first place."

"I did not!"

"Yes, you did. You told the librarian that Reka was a Commie—"

"I merely let it slip that she had Communist sympathies, which she *does*, so it wasn't like I was lying. I had no idea they would fire her, and I *told* her so. I apologized," Arlene insisted, looking peevish. "I apologized *twice*."

"Maybe that's good enough for Reka." The old woman had shrugged at the time; said she didn't care one way or another if Arlene started wedging herself back into the Thursday night dinners with a casserole dish and an ingratiating smile, but the rest of the Briar Club was still inclined to regard the Huppmobile coldly, Bea included. She believed in nurturing grudges; it was the Italian in her. "Two apologies doesn't mean it wasn't still a lousy thing to do, Arlene—"

"What's the commotion?" Harland asked, coming over with a big heaped platter.

“Nothing,” Arlene said quickly, but Bea overrode her.

“Arlene didn’t tell you this particular story over the pillow? How she got old Mrs. Muller fired from the Smoot Library on suspicion of being a Communist? Shocker. Here, I’ll take some of that.” Bea sank her teeth into a golden-fried chicken breast while Arlene and Harland started whispering and hissing at each other and the rest of the Briar Club nibbled and eavesdropped as hard as they could. It was all very satisfying, but Bea felt a little flat as she licked the last delectable fried crumbs off her lips. She found herself slipping out in the commotion of the Nilsson kids slipping in —“Sorry, had to help Lina finish the corn muffins,” Pete said breathlessly, holding the door as his little sister staggered in with a pan fresh out of the oven, the lenses of her new glasses all fogged up, and Bea snagged a couple as she looped around and headed down the stairs.

“You’re missing out,” she said when Joe Reiss opened the door of his second-floor apartment next door. “Arlene’s G-man made fried chicken, and now if I’m not mistaken he’s breaking up with her.”

“I was auditioning a new drummer.” Joe leaned an elbow on the doorjamb, tenor saxophone hanging around his neck on a loop of cord. “Can’t blame Claude for heading to the Big Apple, but I haven’t found a guy yet who can keep a beat.”

Bea took a big bite of warm corn muffin. “Want some company?”

“Depends.” He tilted his head back to look up at her—like Mr. Royce, he was shorter than Bea; unlike Mr. Royce, Joe didn’t bristle about it. “You bring any more of those muffins? Or are they Lina’s?” he added belatedly.

Bea tossed him one underhand, like she was lobbing an easy grounder to first base. “Yes, but they’re pretty good. Lina finally stopped mixing up the baking powder and baking soda. I think it’s the new glasses—she wasn’t really able to read the labels before, poor kid.” Grace had been the one who took Lina to the eye doctor behind her mother’s back, then passed the hat around the Briar Club to cover the bill. Bea had been fairly broke that week after a trip home to Boston, but she’d still kicked in her last few dollars. *The insurance covered the glasses*, Grace assured Doilies later, wide-eyed. *Isn’t that wonderful? The American experiment in action!*

“Huh. Tasty,” Joe said around a mouthful of corn muffin, and he pulled Bea in with an arm around her waist. His room was strewn with sheet music and spare reeds and smelled like fresh bagels and black coffee from Rosenberg’s Deli downstairs. “Come on in, Fort Wayne.” He always called

her that, ever since he'd helped her wrestle her mattress upstairs when she moved in next door, and he learned she'd played for the Daisies in the town where he'd grown up. "Only one thing to do when you grow up in a place like Fort Wayne, Indiana," he'd said, "and that's move east the minute you can figure out how to read a compass." Bea hooted, and they'd been rolling around on that mattress pretty much as soon as they got it horizontal and onto the frame.

"You don't have anyone else dropping by, do you?" she teased after coming up for air from a long kiss. She knew Joe fooled around plenty, but so did she. Why not? They weren't going steady and never had been. The only difference was, Joe could fool around with all the women he liked, and Bea had to be sneaky about it. But if you'd learned to get around the razor-eyed chaperones hired to keep the league girls in their hotel room beds at night (hah!), getting around Mrs. Nilsson was easier than catching an infield pop-up. "I'd hate to mess up your busy schedule . . ."

"Only thing on my schedule is opening set at the Amber Club at ten." Joe's fingers fluttered the length of her spine like he was stroking saxophone keys. "We got time."

It was a good couple of hours, and it got Bea out of her head for a while—nothing like working up a sweat if you needed to stop thinking. But as she sauntered back next door, humming "I Got Rhythm" and feeling as nicely played as Joe's sax, the sensation of flatness came back. Her third-floor room, her favorite bat leaning up against the door, her old Rawlings mitt in the drawer . . . At the bottom of her bureau, wrapped in tissue paper like a wedding gown, her skirted uniform and cap. And on top of the bureau, the home economics textbook she'd half-heartedly been perusing for Monday. She opened it at random to a table-setting diagram like the one Arlene had lectured them about. "Dessert spoon above the cake fork," Bea read aloud. "Bread plate to the left, above the salad fork and dinner fork, butter knife placed at ten o'clock across the plate."

The clock ticked loudly as her voice trailed off. Downstairs, Mrs. Nilsson was coming home from her bridge game, scolding Pete for leaving a pan on the stove. His mumble: *Sorry, Mom* . . .

Bea's voice startled her as she spoke aloud. "I have got to get the hell out of here."

Harland's Fried Chicken

5 pounds chicken parts, preferably dark meat or breasts cut into halves

1 to 1½ quarts buttermilk

2 quarts vegetable oil

4 cups all-purpose flour

2 tablespoons salt

4 tablespoons paprika

4 tablespoons garlic powder

4 tablespoons black pepper

4 tablespoons white pepper

1 tablespoon cayenne

1 tablespoon onion powder

1 tablespoon cornstarch

1 tablespoon baking powder

1. Place the chicken parts in a large mixing bowl, cover with the buttermilk, and place in the refrigerator for at least 1 hour.
2. In a large, deep frying pan, add enough oil to cover the bottom 2 inches of the pan and slowly heat. Do not allow the oil to smoke.
3. Combine the flour and all remaining ingredients in a large mixing bowl, and mix well. Prepare a landing zone for the floured chicken, usually a large baking sheet, and a rack for the chicken once it's fried.
4. Remove a piece of chicken from the buttermilk bath, shake the excess buttermilk off, and dredge it in the spiced flour mixture, then use tongs to set it aside on the baking sheet. Repeat until all pieces are dredged in flour and coming to room temperature.
5. Once the oil reaches 350°F on a cooking thermometer, or when a piece of bread fries golden when dipped in the hot oil, re-dredge 1 piece of chicken in flour to ensure an even coating and place it into the hot oil. If there is excessive splattering, remove the pan

quickly from the heat and turn the heat down for a few minutes. The oil should sizzle, not splatter and spray.

6. Allow the chicken to cook approximately 4 minutes per side, a little longer for larger pieces. Once done (it should just slip off a fork), remove it to the prepared rack to rest and keep warm. Repeat with all remaining chicken pieces. Do not allow the chicken to cool too much (if it does get cold, refry it quickly in the oil), but chicken should rest at least 10 minutes before serving.
7. Eat among friends, without caring whether the table has cake forks or bread plates, as long as there are plenty of napkins and Eddie Fisher singing “Wish You Were Here” on the radio.

“Lousy—goddamn—*March*,” Bea muttered on her way home from work. February was bad enough: the time of year when her body really started yearning for activity, yearning to throw off the winter coat and run down ground balls—yearning, in short, for spring training. And now it was March, and in the Midwest the rest of the Fort Wayne Daisies were limbering up for the season: brushing off rusty double-play moves, taking practice swings in the batting cage, running laps with the springtime zest of a body that had rested all winter, shaken off last season’s nagging shoulder strain or bruised kneecap, and come back ready and eager to play.

Bea’s body hadn’t learned yet that she wasn’t going to spring training, that all her spring fever energy had nowhere to go.

“Say, Miss Bea!” Pete called excitedly as Bea came through the garden gate. He was clearing the weeds out of his mother’s vegetable patch, rearing back on his heels as she paused on the path up to the house. “Did you hear the news? Joseph Stalin is dead!”

Good for Joseph Stalin, Bea thought grumpily. Right now she envied him. She’d spent six weeks thinking *I’ve got to get out of here*, and that thought had led exactly nowhere; no ideas at all about how a failed baseball player could conceivably reshape her life once her playing days were over. Why didn’t she just go ahead and drop dead like Uncle Joe?

“They’re calling it a crippling blow to Reds everywhere as the Kremlin totters,” Pete said, clearly quoting the radio. “I can’t remember who they said is going to succeed him. All those Russian names sound alike—”

“Pete, it’s a beautiful spring afternoon. Go throw a baseball around the sandlot like every other boy in America, and let the Reds handle

themselves.” Bea knew she was being a pill, but right now she hated anybody who had the ability to play ball who wasn’t doing it. Come to think of it, she hated the ones who *were* doing it, too.

“I have to get the tomato plants going in the greenhouse for Mom.” Not enough for Doilies that her old Victory Garden took up most of the yard; she’d had Pete laboring a full three weeks after Christmas this winter putting up a small greenhouse out back so she could get her seedlings going before anyone else in the neighborhood. Or rather, so Pete could get them going for her. Not that he’d get to eat any of those early tomatoes once they ripened, Bea thought, oh no. Mrs. Nilsson would sell everything to the corner store this spring at a stiff markup. “My dad used to play catch with me every spring when the nights got long,” Pete said, looking wistful. “He’d throw and throw for hours . . .”

Bea felt her snappiness subside. “Maybe he’ll come home this summer for a game or two,” she said, trying to sound encouraging.

Pete’s face shuttered. “Don’t want him to,” he said, bending back over the garden patch and yanking a weed out with unnecessary force. “He hasn’t been around for years. I don’t want him around now.”

Yes, you do, Bea thought, but didn’t say aloud. “Come knock on my door when you’re done with those seedlings, then. I’ll get my mitt and we’ll play some catch.”

“After the greenhouse chores I have to trim the backyard hedge and take the garbage out,” he rattled off. “Then find that candy dish that went missing from the parlor, or Mom’ll get mad.”

Pete, Bea had often thought, was really batting zero when it came to parents. “Tell you what, I’ll tell your mom I lost that candy dish and that’ll buy you some time. Knock on my door when you’re done in the garden.” Boys his age thought themselves too tough and manly for a pat on the shoulder, so she punched his arm encouragingly and headed inside.

Where she saw Grace March passed out dead drunk at the foot of the stairs.

“*Grace?*” Bea whispered, flabbergasted. She’d never even seen Grace tipsy before: the woman could drink a stevedore under the table without slurring a single word. But Grace was very definitely drunk now, curled up on the floor in her green print skirt and ballet flats, head pillowed on the very bottom riser of the staircase, stinking of brandy. Bea rushed to her side, saying, “Did you fall?”

“Mmmm.” Grace looked up, muzzily. “No . . . I came in the back door so Doilies wouldn’t catch me. *Hic*. Too many stairs, so I thought I’d take a l’il nap . . .”

Her head started sinking. “Oh, no you don’t.” Bea caught her arm and began hauling her up. “If Doilies catches you smelling like a brewery, there’ll be hell to pay. Come on—”

“She’s gone,” Grace whispered, letting her arm flop bonelessly over Bea’s shoulders. Her mascara was smeared down her cheeks as if she’d been crying. “Bea, she’s *gone*—”

“Mrs. Nilsson? Never mind, just get up the stairs—”

Bea managed to haul Grace’s dead weight up to the second-floor landing when Claire came down the stairs in her stocking feet, looking rumpled despite her secretarial blouse and skirt. “Whew,” she whistled, sniffing the alcohol fumes. “Did she take a bath in Old Hennessy?”

“Help me get her back to her room before Nilsson sees.”

Together they managed to wrestle Grace up the stairs. The staircase was light and airy now instead of drab and ill-lit—Grace and Pete had painted it up a bit at a time, that warm buttercream color she’d cajoled Mrs. Nilsson into approving, and the Briar Club was gradually extending the flowered wall vine down, daisies and violets and roses flowing over the line of the banister. Right now, the vine had grown just past the third-floor landing. “Of course she’d have to live on the *top* floor,” Claire panted as they heaved Grace up the last flight.

“This is nothing,” Bea panted back, thinking of the time she’d hauled a passed-out right fielder up to the sixth floor of a Chicago hotel in a fireman’s carry, without the chaperone suspecting a thing. The three of them fell through the door into Grace’s green-walled room, Bea and Claire managing to flop her gently onto the narrow bed.

“She’s gone,” Grace kept mumbling, tears leaking from the corners of her eyes. “She’s *gone*, and now he’s gone . . .”

“Who’s she talking about?” Bea wondered, grabbing a dish towel and heading for the bathroom.

“Who knows?” Claire looked speculative. “We don’t exactly know very much about Grace, do we?”

That was true, Bea reflected, wringing out the dish towel. The hostess of their weekly suppers always listened, but never seemed to require listening in turn. “She’s gone,” Bea quoted, coming back in to lay the wet cloth

over Grace's forehead. "Nora said she saw Grace with a picture of a kid once, a little girl. I wonder if—" Bea broke off as Grace rolled onto her back, catching her by the shoulder and turning her back on her side. "Got to keep her on her side in case she chucks up all that brandy in her sleep."

"You've looked after a few drunks in your day," Claire said with some amusement. A tendril of red hair escaped its coil and she jabbed it back in place.

The first year my team won the championship, we all went out and got absolutely snookered after the game, Bea thought. Twenty-four women tearing up the town, blitzed out of their minds, even the ones who didn't usually drink. By morning they'd all been holding back each other's hair and passing out . . . God, that had been a good night! Elizabeth Bandyk climbing on a tabletop to sing the "Victory Song" at the top of her lungs; a shy brunette center fielder from Peoria dragging Bea into a kiss like a python, nearly swallowing her down. Bea didn't usually go for girls, but she'd kissed back and kissed back hard, absolutely blotto on champagne and victory. What a night. Screw the hangover.

"One of us should stay and watch Grace," she said, pushing aside the memories as Claire headed for the door. "In case she rolls over again."

"Feel free. I've got things to do—"

"You know she could choke. I'll sit for half an hour, then I promised I'd run to the park with Pete. Spell me then?"

Claire looked over her plump shoulder. "I already helped you get her up the stairs, and that was just so I didn't have to hear old Nilsson shrieking and carrying on—"

"I'll see you in half an hour," Bea overrode her. Because the thing about Claire was that she bitched a lot whenever she was asked to help, but she still tended to show up and actually *help*. She'd pitched in for Lina's glasses, too, just like the rest of them. "You're more of a team player than you like to let on, Hallett," Bea told her.

"I am not." Claire's voice drifted back as she vanished into the hall. "I am a lone wolf and I walk alone—"

"Just walk your lonesome rear back up here in thirty minutes," Bea yelled after her, then looked back down at Grace. "What on earth got into you today?" she wondered aloud.

"She's gone," Grace was still mumbling, three-quarters asleep.

“Who is she?” Bea asked. Why *did* they all know so little about Grace? No family visits in these past few years; no references to sisters or brothers or parents; no photographs in this tiny apartment—not the picture of the little girl Nora claimed to have seen, not a single image of Grace’s dead husband. Did anyone even know his name? Bea, looking around this cheerful room with its crisp curtains and flooding sunshine, didn’t think she did. Grace made her environment so colorful and welcoming, it took you forever to realize she also kept it a complete and utter blank slate. “Who’s *she*, Grace?”

Grace opened her eyes slowly, blinked even more slowly. Didn’t answer.

Bea tried again. “Who’s *he*, then? ‘She’s gone and now he’s gone—’ You mean your husband?”

Grace’s whisper-thin smile cut like a razor. “Oh, him,” she mumbled. “Good riddance.” And she passed out.

“**Miss** Verretti?”

Bea turned, digging into her paper bag of roasted peanuts. “G-man,” she greeted Harland Adams, who looked ready for work in his narrow tie and gray suit but wasn’t at work at all—he was here in Griffith Stadium, presumably to watch the Senators play the Yankees. “Playing hooky?” Bea asked. “Or are you ferreting out Communist plots in the bleachers?”

“Playing hooky,” he admitted, taking off his sharp-brimmed fedora and running a hand over his close-cropped hair.

“Not a very nice day for it.” Bea tilted her head back at the swirling clouds overhead, threatening rain. Cold wind tugged at her jacket (it was April now) but the stadium was still a beauty even without sunshine: compact and irregular, the grandstands smelling like peanut shells and chewing gum, the field smelling of grass and chalk. *The best perfume in the world*, Bea thought.

“It’s gusty, but it feels good to me.” Harland Adams sniffed the wind like a fox. “The bureau offices get mighty stuffy on an April day. You playing hooky too?”

“Grace’s new fling works for the Senators somehow, so she said he could get me in anytime. And with my entire PE class apparently on their period and half the sewing machines in my home ec class on the DL with the Singer equivalent of pitcher’s elbow, you’re goddamned right I’m playing hooky.” Harland looked startled at the word *period*, and even more startled

at her language, but Bea just grinned. "I'm also here to hex the Yankees," she added. "I don't want them winning a fifth consecutive title, and I figured I'd need to get the ill will going early this season. Last year I waited till summer, and three months of spite was just not enough to derail that win record."

"Lordy, Miss Verretti. What have you got against the Yankees?" To Bea's surprise, he fell in beside her as she began making her way toward her seat.

"I grew up in Boston. North End." Bea twisted sideways to get around a cluster of men fiercely arguing batting averages. "You're born within a hundred square miles of Fenway Park, hatred for the Yankees comes in with your mother's milk."

"No Sox hat, though." He nodded at her well-worn cap with FW in the center. "What team is that?"

"Fort Wayne Daisies," Bea said brusquely and got absorbed finding her seat. She expected Arlene's beau would tip his hat and scam, but he lounged along behind.

"Mind if I tag along?"

"Arlene probably would," Bea threw over her shoulder, edging into her row. "She doesn't like it when anyone plays with her toys."

He cleared his throat. "I, um. Arlene and I aren't keeping company anymore."

Bea burst out laughing. "Congratulations on your escape!"

"She's a very fine young lady." Stiffly. "I'm not implying any fault on—"

"She's a bitch on wheels, and she'd have made your life a living hell."

Bea flopped down in her seat, just a row or two behind the presidential box by the first base dugout. Ike had thrown out the first pitch from that box on opening day; Bea had listened on the radio.

Harland looked around at the prime view. "Miss Verretti, is this your seat?"

"Who's going to kick me back to the bleachers? The stadium's half empty. And quit calling me Miss Verretti," Bea added. "I get enough of that at Gompers."

"Then make it *Harland*," he said, passing Bea a pencil for her scorecard as he sat down. "Not *G-man*. Is that Masterson on the mound?"

"Stobbs. Manager thought the Yankees would have more trouble with a southpaw," Bea said as Chuck Stobbs went into his windup and the game

got underway. “Look, you don’t have to hang around with me just to be polite.”

“A lady at a ballpark alone may be exposed to rougher elements of society—” he began.

“Don’t you give me that, G-man. Ballparks are *home* to me.”

Unexpectedly, Bea felt her eyes sting. *I have to get out of here*, the words still drummed in her veins, but the only place she wanted to go was a ballpark.

His eyes went back to her cap. “Fort Wayne Daisies,” he said slowly. “One of the women’s league teams? You played?”

She twirled an imaginary bat. “Bea Verretti, the Swinging Sicilian.”

“Are you Sicilian?”

“No, Neapolitan originally. But it sounded good, and I sure could swing.” *Still can*, she thought.

“You miss it,” Harland said. A statement, not a question.

“Of course I *miss it*. Who wouldn’t? We didn’t get big stadiums like this, and we didn’t get paid anything like what the Senators do, but it was still baseball. It was still getting paid, every day, to play a game I’ve loved since I was four. Of course I *miss it*.”

She didn’t know why she was biting his head off. He was being perfectly pleasant, if a little condescending. *Rougher elements of society*, really. Any rougher elements came at Bea here, she’d grab the nearest bat and flatten ’em with that vicious short-porch swing that could deposit a fastball over the fence. She joined the smatter of applause as Stobbs sat his third batter down, and the Senators loped in toward the dugout.

“Must have been nice having a job you loved,” Harland said. “Most people aren’t so lucky.”

“Don’t you love yours?” Bea raised an eyebrow. “Worshipping at the altar of J. Edgar Hoover?”

“He’s a great man,” Harland said automatically. But he rotated his fedora between his hands, keeping his gaze on the hatband.

“You always want to be an FBI agent?” Bea tried to picture little Harland Adams with a plastic toy badge, towheaded and gap-toothed. “Shooting it out with Dillinger and Pretty Boy Floyd? *Junkballer*,” she hollered toward the field as Eddie Lopat took the mound for the Yankees.

Harland grinned, and the smile made something unexpected out of that lean, foxlike face. “What I really wanted to do was play second base for the

Senators.”

“Second base, not bad. I was shortstop with the Daisies—I could shovel a grounder to second on a 6–4–3 double play faster than any other girl in the league.”

“See, I had no talent at all. Zero, zip. Tripped over my own shoelaces when I tried out for junior varsity in high school.”

“FBI or bust, then?”

His smile disappeared. “Something like that.”

“And there hasn’t been much in the way of shoot-outs with gangsters,” Bea guessed, handing him her bag of peanuts.

“More like collecting files and keeping tabs on suspected—” Harland paused. “Never mind.”

Junkballer or not, the Yankees pitcher breezed through the first and the Senators went jogging back out toward the field. “You don’t like your job, just quit,” Bea said, watching the great, hateful Mickey Mantle head for the batter’s box.

“Quit the FBI, right. And do what?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” The same question kept Bea up at night: What now? Mantle was limping slightly, she noticed—sprain, tendonitis, charley horse? “I wonder if it haunts him,” she wondered. “What he’ll do when that body gives out and he can’t play anymore.”

“It ever haunt you when you were playing?” Harland tipped the bag of peanuts back in her direction.

“No,” Bea said honestly. “Never occurred to me. Baseball players are made to run and jump and hit and *move*, and that’s what we do until it comes out of nowhere: the moment when we can’t.”

“Now, I’m a worrier,” Harland confessed. “I spent my whole first six months at the bureau worried I’d never catch Director Hoover’s eye. Well, I did. Want to know how?”

“How?” asked Bea, letting out a hiss as Mickey Mantle worked a walk.

“He came by my desk and said, ‘Strip out of that suit, kid.’” A lopsided smile. “Some group or other had protested that the bureau didn’t have any Negro agents, so on the morning they were coming to the office the director brought his chauffeur up, told the man to put my suit on since we were the same size, and parked him at one of the front desks as one of the FBI’s premier colored agents. He told me to go wait in the nearest closet in my undershorts until everyone had cleared out, then I could get dressed again.”

“That’s a great man?” Bea couldn’t help asking. Even baseball had Negro players now; she’d been lucky enough to see Jackie Robinson play in Ebbets Field and had felt like holding her breath with the privilege of watching him move—all liquid grace and iron composure—in his Dodger colors. Was the FBI really lagging so far behind the times?

Harland shucked a peanut out of its shell. “I probably shouldn’t have told you that,” he muttered eventually.

“I think you *should* quit,” said Bea, then had to leap up and yell when the still-limping Mickey Mantle managed to steal second.

“Arlene was always saying I should stick it out till I have more seniority,” Harland said, then gnawed his lip as if he hadn’t meant to say her name. “. . . How is she doing, anyway?”

“Making life hell for everyone at Briarwood House,” Bea said cheerfully. “Bit Claire’s head off yesterday for using up the hot water, told Pete this morning that his acne made him look like he had chicken pox, told Fliss her husband was probably flirting with floozies over in Tokyo. We’re all just about ready to kill her. You dodged a bullet not marrying that one.”

“I still feel like a bastard,” he burst out, and that was when it clicked for Bea: just why this fellow she barely knew was tagging along, listening to her insult his boss and offend his sensibilities by wearing trousers and cussing at the Yankees. Harland Adams was *lonely*.

She heaved a sigh. “Tell me all about it. You and Arlene.”

“I couldn’t possibly,” he said, which was what men said when they were about to talk your ear off. Really, men handled heartbreak *much* worse than women did. Women (as Bea knew, having consoled plenty of teammates through faithless lovers and broken engagements) just cried it out as hard as they could, ate all the cake their listening friends pressed on them, then *moved on*. Men jutted their chins and insisted they were absolutely fine, nothing wrong at all, absolutely nothing, and after two months of being *absolutely fine* they were ready to shatter over the nearest consoling shoulder, poor things. So Bea put on her listening face through the next three innings as the Senators and the Yankees traded a run each, and Harland launched into his heartbreak. How he and Arlene had met (“One of those DC parties, all senatorial aides and typing pool girls and junior agents drinking warm white wine and trying to pretend they’re more important than they are”), how he kept meaning to propose after the first year but somehow never had (“Why didn’t I? Arlene was perfect for me, the kind of

wife you know will always have the house clean and the kids scrubbed and make the right kind of impression on your boss; they tell us to keep our eyes peeled for girls like that, it's important for a man's career"); and then the bust-up ("What you said about her getting old Mrs. Muller fired—she kept saying she hadn't known it would happen, but she works for HUAC—she *had* to have guessed. I couldn't marry someone who would risk a thing like that out of spite, could I? What does that say about her? But breaking things off with a girl when you've been going together more than two years, only a cad does that, what does that say about me?").

"Did you sleep with her?" Bea asked with interest and watched his lean face turn nine shades of pink.

"I am not discussing any such thing," he said stiffly. "Arlene may not be my girl anymore, but she's still a lady."

"You didn't," Bea guessed, as Yogi Berra came to the plate in the fifth. "Because you're the type who'd automatically marry a girl if you slept with her—"

"*Keep your voice down*," he hissed, clapping a hand over his fedora to keep it from blowing away in the cold breeze. "Jesus Christ—"

"Nobody's listening, Him included. So you wouldn't sleep with Arlene, because you're a gentleman, and on some level you knew that was the steel trap you couldn't gnaw your way out of. I'll bet Arlene *tried* to sleep with you to seal the deal, though." Bea grinned as he went through all those shades of pink again, clear through to crimson. "She did!"

"I am *not*—"

"Discussing this, right. Look," Bea said as Yogi Berra worked a walk. "You're hurting, G-man. You dated a girl for two years, and you were thinking about the house and the white picket fence and the two kids named Harland Junior and Arlette, and how nice it would be to have someone to cuddle when you come home after a day doing important FBI things like standing in broom closets in your undershorts so the director can pretend he has a Negro agent on the payroll. But you're going to look back on this and be *glad* you didn't leg-shackle yourself to the kind of person who thinks nothing of getting a seventy-one-year-old woman blacklisted out of pure spite."

Harland blinked a few times. "You've done this before, haven't you?"

"I was team captain on the Daisies. You know how many heartbreaks I've nursed my girls through? When your star pitcher is melting down like

an ice cream cone because her love stopped returning her calls, and it's the first championship game tomorrow and you need her pitching her best game, you learn to give love advice *real* fast." Half the time, of course, Bea's teammates were sobbing about girlfriends rather than boyfriends because more than half the women in the league, even with their red lipstick and curled hair and short-skirted uniforms carefully designed to pack the stands with men, were what Director Hoover and Joe McCarthy would call *deviants*. But Bea didn't think she was going to bring that up.

"I still think I should have . . ." Harland trailed off.

"Think about it." Bea took the bag of peanuts back. "You just got out of marrying Arlene Hupp, who might have given you a Harland Junior and a little Arlette but who was never, ever going to cuddle you and make you feel better about having to work for J. Edgar Hoover. And you might feel a little guilty and heartbroken right now but, really, you are going to be *fine*. Strike him out, you bum!" she hollered toward the Senators pitcher, as Mickey Mantle took ball one.

"Jesus Christ," Harland said, looking at her in half horror and half appreciation. "The mouth on you—"

"SON OF A BITCH!" Bea erupted, but no one stared or clucked at her because they were all shouting, too, as Mickey Mantle connected with a chest-high fastball. That *crack*—if you'd ever been a slugger, you knew the sound of a home run by that *crack* before the ball even left the barrel of the bat. This one was going deep, going yard, the entire stadium knew it. Everyone was on their feet, shouting, heads tipped back, watching the ball rise and rise and rise. Over the left-center-field wall, over the left-field bleachers, caroming off the National Bohemia beer sign and out of the park: the biggest home run Bea Verretti had ever seen in her life.

She flung her arms around Harland Adams as the entire stadium erupted. "Did you see it—"

"I saw it—"

"Five hundred feet at least!" This one was one for the record books, she could feel it in her bones. Maybe Mantle was a Yankee but Bea couldn't begrudge him: that soaring home run was a burnished thing of beauty, the greatest goddamned feat of baseball she'd ever seen in her entire life, and at that level teams didn't matter. Only the beauty did. Maybe some folks didn't think a home run could be beautiful, the way a snowy mountain or a fiery sunset could be beautiful, but they were wrong. What could you call it

but beautiful, a moment when the perfect combination of human skill and drive and determination made a humble piece of cork and yarn and horsehide streak skyward like a homesick angel?

Harland was still holding her off her feet as Mickey Mantle took his home run lap and an entire stadium went insane. “Sorry,” he said, setting her down at last, and Bea took his face in her hands and planted a long smack of a kiss on him.

“That is the biggest home run I’ve ever seen,” she said, laughing. The next batter was already queuing up, but the rest of this game, Bea could tell, was going to be something of an afterthought. “I thought only Babe Ruth could hit like that—”

“He’s got the record,” Harland said, arms still around her waist, and planted a kiss right back on her.

“I know,” Bea said once he let her up for air. “Five hundred and seventy-five feet, Navin Field, 1921. Want to get out of here?”

“**D**on’t you dare ask me to marry you,” Bea told him at some point between the second time and the third time.

“I should,” he muttered against the hollow of her neck, hand tangled in her sweat-damp hair, tugging her bad knee around his hip. “Jesus Christ, I did not see the afternoon going this way . . .”

She pulled him closer by his government haircut. “Shut up, G-man.”

By the time Decoration Day rolled around at the end of May, Bea was out of ideas when it came to home ec. “You got me out of a real ninth-inning jam,” she told Fliss, the two of them starting the walk back from Gompers to Briarwood House. “I owe you at least three babysittings for Angela.”

“I will never turn that down.” Fliss laughed, pretty and perfect as ever with her blond hair flipping up under its blue Alice band, her fluffy paisley skirt as crisp as if she’d just whipped it off the ironing board. Bea’s home ec students had hung on her every British-accented word, passing little Angela around like a doll as Fliss showed them how to run up a skirt on the clunky school Singers and get stains out of white blouses so they shone like a Duz Detergent ad. “How are you going to get through the end of the year?” Fliss asked.

"I have no idea." Bea sighed. Who was there left to ask? Nora had taught a class on how to freshen up your wardrobe on a budget; the girls had swooned over her trim suits. Claire had taught a surprisingly thorough class on household budgeting and how to balance a bankbook. Reka would have come in to teach the girls how to make schnitzel and goulash, but Principal Royce got wind of that ("Our Gompers girls can't be taught by *immigrants*, Miss Verretti!"). Bea had been falling on Royce's scolding side a lot lately: today it had been another lecture about neglecting to change from shorts back into her skirt. Bea unbuttoned her sweaty blouse another button now and flapped her collar irritably.

"Are you coming to Grace's cookout tomorrow?" Fliss asked, swinging Angela along between them as they turned the corner onto Briar. "She thought we should make it a picnic, since it's Decoration Day. Or Memorial Day, I hear some people are calling it now."

"Is Mrs. Nilsson going to hover and glare?"

"She'll be gone all day to a bridge tournament, Pete says."

"Then I'm in. You know she's taking that boy out of school? She told me she doesn't see why he should go back after this summer!" Bea shook her head. She'd hated every minute of school, couldn't wait to drop out early, but anyone with eyes could see that Pete—bright, eager, curious Pete quoting everybody from Alexandre Dumas to Wernher von Braun—should be soaking up all the classes he could. "He's going to start full-time at Moonlight Magnolias the minute school's out, and you can just tell she's already mentally cashing his paycheck!"

"That bloody *ghoul*," Fliss agreed, as hot under the collar as Bea ever saw her. "Poor Pete. That darling boy deserves better." The two slanged their landlady all the way home, where they saw Grace halfway up the path to the house, eyeing Mrs. Nilsson's vegetable patch.

"Those tomatoes," Grace said with a sigh after greeting Bea and Fliss. "Aren't they just like rubies on a stem?" Thanks to the backyard greenhouse and Pete's early planting, Doilies had full-blown tomato plants to put down when everyone else was planting seeds, and a warm spring meant the tomatoes were already hanging ripe and heavy on the vine, red as the knee socks Bea had worn during a brief stint as a Rockford Peach.

"I don't even like to cook," said Bea, "and tomatoes like that make me want to start simmering a ragù." It was the Italian in her: suddenly she could almost smell her mother's Sunday gravy, pot wafting the scent of

tomatoes and rosemary and grilled sausages all day long, the smells of everyone else's Sunday gravies wafting right back through the whole neighborhood. Those North End housewives could get vicious about ragù, arguing whether the Bolognese version with minced beef was better than the Neapolitan version with sausage, or if the Venetian version without any tomatoes at all took the prize. (The Neapolitan version was the best. Obviously.)

"Pity none of us will get a taste of those tomatoes." Grace sighed as they all trailed past the vegetable patch into the house. Bea eyed her curiously: relaxed as ever after a day shelving books at the Smoot Library, a smudge of yellow paint on one knuckle from the odd painting jobs she picked up on weekends. Whatever it was that had made her go on that bender back in March, there had been no sign of it since. Grace hadn't said a word, so neither had Bea. Sometimes your teammates got confessional, sometimes they didn't.

Decoration Day dawned warm and cloudless, Mrs. Nilsson haranguing Lina in the kitchen before the sun was even fully up. "Lina, stop messing about with that piecrust and clear the table. Pete, get those tomatoes picked so you can sell them off to Mr. Rosenberg tomorrow—"

"I was going to head down to the sandlot for some ball this afternoon, Mom—"

"Tomatoes first. I want those vines picked *clean*; you know what we'll be able to charge for tomatoes out of season?"

Bea knew even as she listened to that fretful, hectoring voice that the idea that had just popped into her head was a bad idea, but she took that bad idea and ran with it like she was stealing home plate. Ran with it the moment Mrs. Nilsson bustled off for her all-day bridge tournament.

"What on earth . . ." Grace blinked when she answered Bea's knock.

"Have you got a big pot?" Bea hefted the hem of her sweatshirt, now sagging under the weight of every single ripe tomato that had been plucked from under Mrs. Nilsson's PRODUCE NOT FOR BRIARWOOD HOUSE BOARDERS! sign. "We're making a proper Italian ragù."

The Decoration Day picnic turned into a party, spilling out of Grace's room and taking over the kitchen downstairs—which felt much friendlier than it used to. Lina's constant baking had loosened up the space so it smelled more like sugar than Lysol, and Grace had cajoled permission to plant some

flower boxes just outside the kitchen window so now the breezes came through the curtains scented like marigolds and pansies. “It’s *pretty* in here,” Pete said in some wonder, turning on the radio, “it’s actually pretty —” and Bea slung an arm around his shoulder.

Fliss had brought a friend from church, some endlessly tall, devastatingly elegant woman named Mrs. Sutherland who barely said a word (“My husband took our son out to see fireworks and I pleaded a headache on some ghastly patriotic tea for lawyers’ wives”) but shyly tied an apron over her expensive-looking pink linen dress and washed endless dishes. Joe was doing Gershwin riffs on the saxophone for Lina as she whipped up a pair of surprisingly delicious-looking apple pies. And Bea finally got to clap eyes on Grace’s latest fling, the one who worked for the Senators and was such a convenient font of tickets. He turned out to be a tall, dark-haired, loose-limbed drink of water named JD, one of the assistant pitching coaches, and Grace laughed as she introduced them. “Don’t steal him, Bea!”

“What do you think of the Senators bullpen this year?” Bea demanded immediately, dragging him off into the kitchen so she could keep on stirring her ragù. “Did you used to play? What position . . .”

“Claire keeps saying her boyfriend is coming and she is *lying*,” Arlene was seething, rattling a glass of sun tea. “That girl is too *fat* to have a boyfriend; who does she think she’s fooling?”

“I met Grace at a poker game,” JD was telling Bea. He was maybe thirty, definitely younger than Grace. *Good for Grace*, Bea thought. “She took twenty bucks off me, but I got her number, so I can’t regret it too much. She’s got the best poker face in D.C.”

“Somehow I’m not surprised,” said Bea, stirring. “Any chance you can set up a grill? We don’t have any Italian sausage, but Doilies has some lamb shanks in the icebox . . .”

“I can lend a hand,” said a Virginia drawl from the kitchen door.

“*Harland*,” Arlene cooed before Bea could react, smile instantly switched on to its highest wattage. “What a surprise!”

Harland Adams, standing in the door with his hat in his hand, went his usual nine shades of red but his voice was apologetic and steady. “It’s good to see you, Arlene, but actually I’m here to see Bea.”

Arlene went white instead of red. *The white of a clenched fist*, Bea thought, watching from the stove with a grin. Dropping her wooden spoon,

Bea jerked her chin at Harland in a *get on over here* gesture. "Good to see you too, G-man. Come on in and lend a hand."

"We can't leave the pot," she said after the kitchen cleared out and she'd yanked Harland in for a kiss. "Or Arlene will put strychnine in it. Take over stirring; my arm's limp as a noodle."

Looking slightly grim, Harland took over the spoon. "I don't know why I'm here," he said, sounding accusing. "You are not my type."

"I'm not," Bea agreed. "But I'm a *great* lay."

"Oh, Jesus Christ!"

"Why, Mr. Adams. Taking the name of the Lord in vain, a good Christian boy like you!" She grinned again, enjoying the sight of him. She'd wondered if she was going to hear anything from Harland after that Senators game six weeks ago and had just about written him off. Too straitlaced, she reckoned, with a certain amount of regret, because that had been a very enjoyable night: there was something to be said for straitlaced men with a lot pent up, once you wrestled them out of their starched shirts. He had paid attention to every inch of her, from the arches of her feet to the soft spaces behind her ears, in a way that had rattled her spine up off the bed like a bat off the rack . . . "I don't think I've ever seen you without a tie before," she said now, looking at his blue shirt with the collar unbuttoned. "I've never seen you in anything but a suit. Or nothing at all," she added, just to see that pretty vermilion go rolling over his cheeks again.

"I can't stop thinking about you." He glared. "It's extremely distracting."

"Are you going to get all guilty about it?" Bea wondered.

"I do not feel guilty in the slightest," he stated. "And I am feeling guilty about *that* instead."

"You aren't going to start calling me a tramp, are you?"

"No!"

"Good. Because I'm not." Bea liked men, they tended to like her, and that was a long way from being a tramp, regardless of what people like Mrs. Nilsson thought. Besides, there hadn't been any flings since Harland, and before him there had only been the occasional roll with Joe next door, and two lovers in one year wasn't exactly loading the bases, Bea reckoned. "We had fun," she told Harland now, socking him companionably on the arm. "Don't overanalyze it, Freud. Help JD out there, throw those lamb

shanks on the grill, and sit down to the best ragù you've ever tasted. And later we'll sneak upstairs and have ourselves some more fun."

Harland glowered at JD, standing loose and easy out on the lawn with a beer, talking to Claire and Reka. "Who's he?"

Bea laughed. "Hit the grill."

Bea's Ragù

3 large lamb shanks, 3 to 4 pounds each

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Extra virgin olive oil for frying/grilling

4 ounces thickly sliced pancetta or bacon, cut into $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch dice

2 large carrots, finely chopped

1 large onion, finely chopped

1 medium red bell pepper, finely chopped

1 medium yellow bell pepper, finely chopped

4 garlic cloves, minced

1 to 2 cups dry red wine

Four 28-ounce cans peeled Roma tomatoes, coarsely chopped, juices reserved. Use fresh tomatoes if you can raid a Victory Garden.

1 cup chicken stock

3 bay leaves

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon red pepper flakes

2 tablespoons sugar

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon baking powder

Rigatoni or spaghetti, cooked according to package directions

Grated pecorino or Romano

1. Heat a grill or an oven to 350°F. Pat the lamb shanks dry, sprinkle them with salt and pepper, and let them sit for 30 minutes.

2. In a large saucepan, add enough olive oil to cover the bottom to $\frac{1}{4}$ inch, and warm over low heat.
3. If using a grill, brush the lamb shanks in enough olive oil to thinly coat them, shake off the excess, and place them over direct heat on the grill. Rotate to achieve even browning all over, then reduce the heat to low and move the shanks to indirect heat and cook for 20 to 25 minutes. If using an oven, place the shanks into the olive oil warming on the stove and brown them on all sides, then transfer the shanks to an oven-safe dish and cover with foil. Cook in the oven for 25 to 30 minutes.
4. Gently press the lamb shanks with a thumb—they should give slightly and your thumb should leave an impression. Remove them from the grill or oven, cover, and let them rest for 10 to 15 minutes.
5. Add the pancetta to the saucepan, stirring over low heat as the fat renders out. Add the carrots, onion, bell peppers, and garlic, and increase the heat to medium. Stir continuously until the vegetables are softened and beginning to brown. Add the red wine and stir for 2 minutes, scraping the bottom to remove any brown bits.
6. Add the tomatoes, stock, bay leaves, red pepper flakes, sugar, and baking powder. Increase the heat to high, stirring constantly as the sauce comes to a low boil, about 5 minutes.
7. Once the sauce has combined, reduce the heat to low and add the lamb shanks directly to the sauce, bone and all. The sauce should barely cover the meat—if it doesn't, increase its volume with the reserved tomato juice, additional red wine, or water. Let it simmer partially covered for approximately two hours, stirring every 20 to 30 minutes, until the meat is flaking off the bones but not disintegrating into the sauce.
8. Place the rigatoni or spaghetti in a large bowl and spoon the sauce over it, giving a gentle toss to incorporate the sauce with the pasta. Use tongs to gently remove the lamb bones and flake any remaining meat over the sauce.
9. Top with plenty of grated pecorino and eat on a summer day, in between bouts of singing the All-American Girls Professional

Baseball League “Victory Song.”

What could be more patriotic for Decoration Day? Bea thought, looking over the empty bowls littering the backyard picnic blankets. *Beer, apple pie, and a fight about Communism!*

“I’m not saying all Russians are intrinsically evil.” Harland was halfway through a slab of Lina’s pie, which had turned out surprisingly tasty. She was getting confident enough to go off-recipe; that extra dash of nutmeg in the crust was an inspired touch, the Briarwood women had all reassured her. “I’m not painting an entire country full of people with the same brush; that would be simplistic. But as a whole they’re complicit in the evils of Communism—”

“And I’m saying they’re not all believers in the system,” Grace’s beau JD was arguing. Bea couldn’t remember what JD stood for, or what his last name was. Navarro, Cavarro? “I met a lot of Russkies in the war, fought next to ’em. Some hated Stalin even more than we did—”

“I’m stuffed,” said Claire, flopping on her back on the blanket. “I’ve got spaghetti coming out of my ears.”

“I haven’t eaten pasta in *months*,” the elegant Mrs. Sutherland said, mowing through her second bowl of ragù. “My husband won’t have it on the table at home. He says only wops and charity cases eat macaroni.”

“Spaghetti,” Bea corrected, “not macaroni—”

“Goodness, don’t tell him what he’s missing out on.” Grace sucked up a last loop of spaghetti. “Someone like that doesn’t *deserve* good pasta.”

Angela was running rings around the picnic blankets, cheeks smeared with tomato sauce. Reka sat sketching something on a paper napkin, gnarled hands moving quick and deft. *A good Decoration Day*, Bea thought, looking up at the blue sky overhead, ignoring Arlene, who was watching her and Harland with eyes like vicious little chips of ice. *I am not letting you drive me away*, she’d hissed at Bea when the bowls were carried outside to the picnic blankets. *Don’t even think about it!*

I’m not thinking about you at all, Bea had told her, truthfully. And neither was Harland, who was still arguing with JD.

“How can you have fought alongside Russkies?” Harland demanded, taking a root beer out of the ice bucket. “Was that in Berlin, or—”

“A lot farther east. I sprang loose of a POW camp in ’45, walked straight into a Red Army tank regiment. They let me fight with ’em—”

Harland raised an eyebrow. "That's a tall story if I ever heard one."

JD shrugged. "Just the facts, ma'am. I fought with their regiment for near on a month, and they were some of the bravest women I've ever—"

Harland nearly dropped his bottle. "Women? Now I know you're pulling my leg."

"Reds put women in tanks. Put 'em in sniper nests and fighter planes, too."

A blink. "And you approve of that?"

"Hey," said Bea. "I can drive a Buick; don't tell me I couldn't have driven a tank if Uncle Sam had let me try." *There's another career path closed . . .*

"Women shouldn't be subjected to battlefields," Harland protested.

"I don't think we're quite so fragile as that." Grace laughed. "Do you have any idea how bloodthirsty women can be? Ask the housewives on this block if there's anyone they'd be willing to run over with a tank. You'd see nothing but squashed mothers-in-law for miles."

"More than a month I fought under Captain Samusenko and I never saw her or any of her ladies flinch from combat," JD began.

"I'm not saying Communists can't be brave," Harland amended. "But they're still dangerous, because Communism itself is dangerous. It goes against human nature, because we *want* to enjoy the results of our own work. We *want* to build something for ourselves and our children, not see it get scooped away and given to someone else. Any ideology that ignores a human urge that basic isn't just dangerous, it's idiotic."

"Look, the Russkies I knew weren't going around quoting Marx and harping about the proletariat. They were just doing a job, pushing back an enemy who invaded them first. They were our allies at the time—"

"And now they're the enemy," Harland finished. "Maybe they weren't then, but they are now."

JD's black eyes narrowed. Grace's tall drink of water, Bea thought, was well on his way to furious. "The women I fought with will not *ever* be my enemy."

"Do not tell me you fell for a Russki—"

"So what if I did? She drove a tank for Captain Samusenko, her name was Vika, she used to stub her cigarettes out in an old ballet shoe. What are you going to do, report me?"

"I probably should—"

“And what combat have you seen? Driving a desk doesn’t count.”

“Listen, you—”

“Okay.” Bea stood up, brushing off her shorts. “We can argue about the growing peril of the Red Menace, or we can work off some of that spaghetti. Everybody up.”

People started rising lazily, Harland and JD still throwing dark looks at each other. “Where are we going?”

“Prospect Park sandlot.”

Blank looks.

“She used to play for the women’s leagues,” Harland said. “Professional. Didn’t you know that?”

Pete’s jaw dropped. Grace’s eyebrows rose. “*That* explains the bat,” she murmured, sounding vindicated. Bea grinned, hands on hips. “One game, men against women. Who’s in?”

“**OUT!**” screamed Arlene, jabbing a finger at the sky.

“Safe by a mile,” Pete protested, picking himself up out of the dust after rebounding off Claire’s chest protector.

“*OUT!*” Arlene bellowed again. Bea had figured a game would get rid of Arlene, but she was sticking around out of pure spite at this point, just to drink in Harland’s uncomfortable looks. So Bea had shrugged and made her the umpire. After all, the umpire was the only person on the field who stayed clean, and everybody hated them. The Huppmobile was a natural.

Pete shook his head but loped back to the dugout good-naturedly. The men’s team (Pete and JD and Harland rounded out with some sandlot players Bea had cajoled into the fun) cheered as Harland came to bat and Nora fired off a vicious windmill pitch on the mound. Turned out that when you’d grown up in an Irish police family, Sunday games among a hundred boy cousins meant even the girls learned how to sling sidearm. Bea approved. Harland took a swing, and the women catcalled when he missed. He wasn’t quite as bad as he’d avowed in Griffith Stadium, though; he connected on the second pitch and chopped a decent grounder in Bea’s direction.

Not good enough to get past the best shortstop in the league, Bea thought, running to grab it on the hop. She flowed into a scoop-spin-leap, still midair when she fired the ball across the diamond toward Reka on first. *God, I’ve missed that*, Bea thought, landing with barely a twinge of pain.

Maybe her knee couldn't take a whole season, but it could take a sandlot game.

"OUT THREE!" Arlene shouted. She needed an excuse to take off the sugar-sweet smile and scream more often, Bea thought. Maybe *all* women did.

"Reka, that was a good 6-4-3," she called as they all loped in from the field. Technically you needed a second basewoman to sling a 6-4-3, but Bea had sort of played both shortstop and second base. "Grace, Fliss, Mrs. Sutherland, just remember next inning—a ball comes your way, shovel it at me." Put the Iowa housewife who didn't play and the two Englishwomen who didn't know baseball from cricket in the outfield where no one was going to hit anything. "Lina, you did great out there on third base, really great." No one had hit anything to third, thank goodness; Lina adjusted her glasses and beamed. "Claire, nice job blocking that plate."

"Sure, put the fat girl in the catcher's mask and make her squat," Claire groused.

"You don't make the fat girl the catcher, you make the meanest bitch the catcher," Bea shot back, and that made Claire grin. They were all grinning now, even the elegant Mrs. Sutherland, who had borrowed a pair of shorts from Grace to play in and handled her fielder's glove like it was a Buckingham Palace teacup. "I do not understand this game," she was saying in her soft British accent to Grace. "I just do not understand it at all, even as long as I've lived here."

"Oh, honey, I don't understand this game, either, and I was born here . . ."

"Come on, ladies," Bea yelled as the men took the field. "Let's take it to 'em!" Maybe it wasn't much of a game—they had two bats and exactly six gloves to parse between two teams; no one was watching but some idle picnickers who'd brought their wicker baskets and checked blankets out to the grass for a Decoration Day lunch—but Bea could almost hear the roar of a crowd, the snap of the manager's chewing gum, the announcer's voice: *Aaaaaaand introducing our home team, the Briarwood Belles!*

"You're going down, Miss Verretti," Harland drawled as Bea sauntered past him toward the batter's box.

"Bring it," she said with a tip of her Fort Wayne Daisies cap. Pete kept up a steady *Hey batterbatterbatter* from third base as JD wound up. He had a gorgeous fastball ("Should have seen it before I blew my shoulder out parachuting into France," he said. "I could hit ninety-two on a slow day"),

but Bea had his timing by now, and her swing started from her heels and traveled all the way up through her shoulders and into the bat like a bolt of lightning. She connected with a *crack* she felt clear down to her toes, and maybe it wasn't going five hundred and sixty-plus feet like Mickey Mantle's Griffith Stadium moon shot, but it was going plenty far. She flipped the bat with a flourish and dusted off her home run trot, and goddamn, but it felt good.

"I've never seen you look so lit up," Grace observed as Bea fought clear of her high-fiving teammates at home plate. "Like Edison kitted you out with special light bulbs."

"That's how I always felt playing," Bea said, scooping her bat out of the dust for Reka, who was up next. "Lit up." She never understood why people wanted to get drunk. No gin buzz ever felt as good as this, the buzz of doing what you adored.

"Maybe you can go back to it." Grace applauded along with the rest of the Belles (Bea could tell she was going to think of her housemates as the Belles from now on) as Reka stepped into the batter's box, muttering Hungarian insults out at JD on the makeshift mound. "Not playing, but something else. Could you manage a team?"

Bea shook her head. "The managers were always men, even on the women's teams."

"Chaperone for the teams, then?"

"I was the one *breaking* the rules, not enforcing them. *Aim for the plate, why don't you?*" she yelled as JD's next pitch whiffed wide.

"Surely there's got to be somewhere you can slot in," Grace persisted, slinging an arm around Lina and rumpling her hair. "Seems a shame to let all that experience go to waste."

"At least I got to have the experience. The league is dead. It managed to struggle past the war, but now it's almost done." Bea had phoned Elizabeth Bandyk again, catching her between home games, and Liz had never sounded so gloomy. Empty and emptier stands, no advertising, everyone staying home now to watch the men's games on television; half-hearted talk among the women about switching to softball teams if that was the only way they could keep going . . . Bea shook her head. "Eight years I got to play. It wasn't enough, but at least it was eight years. What about all the girls who watched me play and thought *I want to do that*, and by the time they're old enough there isn't any league? Only college teams and factory

teams and softball teams?” She rubbed her hands slowly down her shorts. “I was the lucky one.”

And for the first time, despite her bad knee, she felt it.

Reka managed to bump her bat into the next pitch (JD definitely soft-tossing for her) and took off hobbling for first base. Pete scooped up the ball and tossed it over to first but his throw went wide, and Reka landed safe on the bag, puffing like a Disney witch, gray hair standing out like a haystack. “Hey, Pete!” Bea hollered. “Don’t go to one knee for the grounder, try to catch it on the hop. Like this—” And she demonstrated.

“I think you ladies cheated,” Harland said at the end of a riotous nine innings and a 3–1 victory for the women.

“A Briarwood Belle does not cheat,” Bea intoned, slinging her bat over one shoulder. “Or if she does, she is never caught.” They were all trooping back toward the house, dusty and tired, waving off the sandlot players who had filled the gaps on the men’s team.

“You definitely had the umpire on your side,” Harland accused.

Bea grinned. “Hey, now, I got called out on that play on second when I was standing still. She didn’t rule anything in your favor or mine!”

He reached for her hand, tangling his fingers with hers. “I’ll take that as long as *you* rule in my favor.”

“I might. If you don’t start droning on about the Red Menace again.”

“It’s my job right now to be concerned about the Red Menace, Bea. I can’t help that. If you choose to serve—in the army, the navy, the FBI, what have you—you don’t get to pick and choose where you’re sent or what your directives are.”

“And you’re all right with that?” Genuinely curious. “What if they’re the wrong directives?”

“Then there are channels to address that, and there need to be people on staff who *will* address it, not just shrug or throw up their hands.” Harland rubbed a palm across his short hair, looking frustrated. “The FBI isn’t perfect, I know that. Hell, the *nation* isn’t perfect. That doesn’t mean it still isn’t worthwhile to devote a life in service of both. Make both better. Believe in both, in what they have to offer.” He sighed. “You’re going to tell me I sound pompous, aren’t you?”

“No. Romantic, maybe. Not pompous,” said Bea, and she started to hum the league’s “Victory Song.” She had no urge to puncture Harland—in fact, she was rather touched by him. An idealist after all, under the starched shirt

and tie . . . Though he wasn't in a tie now. She'd had a whole afternoon to appreciate the sight of him moving loose and easy across a baseball diamond, sweat gleaming in the hollow of his throat. "Your place or mine?" she started to ask, when Pete bobbed up like an eager puppy on her other side.

"Miss Bea? Thank you for showing me how to make that scoop . . . Say, I play here with a summer team in the evenings, just for fun. D'you think you could come show the guys a few things?"

"Sure thing," said Bea, and his eyes lit up like Christmas. Worth it, this whole day—worth it, worth it, worth it, even when they trooped back into Briarwood House to the sound of Mrs. Nilsson shrieking "*My tomatoes!*"

"It was Bea, Mrs. Nilsson," Arlene said at once, throwing Bea under the bus with great pleasure. "*She* took your tomatoes—"

"You ate just as many, you tattling cow," Bea shot back. Arlene slapped her, Bea slapped right back with her whole arm so Arlene sat down on her rump in the picked-over patch, Mrs. Nilsson kept shrieking, and even then it had still all been worth it.

*We are the members of the All-American League,
We come from cities near and far . . .*

"**L**ast home ec class!" Bea shoved that hateful textbook with its hateful diagrams of ladylike place settings and ladylike flower arrangements across the desk like it was radioactive. "Thanks for the assist, Grace." Bea didn't just owe her for the class—if it hadn't been for Grace fast-pouring sweet talk on Decoration Day, Mrs. Nilsson would have kicked Bea out of Briarwood House for sure rather than being satisfied with a payment of triple market value for every tomato. (And, ouch, hadn't that stung like getting drilled with a fastball. Still, better to fork over a little cash than find a new place to live . . . Bea had been surprised how glad she was about that, considering she'd started the season telling herself she had to get out of there.)

"I'd rather help you out than head home and hear Doilies harp about that crystal candy dish that disappeared on her," Grace said, flipping the pages of the textbook. "Besides, better your girls learn how to make chicken salad and deviled eggs than . . ." Wrinkling her nose, she paused on a section titled Company Dinners. "'Mock Jambalaya'? Instant rice, canned shrimp, Vienna sausage . . . Oh, honey, no."

The two women laughed. Sunlight poured through the windows, and the room smelled like chalk and teenage sweat. Last day of school tomorrow; the students raked through the halls outside like they deserved a championship title just for getting through the year. Maybe they did, Bea thought. It had been a hell of a year. Her last PE class had at least ended on something of a high note: she finally coaxed some aggression out of the girls, and they played an absolutely vicious game of field hockey, finishing up all sweat-tangled hair and bloody knees. “You like that feeling?” she told them. “Hold on to that. A woman needs to know how to get vicious, get tough, get down and dirty. Remember that.” And there had been grins, and she thought maybe teenage girls weren’t all such prissy little snots after all. Still.

I won’t be back, Bea thought. *Not here*. She already knew she wasn’t going to be playing baseball again, but she wasn’t going to spend any more months spinning in limbo as a PE teacher and home ec substitute, either. There had to be something else other than Gompers Junior High.

She was even starting to get a few ideas what that might be.

Grace had been saying something about the Rosenberg executions—everyone had been glued to the trial a few years ago and now everyone was glued to the execution coverage; would they really send a *woman* to the electric chair, even a Red spy?!—but she broke off, seeming to sense Bea’s mind had traveled a million miles away from Red spies riding the lightning at Sing Sing. “Where’d you go, Slugger?” Grace had started calling Bea that ever since the sandlot game home run.

“Thinking about what comes next.” Bea ran her hand along the edge of the teacher’s desk. She’d never felt like anything but a fraud, sitting there.

Grace perched on the edge of the nearest student desk, green circle skirt flaring out under her bolero. “What *does* come next?”

“Something in the game,” Bea said slowly. “Something other than playing.” For so long, she’d been so fixated on playing, but there was more to baseball than what took place on the field. Look at Grace’s friend JD: he’d been on track for a pitching career, but the war had taken that away from him and now he was a pitching coach. She wondered if he’d been bitter about it. If someone had had to tell him, the way Grace had told Bea on the sandlot, *There’s got to be somewhere you can slot in*. Meaning somewhere *else*.

But . . .

“Baseball always meant *women’s* baseball to me,” Bea burst out.
“Always. But if I want—”

She stopped.

“If you want to stay in the game,” Grace finished, seeing Bea wasn’t going to say the words, “it very probably means men’s baseball.”

Bea swallowed that down. Didn’t much like the taste of it. She supposed she could get involved with women’s softball or the various semipro teams—that didn’t taste much better. But being sidelined from the game altogether the last few years, well, she *really* hadn’t liked the taste of that.

So: Sit around being bitter, or try to carve herself a place in the world she wanted a part of again?

Grace tilted her head. “So what are you thinking of? Not playing, obviously. Not managing, not coaching . . .”

“There’s a kid I’ve been watching at Prospect Park the last few weeks,” Bea said slowly. “Pete plays with some friends in the evening—mostly they’re just clowning around, pretending to be Mickey Mantle. But there’s one outfielder, tall freckled kid goes to Anacostia High . . . he’s got something.” Even in a sandlot game Bea could see it: the crispness, the drive, that little extra pop that elevated a talented kid to an *athlete*. “Last night after the game, I asked him to show me what he had.” A howitzer of an arm that could fire a one-hopper from deep right to home plate like he was threading a needle, and one of the prettiest swings Bea had ever seen. “He’s eighteen, and he wants to play. Wants it so bad he can taste it. I could spot that a mile off.”

“Talent spotter.” Grace drew the term out. “Is that something you could do, Slugger?”

“In the majors, they call that a scout.” And, yes, Bea wondered if it was something she could do. Since her first spring training as an eighteen-year-old, looking around at all the girls there to try out for the league, she’d been able to pick the best ones out. The pitchers with a little extra gas in their fastball, the base stealers with the really fast feet who would beat every tag, the hitters with that sixth sense for where the pitch was coming next. Even playing that joke game with the Briarwood Belles, she’d known how to size her ladies up and where to put them. She’d always had the eye. It was why she’d been a leader on every team she’d ever joined.

She’d never heard of a major league team employing a woman scout. Who was going to listen if an ex-AAGPBL shortstop said she had the name

of a young outfielder from Anacostia they should take a look at?

Bea looked at Grace, sitting there with her billowing green skirt, smiling faintly as she drew on her white gloves—Grace, who could wheedle anything out of anybody. Bea had always been inclined to blaze through life like a fastball, heading straight from where she was to where she wanted to go at ninety miles an hour—Grace, she thought, was a knuckleball, dancing on the wind, taking a less orthodox path to the plate but getting there all the same. There was, Bea mused, something to admire in that. Definitely something to be learned. “I already owe you,” she began. “For helping with class, and even more for persuading Nilsson not to kick me out over the tomatoes. But if I asked for help with something else—”

“Ask away,” Grace said. “You’re family.”

Family. Were they, the Briar Club? Bea couldn’t quite stop herself from grinning, as she explained what she wanted.

Grace’s eyes sparkled. “All I need is a telephone.”

“Miss Verretti,” Principal Royce chided as she rounded the corner of the empty corridor and nearly collided with him. His voice echoed off the double bank of lockers, the hallways entirely empty now. Grace had had to dash, due at the library for book-shelving; Bea had stayed to clear out the last of her things. “What have I told you about changing back into a skirt after PE?” Royce went on, placing his moist hand on her shoulder. “It doesn’t set the right tone for the young ladies of Gompers. Our female instructresses must set an example—”

“Can I tell you something, Royce?” Bea beamed down at him, his resentful eyes and his hovering smirk. “As a boss, you’ve really been something.”

He smiled, thumb working a little closer to her collarbone. “Why, thank you—”

“I mean, you’ve *really* been something. Tinkling, fussing, petty, spiteful, and damp. You’re a real five-tool boss, emphasis on the *tool*.” Bea plucked his hand off her shoulder and flicked it away. “I was going to do this in a few months before the fall semester started, but what the hell. I quit.”

She waited long enough to see his jaw go slack. “Beatrice,” he began, but she just swung around him and sauntered down the hall, out of Gompers Junior High forever, a folded scrap of paper clutched in her hand. On it was the information Grace had wheedled after forty minutes on the phone in the

Gompers Junior High main office, information she'd had no business getting her hands on but had gotten anyway after charming her way through a telephone operator, a junior secretary, a senior secretary, and one very self-important personal assistant.

The private business office address and personal weekly schedule of one Mr. Clark Calvin Griffith, owner of the Washington Senators.

"I'm in!" Bea whooped, pelting through the doors of Martin's Tavern in Georgetown. Harland barely rose from the booth in time to catch her around the waist as she threw her arms about his neck. "I'm in! I've got it!"

"In where?" he asked, setting her back on her feet. "Got what?"

"A job interview." Bea shrugged out of the green bolero she'd borrowed from Grace, paired with a lace blouse loaned from Nora, a circle skirt from Fliss, and a black straw hat from Claire. Feminine and chic; Bea knew from experience that if a woman wanted an in to a man's world, she couldn't afford to look mannish. Bea hurled the hat into the wood-paneled booth now and slid in after it. "I staked out Mr. Griffith's office for three hours straight, right after lunch when he had a lull in his schedule." *Always brace a businessman after lunch*, Grace had advised, both of them looking over the schedule for the best place for Bea to strike. *If you're lucky he'll be three martinis in and feeling mellow. And his secretary said it's when he keeps an hour free to go over his mail and review stats. That's your window, Slugger.*

"I told Mr. Griffith I wanted to talk about baseball prospects for the team, and he told me he couldn't see me, but after two and a half hours when it was clear I wasn't going away, he said he'd give me five minutes on Wednesday. He just wants to get rid of me"—Bea grinned—"but he won't. I will *dazzle* him on Wednesday. I know all his stats from his playing *and* managing days, I can diagram his entire farm system—" She ran out of breath, slumping back in her seat. "So the real interview's Wednesday. That's my shot."

All she needed was a sliver of a chance; she'd grab it with both hands and run the bases. How much of a shot had she had to make the South Bend Blue Sox at eighteen? She'd borrowed train fare from her eldest brother, packed her bats, and ridden halfway across the country for that chance, and it had paid off.

"Something to celebrate?" the waiter said, arriving to take their order.

“The lady may be about to land the job of her dreams,” Harland said, ordering two martinis. Bea looked around the tavern, glowing with old wood paneling and private booths, squatting on Wisconsin Street like a well-worn catcher guarding the plate.

“Your favorite place?” she asked.

“Most of D.C.’s favorite place,” he said. “Half of Congress comes in and out of here, and half the local mob. That’s a judge over there, sitting on a milk crate pulled up to that corner booth with Senator Sutherland . . . That’s Xavier Byrne taking his daily lunch; he used to run half the numbers racket in town for the Warring gang . . . Booth number three, that’s the junior senator from Massachusetts . . .” Harland saw the blank look on Bea’s face and grinned. “Okay. Billy Martin founded this place, and he played shortstop for the Boston Braves back in the day.”

“Now we’re talking.” Bea slugged half her martini when the waiter set it down. “You know there’s been a woman scout before? I had no idea! Edith Houghton, for the Phillies. She only left the post last year, scouted young players all over the Philadelphia area—”

Harland sat back, toying with the stem of his glass, other arm along the back of his booth. “Is that what life looks like for you, then?”

“If I get my foot in the door.” Taking trains wherever there was a whiff of talent, evaluating factory-team pitchers in Baltimore and high school shortstops in Gaithersburg. Sitting through games, talking to eager kids and their wary families. *Show me what you’ve got, kid*. Making the case at staff meetings for the ones she believed in. Getting to see the next generation of talent head off toward a career in the majors, all bright eyes and big dreams of hitting five-hundred-foot homers like Mickey Mantle. Making Briarwood House her base . . . Because Bea had realized she had no desire, after all, to leave it. Not the house, which had become a home, or Grace’s Thursday night suppers, or the Briarwood Belles, who had somehow become family. She smiled, lifting her glass. “I hope.”

“Then I hope, too.” They clinked glasses, just as the waiter swooped back to take their order. “What’s the commotion?” Harland asked, nodding at the wave of craning heads rubbernecking toward Booth #3.

“We appear to be witnessing a marriage proposal.” The waiter lowered his voice. “The junior senator from Massachusetts is, I believe, proposing matrimony to Miss Jacqueline Bouvier.”

“No kidding.” Bea craned her neck, too, unashamedly, for a look at the petite brunette in the pale yellow sheath dress and pearls, and the man in the carelessly rumpled suit holding her hands across the table. “Cute,” Bea appreciated, getting a gander at the big white grin and tanned face. “What’s his name again?”

A cheer went up, rippling across the tavern as the young senator straightened, looking exultant. “I take it Miss Bouvier said yes.” The waiter smiled and whipped off across the room to be the first to offer the engaged couple champagne on the house.

It seemed like a day for toasts. “To the happy couple,” Bea suggested. She swallowed the rest of her martini, lowering the glass to see Harland gazing at her, his lean foxlike face looking oddly, nakedly bemused.

“Let’s make it two proposals for Martin’s Tavern on June twenty-fourth, 1953,” he said. “Marry me.”

Bea laughed. “What?”

“I’m serious.”

“No, you aren’t. What are you thinking?”

“I have no idea. Marry me.”

“Are you drunk?” Taking his glass out of his hand and setting it down. “I am *completely* wrong for you.”

“I’m not arguing. You are completely wrong for me. You are in fact probably the worst candidate for an FBI agent’s wife I can think of. Marry me.”

“But I don’t want to be an FBI agent’s wife.” Bea gave him another grin, but a gentler one. “I want to be the first woman scout for the Washington Senators. I’d rather it was the Red Sox, but—”

“You can do both. Who says you can’t do both?”

“I don’t want to do both. Even if I’m very flattered by the offer, G-man, considering you think everything I do and wear and say is goddamn appalling.” Bea leaned across the table and gave him a lingering kiss.

“You do appall me,” he murmured against her lips. “But I’m not withdrawing my offer.”

“I’m not *taking* your offer.”

His eyes narrowed. “You have no idea how patient I can be, Beatrice Maria Verretti.”

“You’ll have to be, Harland Custis Adams. Because I’ve got miles to go and lots to do, and I’m aching to get started.” Bea rose from the booth,

slinging Claire's borrowed black straw hat across one arm and fishing in her pocketbook for the good luck token she'd brought to stake out Mr. Griffith's office this morning: her faded Fort Wayne Daisies baseball cap. "You got an hour? Let's head to Prospect Park and play some catch."

Interstitial

*Thanksgiving 1954
Washington, D.C.*

Don't leave me, Briarwood House begs its boarders silently. *Promise you won't leave me.*

The house doesn't have hands to wring, but it's certainly wringing its curtains over the idea of losing its ladies. Of being sold off by Mrs. Nilsson and turned into a furniture showroom. How can this be? This entire first floor might very well be gutted, stripped of the well-worn floorboards that give it charm, the chandelier that was put in when the *first* Roosevelt was inaugurated, the elaborate banister down which both Pete and Lina slid as children (behind their mother's back). Stripped out for *living room sets*, of all things. *No abomination like a showroom full of living room sets*, the house thinks, rucking up the hallway runner just to trip the policemen as they go back and forth. A showroom is a facsimile of life, dead furniture on which no lovers have ever kissed, no children have ever flopped with a Baby Ruth and the latest Superman comic, no cats have ever curled and purred. If this place becomes a showroom, the house will die. It knows that. It knows right down to its baseboards.

Briarwood House will die when it ceases to be a home.

Don't let that Nilsson cow sell me, it implores the Briar Club, but they don't have any control over that, and besides, they're too tense with fear over their own futures. The detectives are interviewing them one at a time now, calling them one by one into the sitting room to answer questions.

“This is bigger than just jail,” one whispers to another on a walk down the hallway to the bathroom. “This could mean the electric chair. For *all* of us.”

“Don’t be dramatic . . .”

But the fear is palpable.

If the house could die, well, so might the people in this house who know what really happened here tonight. And Briarwood House does its best to soothe them all, but the house is shivering deep in its foundations, and so are all the women in the kitchen. *I’ll take care of you*, the house wishes it could promise, but the promise is futile and the house knows it, thinking helplessly of that first murder inside the green-vined walls of 4B, the one that kicked it all off.

The corpse with its red hair surrounded by a halo of blood.

One and a Half Years Earlier

July 1953

Chapter 6

Claire

Dear Kitty,

The war in Korea continues apace, but in sheer savagery the conflict cannot compare to the Bathroom Wars waged every morning at Briarwood House. I think Claire is going to stab Reka to death with a toothbrush someday.

I wish you were here.

—Grace

Claire Hallett had learned three things early in life: love was for suckers, luck was an illusion, and there was never a bathroom available when you really needed one. “*Reka*,” she shouted, hammering on the door with her sponge bag, “haul your wrinkled old haunches out of there!”

“Hold your horses,” Reka grunted from inside the bathroom. “It takes time to pee at my age.”

Claire glowered. She hadn’t had her coffee yet, a bathrobe-clad Nora was shifting from foot to foot behind her, and at this rate they were all going to miss breakfast. Doilies Nilsson always whipped the last speck of scrambled eggs and rubbery bacon off the table downstairs at seven twenty-nine and fifty seconds, no grace for those who got stuck at the end of the bathroom line.

“If y’all would just set your alarm for half an hour earlier, you’d be *fine*,” Arlene cooed, perfectly pulled together in her powder-blue skirt and sweater set, waltzing toward the stairs with her pocketbook. “Early bird gets the worm, you know. And the bathroom!”

“Give Bea’s door a knock, won’t you?” Claire asked sweetly. “Or she’ll be late for work. She was out so late with Harland again, she must have slept through her alarm.”

Nora laughed, and Arlene’s smile curdled. “I don’t see *you* getting many dates these days.” Her eyes went deliberately over Claire’s broad hips and broader bust. “Small wonder. Though *small* isn’t really the word . . .”

“I’ve already got my Sid.” Claire smacked her own hip so it jiggled. “And he loves *all* of me, thank you.”

“Nobody’s ever met your Sid,” Arlene said. “I think you made him up.”

“Have not! Want to see a picture?” Claire had her wallet in her bathrobe pocket, because she was never without her wallet even on a morning trip to the bathroom: she dug out Sid’s much-handled picture and flashed it around.

“Dashing,” Nora approved. “Clark Gable nose.”

“I’ll believe in him when I meet him,” Arlene said with a sniff and flounced downstairs. Reka came stumping out of the bathroom, wearing that flamboyant flame silk quilted robe she said she’d bought on her last trip to New York.

“Pushy *kurva*,” the old woman grumbled as Claire flew past her.

“Stubborn old mule,” Claire retorted and slammed the door. Into the shower and out again, of *course* the hot water was already gone; when she had a house of her own she was going to have a claw-foot tub the size of Rhode Island and hot water for days . . . Twisting her damp red curls into a turban, Claire saw a jade drop pendant on the tiles. Reka’s, also from that last New York trip—Claire dropped it neatly into her pocket and veered off to cram herself into a girdle and stockings, a blouse that gapped over her bust (why, *why* didn’t blouses have buttons closer together?), her second-oldest skirt, and a pair of penny loafers that needed resoling.

“Anyone see a jade pendant around here?” Reka was demanding downstairs in the dining room, as Mrs. Nilsson shooed Lina to leave her own breakfast and start clearing plates.

Claire nabbed the last strip of bacon off Lina’s plate. “Nope,” she said and headed out the door. She liked her housemates fine; she’d cook for them when it was her turn on Thursday nights, and she’d pitch in a buck for Lina’s glasses or spend an hour watching Angela when Fliss needed it—but at the end of the day, she always looked out for number one.

“You’re late, Claire.” But Claire’s boss smiled as she said it, coming out of her office for her ten o’clock meeting: Senator Margaret Chase Smith of Maine, fifty-six, gray-haired, sharp-eyed, pearls around her throat.

“I’ve given up trying to be early, ma’am, because you’re always the first one here,” Claire chirped, thinking as she often did: *I work for the most naive woman in Washington*. “I’d have to stay overnight to beat you!”

“I suppose,” the senator said, laughing. “Do you have my rose?” She took the flower Claire gave her, threading it through her collar into the discreet tube vase that clipped to the other side of her lapel. It was Claire’s job, as junior assistant to the office secretaries, to bring the senator’s signature fresh rose every morning, for which expense she was reimbursed every Friday. Claire had been mooching free roses off Pete since he started up at Moonlight Magnolias and pocketing the reimbursement money for months. No one knew the difference, certainly not the senator as she headed out with chin lifted high over that rose. She wasn’t going anywhere critical, of course: she’d made an enemy of Senator McCarthy a few years ago and had been locked out of every important committee and function on Capitol Hill ever since. *Hence, most naive woman in town*, Claire thought. Senator Smith should have known that would be the outcome if she made a run at Tail Gunner Joe.

“Claire,” Miss Wing called over, “if you could take care of that filing—”

“Yes, Miss Wing.” Anyone who thought the business of government was glamorous had never been to the Old House Office Building across Independence Avenue from the Capitol, Claire thought as she took her stack of files and squeezed around the maze of desks, chairs, and bookcases toward the filing cabinets. Congressmen and their staffs were packed into this warren of offices like moles, only moles worked better hours. Senator Smith from Maine rated three rooms in Suite 329, which had a nice view of the Capitol and a picture on the door of the Maine coastline and not much else. Besides the front room and the senator’s office, the secretaries and their three assistants were crammed into a cubby the size of a broom closet. *You know the only people in the federal system with less space than congressmen?* Miss Wing had joked to Claire the day she was hired. *Prisoners*.

Claire shrugged mentally. It was just a job: typing, stapling, filing. She wasn’t a lifer like Miss Wing or Miss Haskell, skinny chests puffed up with pride as they talked about being with the senator since her first term in the

House, clearly planning on being *with the senator* until they were carried out of Suite 329 feetfirst in a box. No, Claire Hallett was only here for the paycheck, and she wasn't going to be here forever. The moment her savings account hit eight thousand, she was gone.

Eight thousand. The magic number, and she was *close*, she was so close. Her bankbook said seven thousand six hundred and twenty-eight dollars and seventy-two cents. She pulled it out and looked at it in between shoving files into the cabinet. Not that she didn't know her savings account down to the last penny at all times, but it eased the ever-present clutch in her stomach to check those neatly penciled lines, to flip the pages that had gone worn and soft with handling and check her figures and affirm that, yes, her calculations were correct. Seven thousand six hundred and twenty-eight dollars and seventy-two cents, saved over nearly twenty years. She was almost there.

"Claire, walk this mimeographic stencil over to the Senate Service Department; the senator needs a hundred copies after lunch."

"Yes, Miss Wing."

By the time Claire came back she could hear the senator on the telephone in her private office. "That man!" whispered Miss Wing to Miss Haskell—the loyalists wouldn't even use his name. "He is *haranguing her* again."

"Senator McCarthy," came the calm voice of Claire's boss through the half open door. Even from here, you could make out the hectoring sounds coming from the other end of the telephone. "Senator, keep quiet a minute, will you? I haven't said anything while you were talking, now I'm going to have my say and it's your turn to keep quiet."

Miss Haskell and Miss Wing sucked in a breath. Claire shook her head pityingly, dumping her heap of copies on the nearest desk. Joe McCarthy owned Washington, and he was a bully. You didn't square up to bullies and spit in their eye; you let them careen on past you waving their lists of enemies and Communists and what have you. You kept out of their way and kept on *your* way, with your downcast eyes and your bankbook with its neatly ruled lines. That was how you survived. Someone should have told that to the senator from Maine, but it wasn't going to be Claire. If there was a fourth thing she'd learned at an early age, it was *don't stick your neck out*.

"You're late," said the housekeeper at Claire's second job, answering her knock. "Mrs. Sutherland's been waiting."

“Slow tram,” Claire lied. She’d stopped off at a pawnshop on the edge of Georgetown to hock Reka’s jade pendant—the same place she’d hocked the crystal candy dish from Mrs. Nilsson’s parlor, a pair of Fliss’s cloisonné earrings, and various other Briarwood House sundries over the years.

“What’s the missus got for me today?” she asked, trying a winning smile.

“Mrs. Sutherland would like you to run these dresses to the cleaners, take this bracelet to the jeweler’s to have the clasp repaired, and pick up a hat for her at Hecht’s.”

“All right if I pick up the hat tomorrow?” Running errands for rich women: a reliable way to make a little cash no matter where you were, because all cities had rich women and all rich women who didn’t work were *convinced* they never had enough time to run their own errands. Claire had marked the elegant Mrs. Sutherland down the moment she saw the woman giving Fliss a ride home from church one rainy Sunday early this spring; she’d been running her errands ever since.

“You can deliver it Saturday,” Mrs. Sutherland called from the hallway, clearly on her way out somewhere in spotless gloves and an ivory linen suit. “Can you watch my son for a couple of hours that afternoon?” she continued, clipping a huge pearl earring to one earlobe. “It’s the Fourth of July—our nanny’s off to see her mother. Drop off the hat then, and my husband can pay you for everything at once.”

“Of course, Mrs. Sutherland.” Claire folded the dresses (Chanel, Lanvin, Dior) over her arm, took the gold bracelet from the housekeeper and tucked it into her pocketbook without even a wistful glance. A good thief knew where *not* to steal from, and a house like this one was strictly off-limits.

“Thank you, that will be all.” Mrs. Sutherland whisked off again in a cloud of Joy perfume. *Must be nice to be rich*, Claire thought, heading out toward her third job of the day.

“You’re late,” grunted Mr. Huckstop as Claire came blowing past the Closed sign on the front door of Huckstop’s Photography. “Strip quick, I’m on a schedule. Got a lot of darkroom work tonight.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Claire dropped her pocketbook, slung Mrs. Sutherland’s Paris frocks over the nearest chair, and began unbuttoning her blouse. “The warhead again?”

“Ever since Miss Atomic Blast got crowned in Vegas, they’ve been flying off the shelves.” Mr. Huckstop fussed around with his camera as Claire shimmied out of her skirt and blouse and girdle, tugged a set of cheap black

fishnets over her nylons, and swapped her sensible shoes for a pair of fairly whorish stilettos he kept on hand for these little after-hours photo shoots. During the day when the shades were up, he had a studio setup with fake flowers and tasteful drapes for couples who wanted their picture taken and parents who wanted to commemorate a child's birthday. Once night fell and the shades were drawn, a different set of props came out.

Claire climbed onto the papier-mâché tube Mr. Huckstop had mocked up to look like a nuclear warhead, complete with cotton wool smoke and conical nose. " Tits out?"

" Tits out." He started fussing with the lights, not paying Claire the slightest attention as she tossed her brassiere aside. You could say one thing for Mr. Huckstop—he was a cheap bastard, always trying to nickel-and-dime what he owed her, but he never ogled and he never tried to sample the merchandise. " Lips parted, chin on hand, you know the drill . . ." Claire bent over the papier-mâché warhead, moistened her lips, and did her best to look aroused. " Good . . . Perfect . . . "

" Exactly why would a naked woman be sitting on a warhead, much less getting aroused by it?" Claire had snorted on her first photo shoot.

" Beats me, girly, but they sell like hotcakes." Mr. Huckstop had been the one to approach her: *You interested in some after-hours modeling? I do a certain amount of under-the-counter photo work—you're kinda fleshy but some fellas like that, and you got the rack.* Claire hadn't batted an eyelash. It paid better than filing papers or running errands.

" You think that girl you room with would be interested?" he asked, clicking away. " The classy one."

" Nora?" Claire shifted into a new pose, crossing one fishnetted leg over the other and pushing her chest out. " Doubtful."

" No, the English one. The one in here all the time getting pictures of her kid."

Claire burst out laughing. " Fliss the priss?"

" Quit laughing, look sultry." *Click click click.* " I can do something with an English priss. The touch-me-not girl in pearls, men like to fantasize about that."

Claire lay flat along the warhead, raising her legs in the air, ankles crossed. " Men are so strange."

" Girly, you ain't kidding."

At least there were plenty of opportunities to make money off their strange ways, Claire thought. "I'm not the touch-me-not girl in pearls, so what am I?"

"The lady-bountiful type. Soft, welcoming. A guy looked any closer he'd see you've got eyes like flint, but they aren't looking at your eyes." Clicking away. "Know any good-looking young fellas who might be interested in posing?"

"What, on a warhead?" Tipping her head back, Claire felt her curls spill over the warhead's cotton smoke.

"More leaning on a motorcycle, y'know? I got a chromed-up one that doesn't run but looks good under some young fella with nice arms, wearing an undershirt and not much else. More suits than you think want to look at Marlon Brando than Marilyn Monroe when they—" A certain gesture. "You'd be surprised."

"Not that surprised," said Claire. "We done here?"

"Always a pleasure, Hallett."

Claire climbed off the warhead and held out a hand. "Pay up."

It was after eight by the time Claire tramped upstairs to her Briarwood House room. The walls were mustard yellow-brown and the faded chintz curtains had been hanging in the windows since she moved in—Claire had never seen the point of decorating something temporary. She never intended to stay here so long, but Grace had moved in and somehow with the Briar Club and the Thursday dinners and everything else, the place had become a lot more pleasant than cheap boardinghouses ever were, in Claire's experience . . . Kicking off her shoes, she flopped across her bed and counted out the handful of bills she'd managed to make today: from Mr. Huckstop, from the pawnbroker for Reka's pendant, even the quarters and nickels she'd quickly scooped from Miss Wing's desk at the senator's office. Totting it all up, Claire jotted the new total in her bankbook. She'd drop by the bank tomorrow before work and deposit everything.

Reaching under her bed for her box, she carefully added the clipping she'd cut out of the *Washington Post* on her lunch hour: a neat, gabled box of a fresh-painted house on an even neater square of lawn. *Magnificent modern colonial home in Hillcrest! Open today, 12 to dark!*

Claire dug out a packet of Nabisco sugar wafers, reading. Eighteen-foot beamed cathedral ceiling, living room finished in Pickwick Knotty Pine

paneling, sliding door closets, complete General Electric kitchen . . . “Not bad,” she said aloud. She’d never have a house this big—it would take her another thirty years to save that much—but eight thousand would buy you something compact and cozy across the state line in Maryland, no problem. Eight thousand was the amount Claire had worked out long ago, full of flint-hard anger, her shoulders set in a defensive hunch from too many sucker punches. Eight thousand equaled *home*. Not a big home, not a Georgetown mansion like Mrs. Sutherland had, not even a modest colonial with Pickwick Knotty Pine paneling and a General Electric kitchen, but a home.

Even so, she liked to collect pictures of palaces. Turning on her side and crunching up another sugar wafer, she sifted through her box of clippings. *Marilyn Monroe’s latest Hollywood home! Four bedrooms, four and a half bathrooms, two-car garage, pool and spa out back . . .*

That’s too much house for one person. Claire imagined her Sid laughing, dark eyes crinkled at the corners. *What would you do with four bedrooms?*

“Throw you down in every single one of them,” Claire said aloud to the sickly mustard walls. Sid’s feet were always cold; she missed those icy toes twined with hers. *This weekend*, she thought, feeling herself smile involuntarily. She was getting a little soppy about Sid, if she was honest with herself. She’d have to make sure that got nipped in the bud, because Claire Hallett didn’t get soppy about anyone or anything, ever. “Bright colors and a white roof add sparkle to the simple lines of this Florida house,” she read aloud from another clipping, banishing Sid from her mind. “Three bedrooms, one and a half baths, carport, and paved terrace . . .”

“Join us for hot dogs in the park?” Grace gave one of her easy smiles, pausing on the landing as Claire came out of her room. “Lina made a cherry pie, and if Bea gets back from that scouting trip in Bowie, I have a feeling she’ll corral us all into another sandlot game. There’ll be fireworks, too.”

“Can’t, got to work.” Claire locked up her room. Most of the Briarwood House women didn’t bother, but Claire never left anything to chance, good fortune, or other people’s honesty. Besides, Doilies was a snoop.

“Work? On the Fourth of July?” Grace blinked, patriotically festive in a red shirtwaist dress and blue kitten heels. “If that’s not sacrilegious, I don’t know what is.”

“Not my favorite holiday,” Claire said, shoving back some particularly ugly memories. It used to be her favorite day of the year, but that had been a long, long time ago, so she pushed her way down the stairs and out of Briarwood House before Grace could probe any further. Claire liked Grace fine; the woman had a positive gift for bringing sunshine into even the most dreary setting—but she could keep those lazily curious eyes on her own business, thank you very much.

“Miss Hallett, is it?” The man of the house glanced up with a smile as the housekeeper ushered Claire into the drawing room. (Once a house passed thirty thousand dollars and five thousand square feet, a *den* turned into a *drawing room*. Claire’s study of housing ads had taught her that much.) “You’ll be looking after my little man today while I take the missus out to hear the military bands and the speeches on the Mall?”

“Yes, sir.” Only her second or third time laying eyes on him, but he’d remembered her name. She had no trouble recollecting his, but that was to be expected—you didn’t forget a name like Barrett Sutherland, Yale law, former army lieutenant, Bronze Star, fourth generation of his family to serve in Washington. Gearing up for his first run at the House of Representatives, or so the rumor went, so he’d be prepared to take over his father’s seat in the Senate someday. He wouldn’t be the handsomest man in Congress—that would be the junior senator from Massachusetts; Claire had seen the engagement photos in *LIFE* of John F. Kennedy and his brunette fiancée—but Mr. Sutherland was handsome in that tall, tanned, toothy way that silver-spoon boys so often seemed to be. Claire couldn’t help but think of them as *boys*, even when they were older than she was.

“Miss Hallett!” Barrett Junior ran into the room: crisp shorts and buttoned shirt and a patriotic red-white-and-blue cockade just like his father’s. “C’n we go to the park?”

“Sure, kid.” Claire wanted to ruffle his hair, which had been painstakingly combed into place. He was a nice boy, at least right now. Later he’d probably turn out just like his father, and then he’d have a loud voice and crew for Yale and talk about the Negro problem over martinis with other men just like him, so she might as well enjoy the kid while the *nice* stage lasted.

“Darling, I’m so sorry—” Mrs. Sutherland rushed into the drawing room in an exquisite blue Balmain dress and pearls. “It’s come a day early, simply the *worst* timing. My time of the month—” She broke off with a blush,

seeing Claire in the opposite doorway. “I’m sorry, Miss Hallett, I didn’t see you there.”

Claire gave a polite *people-like-you-never-see-people-like-me-anyway* smile. Mr. Sutherland frowned. “My father will be expecting us both at his speech.”

Mrs. Sutherland lowered her voice. “You know Dr. Rock says I should lie down as much as possible during my time of the month. To optimize our chances . . . Why don’t you take Bear instead?” She always called her son Bear rather than *Barrett* or *Junior*. “Father and son on Independence Day; I can’t think of a more perfect picture at your father’s speech.”

“Dad, *pleeeeeeease*?”

The crease between Mr. Sutherland’s eyebrows hovered a moment, then smoothed away. “Okay, champ. Let’s go see your grandpa. Someday you’ll be watching your old man give the Independence Day speech, and someday even further down the road it’ll be you . . .”

A flurry, then: Mrs. Sutherland getting jackets and hats for her menfolk, fluttering about how she’d just dismissed the housekeeper for the day, Mr. Sutherland shoving a few bills at Claire (“A little extra for your trouble, sorry you came out here to babysit for nothing—” He was always generous, she’d say that for him). Claire retrieved her pocketbook, fussed toward the door, yelped something about forgetting to leave the hat she’d picked up at Hecht’s for the missus, doubled back to the drawing room . . . Where she and Mrs. Sutherland stood, waiting for the sound of Mr. Sutherland’s Hudson Hornet to disappear from earshot.

“Did your time of the month really come a day early?” Claire asked.

A big, slow grin. “No.”

Claire crooked a finger. “Come here, Sid.”

Sydney Sutherland came crashing into her arms, bending that long, long neck down like a swan so their lips could meet. That neck had been the first thing to fascinate Claire, even before the endless jet-black lashes and soft curving mouth. “You have a neck like a *giraffe*,” she’d said the first time they kissed, having to go to her tiptoes as if she were embracing a tall man. “A neck like a giraffe, and your legs come up to my shoulders—are you even real?”

Sydney Zuill of Bermuda and London, now Sydney Sutherland of Washington, D.C., had laughed that particular laugh she never let her

husband, her father-in-law, or their constituents hear. "I'm very real, Miss Hallett."

She was laughing that laugh now, soft and remarkably wicked, the laugh that did things to Claire's innards. "I was hoping on Thursday that you'd pick up my hint about bringing the hat today—"

"Subtle as a train wreck, Sid." Working her fingers down the row of buttons on that blue Balmain dress. "You shouldn't have begged off Fourth of July. Too important to him—"

"If I had to stand around in the hot sun all day listening to marching bands and patriotic speeches and firecrackers rather than lying in lovely cool sheets with you, I was going to go barking mad." Sydney dragged her lips away from Claire's, looking disheveled and kiss-flushed and perfect. "Come upstairs. My husband won't be home with Bear until after dark."

Who seduced who? Looking back, Claire wasn't sure. Always a delicate dance, looking at a woman and wondering if her eyes were willing to take a sideways wander from the male of the species. Claire had never had any trouble approaching a man she wanted; she threw out her chest and let her eyes go shiny the way they did for the camera when she climbed on a papier-mâché warhead, and that was usually enough. Women, though . . . You could drive yourself mad, wondering *Did she hold my eyes a moment too long just now? Did she linger, touching my hand just now? What did she mean just now?* Knowing that if you got it wrong, if you made your move on the wrong woman, you'd retreat with your cheeks slapped and a cry of *PERVERT!* ringing in your ears, praying to God she wouldn't call the cops.

"I had my eye on you from the beginning," Sydney claimed. "The first time I saw you in the doorway of Briarwood House when I dropped Fliss off from church—you had the coolest expression, but your hair was coming out of its pins, and your blouse was slipping a button, and it was like you were bursting out all over. All that hair, all that strawberry skin, you try to contain it but you can't. Right from the beginning, I wanted a taste."

"But I'm the one who kissed you first," Claire protested. "The third week I was running your errands, when I came by to drop off the gloves you'd had mended, and you fell off your shoe." A momentary insanity; she'd been telling herself sternly that she was *not* to make even the smallest overture to this overelongated, overprivileged Georgetown political wife, but everything had come undone in a single instant: Sydney's slender ankle

rocking in her tall patent heel, sending her long body crashing against Claire's; her arm coming round Claire's shoulder for balance; her red-lipsticked mouth suddenly within reach . . . Claire hadn't thought for a moment; she just dove for that mouth and found it opening under her own like a flower.

"The old fall-out-of-your-heel trick," Sydney said, nodding sagely. "Works every time."

"You *played* me?" Claire's outrage was only half faked. Who conned a con as good as she was? And she knew she was good.

"Listen, Strawberry, I walked fashion shows in London for three years in four-inch pumps when I was working as a model. You think I'd ever fall off a heel unless I meant to?"

And maybe that was when Claire started getting a bit soppy about Sydney Sutherland, and not just lusting for her long legs and blooming skin. Because this overelongated, overprivileged Georgetown political wife was a con, too, in her way.

"What's happening at Briarwood House?" An hour of blissful rolling about on the peach satin duvet of Sydney's rosy-walled bedroom, and now Sydney stretched those endless legs out so she could twine her ice-cold feet with Claire's, making a little *go-on* motion. "Tell me everything. Is Mrs. Nilsson still refusing to send Pete back to school? Did Bea get that job scouting for the Senators?"

"Why are you so interested in my housemates?" Claire demanded, propping herself up on one elbow in the nest of sheets. "They're just *women*, completely ordinary."

"I used to share a flat with three other models in London," Sydney said. "I miss those days—passing gin flasks around when someone had something to celebrate, arguing about who borrowed whose mink stole for a big date. Ever since I married it's nothing but men: my husband and my father-in-law and all the toadies around them. Sad little kings of sad little mountains . . . Even Bear, nothing but little boys running all over the house when he has friends over. Most of the political wives are older than me, and the ones who aren't, I don't seem to have anything in common with." A shrug. "Anyhow, I like your Briarwood House crew."

"You shouldn't have come over on Decoration Day. A whole afternoon of not being able to exchange a look—how on earth was that worth it?" Claire did not believe in across-the-room burning glances. Frankly, that whole

picnic—watching Sydney slurp up long strands of spaghetti, watching her run clumsily after a sandlot baseball in Grace’s borrowed shorts—had been torture.

“Fliss invited me after church the previous week. Besides”—Sydney traced the back of Claire’s hand with one perfect, polished nail—“I wanted to see you. Not to mention all your Briar Club friends.”

“Just how many of my housemates do you know by now?” Claire refused to call this little pinching feeling jealousy, because that would be ridiculous.

“Reka, first . . . She came to the house once or twice over some old matter with my father-in-law. Don’t ask; it’s *her* business. And because of her I met Fliss, and once I knew Fliss was a nurse she helped me with—” A mute gesture toward her belly. “I’ll never cease owing her for that.”

“Barrett still doesn’t suspect?” Another of the quiet little cons Claire admired Sydney for: the efficient subterfuge by which she was shutting her body off to her husband’s plan for a flotilla of little Sutherlands.

“Well, he’s starting to think Dr. Rock is a quack, considering how I’ve been back and forth to Boston for this *fertility study*, and no results yet.” Sydney’s beautiful face went still for a moment. “At some point he’ll insist I go see someone else, but I’m hoping I can string it out another year.”

Claire ran her hand down the supple, endless length of Sydney’s naked back. “Well, if you want Briarwood House gossip, I can tell you Lina’s cakes really have improved,” she said, tone deliberately light. “We all praise her extravagantly to encourage the progress. And Reka’s hopping back and forth between here and New York almost every other week now, seeing this art show and that art show—she came into some money, though she’s cagey about how. And Bea *did* get that job scouting for the Senators, and about half the men in the office are trying to haze her into leaving, which shows they don’t know Bea. Nora gets a huge bunch of flowers every week with a card that just says ‘X’ and she gives them away or dumps them—”

“No! Who’s sending them to her?”

“No idea. She’s Miss National Archives, all about the job. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her doll up for a date. Pete made his Swedish meatballs again for the last Briar Club meeting . . .”

Sydney groaned. “Don’t say *meatballs* to me. I haven’t eaten a gram of meat in two weeks. I have to whittle three pounds off; it’s all black coffee and chopped salads—”

“You do *not* need to lose three pounds!”

“Barrett says I do,” Sydney said simply.

“Barrett can go screw himself,” Claire snapped, but Sydney just gave her a look and she subsided. It was the silent place between them: Barrett Landry Sutherland, the small pinching bruises Claire sometimes saw on Sydney’s satin skin, the fact that she could charge exquisite clothes and expensive lunches all over town but never had more than a fifty-cent piece on her for cash. *Why did you marry him?* Claire had been foolish enough to ask once, maybe their second or third time together, and Sydney had given her a remarkably cynical look.

Because he was the best I could get, and I was raised to be married, Claire. Because he was very charming and very kind, and he said he’d take me away from London, which was so gray and horrible and bombed out. Because he never gave me a single smack until we’d been married six months, and by then he held all the cards.

What Claire did *not* ask—then or now—was *What will you do?* Because it was none of her business; because this thing they had only existed here, two bodies twined together on a peach satin duvet, and that was how she wanted it to stay.

Sydney was changing the subject now, asking something about Senator Smith. “—as much of a firebrand as I’ve heard?”

“Firebrand?” Claire thought of the woman she worked for, her quick eyes and steady smile. “She’s not a firebrand. She’s just another gray-haired Republican senator.”

“I’m fond of her if only because of the headaches she gives my husband’s father.” Sydney laughed, rolling onto one side. “You should have heard him rage when she gave her speech against McCarthy. Said she was a disgrace to the Republican Party, and he’d see she was run out of Washington tarred and feathered. He’s *very* much in McCarthy’s pocket, my father-in-law. Thinks he’s got the right idea about the Commies.”

Claire shrugged. She didn’t care much about Commies—who actually *knew* any Reds, anyway? This was Washington, not Moscow; she didn’t think for a moment that there were Marxists hiding under every rock no matter how many lists some crackpot from Wisconsin waved around. If anything about McCarthy alarmed Claire, it was the comments about *lavender lads in the State Department*, and *sexual perverts infiltrating the government*. Because everyone knew *sexual perverts* didn’t mean the florid family men who pinched their secretaries on the rump every day, oh no. It

meant the ones like Claire and Sydney. Though thank god women had it easier hiding that kind of thing than men did. The year Claire started working for Senator Smith, everyone had been gossiping about how ninety-one queers had been forced to resign from the State Department—only two of those had been women. Claire felt badly for the eighty-nine men who had found themselves in those crosshairs, she truly did, but she wasn't going to complain that lavender lasses had an easier time hiding than lavender lads. Women so rarely had anything easier than men, she'd take it wherever she found it.

"My father-in-law thinks McCarthy has the right idea about the queers too," Sydney said as if reading her mind, leaning down to kiss Claire's freckled shoulder. "He says any man against Tail Gunner Joe is either a Communist or a cocksucker. Gets all red in the face and starts thumping the table. *These deviants pose a danger to our nation's safety every bit as lethal as the Reds—*"

"I just do not understand that logic," Claire objected.

"Darling, you think McCarthy types are all that strong on logic?"

"No, I mean it. Exactly how is someone like me a threat to the nation's safety? I don't want to overthrow Congress. I want to buy a house and be able to eat breakfast in bed every morning in peace."

"Ah, but homosexuals on Capitol Hill are more subject to blackmail and thus are targets for Russian moles," Sydney recited in a pompous bass. "All a Kremlin operative has to do is find out who the queers are and threaten to expose them, and they'll just roll over and start selling state secrets."

"Oh, *seriously* . . ."

"Serious as a heart attack. Hopefully my father-in-law will thump and roar his way into one someday soon."

Claire raised her eyebrows. "You're that eager to be rid of him?"

"Can't stand the old bastard," Sydney said candidly. "Forever telling me to leave off the suntan oil, darlin', *so you don't get any darker than you already are*. He has no idea I sit there at his Sunday dinner table pushing overcooked peas around my plate and daydreaming what I'll wear to his funeral."

Her voice was brittle under its flippancy, and Claire looked for another topic. "*Sydney*," she mused, plaiting her fingers through her lover's black hair. "I don't think I ever asked how you got a name like that, Bermuda Girl. Was your father from Australia?"

“No, London. Sydney Barclay-Jones, Esquire, a real Eton-and-Oxford type, came to Hamilton to drink gin and tonics and write his memoirs . . . Instead he found my mother. She named me Sydney after him—I was supposed to be a boy, Sydney Barclay-Jones II. They were both disappointed, but if he didn’t give me his surname at least he paid for me to go to school in England.”

“Is that why you sound like Princess Margaret Rose?”

“Naturally, darling,” Sydney drawled. “My mum used to cane me across the knuckles if I let my vowels slip. She always said the voice was what would get me places, even more than my legs. A proper English voice, an *educated* voice, and she was right.” Making a face. “I used to be able to switch—be the proper English miss at school, come home and slip back into my old vowels and be an island girl again. I can’t do it anymore. Mum would be proud.”

Claire twined a loop of black hair around her fingers. “Do you see her often?”

“Once a year, when Barrett takes us to the beach house outside Hamilton.”

“You have a beach house in Bermuda?” Claire flopped on her back with a groan. “Of course you do.”

“It’s pale green and white; looks like a wedding cake sitting on the edge of the water. You’ve never seen water that blue in your life.” Sydney’s face scrunched. “I wish I could show you . . . The houses are all different colors there like rainbow sherbet, lemon yellow and mint green and coral pink, but all the roofs are blinding white and stepped like stairs. And the children learn to swim there before they learn to walk, and everyone’s in and out of the ocean all summer to cool off . . .” She sighed. “Barrett lets us have two weeks there every summer, at least. I always find a way to sneak off and meet my mother for coffee.”

“Why do you have to *sneak* to see your own mother?”

“She never thought it wise to meet Barrett,” Sydney said matter-of-factly. “She’s darker than me . . . she said it would hurt my chances.”

Claire’s hand twined back into that black hair. “Sid . . .”

“Hush,” Sydney said fiercely. “Hush—” She rolled over and pressed herself against Claire. Claire had to kiss her with such care; she couldn’t leave any marks on Sydney’s satin skin that her husband might see, but Sydney had no such restraints—she kissed her way across Claire’s neck as

if drinking her way to the bottom of a bottle of ambrosia. Claire closed her eyes, back arching as Sydney's lips traveled across the curve of her waist, lower, and she bit down savagely on the side of her own hand to keep from crying out at the end. Cries of passion weren't supposed to be coming from this house when the husband was away, and Claire knew exactly how cautious they had to be. Not something to forget, even dazed and dizzy and drowning in pleasure.

"Remind me," Claire mumbled into the stars behind her own eyelids, "to send a thank-you note to that English boarding school of yours. Whatever they teach their girls, it is *vastly* superior to any American school district curriculum."

Sydney gave that wicked laugh of hers again. "Lock a lot of teenaged girls together, and they're going to experiment!"

"I have always been a firm believer in the scientific method." Claire rolled over and pinned Sydney down with nothing more than a featherlight kiss to her throat. "My turn to conduct some experiments . . ."

Eventually they ended up down in the kitchen, Claire in her blouse and underwear, Sydney in one of her exquisite lilac satin robes that made her look like Ava Gardner. "I'd cook for you," said Claire, giving the gleaming range a dubious look, "because you need feeding, you skinny thing. But I can't cook a bit, so . . ."

"You sit down, I'll cook. I'm hardly *allowed* to, ordinarily, and look at this enormous kitchen!" Sydney reached for some browning bananas and a packet of dark brown sugar, fished under a back shelf, and came up with a bottle of Black Seal rum. "Proper Bermuda rum," she approved. "The only thing for frying up bananas in brown sugar and eating right out of the pan. My mum would make it for me as a treat sometimes—Barrett says it's too *native*, and I said it wasn't so different from bananas Foster, which he couldn't get enough of on his trip to New Orleans, and he didn't like me saying that very much." She massaged her jaw a little, unconsciously. "I don't dare have more than a bite, but let me dish up a mess for you. Mum always said you *only* make fried bananas in rum and sugar for someone you love."

Claire's stomach turned over. She looked down at her blouse, plucking at the button coming loose over the bust. "Don't bother," she said, deliberately not looking up. "Can't have the neighbors wondering about the smell of cooking when you're supposed to be laid up in bed! Some other time, Sid

—” And she began to make noises about getting on her way, ignoring the tiny flash of hurt across Sydney’s beautiful face. She had no business feeling hurt, not over a bit of illicit peach-satin afternoon fun. Because that’s all this was.

Happy Fourth of July.

Sydney’s Fried Bananas with Bermuda Rum & Brown Sugar

4 teaspoons unsalted butter

2 teaspoons packed brown sugar

4 bananas, peeled and halved lengthwise

6 tablespoons Black Seal Bermuda rum

$\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon allspice

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon cinnamon

Pinch freshly ground black pepper

Pinch of nutmeg

Vanilla ice cream

1. Melt the butter in a large skillet over medium heat, stirring constantly until gently browned.
2. Sprinkle half the sugar over the bananas and place them in the skillet, flat side down. Increase the heat to medium-high and cook for about 2 minutes, until the bananas soften and a slight crust forms on the bottoms. Move the bananas in the skillet with a wooden spoon to keep them from sticking, and be careful the sugar does not burn.
3. Remove the skillet from the heat, sprinkle the bananas with the remaining brown sugar, and pour the rum all around. Return the skillet to the heat and continue gently circulating the bananas as the rum and sugar combine into a sauce, 1 to 2 minutes.
4. Transfer the bananas to serving bowls, then add 2 tablespoons of water, allspice, cinnamon, pepper, and nutmeg to the skillet,

stirring well until the sauce slightly thickens and coats the back of a spoon. Top the fried bananas in the serving bowls with vanilla ice cream and the sauce from the skillet.

5. Eat with your lover, preferably in bed, while listening to “Don’t Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes” by Perry Como.

No one even knew the war was over until Fliss ran in toward the end of July waving a late-afternoon copy of the *Evening Star* and shrieking. “It’s done, it’s done,” she cried, tears streaking down that pale pretty face. “It’s bloody done!” and Claire saw the headline on the paper she slapped down on the hall table. “Shooting Stops Along Korean Front; Cease-Fire Halts 37 Months of War.”

“Okay.” Claire shrugged, not having given the conflict in Korea more than a thought or two over the entirety of those thirty-seven months, and went on shuffling through her mail. But Grace began exclaiming, climbing down off the step stool where she’d been hanging little stained-glass suncatchers in the windows to reflect the light, and Pete (who’d been on a war-movie kick since seeing *Stalag 17*, combing his hair like William Holden and trying to walk with a soldierly strut) wrestled the paper around and began reading. “‘Truce signing brings nervous peace to Korea . . .’ ‘3,313 Yanks to be freed in POW deal . . .’”

“I don’t see what the fuss is.” Arlene leaned over his shoulder to read. “It was just a police action, not a real war!”

“Real enough for the ones who died,” Pete objected. “Look at that: ‘Cost of War to US: Lives of 22,000 Plus 15 Billions.’”

“You’d think we’d have heard more of a hullabaloo in the streets about this.” Grace leaned over his left shoulder to read, still dangling a blue glass suncatcher from one hand. “When the news came down in ’45 about the war in Europe being over, everyone was running into the streets to celebrate. Shouting and dancing and hugging complete strangers—did anyone even care about this war if they didn’t have someone in it?”

“‘U.S.–British Clash Seen Over U.N. Seat for Chinese Reds,’” Arlene read aloud, ponytail bobbing. “Wasn’t the whole point to kill off the Reds, and now we’re talking about admitting them to the UN?”

“Who *cares*?” Fliss burst out in an utterly un-Fliss-like shout. “*Dan’s coming home!*” She burst into tears, sweeping Angela up and weeping into her little ruffled dress. “Your daddy’s coming home! Yes, he is—”

“Well,” Grace said, laughing as she gave Fliss a hug, “it may not be Thursday night, but this calls for a party.”

“I’ll cook!” said Arlene quickly. “I’ll make my famous Victory Pie I made for V-J Day!”

It was really all the Victory Pie’s fault, Claire reflected later. The drinks did tend to flow at the parties in Grace’s room, but usually everyone remained at least *somewhat* vertical. But when Arlene passed around generous wedges of Victory Pie on Grace’s chipped plates—“My flaky Texas piecrust, filled with chicken salad folded together with shredded cheese, crushed pineapple, and slivered almonds, topped with mayonnaise and whipped cream, decorated with carrot curls!”—everyone reached for the spiked sun tea and just did not stop.

“Hey, look at thish.” Bea was definitely slurring as she reached for the crumpled newspaper that had been passed around, sat on, spilled on, and used as a napkin by this point. It was dark outside now—eight, nine?—and it felt like midnight. “‘Preshident Eisenhower to Attend a Charity Ball Game to Benefit the Red Crosh’—between Washington and Boston! Will likely mark the firshst time Boston slugger Ted Williams has appeared in a Red Sox uniform since hish return from fighter pilot duty in Korea!” Bea flopped on her back on Grace’s braided rug. “Ted Williams back on the diamond! Kill me now.”

“Shut *up* about baseball already,” Arlene moaned, even as Claire said, “You’re drunk” and removed the pitcher of sun tea from Bea’s proximity to pour herself another slug. It was crashing into her empty stomach like a cannonball, but what the hell. The secretaries at Senator Smith’s office tomorrow weren’t going to notice if she was hungover. Those old maids had probably never had a drink in their lives.

“We’re all drunk,” Grace declared. Not slurring much herself, though, Claire thought. Tidy as ever, curled on the window seat with her cat in her lap, looking over the rest of the Briar Club, who sprawled in a lazy circle across bed, floor, and chairs, or with backs against walls.

“If we’re *drunk*, that means it’s time for a *game*,” Arlene declared, pink-faced and glittery-eyed. She’d been waxing giddy over the thought of *all those GIs coming home from Korea*, men in uniform positively aching to settle down with the girl of their dreams. “It’s called Taboo, back when I was playing with my friends growing up. What is the most *shocking* thing you’ve ever done? No lying, now!”

"I'm not going first," said Claire, because this kind of game felt like a fishing expedition to her. Getting the dirt, so you could use it later. But Reka had already turned away from the wall vine where she was somewhat crookedly slopping a magenta-orange flower and grunted: "Robbery. Bald-faced unabashed robbery." And she let out a witchy grin, sharp gray edge of her bobbed hair swinging.

"Look at you, Attila," said Grace, stroking the ginger cat. "Robbing the rich to feed the poor, like Robin Hood?"

"Not exactly," Reka said and turned back to the wall vine.

"Details," Fliss begged, but Reka flapped a hand at her.

"We said we'd spill, not that we'd spill everything! I did mine, it's someone else's turn."

"I tell my mother I read the Bible verses she mails me," Bea hiccuped. "But I never read anything but the sports page."

"That is not exactly a shocker, Bea." Nora giggled.

"All right, how about you, Miss National Archives?"

Nora arranged her long stockinged legs beside her like a lady, hands folded primly in her lap. "I am in love with a career criminal, and it's been over for ages but I don't seem able to entirely get past it," she said, and hiccuped.

The Briar Club pounced. "Those flowers—"

"The Great Dane—"

"Nora, you dark horse, you—"

"That is *all* I am saying," Nora said and tossed the rest of her sun tea down the hatch. "Jesus Christ on a crutch, I'm dizzy . . ." And she toppled over and leaned her head on Pete's shoulder.

Pete briefly stopped trying to look like William Holden, and just looked thrilled. He grinned when they all started yelling *Your turn, your turn* and ruffled his hair. "I buried Mom's Chipped Beef De Luxe at the bottom of the trash and told her we ate it. I looked her right in the eye and lied like a rug."

"Good for you, Hammerin' Pete. We are citizens of the land of the free, and as such we do not have to eat Chipped Beef De Luxe," said Grace. "Fliss?"

"Sometimes I look at Angela and I just feel tired." Fliss sighed. "That's it, just *tired*. It's not happening as often as it used to, but it still happens—"

Confessions were rushing now, Claire observed, sitting back on Grace's narrow couch-bed with her ankles crossed. Something about the velvet dark outside the window, the gin, the empty stomachs and flushed cheeks and the end of a war made everyone want to lean closer. She leaned back, sipping the last of her sun tea.

"My hometown in Texas was invaded by a Communist army," Arlene blurted. "And I slept with the enemy."

Everyone looked at her. "I think you've had enough of that gin," Grace said, moving to take Arlene's glass.

"I'm serious! A war game was staged in my hometown. 'Maneuvers by the US Army and Air Force to Simulate Thwarting an Invasion and Recovering from Attack,'" said Arlene, clearly quoting from somewhere. "Soldiers parachuted in, playing the part of the invading Communists. Another force came in and 'liberated' us eighteen days later, but for over two weeks it was like living in *Moscow* or something."

"There is no way something this idiotic ever happened," Bea hooted.

"It did too! Curfew imposed in town, churches closed, propaganda movies being shown at the local theater, armed checkpoints. Walk home at night and you'd see the guns of the tanks sticking out of the brush in the woods—"

"And people just let it happen? They didn't stage a revolt?" Pete blinked, clearly envisioning himself/William Holden retaking the town against the invading Reds.

"Are you kidding? It was the most exciting thing to happen in Lampasas in years." Arlene tightened the band on her curly ponytail. "A town like that, you grow up knowing every man on every ranch within a hundred miles, and suddenly there's simply thousands of new men in town, clean-cut army boys pretending to have Russian accents. All the high school girls went sashaying by with pies for the soldiers—"

"War games." Reka spat the words as though they were an epithet. "*Szar*. Those generals and colonels need a few old women on staff at these meetings so there's someone on hand to say, 'That is the stupidest idea on God's green earth.'"

"It wasn't stupid! It was a *simulation*. I don't have to imagine what it would be like if the Ivans invaded." Arlene looked around the room.

"Because I *know*."

“Sugar pie,” said Grace, “if the Ivans ever do take over Lampasas, Texas, trust me: you won’t be coming by with pies for the invaders.”

“I don’t know, maybe she would.” Claire grinned, feeling mean. “You led this story off with *I slept with the enemy*. Which Ivan got into your pants, Arlene?”

“I slept with a paratrooper who came in as one of the invading forces. All the girls were doing it—soldiers get pensions; if you marry one, it’s a one-way ticket out of Nowhereville. So I slept with him.” There was an ugly gleam in Arlene’s eyes, and Texas was seeping strongly through her vowels—not the syrupy southern belle drawl she put on whenever good-looking men were around, but a flat, mean, ranch-country twang. “Eighteen days later he moves out when the town is liberated, not a backward glance. So I moved here and now I let every man I date assume I’m a virgin. Serves them right.”

“What is it, this thing men have about virginity?” Grace wondered. “Virginity is so overrated . . .”

Claire got up to return her glass to the kitchenette area. Grace had left a tube of lipstick on the edge of the table—Revlon Certainly Red. Slipping it into her pocket, Claire sauntered back into the tiny living room. Everyone had moved on from Arlene’s story of hometown Russian invasions, apparently. “—your turn, Grace!” Bea was insisting, waving her glass of spiked sun tea so it splashed the bed. “What’s the most shocking thing you’ve ever done?”

Claire leaned against the door, folding her arms across her breasts. “Yes, let’s hear it.”

Grace ran a stroking hand down her ginger cat from ears to tail; it arched and purred into her hand. “Assault and battery?” she said lightly. “Or—oh dear—is cannibalism more shocking? Or the fact that I stole my cherry pie recipe from my neighbor back in Iowa and never told her . . .”

That got a big laugh. Of course it did, Claire thought, knowing all the tricks someone could use to slide away from questions they had no intention of answering. First misdirect, then make a joke, then redirect the question back on someone else. So she wasn’t surprised when Grace said, “Let’s hear yours, Claire.”

The most shocking thing I’ve done? she thought, arms still folded tight. The fact that she posed for dirty pictures, stole everything that wasn’t nailed down, or rolled around naked with a married woman? The fact that she’d

traded her body at sixteen for a steak dinner and a place to stay the night, and that wasn't the only time? The fact that there really wasn't *anything* she wouldn't do, to stop from going back to where she'd been at sixteen?

She slammed the box shut hard on those memories before they could get out. Even so a tentacle or two wriggled under the lid, waltzing across the surface of her memory with a dry hiss.

"I'm never going to marry my Sid," she said finally. "But that doesn't mean we still don't meet up whenever we can to do the horizontal tango."

The best way to answer a question you didn't want to answer, even better than Grace's misdirect-joke-redirect routine? Answer with as much truth as you could, but leave out the important details. Everybody clamored to see Claire's picture of Sid then, and she showed it around—she'd slipped it out of a little silver frame she'd pocketed at an antique shop; hocked the frame but kept the picture because when you liked rolling around with women, you kept a man's picture in your wallet to deflect suspicion.

After that the clock struck ten and everyone started moaning about how hungover they were going to be tomorrow and began trailing downstairs. Pete had to nearly carry Nora next door to her room. "Grab me those glasses, would you?" Grace smiled, clearing up her cluttered living room. "Thanks, Claire . . . You all right? You had an odd expression when the game came round to you."

"Right as rain." Claire dumped the glasses on the makeshift counter as Pete came back to wave a sleepy good night and tiptoed away, the last of the guests to leave. "Cross my heart."

"Mmm. You sure?"

"Come on, Grace." Claire raised her eyebrows. "Quit digging. I know everybody in this house has cried on your shoulder and told you all their secrets by now, but I'm not going to. It hasn't exactly escaped my notice that everybody spills to you, but you never spill back. I admire that, actually." Raising her empty glass in a toast. "But you don't fool me."

Grace smiled, not disconcerted at all. The ginger cat strolled across the carpet and she picked him up, tucking him under her chin where he purred like a live fur tippet. "Good night then, Claire."

Claire stepped back into her flats and headed for the door.

"Oh, by the way," Grace called. "Would you mind leaving that lipstick on my bureau? Certainly Red is my best color."

Claire shrugged. "Mine too." She rummaged in her pocket, dropped the tube on the bureau, then sauntered off down the stairs.

"Where's the fire?" Claire arrived at Case's Sandwich Shop on F Street out of breath. "I had to hoof it clear from the Hoover Building."

"What on earth are you doing over there? Congress is in recess." Sydney looked up from her seat in the booth nearest the door, sipping a root beer in a tall glass, cool as strawberry ice cream in a dusty pink linen suit and white summer straw hat. "Don't tell me your senator still has you on the hop in August?"

"She's back in Maine, so I'm filling in for the month at the Department of Commerce steno pool." Claire slid into the seat opposite, wincing slightly at the looks they were getting. Sydney with her pearls, her spotless gloves, her heaped shopping bags from Jelleff's and Peck & Peck already stood out like a sore thumb in this crowd of sweaty office boys and lunchtime secretaries grabbing their \$1.15 hamburgers at the counter. When you were having an affair, especially an affair with a woman, much less a woman with a volatile husband, it didn't do to draw attention. "What is it? Your husband hasn't . . ." Claire couldn't help looking for bruises on her lover's face. Sydney always brushed off any questions about that sort of thing; said it wasn't so bad, but . . .

"Nothing like that. I have something for you, that's all." Rummaging among her shopping bags. "Want to order a hamburger? You may as well have one so I can stare mournfully at it."

"I have to head back in ten minutes, Sid. I don't have time for a hamburger." Claire stole a sip from Sydney's root beer. "I've got about six months of backlog typing to do for Mr. Morrow—he's the Negro adviser at the Commerce Department, and none of the other secretaries will work for him."

Sydney's whole face softened. "But you will."

More because I want the money than because I'm a crusader, Claire thought. That look in Sydney's eyes made her slightly ashamed and slightly greedy, knowing she didn't deserve it, but still wanting more of it. "You said you had something for me?" she asked brusquely.

Sydney pushed a bag across the table. "Merry Christmas."

"It's *August*."

"Don't be a crosspatch!"

Claire eyed the label on the bag. “Jelleff’s? Bit out of my league. Don’t all the First Ladies shop there?”

“Will you shut up and open it?”

Claire pushed aside the nesting tissue paper, peeking discreetly. Bright red nylon jersey, white decorative buttons . . . “A bathing suit?”

“A Claire McCardell halter-top two-piece.” Sydney’s eyes sparkled. “You’ll look like a gorgeous ripe strawberry.”

Claire thought of her saggy old navy-blue Lastex suit. When was the last time she’d taken a day off from the yammer in her head, the yammer of *money money money*, to go swimming? “Well,” she said at last, stuffing the tissue paper back on top of all that wickedly ruched red fabric. “Thank you.”

“I thought maybe we could go to North Beach in Maryland this weekend when my husband takes Bear on a hunting trip.” Sydney didn’t reach across the table to take her hand, but her own hand in its white glove moved an inch closer. “It’s only an hour’s drive, and we could have a whole day—the beach, a picnic, go out somewhere for once. I know what you’re thinking, it wouldn’t be safe,” she said, voice dropping below the shop’s lunchtime hubbub. “But two friends on the beach together, people don’t suspect that. If we’re careful—”

“What’s the point?” Claire said it fast and hard, before she could think twice. “We’re not friends who go to the beach. We’re friends who . . .” *Fuck*. She mouthed it silently. “We go somewhere to be alone, and scratch the itch that needs scratching, that’s all.”

She didn’t stop to see the look on Sydney’s face at that. She could already imagine it, so she didn’t need to see it, so she didn’t look. She grabbed her pocketbook, grabbed the Jelleff’s bag, mumbled “Thank you for the suit—” and piled out of the booth, getting out of Case’s as fast as she could.

Doing a lot of that lately, aren’t you? The voice in Claire’s head sounded uncomfortably like Grace.

3900 Macomb Street, a classic brick four-bedroom between Wisconsin and Massachusetts. *Open today, 12 to dark!* the newspaper ad had said in the Saturday paper, so Claire turned up just before twilight. The agent looked dubious about showing the house to a woman alone, but Claire flashed the dime-store wedding band she slipped on whenever she found it convenient

to pass as married and twittered something about her husband being called into the office, weren't men just *awful* for working on the weekend? But he'd sent her on to look at the place, see if it was what they were looking for . . .

"Wonderful neighborhood," the agent said, escorting her in. "Gray slate porch, fenced backyard for summer grilling. Perfect place to raise the kids!" But he hustled off to attend the other couple already examining the dining room, leaving Claire to wander, which was how she liked it when she went to a showing. Looking at everything, planning just how her dream house would look someday.

Well, not her dream house. Her dream house, if she was conjuring up castles in the sky, money no object, would probably look like Sydney's beachside palace in Bermuda: a pale green wedding cake of a house, a dock leading out into a dazzling turquoise ocean and a white roof stepping up toward the sky, a woman in a bikini standing on the dock and waving . . . But Claire was a realist; she wasn't going to have a beach house in Bermuda (or any of the rest of it). A three-bedroom with a white picket fence, though? Yes. So she liked to go to house showings and mentally furnish it: *yes* to that elegant glass-fronted sideboard; she'd have one just like that; *no* to those heavy velvet drapes, she'd have sheer curtains that let in every ounce of sunlight . . .

This place was nice. Bachelor house, you could tell—that walnut bar, the den with its deep leather armchairs, the lack of vases or decorative touches. Big, square rooms; wide windows; crown molding . . . Saving for a house since you were sixteen made you an expert in things like crown molding. Claire wandered into the kitchen, hoping to see one of those new General Electric ranges.

Whoever the bachelor of the house was, he clearly didn't do much cooking. This was the domain of some daily housekeeper, from the cherry-printed curtains to the decorative flour and sugar crocks. Claire wondered if she might swipe the smallest one into her big pocketbook . . . And then she saw the iron trivet on the counter and went still as stone.

It's not Mama's, she tried to tell herself. *Not Mama's*. But it looked exactly like Mama's, a cast-iron trivet shaped like an American flag rippling in the wind. Claire could see Mama hoisting a sizzling hot pan off the burner and setting it on the trivet so the oil wouldn't overheat before she finished grating the potatoes for the *placki ziemniaczane*. Mama was always

impatient; she invariably got the oil heating too soon, and then ended up grumbling how blessed long it took to grate potatoes, and after that she'd usually end up grating a fingertip or two and shouting, *Michael, I don't care how much you love them, I am never making potato pancakes again!* And Dad would come in with Band-Aids for her skinned fingertips and end up sitting her down with a gin and tonic while he placidly finished grating the potatoes and pressing them into little cakes for the hot oil . . .

And then the iron trivet would come to the middle of the dining room table, and the iron Stars and Stripes would shield the tablecloth from the hot platter of potato pancakes while they all helped themselves. Chattering, the three of them, about their day.

Claire stumbled out of the kitchen, away from that horrible flag trivet (Mama kept refusing to leave it behind; she'd insist on lugging it from boardinghouse to boardinghouse, rented room to rented room—it was like she refused to admit they were never going to have a kitchen of their own again to make potato pancakes). Out to the backyard, gulping in the evening air and the smell of evergreens from the stand of trees against the fence. Claire wasn't smelling cooking oil and frying potatoes; she *wasn't*.

A cold nose pressed itself against her hand, and she yelped. A big dark dog, pricked ears, wagging tail, nearly the size of a pony . . . “Duke?” she said, before she could stop herself. It looked just like that dog Nora had kept for a while, the big friendly Great Dane. For an entire year, the Briar Club had used his long back for a footrest when they balanced their plates to eat in Grace's room.

“Down, Duke.” A cigarette ember flared in the shadows under the evergreen trees, and a man came forward, snapping his fingers. The dog bounded obediently back to his side. “You okay?” he asked Claire.

She realized her cheeks were damp and scrubbed at them furiously. “Yes, I— Yes. Is this your house?”

“I came home early. Waiting out the last of the prospective buyers.” He was burly, dark-haired, watchful, sleeves rolled up and jacket thrown over one shoulder. “You know Duke?”

“My housemate kept him for while. I guess you'd be the owner who was out of the country? Is that why you're selling the place?” If Claire had a house like this, she'd never let it go.

“In a manner of speaking. Some bad memories here. Turning over a new leaf.” He looked at her as if he was flipping some mental file. “You're one

of the Briarwood ladies.”

“Have we met?” Claire was beginning to regret coming to this showing. First kitchen trinkets bringing unwelcome memories, now nosy men.

“No. I know who Nora’s neighbors are, that’s all.”

Claire suddenly remembered that game of Taboo in Grace’s room, Nora blind drunk on spiked sun tea: *I am in love with a career criminal, and it’s been over for ages but I don’t seem able to entirely get past it.* “I’d better be going,” Claire said, edging toward the deck.

“Red hair,” he said, nodding as he thumbed to the end of that mental file. “Claire Hallett. I remember because you were the only one going by a false name.”

Claire froze. Duke wandered up and pushed his nose into her hand again.

The dark-haired man looked—chagrined? Impatient? Hard to tell; he had one of those swarthy, immobile faces. “Look, I’m not trying to scare you. I keep an eye on Nora—she’s got some bad-news family, so I keep tabs who comes and goes around her, if anybody’s a threat. She doesn’t want me around so I don’t come around, but I do what I can to keep her safe. Your name flagged because it’s not your real name, but I don’t give a good goddamn why you changed it, all right? Long as you don’t mean Nora any harm.”

“I don’t,” Claire managed to say.

“Good.” He flicked his cigarette butt away. “So we can be friends.”

“Not sure I want that, but I definitely don’t want to be your enemy.”

He laughed, lighting another cigarette. *Mr. X*, Claire thought. The one who sent Nora flowers with a card marked *X*. “Been a while since I had a conversation like this. What’s your real name?”

“Clara,” Claire heard herself saying. “Clara Halecki.”

Haleckis are lucky. Claire’s father had told her that when she was a little girl. *My grandfather never owned a home of his own in Krakow, and look at us now!* Gesturing at the walls around them, the neat little house in the suburbs of Annapolis. *It’s a great country, Clara. The greatest on earth, because if you work hard here you’ll always be lucky.* He believed in luck, and so did little Clara. Why wouldn’t she? She had an accountant father who was always singing over his ledgers, everything from Cole Porter to his grandmother’s ancient Polish lullabies, and a lovely mother who brushed Claire’s curls out every night and told her red hair was the prettiest so don’t listen to what people said about blondes. Of *course* Clara Halecki

believed in luck. She was the luckiest girl in the world, living in the greatest country on earth.

Until she wasn't.

Until '29, when everything crashed, when the whole country *broke*. When everyone was suddenly tightening their belts, when the accounting firm had to reduce staff, and her father came home in the middle of the day with his briefcase, looking suddenly old.

Never mind, nine-year-old Clara remembered him telling her mother, trying to make light of it. *I'll find something else soon, don't you worry. We live in the land of opportunity, remember!*

"You okay?" Mr. X was looking at Claire; she realized her eyes were brimming all over again.

"Your kitchen trivet." She looked up at the sky so her lids wouldn't overrun. Nearly dark, fireflies beginning to dance around the lawn in bright sparks. "It looked just like my mother's."

Darling Mama, so house-proud. So happy to keep house because she *loved* that house: the rose garden, the fresh-ironed curtains at her kitchen windows, the immaculate sideboard with her grandmother's silver. The silver had been one of the first things to go, down at the pawnshop when the bills piled up and Clara's father hadn't been so quick to find a new job as he thought. The family silver, then the good china, then the shiny Packard her father washed down every Sunday afternoon with such pride . . . *Don't worry, Clara. Something will come up any day now.*

But it hadn't, not in time to save the house. The house that Clara had assumed they *owned*, but somehow they didn't, somehow the bank owned it. And then Mama was weeping as she wrapped up the iron flag trivet and a few kitchen essentials, because the rented rooms where they were moving wouldn't accommodate even half their things, and the women who had been Mama's friends picked their way through the house at the estate sale as if they'd never come to gossip in her kitchen and tell her she made the best lemon cake in town. *I'll just take those candlesticks off your hands*, the woman next door said, as Clara had stood there with rage billowing as red as her hair, watching them strip her home bare.

"I started going by *Hallett* once I went to work," Claire heard herself saying aloud, rubbing the Great Dane's head. "So I'd never get passed over for a job because I sounded like a dirty Polack." No one had called them dirty Polacks when they had silver in the sideboard, but when you were on

the breadlines, the names came out. *No daughter of mine will have to leave school for a job*, her father had said, but Claire was sweeping out movie theaters for change by the time she was twelve, and that was when his red hair started to go gray. From movie theaters to offices by thirteen; it wasn't legal but she already had tits and an ass so she could pass for fifteen, and that meant people would wink and pretend she was sixteen if that meant they could pay her less. She'd clerked at stores, she'd stocked shelves, she'd done anything that brought a little money home, even if it meant getting felt up by the manager. And it still wasn't enough, the whole damn country limping along hungry and cold, Clara's tiny family limping along with it. Limping from boardinghouse to rented room, each a little shabbier than the last. *Our luck's about to turn*, her father said. *It's still the land of opportunity!* Only now Clara and her mother turned their faces away when they heard it.

"You want the trivet?" Nora's Mr. X asked. "You can have it if you want. I don't even know what a trivet is."

"No, thank you." Claire's mother had loaded it into the big pocket of her overcoat when Clara was fifteen, loaded the other pocket with cobbles, then jumped off a bridge. Claire wondered why she'd even bothered to weigh herself down—she was so thin by then, so worn-out, she'd have slipped motionless under the water without a struggle. *You'll manage better without me* was the only note she'd left for Clara and her father, in the cupboard-size rented kitchen that smelled like grease where they had to shoo rats out of the pantry.

Her father had gone a year later, on July Fourth. Dock accident, because the only job he could get in Hoover's America—her gentle, educated father with his college degree and his accountant's license and his lovingly shined shoes—was as janitor for a dockside office, working even on a federal holiday, and a swinging crate had come loose and crushed him flat. The man who believed they lived in the land of opportunity had died on the Fourth of July.

And Clara Halecki had buried her father in a pauper's grave, cleared her things out of their rented room because she was going to be evicted in two days, and then she'd gone to the thirty-five-year-old manager of the store where she clerked and told him she'd fuck him for a steak dinner and a place to sleep. And as soon as he was snoring, she'd stolen his wallet and his watch and a silver paperweight off his desk and every silver spoon in his

cutlery drawer, and took off for Washington, D.C., where she introduced herself as Claire Hallett. Claire Hallett, who would do anything, steal anything, screw anything if it meant food in the pantry and money in her hand. Claire Hallett, who knew she was *not* living in the land of opportunity, who knew that love was for suckers, luck was an illusion, and nothing on earth mattered but security.

Claire Hallett, who was going to have a house someday—a house like this, foursquare and picket-fenced, just like her mother’s, only she’d buy it cash in hand so that no one could ever, *ever* take it away from her. And she was almost there! Almost twenty years of scrimping, and she was almost there: eight thousand dollars, the magic number.

If she didn’t throw it all away, getting soft over things that didn’t matter. Friends who poured you glasses of sun tea. Dark-haired women with wounded eyes.

“Tell Nora I said hello,” said Mr. X, seeing Claire start buttoning up her overcoat.

“No,” said Claire, “don’t think I will.” And she walked out dry-eyed, with a face like stone.

“**H**ey, Miss Claire! Mr. Huckstop said he took your picture recently.”

Claire stopped dead on her way down the stairs, looking up at Pete on the landing above. “What’d he say?” The thing she’d worried about, that someone might recognize her from those cheesecake photos. Huckstop swore he didn’t sell to locals—

But Pete wasn’t toeing the carpet or blushing, like he certainly would if he’d seen her with her tits hanging out over a fake warhead. “I went in to pick up prints for Mrs. Fliss—her latest ones of Angela—and Mr. Huckstop asked if I’d ever considered getting my picture taken. *I could use some photos of a young fella*, he said, and he asked me to come by some evening. He said you did sometimes, to get your picture taken for your boyfriend?”

Pete’s freckled face was just shining with sincerity, in that way that made Claire’s stomach squirm guiltily. How old was he now, sixteen? Too young to be dealing with an under-the-counter photographer without many scruples. “Pete—”

“He said I could make some money,” Pete went on, sounding a little puzzled.

“Listen, Pete,” Claire began, feeling uneasy, but Mrs. Nilsson called from the backyard and he went bounding off before she could finish her warning, and then Lina’s voice piped up.

“Mail, Miss Claire—and could you try one of these?” Hauling an enormous platter of brownies over.

Claire braced herself as she selected one—Lina had improved a lot, but one of her roofing-tile brownies had broken a crown last year, and hadn’t *that* taken a chunk out of Claire’s savings. But it was unexpectedly delicious: big chunks of chocolate, and were those dried cherries? “Good work, Lina.”

“I want to enter the junior division of the Pillsbury Bake-Off,” Lina blurted. “Would this do it? The best bakers in the country enter, and you have to be at *least* twelve to qualify for the junior division, but I’ll be twelve next year . . .”

Claire looked dubiously at Lina: still looking ten at most, not a very appealing child with her slightly crossed eyes and her gummy *please-like-me* expression. But the entire Briar Club had made it their mission to buck Lina up whenever possible, so Claire said, “Sure you can, kid” and pilfered another brownie before heading to the hall table for her mail. She flicked through a few advertising circulars and began to saunter back upstairs, only to hear the front doorbell ring.

“Can you get that, Miss Claire?” Lina’s voice floated from the kitchen. “I’m up to my elbows in batter . . .”

Claire shrugged and went to swing the door open—a warm Saturday evening in September; who on earth was calling? But her mouth dried up utterly when she realized who was there. “*Sid?*”

It didn’t look anything like her Sid. This crumpled woman with her arms about her middle slumped against the doorjamb, no pocketbook, no gloves, no hat. Her knuckles bruised and scraped. Her hair falling lank over her face, not hiding the fact that both her eyes had been blackened.

What did he do? Claire thought in utter horror. *What did he do?*

“H’lo, Strawberry,” Sydney slurred, managing to look up. She had finger marks around her long, long neck, above the ripped collar of her blouse, Claire saw in the endless, horrified moment before that tall, slim body crashed into hers, as Sydney whispered, *Help*.

“He told me how he won his Bronze Star.” Sydney kept saying it, over and over, as Claire got her up to the third floor without old Nilsson seeing, eased her down on the bed, slipped her jacket and blouse off. “He told me how he won his Bronze Star . . .”

Claire stared at Sydney’s ribs, utterly at a loss. She’d been disjointedly thinking of ice packs and a soothing drink, but this—

“I’ll be right back,” she mumbled, heart fluttering in her throat, clutching Sydney’s cold hands. “Don’t go anywhere, sweetheart. Please promise you won’t go anywhere?”

“He told me how he won his Bronze Star,” Sydney whispered, staring at the carpet. Claire took that for a yes and bolted out the door, down the stairs to Fliss’s room. Fliss was a nurse, she’d know what to do—but no one answered her frantic hammering. Dammit, if Fliss was at the park she could be hours running Angela around the pond . . . Claire hesitated only an instant before running right to the top floor.

“Grace,” she panted when the door opened, “I need help.”

Why Grace? Claire wondered belatedly. Was it because Grace gave off the impression—despite her smile and her curls and her flower vine—that she was tougher than old boot leather? If you couldn’t have a trained nurse in an emergency, you wanted someone tough. Someone who wouldn’t flutter or demand explanations, but do exactly what Grace actually, in fact, did: come right downstairs without a word, take one long look at Sydney, and not bat an eyelash when Claire stuttered out, “I’m n-not wrong, am I? Those are *shoe* prints—she’s been *kicked*—”

And then Claire’s throat closed up completely and she could feel the panic rising, her own carefully cultivated toughness completely melting away, but Grace just fetched a blanket and unfolded it across Sydney’s shaking shoulders, commenting, “Let’s get you warmed up, all right, Stretch?”

“S-Stretch?” Sydney’s teeth were chattering.

“Because you’re so tall. I’m thinking your mama took you by your head and your heels when you were a baby and stretched you out like a rubber band. Just let those shakes go right through you; you’re in shock. How about some tea?” Heating the kettle on Claire’s hot plate, talking inconsequentially in that warm Iowa voice. “Lots of sugar, that’s good for shock. Claire, have you got any brandy, whiskey—”

Claire flew for the pint of Virginia Gentleman she kept stashed in her laundry basket away from Mrs. Nilsson's prying eyes, feeling useless. She'd been knocked around before—the mugger who snatched her handbag last year and shoved her into a wall when she fought him for it; a black eye from the assistant manager she'd sucked in a stairwell when she was eighteen and had asked for her money up front—but she had no experience at all with something like this. *Black and blue*, everyone used that phrase: *My goodness, the way the children climb all over me, I'm black and blue!* But Sydney was *literally* black and blue, bruises the entire length of her torso, her face, her long arms, her shins—she'd clearly been on the ground shielding herself from punches and kicks . . .

Claire bolted for the hall bathroom and retched. *Pull yourself together*, she said viciously, dragging a hand across her mouth. How dare she be sickened by this, she wasn't the one who'd had to endure it. Sydney had come here, to her. *Hold it together, for her.*

Sid was sitting up straighter when Claire returned, one hand curled around her mug of sugared tea with its slug of bourbon, one hand holding an ice pack to the worst of her black eyes. Grace was feeling gently around her rib cage. "Maybe a few of these ribs are cracked," she was saying. "But nothing broken. Not your ribs, your nose, your eye sockets . . ." Finishing her gentle probe of Sydney's stomach: "Does it hurt here? Here?"

"Not badly. He was— By the end, he was careful. Kicking my arms. My hips. Not my center."

Grace sat back. "Then you're in a bad spot, Stretch."

"Really?" A burst of semihysterical laughter erupted out of Claire. "You think so? *Really?*"

"Think about it." Grace's customary amused expression had utterly disappeared. "He made a point not to break ribs, damage organs. He did all this"—a wave of her hand over Sydney's injuries—"yet he was in control enough for that."

"But he wasn't in control," Sydney objected. "He's never been like this, it's never more than a slap, a pinch—"

"Yes, it is," Claire heard herself saying. "He's used a fist before, you said —"

"Rarely anywhere someone can see. Today was different."

"I'm sure it was. Today, he didn't care about damage people could see." Grace looked at the black eyes, the finger marks around that long throat.

“But he cared enough that you wouldn’t have internal injuries and need to go to a hospital.”

Sydney looked down into her mug. Claire’s lips felt dry.

Grace’s gentle voice was merciless. “What happens when he finally stops caring even that much?”

“I won’t set him off,” Sydney whispered. “I know better. I shouldn’t have asked . . .”

“How he won his Bronze Star?” Claire finished.

Sydney looked down into her mug again and told them.

“It started with one of his long afternoons at Martin’s Tavern,” she started. “Shaking hands and buying rounds and talking policy . . . *Got to glad-hand the movers and shakers if you want that House seat*, that’s what Barrett’s father tells him, and he wants it so badly. Hours and hours of whiskey, but it’s not the whiskey. He can hold his liquor, drink half a pint and never slur a word. But he’s not free around those men, the ones he needs to impress, he has to weigh every word, so he comes home and he needs to talk.”

A long pause, biting her lip.

“They’d been at him all afternoon to tell the story, how he won his Bronze Star. When his company was ambushed by a German patrol on the push through France, and he saved them all. He knows how to tell it, the eyes down, the *aw shucks*. I didn’t know there was anything more to it, but he was so drunk when he came home . . . I suppose he felt like he had to tell *someone* the real thing.”

Claire wasn’t going to ask, but Grace did, voice steady. “What was the real thing?”

“He did save his men. That part was real. It’s just what they did with the German soldiers afterward.” Sydney’s voice was flat. “In the report, the enemy had all been killed by exchange of fire. That wasn’t what happened. There were seven German soldiers taken prisoner, only Barrett didn’t take them prisoner. He lined them up on the side of the road and gave orders to mow them down with a machine gun. Because they were all Nazis and the rules didn’t apply.”

In the silence, Claire heard the blare of a horn from the square outside. The nonsense rattle of some little girls on the sidewalk below, singing a hopscotch rhyme.

“That was the first time.” Sydney looked up, her blackened eyes blank. “Once he learned they could get away with it, he said they didn’t always bother taking prisoners. They were just—storming through France, drunk on the terror of victory. Hunting down everything they could. For most of them, if it moved it died. Barrett said he used to man the machine gun himself. *Not that I wanted to*, he said. *Because I had to set an example. A good officer takes the lead.*”

Germans, Claire tried to tell herself. Germans, who had been the villains in everything for so long. The black-hatted devils who deserved everything they had coming to them.

“He’s not sure how many . . .” Sydney’s pause was so long this time, Claire wondered if she was going to speak again at all. “But they wrote up the reports to make it look right, and no one really cared. They were the winners, the heroes, every one of them Gary Cooper in a white hat. H-He said that it was the best time of his life. *All the dead Krauts you could want, and all the grateful French women, afterward.* And then he added something about how sometimes the women weren’t all *exactly* grateful, but there was no one they could complain to so it amounted to the same thing. So who really cared.”

The little girls outside were really quarreling over that hopscotch game now, Claire thought frozenly. Impassioned cries of *That’s not fair!* and *I’m telling!* drifting up through the window.

“I should have just let him pass out,” Sydney whispered. Her tea was down to cold sugary dregs now, but she still stared into it like it was a magic mirror with all the answers. “But I started—shrieking. *How could you? How could you?* I stormed out and started throwing things into a bag for Bear and me. I said we wouldn’t stay one more night in a house with a *war criminal*. And he went mad.”

Quietly, Grace replaced the half-melted mess of ice in Sydney’s cold pack with a fresh mass of cubes from the icebox, wrapped in a fresh towel. Sydney pressed it to her other eye.

“You know the worst part after that?” Her words were starting to slur now, whether from the shock or the bourbon. “Bear walked in at the end. My little boy, seeing me on the floor trying to shield my face from being kicked. And he ran in crying, trying to jump in the middle, and Barrett just . . . switched off. Flicked it off like a light switch, all that rage, and he picked Bear up and walked him back and forth, holding him and patting his

back while he cried and I just—huddled there, bleeding. And then he sat Bear down on the edge of the bed when he was done crying, sat him down where he couldn't see me, and explained very kindly that there are times when daddies have to discipline mommies, and it's just part of being a grown-up. *Like when I have to give you a spanking when you're bad. Daddy doesn't enjoy it, but it's what the man of the house does, okay? You'll learn that someday.* And he took him out of the room to get ice cream down in the kitchen, and I lay there thinking, *My son is going to grow up just like his father.*

Sydney looked between them, from Claire to Grace and back. Claire's mouth felt thick, like someone had crammed it full of cotton wool. "You can't go back," she heard herself say, but Sydney gave a reflexive, instinctive shake of her head.

"Don't tell me it's because you still love him," Grace began, but Sydney shook her head to that too.

"How would I leave?" she said simply. "I don't have five dollars cash or a charge card in my name or a single relative in this country. Where would I go? What do I do?"

"You can't go back," Claire repeated, heartsick, helpless, but Sydney was still shaking her head.

"There's no chance I could get away—"

"There will always be a chance," Grace said quietly. "This is the land of second chances. You can find yours."

Claire was less certain. Because Sydney was going to go back, she could already see that. In another hour, when she'd pulled herself together and restored a little order to her hair and borrowed a scarf from Grace to cover her bruised throat, she'd don a pair of sunglasses to cover those blackened eyes and slip into a cab, lips trembling.

And Claire was the one left thinking *What do I do?* as she watched that cab disappear toward Georgetown. Because it was no use—no use at all—pretending anymore that she did not love this woman desperately, painfully, horribly, to the end of the earth and back.

Claire had never seen Senator McCarthy up close. At a distance a few times; he always seemed to be moving in a cloud of lackeys and hangers-on, just another bad-tempered man with a loud voice. But that Monday—four days after watching Sydney head back into the monster's lair she had

to call home, three days after a quick whispered telephone call of *I'm fine; he's already cried on my shoulder and told me he didn't mean it* at least reassured Claire her lover hadn't walked home into another beating—she saw the junior senator from Wisconsin close enough to count every bristle on his unshaven chin.

“Do hurry, Claire,” Senator Smith called over her shoulder as she pushed the button for the office building's elevator. “I want to pick up that folder from Lewis before I head out again . . .”

“Yes, ma'am.” Claire followed the senator into the elevator, clutching the minutes she'd just taken at a meeting so boring she couldn't tell you what it was about. A man's heavy hand slapped the doors open before they could close.

“Margaret,” Joe McCarthy greeted Claire's boss. The man who waved lists of Communists in the State Department; the man who said the government was riddled with homosexuals. Tail Gunner Joe, who probably wouldn't have gotten as far as he had without a nickname like that. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“Fancy that,” Senator Smith answered calmly and turned to Claire. “File the minutes when we get back to my office, then see if Miss Haskell needs any typing done. Once I'm back from committee—”

Claire nodded, more conscious of the man moving heavy-footed into the elevator at her boss's other side. That face, familiar from the newspapers with its perpetual five o'clock shadow; the wrinkled collar and tie pulled askew. He stank of whiskey; the elevator reeked as the doors slid closed. Claire could see Senator Smith's nostrils twitch, but she kept talking calmly. “—and the meeting at five, but I'll have Miss Wing take that—”

“I'm not sure I've been up this close with you since summer of '50, Margaret,” McCarthy interrupted them. “First of June, wasn't it?”

“You know it was, Senator,” Claire's boss replied.

He was standing too close to her, Claire thought. Looming, almost, with his liquor breath and meaty hands and big smiling teeth, the man half of America revered and most of America was petrified of. Except Senator Margaret Chase Smith, who had stood on the Senate floor, looked him in the eye, and said: *Those of us who shout the loudest about Americanism in making character assassinations are all too frequently those who, by our own words and acts, ignore some of the basic principles of Americanism . . .*

“I remember asking you a question that morning, Margaret,” Senator McCarthy went on, clearly enjoying himself. “When we bumped into each other on the way to the Capitol. I said, ‘You look very serious, are you going to make a speech?’”

The right to criticize, Claire thought, wondering why exactly she remembered so much of that speech when she’d thought her boss a fool for making it. *The right to hold unpopular beliefs. The right to protest. The right of independent thought.*

“I said yes I was,” Claire’s boss replied now, “and that you weren’t going to like it.”

“Well,” McCarthy answered as the elevator descended. “I didn’t.”

The exercise of these rights, Claire thought, her brain still unhelpfully reciting the words that had been spoken on the Senate floor that day, *should not cost one single American citizen his reputation or his right to a livelihood, nor should he be in danger of losing his reputation or livelihood merely because he happens to know someone who holds unpopular beliefs. Who of us does not? Otherwise none of us could call our souls our own.*

“Senator,” Margaret Chase Smith said evenly, “words cannot describe how little I care that you didn’t like it.”

He laughed at that, the sound big and sudden in the cramped space. Claire flinched. “You still think it was worth it, Margaret?”

Stop fucking calling her Margaret like she’s your secretary, Claire thought.

Senator Smith stared straight ahead at the elevator doors. “I do. *Joe*. And that was the goddamn point.”

His face darkened. “If you think—”

Claire dropped her armload of paperwork in a sudden shower of mimeographs and foolscap. “I’m sorry, ma’am—” Scrabbling to collect everything, Claire managed to wedge herself on Senator Smith’s other side when she straightened up again, forcing McCarthy to take a step back. “Don’t forget your two o’clock appointment, ma’am. With the committee in charge of—” There was no two o’clock appointment, but Claire made up details about it until the elevator doors opened (finally) and they could escape the malevolent whiskey reek breathing down their necks.

“Thank you, Claire,” Senator Smith said once the elevator whisked away. There was just the tiniest tremor in her voice that made Claire wonder if she

wasn't as iron-calm as she'd seemed, trapped in that too-small space with the biggest bully in America.

The biggest bully except, maybe, the man who had bruised Sydney black-and-blue, who had put his hands around her neck and choked her when she said she wouldn't spend one more night with a war criminal. The man who was very likely going to be a senator himself someday, just like McCarthy.

"Ma'am," Claire blurted, blushing when her boss's clear gaze turned back on her. "Why did you do it? Give that speech." The speech about which Miss Haskell had snorted, *If a man had done it, he'd be our next president*. "Weren't you afraid?"

Because when you called bullies to account, they weren't likely to back down. They were more likely to put their hands around your neck and choke you.

"Of course I was afraid." Margaret Chase Smith seemed surprised by the question. "I had such butterflies in my stomach, I didn't think I could actually go through to the end of the speech."

"Then why? Why stick your neck out like that?" *Why ever stick your neck out like that?*

"Because something had to be done about that man," Senator Smith replied. "And no one else seemed likely to do it."

"But he's still here. Wreaking havoc."

"He won't always be," said the senator from Maine. "His time is coming to an end; he just doesn't know it. Now, if you'll take those minutes back to Miss Haskell—"

Claire obeyed, thinking that for the first time, she knew why Miss Haskell and Miss Wing were lifers here. Because for every McCarthy this country threw at you, it also threw a Margaret Chase Smith. And by god, when you found one, you backed her up because she was going to find herself in a lot of tight corners.

Her words kept echoing through Claire's mind, all day.

Something had to be done about that man.

Something had to be done.

"Mrs. Sutherland isn't home," the housekeeper told Claire when she came by the Georgetown house with some flimsy excuse of gloves she had been

asked to drop off. “She’s at the family home in Virginia, recovering from a minor car accident.”

Car accident, Claire thought. Of course the Sutherland family would need an excuse for why Sydney was battered head to toe. *The wife plowed her Packard into a lamppost; women drivers, eh?* sounded so much better to your future congressional colleagues than *I beat her to a pulp when she found out I was a war criminal*.

Claire mumbled some platitude and retreated from those immaculate front steps. After that, it took nearly a month of telephone calls—one a week, pretending to be a club chairwoman or a secretary for a fundraiser—before Claire finally heard the words she’d been waiting for: “Yes, Mrs. Sutherland is back in the District; may I take a message? She’s at the park with her son at the moment.”

Sydney should have been at one of the nice Georgetown parks, the ones with endlessly green grass even in October, where you saw more nannies pushing expensive baby carriages than actual mothers. But Sydney had come to Prospect Park just down the street from Briarwood House, of course she had—when Claire came dashing through the gates, there Sid was, poised and exquisite on a park bench in a scarlet swing coat and black patent pumps, watching her son chase ducks around the pond. So beautiful she brought Claire to a stop on the path with a feeling like she’d been kicked in the chest. *How did I think I could know you without loving you?*

“Gentle with those ducks, Bear!” Sydney was calling to her son. “Be a teddy bear, not a grizzly bear. Soft paws—” Demonstrating with a mock growl. Her face didn’t have even the hint of a bruise anymore, Claire saw, but if you knew her well you’d realize she was moving just a hair stiffly. As though her ribs still hurt, even if they no longer bore boot prints. And Claire nearly doubled over on the path with hatred for that gleaming bastard with his Yale vowels and his teeth and his Bronze Star. She’d have sunk him in the Prospect Park pond if she could, held him under until he stopped breathing and never lost a wink of sleep.

But she wasn’t going to think about Barrett Sutherland now. She took a deep breath, hands in her pockets against the growing autumn chill, and came up to Sydney’s bench. “What’s a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?”

“Looking for a strawberry patch.” Sydney smiled, but something had gone out of it—some essential, effervescent light. Claire wanted to weep,

she wanted to reach out and pull Sydney's head against her breast, but she couldn't do any of those things. Instead she sat down on the bench at Sydney's side.

"I missed you," she said in a low voice.

"I missed you, too."

Claire looked at the triple strand of black pearls around Sydney's long neck. "Nice rocks."

Sydney stretched her chin upward a little as though the necklace were a noose. "Barrett likes to deliver his apologies via Cartier," she said tonelessly. "By now they should offer me a promotional: every fourth beating, I get free earrings."

"Sid—"

"I don't think we should see each other anymore."

Claire took a deep breath. "Not what I was expecting to hear, I have to admit."

"Grace was right about something." Sydney looked down at her lap, where she was slowly strangling her fur-trimmed gloves. "Barrett's never yet hit me so hard he didn't care who knew it. But if he ever finds out about you, he will. And then he'll come for you." She looked up, endless lashes glittering with tears. "I couldn't ever bear it if he hurt you, too."

"So you'll just let him hurt you instead? Forever?"

"If that's what it takes to protect Bear." Sydney's voice was so flat, so dead. "I don't know how to get Bear away, so I have to stay to protect him. And I can't protect him *and* you." Sydney looked out over the duck pond. "Better go, Claire."

There was a small, ugly part of Claire that wanted to. Walk away from this damaged, doomed woman and the trouble she brought in her wake; be selfish; stick to the plan Claire had clung to since she was sixteen. Look out for herself and no one else, because love was for suckers and happiness meant a well-stocked bank account and a house you bought cash in hand, not the gorgeous uncertainty of a woman's smile.

Instead she reached into her bag, took out her worn bankbook with its precisely ruled lines, and placed it in Sydney's hand. "Run away with me."

Sydney stared. "What?"

"You can't get away from Barrett because you have no money. *I* have money." Pointing at the balance. It had just tipped over the eight thousand mark a week ago. A moment she'd been anticipating since she was sixteen,

but she'd been too sick with worry over Sydney to do more than blink dully at the milestone as it dropped in her lap. "We'll leave together, you and me and Bear. Take a train to California or Florida, somewhere with blue water for my Bermuda girl."

"He'll find us, he—"

"He *won't* find us! It's a big country, Sid—if we take new names, get new IDs, stay out of the limelight, he'll never find us." New names and papers to match wouldn't be cheap, but she'd throw the whole eight thousand on the fire if it gave Sydney safety. "We'll leave the *country* if we have to."

"Even if he'd let me go, he'd never let Bear go. He'd never stop looking —"

"Isn't that a risk worth taking, if it means your son won't grow up in that house and turn out just like his father?" Claire couldn't stop herself seizing Sydney's hands then. "You'll pass as a widow, and I'll be your sister-in-law who moved in with you after my brother died in the war, to help raise your son. No one will blink, believe me. We'll be a family." Some part of her wondered if she'd gone completely crazy. Claire Hallett had gone from wanting no one, needing no one, to going down on one knee for a woman with a child in tow. "We'll empty my savings and hock your jewelry; it'll be enough for a future together."

Sydney was shaking her head. "You've gone completely mad."

"No, what's completely mad is staying with that man until he kills you," Claire cried. "You have to get away. You have to get your son away. Come away with *me*."

Maybe it wouldn't work. The Sutherland family had money and connections; they could rally the newspapers and mount a manhunt. They probably would. But surely there was some quiet corner in this huge country where two women could hide, and live, and love. Surely with eight thousand dollars in the bank, they had a chance of finding it.

"Claire," Sydney began.

"Mama!" Bear Sutherland came barreling up, hair mussed, hands reverently cupped. "Look what I found! The *biggest* snail you ever saw—" He pointed out the snail's retracting horns, the bands on the whorled shell, as Claire got her hitching breath back under control.

"It's a very nice snail, Teddy Bear," Sydney said in a strangled voice. "Be very careful putting it back."

"I'll put it in the bushes, so it doesn't get stepped on." Bear looked at Claire with his huge sunny smile. "Hi, Miss Claire!"

"Hi, sport." Managing some kind of smile.

"My daddy says Mama can take me trick-or-treating this Halloween! I'm going as the Lone Ranger . . ." Bear chattered about his costume, as Sydney's hand stole out to smooth his dark hair and Claire's shoulders still hitched with stifled tears. He really was a nice kid. How many little boys would have picked the snail up like a jewel, rather than stepping on it just to hear the crunch?

"I'll never be able to get away," Sydney whispered as soon as Bear zoomed off still cradling the snail. "Not with Bear. I'm not allowed to take him out of school without his father's permission, and if I so much as take him out for a walk Barrett wants to know exactly when we'll be back. The housekeeper keeps tabs on me; she telephones Barrett if I'm late *anywhere* —"

"Halloween night," Claire said. "You're already taking Bear trick-or-treating; that'll buy you a few hours. As soon as the two of you go round the corner and out of sight, hail a cab straight for Union Station. I'll take care of everything else, you just tell Bear that Tonto and the Lone Ranger are going on an adventure."

For an endless, agonizing moment Sydney was silent, gnawing off her Revlon Cherries in the Snow lipstick, watching her son careen around the duck pond.

"Come with me," Claire pleaded. "We'll live in an apartment with too-thin walls and have to make love in complete silence so the neighbors don't hear. You'll learn to cook on a hot plate and I'll teach you to make Polish potato pancakes. We'll drop Bear off at school in the morning and then go to the beach, and maybe the water won't be as blue as it is in Bermuda, but I'll wear that ridiculous two-piece suit you bought me."

"Claire—" Sydney's eyes were brimming. "Do you know who you're taking on? My husband would crush you if—"

"So?" Thinking of Senator Smith's clear gaze, the way she'd faced down a bully simply because *something had to be done*. Now Claire looked Sydney in the eye and said, "You and your child have rights. Just because your husband holds all the cards doesn't mean you don't have the right to protest. The right of independent thought. The right to call your goddamn soul your own."

Sydney's tears overflowed. "The right to a second chance?"

"This is the *land* of second chances, Sid!" Claire heard Grace's words fall out of her mouth and realized she believed them. She might have lost her childhood faith that it was the land of opportunity, but second chances? Yes. Opportunities were things that fell in your lap, but second chances had to be fought for—and you could always reinvent yourself in this country, if you were willing to claw your way toward a new path. You could always reinvent yourself, if you decided it was worth the fight.

This woman was worth the fight.

"I'm not much, Sid." Claire took a deep breath. "I lie and I cheat and I steal, and I'm not even sorry for any of it. God knows what you see in me. I can't buy you Lanvin dresses or black pearls, and I can't give you a huge pale green beach house in an island paradise, but I *love* you. I will take you away from that bastard you married and I will never tell you that you have to lose three pounds or leave off the suntan oil for fear of getting too brown or lay a single finger on you with anything but love. So come away with me. Come away with me, *please*."

She sat there with her heart in her throat and her hands trembling, waiting for her entire world to shatter or to take flight. Watched as the faint hunch in Sydney's long back straightened, as her lips firmed. Sydney looked at her, and there it was, faintly rekindled: the light in those dark eyes that made her so much more than just a pampered Georgetown political wife.

Sydney pushed the bankbook back into Claire's hand. "Halloween. Union Station. Five o'clock."

Claire's Potato Pancakes

6 medium potatoes, peeled

2 large eggs

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup flour

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Vegetable oil or canola oil

Sour cream or applesauce

1. Grate the potatoes on the smallest setting of your grater. Rinse the grated potatoes, then squeeze them well to get out as much water as possible and place them in a large bowl.
2. Add the eggs, flour, and a pinch each of salt and pepper to the grated potatoes and mix together well. Line a plate with paper towels.
3. Place a large skillet over medium-high heat, add the vegetable oil to a depth of about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch, and heat until the oil is hot but not smoking.
4. Add $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of the potato mixture to the oil, flattening it to a small pancake about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick. Fry until golden underneath, 3 to 5 minutes, then flip and repeat on the other side.
5. Remove the pancake from the skillet, drain it on the paper towel-lined plate, and repeat with the rest of the potato mixture.
6. Serve the potato pancakes hot with sour cream or applesauce, and eat with someone you adore, while listening to “No Other Love” by Perry Como.

Potato pancakes, Claire reflected, were the food of love—meaning, they were such a colossal pain in the ass to make that no one would ever take the trouble except for love. By the time your fingertips were skinned from grating tubers, your hands sticky from potato starch, and your arms flecked with oil burns, you had better have a good store of love in your heart for whoever was going to eat those little bastards.

“Goodness!” Grace surveyed the platter in Claire’s hands, heaped high with crispy golden potato cakes, lacy at the edges and fried to perfection. “I didn’t think it was your turn to cook.”

“It’s not. But I know everyone’s coming over tonight for Halloween, so I thought you could serve up my father’s *placki ziemniaczane*. Dollop ’em up with sour cream or applesauce, as you like.”

“You’re not staying?” Grace took the platter, tilting her head curiously.

“Not tonight.” It felt like the only goodbye to the Briar Club that Claire could manage. They’d been friends, real friends, even when she hadn’t always been the best of friends to them (thinking of Reka’s stolen pendant, Grace’s filched lipstick, Fliss’s earrings). But she *owed* them: over the last

few years they'd made living here something so much more enjoyable than she'd ever experienced in any of the cheap boardinghouses she'd called home. This place had started out as cheerless as any of those dismal flophouses, but Grace came along with her painted vine and her suppers, and now somehow there were flowers winding down all four floors of the staircase wall, and more flowers in vases in every room, and suncatchers throwing prisms of light in the windows downstairs . . . And the Briar Club, getting together now on more than just Thursday nights, on Halloween and the Fourth of July and end-of-the-war day, too, any excuse for a party.

And without the Briar Club Claire wouldn't have Sydney. Because Reka had brought Sid into the house's orbit, and Fliss had befriended her at church, and Bea had set her to playing center field in a sandlot game, and then Grace had done that thing she did and looped Sid effortlessly into the house's fold.

No, Claire reckoned, she owed the Briarwood House ladies a lot. She just wished there was something more she could give them than potato pancakes. Because by the time they realized she was gone for good—probably on Monday, when Senator Smith would also be realizing that her most junior assistant hadn't come in with her lapel rose, when Mr. Huckstop realized she wasn't showing up to sit on a papier-mâché warhead in a garter belt and fishnets—Claire would be long gone, looking at an entirely different ocean. A long way from these people who had somehow managed to befriend her, even when she was trying so hard not to be befriended. "Happy Halloween," Claire told Grace around a lump in her throat and turned to head down the stairs.

"You, too, Strawberry." Grace's voice held a ripple of amusement. "A word of advice?"

"What?"

"Move around a lot the first year, you and Stretch. Avoid staying in the same place longer than three to four weeks. It's safer."

"How do you do that?" Claire turned around on the landing, the lump in her throat converting a laugh into a hiccup. "Figure out everything about everyone, while giving away absolutely *nothing*?"

Grace arched a brow. "Years of training?"

"What's your secret?" Claire asked. Because if she didn't ask now, she'd never know, and god but she wanted to know. "What's your secret, Grace? Because you've sure as hell got one."

“You’d never believe me even if I told you.” Grace laughed, that sound of pure enjoyment that made everyone else want to laugh too. Claire was going to miss it. “Sure you don’t want to stay, eat some *placki ziemniaczane*?” Her Polish pronunciation, Claire noticed, was flawless.

“Sorry.” Claire started down the stairs again. “I’ve got a date.”

The twilight street was already thronged with pint-size cowboys in ten-gallon hats and plastic six-shooters, tiny fairies in rhinestone crowns and wands, miniature witches in pointy black hats. Pete was taking Lina out—of course Doilies Nilsson was too cheap to get her daughter a costume, so Lina had an old sheet with eyeholes cut in it and was pretending she wanted to be a ghost again like last year and the year before. “I’m going to see she gets the most candy in Foggy Bottom,” Pete said, an extra pillowcase slung over his shoulder. “Say, you want help with your bags, Miss Claire?”

“No, thank you.” One bag of her own down toward the waiting cab, then three of Sydney’s—Claire had collected them earlier this week in repurposed Jelleff’s bags, under the pretext that a stack of Sydney’s dresses had to be returned for alterations. *Don’t walk out that door on Halloween night with anything more than your pocketbook*, Claire had warned. *That’s a dead giveaway. And as soon as you get into the cab, change something about your appearance, you and Bear both. Even if it’s just taking off your coats and hats, and ditching his Lone Ranger mask. You don’t want anyone to be able to describe a woman and child arriving at the station wearing the exact same outfits you left home in.* And Sydney had nodded, grim as a soldier preparing to go over the top on a suicide charge.

She’d be helping Bear with his Lone Ranger mask now. Kissing Barrett Sutherland at the threshold, maybe. *See you later, darling.*

“Enjoy your weekend trip, Miss Claire.” Pete threw her a salute, that freckled face of his so open and friendly. God, had he grown up. Hadn’t he only been about twelve when she came to this place? Here he was practically a grown man—but he wasn’t, not yet. Claire caught his arm, remembering something with a jolt. “Stay away from Mr. Huckstop, Pete. He asks you to come by after hours and take pictures, you tell him no, all right?”

“Why?”

“Because he’s mixed up in things you’re too young for. Steer well clear of him, all right? Promise me.”

“I-I promise?” He still sounded uncertain.

“Good kid.” Claire jammed the last of Sydney’s bags into the cab and got in, slamming the door. “Union Station,” she told the driver. Maybe Sydney was hailing a cab of her own now. *We’re going on an adventure, Bear.*

Claire closed her eyes as the cab pulled away from Briarwood House. “I’m coming, Sid,” she murmured. She had the train tickets, two adults and one child all the way to San Diego. She had the luggage. She had her money, cashed out neatly into banded stacks and buried at the bottom of her bag. All Sydney had to do was come. Lead her little Lone Ranger by the hand through Union Station, reach out her other hand toward Claire, and take hold of the future.

Claire closed her eyes and prayed.

Interstitial

Thanksgiving 1954
Washington, D.C.

Briarwood House is still fluttering its curtains and creaking its banister spokes at the prospect of becoming a showroom for McTurney & Sons living room sets, but the palpable frustration now spilling out of the sitting room where the detective has set up shop pulls its attention around. One by one, the waiting witnesses in the kitchen have been called in to answer questions, and the detective just looks more red-faced and irritated with each new set of testimony.

“Can’t women ever pull themselves together?” the house hears him complain to his partner. “They all just start crying the minute I ask what happened.”

“I still think it’s the mobster,” his partner says, but they’d sweated Xavier Byrne for near an hour with no results. The house can tell both cops have been hugging shiny images of extracting a nice weepy confession that would send the Warring-gang ex-con back to jail on a murder rap and result in juicy commendations for the men who put him there, but Xavier Byrne had declined, arms crossed and voice level, to confess to so much as a parking ticket. Therefore, the house knows as it watches the detectives shuffle papers and witnesses around, this budget Joe Friday and his even more budget sidekick are looking for a new theory to explain why two corpses—one red-haired with its throat slashed to the bone, and the even

more mysterious one with the smashed-in skull—are now cooling in the morgue.

So far, nothing very commendation-worthy is presenting itself.

The detective sighs. “All right, bring the G-man in.”

“Shoulda started with him,” one of the beat cops ventures and gets a glare.

“You want a bureau boy coming in here, swaggering all over this case and trying to take over? He’s had time by now to cool his heels and know he’s not in charge, so bring him in.”

Harland Adams enters, sharp-faced in his equally sharp suit. Briarwood House likes Harland well enough—you have to like a fellow willing to fire up the grill on your front lawn and flip burgers all afternoon, making the house smell and feel like an endless Fourth of July day. But now the tension drawn all the way through the man is worrying.

Harland Custis Adams looks like he’s about to explode. And Briarwood House doesn’t like it one bit.

“The apartment on the attic floor,” the detective begins after the introductory details are noted. “With the green walls—I understand that belongs to Mrs. Grace March.”

A single nod. Under the table, the house sees Harland’s hands flex.

“How well would you say you knew the lady?”

A thin smile. *Don’t do it*, the house begs silently. *Don’t do it!* But Harland begins.

“Not very well, as things turned out.”

Nine Months Earlier

March 1954

Chapter 7

Grace

It was the view out the window that made Grace March fall in love with Briarwood House. That very first day nearly four years ago, she'd looked right past the endless steep stairs to the fourth floor and the room's hideous slanted lime-green walls, not to mention the sheer nerve of Doilies Nilsson trying to call a dollhouse-size icebox with a hot plate on top "the kitchenette"—instead, Grace had walked straight to the gabled window overlooking the square, and thought *Yes*. Here was a broad ledge where she could brew sun tea, a window seat where she could curl up on cold mornings with the first cigarette of the day, a place she could raise the creaky sill and lean out and *watch*. Observing people was Grace's favorite occupation by a country mile—watching the world go by on that busy intersection of Briar and Wood, the endless palette of humanity laid out before her like a moving tapestry . . . Even after six years, Grace still found American life fascinating.

So she'd turned around with a wide smile and said, "I'll take it," already knowing this was the kind of landlady who would enforce pointless rules and snoop through her things, but not particularly caring. Let her snoop; there was nothing to find. Grace had been kitted out to the last tag in her clothes the *first* time she disappeared, and she'd done an even better job the second.

Dear Kitty, Grace had written her little sister on the back of a postcard showing the Washington Monument, sipping an ice cream soda in the booth of the Crispy Biscuit that very first day in the square, *I've found the perfect*

place to hide. I can disappear here and they'll never find me in a thousand years. I only wish you were here too.

But Kitty wasn't ever going to join her in Washington. Kitty was a handful of bones in a hastily buried ammunition crate and had been for twelve years. Strange to think she'd be Nora's age now—Grace still thought of her as a lanky child with chestnut-brown plaits. *I never see you mailing any of those postcards you're always scribbling*, Nora had said once, and Grace had just smiled. The postcards went into a shoebox under her bed; writing them kept something of Kitty alive in this shiny new world her little sister hadn't had the luck to see with her own eyes.

"It's not even eight," a man's voice said sleepily from Grace's bed. "Are you already up? It's Saturday . . ."

"I like to watch the square wake up." Grace had already wrapped herself in her threadbare robe with its Chinese dragons, turned on the hot plate under the kettle, and padded over to the window with her morning cup of tea. She'd have liked to stir in a spoonful of jam the way she always did growing up, but she had trained herself out of that habit long ago. *Dead giveaway*, her trainers had said. *Americans put sugar or honey in their tea, so get used to it.* Grace sipped slowly now, curled up on the window seat watching the world below.

Pete, running out the door toward Moonlight Magnolias . . . That boy should be in school, not working full-time; he wasn't even seventeen. Grace had a few thoughts about that, most of them unprintable. There was Nora, clipping off toward the National Archives in one of her slim suits, working even on a weekend . . . Her gangster still liked to ask after her whenever Grace joined the poker table at the Amber Club on late weekend evenings (American poker was an absolute gift to the wallet for someone who had been trained how to lie for a living). There went Fliss in her blue Alice band, swinging Angela by the hand as they came down the steps after Nora . . . Fliss had more bounce in her step these days; she was counting the weeks until her Dan came home from Japan. And then, Grace supposed with a wistful pang, they'd be gone and she'd have a new neighbor in 2A.

Fliss and Angela turned right as they came to the sidewalk—Prospect Park, then. Grace had considered the name another good omen, moving into the neighborhood, although if she had to be honest a stroll to Prospect Park—the sandlot, the sedate playground, the pigeon-decked statue of Councilman Smoot—was not precisely a stroll down the Nevsky Prospect

of her childhood. (T. Nealey Smoot wasn't exactly Peter the Great, was he?) Grace didn't even have to close her eyes to see the Nevsky Prospect, so vividly: not as it had looked during the war, gray and wrecked, gripped by soot-flecked snow and implacable ice, but warm and bustling, the endless butter-yellow and icing-pink facades of the vast pre-Revolution palaces rearing up overhead, eating hot *chebureki* stuffed with ground lamb and black pepper, the just-fried crust searing through mittened fingers. Kitty swinging from her hand, Mama behind with the shopping in a string bag, shouting *Galina, don't let go of your sister. Yekaterina, listen when I call you!* Mama sometimes called Yekaterina *Katya* or *Katechka*, but only Grace had called her Kitty. *After Princess Kitty Shcherbatskaya in Anna Karenina, of course!*

"Jesus—" The male voice from Grace's bed sounded much more awake, and much more panicked. "I need to get out the door. Where are my pants?"

"By the dresser." Grace smiled and sat back as Harland Adams started frantically flying around the tiny room. *An FBI agent*, she could hear her trainers approving. *An excellent source, see what you can get out of him.* But he wasn't a source, he was a friend. A somewhat heartbroken one, too, since he'd recently proposed to Bea (for the third time) and been turned down (for the third time) and had come stamping out of the Briarwood House parlor swearing he was done with women who wore trousers and swore like sailors and smithereened a man's heart to pieces before just heading out like it was nothing so they could *scout pitchers in Pittsburgh*. Clearly a man in need of a listening ear, so Grace had taken him upstairs once Doilies Nilsson's back was turned, poured him some sun tea, and duly listened.

"Bea went on a date with another scout last week!" Harland burst out after the second glass. "She didn't even try to hide it. She told me I should find someone else to keep my bed warm, too; she wouldn't mind a bit!" He was so distressed Grace reflected she could probably get the secret of nuclear fission out of him if he had it, so it was a good thing she was out of the spying business.

"Bea never said she'd be your girl and yours alone, so stop trying to clip her wings," Grace told him briskly. "She's got her dream job at last; you think she's in a hurry to change things up? You really want to net that one, play the long game. Stick around, let her know you love her, but for heaven's sake stop proposing marriage. And you really *should* find someone

else to have a little fun with while you're waiting for her to slow down and smell the coffee, so—" And Grace leaned forward and kissed him, because he really was a good-looking fellow, and her bed had been empty for a while. JD had joined the pitching staff for the Dodgers, Claude Cormier was playing drums at the Cotton Club in Harlem, Joe next door had a girlfriend right now, and Grace didn't poach men who were taken.

"I shouldn't have stayed over last night," Harland said now, looking faintly tortured, or at least as tortured as a man could look while hopping on one foot trying to pull on a sock. "I didn't mean to lead you on, Grace. I don't want to make things awkward with you and Bea—I don't want you thinking—"

"I'm thinking we had a very nice time and that's all there is to it." Grace rose, glided over to the hot plate where her kettle was still warm, and poured out a cup of tea for him. "Let's leave it at that, shall we?"

He couldn't entirely hide his relief. "You mean it?"

"You had a lot to get off your chest, G-man. Glad I could help."

"You won't be able to call me that much longer," he said suddenly, almost mumbling. "I-I'm leaving the bureau. It's not what I ever imagined . . ."

Darling, the things I could tell you, Grace reflected. "Can't say I'm surprised," she said, passing him a chipped mug. "Tapping phones so you can learn people's secrets to use against them doesn't seem like the kind of thing a Virginia gentleman like you is all that comfortable with."

"Grace, if you knew the half of it . . ."

Grace knew considerably more than half of it. She and Kirill had rolled an FBI agent on vacation in a Los Angeles bar during their first eight months in the States: a bottle of bourbon and a little shameless flirtation had netted some absolutely startling allegations, some of which Grace sincerely wished she could wipe from her mind (the image of J. Edgar Hoover in a garter belt?!). But she wasn't interested in extracting information from Harland. She brushed her lips across his instead, comradely rather than loverlike, and grinned privately at the irony of *comrade*. He wouldn't be too amused, this soon-to-be-ex G-man, knowing he'd just rolled out of bed with Comrade Galina Stepanova of the USSR.

Former, anyway.

"Come on," Grace said, "let me scout the way downstairs so you can sneak out without Nilsson spotting you."

Harland looked stricken. "I'm a thoughtless bastard, Grace, I never even thought about the trouble you'd get in if I stayed over. If we get caught, will you be thrown out?"

"Honey," said Grace with complete truth, "I *never* get caught."

In her training days, everyone knew only the best would be sent over. The most dedicated, the most loyal, the true believers. (*How on earth did someone like me slip through the cracks?* Grace sometimes wondered, but never aloud.) No one in their carefully vetted class of recruits would ever turn, not when they had all been so closely screened, so minutely monitored. The very idea was treason, spoken of only in whispers as they practiced their marksmanship, their ciphers, their American slang. There was no such thing as a deep-cover operative who turned traitor, oh no. Only those who were caught, and even they would never go to an American prison. You'd exercise your suicide option before that happened. And if you were less than perfectly loyal to the Motherland, someone would put a bullet in *your* brain long before you were ever sent overseas.

But if someone did turn . . . Grace remembered a young man in her class saying. He was from Vorkuta and looked like he came from Peoria, and he glanced behind him before he went on, bent over a worksheet where he was learning to count out American change. *If someone turned, what would it take? What kind of torture?*

None, Grace could have answered. Despite all her lip-service loyalty, she'd already been ripe to abandon the country that thought it owned her body and soul, the country she'd never entirely thought of as home. All it had taken to start the process of her defection, once she landed on these shores, was an American grocery store.

"You must never appear shocked by the abundance," her trainers had warned her. That was why the engineered towns where the candidates drilled were equipped with American labels; Grace had spent two years wandering aisles stocked with cans blazoned *Campbell's* and *Niblets* as she trained herself to think in Imperial rather than metric and learned a soft Iowa drawl from a linguist born and raised in Irkutsk. She was *prepared* for American grocery stores by the time she and Kirill were finally inserted. Only she hadn't been: she'd taken herself out for that all-important American housewife ritual of the afternoon shop, her friendly smile ready for deployment, her introduction cued up ("Betty McDowell, Bob and I are

new here!”) and . . . well, she’d ended up wandering around the store looking outwardly composed, but with her mind in a complete daze. It wasn’t that she didn’t know what Betty Crocker’s Softasilk Cake Flour was when she saw it on the shelf, or a bag of vibrant California oranges. But in her training days the oranges were just painted wooden balls and the flour behind the Betty Crocker label was the same half-sawdust rubbish Grace had queued for in Leningrad growing up. *Here* was the real thing: real oranges, real flour, stacked high in such opulent quantities—and anyone here could buy such things. There was no line of desperate people snaking out the door, no one checking ration cards, no one arbitrarily refusing to sell because they’d heard your grandfather was a *kulak*. There was *enough* here.

Later, of course, Grace realized it wasn’t quite that simple. Claire told her a little, tersely and without self-pity, about the Hoovervilles where her family had been reduced to living during the thirties; the breadlines and the shacks and the desperate people queuing up at churches for charity aid. America was not really, Grace knew now, the land of unlimited plenty open to all. But on her first afternoon in a grocery store it had looked that way, and it had rocked her back on her heels.

“Disgusting,” Kirill said under his breath. “They share nothing, they hoard it all for themselves. It’s as terrible as the trainers said it would be.” But what did Kirill know about terrible? He’d sat out the war in safety, one of the privileged deemed too important to be sent to the meat grinder fronts where Hitlerites were (regardless of what the propagandists said) mowing down Russian regiments like wheat. He’d sat in an NKVD office during the war, and Grace doubted he’d ever spent a night hungry—because *hoarding* wasn’t something only the capitalist Western pigs did, oh no. Grace had survived the Leningrad siege during the war, and that was probably the first mistake her recruiters had made, recommending her for the deep-cover program. The second mistake had been to think that the Ukrainian half of her heritage was somehow eclipsed by the Russian half; the third mistake was to send her over paired with Kirill. But that first mistake . . .

You don’t need to be smart to serve the Motherland, one of her trainers had said. *Plenty of slots in the machine for dull cogs. But for our program—hiding in plain sight, among the enemy for years, undetected—to serve that way, you need a brain.* Well, Grace had a brain. She also knew what it was to be hungry, so hungry you ripped the leather backing off a chair and boiled it with a handful of frozen weeds for soup, so hungry the teeth grew

loose in your head and you watched your breasts shrivel and your weight drop to eighty-seven pounds at five foot six. To know hunger in your bones, in your blood, as part of your heritage.

Never recruit someone into deep cover when they know what it is to starve, Grace thought, buying a pastrami on rye at Rosenberg's Deli next door to Briarwood House. Because if you'd ever been forced to the knife-sharp edge of that terrible cliff—living day after day knowing you were being slowly dragged over that edge toward death—it drew a stark line within your soul. On one side of that line were the things worth starving, suffering, dying for, and on the other side was everything else. Grace had willingly suffered those pangs for Kitty, for her family, for survival, and she would do it again in a heartbeat. Some things were worth it. But even as she was pulled into the deep-cover program she already knew that Joseph Stalin—the man who, long before the Leningrad siege, had starved every single one of her mother's family in Kharkiv to death before Grace was fifteen years old—was not one of them.

If you had brains enough to know that, *and* you yourself also knew what it was to starve—you didn't think *Disgusting* when you saw a grocer's shop stocked with everything under the sun and no rules at all to stop anyone from buying what they wanted.

You thought, in that soft Iowa drawl that was now second nature even inside your own head, *They said it would be terrible, but it's marvelous.*

You thought, *I could get used to this.*

And most importantly, you thought: *I wonder what else about this country they lied about.*

Quite a lot, it turned out. All that propaganda she'd grown up with, about how Westerners would sell their children for a loaf of bread and prostitute their daughters on street corners for a mug of beer—that certainly hadn't turned out to be true, either. And once you went looking for the lies, you found them everywhere. You looked around at a land you'd been told your entire life was filled with enemies and evil and found it instead to be a land of plenty and peace. And then?

Well.

You'd come to realize this country had more to offer than well-stocked grocery stores.

You'd come to realize you did not have it in you to cause harm to the people here.

You'd come to a breaking point.

And when that point came—say, on the afternoon a certain manila folder came to hand, and you realized what was in it and what it meant for the country you now thought of as your own . . .

You'd take every skill they taught you during training, every trick you'd absorbed, every weapon they'd given you, and *use it*. So that a year after being inserted in your California ranch house near Edwards Air Force Base, about halfway toward the assigned goal of getting your “husband,” Bob McDowell, hired as an engineer on the flight program that was so very interesting to the higher-ups in Moscow, Bob/Kirill would wake up and find that his wife, Betty/Galina, was gone, gone, gone. Headed east with a new set of identification papers their higher-ups knew nothing about, headed east under the name *Grace March*, headed for a brand-new future without ciphers, without dead drops, without missions.

Headed into the land of the free.

Not that the land of the free was a perfect land.

“Thank *god* you're here, Grace.” The other typists in the Department of Commerce steno pool fell on Grace the moment she walked in the door Monday. “That man Morrow called for some *filing* to be done!”

“Heavens, how dare he,” Grace said mildly. “I'll go right over.”

A concerned hand on her shoulder. “Do you want one of us to go with you? It's better to go in pairs, you know. Around *them*.”

“I doubt Mr. Morrow will eat me,” Grace said and took herself off to the shoebox-size office where the higher-ups had deigned to stash a man of the stature of E. Frederic Morrow, former writer for CBS, former Major of Artillery, current adviser to the Department of Commerce. “Good morning, sir.”

He glanced up, light shining off his dark face. “Mrs. March, good of you to come in.” The days she didn't, he wasn't likely to get any filing or typing done. The last time one of the steno pool girls volunteered (“feeling herself impelled by a sense of Christian duty” was how he put it, dryly), she'd burst into tears the first time he had to cross to her side of the room, then she ran straight out of the office. “Start with those folders over there, please,” he said now. “And if you wouldn't mind, leave the door open.”

Why? Grace probably would have asked a few years ago. Now she knew why. *He doesn't want any talk about white women in his office behind*

closed doors was how her ex-lover Claude would have put it in his Louisiana drawl. *You leave that door open if you don't want to cause trouble for him, chère. D.C. ain't Deep South but it's South enough.* Dating Claude had been a profound eye-opener for a woman who hadn't seen a For Whites Only sign before coming from Leningrad to the land of the free. Grace missed him. *I hope he's getting nothing but standing ovations at the Cotton Club.*

She transcribed her way efficiently through the pile of folders, powered through a stack of filing, reorganized some paperwork. "Anything else, Mr. Morrow?"

He'd blinked the first time she called him *mister* and *sir* but didn't now. "That will be all, Mrs. March. Much appreciated."

"I do believe you're wasted here, Mr. Morrow."

His chuckle, as she bowed herself out, was somewhat grim. "I do believe you're wasted here yourself, Mrs. March."

"A lady has to pay the bills." Grace didn't care much what she did for a living as long as she had a little money in her pocket, and there were plenty of ways to earn money in a town full of politicians. The cover for which she had been trained was simply *housewife*, but she could pass as an artist as well: she'd learned to sketch as a child, taught by her mother, who used to paint colorful birds and ferns and flowers around the windows of their Leningrad apartment. "Like your grandmother taught me in the house where I grew up," she'd said, folding Grace's chubby fingers around a brush. Grace had never dreamed of doing anything with it for a living (dreaming wasn't exactly encouraged in the USSR) but she'd been instructed during deep-cover training to learn more, simply because *artist* was a good cover occupation.

Artists never attract attention coming and going at all hours, or for keeping irregular company, her trainers had explained, signing her up for painting classes once her skills were discovered. Grace didn't have Reka's instinctive, outlandish flair with a brush but she'd found illustration work as soon as she arrived in Washington: the odd sign here or mural there, supplemented with anything else she could find. And last year, she had found the Department of Commerce.

"Head there and ask for Mr. Morrow, if you have secretarial skills and want to make a little cash," Claire had said last year, telling the Briar Club about her own stint subbing while Congress was out in August. "None of

the girls at the office steno pool will be secretary to a Black man, and he'll pay out of pocket for a few hours of typing and filing every week." Grace had signed up for a course that winter and now came into Mr. Morrow's office every few days. It backed up the library job and the sign painting nicely . . . at some point she'd have to think about a real position with a proper salary, but for now she was happy to drift through the months with a patchwork collection of odd jobs.

When you had spent so much of your life just surviving, it was such a pleasure to drift. Such a strange sensation to be able to *thrive*.

Grace took her lunch at one of the local Hot Shoppes, a thirty-five-cent cheeseburger and a delicious slush of sherbet and orange juice called an Orange Freeze. There'd been a near-identical Hot Shoppes restaurant in the replica American town where she'd trained, a fact that amused Grace no end. Two years she'd spent there, being immersed with the rest of her classmates during cultural indoctrination, and it had been like living on a movie set. The details were all correct—the cars that passed on the streets were Packards and Chevrolets; the street signs were all in English and the parking meters full of American dimes and nickels—but everything was just a little too pristine. The stools at those diners didn't squeak as they spun, and the hamburgers still tasted like ordinary Moscow mystery meat, not American beef. None of the seats sagged at the replica American movie theater showing *Life with Father* and *The Bachelor and the Bobby-Soxer*. The streets where smartly suited young men called out *Hi, Jim!* and *Nice day, Bill!* in flawless American accents didn't have a single person over the age of forty-five, only those sharp-eyed young men whose NKVD fathers and good linguistics had vaulted them into the deep-cover program. Those green parks with pristine swing sets had no children playing in them, only young women like Grace with razor nerves and white gloves, learning how to coo *Did you see the article in McCall's?* and *I'll bring over a casserole* as though they'd been born and raised in the Rockies, not the Urals.

Trust Russians, Grace reflected as she took a big bite of her cheeseburger, to get the big picture right but the details so completely wrong. Living in a fake American town for several years hadn't prepared her for living in America, not one bit. Because the biggest difference between Americans and Soviets, she'd realized her first month in this country, didn't lie in the vowels, the clothes, or how you sweetened your tea. It was in the shoulders. When Soviets were squashed down by life, by luck, by the system, they got

resigned—the shoulders drooped. Hit an American with an equal dose of the same oppression and they went stiff—either with anger or with fear, but their shoulders and chin went up, not down. Grace even saw it in Mr. Morrow, who went to work every day with a complete lack of surprise for the fact that he was expected to work in a windowless sardine can, that everyone watched him narrowly whenever he addressed a single word to a white woman, that men half his age and half his rank snapped *Boy, get my coat* when he went out on his lunch break. He might not be surprised at such treatment, but his shoulders still went rigid over it.

One month newly arrived in America, graduated from that bullshit city-slick movie-set town to the real thing in California, and Grace had started trying to carry her shoulders differently. Wondering if it would ever come naturally to her.

Pulling her shoulders back, finishing her cheeseburger and fries down to the very last smear of ketchup with a thoroughness only people who had been starved long and recently could muster, Grace thought that she damned well intended to find out.

The whole house came to Grace's room on Thursday nights, but nearly every other evening she'd hear a knock from some member of the Briar Club hoping for a more private heart-to-heart. Tonight it was Pete and Lina, the darlings. "Can you help us fill out Lina's entry form for the Pillsbury Bake-Off?" Pete asked anxiously, Lina chewing her lip at his side.

"If you don't mind sharing my attention with CBS." Grace opened the door, waving them in. "You know I love you, Hammerin' Pete, but Edward R. Murrow has my heart."

"Who's he?"

"Good lord, do you not watch the news? Only the man taking down Senator McCarthy, and about time, too." Grace had been absolutely glued to his program throughout this entire month of March. *We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason. And remember, we are not descended from fearful men. This is no time for men who oppose Senator McCarthy's methods to keep silent . . . Hear, hear,* thought Grace, switching on the television set now and smiling to see Murrow's lean grave face and long widow's peak in black and white. Someone please take McCarthy out so Americans would stop looking for Soviet moles under every rock, and *this* Soviet mole could settle down and live in peace.

“Sun tea?” Grace called, already filling glasses for Lina and Pete as they flopped on the floor. The recipe hadn’t come from any mother-in-law in Iowa, but from a Betty Crocker cookbook all the female deep-cover recruits had been required to memorize during cultural indoctrination. Pete and Lina sipped, already arguing about the application. “We need to include a seal from a Pillsbury flour bag, Lina-kins; if we do, the prize has the potential to be doubled . . .”

Edward R. Murrow had already kicked off about McCarthy, looking grave. *His proposition is very simple: anyone who criticizes or opposes McCarthy’s methods must be a Communist, and if that be true, there are an awful lot of Communists in this country.*

A few more than you think, Grace reflected, wondering what Kirill was up to these days. She very much doubted he’d reported her disappearance to the higher-ups—too much risk of being tainted by association, recalled by his handlers, and briskly shot. If he knew what was good for him, he’d have reported her as dead from a car accident and carried his mission on alone, not that Grace gave him much of a chance of mining information gold from the Edwards flight program without her. Kirill had been one hell of an aviation engineer, but he’d never figured out how to be charming, how to loosen people’s lips. He’d never quite mastered how Americans talked in contractions rather than in careful complete sentences like robots. That had been the reason Grace was paired with him: she’d always had the easier way about her, the ability to make people open up.

You charm the information out of those air force folks, he’ll determine what’s useful, her instructions had been when they began their false marriage. Grace had taken that to mean a partnership: that they each had something valuable to bring to this business of nosing out information and sending it back to Moscow, and that the *marriage* part was about as real as the fake wedding portraits they’d posed for in a studio while making a mocked-up photo album. Kirill had taken it to mean something much more like an actual marriage: he would give the orders, Grace would follow them, he would receive the credit with their higher-ups, and otherwise Grace would keep her mouth shut, open her knees whenever he felt like it, and make *rassolnik* exactly the way his mother from Udmurtia had made it or else get the back of his hand. Not so dissimilar from an American marriage, if you substituted green bean casserole for *rassolnik* . . .

Pete, sounding anxious: “You sure you want to enter the competition this year, Lina? Twelve’s the cutoff age and you’re only eleven.”

“I’ll be twelve by the time the competition’s held in New York—”

Murrow’s beautiful voice was still rolling out from the television set: — *mature Americans can engage in conversation and controversy, the clash of ideas, with Communists anywhere in the world without becoming contaminated and converted. I believe that our faith, our conviction, our determination are stronger than theirs, and that we can compete, and successfully, not only in the area of bombs but in the area of ideas . . .*

Grace supposed he was right: her own faith in the Communist ideal had been distinctly tarnished long before she’d been recruited for this work. Faith in the system, in the collective, in Marxism: those things might have been the water she swam in growing up, but a constant undertow in that water had been her Ukrainian mother’s bitterness. *If I’d married a man back home and birthed you there, we’d all be dead*, Grace remembered her whispering in the Ukrainian she still spoke to her children when her husband wasn’t there to hear. *Whole towns dead of starvation, every cousin I grew up with . . . Purges aren’t just done with bullets and denunciations and black vans in the night, Galina Pavlovna*. And she’d seal her mouth tight before anyone could hear, before anyone could report that the pretty wife Comrade Stepanov had picked up near Kharkiv wasn’t as grateful for Comrade Stalin’s bounty and wisdom as she should be.

Comrade Stalin . . . Grace shook her head to remember how drunk she’d gotten when she heard Stalin had died, so utterly smashed Bea and Claire had had to haul her up three flights of stairs. How she hated that man. Hated him and hated the fact that he was dead and she’d never have a chance to tell him the world he built had been the world that killed her mother’s family, the world that killed her sister. *Rot in hell, Uncle Joe*, Grace thought, and leaned over Lina’s shoulder to look at the contest form. “Breads, cakes, pies, cookies, entrees, and desserts—which category are you entering in, Lina?”

“Cakes.” Lina looked suddenly nervous, chewing on a strand of her hair. “I need to submit an original recipe, and—and Mrs. Grace, I was wondering . . .”

Pete gave his sister an encouraging *go on* gesture.

“Could I submit that cake you taught me to make last month?” Lina asked in a rush. “The eight-layer honey cake? I’ve never seen *anything* like

that in *all* my cookbooks—”

Because it was invented in Russia a hundred and thirty years ago, Grace thought. A treat for the holidays, when she’d been growing up—Papa always frowned at Mama’s Ukrainian desserts like *yabluchnyk*, preferring good old Russian classics instead. Kitty had been the baker of the family; with Grace working at the ammunition factory and Mama putting in long hours as an interpreter, Kitty would be the one rushing into their shared kitchen, not even taking off her red Pioneers kerchief before she started rolling out the biscuitlike layers, drizzling in the honey, sandwiching them together with sour cream frosting. What on earth would Kitty think—her russet-haired, bright-eyed younger sister—to know that an American girl of the same age wanted to take the family recipe to the Pillsbury Bake-Off?

Grace could almost hear Kitty’s bossy little voice: *Make sure she mixes the filling with condensed milk instead of cream for extra sweetness. And pulverizes the cake trimmings into crumbs to decorate the top! And—*

“Of course you can submit it,” Grace told Lina, feeling the thickness in her voice.

Lina beamed. “Tell me the steps again, for the form?”

Grace turned down the volume on the television so she wouldn’t have to compete with Murrow’s sonorous baritone as she began dictating the recipe, but she listened to him with one ear anyway: . . . *I cannot contend that I have always been right or wise. But I have attempted to pursue the truth with some diligence* . . . Pete looked thoughtful, listening. “He really can talk, can’t he?” Smoothing his hair as if wishing he had the newscaster’s long widow’s peak. Grace wondered if Hammerin’ Pete was about to get a new idol. The William Holden/*Stalag 17* phase had given way to the *Dragnet* phase, and the Briar Club ladies had endured a certain amount of Pete intoning, “Just the facts, ma’am,” but that might have just about run its course . . .

“What’s this cake called?” Lina wanted to know. “The winning recipes always have good names.”

Medovik, Grace almost said in Russian. “Let’s call it Eight-Layer Honey Cloud Cake,” she suggested instead. “That sounds like a prizewinner, doesn’t it? Is your mother going to let you compete if you get in?”

The girl’s face fell, and Pete answered somewhat grimly, “We’ll fight that battle when we come to it.”

Later when the television was switched off and Lina bounced down the stairs to find a stamp for her entry form, Pete told Grace, “If she gets into the Bake-Off, she’ll compete if I have to drive her to New York over Mom’s dead *body*. Lina needs this.”

“She does,” Grace agreed. Over the last four years she’d seen Lina Nilsson grow from a singularly charmless, graceless eight-year-old with the personality of Elmer’s Glue to a gangly spotty adolescent who still chewed her hair and talked in fits and starts . . . But she could bake by now, a thousand burned cookies and flat cakes later, and all the lavish encouragement from the Briar Club over the years meant that despite her mother’s carping, Lina *knew* she could bake. If life wasn’t kind enough to give a little girl dimples, beauty, charm, wit, or any of the other things that made for smooth sailing into adulthood, then she had to find something else to put a swing in her step. Grace reckoned that an acceptance letter to the Pillsbury Bake-Off at age twelve would give Lina bragging rights clear into high school. “She’s going to get in, Pete. I can feel it.”

“Until then”—Pete smoothed his hair back like Edward R. Murrow’s, aiming for a sonorous baritone instead of a teenage tenor, and finished up with the words Murrow used at the end of tonight’s (and every) broadcast —“good night and good luck!”

He thumped off down the stairs, and Grace smiled, wandering back inside and folding herself back up at her window seat. The lean ginger cat she’d semiadopted years ago came winding along the window ledge and through the sill, and Grace lifted him inside. “Hi there, Red.” The name, her own private joke—Kitty’d had an ancient cat called Trotsky when they were growing up, but you couldn’t exactly name a cat *Trotsky* in McCarthy’s America. Not that it would be McCarthy’s America for much longer, the way Murrow was taking an axe to his reputation on CBS . . .

Poor old Trotsky, he’d died of advanced age and decrepitude just before the war started, the meanest, most bad-tempered cat in Leningrad, and the luckiest too. If he’d lived into the first winter of the siege, he’d have ended up in a soup kettle. Grace felt a residual clutch of panic in her chest and shifted Red against one shoulder so she could rise and head back into the kitchenette. There she stared at her pyramid of canned food, the joking toll she collected from every member of the Briar Club for every Thursday night meal, only it wasn’t a joke at all. She needed the cans for her bad nights, when she woke up with that aching ghost of starvation raking her

bones with phantom claws. It didn't help to run her hands over her body and feel soft, healthy flesh there instead of jutting bone; it didn't help to run her tongue over her teeth and feel that none of them were loose; it didn't help to eat something and remind her stomach it was full. The only thing that helped was counting the cans. Canned corn, canned peaches, canned spam, pork and beans, fruit cocktail, tomato soup . . . She stood reading the labels, doing the math in her head: seventy-six cans in a colorful pyramid against her kitchenette wall, every one dusted and turned label out with fanatical precision; seventy-six cans meant how many days of survival when divided between eight people, between seven, six, five? Math Grace could do effortlessly, even raked and clawed by ghostly hunger. Survival arithmetic, the only thing you had the energy to do on 125 grams of bread from the state per day, and whatever else you could put in the soup pot once the weeds had been stripped from every crack in every street, every leather chair and spare boot had been boiled, and every stray cat in the city eaten. "You'd have ended up in a stew," she told Red softly, stroking his back. "I could have, too."

The nine-hundred-day siege, some called it—Hitler's forces circling Leningrad like a lethal necklace, choking off everything. Nine hundred days, three winters, but Grace's whole family went in the first winter. Papa was long dead by the time the siege began, leaving eight of them huddled together for survival in a two-room apartment, curled together for warmth, pooling ration cards, drinking water scavenged from shell-holes in the Nevsky Prospect after the German bombers came through. Eight people: Mamochka, Papa's father, Papa's two younger brothers and their wives, Grace and Yekaterina. Kitty had kept a diary, right to the end, even though by the end the entries were just a list.

Aunt Zhenya died on December 12 at noon, 1941.

Grandfather died January 14 at three o'clock, 1942.

Uncle Leonid, February 3 at six in the morning, 1942.

Uncle Josef, February 10 at nine at night, 1942.

Aunt Sofka . . .

Mama . . .

And finally Grace's own handwriting: *Yekaterina Stepanova, March 1, twilight, 1942*. After which she'd shoveled the diary into the stove and warmed her frostbitten fingers on the blaze. A nine-hundred-day siege, but it took less than ninety days to claim her entire family.

Irony, that. Mama had married a Russian so she could escape the tiny farming village of her birth, then wept bitter tears as her husband's Party starved her left-behind family and neighbors to death among millions of others whittled down to skin and bone—but she'd consoled herself by hugging Grace and Kitty close: "At least being born here as good Party girls, you will never die in such a hell." It was only blind chance she'd learned her family's fate at all—worrying, as Grace grew, about how the letters from home tapered away and then stopped coming altogether. She'd only discovered the truth when a gaunt former neighbor made his way to Leningrad just before the borders locked down, looking for work and mumbling horrors from a toothless mouth. "All of them starved," he had whispered, "while food piled up in depots and they weren't allowed near it —" but never where anyone could hear, because it was ten years in the gulags for even hinting aloud at what was happening on the other side of that border. That, Grace remembered, was when Mama's hair began to whiten . . . but she hadn't lost her fierceness, holding Grace and Kitty close. "At least you girls won't meet such a fate. None of us will."

But they had. All except Grace.

So now Grace stood in her kitchenette, in this apartment that she would have been forced to share in Leningrad with at least two other people, and she cuddled the lean cat to her breast the way she'd once slept with her bones folded around Kitty's smaller bones for warmth, and she counted cans of food. She counted green beans and sour cherries and black-eyed peas, counted how many days of survival they guaranteed her, until the ghosts of yesterday slipped away for now and she could remember that she lived in a land of plenty. A land she had made her own, a land she'd entered as an enemy and stayed on in as a friend, a land she was never going to harm and never, *ever* going to leave.

"Good night and good luck, Kitty," Galina Stepanova said. "I wish you were here."

Kitty's Medovik, Lina's Eight-Layer Honey Cloud Cake

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup granulated sugar

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup honey

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

3 large eggs, at room temperature, beaten with a fork

1 teaspoon baking soda

3 cups all-purpose flour, plus more to roll out the dough

1 cup heavy whipping cream

32 ounces sour cream

2 cups powdered sugar

Whole strawberries for decoration

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.
2. In a medium saucepan, heat the granulated sugar, honey, and butter over medium-low heat, whisking occasionally, until the sugar is melted, 5 to 7 minutes. Don't use high heat or the mixture may scorch on the bottom.
3. As soon as the sugar is dissolved, remove the mixture from the heat, and while it's still hot, add the beaten eggs in a slow, steady stream while whisking vigorously until all the eggs are incorporated (whisk constantly so you don't end up with scrambled eggs).
4. Whisk in the baking soda until no lumps remain, then fold in the flour $\frac{1}{2}$ cup at a time with a spatula until the dough reaches a clay consistency and doesn't stick to your hands.
5. Cut the dough into 8 equal pieces. On a well-floured surface, roll each piece out into a thin 9-inch circle about $\frac{1}{8}$ inch thick. Sprinkle the top with a little flour to keep the dough from sticking to the rolling pin. Place a 9-inch plate or the base from a springform pan

over the rolled-out dough and trace around it with a knife to make perfect circles. Keep the scraps for later.

6. Transfer 2 rounds of the dough to the prepared baking sheet and bake for 4 to 5 minutes, until golden. Transfer the rounds to a wire rack and let cool completely. Repeat with the remaining rounds.
7. Once the rounds are baked, place the dough scraps on the same baking sheet and bake for 4 to 5 minutes, until golden. Transfer to a wire rack and let cool completely, then crush the scraps with a rolling pin until you have fine crumbs.
8. To make the frosting, beat the heavy cream in a medium bowl until fluffy and stiff peaks form. In a large bowl, whisk together the sour cream and the powdered sugar. Fold the whipped cream into the sour cream mixture and refrigerate the frosting until ready to use.
9. To assemble the cake, spread about $\frac{1}{3}$ cup frosting on one cake round, then top with another round, alternating frosting and cake layers until all the cake rounds are used up. Don't skimp on the frosting since the cake needs to absorb some of the cream to become ultra soft and press the cake layers down gently as you go to keep the layers from having air gaps. Frost the top and sides with the remaining frosting.
10. Dust the top and sides with the cake crumbs, then cover the cake with plastic wrap and refrigerate overnight. The cake needs time to absorb some of the cream and soften, so be patient.
11. Decorate with whole strawberries and eat with friends of any nation, while listening to "Rags to Riches" by Tony Bennett.

American summers spun the whole year like a kaleidoscope, Grace thought. Sunshine and lengthening days tumbling every month into a new pattern, the bright jewel-like pieces that were the Briar Club women falling with every spin into fresh shapes.

May. The last petals of the famous D.C. cherry blossoms had long winnowed away over the Tidal Basin like rosy snow, tourists winnowing away with them. The Decoration Day picnic that had now become a tradition, Harland with an arm around Bea's waist as he flipped hamburgers

on the grill, telling them he'd gotten feelers from the International Organizations Division. "What on earth is that?" Bea asked, popping the top on a Coca-Cola bottle.

"Sounds like the dulllest thing in the world," Grace said, wandering up with a Schlitz in hand. She gave Harland a reassuring smile, in case he was worried about her saying anything to Bea about that one time in March.

"If it sounds dull, that means it's CIA," Harland said, somewhat glumly. "I don't know if I'm a fit for the intelligence bums—they're looser than the FBI, all Yale and Harvard types. The kind who wear loud ties and write novels in their spare time. Lefties and loonies, Mr. Hoover used to call 'em." But his face was thoughtful, and Grace decided to break her rule about not nudging.

"You didn't like the atmosphere with the feds. Maybe try the lefties and loonies?" She didn't ask about the mission, but he told them anyway, waving his burger flipper. Something about the Congress for Cultural Freedom, setting up artistic and intellectual projects with Agency funding. "A different way of fighting the Communist spread, maybe. Show those Moscow types there's a different way over here, better art and a freer exchange of ideas . . ."

Grace blinked. "Modern artists getting CIA funding?"

"Why not? At least it's *building* something with government funds, rather than tearing something down."

Grace supposed he had a point. Hadn't all those artists of the Renaissance taken money from popes and princes to paint their ceilings and frescoes? Who cared now about where the money had come from, as long as you could admire the genius?

"It could be a different kind of war. A war of the arts instead of an arms race." Harland sounded more thoughtful now, flipping burger patties from grill to plate. "Promote America over Moscow through culture instead of bombs . . ."

"My idea of culture is *Casey at the Bat*," Bea said with a laugh, slinging her lanky arm around Harland's neck.

Which is better than most Soviet poetry, Grace thought, carrying the plate of burger patties in toward the hungry crowd in the kitchen. Soviet art in general; *ugh*. All that cement-heavy poetic verse about the glory of hard work, all those dreadful State-approved landscapes studded with heroic factory welders. If Grace had tried to paint her flowered wall vine on an

apartment wall in Leningrad, her nearest neighbor would probably have reported her for anti-Soviet sentimentality. *My little Petrykivka daubings aren't hurting anyone here*, Mama had shouted when Papa objected to the the wall vine she'd recreated from her Kharkiv home, but she'd still had to paint it out, her mouth bitter. *Who's going to remember how to do these things when all our artists have been starved or shot?* she'd mumbled, wiping her eyes. Grace wondered what she'd think of her daughter's wall vine half a world away . . . "I say jump over to the Agency, G-man," Grace advised Harland over one shoulder. "And then we'll find you a new nickname!"

Summer's kaleidoscope spun again, almost before the Decoration Day picnic napkins were tossed away, or so it seemed to Grace, and it was June and she found herself glued to the Army-McCarthy hearings on television. Watching that dark-haired, half-shaven, sweaty-looking thug bluster and threaten, wondering how on earth he'd ever conceived such a bee in his bonnet about the Red Menace when he could have been kissing cousins with Joe Stalin. If there was ever a man who would have *thrived* in a police state, it was McCarthy. "He looks like a hairy old *pöcs*," Reka grunted, watching the trials at Grace's side as they smoked their way through a pack of Lucky Strikes, and later she invited Grace to see the portrait she'd done: McCarthy in savage abstract strokes of black and red, more ape than man, teeth nearly bared across the table. "I'm calling it *Decency*," Reka said with her feral Hungarian grin, and Grace grinned back—that moment during the hearings when they'd both cheered, when the lawyer opposite Tail Gunner Joe lost his temper and snapped, "Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?"

McCarthy is done, Grace had thought in that shocked, televised moment. *He's done, and it was on television for the whole world to see*. He was done, or soon would be—and maybe she'd be safe here.

Another kaleidoscope spin into July, summer heat and Fourth of July sparklers and Bea—victorious from signing a nineteen-year-old southpaw pitcher to the Senators—corralling them all onto the sandlot for another game as the Briarwood Belles. "We don't have Mrs. Sutherland to play center this year," Bea complained. "Where'd she go off to, anyway?" Claire replying with a white, set face, "Last fall her husband unexpectedly decided to move the family back to Virginia to focus on the home county in his run-up to the election. They haven't been back since." Grace looking at Claire's

immobile face, remembering the way she'd gone to her room for a while sometime around Halloween, and not come out for days. Maybe, Grace thought, she should break her rule about never nudging and apply another nudge here.

"Any word from the lovely Mrs. Sutherland?" she murmured to Claire, helping her do up her borrowed catcher's chest protector. "I do hope she didn't have any recurrence of the injuries of last fall." She still thought about the shoe marks on that long torso . . . Grace hadn't thought she could be surprised by the idea of husbands hitting their wives (Russian men tended to have heavy hands; even her good-tempered papa hadn't been above dealing out a smack when Mama got even vaguely critical of the latest Party directive, and Kirill had certainly been free with his slaps behind the scenes) but Sydney Sutherland's black-bruised body had shocked her profoundly.

"No," Claire said in set tones. "She's— She's all right, she just can't get away right now. Her in-laws swept in for a surprise visit on Halloween and by morning everyone was urging a trip back to Loudon County. And then they just *stayed*. There's a whole clan of Sutherlands there. A Klan with a K," she muttered, face looking bleak, and Grace made a mental note to look for newspaper mentions of the young Mr. Sutherland who was so favorably tipped, him and his white teeth and his Bronze Star, for a House seat. He *deserved* to lose his wife to a redheaded con artist who cooked potato pancakes. (It hadn't remotely surprised Grace, learning Claire had those particular inclinations. Her training had stressed that you had to be willing to flirt with anyone of any sex if it got you the answers you wanted. *American women are perverts*, Kirill had huffed, personally offended that a woman might respond more to Grace's smiles than his. Grace had rolled her eyes on the inside. Kirill could turn *any* female off men for good.)

August, baking summer heat bringing a new addition to the house, because Fliss's husband was finally home. "It's been so long," Fliss kept saying, eyes welling. Nearly a year after the end of the conflict in Korea before her Dan was finally demobbed or cut loose or whatever the army called it, one of the last doctors to be sent home from Japan to San Diego; Fliss had met him there with Angela in tow but come back alone: "He's been retasked to Balboa to fill in for another doctor injured in a car crash." She had sighed, passing English shortbread around Grace's green-walled room. "*Another* month or two apart, but supposedly it's the last delay." She

dashed away tears but at least they were frustrated tears, angry tears, not those terrible leaden sobs that had torn out of her when Angela was younger. Better angry than despairing.

“Are you two moving right away, Bubble and Squeak?” Grace had asked, already dreading her loss, but Fliss looked almost shy.

“Well—I have this hope that he could stay with me here until we figure out where we’re headed next. I just don’t want to leave yet . . . Do you think you could help me talk Mrs. Nilsson around?” And Grace extolled the virtues of having a doctor in the house until Doilies rethought her position on *no men*, and it felt like no time at all before the entire Briar Club was watching Dr. Dan’s cab pull up at the curb, his lanky limbs unfolding from the back seat. He seemed slightly bemused to be embraced by so many women he’d never met before, but he rallied to grill some Japanese *yakitori* on Grace’s hot plate while Fliss slung Angela over one hip and talked about the future. “Once Angela’s in kindergarten I’m starting back at least part-time as a nurse—” Grace wondered idly if the English girl ever thought about that night over the border at the Chickland Club, the riot where Grace had stabbed a man under the jaw when he came at them. Had Fliss seen the gleam of the little steel spike in her fist?—a blade hardly bigger than a toothpick, which Grace kept in an innocent lipstick tube in her pocket. She was no assassin who could crush skulls with her bare hands, but she’d had training in hand-to-hand fighting; she knew how to keep weapons about you hidden and innocuous. Grace could feel the little spike in its tube in her pocket now as she took her plate of *yakitori* skewers from Dr. Dan—sharp enough to puncture an eye or tear open a jugular or push a drop of poison through a shirtsleeve. Not that she planned to use it for any of those things, but did it ever hurt to be prepared? She still had her old pistol, too, oiled and loaded, taped under one of her dresser drawers . . .

September, Lina’s shriek splitting the entire house: “I got in, *I got in*—” Her glasses fogging up as she got off the telephone, flinging her arms around Pete. “I’m in the Pillsbury Bake-Off, I’m invited to New York!” Pete swung her so high her saddle shoes practically scraped the ceiling, Grace got the next hug, Bea leaped around whooping, and Mrs. Nilsson came out to see what all the ruckus was about.

“The Pillsbury Bake-Off?” Crossly. “Don’t be ridiculous, Lina, you’re not going to New *York*, it’s completely out of the question.”

Pete went red as a fire truck, clearly about to detonate like the shells Grace had watched German Junkers drop down the center of the Nevsky Prospect like a string of exploding pearls. She touched his arm and cut in quickly: “Mrs. Nilsson, have you thought about the advantages here? Our Lina in the Bake-Off, only one hundred competitors chosen from everyone who applied all over the country! You know the first place winner among the juniors stands to win three thousand dollars?”

Mrs. Nilsson’s nose twitched, but she continued to look fretful. “Lina won’t *win*, she never wins anything.”

Grace could have cheerfully stuffed the bitch in her own icebox and sunk it into the Volga. Where were the secret police with their pliers and cement blocks when you needed them? “Even if she doesn’t place, Mrs. Nilsson, all the entrants win prizes just for competing. A hundred dollars cash—”

“A Hamilton Beach mixer,” Nora said.

“And a brand-new Stratoliner push-button range,” Bea finished. The whole house was expert by now in the Pillsbury Bake-Off competition rules. “Didn’t you say you wanted to update the old kitchen range here?”

That nose twitch again. “A Stratoliner?”

“You can update this entire kitchen on your daughter’s back!” Grace cooed, holding her smile steady as Doilies blinked. And later that night Lina tiptoed up to Grace’s room, jubilant.

“She says I can go!”

Grace kissed the top of her head. “Of course she did.” *Kitty, you’d be proud—you never made it to New York, but your cake is going . . .*

And then it was October again, bluster in the air and leaves starting to scamper down the street like dried flakes of gold, and half a year had gone and Grace sat in her windowsill with Red in her lap, every bit as fascinated as her first day here by what she could see out her window. She’d never intended to stay so long, not in a bilious lime-green room the size of a coat closet with a landlady who snooped. Grace had assumed she’d move on to somewhere bigger, more anonymous—Washington had just been the first and farthest train ticket available from the San Diego depot when she packed her things (including a certain manila folder) and shed Kirill and her mission and her whole espionage-constructed life.

But here she still was, and the Briar Club was coming in an hour: Reka’s turn to cook, and she was making *paprikas* on the hot plate and talking lately about a new set of abstract portraits she was sketching out for a

series. Wasn't she good enough for a show of her own? Reka didn't think so, but maybe she could be *encouraged* just a little, to think bigger for her work. Not that Grace liked to nudge—

You do too like to nudge, she scolded herself with an inward laugh. *You love to nudge!* She sometimes thought of moving on, finding new horizons, but if she wasn't here, who was going to feed and fix this lunatic grab bag of friends she'd somehow collected? Maybe that was the other side effect of having survived starvation: it left you wanting to feed people, feed *everyone*, feed them and fix them. She hadn't even realized it was what she was craving, back when she walked into a houseful of people who had nothing in common but an address, but who all needed feeding and fixing.

"The way Mom's haranguing Lina now about the Bake-Off, I could just kill her." Pete sighed, first up the stairs as usual. "She's got Lina practicing that dratted cake every other day now, going on and on about how she'd at least better place third and nab the thousand-dollar prize if she can't manage first place. Lina's *worrying* about it now and I want her to enjoy that dratted contest, not go to pieces over it! Mom's going to have her in shreds by the time we're all in New York."

Grace beamed as she passed him a plate of sandwiches, loving the dear sweet earnest kid to bits, loving them all. "Leave everything to me."

Poisons hadn't been a large part of Grace's training as a mole—she hadn't been sent to murder anyone at Edwards Air Force Base, after all, just inveigle diagnostics and logistics out of them for the Bell X-2. But the use of certain quick compounds to gripe the guts, that was a standard tool of the trade. What better way to get access to a man's office or a woman's handbag than if they had to suddenly excuse themselves to the bathroom with a churning stomach?

Simplicity itself to drop a double dose into Mrs. Nilsson's orange juice at breakfast, the morning she was supposed to take Lina to New York.

"We can't miss that train," the horrid woman wailed through the door of the downstairs bathroom, the one she refused to let any of the boarders use even if the line upstairs was five-deep. Grace smiled at the sound of retching, not feeling one drop of guilt. Doilies had already made Lina cry that morning, scolding her not to frown when she mixed her cake because judges wouldn't award anything to a cross-eyed little girl who scowled. "If

Lina misses registration today she won't be allowed to compete! I won't get that Stratoliner—"

"Sugar pie, don't you fret a moment," Grace cooed. "Pete and I will take Lina."

"He doesn't need to go to New York! He has work to do—" Words cut off by the sound of more vomiting. Claire and Bea peeked around the corner with *How's it going?* expressions.

"Then Pete will stay here and take care of you," Grace lied. "You rest up and let me handle everything in New York!"

Some more token harping from the other side of the door but really, Doilies wasn't going anywhere when she was vomiting like this, and she knew it. Besides, as Grace pointed out, the train ticket was covered by Pillsbury so she wouldn't lose money by staying behind.

"Quick, before she changes her mind—" And they were all piling out the door, Grace pausing to scoop Mrs. Nilsson's address book off her bedside table and stuff it in her handbag, Pete tossing Lina's traveling case over one shoulder and running down the steps to hail a cab. It was going to take at least three cabs to get them all to Union Station: the entire Briar Club (minus Arlene) was escorting Lina to the Bake-Off. Even Harland and Joe were coming along. "You don't all have to come," Pete had protested at first, even though his face flushed with pleasure. "It's such a long way."

"Nonsense, of course we're coming." All the contestants would have cheering sections of devoted family and Lina needed one, too, especially if her cheering section largely wasn't composed of blood relatives. Blood was overrated, anyway, Grace mused, helping Reka along with a hand to the old woman's elbow as they spilled out of the cabs onto the steps of Union Station. The only blood relative *she* had left after the Leningrad siege lifted and the war was over was Uncle Tolya, who was something very high up in the NKVD (the KGB now, Grace reminded herself), far too high up to have anything to do with her side of the family . . . Except when he realized Grace spoke near-perfect English and might possibly be useful.

"It must be from your mother," he'd said carelessly, dropping in without warning shortly after the war was over, not bothering to offer any condolences. "She was an interpreter of some sort, wasn't she? Useful, very useful. I've put your name in for screening, language skills like that are much needed."

Grace, still struggling back from a bout of pneumonia that nearly killed her and only up to ninety-eight pounds from her siege days' worst of eighty-seven, had thought he meant she'd end up an interpreter herself. Fine—better than working in an ammunition factory the rest of her life. She'd never thought in a thousand years that a year of screening and interviews would lead to being selected for the deep-cover program. Such an invitation had no possible answer, Uncle Tolya had made it clear, except *I would be delighted to serve*.

"Reflect well on me, Galina," he'd said before Grace was shipped off, a glint of warning in his eye. "You reflect well on me, I reflect well on you. It's the Soviet way."

I'm half Ukrainian, you bastard, Grace thought but didn't say, *and that's the only half worth counting*. Uncle Tolya had already condescended to say she was very lucky her Ukrainian side hadn't disqualified her from the start. Just think, he'd probably be hauled out and shot if it got back to her superiors that she'd defected . . . frankly, that didn't bother Grace one bit.

"What are you thinking about?" Nora asked as they settled into their compartment, barely in time to grab their seats before the train began to rumble down the tracks.

"Family." Grace smiled. "The acquired kind."

"My favorite kind," Nora agreed with feeling, and Grace sat back in her seat as the train left the station, watching America roll past.

Thank goodness Reka knew New York City like the back of her hand, or else the Briarwood contingent would have been entirely lost. "Follow me," the old woman barked as they piled off the train into the chaos of Grand Central, laying about her with the cane she'd recently begun using (less because she needed the support, Grace thought, and more because she liked having something to jab people with). "If anyone gets in your way, use your elbows. Don't make eye contact; New Yorkers hate eye contact. Last ditch, shout *move*. MOVE," she snapped at the man in her path, whacking his shin with her stick until he skittered out of their way. None of the Briarwood ladies listened; they were all too busy gaping, Grace included. Washington was a sleepy little burg compared to this glittering metropolis stacked with skyscrapers and teeming with life.

"Miss Lina Nilsson?" A balding man in a smart suit held up a sign with the Pillsbury logo, and they made their way toward him. "Welcome to New

York. If you will follow me, we'll escort your party to the Waldorf . . .”

“Get used to the high life, sis,” Pete said, seeing his sister look petrified. “You’re living it up now!”

A couple of taxis took them all through the city, and Grace could hardly peel her nose off the glass, seeing those towers of stone glide past one after the other. Everything so *new*, so undamaged—it gave her a twinge of sadness to imagine how the city of her birth compared: tragic, destroyed Leningrad with its sacked palaces, its crumbling tenement blocks. A kind of grim optimism was baked into Soviet society; as long as Grace could remember she’d been told, *Look at the world around you not as it is, but as it will be—as we will make it!* But as she looked at New York City all she could think was how far, how goddamn far Leningrad still had to go.

It could be like this someday, she thought, staring up at the gleaming castle of the Waldorf-Astoria as they all piled out of their cabs. *Leningrad could be beautiful and modern and shining*. So could starved, downtrodden Kharkiv, the other half of her heritage that she’d never seen—and never would. She knew she’d never go, even if everything east of the Berlin Wall became a paradise. She’d given too much blood, shed too many tears, buried too many ghosts to ever go back east again.

A flurry of activity at the long, gleaming hotel desk as they checked in, the Briar Club ladies arguing who would share rooms with whom: Joe and Pete and Harland were bunking together, but Claire refused to bunk with Reka because she snored, and while they scrapped that out Lina stood looking utterly overwhelmed at the huge bustling lobby, the enormous vases of flowers, the Pillsbury logo prominently displayed everywhere. Grace saw a telephone and veered off to make a certain call—pulling Mrs. Nilsson’s address book out of her handbag, she flipped through until she found the number she wanted, a New Jersey number. “Mr. John Nilsson, please,” she said crisply as a woman’s voice answered.

“He’s not in at the moment—he rents my upstairs apartment. I can take a message—”

“Yes. Please inform Mr. Nilsson that both his children are just across the river, in New York City. His daughter is, in fact, competing in the Pillsbury Bake-Off. At her age, it’s a real achievement. It would be a nice gesture on Mr. Nilsson’s part if he were to turn up and show a little fatherly support.”

Grace hung up and went back to Lina, who stood looking intimidated as the man who’d met them at the station checked his way down a clipboard.

“—opportunity this afternoon, Miss Nilsson, to begin meeting your fellow contestants. A gala dinner this evening will kick things off—”

“Gala?” Lina whispered.

“—and after breakfast tomorrow, orientation. You will be allowed to see the ballroom where the competition will take place and make any final requests as to your *mise en place*—”

“My what?”

“—dinner tomorrow evening as well as entertainment, though I advise an early night as the bakers are expected outside the ballroom the following morning at the stroke of eight—”

Lina was shutting down; Grace could feel it. Pete stepped in and took the clipboard. “Just give me the rest of the itinerary,” he said firmly as Grace bent down to Lina.

“What is it?” she whispered, looking around the lobby. Where had Fliss gone off to . . .

“A gala?” Lina whispered. “A *dinner*? I don’t have anything to wear. Mom said my old dimity would be just fine, no need to buy anything new . . .”

“I know she did.” Of course Mrs. Nilsson had thought it *just fine* to send her twelve-year-old daughter to New York City for the biggest event of her life in a too-short hand-me-down frock. *You cheap cow, I hope you’re still hunched over the toilet vomiting*, Grace thought. “About the dress—” she began.

“The dress matter is dealt with!” Fliss wriggled past a cluster of excited bakers exclaiming over the hotel in Georgia drawls, managing not to drop the bulging garment bag she’d hauled all the way from Washington. Pete had asked her what was in it, and she and Grace had exchanged conspiratorial glances. Now she turned to Lina with a beam. “Grace got me your measurements on the sly, and I did a whip-round through all Dan’s cousins who have daughters when we visited his family in Boston two weeks ago—”

“Knew I could count on you, Bubble and Squeak,” Grace approved.

“—so I have quite the selection for you, Lina,” Fliss finished with a flash of dimples.

“Selection?” Lina whispered, a smile starting to creep back over her face.

Fliss unfolded the garment bag. “Pink satin, blue taffeta, or yellow organdy?”

“This is agony,” Bea said. “This is worse than watching a no-hitter.”

“This is worse than a stakeout,” Harland muttered. “At least on a stakeout someone might shoot someone.”

This is worse than sweating through NKVD screening, Grace thought but didn’t say. The Briar Club stood clustered at the side of the Waldorf-Astoria ballroom, utterly transformed from its usual elegance: the walls were hung with red-white-and-blue bunting, an enormous banner blared “WELCOME TO THE SIXTH ANNUAL PILLSBURY BAKE-OFF!,” and row after row of Stratoline ranges with accompanying refrigerators and countertop stations crowded the dance floor. One hundred bakers were baking away in a frenzy: the dinners and speeches and sightseeing were now behind them, and the Bake-Off had begun.

Halfway up the very last aisle of baking stations on the ballroom’s south side was Number Ninety-Two, this year’s youngest contestant: Lina Nilsson of Washington, D.C., whipping sugar, honey, and butter together like a dervish.

“I can’t watch,” Nora moaned.

“She’s out of the gate strong,” Claire said, ripping at a thumbnail. “She’s already on her second cake.” The contestants had exactly six hours to make their recipe twice: one for the judges to taste, one to be photographed.

Dr. Dan, tallest of them all and even taller with Angela perched on his shoulders, strained to see into the oven as Lina took a peek inside. “Nice height in the pans. Angie, honey, can you see those cakes? Do they look brown?”

“Brown,” Angela agreed, hanging on to two handfuls of her father’s hair.

“She’ll have a good crumb.” Joe nodded, fingers tapping out a syncopated jazz beat on his thigh.

They were all experts in Lina’s eight-layer honey cloud cake by now. “You could do this in your sleep,” Grace had said this morning, as the women all gathered in Lina’s room to help her get ready. Fliss had hooked her into a weightless confection of pale yellow organdy that made Lina look like she’d been frosted in buttercream; Claire tied her sash; Nora curled her hair; Pete sat to one side buffing her gleaming patent leather shoes. Lina herself sat in the middle looking so sick Reka sat poised at her side with a wastebasket in case she threw up what little breakfast she’d been able to choke down, and Bea paced back and forth saying things like “You just

gotta control the game one inning at a time, Lina. Ingredient by ingredient, pitch by pitch—” until Claire threatened to cram the curling iron down her throat.

“You could make this cake in your sleep,” Grace kept saying, lump in her throat. Lina didn’t really look like her sister, but how could she not think of Kitty at a time like this? “You could make this cake in a coma!” and Lina managed to look only mildly petrified as they escorted her down to the ballroom and she took her place with the other contestants. They’d all cheered their heads off when she strode in, four abreast with three other junior bakers, cameras flashing, band playing “When the Saints Go Marching In.”

But now there wasn’t anything they could do except watch in agony as Lina flew around her baking station like a buttercream fairy in a Pillsbury Bake-Off apron.

“She should have gone with an easier cake,” Reka growled. “Those biscuit layers need to sit overnight if she wants the best texture—”

“Her first cake is already set and refrigerating.” Claire’s fingers drummed on the strap of her pocketbook. “She’ll give the judges that one to taste—”

They all moaned as Lina dropped one of her layers and it cracked in half, but she calmly pieced it back together with sour cream frosting as the clock ticked agonizingly into the Bake-Off’s last hour.

“She hasn’t left herself much time to decorate,” Fliss said tersely, her English voice clipped, a BBC broadcaster reporting on a wartime air raid. “That could cost her.”

“It’s not going to cost her.” Pete was pacing back and forth like a horse in a box stall. “C’mon c’mon c’mon . . .”

The air was a jumble of smells by now as a hundred fragrant dishes hit countertops all across the ballroom: butter and sugar, chicken and chocolate, savory and sweet. Lina’s hands flew as she decorated the top of her cake with fresh strawberries. The bell rang out—“Time is up, bakers! Please step away so your entries may be collected—” Lina pushed one last strawberry into a frosting swirl and collapsed against her Stratoliner, exhausted. They all stood watching like anxious new parents as Lina’s cakes were ushered away to the sequestered judges. They couldn’t swarm the ballroom; they had to wait for Lina to make her way to them. She looked like she’d just run a race: all the curl was falling out of her hair, flour dusted the lenses of her glasses, and that round little face so often set

in sulky lines was absolutely radiant. “I did it,” she called, pulling off her egg-daubed apron and waving it over her head. “Did you see me? *I did it!*”

“You didn’t even place,” Mrs. Nilsson sniffed when her daughter and entourage swanned back through the doors of Briarwood House in utter triumph. “All that work and you didn’t even place?”

“I still say she was robbed,” Grace said indignantly. “Those Caramel Cream Sandwich Cookies that took second place did *not* look better than Lina’s cake—”

“And that Teen Bean Bake that took third!” Nora huffed. “That girl’s mother was a prizewinner in the first Bake-Off, so you just *know* there was favoritism!” Indignant looks from the Briar Club, who had lambasted the judges all the way home on the train. Lina had been as serene as a water lily floating on a pond, though, clutching her bag, which now held her official Bake-Off apron, a certificate stating that her recipe would be included in the annual Bake-Off cookbook, and a brand-new tooled leather address book bought for her by Grace, in which were the names and addresses of about fifty new friends. *Your cake looks scrumptious*, the fifteen-year-old junior division winner from Centralia, Kansas, had gushed, coming up to Lina after the results were announced. *Much more difficult than my Rosy Apple Whirls! Want to write and trade recipes?*

Lina was still glowing.

“Well, at least we get the Stratoliner and the Hamilton mixer out of it.” Mrs. Nilsson sighed, looking a little wan from her bout of vomiting but clearly full of her usual vinegar. “What about that one-hundred-dollar check?”

“Turns out those were only for the top contestants,” Grace lied smoothly. She’d already handed Lina’s certified check from Pillsbury to Pete and said, *Deposit that in an account for your sister and say nothing to your mother!* He’d grinned like a fiend and said, *Already planning on it.*

“I don’t know why you didn’t mention you were *all* going to New York,” Arlene sniffed, swishing her skirts a little disconsolately. “I would have liked to go! Y’all even got in the paper!”

“Lina saved the clipping—” Everyone crowded around to look, and Grace took advantage of the moment to reach into her own handbag, slip Mrs. Nilsson’s address book out, and stash it under some papers on the hall table. Pete and Lina’s father hadn’t shown up at the Bake-Off, and that

disappointed Grace. When she decided to meddle and nudge, she wanted it to pay off. But there was nothing on earth even a defected spy could do to make a father care about his children.

“I’m going to frame that for your room, Lina-kins,” Pete was saying. Photo coverage of the Bake-Off had mostly been of Mrs. Bernard A. Koteen, who had won the grand prize with her Open Sesame Pie, but one photographer had snapped a shot of Lina throwing her arms around Grace, both of them beaming, and run it with the caption: “Grace March of Washington, D.C., congratulates the Bake-Off’s youngest contestant: Lina Nilsson, 12.” Grace smiled, watching Pete handle the clipping with such care. She’d never even seen the photographer, who must have gotten her name from someone else.

She honestly didn’t think a thing about it—that picture. She remembered that later in utter horror, how happy she’d been. And how careless.

“Thanksgiving dinner for nine,” Grace said, making her list. Normally the Briar Club did an abbreviated celebration on the holiday—Mrs. Nilsson served a grudging late lunch of dried-out turkey breast and canned mashed potatoes and packaged rolls to Pete, Lina, and whoever among the boarders wasn’t visiting relatives, before going out for her usual Thursday evening bridge game. Grace had wondered, her first year at Briarwood House, what kind of bridge club met on Thanksgiving, and then she actually *met* the harridans: the meanest cluster of tightfisted crones imaginable, far more interested in making a few dollars at the card table than throwing a turkey in the oven for whatever family they hadn’t managed to alienate. Usually people like that just sat like a bump on a log making everyone else’s Thanksgiving unpleasant, Grace thought, so she made a point every year after of assuring Doilies that of *course* she shouldn’t stint herself of her usual Thursday game—and then as soon as she was gone, everyone trooped up to the top of the house for pumpkin pie and cider.

This year, though, Grace felt something more was called for. Hardly anyone in-house was going off to visit family for Thanksgiving of ’54, so she began planning: a full dinner for nine. What else was that new Stratoliner range in the kitchen for?

“It’s Lina’s oven, really,” Grace had pointed out when Doilies complained about the idea of the kitchen being taken over by ten, even after being told she didn’t have to do any of the shopping or cooking. “And Lina

says I can use it.” That shut the woman up; she went off muttering and Grace started working out with a pencil just how big a turkey you needed to feed nine. She loved Thanksgiving. Anyone who had survived nine hundred days of starvation during a siege was going to swoon for a holiday that revolved solely around food. No need to wrap presents, no need to put up decorations, just pack in all the pie and Parker House rolls you could without exploding. “Let’s see, it’ll be me, Joe, Pete, Lina, Nora, Reka, Bea, Harland, Claire . . .”

“I wouldn’t mind coming,” Arlene volunteered, looking petulant and a little bit sad at the same time.

“You aren’t going back to Texas for the holidays?” Grace asked brightly. The Huppmobile was not a car anyone wanted parked at the Thanksgiving table.

“I haven’t really . . . ever since, you know. The town invasion at Lampasas, the war games? I told you about that.”

Grace remembered well: celebrating the end of the conflict in Korea with a bit too much gin, the ugly gleam in Arlene’s eye as she talked about American soldiers simulating a Soviet invasion in their own heartland. “I thought you found it so exciting,” she couldn’t help adding with an edge to her voice. *Trust me, you wouldn’t enjoy the real thing.*

“Well, yes and no. I haven’t really felt comfortable going home since.” Arlene started chewing her thumbnail, then caught herself, giving a quick hard shrug instead. “All the girls who managed to marry soldiers from that time just lord it over *everyone*. And you should see how much damage got left behind—soldiers chasing the turkeys on our ranch for fun, laughing when they piled up and began clawing at one another. Good American boys! I can hardly think what state actual Russkies would have left the place in.”

You don’t have to imagine it, Grace thought. *Just look at Poland.* “Well, I’m sure your hometown’s back to normal by now, Arlene. Won’t your parents miss you?”

A brief pause. “You don’t want me at Thanksgiving, do you?” Arlene asked flatly. “Nobody does.”

“Mmm,” Grace murmured. “Well, you haven’t made much of an effort to be liked around here, have you?”

“Claire’s a bitch and somehow everyone’s still friends with her. Reka’s old and mean, and people like her too.” Arlene’s face was tight—had been

since the Bake-Off, Grace thought. Apparently that hilarious group jaunt to New York had finally hammered home to the Huppmobile that no one in the house where she had lived for nearly five years even remotely liked her.

“What’s wrong with *me*? Why does no one like *me*?”

“Well, you were very offensive about Mr. Cormier when I invited him to dinner,” Grace pointed out somewhat acidly. “And you cost Reka her library job out of spite.”

“I never said *anything* to your friend’s face—”

“That hardly—”

“—and I didn’t know Reka would lose her job when I told the librarian! I apologized to Reka, *years* ago, and she *hated* that job. And she still isn’t very nice, and neither is Claire, and I don’t see why they still get to be—”

“Reka might be old and cross, but she still pitched in for Lina’s glasses and makes us all *paprikas* and *haluski* and drew sketches of Fliss to include in her letters to Dan in Tokyo. Claire may be a bitch, but she watched over me while I was”—*drunk*—“sick, and babysat Angela for Fliss, and helped Pete put up the greenhouse.” Grace raised her eyebrows. “When have you ever pitched in for anyone around here, Arlene?”

“I made Red Crest Salad that one time,” Arlene muttered. “And, well, I’m sure I put in a quarter for Lina’s glasses . . .”

You didn’t, Grace thought, but found herself adding Arlene’s name to the dinner list with a slight internal sigh. She just didn’t have it in her to leave anyone out in the cold on a holiday. “Maybe you can bring sweet potato pie . . .” Thanksgiving dinner for ten.

And then: “Dan and I aren’t heading to Boston for the holiday after all,” Fliss said, sounding relieved. “Apparently his parents are quarreling, and *everyone’s* finding an excuse not to come to their house while they burn the turkey and throw martini glasses at each other’s heads. Count us in!”

Dinner for thirteen!

And then came a telephone call a week before the holiday.

“Mrs. March?” a man’s gruff voice said. “John Nilsson here. I just got back from a business trip. I missed the message you left with my landlady about the kids.”

“You’ve missed a lot more about them than a message,” Grace said coolly, looking down the corridor for Pete and Lina. One at work and the other at school, thank goodness. “They’re wonderful children. I’ve boarded

in their house the past four years, and I like to think I know them very well.” *Better than you*, her tone said.

“What business is it of yours?” Bristling down the line, just a little.

“You should have showed up to the Bake-Off, Mr. Nilsson.” Layering her voice with that gentle hint of reproach, that pause that just invited the guilty to rush and fill it.

He was silent awhile, on the other end of the line. Grace let the silence bloom, curling the telephone cord around her finger. “They are better off without me,” he said at last, very quietly. “I’m . . . not a good influence.”

Normally Grace was inclined to take men at their word if they said they were bad fathers, but she thought she heard the echo of someone else’s words there. Mrs. Nilsson, maybe. And she couldn’t help but remember thirteen-year-old Pete’s face glowing as he recounted how, in the years before the war, his father taught him to make Swedish meatballs, took him out to play catch, tossed little Lina high in the air till she giggled. “Did you know your wife made your son drop out of school?”

The man’s voice shifted on a dime from uneasily apologetic to outraged. “Wait. *What?*”

Grace made a decision on the spot. Maybe the man *wasn’t* a good influence, but exactly how much good was Doilies doing her children?

“What are you doing for Thanksgiving, Mr. Nilsson?” And she hung up a few minutes later thinking, *Dinner for fourteen!*

Thanksgiving morning. Grace was decorating the dining room table by nine, making the dreary room with its flocked wallpaper festive with branches of autumn leaves she’d collected at Prospect Park, wondering if she could persuade Mrs. Nilsson to let her shake the place up with some sunny new curtains and fresh flowers. It had taken her four years to gradually brighten the stairwell with its four-story *Petrykivka*-inspired wall vine, the corridor with new colorful vases and refurbished carpet, the kitchen with its window boxes full of marigolds, and the front room with its glistening suncatchers—maybe she could talk her way into bringing some light into the dining room too, make it a place people *wanted* to eat rather than something that should be kept under glass. Lina began banging around the kitchen by ten, whisking pie tins like a seasoned line cook at the Crispy Biscuit. “I’ll make anything but another honey cloud cake,” she said airily when Grace finished up the dining room so it looked like an autumn glade

and turned her attention to the turkey. “I’m trying a new piecrust recipe Helen gave me—”

“Who’s Helen?” Grace eyed the turkey where it rested on the counter, wondering how she was going to truss the slimy thing without getting poultry blood on her red taffeta dress. Was turkey-trussing the sort of thing you could shove off on a man, because it involved an enormous hunk of meat? Or did American men only consent to help with meals if a grill was involved? Some customs about this country she would *never* understand.

“Helen Beckman from Iowa, the Bake-Off second-place winner in the junior division.” Lina had been exchanging round-robin letters with a whole cluster of Bake-Off contestants for the past month, to Grace’s delight.

“Helen says if you want to avoid a soggy bottom crust . . .”

Lina chattered, Grace trussed, Pete came in on a gust of icy autumn wind, blowing on his hands. “Mom’s off to her bridge party; she let me drive her with the weather looking so bad. It’s going to be an all-day tournament—”

Grace sent up a little Thanksgiving prayer of gratitude. The kitchen was really bustling now, Nora in a slim green dress and her reheeled Cuban pumps pulling down the good crystal punch bowl—“Are you sure we shouldn’t just carry plates up to eat on the floor in Grace’s room? It won’t be a Briar Club dinner without those green walls all around us!” Grace got the turkey in the oven and turned her attention to the stewpot; Claire was stirring up punch and spiking it liberally with rum. “Grace, what’s that you’re stirring?”

“Sort of a beef-and-leftovers soup. Barley, potatoes, beef, some chopped pickles. Trust me, it’s tasty.” Grace had decided to make Kirill’s mother’s *rassolnik*. The woman had produced a bastard of a son, but her thick, briny *rassolnik* was top-notch—excellent for curing hangovers, and there were bound to be some of those tomorrow . . .

Knock knock. Joe arriving with a bottle of bourbon, dropping a kiss on the back of Grace’s neck. “Thought you’d spend the holiday with your girlfriend,” Grace said, laughing.

“Eh, we broke up. You look about as mouthwatering as a piece of cherry pie,” he said, appreciating the red dress with its long tight sleeves and nipped-in waist, and Grace twirled so her full skirts flared. Stylish clothes; something else she’d never tire of. The thrill of having a closetful of dresses that had never been owned or worn by someone else first; it sated her soul nearly as much as her pyramid of canned food . . .

Knock knock. Harland coming in with two bottles of sherry, which promptly disappeared down everyone's throats as Claire mashed potatoes and Pete made stuffed celery. "Someone dig Reka out of her room," Bea called, opening Joe's bourbon. "She's painting again and she's lost track of what inning it is." Grace dashed up the stairs and hammered on Reka's door awhile; the old woman answered looking sour as ever, with green paint under her nails. "Dinnertime already?" she growled. "Just as well, I'm stuck." She waved at the latest canvas propped on her easel, and Grace made a *May I look?* gesture. "Feel free; it's terrible."

Grace surveyed the canvas: an abstract blur of the Briar Club on their sightseeing tour in New York. The day before the Bake-Off they'd gone to see the Statue of Liberty, even though Reka had grouched about the tacky tourist predictability of it all. They'd all gaped up at the statue, serene copper-green Lady Liberty, and Grace had gotten a little choked up and also a little giggly. *Give me your tired, your poor, your defected spies . . .*

Reka's painting showed them all in a line before the water, backs to the viewer as they looked at the bold green slash of the statue pointing at the sky. Grace and her friends drawn in abstract scribbles of paint, more implied than depicted—yet she knew every one of them at a glance. Claire's bright hair, Bea's arm winding up like a pitcher's as she skipped a stone across the water, her own red skirt in the center . . . The painting was bright and unabashed, both abstract and specific, a portrait and a snapshot at the same time. "It's good, Attila," Grace said quietly.

"It's complete *szar*," Reka retorted, but Grace could tell she was pleased. Handing the old woman her cane so she could hobble downstairs and beeline for the stuffed celery, Grace arrowed for Harland and drew him off. She was definitely *not* going to miss the chance for the newest member of the CIA's International Organizations Division to take a look at Reka's work for recommendation. "Weren't you saying something about there being government funding for modern art, sort of as an anti-Soviet protest? Let me tell you what our Reka's been working on . . ."

Knock knock. "Uh, John Nilsson," the thickset man on the doorstep said, eyes already hunting beyond Grace for his children. All going according to plan, Grace thought as she waved him inside. Thanksgiving dinner for fourteen, Briarwood House positively preening itself with holiday goodwill now that the last guest had arrived.

And then, three more knocks in a row.

Kirill's Rassolnik

1 pound lean beef, cut into bite-size pieces
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup barley, rinsed
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoon salt, plus more to taste
1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups diced pickles (about 6 baby pickles or 3 large pickles)
4 tablespoons olive oil
3 medium potatoes, diced
2 carrots, 1 thinly sliced and 1 grated
1 onion, finely diced
2 celery sticks, finely sliced
1 tablespoon tomato paste or ketchup
2 bay leaves
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
2 tablespoons dill, plus more for serving (optional)
Sour cream

1. In a large pot, bring 12 cups water and the beef, barley, and salt to a light boil and cook, partially covered, for 30 minutes. Skim off any impurities that rise to the top to keep the soup clear.
2. In a medium skillet, sauté the pickles with 1 tablespoon of the oil for a few minutes on medium-high heat. Add the pickles, potatoes, and carrot slices to the soup pot and cook for an additional 10 minutes while making the mirepoix, aka zazharka.
3. To make the zazharka, place the remaining 3 tablespoons oil and the onion in a large skillet and sauté for 2 minutes. Add the grated carrot and the celery and continue to sauté until the carrots are soft, about 5 minutes. Stir the tomato paste or ketchup into the skillet and add this mixture to the soup pot.

4. Add the bay leaves, pepper, and dill, if using, to the soup pot. Season with additional salt. Continue to simmer for another 2 minutes, or until the potatoes are fully cooked and can be easily pieced with a fork.
5. Serve with sour cream and extra dill, if desired, and eat when hungover or when life is in danger of spectacularly imploding in all directions, while listening to “Wanted” by Perry Como.

The first knock came as Grace was talking to a shaky-looking Pete by the stairs. “—don’t have to get your father’s side of the story,” she was saying. “But I thought you might *want* to, without your mother, while the rest of us are around if you need us.”

“Uh-huh.” His eyes kept drifting over her shoulder to where stocky, square-faced Mr. Nilsson was twisting his hat between his hands and making awkward conversation with Lina, who had retreated behind her pies as if for moral support.

“I can tell you one thing: your mother is lying when she says your father never sent money for your upkeep. I did a little rifling through her desk—” Grace waited for Pete to bristle at this invasion of maternal privacy, but he looked too comprehensively shocked to do more than blink. “I found her bankbook—he’s sent checks every single month, and believe me, she’s cashed them, so—”

Knock knock. Grace broke off at the rap on the front door, giving Pete a gentle push toward where his family hovered around the pies. *You hurt those two, I’ll kill you*, she thought benignly toward John Nilsson, but she had a good feeling. It was Thanksgiving, the holiday that meant good things for family. She threw the door open just as the man on the other side was raising his fist to knock again.

“Mrs. March,” Xavier Byrne greeted her, expensive overcoat stirring around his knees, his eyes as watchful as she’d ever seen them over a poker table at the Amber Club. “I’m here to see Nora.”

Grace blinked. Did gangsters celebrate Thanksgiving? Cultural indoctrination hadn’t covered that. “Nora?” And Nora was there, looking wary in her slim green dress but drinking him in, and he was drinking her right back. “Cold drink?” Grace suggested, just to bring down the temperature before things ignited right here in the doorway.

“Ten minutes, Nora,” Xavier Byrne said. “If you can hear me out for ten minutes, I’m gone for good. Okay?”

But he only got three, Nora mutely leading him back toward the parlor where the two of them vanished into a whispered conversation, before another knock came at the door.

“Claire,” Sydney Sutherland gasped, beautiful and bareheaded in a raspberry linen sheath, looking like she’d run all the way here from her old Georgetown address, and in those high black heels too. “Is Claire here?” And Claire was already shoving past Grace, pulling Sydney inside and into a violent hug.

“I don’t have long,” Grace heard Sydney whisper into Claire’s red curls. “He’s playing touch football with some friends from Yale, and he took Bear along—I’ve got maybe an hour. I just had to *see* you, it’s been so long—”

Goodness, all kinds of drama and most of it not even because of meddling, Grace thought, discreetly herding Bea and an avid-eyed Arlene back toward the kitchen to leave the lovebirds some peace in the hallway. “Is that turkey burning?” Grace said, and she heard *another* knock, this one at the back door. “What is this, a clown car?” Grace joked to Reka, reversing into the dining room past the table set with all the good china. “Is someone trying to find out how many people can be stuffed into one house for one holiday?” She went through the autumn leaf-wreathed dining room toward the house’s back entrance, but Fliss had beaten her there, throwing open the door.

“Happy Thanksgiving!” Grace heard the Englishwoman sing out in her cheerful voice. “May I help you, Mr.—?”

“McDowell,” a folksy Iowa voice said. “Bob McDowell, ma’am. Looking for Mrs. Grace March.”

The hallway telescoped in front of Grace’s eyes, darkening and lengthening, suddenly as long as a football field. She began to run, she began to scream, “NO, DON’T LET HIM IN—” but the corridor just lengthened before her like in a nightmare, and Fliss was already swinging the door wide.

Then the welcoming smile on her face turned to a startled cry, and she stepped back with her hands flying to her throat as blood slipped through her fingers like rubies, and the man on the other side struck the door all the way open with the blade in his hand. A curved blade, curved like a sickle—it *was* a sickle, Grace saw with crystal clarity, the short-handled sickle that

hung on the shed wall in the backyard, the one Pete used to cut down overgrown weeds in summertime. Only now it was in Kirill's hand. A sickle for a Soviet, dripping red off its edge, as Fliss crumpled against the wall.

A gasp sounded behind Grace and someone—Nora? Arlene?—gave a shrill scream. Kirill ignored them, taking a step into the hall toward Grace. She had forgotten how big he was. Kirill Lensky/Bob McDowell, looking like a retired football player with his big shoulders, his blue eyes and square, all-American jaw, his red Udmurtian hair buzzed in an all-American crew cut. Until you heard the growl in his voice, the growl of a thug from the banks of the Volga.

“Galina,” he said, stepping forward.

And she bolted.

She bolted toward him, not away, and the false lipstick tube she always kept in her pocket was already in her hand. *Hurt him*, the thought drove through her, *hurt him first and fast*. She flicked the cover off to bare the little steel spike, flipping the needle-sharp length of it around in her palm between first finger and second even as her fist clenched, and then she drove the spike into Kirill's throat, cheek, face, one-two-three. He howled, doubling over, but he didn't collapse and she hadn't really thought he would—he was much bigger than she was and they'd had the same training; she'd never take him down by brute force. All she could do was try to knock him off guard.

She yanked him away from the door by the shirt collar and hit him with the spike again, raking his eyes. This time he screamed, lashing out and getting hold of her other wrist. One brutal yank and agony shot up her arm. Grace caught her own shriek of pain before it escaped her teeth and turned into the motion instead of against it, getting a strangely vivid memory of hand-to-hand instruction during her training days: *Go with, never against, Comrade Stepanova!* She'd never been the best at hand-to-hand fighting; she'd never been the best shooter, either. She'd been the silver-tongued one, charm her weapon rather than killer's instincts. And charm wasn't going to save her here, not against Kirill, who had murder in his eyes.

Grace leveraged the twist of his arm, managing to yank her wrist free and slide out of his grip. He was already lunging, but this time she didn't fly at him; she reversed and sprinted hell for leather toward the stairs, leaving her

pumps behind on the floor in the first two hurtling steps. Three thoughts were pounding.

Draw him away from the rest of Briarwood House before he could hurt anyone else.

Make him chase her to the top of the house, up three flights of stairs on his two-packs-per-day habit.

Get far enough ahead so she could free the neat little pistol she kept oiled, loaded, and taped on the underside of her third dresser drawer.

She took the stairs three at a time, mind bulleting ahead of her. Kirill crashed behind, bowling over Reka, whose cane went flying. Grace heard a man shout—Xavier Byrne, Dr. Dan, who knew—and then she was up to the second-floor landing and rounding the post. She'd trudged these flights three times a day for four years and she was only flying faster; behind her, she could hear Kirill wheezing and slowing. Shouting below, screaming from the Briar Club, but she couldn't spare even a second's thought for them now.

How did he find me?

She couldn't spare a thought for that, either, bursting onto the top-floor landing and through the door of her tiny apartment. She slammed the door behind her and dropped the bolt, not that it would hold—two steps across the room and she wrenched the third drawer all the way out and onto the floor. Flipped it over, clawing for the pistol—

Her door splintered, half stove in.

She raked the pistol off the drawer's underside, thumbed the hammer back. Her hands felt clumsy; how long had it been since she'd done this in earnest? The shattered door crashed open and Kirill bulled through. Grace whipped her pistol up and fired all in one motion.

Dry click. Misfire. She wanted to howl, but instead she talked. "Don't rush me." Talking fast, before he could lunge. "I've got you dead to rights, and my next shot kills you. Don't you move, Kirill. Think about what comes next."

She didn't think it would work, but he stopped at once, the sickle swinging in his big hand. In the hall downstairs he'd gone for her in unthinking rage—now he was trapped on the top floor of a house full of people, which certainly hadn't been his plan, and Kirill had never been good at improvising when plans went south. Most Soviets weren't. Their training stressed conformity, obedience, not ingenuity. He hadn't meant to

get caught up here, and now all he knew was that he didn't want her to pull the trigger again and he didn't want anyone calling the police, either. He stood there visibly thinking, his face and throat bleeding—Grace could see that her little steel spike had punctured the corner of his eye. He looked like he was weeping blood. “You bitch, Galina,” he said at last. “Why did you run?”

She wasn't sure she could risk pulling the trigger again—another dry fire, he'd pounce on her. *Keep talking, keep talking.* “How did you find me?”

“A photograph, some stupid baking contest. I saw it by chance.” His Russian was clumsy, almost stilted, like Grace's. Neither of them had spoken it in years; that had been the first thing drummed into the recruits: *Never assume you're somewhere safe and can let down your guard. From this moment on you use nothing but English, until it's all you're able to speak and think and dream in.* ““Grace March, Washington, D.C.”—once I had the city and the name, I had you.”

Grace found herself remembering the moment she'd picked that name out. *March* after the March sisters in *Little Women*—part of her training had been a reading list crammed with American classics. *Grace* because . . . Well, her war-haunted, spy-trained soul had been howling for it by then: a little grace.

“Is Fliss alive?” The words burst out. “If you killed my friend, Kirill—”

“*They aren't your friends,*” he roared, moving toward her. “They're dirty capitalist whores, moneygrubbing American bitches who—”

Grace fired. Another misfire; this time she felt the round stop in the barrel, dammit all to hell. If she tried again, it might explode in her face, and he was nearly on her, that curved blade in his hand rising. But there was someone standing in the shattered doorway behind him, tall and resolute—Bea, it was Bea, those long baserunning legs carrying her up the stairs ahead of anyone else in Briarwood House. Bea with a terrified face, blazing into the room with hands white-knuckled around her Fort Wayne Daisies baseball bat. Her swing carved a short, vicious arc downward, as a howl tore out of her throat.

The bat crashed into his ribs with a home run crack. Kirill went down as though he'd been scythed, the curved blade flying from his hand. But even as he screamed he was turning, lashing out at Bea, and Grace never hesitated. She scooped the sickle from the floor, whipped it around her former partner's throat, and slashed with all her weight behind it.

The spray of blood painted her hands, the front of her dress, Bea. It caught Claire and Nora and Reka and Harland, who had just reached the doorway behind Bea. So much blood. The creeping tide of it reached for Grace's stocking feet as Kirill bled out there on the floor of her green-walled room, his blood so much redder than his hair. She moved back from the liquid crimson edge at her toes, feeling like her head was made of glass. She couldn't drop the sickle. She knew he was dead—she'd opened his throat nearly to the bone—but her fingers wouldn't release the handle. She just stood there, gasping a little, looking at Kirill's empty blue gaze. Better to look there than at the horrified eyes of the Briar Club, of her friends as they realized what she was. For four years she'd welcomed them all to this room, fed them from her mismatched plates, heard their secrets. Now they knew hers.

She looked up at them, blood painted across her face, across the wall vine behind her. A woman in a red dress, a sickle dripping in her hand. McCarthy would have dropped dead of a heart attack at the sight: his much-vaunted Red Menace in the flesh. Grace just felt a rush of weary, dulled shock.

"Well," she said, dropping the blade. It clattered loudly in the thickened silence. "Now you know."

"—calling the police—"

"—not until we know what we're dealing with—"

"—what *are* we dealing with? Who do we even call? You think Sergeant Laker from down the block is equipped to handle this, him and his potbelly —"

Harland, Joe, and Xavier Byrne were arguing at the parlor door in low, fierce tones, none of them sure what to do with her. It was, Grace supposed, a real dilemma. She sat on a footstool before the fireplace, watching the blood dry on her hands, wrist throbbing where Kirill had wrenched it, so utterly exhausted she could barely move.

"You're a Soviet *spy*?" Claire burst out. "What— I don't even know what to . . ."

No one did, Grace thought. The Briar Club stood around her at a wary half-room's distance, in a semicircle like a traumatized book club. Claire and Sydney were welded together at the hands and Bea was pacing back and forth, unable to keep still, limping badly—her sprint up the stairs had torqued her bad knee all over again. Mr. Nilsson had vanished into the

kitchen the moment he saw Grace, pulling Lina with him before she could get a glimpse of the blood, saying with surprising authority, “She doesn’t need to see this.” Pete had gone with them briefly but come back into the parlor, crossing and recrossing his arms, his father’s return officially no longer the most unsettling event of his evening. Reka had slumped down on the nearest couch, looking small and shaky, cursing a bruised hip from where Kirill had bowled her over in the hallway. Nora was cradling a crying, hiccupping Angela so that Dr. Dan could press a compress against the slash on Fliss’s neck.

Grace indicated it with a red-brown hand. “I’m so glad you’re all right, Bubble and Squeak.” The first thing she’d seen as everyone flooded back down the stairs, unable to stay in that blood-soaked room with a dead Russian spy: Fliss in the parlor, her frantic husband wadding clean towels against her neck. Grace’s legs had given out in relief, sinking her down on the footstool. All the harm Kirill could have wrought—at least he hadn’t murdered one of her friends.

Fliss stared at her, wondering. “The nicknames,” she said. “The friendship. The suppers, the *years*. Was it all an act?”

“None of it,” Grace said, but what reason on earth did they have to believe her?

“Your English is so—” Claire shook her head.

“My mother was an interpreter in Leningrad,” Grace said wearily. “She had a well-to-do uncle who sent her to a private school before she married; she had a gift for languages. She was teaching me English before I could walk.”

“Where is she now?” Bea’s right hand flexed around the bat she couldn’t seem to put down.

“Dead,” said Grace. “Murdered during the Leningrad siege. She went out to get our daily ration, which was one hundred twenty-five grams of bread per citizen per day, and someone smashed her head in with a brick. All for a few slices of bread that was half sawdust.”

The muttering among the men halted, and Harland came back into the room toward her with quick, angry strides. “What are you here for?” he demanded, color flaring high in his cheeks. “State secrets? Are you trying to infiltrate Congress or the FBI or—”

Grace laughed. She couldn’t help it. “If I was, I’d have gotten a lot more out of you, wouldn’t I?”

He flushed. *Yes, you slept with a Red spy, G-man*, Grace nearly said. *Get over it*. But she didn't say it, because she still hoped Harland and Bea might work things out someday, and what a thing to think about at a time like this, but she couldn't switch off caring about her friends just because she had blood drying in her hair. Shocked and angry or not, they were her family, the only family she had left.

Not that they'd believe it now.

"Were you here to assassinate someone?" Harland went on, voice rising. "Get a shot off at the president? At Hoover, or McCarthy, or—"

"I was here because I was *hiding*." Grace gestured up at the ceiling, in the direction of her partner lying dead three floors above them. "Hiding from *him*. I didn't want anything but to be left alone."

"Like we'd believe that!" Arlene's voice was shrill; her eyes glittered like shards of broken glass. "You're a Commie spy like Ethel Rosenberg—"

And Ethel Rosenberg's fate is probably going to be mine, Grace thought. Tried and sentenced to execution, all because of a photograph taken at a baking contest. A high price to pay for honey cloud cake.

"Do what you want with me," she said, cutting across Arlene's rising voice, Harland's furious questions. "I can't stop you. Because I'm not an assassin, I'm not a villainess out of Pete's comic books who can . . . I don't know . . . shoot kryptonite from my fingertips. I am just Grace March, and yes, I had another name growing up: Galina Pavlovna Stepanova. I was given a job and sent here, but I didn't have much choice about taking that job or not. If I hadn't, I'd have gotten a bullet in the brain or lived the rest of my life being worked to death on the Arctic Circle, so I came here. And, yes, my partner and I passed information for a while in California. It was done with an encryption cipher and an identification code, everything placed in dead drops around town so someone we never met could collect it and pass everything back to Moscow. But it was never anything more than details on flight programs and—" Grace cut herself off as she heard her voice rise. "I never hurt anyone," she said, more quietly. "Not until today."

Xavier Byrne spoke up, very quiet, his eyes very dark. "Why are you running from your own people?"

Grace looked at him as though he were crazy. "Because they are *not* my people. Not really. My father might have been Russian but my mother was Ukrainian, and she told me what the Soviets did to her home—"

"Russian, Ukrainian, what's the difference?"

“Oh, fuck you,” Grace spat. “There’s a difference. I’ve never seen it, I was born in Leningrad but my mother’s family came from Kharkiv and they were all starved to death on Stalin’s orders, so what goddamned loyalty do you think I feel for him? I knew enough to keep my mouth shut about that, just keep my head down and parrot the party line, because I didn’t want to end up dead or in a gulag, but Leningrad wasn’t really my home. I’ve never *had* a home, until I came to this country.”

The silence was absolute.

Grace drew a gulping breath. “When I came here I looked around and thought *I never want to leave*. You wouldn’t want to, either, if you’d been living in a city where one and a half million people died in a nine-hundred-day siege, where the survivors murdered one another for ration cards and bread. A city where you drank water out of shell craters on your hands and knees, and when your one surviving uncle brought home a lump of meat and said not to ask what it was, you cooked it and ate it without asking because no one in your family had eaten in four days. A city where I had to watch my little sister starve to death before my eyes and there was *nothing I could do*.” Grace felt the tears begin to slide. Let them fall. Let it all fall. “And then I come here. And it isn’t a cesspit of capitalist evil the way I’d always been told my entire life, it’s a wonderland. Not a perfect place, maybe, but compared to the secret-police-infested wasteland I left behind, it is *paradise*. And I realized that all I want is to stay here, make a life here, get a job and pay *taxes* here, so I did. I made a life. I walked away from everything I was and made a home around a room with green walls, and sun tea, and Thursday night suppers on a hot plate, and *friends*.”

She looked at them, from face to face. “I have been *your* friend,” she said to Pete, the first person she’d met at Briarwood House. Hammerin’ Pete with his battered Mickey Spillane paperbacks and his thirteen-year-old blushes and stammers. “I have been your friend.” Looking at Nora, with whom she’d shared a landing bathroom for four years and given advice when she fell in love with the gangster who now had a protective arm around her waist. “I have been your friend”—to Reka, Attila the Hungarian, scowling on the couch—“and your friend”—to Fliss, who she’d hauled out of a nightclub riot full of bigots—“and yours, and yours, and yours.” To Bea and Claire and Sydney, Harland and Joe. “I have *always* been a friend. To all of you.”

“If you wanted to stay, why didn’t you go to the nearest embassy and defect?” That was Joe, very quiet.

“With McCarthy starting up his rants about Reds?” Grace let out a harsh bark of a laugh. “I might as well strap into the electric chair and flip the switch myself.”

“You could still turn yourself in.” Harland looked like a man groping for a lifeline. “Immunity in return for everything you know—”

“I don’t know anything useful. They make sure we don’t. I can’t tell you where any other spies are, or who collected from my dead drop. I don’t even know where my old training facility is; they took us there blindfolded in trucks—”

“You tell us you never hurt anyone here with your spying, but how do we believe that?” Harland folded his arms.

Because I love this country, Grace thought. I can speak my mind here without being arrested; I can walk these streets a free woman without worrying I’m going to be hauled away in a van; I can earn money and decide for myself what to do with it. Why wouldn’t I love this place? Why would I ever want to harm it?

But they wanted proof.

“Behind the bureau in my room,” Grace said. “Third board, the one with the crack—you’ll need to pry the nails out. Look inside. You’ll find a manila folder.”

Waiting, then. Blinking tiredly, as feet tramped upstairs and then down again. Seeing the folder in Harland’s hands, his face over it growing slowly white. “What the . . .” he said softly, flipping pages, and the others crowded close, reading over his shoulder.

“What’s Skunk Works?” Nora said blankly.

“A department of Lockheed Martin,” said Grace. “The kind of department that isn’t publicized.” The plan from Moscow had been to get Kirill hired there. Grace had found a back door—befriending the secretaries, the women no one noticed who had access to so much.

Harland was flipping pages more rapidly now. “This is— Jesus, this is their proposed development plan for the next ten years of supersonic aircraft. Project names, rudimentary designs, material sciences advances . . .”

“What’s a ramjet?” Bea asked, reading over his elbow.

“Some kind of engine for bombers or fast-strike aircraft or—”

Grace spoke up. “I got my hands on those pages spring of ’50. I knew as soon as I saw it that I wasn’t telling Kirill about it, I wasn’t taking it to the dead drop for collection, I wasn’t turning it over.”

“How do we know that?” Harland shot back. “You could have just copied this and sent the information on; how is this proof that—”

“Because the first thing the Soviets would have done with this information if I’d handed it over back in ’50 was rub the West’s nose in it, because that’s what they *do*. They know they’re behind in aviation and engineering; the West stole their scientists left, right, and center after the war. They’re desperate. If they got hold of that”—indicating the folder—“they’d be rushing to brag how far *ahead* they were for once.” She looked around the circle. “Have you seen a single headline in the newspapers over the last four years that said *anything* like that?”

Glances back and forth among the Briar Club.

“When I got my hands on that report, I ran.” Grace remembered her frantic clandestine scramble for a new name, new identity, new papers behind Kirill’s back. “I didn’t know what to do with it, whether I should destroy it or try to return it somehow, so I just . . . hid it. I guess it’s your problem now, Harland.”

“There’s not a government I can think of that wouldn’t paint the walls red to get their hands on this,” Harland said softly, closing the file. They all edged away from it as though it were radioactive.

Grace looked between her friends again, from face to shocked face. “Do what you want,” she said. “I can’t stop you. But someone turn off the oven. Because the turkey’s burning.” Grace March let her face drop, let her hopes drop, let the tears drop. “Happy Thanksgiving.”

Chapter 8

Arlene

Pinko slut.

That nasty old refrain was yammering in Arlene Hupp's head, but after today she wondered if she might be able to put it to bed. If she might finally, finally be able to quiet those words for good.

The men were still passing the manila folder back and forth, arguing what to do—typical, Arlene thought, just *typical*. She had no idea what *Skunk Works* was, or *Lockheed Martin*, or any of that stuff about fast-strike aircraft, but surely it was obvious what to do! She was about to tell them so when Bea cut through everything with one of her quintessential Bea-stings. “What if we don't turn Grace in to the police?”

Everyone stared. Bea stood there, fingers still drumming on the handle of her bloodied bat, other hand raking through that short black hair Arlene hated, so *unfeminine*. If that was what Harland swooned for, Arlene was well shut of him. Maybe he was a pansy. “Look,” Bea started, sounding dogged. “Maybe Grace started out, um, as a spy—” Stuttering over that a little bit; they were all still in shock. “But I believe her, that she quit that game in the first inning. She didn't turn that folder in; there would have been consequences—things would look different for us right now if she had. And the man upstairs, her partner, he came to kill her. He wouldn't have done that if she was still spying, still following orders.”

Don't you dare do this, Arlene thought, glaring at Bea. *Don't you ruin this for me*. This chance: fame, fortune, and a nasty memory put to bed, all tied up with a bow. A *red* bow, in the form of Grace March, sitting bloodstained

and quiet in their midst. “We have no idea why her partner came here to kill her,” Arlene said to Bea, acidly. “He was a crazy Commie. Who knows why they do anything?”

“But her people *invested* in her. How much does it cost, developing someone like her, so she can pass here without anyone suspecting?” (“Quite a lot,” Grace murmured from her stool.) “You don’t just kill off someone like that for no reason, it’s a waste of training and money. Even Reds aren’t that crazy.” Bea looked like she was grappling with the whole idea in whatever terms came to hand. “Like . . . like a young pitcher. You don’t throw ’em a signing bonus and send ’em off to the minors and put years into developing their fastball—”

“Oh, *quit with the baseball metaphors*,” Claire snarled, pacing.

“—and then get rid of them as soon as they join the Red Sox and start striking out star hitters right and left. You’ve got an asset, you protect it. The only way you throw the asset out is if it’s not wearing your colors anymore.” Bea took a breath, leaning her bat up against the wall at last and straightening on her bad knee. “She says she quit that work to live in peace. I think—”

“I think she was a pinko slut keeping her cover up with us while she did who-knows-what behind our backs,” Arlene snapped. How good it felt to spit that particular epithet out at someone else, for once. “She could have been infiltrating the White House or HUAC—”

“I don’t think so,” Bea said. “She’s always here. She wasn’t sneaking out and disappearing for days. She was always at the library shelving books, or painting a sign over at the beauty parlor, or right here in Briarwood House giving dinners and being friendly to everybody.”

Not everybody, thought Arlene.

“All right, maybe it’s possible she was off spying every night she wasn’t hosting dinners,” Bea finished. “But we’ve known her four years now, and I don’t believe it. I just don’t. She may have started out Galina Whoever, but she left that behind to become Grace March.” Bea’s voice dropped. “And I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to see our Grace in the electric chair.”

Grace looked up from where she sat on her footstool, hands cupping her own elbows, hunched over as if to shield herself from incoming blows. “Thanks, Slugger,” she said briefly, then fell silent again as all their eyes turned to her. Realizing, maybe, just how much the sound of her voice was

newly unsettling to them all: those soft Iowa accents, when upstairs they had heard her snarling and spitting in Russian.

Grace March. Their Grace March, a Red spy.

"I knew there was something off about you," Arlene couldn't help saying. "I knew from the very first!"

Grace gave her an exasperated look. "No, you didn't. I'm good at this. And if you did know, why did you sit on it for four years?"

Arlene felt the flush climb up from her lace collar. She *hadn't* known, had she? She'd looked at Grace March the day she moved in and felt like an eager puppy: *Please like me! Please like me!* A woman with style and manners, a woman who wasn't mannish or eccentric or bitchy like so many of the others in Briarwood House. A woman who had been married, who could tell Arlene how she'd done it, take her under her wing. Arlene *cringed*, remembering how she'd sucked up to this woman. Coming around those Briar Club dinners like a dog who refused to stay on the other side of a shut door, even when the others made it clear they hated her. Grace hadn't been a friend to Arlene, but she hadn't entirely shut that door, so Arlene kept coming back wagging her tail. *Please like me! Or at least, tell me why nobody else does?*

Because she didn't know. She didn't know why nobody *ever* liked her, when (ever since what she thought of as The Incident) she dressed how the magazines agreed a girl should dress, and had the kind of job people agreed a girl could have before she married, and said the kinds of things everybody agreed a girl should think.

Arlene pushed that away, though, because there was a bigger problem here: they had a Commie spy in the room, caught literally red-handed, and Bea had just suggested letting her go, and people weren't shouting her down.

"She's done more than be our friend." Fliss spoke up unexpectedly before Arlene could, still holding a reddening compress of bandages against her slashed neck. "She saved my life tonight. That man would have cut my throat, and she charged in to protect me. She protected all of us. She could have run out the front and left us all behind, but she didn't. She fought." Looking around the circle. "She fought for us, and if not for Bea's cracking home run swing she'd have *died*. So I don't want to turn her in, either. Because of her my daughter still has a mother."

Fliss's husband made a sudden convulsive movement, pulling his wife toward him as if he needed the warmth of her pressed against him *right now*. Dr. Dan wasn't that handsome, Arlene thought, even if he was a doctor—but that instinctive, protective movement made her want to spit and scratch. Jealousy, not a good look on a girl, but she'd never been able to shake it off when she saw someone like Fliss. Why did some girls get everything and some got nothing?

Focus, Arlene, she told herself. She was going to be the HUAC secretary who helped uncover a Commie spy; she was going to have her picture in *LIFE* and suitors lined up out the door. None of whom would ever call her — “Some of you should try thinking like loyal Americans here,” Arlene said to cut off her own thought, folding her arms. “It's *espionage* she is guilty of. Does that mean nothing?”

“I'd have committed espionage to get out of the hellhole I escaped from.” Reka's creaky old voice with its paprika dusting of eastern Europe around the vowels, her paint-stained hands a gnarled knot in her lap. “I'd have done it in a heartbeat if it got me a ticket here. I didn't have to, but I'd have done it.” Reka looked at Grace. “I don't want her arrested, either.”

“If she'd wanted out of her own country, she could have applied to come here legally—” someone else began.

“*How?*” The word broke from Grace and Reka simultaneously. Reka was the one who continued, “How could she have come here legally? The USSR wouldn't have let her go. Even if they had, would this country have taken her? I had trouble getting accepted here legally, and I had a sponsor in the Senate and was fleeing *Hitler*.”

Arlene planted hands on hips. “So you'll let a traitor go just because you happen to like her?”

“Frankly, yes. I'm a selfish old bag that way.”

“This is much bigger than just us.” Nora spoke up, still rocking Angela, who had fallen into an exhausted sleep against her collarbone. “Has anyone considered the national side of things? Jesus Christ on a crutch, this country's only now getting free of McCarthy—the trials, the accusations, the denunciations. If it splashes into the papers that a Soviet agent was uncovered in Washington, D.C., this country will *erupt*. We will never, ever be free of Tail Gunner Joe then. Or his lists or his loyalty review boards or his investigations—”

“But he was *right*.” Arlene felt her voice scale up. “He was right, there *are* Communists hiding in plain sight!”

“It’s not illegal for Grace to have been a Communist.” Unexpectedly, that was Claire. That stupid cow, standing there with jaw set. “No matter what idiocy McCarthy’s hammering us with, it isn’t illegal. It’s one of the basic principles of Americanism: the right to hold unpopular beliefs—”

“You’re quoting Margaret Chase Smith again,” murmured the elegant Mrs. Sutherland at her side (and what was she doing here, anyway?).

“Yes, well, old Maggie’s kind of gotten into my head. And if she were here, she’d say no one should be strapped to Old Sparky just for a belief. She’d say it was un-American, and she would be right.”

Nora nodded. “Every day I go to work and I walk past the Constitution in its case. The Bill of Rights. The things we stand for—”

“Holding criminals accountable is what we stand for,” Arlene shouted.

“—and maybe she committed a crime here by spying, but turning her in will likely mean punishment out of proportion to the crime. Because of this environment we live in.”

“We let the courts decide—”

“I don’t know if I can do that,” Nora said stubbornly. “If it’s between taking the choice away from the courts by not turning Grace in, or turning her in and ignoring the fact that this decision will likely get her killed *and* set off another firestorm against innocents in this country—well, both choices cross boundaries of the law. But I know which is more likely to get someone hurt. Probably *many* people hurt.”

Arlene rounded on Harland. “Tell me you’re not listening to this.” The rat had never put a ring on her finger but he’d worked for Hoover. He couldn’t be—

But he stood with that manila folder in his hands, looking desperately troubled.

“Before we get too lost in the lofty ethical side of things, remember we have a corpse upstairs.” Xavier Byrne spoke up, the one they said was some kind of gangster. He stood with his hands in his pockets, looking around the circle coolly, and Arlene remembered with a claw of envy that dime-size diamond he’d put on Nora’s hand once, before the idiot gave it back. “Call the police or don’t call the police, how are you going to handle the damn body? And don’t ask me to do it,” he added, sounding dry. “I’m out of that business for good.”

Nora looked at him sharply, but said nothing.

“Could we say it’s a robber, and we acted in self-defense?” Fliss asked, sounding tentative. “If he’s a Soviet mole, there’s no family or friends to contradict anything we said about him . . . right?”

Arlene had the familiar feeling like hot wires of rage were burrowing through the back of her eyes into her brain. Only this time it wasn’t because of a question like *How does a mouse like Nora Walsh get a five-carat diamond out of a man in two months flat when I can’t get Harland to propose after two years?* It was because they couldn’t see what was right in front of them, these snippy cows who thought they were so much better than she was. Too good to be friends with Arlene Hupp, but not too good to be friends with a pinko slut.

“Something else to consider,” Xavier added. “How does it look for all of you, living with a Red spy for four years? Think about how the police will view it. Nora’s not wrong, that the headlines will start McCarthy and his accusation wheel up all over again. Jobs will be lost. Security clearances.” Looking at Harland. “Think about that.”

“The police wouldn’t—” Arlene began.

“Yes, they would.” Xavier cut Arlene off. “I did a year inside Lorton and I’m not so keen to hand the boys in blue an excuse to send me back. So if we’re taking votes here—”

“We aren’t *voting!*” Arlene cried. “You’re some kind of criminal, why are you even—”

“Shut it.” He looked at her, eyes hard, until her mouth snapped shut. Then he looked around at the others. “I vote we keep the police in the dark.”

“The criminal’s in favor of the illegal option, that’s novel,” Harland snapped. They began arguing, and Pete got up suddenly and went to the kitchen where they heard him clattering around, talking briefly with his father and Lina. He came back with a lowball glass of bourbon and handed it to Grace.

“What are you doing?” Arlene demanded. “We all know you have a stupid crush, Pete, but that doesn’t mean waiting hand and foot on the Commie spy—”

“She’s tired and hurting and she’s under my roof.” Pete folded his arms. “I’m not having anyone go without a drink and a little common decency under my roof.”

“Pete—” Harland began.

“No.” Pete’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed, but he sounded very firm. “Until Mom’s back, I’m the Nilsson who’s in charge of this house, and I’m not having Mrs. Grace mistreated. And I vote we don’t turn her in, either,” he added, belligerently. “I vote we report an attempted robbery, get that lunatic’s corpse off the floor upstairs, and forget this entire night ever happened. Because— Because you’re all family, and that includes her, and it *still* does.”

They’re going to let her go, Arlene thought. The feeling of the white-hot wire worming through her brain got even stronger. *They’re going to go soft and let her go. A Soviet spy!* Grace March, Galina whatever-her-Ruski-name-was, would waltz free and with her all those half-formed things Arlene had only just started to imagine: the promotion from her boss at HUAC (maybe he’d finally stop asking her out to dinner, him a married man, and just give her the *raise* she’d earned a year ago); the handshakes and congratulations from President Eisenhower himself (*You are a very brave young lady, Miss Hupp!*); the line of eligible men asking her out to dinner (*Let me introduce you to my mother, she’s dying to meet the heroine of the hour!*). A leg up from this frustrating life that had become a quagmire when it was supposed to be an escape. She’d thought she’d gotten away from it all when she took the bus out of Lampasas—away from the turkey ranch, away from the lack of friends, away from The Incident, headed for the bright lights of the nation’s capital—but she’d just landed smack in the middle of another life she couldn’t stand. A rented room and a dead-end job working for a married man with wandering hands, and still no friends.

Pinko slut. Pinko slut.

“Excuse me,” Arlene muttered, shoving out of the parlor, but no one was paying attention to her anyway. They were all still talking it through, talking it over, *persuading* themselves to offer the hand of mercy to the blood-drenched Red in their center, and Grace was quietly listening to them decide her fate. No one watched as Arlene stamped into the dining room decorated up with the good china and the boughs of autumn leaves, snatched a folded napkin off the table with a scatter of silverware, crammed the starched cloth into her mouth clear back to the molars, and screamed into it.

His name had been Les—Lester Gibbons, paratrooper, Eighty-Second Airborne Division from Fort Bragg. Arlene had been feeding the turkeys

(how she hated that chore, the way they clawed and squawked) when she saw the parachutes start to bloom in the blue Texas sky. How everyone gawped! She'd known there was some war game planned, but hearing her parents drone on at the dinner table about paperwork signed from Fort Bragg for use of ranch lands in maneuvers was one thing. Seeing tanks and trucks roll through town flying the mock flag of the People's Republic of the Glorious Aggressor Nation, that was something else.

Some of her neighbors were frightened, Arlene remembered that. When the president of the school board got mock arrested in front of the courthouse the next day and it was announced that schools and churches would be closed until all teachers and clergy were vetted, some of the kids cried. But Arlene, clutching her high school book bag while an officer in a People's Republic armband intoned something about *bursting the bonds by which the filthy capitalistic Wall Street warmongers have enslaved the people of Texas*, had looked at those buzz-cut young paratroopers, most of them struggling to keep a straight face in the ridiculousness of it all, and just thought, *Finally!* Some men around who weren't sunburned ranch hands or pimply boys she'd known since junior high. She'd twinkled her fingertips (newly varnished in Cutex Old Rose) at the nearest one, and he came bounding up to her later on.

"Hi," he said in a fake Russian accent, grinning. "I'm Ivan. Who are you, American girl?"

"You're not supposed to be Russian." Arlene laughed.

"Well, no. We're supposed to be a totalitarian state called Aggressor, risen from Central Europe to attack the United States," he recited. "By now we supposedly already control Florida and New England and have started our assault on Texas by dropping an atomic bomb on Corpus Christi—don't laugh," he reproached. "This is serious stuff."

"We need to be prepared for a potential Communist invasion," Arlene agreed, thinking it was amazing the stupid things army men could get up to and get paid for and still manage to look solemn about.

"So we're not supposed to be Soviets, but we're sort-of-Soviets for the next few weeks," Call Me Ivan said. "I'm Les, Les Gibbons from Santa Barbara—" And that was it, Arlene was dreaming of California beaches and orange groves, a little house on an army base big enough for a paratrooper and his wife and babies. All she had to do was lasso the paratrooper; and Arlene was a ranch girl—she knew her way around a lasso. And Les fell

right into her arms, the two of them sneaking around after curfew giggling about whether this counted as *fraternization* or not. ““Make the invaders feel unwanted,”” Arlene said, reading aloud from a propaganda sheet passed around by a simulated Lampasas resistance movement. ““They have been taught that you will welcome them. Ignoring them will help to lower their morale—””

“Here’s something else you can help lower,” Les murmured, putting her hand on the front of his trousers, and Arlene had really thought she was on her way to a quarter-carat diamond and a meet-my-fiancée telephone call to his parents in Santa Barbara. Until The Incident, the day she came around the back of the bar where Les and some friends liked to hang out off duty and heard them talking outside, cigarettes dangling from their lips. One of Les’s friends, asking about *the girl from the turkey ranch—Darlene?* Slowing her footsteps, holding the blueberry pie she’d made fresh that afternoon, smiling to hear what he’d say about her.

“She’s okay,” Les had said, not correcting them about her name. “Bit of a pinko slut. You can tell she’d roll over for a real Ivan if they came parachuting in, she’s that desperate.”

They were all still laughing when Arlene stormed around the corner and smashed her pie over Les’s head.

Really, it all happened for the best, Arlene thought now. She’d packed her suitcase the moment high school was done (long after the soldiers of the fake People’s Republic were routed out of town by the countering forces from Fort Hood) and headed for Washington, D.C., where she knew she could do much better than a stupid paratrooper barely out of basic training. And she’d learned something from the entire experience: men could be horrible, but think how much worse it would have been if it had been real Soviet men, real enemies. Les and his friends, angry and covered in blueberries, hadn’t been so bad. They’d only pushed her around a bit between them (so she couldn’t claw them with her nails); rubbed a handful of pie in her face (like little boys with sand at a beach); called her names (*pinko slut, pinko slut*). And maybe “pinko” was a bit harsh—Arlene was no Commie sympathizer—but she *had* acted like a slut. She’d brought it on herself: getting pushed around behind a bar, getting a button on her blouse popped. She’d pulled loose and run home sobbing, blueberries in her hair, but you couldn’t say she hadn’t *learned*. Men weren’t to be trusted, but once you knew that, you had only yourself to blame if things went wrong.

Do you know any Communist sympathizers, Miss Hupp? the interviewer had asked when Arlene applied for the typing pool with HUAC, clearly already appreciating her neat ponytail and tidily crossed ankles. *We cannot employ anyone here—even the lowliest typist—who has questionable loyalties.*

I don't associate with such people, Arlene had promptly said. *Only a pinko would do that.* And she didn't miss the approving glance that earned her. Or the promotion she earned for reporting on the typist who said her sister got blacklisted from teaching second grade in Massachusetts because of Socialist sympathies. She'd learned her lesson: no fraternization. Make the invaders feel unwanted. Don't be a pinko slut.

Well, Briarwood House had an invader in their midst, and maybe no one else knew what to do, but Arlene Hupp understood her duty.

“Oh, are y'all still arguing?” she asked sweetly, coming back into the parlor. Grace was still sitting on her stool, hands folded around her glass of bourbon, but someone (probably the lovestruck Pete) had draped a blanket around her shoulders. The rest of the Briar Club was still clustered in a standing circle like they were at Bible study, apparently debating what they were going to do about the body upstairs. “Have you had your little vote now?” Arlene said when they finally turned to look at her. “Well, let me tell you it doesn't matter. I've just called the police.”

For a moment she savored it, the astonished looks on their faces. *That'll teach you to ignore me,* Arlene thought, pulling her chin high. *I don't need friends to do what's right.*

“What did you tell them?” Bea rapped out. “What did you say?”

“I just said they should send an officer around right away.” Because if she'd started off with *I've caught a Soviet spy* they'd assume she was crazy or drunk. “I said we had a terrible situation at Briarwood House, and they said an officer would be over as soon as—”

Reka came across the parlor, surprisingly fast for those old legs of hers, and backhanded Arlene across the face so hard she lost her balance and went down hard on Mrs. Nilsson's bilious rug. She sat there ears ringing, a hand to her stinging cheek, almost too shocked for words. Reka would have come at her again, but Pete pulled her back, and then no one was even looking at Arlene anymore. They were all looking at Grace.

Grace shook off the shawl, setting down her glass with hands that trembled just a little. “I’d better run,” she said, matter-of-fact. “I have cash—enough for some hair dye and some new identification if I can get clear of Washington.”

You won’t get clear of Washington, Arlene wanted to shout. *You won’t be safe anywhere. Your face will be on every front page in the country within twenty-four hours.* But the Briar Club was pulling around her quietly, all speaking at once. The whole *parlor* seemed to be curling protectively around her.

“—don’t have to run,” Joe was saying. “We’ll just report the robbery and the body, keep the rest out of it—”

“—we’ll all say Arlene’s lying,” Pete added. “Who do you think they’re going to believe, when the rest of us—”

“I can’t *believe* you all,” Arlene said loudly, but no one paid attention. Bea was picking up Grace’s shawl; Fliss was soothing Angela, who had begun crying again—Grace reached out to touch the little girl’s hair as she was carried into the kitchen, and Fliss didn’t flinch away from her. Even those who looked uncomfortable (Harland, Dr. Dan) were still *letting this happen*. “I can’t believe any of you,” Arlene repeated. “You *traitors*.”

Grace tried to press them back. “I can’t stay,” she said briefly, looking around the circle. “Nothing is going to stop Arlene from telling, and once she does—”

“That’s right.” Arlene realized she was still sitting on the floor—even Harland, with his Virginia-gentleman manners, hadn’t stepped over to offer her a hand up. Her cheek burned from Reka’s slap as she scrambled upright. “I’ll tell, and if you don’t back me up I’ll report all of you as well.” *That police officer can’t get here soon enough*, Arlene thought, looking at their contempt-filled faces. “Why can’t you be on my side?” she cried, looking between them again. “Why can’t you do the right thing? I’m only doing the *right thing*, why do you all hate me?” Already her moment of triumph was slipping away like a dust devil dissolving in a hot Texas wind, and why did that always happen? Why did everything always turn to hot dust in her hands?

Pinko slut. She felt the white-hot wire begin squirming back through her brain, felt the choking thickness rise in her throat—and then the doorbell rang.

Everyone froze. “It can’t be the police,” Joe said. “It’s too fast—” But Arlene darted across the room, slipping between Bea and Nora.

“Don’t you *dare*,” Bea yelled, grabbing at her arm, but Arlene evaded the tug and ran down the hall, heart thumping. Reinforcements, at last. Support. The police, at least, would know she had done the right thing. They would *laud* her for it.

“Thank god—” Arlene began, flinging the door open. But the man swaying on the doorstep wasn’t wearing police blue, and he was quite definitely drunk. “Are you a detective?” Arlene ventured, looking at his fine but crumpled three-piece suit.

“I’m Barrett,” he said, slurring so much she missed his last name completely. The rest was clear enough, though. “That bitch of mine, she’s here.” *Bishoffmine, sheshere*. “She took a taxi here, housekeeper heard the address.” *Taxshi, houshkeeper, addresh*. “Where you hiding her?”

“Who?” Arlene’s skin crawled. “What bitch?”

“I know sheshere—”

“Excuse me.” Harland’s authoritative voice sounded behind Arlene. “There’s been a misunderstanding. We’re in no need of—”

Barrett whatever-his-name-was jostled over the threshold, pushing Arlene to one side. “You the one she’s fucking?”

Harland blinked. “What?”

“What?” Arlene echoed, adding, “*Who*?”

“She’s fucking someone,” the drunk man muttered, tottering forward. The bourbon fumes nearly made Arlene gag. “Know she is . . .”

“Who are you?” Arlene seized his arm, trying to keep this night from careening off the rails. “You can’t be with the police, are you—”

He hit her in the throat with a fast, easy chop of his hand, like it was a blow he’d dealt out many times and in just the right place. “Slut,” he said, rather casually, and that was a word he didn’t slur on, as if he said it quite a lot. Arlene found herself sliding against the paneled wall toward the floor, throat burning, as the man lurched at Harland.

“Look here—” Harland began, moving forward, and then a fist glanced off his sharp cheekbone, Arlene saw through blurring eyes. It wasn’t hard enough to drop him, but he stumbled and hit the side table, its spindly legs tangling with his, and crashed down. The drunk man kned him in the head as he stumbled on toward the parlor, and Harland, who had started to rise, went down all over again.

Arlene cried out, but the man named Barrett ignored her. “Know you’re in there,” he slurred in a singsong voice as he crashed toward the parlor. “Know you’re in there, you *whooooooooore*—” Only his name wasn’t Barrett, Arlene knew. Because he was looking for *Grace*, wasn’t he? Of course he was. Who knew how many others she’d been sent over with from Moscow? One was dead upstairs, and here was another. It was all about Grace the spy, Grace who had started out Galina, so who knew what name *Barrett* had started under? Probably *Boris*.

“No,” Arlene said thickly, managing to drag herself upright. “You get out of here—this is an *American* house, you Commie bastard—”

But he’d already disappeared into the parlor, and a beat later there was a roar. “You *fucking bitch*—” and a woman’s terrified cry. Arlene was still having trouble breathing, her throat on fire from where he’d hit her, but she stumbled after him, tripping over Harland, who was dazedly trying to get to his feet. “Stay in there,” Arlene gasped at Fliss, who had flown to the door of the kitchen with Angela in her arms, Lina and Mr. Nilsson right behind her—later they’d applaud Arlene for that, her prescience at making sure the children were kept back from the violence. She stumbled onward, bursting through the door, nearly falling again over Bea’s bat.

And yes, she’d been right, the drunk was trying to get at Grace. Everyone in the room had fallen back—Pete pulling Nora behind him, a limping Bea stepping in front of Reka—but the new arrival ignored all of them, looking toward the mantel at Grace. Grace, who had Claire behind her holding the shaking Mrs. Sutherland in protective arms. Grace, saying in her soothing voice, “Calm down, it’s all right—”

Pinko slut. Arlene’s head was throbbing. Her throat screamed.

“You bitch,” the Russian kept saying, “you goddamn ungrateful whore,” and his English was every bit as perfect as Grace’s but the wool was off Arlene’s eyes now. Spies all around us, Commies all around us. Under every rock. McCarthy was right.

“You shut the hell up and sit down.” Xavier Byrne came from behind and grabbed the man in an armlock, addressing him with remarkable calm. “You’re not putting hands on anyone in this room. *Sit down*—”

The man wasn’t going anywhere, but he wouldn’t sit, either, snarling, trying to get at Grace where she stood in front of Claire and Mrs. Sutherland. Arlene didn’t hesitate. Another threat, another invader, and the Briar Club would probably vote to let *this* one go too.

Well, not on her watch.

“I know what you are,” she shouted, snatching Bea’s bat off the floor. The Russian managed to wrench an arm loose from the grip around his elbow, swinging toward her. For an instant his face—furious, handsome, deceptively all-American—looked like the face of Les Gibbons in Lampasas.

Pinko slut. And the white-hot wire burrowing through Arlene’s temple gave one final flash and exploded inside her skull.

“*Go back to MOSCOW,*” she screamed and swung the bat.

Once again they were all staring at her, their faces white, open-mouthed. *That’s right*, Arlene thought, ignoring the slumped shape at her feet, feeling something warm slide down the side of her face. The bat was covered in blood. *Look at me: the heroine of the hour.* President Eisenhower would be pinning a medal on her in the White House rose garden: the HUAC secretary who took down a Red spy.

She realized she must have said it aloud, because Grace gave her a strange look, stepping forward slowly as though approaching a wild animal. “Arlene,” she said, reaching forward and uncurling Arlene’s fingers from around the bloodied bat, “that’s . . . not a Red spy.”

Arlene put her chin up. She knew what she knew.

“No.” The elegant Mrs. Sutherland stepped forward from behind Grace, not so elegant anymore, her raspberry linen dress crumpled, her hair hanging in her wild eyes. Those eyes fixed on the corpse crumpled at their feet, skull smashed into the carpet. “Th-Th-That’s—”

She was shaking so hard she couldn’t get out another word. Suddenly she flowed down to her knees, shivering, leaning into Claire, who caught her before she could fall all the way, and Arlene stared from face to face. “Why are you all looking like that?”

“Um,” said Pete. “You know who Senator Sutherland is, right?”

“What does that have to—”

“That’s his son.” Pete swallowed, looking at Sydney. “Her husband.”

“What?” Arlene blinked. “What?”

Nora looked like she wanted to throw up, but she stepped forward. “So we have two bodies in this house—”

“One a Soviet agent,” said Reka, “and one a senator’s son—”

“—and the police are on the way,” Bea finished.

They looked around at one another, and that was when Arlene lost time. When it all slipped away from her in a babble of voices. When she came back to herself she was sitting on a straight-backed chair in the kitchen, the children now whisked away, the smell of burned turkey in her nose. Alone, of course. *Why am I always alone?* she thought dully. *No matter what I do, no matter how hard I try, I'm always alone.*

But a warm arm slipped around her shoulders in that moment, and Arlene looked up through swimming eyes and saw Grace's golden-brown gaze. She was wearing a different dress from the bloodstained red taffeta, an old floral print that didn't have a single drop of gore on it, and her hair and face were sponged clean. "Arlene," she said, and there was a flurry of activity all around them (someone hissing *Are the clothes disposed of?*; someone else hissing *The police, I think they're here—*), but Arlene couldn't tear her attention away from those calm golden-brown eyes. "Arlene," said Grace, "listen to me and do everything I say, and neither of us is going to jail."

Chapter 9

Thanksgiving 1954

“So that’s what happened?” the detective asks.

Former FBI agent Harland Adams nods once, and the house sags in such relief that the floorboards of the sitting room creak under everyone’s boots.

“That’s what happened, sir.”

The detective grunts, grudgingly pleased to finally have a cooperative witness. “Go through it one more time for me, Mr. Adams.”

Harland lays it out again, crisp, no hesitation, and the house has to admire his composure. He’s tense, but he’s giving the story his all: Thanksgiving preparation in full swing, the party newly joined by Mr. and Mrs. Sutherland. “Family friends of the Ortons,” he explains, “through the wives, you know, both of them being English, of course they know each other.” The stranger bursting in, clearly drunk, waving a sickle from the garden shed, trying to rob them all. An altercation—poor Barrett Sutherland had picked up a bat to defend Mrs. Felicity Orton, look at that cut on her neck, he’d undoubtedly saved her life stepping in like that, though he’d had the bat turned against him. The stranger, panicked at killing him, had fled to the top of the house.

“And you were the one to follow, Mr. Adams?”

“Yes. There was a struggle.” Indicating the bruise under his eye, the lump on the back of his head, the blood spray dried across his front. “I managed to get hold of the sickle and turn it against him, sir. A handful of the women were behind me, I couldn’t let them come to harm.”

“The others will corroborate your version of events? The ladies have been mostly hysterical—”

“Feminine nerves,” Harland says, not batting an eyelash. “Naturally they’re all in shock.”

The more shocked we act, the better, the Briar Club women had all agreed as they put the story together. *Cry as much as possible*. And had they ever, the house thought in admiration, having watched them called in one at a time for questioning. Nora oozed ladylike tears into a lace-edged hankie, Claire bawled and sniveled, Reka lapsed into incoherent Hungarian babble. Fliss played the distressed Englishwoman to the hilt, all gentle fluttering; Sydney worked up a completely sincere fit of hysterics. Bea couldn’t quite get herself to cry, but she played up her reinjured knee until she was nearly swooning in agony. By comparison to the sobbing ladies of the house Pete looks like a model of responsible young manhood, Dr. Dan a clear-eyed army veteran, Mr. Nilsson a concerned father, and Harland a stalwart all-American patriot.

What’s more important? They all tell the same story.

“Am I the last one you’ve got to interview, Detective?” Grace asks—by now the man looks exhausted by all the tears and drama, not to mention the hour. “It must be nearly four in the morning,” Grace says with a sympathetic glance at the clock.

“One more after you—” Consulting his notes. “A Miss Arlene Hupp?”

“I’ll see if I can pry her out of bed. She was having such dreadful hysterics, Dr. Dan gave her a pill.”

The thought of another woman having hysterics across this table is clearly making the detective’s head throb. “We’ll follow up with her tomorrow if we need clarification,” he decides. “You’ve been very helpful, Mrs. March.”

Very helpful, Briarwood House echoes, giving Grace the closest thing to a hug it can manage: a certain warm folding of the house’s atmosphere around her like a soft blanket, a place to shelter. At the beginning of the fracas when Grace’s secrets came out, the house had thought *I won’t let them take you, I promise*—had sent the thought like an arrow toward its favorite resident as she sat there shaking, her past laid bare for all to see. Because Briarwood House doesn’t care if Grace is a Communist or a spy or a woman entirely capable of opening a man’s throat with a sickle. Grace is the one who brought the house to life. Grace belongs.

I won't let them take you. I'll protect you—but Grace has protected herself. Has protected Briarwood House as well. And the house is grateful.

Things are, probably, going to be all right. The house even manages a certain cautious optimism about the prospect of ending up a furniture showroom. If Grace and the rest of this household can head off two murder charges and a Red spy attack, surely a bill of sale won't be too hard to scupper.

"I'm so sorry you were dragged away from your Thanksgiving, Detective." Grace's eyes are so warmly sympathetic, the detective clearly can't help smiling back. "You must be exhausted—and parched, talking half the night. Can I offer you some sun tea?"

Grace spent a great deal of time, during the weeks that followed, in the sitting room with Arlene. Arlene had quit her job at HUAC, she wouldn't sit alone in her room, she trembled if she had to go into the parlor or the kitchen, but the front sitting room where Grace had scattered comfortable squashy cushions and put big bunches of sunflowers in the broad windows overlooking the square—that was safe. She'd sit there doing a puzzle or staring at a magazine, and Grace sat with her and listened. Not just to Arlene, since Arlene rarely rose from her daze, but to everything else.

"You're always listening. I guess that comes with your old job," Pete said, aiming for a joke. He was still trying to fit what he now knew about her into some context of ordinary life, and Grace was sorry about that.

"Pete," she said simply, "I always listen because I was raised in a police state. When you live in fear, you're always listening."

"Guess I never really thought about that." He jammed his hands into his pockets. "We're— We're pretty lucky to live here, aren't we?"

"We are," Grace agreed. She was going to miss this place. So while she could, she sat in the sunny windowsill and soaked it all in.

She watched Xavier Byrne come and ring the bell for Nora, the Great Dane named Duke on a leash. The three of them sat on the top of the stoop outside—it was a reflexive instinct, Grace knew, to discuss dangerous matters outside where your words could disappear into the sky rather than hover around the lamps, which might possibly be bugged. (If you'd grown up in the Soviet Union, you always assumed the lamps were bugged.) Through the blowing curtains Grace could hear Nora's quiet voice,

speaking very carefully. “How long do you think the case will . . . drag out?”

“We’ll see.” Xavier sounded as calm as ever. “The police like Harland for the hero of the piece.”

“I heard Senator Sutherland’s kicking up a fuss. Insists it can’t have been just a simple robbery, insists there’s more to *Bob McDowell* than meets the eye.” Even here, Nora didn’t say the name *Kirill*. Grace approved of her caution. *You’d have made a good spy, Tipperary.*

“Let the senator bluster. He’s thinking political enemies, but we both know that line won’t lead anywhere.”

Nora exhaled, sounding shaky. Xavier took her hand, thumb rubbing across her knuckles. Grace smiled to see Nora grip back, hard. “I heard they brought you in for more questioning.”

“Didn’t get them anywhere,” Xavier said, unconcerned. “I didn’t have a drop of blood on me, and I had every reason to be there that night. Just a guy visiting his girl.”

Nora sounded wary. “Is that what you are?”

“It is now. I spent two years after I got out of Lorton extricating myself. I’m a businessman now, Nora.”

“That’s what you always called yourself before.”

“Now it’s *all* I am. I even laid off playing poker—the club’s just a jazz club these days.”

“Did you do it to get me back?” Voice flaring, defensive. “Because I didn’t ask it of you. And I sure as hell didn’t promise I’d come back if you did.”

“No. I did it for me. Spend a year locked up, you get time to think. I’m not going back to a cell. Not ever. I missed my house too much, I missed my dog too much. It’s not worth it.”

“So you’re someone who follows the law just to stay out of jail? Xavier, I don’t know what that’s worth if you’re still the man who will kill in cold blood if you can find a way to get away with it.”

“I’m not. I’m done with that. And you can give me all the skeptical looks you like, you know I don’t lie to you.”

A pause. “What did your family say when you . . .”

“They get it. Most of them get out at some point; it’s expected.”

Grace leaned closer to the window, listening. She remembered Nora saying once, near despair: *Jesus Christ on a crutch, he’s worse than opium.*

Can't get him out of my veins for anything.

"It's what I came to talk to you about, on Thanksgiving. Before we got interrupted." Xavier leaned down, tousling Duke's ears where the dog's huge head lay on Nora's T-strap pumps. He spoke for a while, voice too low to hear, and Nora's answer was inaudible. *At least speak up so I can eavesdrop*, Grace urged silently, but Xavier went away soon after, and Nora's thoughtful face gave away nothing.

The newly widowed Sydney Sutherland dropped by a few days later, exquisite in black chiffon and a big-brimmed black hat, and she pulled Grace aside without a hint of the discomfort the others still showed. "I owe you," she said simply, slipping the loops of her black patent-leather handbag from her own wrist over Grace's. "And I owe Arlene, though I know she didn't exactly intend to do me any favors."

Grace peeked into the handbag. Banded rolls of cash, and a great deal of it. She blinked. "I didn't think you had access to these sorts of funds."

"Not as a wife." Sydney's eyes were hidden behind her big black sunglasses. "As a widow, hmm, not exactly, either . . . But it's amazing, the effect a widow's tears can have on bank clerks."

"How is your son?"

"Heartbroken. He loved his father." The glasses came off then, snapped shut with a click like a switchblade. "When the investigation and the funeral are over, I'm taking Bear to see his grandmother in Hamilton. Warm beaches and lemonade and family picnics . . ."

"Hmm. Senator Sutherland won't object?" Grace didn't think an old bigot who had just lost his son would be very keen on letting his only grandson be carried off to Bermuda.

"I'm not worried about my father-in-law." For the first time, the widowed Mrs. Sutherland smiled. "I know some things about his son. If he doesn't want them revealed to the press and ruining the family legacy, he won't fight me for Bear."

Grace smiled. "Enjoy Bermuda, Stretch."

Sydney kissed her cheek in a waft of Joy perfume and bounded upstairs to see Claire, leaving Grace looking into the cash-stuffed patent-leather bag over her arm. It certainly did open a few things up . . .

She was watching a few days later when Claire came up the steps with a glow in her cheeks, slipping what looked like a passport application into her pocketbook. She watched when Fliss and Dr. Dan went off to get the

stitches removed from the cut on Fliss's neck. And Grace certainly made sure to watch when John Nilsson came back from New York to talk to his kids. He took them out to the Crispy Biscuit for hot fudge sundaes, but first he approached Grace—moving warily, unblinking, like you'd approach a threat.

"Heavens," Grace quipped, "you're not stalking a bear."

"A Russian bear," he shot back.

Grace couldn't help a laugh. "Touché. Though my mother always said that where she grew up, the symbol was a nightingale. A humble, harmless, singing nightingale."

"You sang a pretty good song the other night." Mr. Nilsson cleared his throat. "My son's been singing, too—singing your praises, telling me everything you did for him and Lina since you moved in. So . . ."

"So," Grace echoed. "Why on earth did you never visit those marvelous children of yours these past few years?"

He was silent a long moment. "I was in Saipan during the war," he said at last, one hand reflexively opening and closing. "Marines. Saw the Japanese women and children jumping off Banzai Cliff to avoid being taken prisoner . . . I came back a mess. My wife said I was a bad influence, the docs agreed, so I left. Thought the kids were better off without me."

Excuses, Grace thought, if not entirely without sympathy. "Well, your children couldn't have a worse parent right now than your wife. Think about that?"

She didn't know what he said to his children at the Crispy Biscuit, but Lina came back with a cautious smile and fudge sauce on her chin, and Pete looked about a decade younger, like an actual kid again. "He says he never got any of the letters I wrote him—he was *stunned*, hearing I'd been writing to him up until a few years ago. And—" Pete gulped a little as if he were trying not to cry. "And he says he won't let Mom sell the house."

"She wants to *what*?" Grace reared back.

"Mom said she had an offer, from some—I don't know, who cares? Dad told me the house is in his name, and if Lina and I want to stay here there's no way in hell he'll sign off on a sale." Pete's hand stole out, patting the staircase newel post like it was a dog. "I can't imagine living anywhere else."

Dodged a bullet there, Grace thought. *Imagine no more Briarwood House!* The entire Briar Club made sure to eavesdrop when Mr. Nilsson

took his former wife off to the parlor for some choice words—it felt like even the house was leaning in to listen, not that it was difficult the way Mrs. Nilsson was shrieking. “He’s letting her have it,” Nora whispered to Reka, gleeful. “He says he’s moving back to D.C. so he can visit the kids every weekend—”

“Apparently he’s been sending money for *years*, and she’s been cashing the checks while telling us all he never contributed a cent—”

“—and he says Pete’s going back to school next semester and what was she thinking making him drop out . . .”

“Looks like things are changing around here,” Joe said the next afternoon when he slipped over during Mrs. Nilsson’s daily shopping trip. “I didn’t have to sneak in—Pete said I could just go on up.”

“I’m glad you wanted to.” Grace opened the door to her apartment a little wider, smiling. “Thought you might be in a tizzy about having slept with a Red spy.”

“I always knew you had an edge about you.” He reached out, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. “Just didn’t know how *much* of an edge.”

Grace gave him a lingering kiss and pulled him inside.

Another week drifted by, and Grace found herself in the sitting room feeding the ginger cat (no longer forbidden from the premises; Doilies had lost ground on a *great* many things lately) when Harland came to call. His jacket was thrown over one shoulder, his sharply drawn face unsmiling as Grace waved him in. “You look like you’re not sleeping,” she observed.

“I’m not,” he said briefly, rotating his hat between his hands.

“Don’t waste your nightmares, Harland.” Herself, she wasn’t going to lose one minute’s sleep over the fact that Kirill had been removed from this world, or Barrett Sutherland. Sometimes she woke up in the night and had to check that her hands weren’t covered in blood, that a sickle with a reddened blade wasn’t lying on the floor . . . But after that, she switched off her light and went right back to dreamland.

She’d never killed anyone back home, despite all the desperate violence of Leningrad’s shattered, icy streets during the war. Never killed anyone as a spy, either. Now she had, but she could not be sorry. Kirill could have run with her, could have let her go, could have targeted her without targeting the people in this house . . . A million chances to live some version of the American dream, and that stupid bastard somehow muffed all of them.

But Harland still looked troubled and Grace was sorry for that, even if she couldn't regret that he'd taken the official credit for dispatching Kirill. It had been the best move they had; everyone knew a former FBI agent would be treated differently at a murder scene. And he had been, and they were all reaping the benefit: they were, she thought, going to get away with it. She'd painted her hands red with an enemy's blood, but she was going to walk away.

"I thought you might want to know about the . . . the file," Harland went on. Grace nodded, her fingertips still remembering that embossed Lockheed Martin logo. "I got rid of it. Scrubbed every page back and front three times over to get rid of prints, packaged it anonymously, mailed it back where it came from. Triple layered, marked eyes-only—took every precaution I could think of. Hopefully it's enough."

Grace thought it would be. What a weight, to have that file off her hands. The whole house felt lighter, sunnier, as though a cloud had slid away from the sun. "Thank you, Harland."

His eyes flickered to hers, holding them with an effort. As if he were looking all the way through her irises like through a window, to see if he could catch a glimpse of Leningrad. "Hoover would've pinned a damned halo on me if I'd told the truth. Forget commendations—it was my *job* to tell." Voice almost inaudible: "Why couldn't I do it, Grace?"

Because you're a human being, Grace wanted to say. Because you realized that it's a more complicated question than people like McCarthy or Hoover like to think.

Who deserved to live here. Who deserved a second chance. Who deserved to call themselves a citizen of this big, flawed, complicated country.

Her friends had decided she deserved it. How she deserved *them*, she'd never know.

Harland let himself out and later Grace saw him wandering toward Prospect Park with Bea, hand in hand, probably off to play some catch at the sandlot with the glove under Bea's arm. Ball popping crisply against mitt in the lowering twilight sky . . . Grace sat in the window awhile longer, thinking of her friends. Thinking of what happened when you stopped drifting in the moment; when you had to think past *Will we get away with it?* and move on to *What comes now?*

She already knew.

Thursday night. The first Briar Club dinner since they'd gotten the news that the case was closed and no one (despite the rumblings of a certain senator from Virginia) was being sought in connection to the deaths of Barrett Sutherland and a drifter named Bob McDowell. Any minute now, Grace knew, the Briar Club would be coming upstairs to her green-walled room. She'd left them a pot of chicken soup on the hot plate, and a bouquet of sunflowers.

The cab was already waiting outside; Grace passed her suitcase over and went back for her last box. Hoisting it under one arm, she found herself pausing on the stoop and looking up at the front door. "Well," she said aloud, looking up at Briarwood House, "I suppose this is goodbye."

The house didn't answer, of course. But Grace had always talked to it, anyway, right from the beginning—from the day she arrived in the same camel coat and red beret she was wearing now.

"I wish I didn't have to leave," Grace told the house. But hers was a big secret for so many people to keep, and it would keep easier if she was out of sight. It had to keep, because they were all neck-deep in it now.

And if there were any more consequences from Moscow—if Kirill had reported anything up the chain before coming here and meeting his death—she wasn't going to have it land on her friends. She was going to disappear all over again. She was good at that, after all.

"Where to, ma'am?" the cabdriver called from the street.

"Union Station," Grace called back. Arlene was already sitting in the back seat, passive as a child. Looking disheveled as she so often did these days, hair uncombed, staring out the window. Grace couldn't say she liked Arlene Hupp, but if Arlene cracked under the weight of what she'd done and spilled her guts to anyone, it was going to make life very uncomfortable for everybody at Briarwood House. And she very much had the look of someone who was going to crack, so Grace reckoned she'd take the wretch along, give her a fresh start, and make sure she stayed patched together. It shouldn't be too difficult. "That girl is so desperate for a friend, I could take her under my wing and have her saluting the hammer and sickle inside a month," Grace told the house. "Good thing all I want to force-feed her is a little empathy."

The curtains fluttered, almost like the house was laughing. Grace smiled, laying her hand on the front door.

The cardboard box in her arms thumped indignantly from the inside. “Hush, you,” she scolded. Red hadn’t been too pleased to find himself lured into a box and the lid crammed over his head, but there was no way Grace was leaving him behind.

The cabdriver loaded her into the taxi, cat box and all, and the door slammed. Arlene looked over at Grace, dull-eyed, but with something desperate behind her silent stare. *We’ll fix that*, Grace thought. She didn’t think she’d ever have a family of her own—burying an entire family in Leningrad had killed the urge in her for children, for a husband, for anything more permanent than lovers and friends and the easy warmth of companionship—but she still had her urge to feed and to fix. Why not start with miserable, nasty, broken Arlene? “Let’s get ourselves a really delicious dinner at Union Station,” she suggested. Arlene Hupp needed a lot of things, but what she needed first was *feeding*.

A faint spark lit those dulled, lonely eyes. “I’m on a diet—”

“Do not ever say that again, Arlene.”

The cab pulled away from the curb, down Briar Street toward Wood. Grace looked out the back window, remembering the day she’d come here. Hoping desperately not to be found, hoping for a place to lay her head. Coming up those steps with a bag in her hand and a lifetime of secrets on her back, hoping for . . .

Hoping. Just hoping.

“Good night,” Grace March said aloud as Briarwood House slid into the past.

The house answers: *And good luck*.

Briarwood House’s Good Night and Good Luck

Champagne or prosecco

St. Germain or other elderflower liqueur

Vodka

Lemon juice

1. Fill a flute half full of champagne or prosecco.
2. Add one shot of St. Germain and one shot of vodka.

3. Add a dash of lemon juice, adjusting sweetness to taste.
4. Garnish with a twist and drink to celebrate the departure of old friends or the arrival of new ones, while listening to “Come On-a My House” by Rosemary Clooney.

Epilogue

Pete

May 1956

“We hope you’ll consider taking the room, Miss Graves,” Pete said, trying not to stare. The prospective tenant was stunningly pretty, dimpled and short with waves of golden-brown hair—Pete suspected he was always going to have a thing for golden-brown hair on women. At least this one—Miss Linda Graves, newly arrived in Foggy Bottom clutching a secretarial school certificate and looking for a job in the capital—was exactly his age, nineteen. Even though he was just finishing high school, catching up on the time he’d missed, Pete thought it would be nice having a boarder his age here at home.

“It’s smaller than I was hoping, but it’s so pretty . . .” She had looked mesmerized the moment she saw the flower vine growing up the wall on the first floor, following it with her gloved fingertips all the way up three flights of stairs until Pete opened the door to 4B and she saw the warm green walls where the vine blossomed in a riot of color clear up to the gabled ceiling.

“Who painted it?”

“A past tenant.” Pete already knew he wasn’t going to mention that a man had died in 4B. Some houses might be haunted by such violence, but not this one: Grace’s old room glowed quietly, alive with sunshine and warmth, practically whispering, *You’re home!* “Maybe you’d like to stay and meet the other tenants? We have a weekly supper club on Thursday nights . . .”

By the time they came down the stairs chatting, Pete knew Linda Graves was going to take the room. And that was good; the house had been rattling just a bit with Fliss and Dr. Dan having moved back to Boston. They'd already taken the train down to visit: Angela was getting lanky, Dr. Dan looked terribly tired with the hours he was putting in at the women's clinic, and Fliss confessed she was fed up to the back teeth with the way some of her fellow nurses chided her for working when she had a daughter at home, but her dimples winked back on whenever she talked about the fertility research she was helping with. "I don't understand what this female pill is," Pete confessed, and Fliss just looked amused and said, "You'll be very glad for it in a few years."

"Oh, goodness," Linda Graves exclaimed, getting a look at the big painting hanging in the sitting room. "That's an interesting picture."

"Painted by a former resident." Pete looked at the portrait Reka had done of the Briar Club in New York at Lina's first Bake-Off, gazing at the Statue of Liberty. Harland had asked Pete's dad about borrowing it: there was talk about a big display of abstract art going on tour through Europe. *The New American Painting*, Harland said the exhibit would be called, and it was going to smack one in the eye of the Soviets, who were always touting the superiority of artistic freedom in Moscow. Pete wasn't entirely clear what someone like Harland had to do with art tours, since he worked for some branch of the CIA now, but it wasn't any of his business—he just hoped this painting got chosen. Reka would have been tickled pink. He still couldn't believe she was gone—a heart attack in the night, out of nowhere last spring. There was a nice widow living in Reka's rooms now, a woman who'd lost her husband in the Second Battle of Seoul and brought apple turnovers for Thursday night suppers, but Apartment 2B still smelled like oil paint and Pete still got a big lump in his throat whenever he passed the door.

Pete introduced Miss Graves to his mother, who began explaining house rules—quite a lot fewer of them these days. The boarders all now knew (because Pete told them) that they could appeal over her head to Pete's dad, who had his own apartment four blocks away but came around every evening to see what needed fixing, check Lina's homework, and settle any disputes. There were usually disputes because Mom was always picking fights, and maybe it wasn't the best thing having parents who fought a lot, but Pete reckoned he'd take it: at least now he and Lina had someone

fighting on *their* side. Dad wasn't perfect maybe, but he was talking about having Lina's eyesight surgically corrected so no one would ever call her Cross-Eyes again, and he insisted Pete didn't have to work at Moonlight Magnolias anymore; he also said he wasn't going to evict any boarders just because they occasionally tracked mud in the hall or had the odd guest after seven o'clock.

"I will not put up with your father interfering," Mom had shrilled, but Pete shot right back at her: "By interfering, do you mean taking an interest in our lives? When you told us for years that he didn't care about us?"

"I knew you'd take his side! I just knew it—" His mother picked as many fights with Pete as she did with his dad these days, or tried to, but Pete had learned how to tune her out. The whole house had, really—the entire atmosphere of the place had lifted. Pete wouldn't admit it for worlds, but he sometimes caught himself talking to the house when there was no one else around. *A Don't you feel better now?* whenever he fixed a loose banister spoke, or a *There, isn't that nice?* when the sitting room flowers got freshened up. And sometimes he could swear Briarwood House give a kind of contented creak in response.

Linda Graves was asking his mother about meal schedules, so Pete waved and went to collect the mail in the hall. An advertising circular for Bea; he'd hold it for her till she was back from scouting that pitcher in Bowie—she'd had her last prospect poached by a fellow Senators scout who thought Miss Verretti should stick with fetching the coffee, and Bea was swearing up and down that he wouldn't get the next one . . . One of those round-robin letters for Lina from the other Pillsbury Bake-Off contestants; he set it aside with a smile. Lina had already prepared her junior division entry form for this year's contest, and she said with a jut in her jaw (tweaking and retweaking her recipe for Raspberry Ripple Cake) that this time she was going to *win it* . . . A catalog for Nora; Pete laid that aside too. He'd worried that Nora would be leaving, too, what with that big diamond reappearing on her finger, but "No, I'm definitely staying," she said brightly, dishing up her colcannon at the last Thursday supper, and even if she stayed out late an awful lot of nights, she was wearing the diamond on her *right* hand and not her left, so who knew what was happening there.

Pete sifted the rest of the mail, hoping for a postcard from Claire, but she was a lousy correspondent. They'd only gotten one quick note since she'd

moved out, postmarked exotically from Bermuda, and a photograph: Claire smiling in a red bikini, making Pete blush (all that red hair and all that creamy bosom), sitting on a dock in front of a huge pale green house, arm around a sunburned, grinning little boy. Her boss, Mrs. Sutherland, must have been the one who took the photo; you could see her tall skinny shadow on the dock. *Awfully nice of her to offer Claire that job as social secretary*, Pete thought, though he wasn't entirely sure what a social secretary for a Washington political widow actually *did* in Bermuda.

At the very, very bottom of the mail stack, Pete saw it: an unsigned postcard showing the Brooklyn Bridge in New York, addressed to him in a familiar looping feminine writing.

Dear Hammerin' Pete,

Writing in haste—illustrations due for a children's book AND helping plan Arlene's wedding. What is it about American women and weddings? Did I mention how deadly dull her fiancé is? She runs him like a train & he seems quite happy.

Give my love to the Briar Club. I wish you were here!

Historical Note

For the very first time, I'm starting my author note with a warning: for readers who like to jump to the back and read the author note first, read no further. Reading this first *will* ruin *The Briar Club*'s big twist.

For those who have finished, read on . . .

"Where did you get the idea?" is one of the first questions asked about how a novel came to be. *The Briar Club* came together out of a pandemic-year mishmash of inspirations: a Laurie Colwin essay, an Instagram photo, a Japanese Netflix series, and a footnote from my husband's undergraduate days.

In "Alone in the Kitchen with an Eggplant" from the superb essay collection *Home Cooking*, food writer Laurie Colwin wrote with humor and heart about her years as a broke twentysomething living in a broom-closet-size apartment in New York, managing to feed her equally broke friends from a kitchenette consisting of a minifridge, a hot plate, and a dish rack parked in the bathroom. I reread that essay a lot during the pandemic, whimpering—I'd have happily cooked on a hot plate and drained spaghetti in my bathtub if I could be surrounded by loved ones, scraped plates, and half-empty bottles of wine. *Could this be a book?* I thought. *Stranger comes to town, pulls housemates together with weekly dinners in her tiny apartment?* Pretty low stakes for a Kate Quinn book, though; nobody getting bombed, arrested, or shot.

The idea wouldn't go away. It kept talking to me when I stumbled across an Instagram photo of a glorious green-walled room, all slanted ceiling and quirky angles, which had been painted over with riotous vines and flowers:

the belfry room in the Sleeper-McCann House in Massachusetts, if you want to google it. *That's the room*, I thought. *The mysterious newcomer paints the vine when she arrives!* The idea really came to life when I started Netflix's *Midnight Diner* series, where an enigmatic Tokyo cook observes the problems of a series of clients to his late-night café: *Each chapter could be a different woman in the boardinghouse—and there could be recipes!* Still not much of a plot, though.

And then my husband—whose undergrad work was in International Relations/Foreign Security and Intelligence, with a focus on post-WWII eastern Europe through the post-Soviet bloc—casually dropped a tidbit while I was watching an episode of *The Americans*. He said the deep-cover moles played by Matthew Rhys and Keri Russell would in real life quite possibly have ghosted their mission. “You know how many deep-cover agents the Soviets lost that way? The ones who got sent over, looked around, realized they had it pretty good over here, then quietly disappeared so their handlers never found them? Until maybe their grandkids got tested on Ancestry for fun and wondered why half their DNA was Russian when Grandma and Grandpa supposedly never left Iowa?”

Record scratch. I hit pause on the TV, light bulbs exploding inside my head. “Tell me more.”

A book was born.

Grace

It's difficult to determine exactly when the Soviets began their deep-cover program in which young Soviets with impeccable loyalty and language skills were trained in fake towns mocked up to look like midwestern cities. Such towns apparently existed: trainees practiced their English and knowledge of American life until they could pass flawlessly as Bob and Betty from down the street, then were inserted (sometimes singly, sometimes in pairs as married couples) into the US to collect and pass information. Grace is fictionalized, so I gave her a background—first as a woman of Ukrainian descent whose family died in the Holodomor, the horrific man-made famine that killed millions in Ukraine; then as a survivor of the Leningrad siege, a three-year period in which over a million people died of starvation, disease, and shelling—that formed a logical foundation

for her to join the percentage of deep-cover agents who decided a fake life in America was better than a real life as a Soviet spy. It's impossible to know how many made that decision, because the facts (even after the widespread recovery/sale of information following the fall of the USSR) remain incomplete. Bad news was frequently not reported internally because of the shoot-the-messenger mentality that pervaded the KGB; the very idea of deep-cover moles who had abandoned their mission was an embarrassment that would have been swept under the rug, even in the deepest reaches of the KGB's files. Perhaps 20 to 30 percent of deep-cover moles went rogue but that number may be higher—in the words of a similar defected agent in the nineties comedy *Sleepers*, extolling his new life in the West: "I earn three hundred thousand quid a year; I've got a flat in town, a cottage in the country, a string of girlfriends, and half a bloody racehorse—you think I'm going to give it all up for a bowl of red cabbage and a bedsit in Vladivostok?" I have written about bad Soviet spies (*The Rose Code*) and I have written about bad women hiding in white-picket-fence America (*The Huntress*), but here I have written about a good woman in hiding who quits spying for ordinary suburban life and regrets nothing.

Philip and Elizabeth from *The Americans* are involved in more flashy and lethal operations than most deep-cover Soviet moles, who operated quietly as information gatherers, and they were inserted into American society in the sixties and worked through the eighties—but I didn't want to tread on that territory. The 1950s interested me much more as a backdrop: what better (or worse) time for a Soviet mole to try to disappear into the States than in the early days of the Cold War, when the USSR was the big bad enemy lurking on the horizon of the American public's consciousness, when Lockheed Martin and Edwards Air Force Base were indeed involved in top-secret aviation projects racing the Soviets toward the stars, and when McCarthy was thundering in the press about Communists infiltrating American life? Thus the Red Scare became the backdrop of this book: that period when the junior senator from Wisconsin waved many lists of supposed Communists and the resulting effort to root them out destroyed countless lives, most of them utterly innocent. Loyalty oaths and background checks for suspected Communist sympathizers were nothing new (the Loyalty Program was instituted in 1947 by the Truman administration), but under McCarthy—a demagogue and a bully with a frightening ability to whip up public hysteria—the witch hunts reached their

peak. Innocent people in the entertainment industry, educational system, and the government were pressured to swear loyalty and report on their colleagues; those who did not faced loss of work, blacklisting, and jail time. Even a fleeting past interest in Communism or Socialism could spell doom, despite the fact that such censoring of personal beliefs was and is utterly against the Constitution. McCarthy was eventually brought down by his own inability to back up his claims, by the concerted efforts of principled souls like CBS journalist Edward R. Murrow, who worked tirelessly to expose his lack of credibility, and by the televised trials where the famous words were spoken: “Have you no sense of decency, sir?” It became clear to the nation that he did not, and he soon slunk under a rock, censured by the Senate, his power base gone, but he left behind a word—McCarthyism—that forever symbolizes the use of illegal and unscrupulous tactics to persecute the innocent.

Pete & Lina

Pop culture would have it that there was no better time in America to be a kid than the 1950s. (A white middle-class kid, at least.) But behind the root-beer floats and sandlot baseball games that mark our idealized view of fifties life, there were less placid currents. World War II lingered like a hangover, the civil rights movement was gathering momentum, and the atomic bomb was changing the face of science, politics, and the world. Hence the corresponding fifties urge to bury heads in sand and keep eyes firmly on the pleasures of the present: family life, entertainment, and pretending to enjoy some truly bizarre culinary dishes like Candle Salad and Chipped Beef De Luxe. Washington, D.C., seemed a great setting to examine the 1950s—far from the sophisticated capital it is now, it was then a rather sleepy southern town where segregation ruled, cops and criminals alike flocked to Pete Dailey’s for beer, and senators and judges gathered at Martin’s Tavern (still extant, with its booth where JFK reportedly proposed to Jackie!) for martinis. Boys like Pete grew up fascinated by Mickey Spillane, whose hard-boiled prose sold like hotcakes; by Wernher von Braun’s promises that man would soon land on the moon; and by the silver screen where William Holden played war heroes and Lucille Ball racked up more viewers than President Eisenhower. Girls like Lina were glued to *The*

Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet, absorbing the image of the ideal suburban family run by a loving mother in apron and heels—and culinarily inclined boys *and* girls dreamed of entering the Pillsbury Bake-Off. Long before Mary Berry and Paul Hollywood mesmerized modern viewers on *The Great British Bake Off*, Pillsbury ran its yearly contest that glorified home bakers, feting a rigorously chosen hundred contestants (including a handful of juniors in the 12–17 division) in New York to compete for the fifties version of Star Baker. Competition, then as now, was fierce: no soggy bottoms!

Nora

Washington, D.C., wasn't a mob city like New York or Las Vegas, but it had its share of organized crime: namely, the Warring family of Foggy Bottom, who ran the booze racket during Prohibition, then the numbers racket in the forties and fifties. Xavier Byrne is a fictional composite of two very real men. The first of them is Joe Nesline, a cool-nerved professional cardplayer who worked for the Warrings and frequented several D.C. bottle clubs (after-hours clubs that provided entertainment and alcohol fixings, but no alcohol). The second is Emmitt Warring, the soft-spoken tough-as-nails brains of the family who wore a five-carat diamond solitaire, lived on Macomb Street with a Great Dane named Duke, and was robbed in his home at gunpoint by George “Mad Dog” Harding in 1951. Harding worked briefly for the Warring family but was fired for lack of control (he was arrested for kidnapping and assaulting his girlfriend, then trying to break into her hospital room with flowers—a story described by the press as “Caveman Wooing”). Harding’s revenge in robbing Emmitt Warring was short-lived; he was shot in a club by Joe Nesline, who was acquitted of murder but served a year for carrying a deadly weapon. Nora is based on two women: Mary Healy, a Foggy Bottom girl who achieved the position of personal secretary to the executive officer of the National Archives, and who was threatened with losing that job if she did not break off a romantic entanglement with one of the Warrings (which she did), and Emmitt Warring’s long-term girlfriend, who lived with him nearly thirty years but kept her own apartment, her own name, and her own legal status separate from him throughout their long romance. In my mind, Nora will do the same—although Nora will get to become the first female chief of Building

and Grounds for the National Archives, unlike Mary Healy, who as a woman was denied the top job. The Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Declaration of Independence reside in the National Archives to this day for public viewing.

Reka

“Why didn’t you just leave?” is the frequently thoughtless question asked of German Jews, Socialists, and other survivors of targeted populaces as Hitler’s Third Reich began to make their lives miserable in the thirties—but as I have attempted to show through the fictional Reka, emigration was not easy. Not only was it difficult to leave a city that had before Hitler been known for vibrancy and tolerance, but other countries including the United States often required money and sponsorship from asylum seekers. Once across the water, refugees struggled with language barriers and anti-immigrant prejudice—and that’s without the possibility that unscrupulous sponsors might strip them of their valuables, which did happen. The Sutherland family is fictional, but their sins are not: some US soldiers committed war crimes on their post-Normandy drive toward Berlin, such as the shooting of unarmed prisoners—and sponsors of many nations took advantage of the refugees they were supposed to be helping. Reka’s experience is partially inspired by the history of a family friend whose Jewish relations sent valuables ahead of them halfway around the world, as encouraged by a South Africa-based sponsor, but the sponsor died in an untimely accident and their children made the decision to keep the entire shipment of valuables for themselves, send no further aid, and condemn an entire family back in Germany to the camps. Reka at least manages to escape with her life and recover her stolen belongings: her sketches are based on some real drawings Gustav Klimt made in preparation for his much-heralded (also much-condemned) Faculty Paintings. The paintings were reportedly burned at Schloss Immendorf in 1945 by retreating German forces; if they survived, they have never been seen again and exist now only in a few sketchings and photographs. As for Reka’s own artistic career, it might seem absurd that the CIA funded modern art in a blow for the culture war against the USSR, but it is very true: government funds sent a sensational collection of abstract expressionist art called *The New American*

Painting on a tour of Europe, comprised of works by Pollock, Rothko, and many more. One woman artist was represented in the collection—Elaine de Kooning, who specialized in abstract portraits, including a famous depiction of JFK in the sixties. Reka’s work is based on hers.

Fliss

For all that World War II dominates the entire decade of the forties, the Korean War was treated with a collective national shrug by many Americans of the 1950s—except for those who had loved ones involved. Doctors were in particular demand, resulting in the so-called Doctor Draft, and those sent to man M.A.S.H. units or more permanent hospitals on bases in Korea or Japan might go years without seeing their families. As a navy wife I’m no stranger to long separations and deployments, but wives like Fliss didn’t even have regular phone calls—a tough situation for any military spouse, much less one suffering from depression and feeling even more like an outsider during the baby boom for wanting to stop at one child. Fliss thus became the perfect set of eyes to examine one of the decade’s greatest advancements: the birth control pill. Fertility suppressants had been debated and studied for decades, but medical trials were finally carried out in the fifties when the extraordinary Dr. John Rock was recruited to the cause: a fertility specialist who did indeed state that religion made a very poor scientist and whose Catholic faith didn’t interfere with his belief in contraception as an aid to women’s health. The birth control pill was not created without controversy—the involvement of Margaret Sanger and her embrace of the eugenics movement; the enrollment of institutionalized women in trials by their supervising doctor without their consent; the Puerto Rican trial subjects recruited without the knowledge that they were receiving an experimental drug—but Dr. Rock joined the project in the full belief that access to contraception was critical to women’s overall health and happiness. Inserted here as a relative to the fictional Fliss, he ran early trials for what would become the modern birth control pill, outwardly labeled as fertility trials to get around Massachusetts law. As a result of those trials, women like Fliss and Sydney could opt out of the birth explosion for which the fifties is famous. As an English outsider, Fliss was also a good set of eyes to examine American segregation—Britain was

certainly not without racism, but it was not institutionalized in the same way as the American system. Men like Claude Cormier (I made him a veteran of the Tuskegee Airmen as a tip of the hat to one of the bravest and most decorated all-Black fighter groups of WWII) served their country with honor, were lauded in Europe, then went home to be treated like absolute garbage. Sharp-eyed readers might also have noticed that English Fliss's aunt Beth is one of my heroines in *The Rose Code*!

Bea

As anyone who has watched the movie or TV series *A League of Their Own* knows, women baseball players were called up during WWII to form the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, keeping the populace entertained while male baseball players went off to fight. The AAGPBL continued on past the war, but by the early fifties attendance was petering out and televised baseball meant that more people were watching from home than in the stands. Nineteen fifty-four spelled the end of the league, and I have always wondered how that affected the women who had to hang up their cleats. Bea's ambition to become a scout is no pipe dream: despite the fact that professional sports was and is such a masculine enclave, ex-baseball and softball star Edith Houghton became major league baseball's first female scout in 1946, traveling around Pennsylvania signing talent for the Phillies. And on April 17, 1953, Mickey Mantle really did hit one of the biggest home runs in baseball history in a Griffith Park game against the Senators!

Claire

Inside the Red Scare, another persecution was taking place: the Lavender Scare, where LGBTQIA+ citizens were persecuted with nearly the same enthusiasm as were Communists. Gay men made up the bulk of the accused, but lesbians lost jobs and livelihoods, too. Claire is fictional, but her background echoes the desperate struggle for survival of many families after the Wall Street crash. Like countless young women of the time, she

flocked to Washington, D.C., in pursuit of the white-collar government jobs made available to young women during and after the war, helping create the image of the city-living career gal. City-living but often still parochial and prejudiced: E. Frederic Morrow, adviser to the Commerce Department and later the first Black man to hold an executive position at the White House, commented that most of the white secretaries in the office steno pool refused to work for him, even as he was routinely insulted and sidelined by the administration supposedly soliciting his opinion. He would go on to become the first Black vice president of Bank of America and write several books, including *Black Man in the White House*. Claire's other employer, Senator Margaret Chase Smith from Maine, is an equally impressive historical figure. A lone voice to speak out on the Senate floor against McCarthy, she delivered the famous Declaration of Conscience outlining four basic principles of Americanism: the right to criticize, to hold unpopular beliefs, to protest, and to hold independent thought. An enraged McCarthy did his best to destroy her, but she outlasted him, remaining a senator until 1973. It was remarked that if a man had delivered the Declaration of Conscience, he would have been the next president.

Arlene

Did the US Army really stage massive war games in the Texas heartland, simulating the Communist invasion and then the retaking of the town of Lampasas? Yes, it did: Operation Longhorn, a mock occupation complete with mock propaganda, mock arrests, and mock media broadcasts. As Arlene comments, it is truly amazing the stupid things our nation's army managed get approved, get funded, and then implement with completely straight faces.

As always, I have made small changes to the historical record in order to serve the story. The murder of George Harding and subsequent trial of his killer was moved up to compress the timeline. Two sources conflicted as to the precise date of Dr. Rock's birth control trials; I chose the earlier one as it suited the story better. The riot at Chickland Club occurred as I described it (a riot erupting at a mixed club, police reluctantly escorting several

interracial couples to safety, COMMUNIST scrawled on the windows) but a year earlier; similarly, the Lampasas town invasion happened somewhat later than I have implied here. The art show Reka attends in New York was very real, but it took place in June not October. I was not able to determine whether an Englishwoman would have been allowed to join the United States Cadet Nurse Corps or not, so Fliss's admission to those ranks is guesswork on my part, and Claire's under-the-counter job as an atomic pinup girl is another educated guess. Pageant winners competed to be crowned "Miss Atomic" and burlesque dancers posed in skimpy bathing suits and mushroom-cloud headpieces, but human nature being what it is, there were undoubtedly more X-rated versions. Finally, a few details of the 1954 Pillsbury Bake-Off have been changed to suit the story: in reality it took place later in the year, and I wasn't able to determine if friends and family could watch their loved ones compete in the Waldorf-Astoria ballroom.

Most of the writers I know, myself included, have a pandemic book—the book into which we poured all the uncertainty, upheaval, and darkness we were feeling during lockdown. I like to think of *The Briar Club* as my postpandemic book, a novel that erupted out of a desperate need for light, for connection, for friendship. A need (like Grace's) to gather round the table, to feed, and to fix. I hope you enjoyed the results.

Acknowledgments

I owe thanks to many people who helped me during the writing of this book. To the folks who gave me insider details on the Pillsbury Bake-Off, Earl Koteen (son of 1954 Bake-Off winner Dorothy Koteen) and Debbie of the lovely Culinary Cellar blog. To Bob McDowell, who won the “name a character after you” raffle at the Southwest Florida Reading Festival and didn’t at all mind a murderous Russian mole getting his name as a cover identity; and Elizabeth Bandyk, who won a similar prize at the Amelia Island Book Festival and who I hope will smile to find herself in these pages as a fastball-slinging member of the AAGPBL. To fabulous author Adrianna Cuevas, whom I was lucky enough to meet at the Southwest Florida Reading Festival, and whose casual mention of Operation Longhorn abruptly upended my entire character arc for Arlene—thank you, Adrianna, for emailing me all those articles so I could rip my planned ending apart and put it back together. To equally fabulous author Erin Litteken for beta-reading on a tight deadline and helping me fine-tune the details of Grace’s Ukrainian heritage. To Kevan Lyon, literary agent extraordinaire; my editor, Tessa Woodward; and the entire fabulous team at William Morrow. To Stephanie Dray (extra thanks for your expounding on the importance of constitutional documents, a monologue I gave straight to Nora!) and Lea Nolan, my wonderful critique partners who red-penned my rough draft into something infinitely more readable. Thank you to *New York Times* bestselling cookbook author and food blogger Natasha Kravchuck of Natasha’s Kitchen, for allowing the use of her delicious recipes for rassolnik and medovik. And always, thanks to the Overseas Gladiator, who

acted as sounding board, test-kitchen cook, and author for every other recipe in this book.

About the Author

KATE QUINN is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of historical fiction. A native of Southern California, she attended Boston University, where she earned bachelor's and master's degrees in classical voice. A lifelong history buff, she wrote four novels in the Empress of Rome Saga and two books set in the Italian Renaissance before turning to the twentieth century with *The Alice Network*, *The Huntress*, *The Rose Code*, and *The Diamond Eye*. She has written several collaborative novels, including *Ribbons of Scarlet: A Novel of the French Revolution's Women* with five other female historical fiction authors, and *The Phoenix Crown* with Janie Chang. All have been translated into multiple languages. She and her husband now live in Maryland with three black rescue dogs.

Discover great authors, exclusive offers, and more at hc.com.

Also by Kate Quinn

The Phoenix Crown

The Diamond Eye

The Rose Code

The Huntress

The Alice Network

Lady of the Eternal City

Empress of the Seven Hills

Daughters of Rome

Mistress of Rome

Ribbons of Scarlet

The Lion and the Rose

The Serpent and the Pearl

The logo for Bookperk is centered on a black rectangular background. It features a large, faint white circle behind the text. The word "Bookperk" is written in a sans-serif font, with "Book" in yellow and "perk" in white.

[Sign up for Bookperk](#) and get e-book bargains, sneak peeks, special offers, and more—delivered straight to your inbox.

SIGN UP NOW

Copyright

Recipes for medovik and rassonik © Natasha Kravchuk, *New York Times* bestselling author and creator of Natasha's Kitchen.

This book is a work of fiction. References to real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales are intended only to provide a sense of authenticity, and are used fictitiously. All other characters, and all incidents and dialogue, are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real.

THE BRIAR CLUB. Copyright © 2024 by Paul Wehmeyer Productions LLC. All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the nonexclusive, nontransferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse-engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins e-books.

FIRST EDITION

Cover design by Elsie Lyons

Cover photographs © Aimee Marie Lewis/Arcangel Images (key hole); © Getty Images; © Shutterstock

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

Digital Edition JULY 2024 ISBN: 978-0-06-324476-4

Print ISBN: 978-0-06-324474-0

About the Publisher

Australia

HarperCollins Publishers Australia Pty. Ltd.
Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street
Sydney, NSW 2000, Australia
www.harpercollins.com.au

Canada

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd
Bay Adelaide Centre, East Tower
22 Adelaide Street West, 41st Floor
Toronto, Ontario, M5H 4E3
www.harpercollins.ca

India

HarperCollins India
A 75, Sector 57
Noida
Uttar Pradesh 201 301
www.harpercollins.co.in

New Zealand

HarperCollins Publishers New Zealand
Unit D1, 63 Apollo Drive
Rosedale 0632
Auckland, New Zealand
www.harpercollins.co.nz

United Kingdom

HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
1 London Bridge Street

London SE1 9GF, UK
www.harpercollins.co.uk

United States
HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
195 Broadway
New York, NY 10007
www.harpercollins.com