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2006

## Ladies in Waiting: A Collection of Short Stories

Anne Fox

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**LADIES IN WAITING**  
**A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES**

Anne Fox, B.A., B.S.

An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Lindenwood  
College in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Writing

## ABSTRACT

The stories in this collection feature female characters, mainly grown women. The exception is "Ruby Begonia" in which the eponymous main character is a little girl with a gift for seeing and believing in things others cannot see.

In "Homefront," Peggy decides to leave her daughter with her mother-in-law in order to save herself. She suffers from depression. While leaving a daughter behind is not viewed as good mothering, it is infinitely better to having that daughter suffer the effects of her mother's illness.

In "Lessons Learned," the young teacher learns to work things out for the benefits of her two students, teaching them both a lesson, instead of concentrating on the perpetrator as most disciplinary codes demand. In so doing, she learns a lesson to look beyond what she observes.

Olivia's story is told in "Olivia." She is a woman who pursues what she wants, usually gets what she wants, and does not care who she hurts in the process. The story is told from the viewpoint of her newest victim.

"Good Advice" is the story of rearing children and being the children's parents and not their friends. The two main characters are sisters Mary and Joan and they observe the influences of modern society on child-rearing as they shop at a local mall. This story is a departure from the others in that it fits in the science fiction genre, but the main point of the story is that good advice is good advice, even if that advice is decades old.

The final story in the collection is "The Wedding." Ellie's daughter Robyn is getting married and Ellie faces her past, tries to embrace her future, but then, as unpredictable as life is, an unknown is revealed.

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**COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY:**

Michael Castro, Ph.D.  
Chairperson and Advisor

Adjunct Instructor T. Glenn Irwin

Dedicated to my husband, my children—  
I love you.

XOXO

WITH thanks to those who would not let me quit, to those who gave support both with pen and ear, to those who appreciate how my mind sometimes works and love me for it anyway.

--A.F.



## Table of Contents

Introduction . . . The Ladies Who Wait . . . . .	v
Ruby Begonia . . . . .	3
Homefront . . . . .	16
Lessons Learned . . . . .	25
Olivia . . . . .	39
Good Advice . . . . .	56
The Wedding . . . . .	66

## The Ladies Who Wait

When I started the MFA program at Lindenwood University, I was not sure that I would finish. In my first cluster of classes, I found myself surrounded by people who considered themselves writers. People who described themselves as writers and who wrote every day. I did not fit into that category. When going around the table and introducing ourselves, I was the only one in that group that did not mention writing. I said I was a wife, a mother, a teacher. I felt out of place because I did not have the urge to write as the rest of the class did. My small voice of inexperience could not match the booming voices of published writers.

For many years prior to enrolling, I focused on finishing my undergraduate degrees and then on teaching. I was the new kid at school, the new kid on the street. Receiving a Master's degree seemed to me to be an uncatchable firefly floating beyond my reach. I could easily catch the ones that stayed in the grass—the ladies in waiting—who waited for their potential mates. But it was not those in the grass that attracted my attention, it was those who floated beyond my fingertips, slipping in and out of the gloaming. I wanted those. And so, I focused on achieving that goal.

I persevered through that first class because I realized that I could put together a short story and write a poem or two. They were not of the best quality since I had not written anything in over ten years, but they passed the critique sessions and even garnered a few compliments. As the first class progressed, I realized that everyone in the class possessed different skills of writing. Some

were wonderful poetry writers, painting pictures with precise words and phrases, and others were wonderful story writers, packing action, plot, and character development into page turners. I read, I listened, I critiqued, and I listened some more. I took advice and discarded advice; I spoke in defense of my stories. I was finding my voice, and I realized that I would have to try new things, new approaches to writing in order to develop my voice, to make it stronger. I began to move from the easy-to-catch fireflies in the grass and to reach for the floating ones.

As I passed through the clusters and revisited some of my favorite short stories, I began to experiment with style. A fan of women writers such as Edith Wharton, Kate Chopin, Shirley Jackson, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Jane Austen, and Jodi Picoult, I took those stories I liked and tried some of the techniques in my own writing. For example, I liked the surprise endings, with the author providing clues, and I tried that technique with "The Wedding." One of my favorite short stories is "Roman Holiday" by Edith Wharton with the surprise ending in which Mrs. Slade discovers that her friend's daughter is her own husband's daughter. I remember reading it for the first time in seventh grade and gasping in delight at the ending. I gave this technique a try in "The Wedding."

Another favorite short story is "The Story of An Hour" by Kate Chopin, a story where the ending is given in the first line, but since it is the first line, many readers do not process it as important to the story. Though I did not manage to create a story of my own that precisely copied this technique, I have tried to

embed clues to several of my stories' endings throughout the stories themselves. In experimenting with different techniques, I began to refine my voice.

The women writers listed above were and are great influences on my writing. I like to read (I believe I like to read more than I like to write) and I jot down ideas and words from books that I have read. In Shirley Jackson's "The Possibility of Evil," I often wonder what happens to Mrs. Strangeworth after she discovers that her roses have been cut. I liked Mrs. Strangeworth's character because she was so evil even though she appeared nice to everyone in town. She was the model for the mother-in-law in my story "Homefront." My character, Mother Duvaney, is nice to everyone in town, to her son, to her grand-daughter, but she is downright evil to Peggy. It is not physical abuse that Mother Duvaney heaps on Peggy, it is verbal abuse. Mother Duvaney slaps Peggy with harsh comments and then pinches Peggy's bruises with her dismissive actions. Nothing Peggy did was good enough for Mother Duvaney. I even chose to call the mother-in-law *Mother* Duvaney because *Mrs.* Duvaney sounded too friendly and friendliness is not a big part of that character's make-up, just like Mrs. Strangeworth. Like Mrs. Strangeworth in "The Possibility of Evil," Mother Duvaney is a character that I wanted readers to dislike. I believe I accomplished that with this story bringing me one step closer to my goal of receiving my MFA.

Another character of mine that has an evil side is Olivia, eponym of "Olivia." She was the first evil character I created, and I used an exercise I learned in my first cluster. In that class the instructor had us describe a villain's place. Immediately, I thought of dark shadows, cold nights, and wicked laughs.

My villain had dark hair, a thin line of a beard, and squinty eyes—definitely not creative. Obviously, I did not have high hopes for that exercise because I had never before created an evil character. Villains were the phlegm of life, the people you did not want to meet on the streets, the personification of wickedness against which I had been warned my entire life. How could I, the good girl, the good student, the good daughter, the good wife, the good mother, create something so out of my realm of experience. I re-read some of Jodi Picoult's writings and decided that there was a reason that I liked her stuff: she wrote about people who do evil things, whether because of circumstance or character make-up. I gave the assignment a shot.

And then a funny thing happened: I created a villain who turned out not to be a villain.

I created a setting, actually, a room, that differed from the villain I pictured. Sun shone, breezes blew, and children played on the playground. My villain could see those children from his window as he stood in the billowing curtains. I had ideas of him stalking a child or a child's parent or that he lived close to the playground because the sounds of laughing children provided a stark contrast to his hit-man lifestyle. However, he turned out to be good man, a man struggling with inner issues and who wants to do the right thing.

From that exercise I created a character for my first short story (which is not part of this project) that had readers thinking he was evil from the first page because of the setting and the shadows in which he sat. Though I enjoyed creating a villain, initially, I was delighted that a little of the dark side could be

incorporated into a “good” character. I took this concept a step further as I concentrated on women characters—some are good, some are not so good, but with all my characters, I want readers to identify with them. What is fun about creating an evil character is that I decide just how terrible that character will be. It is the creation. It is the control. And most of all, it is that I enjoy the process.

From that first cluster two years ago, I have come full circle. I did finish the MFA program. I did catch that elusive floating firefly even though, at times, I felt I had no breath left with which to move forward. However, the firefly would not come to me, I had to pursue it relentlessly in order to catch it. In doing so, I realized that if I took advice, and gave advice, and tinkered with my stories, I would improve my writing. I did not have to chase the firefly, because as a lady-in-waiting, a writer honing my craft, that firefly would eventually come to me. The steady blinking of my computer would act as a beacon for my far-flung thoughts and ideas, and as I tapped away at the keyboard, those thoughts were transferred to paper, completing the circle of pursuit and capture.

The title of my final project is Ladies in Waiting: A Collection of Short Stories. All of the stories have female leads—women as homemakers and teachers; women as young girls and young wives; women as warm-hearted grandmothers and cold-hearted sirens. They are the silent sufferers of years past, as with Peggy in “Homefront.” They are the soil for a family to take root in, as with the grandma in “Ruby Begonia” and the sisters Joan and Mary in “Good Advice.” Women are the strength in a family, as with Ellie in “The Wedding.” They are the bedrock, the foundation, the pillar of life. And yet, like the female

firefly waiting patiently in the grass for its mate to come to her, these women are often overlooked yet are returned to again and again.

All of these women characters speak from a side that often goes unheard simply because they are female, and this is a big part of my writing voice. I liked the idea that my characters speak for themselves and take matters under control. In this respect, authors like Jodi Picoult and Edith Wharton have influenced me, have shown me how to develop a writer's voice. Their central female characters are built of sturdy stuff, and they exhibit this characteristic through different social, familial, and political situations. I wanted my female characters to do the same things.

As a result, I wrote stories with capable female leads who exhibit their strength differently—quietly like Peggy in “Homefront,” vocally like Joan and Mary in “Good Advice,” supportive like the grandma in “Ruby Begonia,” and lovingly silent like Ellie in “The Wedding.” In “Lessons Learned,” Jodie Piper learns to see beyond what written codes tell her to do and what older, tenured teachers expect her to do and discovers for herself the power of helping students help themselves. Olivia, in her own story, is obnoxious and catty and uncaring. She is a part of every woman I know, only that part is often hidden behind the public persona. She was a great character to write, and I enjoyed getting to know her.

With all my characters, I feel that I have to understand them. I have to know that Olivia wants more than her life will give her before I can impart that to my readers in a believable way. I knew I wanted to create a disliked character; I

just did not know how much fun it would be. Olivia is the dark side of human nature and she is not afraid to show it. She is the epitome of how my mother always instructed me how not to behave. And what fun it is to create a character who acts in ways that I never would.

From that first cluster to now, I have developed a voice strong enough to be heard—in discussions and in stories—and that keeps growing stronger. I am no longer that new kid; I am a writer now. It is wonderful. And that firefly? Indeed, I caught it, and tucked it close to my heart, and wrote these stories, but then I let it go so that others may enjoy its beauty. And that is why I share these writings.

-- A. Fox



LADIES IN WAITING

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

Ruby Begonia

“Ruby Begonia! Ruby Begonia!”

Ruby looked up from her story she was reading aloud to her friends. She knew that voice. More importantly, she knew that tone. Gran’ma wanted her home. Now.

She closed her book and looked sadly at her friends. “Gotta go. Sorry.” Louder and with her chin raised to the heavens, she called, “Coming, Gran’ma!” She stood and stretched while her friends fluttered around her.

Again she heard her Gran’ma, only closer this time. “Ruby Begonia! I swear if you’re in that cemetery again, I swear . . .”

Ruby shrugged at her friends and repeated, “Gotta go. Sorry.” Amid a chorus of disappointment, she picked her way through the headstones until she could see the white frame house of her Gran’ma and Pappy.

“Coming!” she hollered to her gran’ma standing at the edge of the backyard abutting the tail end of the cemetery. Her gran’ma stood with one hand atop a spindle on the iron gate looking to spot her. Ruby knew her gran’ma couldn’t see her just yet so she turned around and waved good-bye to her friends. They waved in return and floated away.

RuthAnn spotted her as she came around the Lindholtzer memorial. She sighed but raised her hand in greeting. *What are we going to do with this child?* she wondered as Ruby waved to her. She sighed once more as Ruby slowly walked towards her. *Ah, she did indeed look like her momma,* she thought. *Just like her momma at that age with her long brown hair swinging in a ponytail.* She

smiled at the memory. Her little girl, Lacey, also liked to play among the headstones. The difference between Lacey and her daughter Ruby Begonia was that Lacey played in the cemetery with other children. Children that RuthAnn and her husband, Ivy, could see. Ruby Begonia seemed to play with children only she could see.

RuthAnn had heard of people who communicated with the deceased. She had even had a Ouija board when she was young, but she never played it. It scared her. What if it really did move on its own? RuthAnn knew that she would be scared sillier than a fox with hounds after it. And now her grand-daughter said she could see angels. Whatever was she going to do?

Shaking her head and straining to see Ruby Begonia, RuthAnn rubbed her left shoulder with her right hand as she glanced at the sky. An ache in her shoulder always foretold a change in the weather, but those clouds looked innocent enough. At any rate, she needed to get Ruby Begonia out of that cemetery.

"I'm sorry, Gran'ma. I was just reading a story, and I didn't notice the sun's passing over," Ruby explained as she opened the cemetery's rear gate and stood next to her Gran'ma. "I'm real sorry if I scared you."

"You didn't scare me, child, I knew where you were." She put her arm across Ruby's shoulders and pulled her close. "I was just hoping you weren't where I knew you were."

"Oh, Gran'ma, you know I like to read to my friends," Ruby smiled back as she spun away from her gran'ma and danced backwards. "I've got lots of

friends who like to listen to my stories. And we talk, Gran'ma, we talk about lots of things."

"Really? And just what do you talk about with these imaginary friends?" RuthAnn turned to latch the gate and gave a quick sweep of the cemetery yard with her eyes. She didn't see anyone.

"Gran'ma, they're not 'maginary." Ruby stopped and stood with one hand on her hip. RuthAnn had to hide a smile. "We talk about my daddy and my momma. They told me that I would hear from my momma real soon." She looked indignant that RuthAnn dared to say her friends weren't real.

"Now, Ruby, you understand why you can't go around town talking about these friends of yours, don't you?" Ruby nodded. "These friends aren't real, honey."

"But Gran'ma, they're real to me." Ruby turned around and faced the house. RuthAnn had to walk a bit faster with her head bent low to catch Ruby's words. "And they're nice to me. I don't feel so sad when I talk to them."

"Ah, Ruby." RuthAnn caught and turned her so they were face-to-face. She knelt so that their faces were on an even keel. *Oh my, Ruth Ann thought, I'd forgotten how like her momma's eyes were Ruby Begonia's. Greener than rain-washed grass and clearer than the water in Kitchen Hills Lake.*

"Ruby." She searched her grand-daughter's face looking for a hint of whimsy but finding none. "Ruby, I know *you* believe they're real, but honey, these friends of yours don't show themselves to me or Pappy." She brushed a few wayward tendrils off Ruby's forehead. Ruby hung her head. Giving her a hard

hug, RuthAnn said, "Oh, Ruby, I know you're smart and pretty and loving, but there's folks in town who spread rumors, and since your momma's off fighting a war, I've got to protect you, me and your Pappy do, and we hate it when the townsfolks talk about you. We love you, Ruby, but you've got to stop telling other folks about your *friends* that don't exist."

Ruby jerked her head up. "But Gran'ma, you just said you believed me. And my friends *are* real. They just don't like to show themselves to everybody." She stamped her foot.

RuthAnn stood and placed her hands on the small of her back as she stretched out the kinks that came with watching over an eight-year-old girl with an over-the-top imagination. "Ruby," she said as she took her grand-daughter's hand. "Let's not tell anyone that you were in the cemetery again today."

At Ruby's mutinous look, she said, "Ruby, it's best this way. Okay?" She gave her hand a little shake. "Ruby?"

Ruby nodded and grabbed RuthAnn around the middle, squeezing tight. "Okay, Gran'ma, I'll try."

RuthAnn nodded. "That's all I ask. Now you need to get in the house and snap those beans for supper. Pappy'll be wantin' it as soon as he gets home."

"Yes'm, Gran'ma," Ruby said as she climbed the steps to the back stoop. She paused when she reached for the green screendoor. "Can we have extra butter on them, Gran'ma?"

"I declare, Ruby Begonia, you do like your butter!"

“Yes’m, I do,” declared Ruby. She skipped into the house, letting the screendoor bang shut behind her. “And so does Pappy,” she called.

RuthAnn Carthage laughed out loud at her grand-daughter’s remark. She turned and faced the west, shielding her eyes from the sinking sun, looking for Ivy’s truck. Ivy was Ruby’s grand-daddy, married for 42 years to RuthAnn. For 41 of those 42 years, they had lived in the small southern Missouri town of Kitchen Hills, and for 38 of those 42 years, Ivy had been the caretaker of Crimson Creek Cemetery. Twice weekly, he mowed the grass around the tombstones. Occasionally, he planted a shrub here or there around a grave that hadn’t seen a visitor in many months. He kept the cemetery free of clutter, and once the young boys in the area learned of Ivy’s predilection for chasing them off the property with a shot-gun, empty beer cans and discarded cigarette butts were a thing of the past. He didn’t get paid for the upkeep; he felt it was the least he could do because the cemetery was home to his folks, RuthAnn’s folks, and two of Ivy and RuthAnn’s six children. The only person Ivy couldn’t seem to keep out of the cemetery was Ruby Begonia.

“Gran’ma!” Ruby pressed her small face to the screendoor. “I hope Pappy brings me a letter from Momma!”

“Now, Ruby,” RuthAnn said, walking up the steps. “You know how long it takes to get a letter from Iraq to here, and sometimes she just doesn’t have the time to write.”

"I know, Gran'ma, but I'd like to get one anyway." She helped RuthAnn set the table with blue-and-white china that once belonged to Ruby's great-grandmother.

"One of my friends said I would hear from her real soon."

"Ruby."

"No, Gran'ma, it's true. I believe her. I'll get a letter from my momma real soon." She focused her attention on setting the silverware. RuthAnn watched her through the screendoor. "Okay, Ruby. I'll just wait out here for Pappy."

"Okay, Gran'ma. I'll put extra butter on the beans."

RuthAnn let a low laugh escape her as she turned to sit on the back steps. Ever since Lacey had volunteered for duty with her food service unit, she and Pappy had kept watch over Ruby. Ruby's father lived in the next town over—Plimpton—but worked the nightshift at the factory and couldn't take proper care of Ruby. He visited on the weekends. The brown-haired, freckle-faced little girl added quite a bit of bounce to their lives, but they loved it. Ruby stayed in her momma's old room and went to the same grade school as her momma. A lot of the things Ruby did reminded RuthAnn of her daughter. The biggest difference, of course, was Ruby's friends.

When Lacey was young, she had lots of friends. RuthAnn and Ivy had six children, four of whom survived infancy, and among them the little house was filled to bursting with kids. And all of them liked to play in the cemetery, especially hide-n-seek at night. It seemed it was an honor among the elementary school set to be asked to play in Crimson Creek Cemetery with the Carthage

children since Ivy's reputation with that shotgun was well-known. Not one parent had complained about their choice of playground—until Ruby began telling stories about her friends. She had even gone so far as to tell Mr. Watson, the dime-store owner, that his wife sent her love. And Mrs. Watson's been dead these five years past! In a town as small as Kitchen Hills, it took no time at all for that tale to make the rounds. Parents stopped allowing their kids come to the Carthage house. Nothing RuthAnn or Ivy said could change their minds. Ruby got lonelier and lonelier and took to spending more time in the cemetery. And heaven help her, RuthAnn didn't always have the heart to make Ruby come home.

Ivy's truck pulling into the gravel drive interrupted her thoughts. RuthAnn stood at the same time as Ruby rushed out the screendoor. His truck came to a halt a few yards beyond the house and several yards from the wooden shed. Ivy stepped from the cab and slapped his cap against his thigh.

"How're my girls?" he called.

Ruby threw herself at Ivy who caught her in mid-flight and swung her in a big circle and then pulled her in for a quick hug. "Hi, Pappy!" Ruby whispered against his neck. Ivy patted Ruby on the back and set her down.

"And hello to you, too," he said.

RuthAnn had walked to the truck and held up her arms for her own hug. Ivy obliged, then with his arm around RuthAnn's waist, the three of them walked back to the kitchen.



“Saw a bunch of birds flying today; looks like we’ll get that rain we need,” Ivy said.

“Good, good. I was feeling it in my shoulder today, too. My garden could use some rain, for sure. The tomatoes are happy with this dry weather, but a little rain never hurt nobody,” RuthAnn replied.

“Mmmmm, fresh green beans,” Ivy said with his eyes closed as he savored the smell coming through the screendoor. “Ladies,” he said, opening the door and making a grand sweep with his arm.

“With lots and lots of butter, Pappy,” Ruby informed him as she walked past. She grinned at Ivy as he winked his approval.

After dinner, Ruby settled in front of the television in the living room to watch one of her many favorite movies. RuthAnn and Ivy sat in the kitchen finishing their coffee.

“Saw something today that made me pull over to the side of the road,” Ivy said.

RuthAnn heard the odd note in his voice and reached across the table to cover Ivy’s hand holding the coffee mug. His eyes were downcast and the sun through the window added a halo around his snow-white hair. “What was it?”

Ivy looked up. “A train of tanks.”

RuthAnn sat back in her chair. “A train of tanks?”

Ivy nodded. “A train of tanks. I just couldn’t keep on driving. It was a little past six this morning and I was heading up Highway 101 when the train appeared from my right. I looked up and saw the tanks.” He took a drink of

coffee. "Since the train was coming out of the trees, I couldn't see all the cars at once so I figured I'd see three, maybe four or five tanks, but I counted twenty-four in all. Twenty-four tanks. Not a one of them covered, either. All of them out in the open, just as you please. Painted in beiges and browns to better disguise them in the sand, I guess, but it sure was a shocker."

"Why did you pull off the highway?" asked RuthAnn.

"I had to. I thought of our Lacey over there, fighting the war. And I thought of the Thomason kid who was killed last year, and the Lindholtzer twins who came home last month." Ivy rubbed both hands through his thinning gray hair and then wrapped one arm around the back of his chair while fidgeting with his coffee mug with the other. "I thought of a lot of stuff. I had been whistling along to the radio, and suddenly, out of nowhere, the war was right in front of me." He looked at RuthAnn. "It wasn't so very far away anymore, it was right in front of me."

RuthAnn went around the table to hug Ivy from behind. Ivy reached up to pat RuthAnn on her arm. "It was a shocker, that's all. Then I drove into town and checked the box, but there was no letter from Lacey."

RuthAnn walked to the sink and rinsed out her coffee mug. "Well, Ruby'll be disappointed, that's for sure."

"Disappointed for what?" Ruby asked as she walked to Ivy's chair.

Ivy pulled her to his lap and gave her a kiss on top of her head. "No letter from your momma, darlin'."

Ruby twisted her head so that she could see into Ivy's face. "No letter? Are you sure? My friends told me I would get one. I was hoping it was today."

"Sorry, Rube, no letter today."

"It's okay, Pappy. I might get one tomorrow." With that, Ruby jumped down from Ivy's lap. "C'mon in the living room; Dorothy's going to get her ruby slippers," she said and walked back to the movie.

Ivy shook his head as he smiled at his grand-daughter. "Maybe it wasn't a bad sign, after all, RuthAnn. Maybe I saw those tanks just to remind me where my daughter was." He looked at RuthAnn. "Maybe it wasn't a bad sign, after all. D'you think?"

RuthAnn sighed and held out her hand to Ivy. "I don't know, Ivy. We'll pray on it. Right now, we have a date with our grand-daughter and a movie."

Ivy took her hand. "She still talking about those imaginary friends of hers? I thought you told her to stay out of the cemetery."

"Yes, I told her to stay away from there but it's like telling a child to stay out of the creek. It just pulls her in." They stopped in the doorway to the living room. "And she told me today that she doesn't feel so sad when she 'talks' to them. She's so lonely, Ivy." RuthAnn shook her head. "I don't know what else to do. Folks in town ask me about Ruby and her friends, and it's getting so that I don't like to go to town anymore because I know they're snickering at us behind our backs."

They both looked at Ruby sitting on the plaid sofa in front of the television.

"I understand."

He gave RuthAnn a quick kiss on the temple. "You're as lovely today as the day I married you."

RuthAnn laughed. "Oh, go on."

Ivy kissed her again. "Come on, let's join Ruby."

They walked to the sofa and sat on either side of Ruby. They had just settled in when the doorbell rang. Ruby turned off the television while Ivy walked to the front door and RuthAnn went to the curtains where she peeked out. She saw a navy blue sedan parked on the road in front of the house.

Ivy opened the door to reveal two uniformed men—men in army dress greens. He turned around and said, "Hey Ruby, I left an envelope of papers on the front seat of my truck. Would you go and get it for me, please?" He watched as Ruby skipped through the living room and out the screendoor. He gestured for the two men to come in.

"Mr. Carthage?" asked the first man in as he removed his cover and tucked it under his arm. "I'm Captain Schmidt and this is Chaplain Sundersen. We've got some news about your daughter, Staff Sergeant Lacey Flowers."

RuthAnn had come over to stand next to Ivy and now grabbed his arm. Ivy gently took her hand and held it, and the two of them led the way into the living room. They heard the screendoor slam at the same time that Ruby called, "Pappy! I couldn't find the envelope." Ivy and RuthAnn stopped to intercept Ruby before she saw the two uniformed men, but they were too slow. Ruby

skidded to a halt, her eyes wide as she looked from her grandparents to the two men. "Pappy?"

"Ruby, honey, come here, darlin'." Ivy held out his hand as he walked towards Ruby.

Ruby, however, would have none of it and backed away. "What are they doing here, Pappy?"

Fear and confusion rolled across Ruby's face followed quickly by an understanding that no eight-year-old should comprehend. Ruby's tears came hot and fast as the words worked themselves up from her throat. Hopeful words. "What? Why, why are they here?" The words seemed to push Ruby backwards and her feet tried to keep up. She stumbled once and held onto her dinner chair, the same chair in the same spot where her momma always sat when she visited.

RuthAnn reached for her. "Ruby, honey, come sit with me."

Ruby only shook her head and choked out more questions. "Pappy? What are they doing here?" Still moving backwards, Ruby was at the screendoor.

"Ruby." Ivy said, "We're going to need you to be strong. These men are here to tell us about your momma."

"Momma? What's wrong with Momma?" Ruby frowned amid her tears. "Nothing's wrong with Momma. My friends said she was fine."

"Ruby."

Ruby shouted, "My friends said she was fine!" The screendoor banged shut behind her as Ruby Begonia raced to the cemetery.

Ivy grabbed RuthAnn's arm as she started to go after her grand-daughter. "Let her go, RuthAnn. We know where she's going. Let's talk to the gentlemen." Ivy gently led her to the sofa and they faced the two men, the chaplain holding a white envelope.

Ruby threw open the iron gate and ran to her favorite tombstone—the one with the angel on top. A fine mist filled the air, softly coating Ruby's face and clothes. She dropped to the ground and called to her friends. "You told me my momma was all right! You told me she was! You lied to me!"

She cried out her frustration and heard a soft voice say, "But Ruby, they didn't lie to you. *I am* all right."

## Homefront

Peggy watched the train pull out of the station, headed for Islet Bay where those on board could catch a boat to the mainland and away from here. The train lumbered, breathing hard, until it gathered speed and chugged around the bend, out of sight. All that was left was the whistle as it approached the crossing, the one and only crossing of the tracks over the one and only main road in and out of town, and the plume of steam from its labored breathing. Peggy turned right towards Main Street.

*I'm going to be on that train, she thought to herself. On that train tonight.* Peggy waved to the barber after he called out to her, "Have you heard from Nick?" Peggy pretended she didn't hear the question because of the bus that rumbled past. She just waved and continued walking, clutching her handbag with white gloved hands. The barber waved back. Peggy stepped into the dry-cleaners.

"Hello, Mrs. Duvaney. Have you heard from Nick?" asked Walt, the drycleaner. *Why does everyone ask about Nick when they see me, Peggy wondered to herself. I'm the one standing in front of them, why don't they ask about me? Sure, Walt, I'm fine, and the kid's fine, too. No, nothing new. I'm just getting on that train and away from all of you.*

"Got a letter from him yesterday, Walt. He's fine," Peggy answered.

"Good, good. We worry about all our boys," he said as he took her claim check, though he didn't need it to locate her cleaning. "Want 'em all to come home safe and sound, you know."

*Yeah, yeah, don't we all, Peggy thought. Don't we all. We want them to come home. We want to take down stars, and we want them to come home.*

“Yes, I do, and I appreciate your asking about him.” Peggy smiled at Walt at the same time thinking, *You stupid man.*

“Well, now, we’ll keep praying for him, we will. He’ll be home right soon.”

“Yes, thank you.” Peggy paid Walt and left.

She checked her watch. She had a couple more hours to finish up what she needed in order to get what she needed—out of here. Yes, she wanted Nick to come home, but she did not want to be here when he did. She wanted to be long gone. *Let someone worry about her for a change, she thought. Let someone wonder what the hell she was up to, and where she was, and what she might be doing. Let’s see how well he liked to worry.* Peggy was tired of it.

She came to the drugstore and walked in. Two of her neighbors were paying for purchases and both asked after Nick. “He’s doing fine,” she replied, *but I really don’t care anymore,* she added in her head. Both women nodded their heads as if all was right, as if Peggy telling them that Nick was fine meant that she was fine and that the war was fine and that keeping a kid in line was fine and that her life was fine. Peggy nodded back and thanked them for their kindness.

At the back of the drugstore, standing behind his counter so that customers had to look up to talk to him—*Probably because he knew everyone’s ailments and drug uses,* thought Peggy—stood Mr. Billington. He smiled as Peggy approached and leaned his elbows on the counter, hands cupping his chin, as if that made him friendlier.

“Did you come to get your prescription, Mrs. Duvaney? I’ve got it right here,” he jerked a thumb over his shoulder as he straightened up.



“Yes, thank you. I have.”

“Sure thing, Mrs. Duvaney. How’s Nick doing? Do you know where he is?”

*Yes, I know where he is, you idiot, he’s over in Europe shooting up Germans and getting shot at.* Peggy sighed. “No, Mr. Billington, I don’t know exactly where he is. You know the censors. I can barely read parts of his letters because of the blackouts in it.”

Mr. Billington nodded his head, thinking about poor Mrs. Duvaney needing a sleeping draught. She must really miss her husband. “Well, at least you get to hear from him. Lots of wives don’t know anything about their husbands. You’re one of the lucky ones.” He handed Peggy her prescription. “Remember, now, follow the instructions carefully. Doc gave you a powerful draught. Don’t take too much.”

*Yeah, I’m lucky, all right,* Peggy thought. *I’m left here to tend to the kid, take care of the house, plant that damn victory garden even though I don’t like to garden because if I don’t have one then everyone will make me feel worse than I already do, and live with a mother-in-law who doesn’t like me because I married ‘her’ Nicky.* “Yes, thank you, Mr. Billington. I’ll be careful with it.”

Peggy took the prescription to the front counter, paid for it, tucked her purchase in her purse, and left. She switched the dry-cleaning to her other arm and walked down Main Street towards Church Street.

Peggy lived on Church Street in an old Victorian home with a wrap-around porch. She loved the house—the tall oaks that grew in the yard, the big

backyard for Audrey to play in, the high ceilings and drafty rooms. She loved the house. But it didn't replace Nick.

Peggy and Nick had been married three years, living in Virginia because that's where they had met and where Nick was stationed. Their daughter was one year old when the war broke out. Nick had Peggy move here because he felt that if he didn't return then their daughter could grow up where he had grown up, under the watchful eyes of his mother, old neighbors and friends. It was those same watchful eyes that monitored Peggy's every move. They probably meant well, but Peggy felt cloistered. She couldn't do anything that someone didn't know about it and then everybody knew about it. For all she knew, the people in the town told Nick more about her than she did herself.

Walking up the front steps and across the wide porch, Peggy tugged at her gloves. Inside, she placed them, along with her pocketbook and hat, on the secretary that stood next to the grandfather clock that boomed out every hour of her life. Peggy would have stilled the clapper long ago, but she knew her mother-in-law would tell Nick in her letter about how Peggy had yet again disrupted her household and then Nick would write to Peggy to be nicer to his mother and Peggy didn't want that. She hung the dry-cleaning on the coat butler; her mother-in-law did not appreciate Peggy going in her bedroom for any reason and preferred Peggy to leave the things she picked up for her in the foyer.

"Hello, anybody home?" Peggy called. *No answer, they must be at the park. Good, I can get on with what I need to do.*

Upstairs in her room, Peggy checked the contents of her closet. Many of her clothes still hung on padded hangers, but others were packed in boxes waiting

in a post office in Maine for her to pick up. The same was true for the things in her dresser drawers. She was going to leave all the pictures.

Peggy reached up into the far right corner of her closet and pulled down a carpet-bag. It was old and had smelled musty when she picked it up for a dollar at the used goods store in Bluepoint, but she had freshened it with lilac bundles. It was now filled with a change of clothes and shoes, several hundred dollars that she had hoarded from the household money and from working several days a week at the *The Supermarket*. She checked the inner pocket of the carpet-bag for her train ticket. Still there. She had bought the ticket at the Western Union station in Bluepoint because she knew if she bought a ticket here in town the news would travel faster to her mother-in-law than the train leaving the station. Her ticket was for the 9:15 that night, the one the factory workers on the evening shift took to Islet Bay. From Islet Bay she would take the last ferry of the night to the mainland. She knew no one at the station would know her. She returned the carpet-bag to the closet.

No one, not even Doc, understood her. Sometimes, when she watched her daughter sleep, she would realize how tied to this place she truly was, but then she would remember how it used to be when Nick was home. When the three of them lived happily in their unit on the base in Virginia. Now, there was no guarantee that Nick would ever get home, or if he did, where that home would be. A career Army man, home could be anywhere she didn't want to be.

Once she had loved Nick. Once she had believed that Nick could give her everything she had ever wanted. Now he wasn't around, hadn't been around for over four years. She hadn't seen him once in four years. That was why she wasn't

taking the pictures. She would remember Nick the way he was four years ago. She didn't know what kind of man would come home from the war, and Nick couldn't know what kind of woman awaited him.

Peggy walked back downstairs to her purse and retrieved the sleeping draught. It had taken her months to get the prescription. Every time she visited Doc's office, he told her it was nerves because her husband was off to war. Or he told her to settle down a bit in dealing with her mother-in-law; after all, Peggy was married to her son. Peggy thought it interesting that Doc knew so much about the goings-on in the household, but she wasn't surprised. She never told Doc anything about Mother Duvaney, it was Mother Duvaney who told Doc about Peggy. Peggy didn't care. She kept going back to Doc because she needed that sleeping draught. She figured if she went back enough times, Doc would give her a prescription. She was right. It had only taken almost a year. But Peggy knew it was much more than what could be cured with a sleeping draught.

No one understood the blackness she felt. It wasn't only the nights sleeping all alone; Nick's scent was forever washed out of the linens. It wasn't just the mornings when she awoke alone or any other time of day when she felt the loneliness take her by the hand and blanket her with indifference. Her own mother also didn't understand. "Every woman with a husband gone goes through that, honey," she had said to Peggy on one of their weekly long-distance calls. Her mother-in-law kept track of how many calls Peggy made. "She's worried about you, Peggy," her mother would tell her. "Don't make her feel bad because she's worried about you." No, her mother didn't understand.

Even when she tried talking to other young war wives, all she met was silence. None of the other wives her age wanted to talk about anything except when their husbands were coming home or when the war would end or what else they could do for the war effort. Peggy often thought that if people stopped doing what they could for the war effort then maybe the war would stop. She knew that thought was not allowed outside her head.

She took the sleeping draught upstairs and put it under her pillow. Later she would mix it the warm milk.

“Mom! Mom! We’re home!” Peggy heard her daughter call out as she entered the foyer. Her mother-in-law’s scold was not far behind. “Shhhh, Audrey, we’re in the house now.” Peggy hurried downstairs.

“Mom! We played in the park, and I fed the ducks,” Audrey said as she hugged Peggy. On her knees, at eye level, Peggy could see Audrey’s resemblance to Nick as well as to herself. *I can’t take her, she thought. It has be to this way. Nick’s mother will take care of her.* Audrey was a part of Nick and Mother Duvaney loved Nick, so, she loved Audrey, and Peggy couldn’t bear to take Audrey away from everyone and everything she loved.

“That’s wonderful, Audrey, honey. But let’s get you a bath and then we can have dinner.” Peggy took Audrey by the hand and led her up the stairs.

“You do remember that tonight is my bridge night, don’t you?”

Peggy stopped on the landing and faced her mother-in-law. “Yes, Mother Duvaney, I remember.” *She thought, I remember because you’ve reminded me every morning, noon and night since last week when I forgot to leave the porch light on.*

“Good. Sometimes I just don’t know what you’re thinking. I’ll be leaving at 7:30 and returning at 10:00.”

“I remember, Mother Duvaney. I’ll be sure to leave the porch light on.”

“Make sure that you do. I almost killed myself stumbling on the porch steps last week.” Mrs. Duvaney laid her hat and gloves next to Peggy’s, noticed her dry-cleaning hanging on the coat butler, and walked into the kitchen. “I’ll get dinner started since I see you haven’t.”

“Thank you, Mother Duvaney,” Peggy said. She looked at Audrey. “Let’s go get cleaned up, shall we?”

That night, after her mother-in-law had left for her bridge party, Peggy stood at the stove warming milk. She watched her daughter color a picture for Nick, and then she helped Audrey put it in an envelope and address it. “Don’t you want to write a letter, mom?” Audrey asked.

“No. Not tonight, honey.” Peggy said. “Time for bed, sweetie.”

Audrey scooted off her chair and headed upstairs. “I’ll be in my jammies before you get up here,” she called to Peggy.

Peggy smiled and poured the milk into coffee mug. Audrey liked to pretend she drank coffee before bed. Peggy walked quietly up the stairs and to her room. She placed the milk on her nightstand and took the sleeping draught from under her pillow. She heard Mr. Billington in her head: Don’t take too much, Doc gave you a powerful sleeping draught. Peggy poured some into the milk.

Audrey was in bed when Peggy walked in. She smiled and reached for the milk. She took a big swallow before she asked Peggy to read her a story.

"After you finish your coffee, dear." Audrey smiled at that and finished her milk in four swallows. "Okay, how about "Little Red Riding Hood?" Peggy looked through the children's books in Audrey's bookcase, fingering the top of each one. "Here we go."

Peggy sat on Audrey's bed and began the story. Long before finishing, Audrey was asleep. Her heavy body lay against Peggy's side. Peggy picked up Audrey's limp hand and moved it under the cover. Peggy knew Audrey would sleep past her usual waking time. Her mother-in-law would think that Peggy had kept her up too late and would not wake her until eight o'clock. Mother Duvaney believed that sleeping past eight in the morning was a wasted day. Peggy wouldn't be at the *The Supermarket* when Mother Duvaney went to check on Audrey.

In her own room, Peggy picked up the carpet-bag and turned off the light. She left the night-light on in Audrey's room but closed the door. She walked by her gloves, hat and purse still on the secretary and left through the front door. The porch light was on.

At the train station, Peggy handed her ticket to the conductor and took her seat. The train gathered speed as it left the station and the whistle blew as it came to the crossing. Peggy was on the train.

## Lessons Learned

His t-shirt read "If you choke a Smurf, what color does it turn?" Jodie Piper noticed it in the middle of chastising the t-shirt wearer about his disruptive behavior in the classroom. Teacher and student were standing in the hallway, again, and she wanted to be firm and stern because this time Tyler almost hurt someone, but it was difficult for Jodie to do. She always wanted to give the students the benefit of the doubt; let them see what they had done wrong and understand it. Being a teacher wasn't just showing up for work with copies in hand, and Jodie had never taken a class in discipline, in fact, she hated filling out office referrals on students unless, of course, the infraction was severe. But for everyday classroom disruptions that young teens were prone to do, she liked to handle them herself. However, this time, Tyler *had* almost hit the paraprofessional helper she had in the class this hour. She knew she had to be stern, but then she read the t-shirt. Bad timing. It wasn't easy to stifle a giggle when she needed sternness. Tyler noticed.

"Aw, c'mon, Mrs. Piper, you know I didn't mean it," he said.

Tyler Carson had very nice manners and a winning smile to go along with them. He was polite, sometimes to a nauseating degree, but he had never been impolite to Jodie's face. Other times, he was so annoying that she wondered how he was able to maintain a passing grade in her class because he spent so much in the hallway. Whichever aspect of his character he chose to showcase, he could always be counted on to take Todd Matthews in his group, and not too many students could lay claim to that distinction. Todd was a Special Needs student with cerebral palsy, confined to a wheelchair, and unable to do more than utter



unintelligible sounds if he did not have his laptop. Todd could type with the first two fingers on his right hand, and he was intelligent and friendly, but his limitations put off many students. Having Tyler in class with Todd helped enormously. Tyler knew this and occasionally took advantage. Today was such a day.

Clearing her mind of visions of Smurfs with their heads about to explode from suffocation, Jodie said, "Tyler, you pulled Todd's laptop off his desktop."

Tyler turned his head to look down the hallway, away from Jodie. In profile, he looked older than his sixteen years. His light brown hair was cut in what Jodie called a "boy cut" because he had it parted on the side and combed back above his ears. It was neat and clean. Jodie noticed also that Tyler shaved, a small nick under his chin had clotted. His jeans were baggy but with no holes, and his shirt smelled April Rain fresh. Despite his outward appearance, all Jodie knew about him was that he had a younger sister, a freshman to Tyler's sophomore standing; he lived with both parents; and he had driven Mrs. Meecham, his freshman English teacher, up the proverbial wall. All in all, he seemed like a pretty normal kid.

"Tyler." She waited while Tyler focused on her face. "I can't allow you to do things like that to Todd. Not to anyone."

"C'mon, Mrs. Piper, Todd knows I was just funnin' with him. He didn't care. He was laughing with everybody else." He was right, and he knew it. Damn it, thought Jodie. I hate these situations.

"Still." Jodie cleared her throat. "It was in the middle of class."

"You mean if I had done it earlier or later I wouldn't be in trouble?"

Startled, Jodie smothered another giggle. *What was she going to do?* she thought.

Tyler's quick wit reminded her of her little brother and herself when they were teenagers. Their poor mother could barely get a word of reprimand in when the two of them started splitting hairs.

"No, Tyler, it wouldn't have made a difference. You know the Zero Tolerance Policy. I can't allow any student to trouble another student." Jodie folded her arms across her chest for emphasis. *Nice touch*, she thought.

Tyler dropped his chin for a moment before looking at Jodie with wise blue eyes. "Gee, Mrs. Piper, I thought you of all teachers would understand me."

"What do you mean?" asked Jodie, unsure of his direction.

Tyler hooked his thumbs in his back pockets and cocked a knee forward. "You know. You're always telling stories about you and your brother and the things you did. I thought for sure you would understand a practical joke."

Jodie wanted to hit herself. She shared those stories to foster understanding between her ancient 24-year-old self and her already jaded teenaged students. Perhaps she had gone too far in sharing some of her adolescent adventures. Feeling herself start to capitulate, she inwardly scolded herself. *No, not this time*, she thought. *I have to be tough.*

Holding her arms at her sides and drawing herself up to her full 5 feet 6 inches, almost nose-to-nose with Tyler, she lowered her voice and spoke forcefully. "Tyler. You disobeyed the classroom rules of not interfering with other students' learning with your practical joke and your disruptive behavior."

He turned his palms upward at waist height towards Jodie wearing an expression of innocence though his eyes gave himself away. He knew what he had done.

"But, Mrs. Piper,"

"No buts, Tyler, we've had this discussion before. We've been in this hallway many times before. And it's still first quarter. And it's always for the same things. You start disruptions, you encourage the other students in that disruption, we come out here, you apologize, and I let things slide. Too many times. Not this time." Jodie hated it when she had to be the bad guy, but Tyler really had gone too far this time. "And this time, you could have hurt Todd when you swiped his laptop, and you could have hit his para, Mrs. Davies, with it as you hoisted it over your head." Jodie was encouraged to see that Tyler grimaced at this reminder. She forged ahead. "You went too far this time. This little episode will get you a three day in-school suspension."

"Whatever," he said, leaning his head back on the lockers.

Jodie narrowed her eyes and bought some time by rubbing her forehead. Even though she hated to bargain with students, Jodie offered a compromise, of sorts. "Listen, Tyler, it's the end of the quarter. You've been an asset in the classroom, even with all your nonsense, but none of it was as serious as what you did today. I have to write you up."

Tyler nodded and mumbled an apology. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Piper. I didn't know I had come that close to hitting Mrs. Davies." He looked directly at Jodie and spoke clearly. "I really am sorry, Mrs. Piper."

Jodie nodded once and said, "Well, then. I'll write a referral but I'll make it an after school detention with me so you can help me with some things in my room. We'll make the detention for next Tuesday and Wednesday after school. I'll call your mom and talk it over with her. Okay?"

Tyler looked relieved that he wouldn't receive the three day in-school suspension, but he didn't look happy that she mentioned his mom. "My mom?"

"Yes, Tyler, your mom. I'm going to need to talk with her about your behavior," Jodie replied. It's a courtesy to let the parents know about after school detentions spent with a teacher."

"Okay."

Jodie knew exactly how he felt. Calling parents was the kiss-of-death to lots of students. Often the punishment at home was worse than the one meted out at school.

"C'mon, Tyler, let's go in." Jodie held out her right arm to shepherd Tyler back inside the classroom as she held the door open with her left. She had to hide a smile. Tyler would be on pins and needles until he got home.

"Sure, Mrs. Piper."

As Jodie pulled the door open, Mrs. Meecham walked by and rolled her eyes. Jodie was shocked and checked to see if Tyler saw; he didn't. "Louise!" Jodie said as she allowed the door to close slightly behind Tyler. "Don't do that!"

Louise Meecham stopped next to Jodie. She was an older version of Jodie's mom—gray hair cut short to frame her face, wire-rimmed eyeglasses, and comfy shoes. "I'm real sorry that you have that boy in your class. He gave me nothing but trouble last year."

She wagged a folder at Jodie. "He was a constant disruption, and, oh, I see you also have Todd Matthews in your class." She craned her neck to peek into the classroom giving Jodie a vague distaste that her students were on display. "That Carson boy was always turning off Todd's computer. I think he spent more time in detention than he did in my classroom." She looked at Jodie and clutched her folder. "If that boy gave you trouble, you write him up and Mr. Givens will see to it that he's sent to ISS. That's what I did all last year." She looked once more into Jodie's classroom. "I don't know how he passed." She walked away as Jodie entered her classroom.

On her plan, Jodie decided to call Mrs. Carson. She thought about what Louise Meecham had said and didn't like it. Especially the way she had called Tyler "that boy." Jodie admired the tenured, experienced teachers and often heeded their advice, but this time, she decided to do things her way. She made her way to the teachers' workroom—a barren room with a copier, four tables, two soda machines, and a snack machine. No stapler or scissors or glue or computer that would help a teacher work, though. Entering the room always made Jodie chuckle.

Tracey Baxter from the math department was in the workroom making copies. She looked up as Jodie said hello.

"Making a parent call?" she asked.

"Yes. What gave it away?"

"Well, first, your expression. No teacher looks happy when she has to call a parent. And second, your gradebook. Dead give-a-away." She collected her copies and patted them this way and that to get them straightened out.

Jodie took a seat and put her chin in her hands. "I talked with Louise Meecham and she told me to skip the parent phone call and give the problem to the principals."

"And you don't want to do that?" asked Tracey.

"No, I don't. I don't think it's a big deal, but I don't want it to happen again."

Jodie rubbed her forehead. "I want to do what's best for both students."

Tracey took a seat opposite Jodie. "Tell me what happened."

Jodie told her as quickly as she could. When she finished, she waited for Tracey's response.

"Well, let's see." Tracey pursed her lips and then leaned forward. "Since you don't want to give it to the principals right away, I'd say to call the mother and explain what happened, then listen to what she has to say. She might surprise you and give you information about her son you don't have."

"Okay." Jodie nodded.

"I'm sure you know since this is your second year, but sometimes parents give more information than what teachers want, and sometimes, if we're lucky, it's information that will help us with the students. If, after you talk to Mrs. Carson, you're still unsure of what to do, then go talk to his principal. Either way, you should let the principal know what you've decided to do." She gathered up her papers. "And let me know what happens, okay?"

"Sure, Tracey. And thanks."

As Jodie sat in the phone booth, she cracked her knuckles and rubbed her hands as if she was getting ready to play a concerto. Even though she had phoned

several parents in her short teaching career, she still got the shakes. Jodie always tried to put herself in the parent's shoes: How would she feel if she got a phone call like the one she was making? That way, she always tried to sound calm and competent. No better way to rankle a parent than to call in a huff. She took a deep breath and dialed.

Mrs. Carson answered on the third ring, and after exchanging pleasantries, Jodie told her what had happened in class. Mrs. Carson listened courteously as Jodie told the story and explained the course of action she had decided to take. When Jodie asked if she had any questions, she was surprised that Mrs. Carson said she only had one.

"Did you talk to Todd?" she asked.

Slightly thrown off-kilter, Jodie replied, "No, Mrs. Carson, I didn't."

"Well, then, did you talk with Mrs. Davies? She's been with Todd for many years now; you do know that Todd and Tyler have known each other since the sixth grade, don't you?"

Swallowing a sigh, Jodie said, "No, Mrs. Carson, I didn't know that. Neither boy has said anything about it."

"Did you ever wonder why Tyler always volunteered to help Todd?"

"Yes, I have," said Jodie as she twined the telephone cord around her fingers. "But the first time Tyler told me he didn't mind working with Todd, I asked him why, and he just said that he really didn't mind." Jodie released the telephone cord and picked up a pencil to make a note to ask Tyler's counselor about that. "He didn't seem to want to elaborate, so I guess I never asked him again."

Jodie could hear the smile in Mrs. Carson's voice. "I understand, but now that you know,"

"I'll talk to Tyler again, and I'll speak with Todd and Mrs. Davies," Jodie interrupted.

"Thank you. I appreciate that." After a moment's silence, Mrs. Carson continued, "I have something else I'd like to share with you if you don't mind."

"Not at all, Mrs. Carson, please tell me what's on your mind."

"You are the first teacher to call me since Tyler entered high school. I usually just get a phone call from a principal, after the punishment is given, and minds are made up. Tyler's not a bad kid—"

"I know, Mrs. Carson."

"—and there's always more to a story than what a person sees." Jodie waited.

She heard Mrs. Carson take a deep breath. "Tyler has a step-brother, did you know?"

Surprised, Jodie said, "No, I did not."

"I'm not surprised, Mrs. Piper. Tyler doesn't like to talk about him to other people. His name is Patrick and he's my husband's son from his first marriage."

"Okay," Jodie said, not sure why this connected to her phone call. Sometimes parents just start talking and she wound up knowing more than she ever wanted to. She crossed her fingers hoping this wasn't one of those times.

"Anyway, I married Tyler's dad when Patrick was eight years old. He and Tyler became pretty good buddies as Tyler grew up. Several years ago, just after



Tyler entered middle school, Patrick was in a car accident and suffered extensive injuries. He's confined to a wheelchair."

Her mouth open like a birdhouse entrance, Jodie sat back in her chair in the little phone booth in the teachers' workroom and relaxed her fingers. Grasping for words, she said, "I had no idea, Mrs. Carson. *That's* why Tyler always wants to help Todd."

"Yes, it is. He met Todd just about the same time that Patrick had his accident. He doesn't like to talk about it, not that he doesn't love Patrick, but when people find out that you have a sibling with problems, well, they sometimes aren't nice about it. They tend to ignore Patrick and speak over his head as if he can't hear them or understand them, which, of course, he can. Tyler is very protective of Patrick when we all go out, and I know he feels the same way about Todd."

Completely flummoxed but trying to maintain her composure, Jodie could only shake her head. As if understanding the difficulty in absorbing all she had shared, Mrs. Carson simply said, "Tyler's not a bad kid."

Rubbing the back of her neck, Jodie said, "I know, Mrs. Carson, I know. And thank you for sharing that with me. I appreciate it. Still—"

"I know," interrupted Mrs. Carson, "Tyler did something he shouldn't have, and after school detentions with you are fine with me and my husband. But if you would talk with Mrs. Davies and Todd, I would appreciate it. I'll talk to them as well."

Jodie thanked her once again and hung up. She sat in the darkened booth and contemplated all that she had been told. She watched two teachers come in,

make selections at the Coke machine, and walk back out. Gathering up her pencil, pad, and gradebook, she went in search of Mrs. Davies.

After school on Tuesday, Jodie sat behind her desk and waited for Tyler. She was tucking her gradebook in her bookbag when Louise Meecham stuck her head in the doorway. "On your way out?"

"No, Louise, I have an after school detention today."

Louise walked into the room. "Don't tell me it's with that Carson kid. He drove me absolutely nuts last year."

Smoothing her navy blue skirt as she stood up, Jodie said, "Yes, Louise, it's with Tyler Carson."

"Why, in heaven's name, did you give him an after school detention?" Louise demanded. "You don't want to spend any more time with a kid like that than you have to."

"Louise," Jodie said, taking her arm and steering her out the door. "It was my decision as to what kind of punishment to give, and I believe that this is the best choice."

Louise jerked her arm from Jodie's grasp. "Well, good luck to you. I don't understand why you just didn't let Mr. Givens handle it."

"Because, Louise, I called Mrs. Carson and found out some stuff."

"Stuff?" Louise squinted one eye making her look like a pirate's mom.

"What stuff?"

Shaking her head, Jodie said, "I'm sorry, but I don't have time to explain. Tyler will be here soon, and I would rather he not see us talking."

"Jodie, you're going to have to learn—"

"Don't worry, Louise, I've learned a lot already."

"But—"

"Never mind, Louise. I'll explain it to you tomorrow." Jodie glanced to her right and saw Tyler emerge from the stairwell. "You go on, Louise, I'll talk with you tomorrow."

"Mphmmm." Louise hitched her red bookbag up on her shoulder and walked away.

From the other direction Jodie heard, "Hey, Mrs. Piper, here I am, ready or not."

She turned around to see Tyler walking towards her with a big grin on his face. He looked relaxed, shirt-tail out, jeans shorts past his knees, and flip-flops on his feet. He stopped directly in front of her. "Here I am," he repeated.

"Good to see you, Tyler. I'm glad you're on time."

"Sure thing, Mrs. Piper, my mom told me to be sure to be on time and—hey, what's Todd still doing at school? I thought his bus left before all the others." He peered around Jodie to see his friend gliding down the hallway in his motorized wheelchair, Mrs. Davies not far behind. Todd stopped his chair in front of Tyler and Mrs. Piper.

"Come on in, boys."

Once in the classroom, Tyler sat in one of the desks and Todd stopped his chair next to him. Both looked to Mrs. Piper.

Jodie pulled a desk around and sat facing the boys. "I talked to your mom, Tyler, as you know, and she shared some things with me." Tyler's face leached all color. Jodie ignored it. "She said that you and Todd have known each other

for a long time.” Tyler’s posture relaxed. Jodie remembered that Tyler didn’t talk about his brother, and she had no intention of bring it up. “She also said that you two like to play with the computer.” She nodded her head towards Todd’s laptop. Both boys nodded. “She also said that sometimes, and Mrs. Davies verified this as well as Mrs. Matthews, Todd goes to sites that he shouldn’t, especially while in school.”

Todd and Tyler looked at each other. Tyler looked confused, but Todd grinned. Both turned their attention to Jodie.

“What’s going on, Mrs. Piper?” asked Tyler.

Todd typed on his computer and nudged it towards Tyler. After Tyler read it, he stared first at Todd and than at Mrs. Piper. “You know why I took Todd’s laptop? Because he was—“

“—he was on an inappropriate site and you didn’t want Mrs. Davies or me to see it,” Jodie finished for him.

“How? How did you find out?” Tyler asked.

“I called your mom who told me about you and Todd. Then I talked to Mrs. Davies and together we called Mrs. Matthews. We then checked the history on Todd’s computer, and voila, we had the whole story.” Jodie looked over Tyler’s shoulder at Mrs. Davies. “So Mrs. Matthews was in agreement that Todd join you in your after school detentions because Todd was just as guilty of the class disruption as you were.”

Tyler sat back in his chair and looked at Todd. “You knew?”

Todd jerked his head up and down.

“And you didn’t tell me?”

Todd typed his answer and Tyler read. "Because you were *happy* to get a detention?" Tyler's brow furrowed into a V. "I don't understand."

Todd typed his answer again.

Tyler's voice was halting as he read along. "I . . . am . . . being . . . treated . . . like . . . any . . . other . . . student . . ."

Todd's lopsided grin was huge as comprehension dawned on Tyler. "So you're *happy* you got detentions?"

He read along with Todd's typing. "Yes . . . I . . . did . . . something . . . wrong . . . and . . . I . . . am . . . here.

"Wow," was all Tyler could say. He looked at Jodie.

"Yes, wow," Jodie said as she got up from the student desk. "Todd, you know what sites are appropriate and what sites are not, especially at school. From what Mrs. Davies told me, last week was the first time in my class that you brought up such a site on your computer. Am I to be assured that it won't happen again?"

Todd nodded.

"Because I will be watching you."

Todd nodded again.

Tyler stood and looked at Jodie through those too-wise blue eyes.

"And you, Tyler, you will *discreetly* catch Mrs. Davies' attention, or mine, if Todd happens to stumble onto such a site again, won't you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good." She looked at both boys. "Now let's start this detention."

Olivia

"I was eight years old when I first saw a naked woman."

Olivia laughed out loud and covered her open mouth with her left hand as she reached for her wine glass with her right. "What did you do?" she asked me as she caught her breath and took a sip of Merlot.

"Oh, I looked. Up and down."

Olivia laughed again. "Oh, do tell."

"No, really, I did look up and down. I couldn't believe a naked woman was standing next to me. And talking to my aunt, who, thank god, was still wrapped in a towel."

"Where in heaven's name were you?" Olivia asked.

"The old country club out on Pinetree Road."

"What old country club?"

I had forgotten that Olivia had only been living in St. Louis for two years. She had probably never heard of the Old Gentlemen's Golf Club. "It's no longer there," I said. "There's a university on the grounds now. It's been gone about, oh, twenty-five years now. My aunt had taken me there for lunch, and then we went swimming." Olivia nodded and motioned for me to continue as she ate her fiesta salad.

We were sitting in the tea room of the Women's Exchange in downtown St. Louis. We had been friends, of a sort, ever since she and her family had moved in next door to us after her husband's transfer from Phoenix. That was a little over two years ago. We weren't the talk-on-the-phone-every-day kind of friends, and though I had children and she did not, we did have some things in

common. We both had been married for ten years and we both felt that our husband's careers took priorities over any of our own. We also shared a passion for baseball and for the Muny, which was why we were downtown, having lunch, on a Wednesday afternoon. We had tickets for that evening's performance of *Oliver!* Olivia and I liked to sing along with the songs, probably to the detriment of the other patrons. After lunch we were shopping, and then heading over to Forest Park.

Sometimes I wondered why Olivia and I were friends; she certainly wasn't the church-going, PTA attending mom that I was. It was true that I enjoyed, mostly, her outrageous stories about Phoenix, but sometimes, sometimes, she made me feel inferior. My husband worked with her husband and he encouraged the friendship, said it helped at work that the wives got along. I did what I could for him in that respect, but sometimes, Olivia just plain made me feel uncomfortable.

"Anyway," I continued, "I was sitting on the bench in front of the lockers—I had gotten dressed in the shower stall—and this woman walked right up next to me, opened her locker and dropped her towel. I'm sure I dropped my jaw."

Olivia murmured "My, my my," and I smiled at the memory.

"I'm sure I looked dumbfounded, but the lady, very nonchalantly, said hello to me and started talking to my aunt."

"Did either one of them . . .?" Olivia's question trailed off.

"Wonder what I was thinking?" I finished for her. She nodded. "No, neither one paid me any mind, so I took a good, long look. I was fascinated; I had

never seen my own mother naked, so seeing this woman right in front of me, well, let's just say she had my full attention."

"Oh, my," Olivia said. "You poor thing. I can see you sitting there, eyes glued to that naked body."

"Yeah." I nodded. "An image forever burned in my brain. Traumatized for life." I took a bite of fish. "What about you? Any naked woman memories?"

"Yes, I have one. But I was probably a year or two younger than you were. And she winked at me."

I was startled. "Winked at you?"

Olivia looked smug. "Yes. She winked at me because I happened to be looking in her bedroom window from my bedroom window. She was getting dressed."

"Olivia! Weren't you embarrassed?"

Laughing, she said, "No, Marian, I wasn't, unlike you in your story. I had a lot of questions." I looked puzzled.

"At that age?"

"Yes. At that age." She sipped her wine. "I was an early bloomer, you might say."

We both laughed though I was a little uncomfortable. Olivia always had a better story than I did or she did things earlier than I did. And we were the same age. Sort of a one-upmanship thing with her, but sometimes it made me feel foolish. Or rather, *she* made me feel foolish.

"Olivia, really, an early bloomer at seven years old?"



“Yes, my education started early.” She took another sip of her wine. “I spent a lot of time in my bedroom—my mother banished me there whenever she had a guest over—and I took to watching the neighbors through their windows.”

We were interrupted by the waiter, who had come by the table to ask how our dinners were, if we needed anything, did we want dessert. Waiters always seemed to appear at the wrong times—not when you needed them but rather when you wanted them to stay away—but this time I was relieved that he had shown up. I doubted that I would hear anything else about Olivia’s window peeping. I watched Olivia as she flirted with the young man and knew that she had already forgotten our conversation. Except for a couple of laugh lines around her mouth, she had no wrinkles on her skin. Her caramel-colored hair sported a hint of red, courtesy of the beautician, and she was trim. Not fat, not thin, trim. Olivia laughed and touched the waiter on his hand as if to emphasize that they shared a joke. The waiter—Tom, I think he said his name was—blushed a bit. Ah, an off-color joke. One of Olivia’s favorite things to tell. She told me she liked the awkwardness of the situation when a woman would tell a bawdy joke to a man. Said it felt as if she were breaking an unspoken code that only men could be crude.

Remembering that I was at the table, Olivia asked, “Are you ready?”

“Sure.” *Sometimes*, I thought, *Olivia didn’t know how she made me feel.*

“Sure, Olivia, I’m ready. Let me get the check.”

“No, dear, Joe will get the check,” she said as she signed the receipt with a flourish. “Joe won’t mind.”

Joe. Olivia's husband. Now, his off-color jokes made me blush. And he winked a lot, too. At me, as he told jokes. I smiled my thanks and picked up my handbag.

"Honestly, Olivia, do you have to flirt with everyone?"

Olivia looked at me in surprise. "What's this? Your prudish upbringing rearing its ugly head?" She pressed her lips together and shook her head. I felt like a six-year-old.

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't know if you knew you were making the waiter uncomfortable."

"I knew," she answered. "And I liked it." We entered the elevator.

"Really, Marian, you should lighten up."

Lighten up. One of Olivia's favorite sayings. She used it often when she thought I was being a prude. Last Saturday she had called me a prude when I wouldn't go skinny-dipping in their pool. "Your children are in bed, Marian," she had said. "What's wrong with adults having fun?" Nothing was wrong with that, but I didn't feel comfortable swimming in the nude with Joe and my husband, Chuck, present. For that matter, I didn't want to go swimming in the nude with Olivia. I just didn't want to go skinny-dipping, period. I hadn't wanted to do it last summer, either, and when I reminded everyone of this, Olivia had laughed, stripped off her swimming suit, and dived into the pool. Joe and Chuck remained seated in their pool chairs, drinking Budweisers. Chuck had encouraged me to "go ahead, honey," but I noticed that his eyes never left Olivia's water-clad body. I had left a few minutes later, but it was about an hour later when Chuck had

come home. His dark brown hair was wet. I was finishing folding a load of laundry.

“Why did you stay so long?” I asked him as he pecked me on the cheek and I smelled his beer-laden breath.

“Why did you leave so early?” he countered. “I thought we were going to spend the evening with our neighbors, and you had to go and get all uppity and leave. I was embarrassed. You made Olivia feel terrible.”

“If I made Olivia feel so terrible, then why didn’t she say anything as I left? All she did was laugh. I didn’t want to skinny-dip last summer, and I don’t want to do it this summer,” I said as I hefted the laundry basket and carried it into our bedroom.

Chuck was right behind me and he grabbed me around the waist. “C’mon, honey, it was all in good fun.”

I twisted out of his grasp and put the laundry basket between us. “And you smell like chlorine.”

“Well, I went swimming.”

“With your suit or without?”

“What does it matter, Marian? You didn’t stay and join in the fun.” He walked out of the room.

Riding to street level with Olivia, I wondered what that “fun” was. Chuck and I hadn’t talked about Saturday night all week. Olivia asked, “Shall we hit Stix first?” I nodded. “Good,” she said. “I bought a new dress for a dinner with Joe’s boss next Tuesday, and I need some new jewelry to go with it. I want to

look good.” At my raised brow she added, “For Joe, you know. It never hurts for the wife to look good for her husband.”

“Of course,” I said. “It never hurts.”

“Marian, really, I want to make Joe look good. I helped him get this St. Louis promotion, you know.” The elevator doors opened and we stepped out into the lobby. Olivia rooted in her purse for her claim check and handed it to the valet. She then pulled out a lipstick and compact and fixed her lips. Snapping the compact shut, she looked at me. “*I got Joe the promotion. I get what I want.*”

The valet pulled up in Marian’s Cadillac and I went around to the passenger side. “What exactly did you do to help Joe?” I asked. “How did you help him?”

Olivia looked over her right shoulder before pulling into traffic and said, “I did whatever his boss wanted me to do. I gave dinner parties. I bought Joe’s suits at Ben’s Fine Suits. I wore designer dresses and good jewelry. I flattered his boss.”

“Flattered his boss?”

“Yes. You understand, don’t you?” Olivia glanced at me.

“Sure, Olivia, I understand.” Although I didn’t. Or maybe I did and I just didn’t want to know. Was skinny-dipping part of the flattering? “So Joe must have made a really good salary if you could wear designer dresses.” That made me wonder why, if Joe did make such a good salary, they were living in our part of the county. Not that where we lived wasn’t good, it was, the school district was one of the top rated ones in the state, but it wasn’t where the truly wealthy people lived. When we had bought our house we believed that it would be our

last move. We saw no need for a bigger house though we had talked about moving to a smaller house when the kids were gone. We liked our neighborhood with its big lots and good neighbors, and when Olivia and Joe had moved in, we were flattered that they invited us over to swim. It turned out, or so I thought, that Olivia and Joe were like Chuck and me—fairly normal and average, maybe a bit above average in the salary range. I began to think that I was wrong. About a lot of things.

“Well, he made a pretty good salary, but I wanted more for him. For us. I scrimped on the household account in order to get a few things. And I found other ways to get what I wanted.”

“What other ways? Did you work?”

“Oh, Marian, you make me laugh,” Olivia said.

Olivia pulled into the parking lot for Stix and found a spot close to the door. I opened the door. “Why do I make you laugh?” I asked as Olivia came around the back of the car. We started towards the store entrance.

“I just meant that you seem like such a goody-two-shoes at times.”

“Oh,” I replied. *Must be that early blooming thing, I thought.*

“C’mon, let’s have a little fun,” she said as she linked her arm through mine. “I’ll show you how to shop *my style*.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said and followed her into the store. Olivia headed for the Better Sportswear section. We both picked up a couple of blouses and pairs of slacks and headed for the dressing room.

“Did I ever tell you that at this age we’re invisible?” Olivia asked me.

“Invisible?” I replied. “What do you mean?”

"Invisible as to not being taken seriously by the sales staff." I followed her down the hallway of the dressing room where we chose rooms opposite each other.

"What do you mean?" I repeated.

"I'll explain in a minute. Let me just see if these things fit."

After several minutes of trying on outfits, we both decided to buy a blouse. We left the rest of the things in the dressing room and went to the checkout counter to pay for our selections.

"Now, see, no one asked us if we needed help and no one came into the dressing room to check on us," Olivia said as we walked away, swinging the carry-bag she had requested for her blouse.

I nodded.

"So, no one really knows what we took into the dressing room and what we left in there."

"O-kay."

"Watch." She picked up a skirt in the next department and wandered over to a display of knit tops. Two salesclerks chatted nearby but only gave us cursory glances. They did not ask if we needed help.

"Olivia! You don't mean," I watched as she walked away from me and into the dressing rooms. I glanced over at the salesclerks, but apparently their conversation had taken a serious turn for they were folded towards each other as if their fates hung on each other's words. I followed Olivia into the dressing room. "Olivia!" I called.

"Down here," she called. "I'm trying on the skirt." She opened the door.

"You are not," I accused. She was sitting on the bench with the clothes on her lap.

"But they don't know that. Have a seat." She slid over, making room for me. "They don't know that I'm not trying anything on. All they'll know is that I'll buy one."

I was relieved. She was really going to buy one. "I thought . . .," I trailed off. Olivia smiled at me. "I thought you meant that you were . . ."

"Going to steal one?"

"Yes."

"Watch and learn," she said.

With that she stood and walked out of the dressing room. *Watch and learn?* What the hell was that? I caught up with her at the counter where she was chatting with the salesclerk and paying for the skirt. Putting the purchase in a bag, the salesclerk handed it to Olivia who put it in the carry-bag containing her previously purchased blouse.

"See how easy that was?" Olivia asked. She held open her bag so I could look in it. "I have a new skirt." She shook the bag so the skirt moved a bit to the side. "And a new top to go with it." Inside the bag was the powder blue top that matched the floral-print skirt.

"Olivia!" I was shocked.

She shrugged. "All right, let's go down to Menswear," she said.

"Olivia. I don't think I like this game you're playing."

"Oh, Marian, don't be such a stick-in-the-mud. It's so easy. Watch me."

We entered the men's department and Olivia looked over the ties. "You have to look as if you're interested in buying," she whispered.

I picked up a tie.

"Oooh, that's a nice one, Marian. You should buy that for Chuck," she said as the salesclerk looked at me and she slipped the tie she was holding into her shopping bag. "That'll look nice with his blue shirt."

I was appalled. "N-n-n-o, I don't think so." I put the tie down. "It's not his color." I walked away.

Olivia picked up the same tie and called after me, "But, Marian, I think it'll match his eyes perfectly."

I continued walking away without looking back.

Olivia shrugged at me, looked at the salesclerk, and put the tie down. "Guess she doesn't want it," she said. The salesclerk smiled and turned away. Olivia hurried to catch me. "Marian! Wait for me!"

I turned to face Olivia. "Olivia, I can't believe . . ."

Olivia hooked her arm through mine and pulled me towards the escalator. "Now, Marian, it's just a game. Like I said, I get what I want and I found a way to get it. Let's go to the jewelry counter. I need new earrings and a necklace." I tugged my arm free. "No, Marian," she put her hand on my arm, "it works better if it looks as if we're just two friends out shopping and having some fun. Nobody pays us any attention. We're practically middle-aged and dressed nicely. We're invisible." She sounded gleeful.

I hated it. I hated her. I hated it that I hated her.



“I think a nice pair of silver circles will look great with my new outfit, and I need a pair of green stone drop earrings to go with my new dress.” She turned to me. “That I bought,” she murmured.

At the jewelry counter, Olivia engaged the salesclerk in chatter as she spun rack after rack and had the salesclerk bring out several pieces from beneath the glass counter. Olivia would pick up a piece and then put it down. She tried on several pairs of earrings. When she noticed another customer at the end of the counter, she put down the necklace she was holding and apologized to the salesclerk for taking up so much of her time. Olivia moved away down the counter as if she was finished shopping. Fascinated at this acting, I could only watch. As the salesclerk thanked her for looking and moved towards the new customer, Olivia waved her fingers just above the counter as if she was saying goodbye. The salesclerk nodded and focused her attention on the other customer, and Olivia swept a pair of earrings into her shopping bag and calmly walked away. If I hadn't been watching, I wouldn't have seen it.

In the parking lot walking towards the car, I asked her, “Where did you learn to do that?”

Olivia opened the trunk. “I told you. I wanted things and I found a way to get some of them. This was the easy way for that.” She put her bag into the trunk. “And I got you something.” I looked at her. “Look in your bag.”

I opened my shopping bag and the waning sunlight reflected off something shiny inside. Reaching my hand in, I picked up a necklace of interconnected locks of silver and gold I had admired. I had admired it, but Olivia had tried it on. I thought the salesclerk had put it back. “Olivia! I can't take this!”

I could see that she was deciding how much to tell me. I didn't know if I wanted to hear anymore but this was a side of Olivia that I had not seen before. She had changed. I used to laugh and feel sorry for those people that Olivia would embarrass, but now I was embarrassed for Olivia. Something had happened in Phoenix before they transferred here, something that Olivia had not explained.

"What happened in Phoenix, Olivia?"

She didn't look at me, she continued to stare through the windshield. "We left Phoenix. We moved here. To St. Louis. It wasn't a promotion."

I didn't say anything. I waited for her. She breathed heavily in and blew it out.

"It wasn't a promotion. Joe's boss?" She looked at me. "Well, it seems that Joe's boss had a wife who didn't like her husband, shall we say, *flirting* with me." She braced her hands on the steering wheel and pushed herself into the seat. "Joe didn't mind my flirting with his boss, but that bitch . . ." She relaxed her hands. "That bitch ruined everything, except maybe getting Joe and me out of Phoenix." She looked at me then. "Lateral move, they called it. Joe was pleased. But, I . . ." She watched several bicyclists roll past the car. "I wasn't too pleased. His boss and I had a nice arrangement, and it suited Joe fine. He did well at work. And I, well, I did pretty good with his boss except he still gave the nicer jewelry to his wife." She looked at me and gave a tight smile. "She caught me trying to lift one of her jewelry pieces. A really nice topaz bracelet." She thumped the steering wheel with a fist. "And I would have had it too if she hadn't come back in for her cigarette case. She screamed at me and called for her husband and he

and Joe came in and . . . well, here we are.” She cursed under her breath and hit the steering wheel again. I couldn’t take any more.

“Olivia. Take me home. I don’t want to go to the Muny tonight.”

“Take you home? So you can tell dear old Chuck?” She turned to face me. “And what do you think Chuck will do?” She leaned close. “Do you think he’ll believe you? Or will he even care?”

I didn’t know what to say.

Olivia leaned closer. “You went home early on Saturday.”

I felt as if I had been punched. Somehow, I found my voice. “Olivia,” I said, “I want to go home. Please drive me home.”

Olivia straightened in her seat and put the car in drive. She laughed at me. “Oh, Marian, you naïve thing.” She looked at me with pity. “Maybe you should ask Chuck why he really didn’t care that you went home early Saturday night.” She pulled a U-turn so she could head out to the highway without getting caught in the Muny goers’ traffic.

“What do you mean?” I asked. I played with my necklace, twisting the pendant from side to side.

“Just that Joe’s boss liked what I could do for him, and Joe liked it that his boss was happy.”

“Olivia. Stop. Please.”

“No, Marian. You need to lighten up. Men like to be in charge; they like it when a woman makes them feel good.” She pumped her chin in the air. “And I like to make men feel good.”

The rest of the ride was quiet. Every once in a while Olivia would shake her head and make noises. Every so often she would give me a sideways glance and smile to herself.

I couldn't wait to get home.

In the driveway of her house, Olivia said, "Go ahead and tell him. See what he does. See what he tells you." She got out of her car but before she went inside, she turned to me. "And remember, Marian, Chuck is the one who wants our *friendship* to work."

Her smirk made me want to vomit. I opened the front door and went in.

Chuck called out from the family room. He thought something had gone wrong, but I assured him that all was fine, that I just had a slight stomach ache from something I ate and didn't feel like sitting in the muggy air at the Muny. He hugged me and said he was sorry I didn't feel good because he knew how much I had looked forward to seeing *Oliver! The story of a pick-pocket and unrequited love, I thought*. I laughed to myself.

Later that evening, as Chuck and I sat on our front porch with lemonades, I asked him how he felt about moving. "Huh, funny you ask. I'd been thinking about it lately."

"And?" I asked.

He took his arm from the back of my chair and leaned forward, cupping his lemonade between his knees. "Well, it would be a lot of work." He looked at me. "You know, searching for a new house. Making sure about the schools, the stores, all that."

"I know. But we did it before, we can do it again." I noticed that he hadn't asked me why I'd brought up the subject.

"Yeah, again. But, you know, I like this house and this neighborhood." He leaned forward again. "And I like our neighbors, Joe and Olivia. I don't really want to move right now." He leaned back in his chair and put his arm on the back of mine. Leaning close to me, he kissed me and whispered, "Okay?"

## Good Advice

"Have you ever seen the like?" Mary asked her sister Joan as they both eyed a nubile young girl, barely half-dressed, walking hand-in-hand with a boy who looked to be dressed in his pro-football-player-big-brother's clothes.

Joan shook her head in disbelief. "I know I'm not young anymore, but I'm not old either, and I don't know how that clothing, or lack thereof, is considered okay."

Mary sighed. "I know. But seeing the young things dress like this makes me think I'm really old." She flipped her hand towards the couple. "Sheesh, what were their parents thinking?"

"Maybe their parents don't know," Joan said.

The sisters watched the couple walk past the bench where they sat. The young girl noticed their interest and stuck out her tongue and crossed her eyes. Mary and Joan drew back, a bit shocked but more bemused at her action.

"Well!" said Joan. She sat straighter on the bench and called to the young girl, "Didn't your mother ever tell you not to do that? Your eyes could get stuck that way!" The young girl simply stuck out her tongue again and continued on her way.

Joan sat back and looked at Mary. "Well!" she repeated.

Mary pressed her lips together and shook her head. "I hope none of my grandchildren do that."

"They won't," said Joan. "We raised our children well, and they're raising their children well."

Both sisters returned their attention to their snacks. Shopping for a brood of grandchildren took a lot of work, and they had decided to stop for a break. Joan munched on a bagful of roasted nuts, while Mary picked at a sugar-cinnamon pretzel.

"There's too much sugar on this," she complained.

Joan laughed at her. "Then you shouldn't have gotten that. You should've stuck with the plain." Mary sighed. "You know you never listen to me when I remind you."

Mary made a noise low in her throat, of displeasure or disgust Joan was not sure, and walked to the trash can where she tossed her half-eaten pretzel. She smacked her hands together to rid them of excess sugar particles.

"Well, at least the entertainment is cheap," she said as she returned to the bench and stood in front of Joan. "I just blew four dollars on that pretzel." She looked at the young couple window-shopping at Baker's Shoe Store. "At the least, that four dollars would have bought enough material to make a top for that girl."

Joan laughed, and Mary reached down to pick up her packages. "C'mon, old girl, let's get moving."

Joan nodded, still snorting, tucked her packages under her arm, and slowly got up.

"Your back okay?" Mary asked as she took Joan's elbow to steady her.

"Sure. Sure. As okay as ever. It's just all this walking."

"Well, we're almost finished," Mary said. "Let's hit the See's Candy Shoppe down the mall and we'll be done."

"Except for the dollar store."

“Yes,” Mary nodded. “Except for the dollar store.”

As the sisters stood, a young mother with a little boy in tow came behind them.

“Are you ladies leaving?” At their nods, she sat heavily on the bench and tugged her son down next to her. She placed a soda and a bag with pretzels in it on the bench. “Oh, thank you. My feet are so tired.”

“We understand, dear,” said Joan. “Enjoy your rest.”

The young mother nodded, smiled and said, “I will. Thanks.”

Ever the chatty one, Joan looked at the little boy and said to the mother, “That’s a fine young son you’ve got there. Reminds me of my youngest grandson, AJ.”

“Oh, thank you,” the young mother replied as she pulled her fingers through the boy’s blond hair, pulling it out of his eyes. “This is Topher.”

“Well, how do you do, Topher?”

The little boy did not look up. He was engrossed in his game on his lime-green GameBoy. The beeps, whoops, and buzzes informed everyone that he was very busy.

“Topher! Answer the nice lady,” his mother instructed, shaking his shoulder. The little boy ignored her.

The young mother looked at Joan and shrugged. “Sorry, he’s like that. I can’t pry that thing out of his hands when it’s bedtime.” She looked at Topher. “Or any time for that matter. It can be a real battle.”

Joan and Mary both said, “Oh, we know how that is.” They looked at each other and laughed.



Joan said, "We're sisters, and between us we have seven children and twenty-one grandchildren. We've seen our fair share of recalcitrant children."

Joan said, "Oh yes, getting them to come in for dinner was a chore in itself. I used to threaten to spank them, or make them do the dishes for two weeks without switching with a sister or brother, or even not to give them dessert."

Mary nodded vigorously, her gray bob swinging. "Oh, yes, those all worked very well with my kids, too."

The young mother smiled. "Well, I know it's his favorite toy, and it does keep him amused, so I don't see how a punishment would make him giving it up to me any better."

Mary and Joan exchanged an *uh-oh, new age mom* look.

"Uh, Topher, you said? That's an unusual name," said Mary.

"Oh, yes, well, his real name is Christopher, but when he started kindergarten, there were five other boys named Christopher, so his daddy said he would be called Topher instead." She drew her finger with the brightly painted nail down her son's cheek. "We like it."

"Oh, I didn't mean to imply that it wasn't a good name," Mary said, "just unusual."

"I know, we get it all the time. It makes him unique, though, and we like that. People will remember him because of his name." The young mother pointedly picked up her soda and took a sip, not looking at the sisters.

Joan looked once more at Topher, and then with a good-bye and a good luck, the sisters went on their way.

After going a few feet, Joan and Mary heard the sharpness of the mother's tone as she told Topher to put down the GameBoy and drink his soda. Joan looked back and saw the little boy take a drink from the soda his mother held under his nose without pausing in his game-playing. Joan tugged Mary's sleeve.

"Would you look at that?"

Mary turned to look in the direction of Joan's head tilt. "What?"

"He's drinking without stopping playing. If I were his mother, I'd make him put down the game. There's so much to see even here." She waved her hand around as if presenting the mall and its lights and sounds to Mary for the first time. "You don't need a game to amuse yourself. It's like parking your kid in front of the TV all day so you don't have to deal with him."

"Well, you're not his mother," Mary said, pulling the bottom of Joan's navy blue cardigan to get her moving again. "Come on, let's get to the candy store."

After buying a pound of bridge mix (split into two one-half pounds for each of their husbands), half a pound of caramels (for Bunco night), several small bags of foil-wrapped chocolate baseballs (for their grandsons), and an assortment of candy sticks (for the grand-daughters), the sisters decided to walk to the dollar store at the south end of the mall. Foggy Bottom Mall was laid out in a French cross, with arms of equal length. The dollar store was a new addition in the south end, and though a pretty fair walk for the sisters, they were planning to exit the mall through the south side and walk up the sidewalk to their car. It was still early afternoon, and they felt it would be safe enough.

As they left the candy store, they fell in behind the young mother and Topher. Topher's eyes were still glued to the GameBoy screen, yet he followed his mother unerringly, little black Adidas sneakers dutifully tagging along behind his mother's thwacking sandals. The young mother dodged various kiosks and knots of people, and Topher never lost track of her. He also never looked up.

"Odd, isn't it?" asked Joan.

"Yes, it is. But look over there," and she pointed to their left where two children were following their mother with their eyes focused on their GameBoys. "Maybe they have some sort of built-in navigational system that enables them to follow their mothers blindly."

"Or the mothers have some kind of homing chip in their butts," said Joan.

"Joan!"

"Well, think about it. The kids don't even look up." Her green eyes, so like her sister's, looked at the children. "I remember our mom telling us to always watch where we were going. She would've never let us get away with that."

"Our mother wouldn't let any of us get away with anything, but apparently, it's all the rage with these kids." Mary headed for the entrance to J.C. Penney. "She checked our teeth before we went to bed; she checked our outfits before we headed off to school; she screened our phone calls; she made us eat our vegetables. And still we turned out okay."

"I know, I know," said Joan. "And we raised our kids the same way—"

"And they're raising their children—"

“Just like mom raised us.” Joan looked at her sister with love. “And we did indeed turn out okay.”

Mary patted the arm Joan had flung across her shoulders in a quick hug.

Joan looked up at the J.C. Penney sign, “And just why are we here?”

“Because I need a new dress,” Mary said, walking ahead.

“Alrighty then,” said Joan. But she glanced behind her, a little unsettled to see the two children with the GameBoys. “Still,” she said to herself, “why can’t the parents see this?”

“Are you coming, Joan?” called Mary.

“Coming, coming,” said Joan as she hurried to catch up.

Riffling through the racks of dresses a few minutes later, both sisters were surprised to see Topher and his mother stroll into the dress department, Topher still playing his GameBoy and the mother still calling constantly for him to keep up. Mary pulled a blue dress from the rack and headed towards the fitting room. Joan watched as the young mother pulled a few things, slung them over her arm, and reached out her other hand for Topher.

“Topher, come on. I need to try these things on.”

Topher never lifted his eyes from the GameBoy but followed his mother around a few dress racks, past Joan and into the fitting room. Joan shook her head and went to locate her sister.

After paying for the dress, Joan and Mary were finally headed towards the south entrance and the dollar store. As they wended their way across the main concourse, past an elementary school choir, and several persistent salesmen, they noticed several more children with their faces focused on GameBoys.

“Mary,” Joan began, “when you went to the fitting room, I watched Topher and his mother in the dress department.”

“Yes, I could hear that GameBoy in my fitting room *before* they got in the room next to me.”

“They do get loud, don’t they?” Joan asked. Mary nodded. “But I noticed something odd about Topher’s GameBoy.”

“What was that?”

Approaching the entrance to the store, they heard a commotion behind them. They stopped to see what it was. Topher and his mother were the center of attention.

“Topher! I asked you to help me with these packages,” said the young mother.

“Put that thing away and hold this for me. I need to find my keys.”

Topher continued playing.

“Topher!”

Joan and Mary walked up to the young mother. Joan asked, “Is there anything we can do?”

The young mother look harassed, but shook her head. “He has to learn that he has to do what I say.” She leaned down to take the GameBoy.

Topher continued playing.

“My mother always told me that if I didn’t obey her instantly, then I would not get my supper that night,” Joan said with a smile in her voice as she recalled the stern expression on her mother’s face as she issued the threat. But

Joan knew even then that her mother would bring up a sandwich and a glass of milk later in the evening.

Exasperated, the young mother straightened and looked at Joan. "Listen, lady, I know you mean well, but we come from different generations. I don't threaten my son; I don't take things away from him; I don't spank him. All I ask is that he does what I tell him to do, and sometimes, he doesn't. When that happens, I get him to look me in the eye and I explain to him why I need him to do what I asked."

Mary stifled a laugh. Joan lifted her right eyebrow. She was quite good at that—just like her own mother was. "I don't mean to interfere, dear—"

"Then don't."

Joan nodded once. "All right."

"Thank you," the young mother said tersely. Mary and Joan moved a few steps away but both stopped as Joan touched Mary on the sleeve. "Mary, about that GameBoy—"

"What?"

"He's not playing a game." Mary looked bewildered. "There's no game in the GameBoy. It's a blank screen." Mary's mouth dropped in astonishment and she looked at Topher. "He's not playing *anything*," Joan said.

The young mother tried to pull the GameBoy out of Topher's hands. He wouldn't let go. The young mother tried again. Mary and Joan looked at each other and knew what each was thinking: *There's no possible way for a five-year-old to resist a grown woman's angry tugging.* They looked back to Topher and his mother.

"Topher! For the last time. Give. Me. The. GameBoy." And she pulled incredibly hard.

Mary and Joan backed towards the south entrance. Backed slowly towards the entrance because they were horribly fascinated to see that the GameBoy had become welded to Topher's hands. And that when he raised his face to his mother, his eyes were an opaque screensaver blue.

"Why, Mommy? Why do you want my GameBoy?" asked Topher.

Mary and Joan pushed open the door as they heard the young mother scream and scream and scream.

---thanks T.S.

## The Wedding

Her daughter was getting married tomorrow, and Ellie was a wreck. The bride-to-be, Robyn, however, was currently pummeling her brother Chase in a rousing game of ping-pong. Obviously no worries there. Ellie couldn't understand it. She remembered her own wedding, so many years ago, and how she had wanted everything to be perfect. She had driven her own mother to distraction with her constant worrying about the decorations (in the capable hands of her best friend Patsy), about the food (in the excellent hands of a professional caterer), and the weather (in hands far beyond her reach). She had had trouble going to sleep, and she couldn't eat a thing. Robyn, however, seemed to have no trouble with *anything*. And *that's* what was really bothering Ellie. A worrier she might be, but it was so much better to worry *with* someone.

"Robyn!" Ellie called downstairs.

Ellie heard the hollow thunk of the ping-pong ball several times and then Robyn's triumphant cheer before seeing Robyn's face peer up the stairs.

"Yes, mom?"

Looking at her daughter Ellie didn't immediately see the self-assured 24-year-old middle school teacher. She saw a six-year-old girl grinning on Christmas morning with her arms around a new puppy. She saw Robyn at twelve, quietly but proudly announcing that she was now a woman. And she saw Robyn at seventeen, starry-eyed and blushing, proclaiming to Ellie at 1:00 in the morning that she was in love. All those images of her daughter rolled into one as Chase came up behind her and picked her up in a bear hug, laughingly calling her a cheater.



"I don't cheat," she said, as she wriggled free of her brother. "You just can't play." She smacked Chase in the chest and ran up the stairs.

Ellie stepped back as Chase bounded up after her. "You know, just because you're getting married doesn't mean that these ping-pong matches will end."

Robyn had gone into the kitchen and pulled a bottled water from the fridge. She took a long swallow before she answered. "I know. But at least I can practice on Dolan."

Ellie stepped between her two children. "Okay, okay, you two. Chase, I have an errand for you to run, and Robyn, we need to review some things." She picked up a tablet from the island in the middle of the kitchen. Chase and Robyn exchanged an 'uh-oh, mom's in one of her moods' looks.

"Mom . . ." Robyn ventured.

Raising a hand, Ellie forestalled her. "No buts, Robyn, we have to make sure everything is done and checked off." She poked a pen at the tablet for emphasis. Robyn raised one eyebrow, a gesture that never failed to irritate Ellie namely because Ellie couldn't do it. "Robyn, I mean it. I want to make sure everything is ready to go."

"Rob, you know you can't win an argument with Mom. Just sit down and go over the lists with her," Chase said as he reached for his car keys hanging on a hook by the back door. He turned to Ellie. "What's my job?"

Ellie gazed at her children. They looked so much alike. Chase, older than Ellie by three years, remarkably resembled his father, Ellie's late husband Jack, and it never failed to startle her. He had the same dark brown hair, cut close but

not shaved, and the same cleft in his chin. Sometimes, when he was talking to Ellie, she imagined that Jack was looking at her out of Chase's brown eyes. She found comfort in that. Standing a shade over six feet, Chase was three inches taller than Jack had been and was a good seven inches taller than Robyn. Her dark brown hair, parted in the middle with a wispy fringe of bangs, fell to her shoulders. A light sprinkle of freckles on her nose complemented her clean hometown-girl looks. Both were good-looking kids. In her opinion, of course.

Giving her head a shake, she answered Chase. "I need you to go to Walgreen's and get some safety pins, a can of hairspray, preferably White Rain, and some spearmint gum."

"Um, okay," he answered, obviously puzzled.

"The safety pins are for any last minute wardrobe glitches, the hairspray is to get out any lipstick stains on the girls' dresses, and the gum is for nerves," Robyn said.

Ellie nodded, pleased. "Exactly." *Well, she thought, she does have a little of me in her, after all.*

"Okay, then, I'm off." Chase gave Ellie a quick kiss on her cheek and patted Robyn on her head, expertly ducking her half-hearted punch before heading out the front door.

"Okay, Mom, let's do the lists." Robyn sat at the kitchen table and beckoned her mother over with a wave of her hand.

Forty-five minutes later, the lists checked and double-checked, the three of them sat on the deck—Ellie and Robyn sipping wine and Chase nursing a beer—and talking.

“Well, Rob, you’re getting married tomorrow,” Chase said.

Laughing a bit at that obvious fact, Robyn answered, “Yes, I am, and to a wonderful man, Dolan.” She took a sip of wine. “And you’re giving me away.” She reached out and took Chase’s hand. “Thanks for that.”

Chase leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “My pleasure, you know. I would have been hurt if anyone else was doing the honor.”

“You know that David offered, didn’t you?”

“No, I didn’t,” Chase said, looking from Robyn to Ellie. “But I suppose I always knew that he would; we’ve always called him our “pretend-father.” Chase rubbed his hand over his hair. “When did this happen?”

“Oh, about three months ago,” Ellie said. She refilled her wineglass and offered more to Robyn who covered her glass with her hand and shook her head no. “He and Patsy were over for dinner and the question came up as to who was giving Robyn away. I assumed that people were assuming that I was walking her down the aisle, but I was surprised when Patsy asked about it . . .”

“. . . and I told her that my big brother was giving me away,” Robyn finished, flashing a big grin at Chase.

“Well, good,” Chase said as he drained his beer. “I hope David wasn’t upset because I know that Dolan was okay with it.”

“No, David wasn’t upset, although now that I think about it, it seemed as if Patsy was a little put out,” Ellie said but shrugged off an uneasy feeling.

“David offered out of the kindness of his heart. He’s been our friend for years, and he’s always kept our interests close to his heart, you both know that. And then, well, when the doctors confirmed that Patsy couldn’t have kids, well, David

took his position as pretend-father very seriously.” Ellie sipped her wine. “It could be because of that that Patsy was a little upset.”

Chase and Robyn nodded.

“Let’s see, Mom, you’ve known Patsy since high school, and you met David when Patsy started dating him? Isn’t that right?” asked Robyn.

“Actually, I met David before Patsy met him.”

“Really? Did you have a thing for him, Mom?” teased Chase.

Ellie started just a bit. She hoped the kids couldn’t see her face clearly in the soft black of late evening. Did she have a thing for David? What a clever question, she thought. It was so long ago.

“No, not really,” she answered. “I thought he was good-looking, but I met your father about the same time and, as you know, I chose your father.”

Laughing at the same time, both Chase and Ellie spoke over each other in their acknowledgement of that statement, referring to the numerous pictures of Jack throughout the house.

“It’s really not fair that I never got to know him,” Robyn said. “You always tell me that I do things that remind you of dad, but still, . . .”

“And I know I look like him just from looking at Dad’s pictures,” Chase said.

“It was a long time ago, kids. Chase was only two-and-a-half, and Robyn, well, I didn’t know I was pregnant with you when your dad died.” Ellie looked down into her wineglass. She spoke as if to herself. “And I was left alone.”

Robyn and Chase exchanged a look and Chase put his hand on Ellie’s knee.

“Hey, Mom, we didn’t mean to stir . . .”

“Yeah, Mom, we’re sorry, it’s just . . .”

Ellie looked up at her children. Her two wonderful children and smiled.

“It’s okay, you two, I’m allowed to get a bit sentimental.” She drew a deep breath and exhaled gustily. “Especially since my daughter is getting married tomorrow.”

“Here’s to that,” Chase said as he raised his beer. Ellie and Robyn clinked their glasses together and then with Chase.

“And I’m giving the bride away.” Another toast of his glass. “And David and Patsy will be there, along with one hundred and fifty other guests.” One more toast of his glass. “And Robyn and I thank Dad for choosing such a wonderful woman to be our mother.” A last toast of the glass and Ellie was near tears.

“Enough, enough!” she said.

“You’re right, Mom, we definitely don’t need to get maudlin. After all, the lists are checked, the cake is ready to go, the priest will be on time, my dress is pressed and hanging on the back of my door, and all our friends and family have bought presents!” Robyn took a sip of wine. “It’s going to be a blast!”

“Oh, Robyn, really!”

“Let’s just hope that David doesn’t do that dance move of his,” Chase threw out.

That comment caused all three to convulse with laughter. Chase and Robyn swapped tales of how often and when David had demonstrated his dancing prowess, the first time being at a backyard barbeque where David had had several too many beers.

Ellie listened and laughed. It was nice to have her children at home again. Robyn had moved out after landing her first teaching job, and Chase had been living in Cincinnati for the past three years. Ellie was used to living with an empty house, but this time, with Robyn getting married—and that Dolan was *such* a nice man—she knew her empty house would feel emptier. Even with Patsy and David next door, Ellie would feel all alone again, just like after Jack's death. But this time, *this time*, she wanted to be alone. She wanted time to herself, and even though Patsy and David had helped her enormously when Jack died, as well as through the years that followed, she wanted to get away.

That thought startled her so much that she spilled some wine onto the deck.

"Hey, Mom, are you okay?" Chase asked as Robyn jumped up to get a towel from the kitchen.

"Um, yes, uh, yes, I'm, I'm, okay," Ellie said. "Just a little frazzled."

"Okay, young lady," said Robyn, returning with the towel and taking Ellie's wineglass from her, "no more alcohol for you."

"I must be more tired than I thought," Ellie said.

Standing up and stretching, Chase agreed. "And maybe we should all call it a night. After all," giving a wink to Robyn, "I have to look fresh as a daisy tomorrow."

"Oh, you," Robyn said. But she bent to kiss Ellie before lightly punching Chase in the shoulder. "I'm off to bed, Mom. Don't stay up too late." And she disappeared through the kitchen door.

"Good night, Mom," Chase said, giving Ellie a kiss too.

“Good night, son, I’ll be in soon,” she said.

Ellie sat on the swing, slowly moving back and forth, enjoying the slight chill and the night noises.

*I’ll be all alone again, she thought. Robyn will be starting a new life with Dolan and Chase will return to Cincinnati where, hopefully, he will meet someone with whom he can settle down. And I will be all alone. It was so hard the last time. Jack was gone. Chase was so little. Patsy and David lived on the other side of town. It was a horrible time.*

Ellie sighed and ran her fingers through her Pixie haircut.

*It was horrible, she thought. And I got rip-roaring drunk one night a month after Jack’s funeral and called Patsy in the middle of it, only Patsy wasn’t home. She had taken the night shift at the hospital. David was home, though. And he came over. He came over and held me. And let me flail at him, and let me cry. But he kept the demons away. The ones that I believed were hovering around me, waiting for me to lose all control so they could swoop down and take me and leave my son all alone.*

Ellie remembered that night. David had held her, rocked her, smoothed her hair, and murmured nonsense to her. But at some point in the night, things were crazy for both of them.

It wasn’t until six weeks later that Ellie realized that she had missed two periods. She was pregnant.

Ellie bent over clutching her stomach as she remembered that night. Her breathing was faster and harder as if the memories rushing through her could

break free and be gone. Forever. But they couldn't. Ellie had to live with them. She made herself take a deep breath and straightened up.

She and David had never mentioned that night. To anyone.

"Not the time to think about this," she told herself.

*I must really be stressed, she thought. I have to get away, she thought.*

*After the wedding. I'll go somewhere; I'll sell the house; I'll visit my cousin in Greece . . . I'll . . . I'll . . . I don't know . . .*

"Stop it," she said.

The memories slowed and Ellie stopped the swing's movement. Her daughter was getting married tomorrow. Her daughter. And Jack's. She pushed herself off the swing and went inside.

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Patsy came up to Ellie at the reception and the two friends hugged.

"It's a wonderful reception, Ellie. It was a beautiful wedding. You've done a great job."

"Oh, Patsy, thanks." Ellie hooked her arm around Patsy's waist. "I couldn't have done it without you and David." They watched David dance with Robyn as her new husband Dolan looked on. "You did a fabulous job with the decorations; you've been the best friend. And David's done a crack job at pretend-father."

Patsy laughed. "Pretend-father. He loves it when Robyn and Chase call him that."

"And they love him back," Ellie said.



They stood together for the duration of the song, and then clapped along with everyone else at its conclusion. Dolan came forward to claim his bride for another dance and David walked over to his wife.

“Hey, sweetie,” he said, kissing Patsy and then turning to Ellie.

“Wonderful wedding, Ellie.”

“Thanks, David.” Ellie smiled in her daughter’s direction. “She’s beautiful, isn’t she?”

“Yes, she is,” David and Patsy chorused. They laughed and then Patsy patted David’s arm before heading off to visit with guests.

“I love that woman,” Ellie remarked as she and David watched Patsy’s graceful maneuverings across the dance floor.

“As do I,” replied David.

When Patsy was out of sight, David turned to Ellie and took her hands in his.

“I have something to tell you, Ellie,” he said.

Looking at David, Ellie saw how serious an expression he wore and clutched his fingers.

“Is everything okay?” She glanced over to where Patsy was talking with a group of wedding guests. “Is Patsy okay?”

“Sure, sure, Ellie, I just have something to tell you and I’m not quite sure how to do it.”

“Well,” Ellie said, “just spit it out.” She peered up at David. She liked that about David—his height always reminded her of Jack.

“Are you and Ellie moving? Is that it? Because if you are, I’ll miss you, but, you know,”

“Ellie.” David interrupted. “No, no, we’re not, we’re not moving.” He cleared his throat before continuing. “Ellie. I helped Robyn adjust her veil before the ceremony.”

Ellie look puzzled.

“While you were checking on the boutonnieres for the groomsmen.”

Ellie nodded. “Yes, I did do that.”

David repeated, “I helped Robyn with her veil.”

“O-kay,” Ellie said slowly, puzzled as to why this was so important and why David was clutching her fingers so tightly.

“And when Robyn bent her head to help me adjust a pin, I noticed a birthmark just under her hairline beneath her right ear. Not big, rather small, very light—you wouldn’t know it was there unless you looked—and shaped like a clover.”

Ellie smiled and dropped David’s hands to smooth an errant hair out of her eyes. “Oh, that. She developed that when she was about four. I suppose it’s from one of Jack’s relatives. I don’t remember Jack having one, and once I discovered it, I checked Chase, but he doesn’t have one. No one in my family has one, and you know that Jack’s parents are dead. It’s harmless.”

“I didn’t think it was harmful,” David broke in. “It’s just that, well, it’s just, . . . I have one too.”

Ellie stared at him. Robyn was *her* daughter. Hers and Jack’s.

“Ellie,” David stopped her from walking away. “Ellie. I’ll never tell anyone. No one knows about that night.” He gestured with one hand. “What happened. No one knows.”

“No one knows,” Ellie repeated. Her face was white and a trickle of perspiration snaked into her ear. She felt her stomach turn upside-down and a clammy vise wrapped around her chest, cutting off her air.

“Ellie, come sit down.” Alarmed, David steered her towards a vacant table. Ellie sat heavily, as if her world had once again broken loose. She tried to take deep breaths but couldn’t seem to do more than take short, shallow breaths.

David grabbed a glass of water from the table and pushed it into Ellie’s face.

“Drink this.”

Ellie took a sip, but it stuck on the lump in her throat.

“Ellie, it’s all right.”

“David, don’t. Not here.”

David again clasped her hands in his and held tight.

“I’m happy that I know. Really I am. I’ve been her pretend-father all these years; it’s nice to know that she’s really mine.” He smiled at Ellie. “And we—you, me, and Patsy—we’re friends. The best kind of friends. We help each other.”

“But . . .”

“I know you didn’t keep her paternity a secret,” David said, ignoring Ellie’s attempt at speech. “I know you wouldn’t have been able to keep it a secret. Everyone will always know her as Jack’s daughter, but *I* will know

differently. Only you and I will know. And it makes me so happy, Ellie.” He reached for her hands again.

“But . . .” Ellie tried once again, putting her hands in her lap.

“It’s okay, Ellie,” and David reached across the small space between them and hugged her. “Only the two of us will know.”

Ellie looked over David’s shoulder and saw Patsy watching them from across the room. Patsy smiled briefly before Dolan whisked her off to dance.

Ellie found her voice and whispered near David’s ear. “But I told Patsy about that birthmark almost twenty years ago.”