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# INVISIBLE

KATIA  
LIEF

A NOVEL



# WOMAN

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**INVISIBLE WOMAN**  
**A NOVEL**  
**KATIA LIEF**



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For my daughter, Karennia, and for your daughters, and their daughters—  
Hold the torch higher and brighter with each step forward through time.

The past is a grenade that explodes when thrown.

—Jeanette Winterson

*The Gap of Time*

## CONTENTS

**Prologue**

**The Assault**

**1**

**2**

**3**

**4**

**5**

**6**

**7**

**8**

**9**

**10**

**11**

**12**

**13**

**14**

**15**

**16**

**17**

## **A Lost and Forgotten Person of Interest**

**18**

**19**

**20**

**21**

**22**

**23**

**24**

**25**

**26**

**27**

**28**

## **Broken Mogul**

**29**

**30**

**31**

**32**

**33**

**34**

**35**

**36**

**37**



**38**

**39**

**Epilogue**

**Acknowledgments**

## Prologue

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THE FIRST TIME the thought came to her, with clarity instead of anger, it was a warm evening in June not long before the party that was supposed to launch a new phase of her husband's brilliant career. She was standing at the kitchen sink sponging tomato sauce off a white plate. She rinsed it and set it dripping in the dish drainer, then picked up a wineglass and scrubbed at a haze of lip gloss biting the rim. She put the glass down but left the water running, as if the sound could blot out her thoughts, as if he could hear them through the linkage of empty rooms.

*What if I killed him?*

The thought arrived whole, like a package delivered to her door. It shocked her and she slammed the door but eventually she cracked it open to take another look.

Despite all their challenges, she had only recently started to fully imagine life without him; the thought had occurred to her, of course, but had never seized her like this. What really fascinated her wasn't the idea of his absence but that it might be caused, somehow, by *her*.

She was starting to crave a chance to exert force in his life the way he'd exerted force in hers. More and more, it was as if the defenses of the mutually agreeable life they'd built together had been stripped away and when they looked at each other now, they no longer liked what they saw. Well, she didn't know what he felt about her at that point. What she knew, what she was starting to know, was that he was not the man she thought she'd married.

She turned the water off and closed her eyes and went into revision mode—she was a writer, a director, a creator of worlds, and no idea ever survived without a vigorous remolding—and nullified the violence of his imagined absence. She loved her husband. She did. Their commitment was based on

not just love but friendship, with roots that went deep and got tangled where no one could see.

She'd get over it. She'd adjust.

Other people killed their husbands, not her.

# THE ASSAULT

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## May 2018

HIGH ON THE WALL above the kitchen sink the cat clock's eyes swished back and forth, back and forth, ticking off seconds. In the window, between sink and world, a tugboat passed on the East River—a *tugboat*, of all things. Beyond that, the Freedom Tower glistened skyward, planted firmly in its barely healed wound. From Joni's edge of Brooklyn it looked like a bright spring morning out there, with a promise of warmth, but inside the house she felt cold to the bone.

Her laptop was open in front of her and she returned her attention to the screen, to the front page of the *Times* digital edition.

### BREAKING

LOS ANGELES — Lou Pridgen, the legendary founder and CEO of Highrise Productions, has been accused by multiple women of sexual assault. According to allegations just surfacing, Pridgen and an unidentified man together preyed on women in Los Angeles in the late eighties and early nineties, after which Pridgen continued the attacks on his own.

Another hard fall for a powerful man. But this one was different; she knew Lou Pridgen. *Everyone* knew Lou. He was the King of Hollywood, basically, an element in nearly everyone's professional circle and, in recent years, as Paul's star rose and rose, in their social circle as well.

So they'd finally caught him, the *him* she'd assiduously swatted from her thoughts. Not the famous Lou glinting from a magazine cover but the *other* one, the memory-ogre who'd assaulted her best friend at a party when they were all young.

She closed her eyes but now the memories wouldn't stop.

The drunken, out-of-control night at a crowded party in the Hollywood Hills.

How, after becoming separated from her, Joni had found Val alone in a bedroom, battered, confused.

How, because they'd crashed the party, they figured it was probably, somehow, their fault and so they did the "smart thing" and buried the secret between them.

How, back then, when they were just starting out, when they were ambitious but unsure of themselves, rape was "rape" only when it happened to other people in distant places.

It was the year before Joni met Paul, two years before they were married, and another "smart thing" she did was never tell him, because she didn't want him to love her less, which he would have if she'd told another man's secrets. Everyone knew that.

Funny how "smart" could look so stupid in hindsight.

Now, with this news, wasn't it imperative to tell Paul everything?

Her thoughts spun and jostled, and she didn't know, she wasn't sure—and then she heard her husband calling her from somewhere nearby in the big house.

"Joni?"

"Kitchen!"

At the sound of her voice their Goldendoodle, Stella, came trotting into the room and curled at her feet under the table. Joni leaned to pet the soft fur, to take comfort from those big black eyes.

Paul's footsteps drummed closer and there he was in the doorway, crisp in slacks and black ankle boots and a fresh shirt open at the neck, the uniform of a twenty-first-century entertainment warrior. He wasn't tall and he wasn't short, but he had a strong build that gave him a sense of stature. Lately she'd noticed a paunch developing. Rectangular reading glasses were already tucked into his gray-frizzled brown hair and his weathered satchel hung from his shoulder. He was ready for another day of battle, eyes fixed on his phone for a beat too long, two beats—if she'd been directing this, if it had been a scene in one of the films she used to make, she'd have pointed out that his fixation on the object in his hand disconnected him from the present moment and conveyed a sense of ... what? Apathy. Toward her.

Finally he looked up and noticed her, his wife, and his eyes registered

annoyance at how she was always on the edge of something, how she was leaning away from her jawed-open laptop like it was trying to bite her.

He asked, “You okay?”

“Did you hear about Lou Pridgen?”

“Oh yes.” He grimaced. “Here comes the shitshow.”

Joni opened her mouth to speak, to tell him, but somehow she couldn’t; the old promise was too tight a seal.

“In *more* fabulous news,” she said instead, “I got an email from BAM about a film retrospective—they want to start with both of mine.” She hadn’t had a chance to tell him about it yet—he’d arrived home so late from work last night that she’d already been asleep in their bed.

“But that’s great.”

“They’re calling it”—she raised hooked fingers in the air—“‘Women Filmmakers of the Eighties and Nineties.’ It’s part of their *Lost and Forgotten* series.”

“Ouch.”

“Think TV could use me?”

“Sure you’re ready to slum it?”

His hazel (like their second daughter Alex’s) eyes flashed and then his face broke open with his most confident smile, top lip pulled higher than usual, bottom lip concealing his lower teeth. She knew he considered it his best smile, but she hated it. It was the smile he deployed to win arguments and negotiate deals. His assassin smile, she secretly thought of it. They weren’t arguing, but the implication was that they would be if she attempted to cross into his territory. It wasn’t the first time she’d hinted to her powerful husband that she wouldn’t mind a professional favor, and the knot in her stomach confirmed that she’d repeated an old mistake. She had film, Paul had TV—it was a distinction that had long delineated the geography of their careers and their marriage.

“Never mind.” She sipped her coffee without tasting it, sensing only the bite of its heat.

“I was thinking,” Paul said. “Want to get away for our anniversary this weekend? A couple of days in the sun?”

They’d been married ... drumroll, please ... *twenty-six years*.

She smiled impulsively. “I’d *love* to.” They usually just went out to dinner. “Where?”

“I’ll surprise you.” Meaning: his assistant Blair would figure it out. “Gotta bolt.” If it was even a minute past nine, his driver would be waiting outside to ferry His Highness onward and upward to better things than kitchen chatter.

He stepped forward to kiss her. For years he’d used the same aftershave, a cheap drugstore brand he could have upgraded long ago but hadn’t at her request. She breathed in the slightly sweet talc scent as he drew away and hurried out.

Her voice trailed him: “Any idea what time—”

The crack of the front door closing swallowed the unfinished question.

She reminded herself that even if he’d heard her, even if he’d answered—she’d wanted to ask if he’d be home for dinner—it wouldn’t matter. Even when he committed to a time, it almost always changed; his work at the production studio had a life of its own. There would be meetings, and meetings within meetings, and phone calls to be dodged and taken, and alliances to nurture, as he built and defended his empire. Once he was at work, he probably didn’t think of her at all.

Anyway, it didn’t really matter. With both their daughters grown and gone, she’d learned the art of the solitary meal. It was a funny kind of freedom, after decades of family life, being able to eat what and when you wanted, if at all.

What it meant was that she really ought to get back to work, to write something new, to use her time wisely and be productive again; but lately it had become difficult, some days even impossible, to believe that it mattered what she did with her time.

She poured another half cup of coffee into her mug, bent to open the liquor cabinet, and added a splash of rye. Bolstered, she reread the news and blood rushed to her head.

That long-ago night intruded again, this time with flashes of painful clarity.

Having fun with Val, getting ready for the party in the apartment they’d shared since graduating from college together: doing their makeup, their hair, choosing clothes, already drinking, sharing a joint. The night was damp and their dresses were short and by midnight they’d kicked off their shoes, which they never saw again.

The bottoms of Val’s bare feet were filthy when Joni found her later, unconscious on a bed, fresh bruises hazing her bare shoulders with sickly



color. The bruises flared over the following days, creeping onto her neck in a bright rainbow of reds and greens and purples.

Val didn't remember much about what had happened, just Lou Pridgen—at the time a junior producer, just another asshole running around Hollywood thinking he'd be a big deal someday—chatting her up at the party. He brought her a drink, and a powerful sensation of grogginess overtook her—"mind blindness" was how Val had described it—as he led her somewhere, up a flight of stairs, dragged her almost, she could hardly hold herself upright. And then she was lying down. And he was on top of her, pinning her down at the shoulders. Then a fleeting recognition that someone else had taken Lou's place—another man was taking his turn. Then a sensation of going under. Then Joni waking her up and a strange salty taste in her mouth and realizing she'd been drugged.

It was the next morning, as Joni was bolstering her friend with oatmeal and strong black tea, when they made their pact to keep the rape a secret. Back then, Val was an actress, a good one. Joni had cast her as the lead in her indie feature *She Knows*; she got rave reviews and then a good agent and it looked like she was on her way. Val was convinced that if anyone found out, it would poison her career. But it didn't have a chance to.

Before long she sank into depression, quit acting, and went home to Philadelphia. They spoke on the phone a few times but their friendship became stilted; Val wanted to forget what had happened, so they avoided talking about it. It was like trying to dance around an open pit—nearly impossible. Eventually the calls stopped. That was nearly twenty-eight years ago. And the story of Val's rape, their shared memory of it, their secret, had drifted into the distant past.

Now here it was, resurrected in the headlines, told by another woman and another woman and another woman in echoing repetition. Five women had come out publicly against Lou Pridgen, *five*, not including Val. Three of them, the earliest victims, had a hazy recollection of a second man.

Joni picked up her phone and saw that @LouPridgen was already trending on Twitter. The smack talk against him was bountiful and profane, the pile-on whenever an idol went down.

I was an intern and @LouPridgen screamed at me my first day  
#assholeboss

@LouPridgen was my boss for 3 years + women wld leave his office upset all the time #CastingCouchKing @TIMESUPNOW

Yeah right all men are monsters blah blah blah #justiceforall give @LouPridgen a chance b4 u hang him ladies #bitchesonfire

@LouPridgen nearly ripped my dress off after a party, I fought him, he called me a prude. Never got another acting gig after that. #MeTooLou #TimesUp

#WhoIsTheSecondMan was also starting to trend. Men's names, some of which she recognized but many of which she didn't, spewed forth with vicious speed.

A glance at the kitchen window showed an altered view. The tugboat was gone. Now, a small motorboat drew a frothy line in the opposite direction. From the far left, a ferry came into view and angled toward the Battery Maritime Building in Lower Manhattan, just across the river.

Things had changed. Joni knew in that instant, looking out the window, that she had to find Val, they had to talk. She wanted, *needed* to know what her dear lost friend was thinking and feeling now that the floodgates had opened against her attackers (well, one of them) and what she wanted to do in light of the news ... and if Joni could help.

JONI CARRIED HER LAPTOP and mug of “coffee plus” through the dining room, with its own river-facing view, then a sitting room, which was not the living room but a kind of elegant, antiquated holding place between entry and dining, then reached the large foyer with its chandelier and down-sweep of curved stair. The living room, an enormous space for which they’d had to buy extra furniture, was on the other side. They’d been here less than a month but every physical vestige of upheaval had been taken away by the movers, who also had done all the packing and unpacking, at an extraordinary cost. The lady who’d sold her on the service had promised they’d “even put the dust bunnies back under the nightstands” and Joni wondered if they actually had.

She had yet to feel easy or at home here—here in the Commandant’s House, named for the commander of the Brooklyn Navy Yard back in the nineteenth century, when it was hailed for the warships it built. Now, the mansion sat at the edge of its urban neighborhood like a glossy white tooth in a ruined mouth. The place was a landmark, surrounded by lawns and cosseted by fences and locked gates—the jewel of Vinegar Hill. The owners hadn’t been looking to sell but Paul had a way of getting what he wanted. It was, he liked to say, “our showplace” now. Paul’s showplace. Major movie stars angling to get into television (!) were coming to their party next month—so far Gosling and Hawke were yeses and Paul’s hopes were up for De Niro and Streep—plus production people from both coasts, and invariably there would be some fresh faces they’d make nice with until they sussed out who was important. They’d entertained frequently back home in Malibu—thinking of it now made her miss the easy comforts of the three-bedroom cottage where they’d raised their family. Well, it wasn’t really a cottage, just as this wasn’t really a house.

Joni parked herself at her desk in the study off the living room and got to

work searching for Val on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, everywhere she could think of. There were countless Valerie Grahams out there but none with a photo that looked anything like Val used to look: a diminutive towhead with dazzling blue eyes that emanated wit. She had a middle name—Joni used to know it but now it wouldn't come to mind. Stumped, frustrated, she set up push notifications for Lou Pridgen and Val Graham, then turned to the simpler task of answering email.

She started by deleting all the emails in a single clump-and-whoosh until only one was left. The “special invitation” (according to the subject line) that had arrived yesterday had been so unexpected she'd minimized it to a speck at the bottom of her screen until she could figure out how to respond thoughtfully, without showing any of the high emotion that had swamped her when she first saw the polite email that said one thing, and so nicely, but meant something else: that it was time to dredge her accomplishments up from the past, to remember them, because she had been not only lost to time but forgotten. *Forgotten*. Evaporated. Mist.

*Dear Joni Ackerman,*

*I'm thrilled to announce that from June 29 through July 14 BAMcinématek will host a festival devoted to women filmmakers of the 1980s and '90s. Our intention, subject to your approval, is to open with a paired viewing of your features *She Knows* and *Try Harder*, followed by a live Q&A with you. Other notable filmmakers in the program include Lois Hampton, Kelley Sandoval and Bea Petty.*

*Please let me know at your earliest convenience if you'll be available for the June 29 opening event, immediately after which we would like to host a reception in your honor, to celebrate your films and welcome you to New York.*

*All the very best,*

*Luis Todd*

*Curator, BAMcinématek*

*Brooklyn Academy of Music*

Huh. It had been a long time since anyone had suggested doing *anything* in her honor. Maybe it shouldn't have come as such a surprise; lately the

MeToo and Time's Up movements had been doing more than outing old predators like Harvey Weinstein and Bill Cosby and on and on; they'd also been unearthing relics like her. The reminder of Bea Petty in particular was like a hook in her throat—Petty, who'd made one great film, spoke out publicly when the producer of her nascent second film sexually coerced her, and was rewarded with a swift and devastating industry-wide blacklist. Wondering what ever happened to that brilliant woman, Joni lifted her mug and drank a toast to the annals of obliteration.

Of course they knew Joni had left Los Angeles and moved to New York. They knew, everyone knew, because she would inevitably have followed her husband, given their long marriage, and his relocation had been splashed across the press. PAUL LOVETT'S SUNNY DAY PRODUCTIONS SHINES ITS LIGHT ON THE BROOKLYN NAVY YARD. STEINER STUDIOS LURES LA STAR. IS NEW YORK THE NEW HOLLYWOOD? Even—and this one made her laugh—A CELESTIAL REPOSITIONING, as if Paul were more than just a guy who had stumbled into a B career at just the right time, when it transformed into the golden age of television. When being Mr. TV became an accolade and not a slur. As for Joni, professionally, the move was lateral and well below anyone's radar. She'd traded in her adjunct position as a part-time professor of directing and screenwriting at Pepperdine for one at New York University that would begin this fall. She had a whole summer in front of her now, in a new home and a new city where she had no close friends. But she was resilient. She was a filmmaker—well, a screenwriter, these days—and she could work anywhere and she had all the time in the world.

She gathered her thoughts and crafted an answer, weeding out any hint of the venomous strains of resentment that sometimes unfurled when she wondered when and where and why and how her career had detoured and diminished. She sat up straight, took a breath, and even smiled as she typed: *Thank you for your kind invitation. I'd be happy to appear for the Q&A following the screening of my early films.* Simple. Professional. Send.

Then she returned to her search for Val and hit the same wall. It was as if she'd vanished into thin air, the same thin air that had gulped up Bea Petty. The cruelty of that struck hard. How was it that Val, who had dutifully kept silent, had paid the same price as Bea, who had spoken up?

Frustration reared again and Joni's eyes jittered off the screen and roamed the wood-paneled room in search of respite: broad windows gulping

sunshine, plush Turkish carpet mazed with reds and blues and golds, matched set of upholstered chairs, a small, polished table between them.

Her gaze settled on the fireplace mantel crowded with family photos—a collection of years and memories that usually had the power to ground her in context and perspective, to remind her of what was most important. In the pictures, she looked to herself like someone with a full life, a woman who had passed gracefully through the years surrounded by love.

But today she saw something else: somewhere along the line, the *grin and bear it* smile worn by the women of her mother's generation had found its way onto her face.

The knot in her stomach tightened.

She got up and paced in front of the floor-to-ceiling shelves crammed with books and there, finally, was some relief: the complete set of Patricia Highsmith novels Val had given her as a gift just after college, knowing her taste for the dark side of the psyche. For a time she'd loved these books, devoured them, lost herself in them. And yet there were still some with unbroken spines, never even opened, which irked her now, as it had been Highsmith's weird, captivating storytelling that had inspired her to make *She Knows*. On the shelf above were the books she'd saved from a women's studies course she took in college, with a couple of newer titles added over the years, a parade of voices ranging from Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Chopin to Naomi Wolf and Virginia Woolf. (They used to call it "the plight of women"—she'd thought she had it all figured out and filed away a long time ago. What is it they say about hubris and life experience? Well, at least they tried.) One by one, she pulled out the Highsmith novels she'd never read after burning herself out on the film and made a neat pile on the corner of the desk. She would read them now.

Upstairs, she finally took her morning shower—in the afternoon. She stood under water as hot as she could stand it but no matter how hard she scrubbed, it wouldn't melt off, that gluey sensation of having lost track of Val and time and *herself*, of having become invisible. Of something dangerous, urgent, bubbling just under the surface of her consciousness. Of not knowing how far she should go to find her old friend—or if she should leave her alone in what she hoped (but doubted) was a comfortable obscurity.

And then, out of nowhere, she remembered: *Elisabeth*.

Valerie Elisabeth Graham.

She dried off and got dressed and hurried back to her laptop and voilà. Val was Valerie Elisabeth Williams now, presumably a married name. She had gotten a master's in education in New York several years ago. If she was listed with an email or phone number somewhere, Joni couldn't find it.

Then, scrolling through a long list of Valerie Williamses on Facebook, a tiny round photo called out.

Val had short hair now and sprays of lines beside her aching familiar blue eyes. That smile, Joni remembered it: sharp and friendly. She clicked. Val described herself as a high school drama teacher in Maplewood, New Jersey. No other information was viewable; her profile was locked to strangers.

Joni tapped Add Friend and stared impatiently at the screen as if her old friend was just behind it, waiting for an invitation back into her life.

VAL RUBBED HER EYE to still the twitching, a nervous reaction when something upset her. She knew, even as she'd logged on, that checking Facebook would be a mistake. Well, *waste of time* was what she'd thought but now, seeing the friend request from Joni, the subtle warning hardened into something else. It wasn't that she didn't like Joni, even love her; it was ...

She powered down the desktop computer she and Russ shared mostly for paying bills and ordering shit (and frittering away time when no one was looking) and Zeke used for video games during his daily after-homework hour. They were a disciplined family, teacher and architect, a single child who'd somehow sprouted into adolescence, family dinners with phones-not-allowed, movie nights and game nights, heartfelt apologies when disagreements went too far. Not perfect, but good, solid. She loved the life that she and Russ had built together in their small but comfortable house on their calm, safe street in a good suburb within commuting distance of the city. Marrying Russ, leaving the city and coming here, giving up her (neurotic, painful, disastrous) quest to be an actress—no, *movie star*; what she'd imagined had been nothing less than her face large on the big screen—for teaching the craft to high school students were collectively the best decisions she had ever made.

She knew why Joni was getting in touch. She'd seen the news, too. But Val did not want to revisit that time in her life, that early garbage heap of mistakes. She didn't want to talk about it, didn't want to *think* about it.

Sitting at the cramped kitchen desk, gazed at by the dark monitor, she felt a draft coming from somewhere in the house; a window must have been left open. It was spring but chilly, the heat was still on, leaking out. She got up and there, in the living room, beside the green corduroy couch strewn with Zeke's jacket and baseball cap, was the offending window. She closed it so



hard she startled herself, the crack of the wooden sash coming down as loud as a gunshot, and with that jolt of sound, memory rushed in.

Freshman orientation week. A girl, a young woman, a woman-girl of middling height appeared out of nowhere, strands of her long brown hair floating, electric. A dry September evening as she crossed the South Lawn that served as their college's town square. She wasn't one of the beauties that seemed to abound at this school, but her confidence—her confidence was captivating. It was the confidence Val had always wished for. She couldn't stop watching the girl as she made her way through the crowd of fellow students, teenagers splayed across the grass, clustered or alone in the glow of the waning autumn light. It was a stew of restless energy—bodies lean and fat, tattoos and piercings, hair dyed in every possible shade, boys who looked like girls and girls who looked like boys and girls and boys who looked like neither.

Even back then, without understanding why, the Gilded Age mansion cum administration building looming in the background felt oxymoronic (a word she wouldn't master for another three semesters), an out-of-place-and-time hulk of stone embedded with glass eyes that shone golden in the twilight. Now, pulled back into that moment, the thought finally, after all these years, crystallized: The old building with its shining eyes patiently awaited them, understanding that no matter how badly they all wanted to burst out and move forward, to ditch their parents and their siblings and their childhoods, they would discover that they were joined to the past. Eventually they'd turn around and notice the building with its history and its promise and its expectations. One day they'd find themselves *inside* the building. Sooner or later they'd understand its significance and with painful clarity recognize their own insignificance. Some would be haunted by the insight, others liberated.

Young Val stood there, not knowing how to insert herself into the happy lawn ruckus of radical shapeshifters, how to be a college student, why she'd ever thought she'd be up for this, and found comfort in the bright girl moving in her direction.

And then the girl glanced her way and for a split second their gazes merged.

The girl strode closer, smiling, moving among the others like they were old friends, though everyone was new. She paused to catch something, an

orange, tossed by someone with short, dyed-gray hair and an indiscernible-in-twilight skin color. The girl held the orange firmly in her hand, as if it had always been meant for her, and kept going.

As Val's eyes adjusted to the changing light she began to see that there were some kids who, like her, weren't experimenting on any edge—boys recognizable as boys, girls as girls, hair as hair, clothes as something available in a store that even *she* might walk into—*normcore*, they'd call it now, as a statement of ... what? Looking back, she recognized that in that atmosphere of almost compulsive rule-breaking you could argue that *those* were the kids who were the risk-takers, given how nonconformity could seem conformist when people broke the same rules. Every generation comes of age in a distortion of its own mind-bends, a remaking of the future fueled by some new kind of wishful thinking that guarantees to change society but never manages to perfect it. She knew that now. She hadn't begun to know it then, watching the girl cross in her direction.

The girl stopped in front of Val, tossing the orange from hand to hand. They stared at each other. Val felt a swelling of her own nascent confidence and smiled. The girl opened her mouth and tore a ferocious bite out of the orange, right through the thick skin, then tossed it to Val. She caught it and took a bite out of the other side, straight through the bitter pith and into the sweet middle. Orange juice dripping down their faces, they laughed—and that was it. That was their beginning.

“I'm Joni,” the girl introduced herself, a twinkle in her brown eyes.

“I'm Val.” After an awkward, lonely week, she'd arrived at the start of her future.

They got drunk together that first night, found boys, had fun. Over breakfast they unfurled themselves to each other, the way girls do, letting everything out at once. Val and the pressure she felt from her parents to study something practical, their doubts about her future as an actress, how those doubts had transferred to her. Joni and her “tuned out” parents and younger brother, who, as soon as he overtook her in size, began to torment her—and Joni being Joni, she offered chilling details: the time he twisted the skin on her arm until it burned red; the time he held her down and peed on her; the way her mother didn't believe her when she told.

Joni helped Val learn to trust herself. Val helped Joni feel grounded and safe.

By year's end they were practically inseparable except when one of them detoured on a romantic quest (inevitably brief). They were roommates for the next three years and their lives and identities became so fused that by the time they launched hand in hand into adulthood, they couldn't imagine the possibility of anything that could force them apart.

Standing at the closed window, before turning to go upstairs to her son, Val felt a fresh surge of love for Joni, the Joni she used to know, and was tempted to go back to the computer and click Confirm, yes, I want to talk to you, too! But that Joni had to be gone by now; no one reached middle age with that much confidence intact.

Val wasn't sure if she had the emotional energy to unpack the conversation they'd need to have if they spoke.

Or the courage.

Or if Joni, *this* Joni, had the strength to hear it.

Because the secret had mutated inside Val over the years and if she opened her mouth, monsters would fly out.

IT WAS A RECURRING DREAM: Joni's younger self framed in an office window mottled by refracted images. Streaks of blue sky. Long crisscrossed shadows of palm fronds. Reflections of two little girls playing outside, cartwheels, bike wheels, sun wheeling into moonlight, and her daughters fading from view. She panics and stands and calls their names but they can't hear her through the window. Her dream hand reaches through dream glass, which turns to liquid ... and that's when she wakes, every time, in a sweat.

She lay there, groggy, relieved to be beyond the grip of the dream, a classic: fear of losing control, working mother can't be everywhere at once despite best intentions.

Her thoughts drifted to her girls. She had felt so eager and privileged to be able to raise daughters—as if she was uniquely qualified, by dint of her idealism, to build smart girls into strong women who would know how to avoid all the pitfalls of their mother's generation. It disturbed her, it *always* disturbed her, that dream-reminder of how time slips away and then, suddenly, your children are gone. She missed them, and if she had it her way they'd talk every day at least once. But her daughters were habitually unreachable—Chris working long hours as a freelance documentary producer in San Francisco, and Alex nearby in college (the same one Joni and Val went to) and loath to return calls.

Joni closed her eyes and almost drifted back to sleep until a loud sound jolted her. Her girls evaporated and now she was fully awake, forward in time and back in reality, alone in bed—Paul's side rumpled, empty.

The vacuum droned from somewhere distant in the big house. It was Friday, one of Makta's three workdays here keeping the enormous place from going to seed. A little sunlight peeked through the pulled-down shades and, since the housekeeper was already there, Joni knew it was after nine. As her

brain oriented to wakefulness, she remembered that tonight Paul was whisking her away to a mystery destination to celebrate their anniversary. She rolled over and huddled under the blanket and felt Stella's comforting weight at the foot of the bed.

And then the shadow of Val entered her thoughts.

It had been like that all week when she first woke up. Agitated dreams. Then she'd right herself. Then she'd think of Val: how, not hours but days later, she still hadn't accepted the friend request. Wherever she was, she would have heard the news by now, but she hadn't come forward publicly—Joni knew, because she'd checked several times every day since learning about the legion of women Lou Pridgen and the other man had allegedly victimized.

She let Stella out into the yard to relieve herself and waited in the doorway as she raced to her favorite tree then back for a dual ear rub. In the kitchen, they ate their breakfasts quickly—Joni hoped to avoid Makta before having a chance to shower and dress. But no luck. She was angling her bowl into the dishwasher when the woman's coarse voice found her.

"Missus."

Joni cranked on a smile and turned. "Good morning, Makta. How are you?"

Makta was a small woman, in skinny jeans today (they didn't suit her) and an oversized T-shirt that tented over her ample bosom. Her dyed-black hair looked clamped in place by the gray root-stripe of a stern middle part. She wore fleece slippers; her worn black shoes would be parked beside the front door in their usual place, the thought of which made Joni feel vaguely agitated.

"Not so good. My knees. Okay I work only downstairs today?"

"Absolutely. Sorry you're not feeling great."

She was never feeling great, but Joni was relieved—this meant she could hide upstairs and pack without any commentary from the older woman. She'd never been comfortable with household help. Back home in California, in their normal house, they'd managed with a cleaner one day every two weeks. But the Commandant's House was a different, hungrier beast. They hadn't been there long before Paul hired Makta—well, had Blair hire her—from a service and let Joni know that, contingent upon if she approved, the housekeeper would be with them every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

Joni tried but couldn't seem to get comfortable having a stranger in her home doing her cleaning—a deeply rooted feeling despite the nagging suspicion that the cleaning shouldn't automatically belong to *her*.

Makta must have assumed they were rich. Well, they weren't poor. But in fact, an investment trust owned the Commandant's House. Paul spearheaded the purchase, having convinced the board of Sunny Day Productions that it would be a preeminent venue for luring major film talent to television, and it was bought for them to live in as a perk of Paul's elevated position as the new East Coast TV guru. Their party would be the first big event in the house since they arrived and, among other things, would aim to reinforce the idea that Paul was *the man*. Meantime they still owned their Malibu house, but they'd had it a long time and it was modest by today's standards. Joni held on to the expectation, *hope*, that one day they'd move back there for good.

She packed quickly and set her suitcase at the top of the stairs. Paul had promised to be home no later than three thirty so they could easily make their eight o'clock flight with time built in for rush hour traffic. Alex was coming for the weekend to dog sit but didn't expect to arrive until after they'd left for the airport.

Settled into the comfy chair by the bedroom window, coffee at hand and laptop on knees, Joni spent a few minutes clicking around for Val as if the effort would incite her to accept the friend request. It didn't.

Finally, determined to use her time wisely since she had so much of it these days, to focus on work, she opened the file with notes for her next screenplay. Stella lay down between window and chair, where Joni could reach her with a foot nestled into the comfy fur.

Her attention drifted to her chipped toenails—she needed a pedicure.

And drifted further as she wondered when she'd started getting pedicures in the first place. Certainly not back when she was reading all those (inspiring) books for women's studies, and not when she was busy making films.

She forced herself back to the screen and poised her fingers over the keyboard but nothing happened. She couldn't concentrate, couldn't think, couldn't write. Every time she tried, her mind wandered back to Val.

She shut the laptop so hard she feared she'd killed it—a quick peek under the lid reassured her it was still alive.

Joni nudged Stella with her foot and the dog sprang up at the offer of a

walk. She stuck her phone and a credit card into the back pocket of her jeans and her keys into a front pocket (she hated carrying a purse if she didn't have to), laced up her sneakers, and opened the front door onto a crisp blue day.

Back home in California, their daily long walks used to take them up and down the beach. One of the many things she'd dreaded about moving east was losing the glories of sand and wind and ocean and endless horizon that allowed her to forget herself—she dreaded it for both of them, for herself and for Stella. But within days of landing in Brooklyn, walking the city streets, Joni had discovered the intimacy of stitching neighborhoods together footstep by footstep. Every several blocks something new emerged, a change of demographic, a different slant on a similar culture that was uniquely New York and as homogeneous as her thoughts at the moment—not homogeneous at all.

Turned corners resulted in fresh resolve.

What happened next was up to Val. If she wanted to reconnect or, better yet, come forward publicly, Joni would confirm the events of that awful long-ago night.

If she didn't come forward, Joni would tell the story for her.

No, she wouldn't, because it wasn't her right to violate Val's privacy.

It was a bewildering calculus, trying to honor the needs of an old friend who seemed bound to a silence that was becoming intolerable.

Distracted, Joni nearly lost her balance on a humped cobblestone, and the jolt ignited a feeling of heat, a visceral edge of anger, forbidden anger, trying to push itself out. *This, right now, was the time for Val to speak up, because she'd actually be listened to.* It was such a huge shift. Joni could almost feel her bones, her organs, her veins detaching from whatever was holding her together—every little bit of her flying off in a different direction. She'd kept the secret for so long, even from her LA shrink, Jennifer, that the prospect of unzipping their silence held the promise of a liberation—an uncorseting that would allow all those pent-up truths and held breaths to spill out. She wished she'd spilled to Jennifer years ago, when she'd had the chance; Jennifer with her sealed lips who could have been trusted before retiring six months ago and decamping to some unknown (to her greedy, needy clients) destination. The thought of starting fresh with a new therapist felt overwhelming, but she

needed to talk with someone about it, someone she could trust—and if not Val, then who?

Paul, *of course* Paul. After decades together, wasn't it time to confide in him? He had his ear to the ground in the industry and she was sure he wouldn't discuss it with anyone else if she asked him not to.

Her thoughts were racing when she spotted a nail salon on Jay Street. A pedicure would help her relax and process all this, *and* she was heading to a beach somewhere, "somewhere in the sun," Paul had said.

She tied Stella to a post, went inside, and chose a seat beside the window where she could keep an eye on her darling Doodle. The moment she plunged her feet into the hot water her mind began to empty.

She pictured herself stretched out on a towel on a beach, wherever her husband was taking her.

The sun is hot on her face. Sweat prickles her skin. He reaches across the sand to take her hand. They turn to look at each other and smile. Her words flow, calm, assured, as she tells him about what Lou Pridgen did to Val, the shock, the panicked aftermath, the bruises that lasted weeks and changed colors every day until they were gone and then Val was gone and time moved forward and it was as if the assault had never happened. Joni offers no explanation of why she kept it to herself for so long, and he doesn't ask.



THREE THIRTY CAME AND WENT, and no Paul.

Joni was irritated but not surprised. She texted him, Running late?

Doing my best to get out the door, he answered. Hang tight.

At five o'clock, Makta left.

Earth to Paul?!

He didn't respond.

By seven, she knew there was no way they'd get to the airport on time.

She was eating a salad and drinking wine at the kitchen table when the front door creaked into the quiet. She glanced at the cat clock: it was quarter past eight. Their plane had already left.

"Paul?" she called out.

A loud thump told her that someone had dropped something in the front hall. Stella went running and Joni listened to the happy tumult of reunion.

In a moment, Alex appeared in the kitchen, long dark hair swinging, hazel eyes smiling, looking lean and summery in shorts and a T-shirt. Joni was surprised by her daughter's bare legs, which looked dirty, as if she'd walked through a fog of soot. She stood up and opened her arms and Alex fell into them. They hugged, inhaling and exhaling together, kissing each other's cheeks.

"Mom, why are you here?"

"Dad's still at the studio. We missed the flight."

"Again?"

"Again." (Yes, it had happened before.)

"So, what—you're sitting here drinking wine and waiting for him?"

"I guess so."

"Am I still dog sitting?" Alex asked. "What's happening?"

Joni shrugged. "Not sure."

“Dad’s a real piece of work. If he says, ‘Come on, let’s go now,’ you’ll go. If he says, ‘We’re not going,’ you’ll be okay with that, too.”

“I can swing either way with this, it doesn’t bother me that much.” Joni looked at Alex and smiled, hoping to make *her* smile, but she didn’t. It could be chilling the way daughters saw everything.

Alex opened cupboards until she found a wineglass, then joined her mother at the table. “The amount of emotional labor you put into your relationship with Dad is kind of insane.”

“Emotional labor—right.” Joni recalled that old workplace-dynamic concept that had surfaced in the 1980s. Since when did it apply to marriages, too? “You mean flexibility? Resilience? Understanding? Forgiveness?”

“You know what I mean, Mom—and you know what I’m talking about.”

It was true: Joni did. And she’d been thinking about it lately. But if you stripped all that out of a marriage on the grounds that the emotional labor was unequal, what would hold it together?

Alex sipped her wine, put down her glass, and modulated her tone as if she were the mother and Joni were the baffled child. “You pour time and energy into regulating your emotions to suit Dad and everyone else—Chris, me. It used to seem normal, but more and more it doesn’t.”

“It’s called being a mother.”

“You’re not Dad’s mother.” Alex cracked an ironic smile that made Joni laugh.

“Thank God for that.”

Finally, Alex laughed. She lifted her glass and they clinked a toast that was part sisterhood celebration and part familial truce.

“*You’re* here,” Joni said. “Let’s make lemonade from lemons. We can have a fun weekend together—I miss you.”

This would be better, much better, than a weekend with her work-distracted husband. Alex could be a wise listening ear and Joni longed to talk to another woman about her connection to the burgeoning Lou Pridgen scandal—but was her daughter too young and idealistic to understand why silence had seemed like the best option at the time?

“Maybe, Mom. I don’t know. I have a lot to do—it might be easier if I head back to school.”

“Okay.” A sinking disappointment. “I understand. Could you wait to decide till Dad gets home? Just in case he pulls something together?” Joni

knew from experience that the possibility of a last-minute flight wasn't out of the question.

"Sure. I'll sleep over either way. How's that?"

"I'll take it."

Alex pushed back her chair and flung her legs onto Joni's lap, the way she used to back in their Malibu kitchen. She wanted a foot rub. Her legs, Joni now saw, weren't dirty but hairy. When did she stop shaving? Joni had no idea how or if to react. She understood, though, that her daughter's proffering of her feet, her legs, was not so much about the foot rub as about how Joni would react to a choice Alex had made. Joni ran her hand along the scratchy leg, up to the knee, back to the ankle. Said nothing. Pressed her thumb into the sole of the foot. Alex tilted her head back and moaned with pleasure.

Joni felt she'd passed a test, though she didn't know what the test was for. Part of her was proud of Alex for this bold choice. Part of her was afraid for her child. She didn't know what to think. Her own young womanhood decades ago hadn't offered many options; in those days there was a lot of lip service to open-mindedness, but in the end they'd mostly slipped back into old molds. Shave your legs, keep your hair long, and for God's sake, *smile*.

Joni's phone buzzed with a text from Paul: I'm sorry. Meet me for dinner at the River Café @9?

So there would be no replacement flight, no sunny beach, just the usual anniversary meal out, this time at the fanciest restaurant in nearby Dumbo. He would have flexed his reservation muscles (or Blair would have) for a same-night table at the River Café. She felt like saying no, she wasn't hungry, she already ate. But what was the point? She had said it herself: flexibility, resilience, understanding, forgiveness, those were the spokes that kept the wheel of marriage from buckling in on itself.

She released Alex's foot and tapped: If you're late, I won't be waiting. The *swoosh* of sending that made her feel powerful. Did she mean it? If he was late, would she really walk out?

Also (he added) Blair canceled the dog sitter.

Dog sitter? It must have been a service—they didn't have a professional dog sitter, though it had recently occurred to her that they should have someone lined up in the inevitable event that Alex couldn't make it at some point. Joni was sure she'd mentioned that Alex was coming, but sometimes Paul magically didn't hear her.

“Consolation dinner,” she told Alex. “I’ve got to get changed.”

“He can be an asshole, Mom. You know that, right?”

“No, honey, he’s just overworked.” Joni believed that if Alex really meant it, she wouldn’t have said it aloud.

“Well, it was an asshole move.”

“I’ll give you that.”

Joni rolled the suitcase back into the bedroom and opened it on the floor, grabbed her underwear and nightgown and bathing suit and shoved them back into the dresser drawers.

She decided that she might as well wear the one good outfit she’d packed for the trip. But when she slipped into the strapless white dress it felt wrong for a spring night in Brooklyn. A survey of her closet didn’t help—nothing looked right.

She called Alex into the room for help. Alex had a great eye and wouldn’t mince words, though Joni wasn’t expecting what she said:

“It doesn’t matter what you wear, Mom. No one’s looking at you, anyway.”

Joni swallowed a sharp retaliation about Alex’s hairy legs: at the height of her beauty, people *definitely* looked at her, so why didn’t she care? *Why didn’t she shave?* But Joni didn’t say anything. She knew that her daughter’s intention was to be direct, not cruel. Joni hung somewhere between hurt and insulted for the half minute it took to realize that what Alex said was probably true.

She pushed the unsettling thought away, finished getting ready, and kissed Alex goodnight on her way out the door.

JONI WALKED INTO THE RIVER CAFÉ wearing a black dress and a pair of high-heeled sandals with her fresh red pedicure and matching lipstick and it was impossible not to notice that what Alex had said was true. Not a single head turned. Even Paul didn't glance up from his phone as she crossed the restaurant to their table where, looking trim in his blue sports jacket, he sat in front of a window overlooking the shining river and velvet night and sparkling city.

She sat across from him and he looked up and smiled. "I ordered you a Manhattan."

"Thanks."

His forehead pleated. "I'm really sorry about screwing up our trip."

"What happened?"

"Dustin Hoffman decided to drop in."

"Unannounced?"

He nodded. "What could I do?"

"Tell him you had a flight? Invite him to the party and tell him you had to bolt?"

"He'll be out of town for the party. Did I tell you? De Niro's coming for sure, and Geffen thinks he can make it." Paul beamed hard, bloated with LA starlight, ready to release all that golden brilliance onto the Commandant's lawn.

"So what did Hoffman *want*?" Movie stars didn't just drop in. They strategized.

"He wants to play the Skipper." Paul's eyes shone—they were doing a remake of *Gilligan's Island*, an idea Joni thought was idiotic, though she hadn't said so. "He's A-list. I couldn't just tell him to get lost."

Picturing Dustin Hoffman in that jaunty blue captain's hat, she had to

force herself not to laugh. Paul was genuinely excited. She screwed some enthusiasm into her tone and said, “Wow.”

“Oh, did you ever get the call from that reporter?” Earlier that week, Paul had copied her on an email from his production studio’s publicist, letting her know that she’d be contacted for a profile of him slated to run in the July issue of *Vanity Fair*.

“Yup. He’s coming by with a photographer in a couple weeks. It’s on the calendar.”

“A couple *weeks*? I know he’s already started talking to people.”

Joni had looked up the reporter, Dallas Miller, right after he’d called. The deep, confident voice didn’t match the pale, lashless young man on his LinkedIn page. He was six years out of college, with stints at places like *E! News*, *HuffPost*, and *Salon*—getting a big assignment like this, for a venerable print publication, was a step up. Obviously he expected the interview with her to be easy—*the great producer’s wife at home*—like a little *i* getting dotted. *That* was why she’d been scheduled so far out, because she was an afterthought.

She put on her smile. “He said if you could be there, too, they’d get pictures of us together. Actually, he said pix.”

Paul grinned his crinkle-eyed grin, sharing her old-school amusement at the young reporter’s jargon. “Sure. Could you ask Blair to put it on the calendar?”

“Already did.”

“So, what’d you do today?” he asked. “I mean, besides wait.”

“Packed. Tried to work on my screenplay. Stella and I took a long walk.” The dull litany of her day. She didn’t mention all the time she’d spent fruitlessly googling Val. Her hand trembled when she unfolded her napkin and dropped it onto her lap, but he didn’t seem to notice. *Pay attention to your wife*, the director in her would have noted, *at least a little bit, at least pretend*.

“That’s nice.” His phone buzzed and he turned to it.

While he texted, Joni sipped her drink and gazed out the window at the streaks of wavering light on the dark river, the way they flashed and vanished. She wasn’t hungry but when the waiter came around she ordered something. Shrimp. It didn’t matter. She knew she’d only nibble at it and bring the rest home for Alex.

As soon as he put down his phone Paul told her, “You wouldn’t believe the other names who are lining up for the new series, feature-level actors.” He told her about everyone’s general excitement over the project and about how, as soon as Hoffman was gone, his colleagues had pushed Paul out the door so he wouldn’t let Joni down (as if it wasn’t already too late) at the start of their anniversary weekend. She pretended to listen but the more he talked, the farther away her attention flew. She smiled. She nodded. (Score one for Alex: after all these years, Joni was a slick emotional laborer, indeed.)

His finger scrolled along the face of his phone until he saw something that made him stop and crunch his forehead in thought.

“Paul?”

“One sec.”

“Did you hear the latest about Lou?” On her way to the restaurant she’d seen the news that the great man had been not only outed as a sexual predator but *ousted* from the helm of Highrise Productions.

He looked at her. “Yes. I got wind of it yesterday.”

“You knew he was getting fired?”

“Technically he resigned—in reality, he was forced out by the board. Not even Lou can survive a couple of women complaining he harassed them.”

“Five women,” she corrected him. She sipped her drink and wrapped her arms around herself. “And I think it was a little more than complaints. And it wasn’t exactly *harassment*.”

With a tilt of his head to show he’d been humbled, he self-corrected. “Right, sorry, of course.”

“Do you have projects in the pipeline with Highrise?”

“A few,” he said. “But Damien King’s taking over—we’ll be in good hands.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“It’s new.” Of course he’d have been aware of what was happening before the media got hold of it; if anyone was an insider, it was Paul.

But he didn’t know everything.

Joni took a deep breath, steadied her voice, and told him, “It’s *more* than five women. There’s at least one more.”

“Oh?” He leaned forward, poised to listen.

“Paul, there’s something I never told you.” She plunged ahead. “The sixth woman was a friend of mine. It happened a long time ago, and it didn’t seem

like a good idea to tell anyone, but now—”

“Who?”

“Val Graham. We were friends in college and roommates in LA—you never met her. She went back to Philly after it happened and we fell out of touch.”

His face looked waxy, putty-hued despite the candlelight. His bottom lip fell open and she could see the movement of his tongue in his mouth, as if words were forming, but at first he didn’t speak. Then he asked, simply, “When?”

“In 1990.”

He blinked. She sensed he was calculating, since that was the year they’d met—by accident, in the waiting room of a production office, the way it used to happen pre-internet. They were both trying to get hired as writers on the second season of a cop drama. Joni was crossing the room holding a paper cup filled with coffee when Paul barreled through the door so hard and fast she nearly spilled the coffee but somehow didn’t. That first physical jolt of their meeting stayed with her, the flash of irritation that melted when she took in his luscious brownish-green eyes.

“Sorry about that,” she’d said, as if she had been the one who’d caused the collision. She extended her free hand. “I’m Joni.”

“Paul.”

He got the job, she didn’t, which was fine because she was only after a paycheck; she wanted to make movies, not TV. After their first date he called to say what a nice time he’d had and she told him she felt the same way and after that, well. They fell in love—it was wild, fabulous. Had babies. Grew tired. Grew up. Fade to now.

“He drugged her,” she told him. “At a party we went to together. I brought her home. It was awful. There were two of them, just like with some of the other women.”

“Can *she* ID him?” he asked.

In the past few days, the salaciousness of the story had grown as it became clear that the attacks had always started with Lou and by the time the other man appeared, when he appeared, the women had been too dazed to remember much.

Joni shook her head. “She hardly remembered anything back then. I have no idea if she remembers more now.”



Paul reached across the table for her hand. Only when he touched her did she realize how cold she was, how afraid she'd been to discuss this after all these years. He held her left hand in both of his and rubbed it warm, while her right hand reached for her glass and tilted the dregs into her mouth. Sweet. And sour. Diluted with melted ice. She set the empty glass back down.

"She never told anyone?" he asked.

"Nope. Neither did I. We made a pact."

"Joni, you're a good friend. Val was lucky to have you. Is she still in Philly?"

"I found her on Facebook. It looks like she's in New Jersey now. Maplewood."

"You talked?"

"She hasn't accepted my friend request yet, so—" Joni shook her head in resignation. "But Paul, I made a decision. If she speaks up publicly, I'm going to stand with her. I wanted you to know."

"Good." He smiled, then his face stilled with thought. "But it was such a long time ago. What if no one believes her?"

"That's why I have to stand by her side, because I was there, and I know the truth. And you're wrong, people will believe her—they'll believe her now."

"I'm just a little concerned that she'll be steamrolled by the press, you know? And that it'll take over *your* life, too."

"Paul, have you ever watched someone suffer in silence? It's awful. And now she doesn't have to."

"I understand—and you're right, of course you're right. I just can't help wondering if it's worth it."

The skin on the back of her neck prickled. "Of course it's worth it."

Fresh drinks arrived and they sipped them without meeting each other's eyes. They were going in circles and solved it by falling silent. Usually when he disagreed with her, when he reframed her impressions or opinions or memories, she relented because it was easier—but not this time. This was too important.

VAL CLICKED OFF THE TV and Russ headed into the kitchen to do the dishes. They'd stayed up too late, as usual, but it wasn't easy to not watch *just one more*.

On her way up the stairs she collected their son's detritus. The soccer jersey he'd stripped off after practice and flung on the banister. Three dirty athletic socks (why three?). A leaflet about the science fair that must have fallen out of the bookbag he never bothered to zip shut. And, finally, a triple-A battery.

Arms loaded, she attempted a knock on Zeke's door with her elbow, then pushed it open with her hip without waiting for the required invitation to enter.

"Mom!"

"Shouldn't you be in bed by now?"

"I'm not *tired*."

"Is this from your calculator?" In her open palm, the slender battery. Everything else she dropped on his messy bed.

"You didn't *knock*."

"How could I?"

Zeke sat on the floor, staring up at her with forced indignation. Since he'd entered his teens it was not only his right but his duty to object to nearly every move his mother made. These sharp pellets of rejection still surprised her, hurt her, though she was working on that with her therapist, who reminded her often, "Don't take it personally, it isn't about you."

Val placed the battery on his desk and crouched down to look at the architectural model her son had constructed on the floor. "Is that for the science fair?"

"What about this says *science*?"

“Is it the ... wait, it’s going to be the Eames House.” Russ must have inspired the choice; her husband was a huge fan of Frank Lloyd Wright.

“It is the Eames House, Mom.”

Val smiled. It lacked the zigzag detail along the upper edge and the splashes of primary color on its celebrated facade, but she wouldn’t argue those points with her creative, belligerent, beloved son. If Russ was paying attention, it would be perfect in the end.

“It’s fabulous.” She smiled at it and then at him. She *loved* this kid, was so *proud* of him. He struggled not to smile back but she saw those fine muscles around his eyes relax, that snarl unwind into an almost-smile.

“It’s for Geometry,” he told her. “We have a choice to do this instead of the final exam.”

“Well,” she said, “I have no doubt you’ll pass with flying colors.”

“Hope so.”

Iceberg cracked, he allowed her a goodnight kiss on the cheek—just the smallest peck, but still—before she gently closed the door behind her.

On her way to the bathroom she picked up an empty laundry basket and shoved it into the hall linen closet. Pushed a tottering stack of towels back from the shelf’s edge. Remembered to tell Zeke to pack his textbook for World History class tomorrow and turned back toward his room, then thought better of it—if she didn’t let him remember things on his own he’d never grow up.

She stood at the sink and started on her bedtime routine: teeth, face, nightgown, to bed with a book.

Cozy under the covers, she thought about how much she loved her life, even the prosaic routines that moved her forward, every day a step on a ladder to the next day. To somewhere. To nowhere. It didn’t matter. She *loved* how calm she’d felt since she’d relinquished ambition and ego and—oh God, all those years ago—Hollywood and The Dream.

The book she was reading—well, *not* reading right now—lay open on her stomach beneath her clasped hands.

She thought about Zeke’s model house, its simplicity and openness and aspiration.

She thought about the houses we build for ourselves to live in, the choices we make when we’re young that land us in those houses later.

She wondered how Joni was doing in that obscene mansion of hers.

Val had looked up her old friend right after the Lou Pridgen news broke, and then came the unexpected friend request, and she didn't know how to feel or what to think about Joni's gilded life. They'd started off in the same place, young and hungry, but only Joni had gone on to a degree of real success and ... what? Not fame—it was her husband who was famous now. Riches, maybe. But happiness?

How could Joni possibly be *happy*?

Val closed her eyes, pushing away a memory of the day she'd heard about what had happened at Joni's Malibu house. That horrible accident. It was too awful to think about, even now. For years she'd made a point of not thinking about it because it was too difficult, she just *couldn't*. But what about Joni? How could anyone sustain blinders big enough to not see that kind of damage looming in her past? And yet ... Val had managed to flee her own apocalypse, to ditch the memories and the label of *rape survivor*, and she never thought about it, ever, if she could help it. Until recently.

Now she wondered if ignoring Joni's friend request was thoughtless, selfish, possibly even cruel. What happened to Val had really happened. And evidently it had happened not just to her but to others. That bit of news had come as a shock. Didn't she owe those women her solidarity? Maybe it *was* time to talk about it, maybe it *was* safe now—the world certainly thought so. And Joni was the logical person for Val to start that conversation with. She just wasn't sure if she wanted to, if she could.

Though maybe that wasn't what her old friend wanted. Maybe it was something else.

Maybe Joni was lonely.

Of course she was lonely, how could she *not* be lonely, coming from that family of hers?

Val would never forget the spring break she'd spent in Rhode Island with the Ackerman family. The house itself was *perfectly nice*, meaning averagely decorated and organized and clean, comfortable enough, with nothing memorable about the physical space except that it was a suburban house on a regular street of *normal* houses. By the end of the week Val's imagination placed the family, that horrible family that had somehow produced the gem that was Joni, in a cobwebbed, broken-down Victorian hulk secluded in a damp wilderness where it was always dark.

Those parents and that brother—Bert and Lillian and Marc (who, for some

reason, insisted on being called *Marco*)—were respectively drunk and bedbound and merciless. It was all there the moment Val stepped into that bland house, there in the father’s sour breath and glazed eyes, in the mother’s absence, in the teenage brother’s boredom that translated into an avidity to *make something happen*. Each night that week Joni and Val prepared dinner, which they shared at the kitchen table with a mean drunk and a stoned adolescent whose foot constantly drifted to Val’s leg under the table in a badly misguided attempt at seduction.

The one time Val didn’t bother to hide her amusement when Joni inevitably kicked her brother’s foot away from her friend, the father reacted by shouting at the boy that he was “a fucking idiot,” and the brother lashed out at Joni that she was “such a bitch.”

After that, Val kept her mouth shut. Joni carried her mother’s dinners to her bedroom on a tray; even though there was nothing wrong with the woman physically, she claimed she was “too tired” to get out of bed. Val had no idea who fed her when Joni wasn’t home, maybe the housekeeper who came twice a week to put the house in order. What upset Val the most was that Joni didn’t seem to realize how extreme her family was; she’d call them “toxic” with an eyeroll that suggested that she thought they were toxic in the usual way.

But they weren’t. They were different. They really *were* toxic.

In college, Joni was obviously on the run from something, with her nonstop partying and huge dreams and ambition. Even when she wasn’t sure exactly what she wanted to do—back then, it boiled down to “something in film”—she was determined to “make it.” She had something to prove and it had to be big—a bridge to build, maybe, to take her far away from that family.

Joni, as valedictorian, gave a rowdy, inspiring speech, telling her cohort to “Go *before* your dream, don’t follow it, let *it* chase *you!*” Laughter and applause were riotous and Joni stood there, clapping along with everyone else, taking it in, inviting more. Val remembered Mr. and Mrs. Ackerman parked side by side in the third row, the mother pale and vacant, the father red-eyed, snickering. How could *those two* have made Joni? The brother hadn’t bothered to show up.

Over time, Val grew to believe that the fertile imagination that had saved Joni once came to the rescue again when she channeled it into a first film so

rich and authentic and vibrant that it catapulted her to early success. Somehow, the distortions of her childhood fueled her.

Val suspected there weren't too many people who understood Joni as well as she did, having seen the quicksand she'd risen out of. She *had* to be lonely.

*Be a friend to Joni. Just a friend.*

Val closed her book and got out of bed, crossed the room to her dresser, and yanked the charging cord out of her phone.

They could start with friendship, if that's what this was about.

But if it was the other thing, well, she wasn't ready to talk about it—not all of it, not yet.

JONI AND PAUL WENT RIGHT TO BED and he was asleep almost instantly, but she couldn't relax. His back was toward her and she laid her hand on his shoulder blade: a muscle was clumped just beneath the bone. His skin was damp. She took her hand away. The agitation she'd felt in the restaurant was congealing into something else, something she couldn't name yet.

She knew she wouldn't sleep so she got up and slipped her phone into the pocket of her robe. Padding barefoot along the carpeted hall, she was careful not to wake Alex, asleep in *her room*, though she'd never actually lived in it. When Joni reached the library at the end of the long hall she opened the door slowly, hoping it wouldn't creak, and it didn't.

She called it the library because she thought it was odd and kind of funny to have so many rooms that you could dedicate them for specific purposes. There was also an exercise room, a room for ironing and sewing that Makta used sometimes, a room for home projects and gift wrapping, a whole room for off-season clothes, and three guest rooms with en suite bathrooms (she had a feeling Makta catnapped in one on occasion). Oh, and don't forget the wine cellar in the basement—another dedicated room. Sometimes she joked (silently, in her mind) that they should have a room just for talking to yourself and another for screaming.

The library's walls were lined with bookcases, half filled with the overflow from her office, and there was a single plush armchair; this was a room for one person at a time. She turned on the light, walked soundlessly across the carpet, curled up in the chair, and opened her book.

She was almost done with Highsmith's *The Tremor of Forgery*—a self-conscious young man arrives in Tunis, in the 1970s, for a writing gig. (Patricia Highsmith often made her protagonists men, a fictional gender conversion for a woman who confided to her diary that she'd been born into

the wrong body.) He kills someone by throwing a typewriter at his head and pretends he knows nothing about it. Strange story but pure Highsmith, with that characteristic bottled-up rage. At some point Joni realized that she was more concerned with the friend's dog going missing, possibly poisoned by nasty neighbors, and she was really reading to find out whether the dog came back. It wasn't so much that she couldn't put the book down as that she couldn't, somehow, turn away from it. She began to feel the old pull that had first hooked her decades ago. It was a weird but good feeling. Ideas for her screenplay were starting to pop.

Eventually, sleepy, yawning, she got up to turn off the light and reflexively glanced at her phone. She froze when she saw the notification.

Val had accepted her friend request.

She switched the light back on and returned to the chair. Gripping the phone, she scrolled through Val's profile and drank in photos of her family, her garden, her travels, her meals. She seemed to have made a very good life for herself and Joni was happy for her, so happy.

It took several tries before she settled on the right tone for a private message that was casual and friendly. The aftermath of the assault, the silence they'd enforced on themselves, had her feeling defeated and confused. She assumed that Val felt the same things—and more. It seemed wise to tiptoe into the conversation after so much time.

Hi Val! Can you believe it? It's Joni from centuries ago. I stumbled on you online and couldn't resist saying hello.

Any interest in catching up on the phone one of these days? Xo

Hi, Joni. It's nice to hear from you.

How are you?

Really good. You?

Paul and I moved to New York recently—yup, I stayed in LA all these years. We're empty nesters now. I see that you're also married and it looks like you've got a son. What's his name?

Zeke, just turned 14 ... cue the eyeroll.

Good luck to you ☺. So, you became a teacher?

Yes, it's been excellent. Really satisfying. Turns out I love teaching



and I'm not too bad at it.

Val, you heard the news about Lou Pridgen, yes?

I wondered if that was why you were getting in touch. That's why it took me so long to answer.

It's okay, I understand. The news was a shock—I can only imagine how hard it's been for you. Can we talk? On the phone? Or even in person? I can come to you.

I don't know, Joni. I don't know if I'm there yet. I have to think about it.

Because if you want to talk, to me or to anyone—to everyone—I'll be there for you. That's what I wanted you to know.

Thanks. Maybe. This is pretty confusing.

I know, but Val, it's so important. Your voice counts. Don't you want to see those bastards behind bars?

And then—radio silence. Joni's last message didn't send, and she could no longer see Val's profile. It was a slap in the face, being blocked in real time; she felt so humiliated, so ashamed. She hadn't meant to push Val too hard. Why hadn't she let it go when Val said she wasn't sure?

Joni lay awake in bed for hours, and when she finally managed some sleep, Val haunted her dreams.

Val, young, luminous hair a wild mess, face a livid bruise.

Val tearing wrapping paper off a child's green bicycle with enormous handlebars and rainbow streamers that reached the floor. Getting on. Riding in frantic circles.

Joni struggled awake.

*No, not green, not rainbow.* The little bike they gave Chris one birthday, which was later passed down to Alex, wasn't green. The streamers were white and they weren't nearly that long. And why would Val be riding it? She'd never seen that bike or even heard about it, had never met Joni's children or husband. Their lives hadn't been intertwined for many, many years.

Val had moved on.

Joni needed to move on, too.

Unless, maybe ... Joni almost reached for her phone to see if Val had had a change of heart and unblocked her, but she stopped herself.

In the bathroom she splashed cold water on her face, again and again, until her skin stung. She looked into her mirror-eyes and demanded, “Deal with it—she said no.” But the woman who looked back at her had eyes that sparkled with hard glints of refusal.

SITTING AT THE KITCHEN TABLE while morning coffee brewed, Joni couldn't resist a glance at her phone—still nothing from Val, no change of mind. Instead, a calendar reminder appeared in a banner at the top of the screen: Digitrans follow-up.

Right, she'd almost forgotten. Two weeks ago she'd dropped off a box of old videotapes to be digitized and they were supposed to be ready by now. Since they'd moved she'd been craving a deep dive into their family's shared past, the *old us*, but as the outdated cameras that had shot the footage were long gone and they no longer owned a VCR, she was out of luck. She had not only forgotten about the project to digitize the tapes but had forgotten setting the reminder to follow up if necessary, which was exactly why she'd set it.

She found a phone number for Digitrans. It was early for a Saturday morning—eight thirty—and if no one answered she'd leave a message. But instead of ringing through to voicemail, a recording announced that the line was disconnected.

Hearing that, something inside her snapped. *A dozen years of precious family memories.* The bargain price for farming out the project—when she could have gathered what she'd needed to do it herself—now felt disastrously expensive.

She immediately dashed off a forceful email demanding the return of her tapes. At the *whoosh* she put down her phone and wondered if she'd overreacted. A disconnected phone could mean anything, she knew that; she knew she shouldn't allow herself to worry about something that would probably be resolved by noon.

She stood up and looked around the kitchen, at the window framing a bright morning. She would cook something, that's what she would do. Cooking would get her mind off the sensation of time slipping away, not

minutes but whole chunks of a lifetime.

She took out a bowl and a whisk and a dozen eggs. Chopped some fresh spinach and grated some cheese for a frittata. Peeled apart strips of bacon and, while they sizzled, found a corn muffin mix. Soon the kitchen filled with the lush smells of breakfast and a sense of renewed balance, until a drawer scraped open behind her and she flinched.

She turned and there was Paul, fresh from bed in pajama bottoms and a T-shirt, tousle-haired, barefoot. “Whoa, Joni—you okay?”

“I didn’t hear you come in. You scared me.” Craving comfort, she almost opened her arms for a morning hug but remembered the restaurant last night, their disagreement, how dismissive he’d been. She turned back to the stove and watched the edges of the bacon curl in the pan.

He set the table while she transferred the food onto serving dishes; they normally didn’t bother with that but she wanted it to feel special for Alex. Every experience their daughter had in this new house would become a memory and maybe, in time, she would come to feel it was home. She still wasn’t awake when everything was ready so they sat down without her. The food was hot and delicious.

Alex finally appeared, already dressed, with her long hair gathered into a floppy topknot and her face moist from a fresh washing. She got herself a plate—out of habit, Paul had only set the table for two—pulled out a chair and sat between her parents. She ate hungrily. When she was done she went upstairs to gather her things into her backpack. A fresh tug at her mother’s heart; Joni didn’t want Alex to leave.

Paul leaned in to say, “You weren’t in bed last night. I was looking for you.” A glimmer in his eye and Joni knew what he meant—he’d woken up and reached for her, wanting sex.

“I couldn’t sleep after our conversation at dinner,” she told him.

He leaned back and the glimmer faded. “I woke up thinking about it, too. Listen, I hate to ask, but if your friend *does* come forward, would you mind just hanging back for a little while? Until after the party? I was thinking about it and I realized the timing couldn’t be worse, I mean if your name gets into the press over this. You know how it is—once something goes public, the stink never gets off.”

She knew she should explain that she’d reconnected with Val in the middle of the night, that it hadn’t gone well, that her old friend had blocked

her and apparently had no intention of telling her story. Joni was still too raw to share that disappointment, though—the humiliation of being rejected by her once–best friend. But it was more than that. He was more concerned about the *stink* of Val’s scandal getting on himself than on Joni and it made her feel ... what? Angry? Unloved? She wasn’t sure, but it came on powerfully and she lashed out.

“Paul, you *know* that the minute she says anything, the Twitterverse will light up. Lou’s lawyers will claim it’s a lie. It’ll be like getting attacked again. She’ll need me. If I wait, it’ll spiral out of control.” Joni crossed her arms and sealed her lips and stared at him.

“Huh.” That’s all he said, that one flat utterance, before pushing away from the table and dropping his plate into the sink with a clatter so sharp she knew it was broken. The passive violence of his carelessness made her catch her breath.

“Was that an accident?” she asked.

“Of course.” But he’d hesitated.

When he didn’t fall in line with a request from her, *she* didn’t break dishes. Standing, she said, “I’ll be back in an hour.” She strode past him out of the kitchen. She wanted to be alone.

No, not alone—away from him.

With Alex.

Joni hoped she could soak up some comfort by walking with her daughter to the subway. Something had to turn the morning around, and normally time with one of her children did the trick.

They said goodbye outside the subway entrance. Joni hugged Alex a little too long and got no resistance, a kindness she appreciated. She wondered if Alex had overheard the kitchen argument, but the house was so big it was possible she hadn’t. Still, Alex must have sensed that something was off. Both Joni’s daughters were good at reading her.

She stood there and watched her baby disappear down the stairs and missed her so sharply she could hardly breathe.

She didn’t want to go home without Alex, home to Paul’s demands, home to a place that didn’t feel like home.

Since she still hadn’t heard back from Digitrans and it was only a few

minutes to the address listed on their website, she decided to walk over and see if she could track down the tapes. Every step forward was an effort to stop thinking about Paul's arrogance, Val's silence, Alex's absence, to latch her mind onto a different problem, one she might actually be able to resolve.

The little blue dot on Google Maps led her along Front Street until she reached a placard announcing THE SHOPS beside an interior passageway lined on either side with tiny storefronts. The dim corridor of a marketplace offered a hand-tooled-belt maker, a scarf and hat and sweater knitter, a jewelry designer, a purveyor of gift baskets stuffed with nuts and dried fruit, a tarot card reader, another jeweler, a dog groomer. Taped on the wall beside the groomer's door was a dog walker's homemade ad with a photo of a smiling woman surrounded by happy canine clients: LYNDA MONTOYA, DOG'S BEST FRIEND. Joni tore off a slip with the woman's phone number—it would be better than whatever impersonal service Blair had come up with.

Two-thirds of the way in, on the left, was the Digitrans storefront. The glass walls were covered on the inside with brown construction paper. The door was locked. A note taped on the door listed four names and phone numbers.

A man in a Yankees baseball cap, standing in the door of one of the jewelers, said, "Those guys are gone."

"Gone gone?" Joni asked.

"Some shit went down—who knows. But maybe you could find them, I dunno—sometimes they rehearse at night in the basement around the corner at 65 Pearl. They got a band or something."

"I thought—" *I thought they were video transfer professionals*, she stopped herself from saying. She was beginning to get the picture. Digitizing was their day job until their band got famous.

Scrolling through the Digitrans website on her phone, she found the staff bios. The owner was Wally Cobb, a young man with a broad smile and thick brown hair to his shoulders. His was the number at the top of the list posted on the door.

She dialed and he answered quickly. She introduced herself, said why she was calling.

"Oh, cool, yeah," he said. "I've been working on your job. It's almost done."

Something about his earnestness: she didn't believe him. "I'm at the

storefront. It looks like you're shut down."

"I'm going out of business but I'm finishing all the jobs that were started. I'm sorry—a couple days ago my employees had kind of a, well, like a coup."

"A *coup*?"

"Basically, yeah." He chuckled. "They cleaned me out, stole all my equipment. I'm borrowing someone else's setup so I can finish. Your job, it's almost done. I'll get it back to you as soon as I can."

She still didn't believe him. He was talking too much, trying too hard to appease her, the way a con man would. "When?"

"I can let you know tomorrow."

"Wally, those are the only copies of my family videos and I want them back. Can I get them right now? Where are you?"

"I'm out of town but I'll call you in the morning." He spoke fast and hung up and frustration hissed through her, the front edge of panic. Something wasn't right.

Around the corner, she found 65 Pearl Street. She stood in front of a padlocked metal door pocked with dents as if someone had tried to kick it in. Beside the door, raggedy steps descended into a basement that swallowed all the daylight like a voracious open jaw. She took one step down and was hit with a bad smell, some dank concoction of mildew and shit. She held her hand over her face. Whatever was down there ought to be avoided, she knew that; so why did she feel drawn to it even as she backed away?

Later that afternoon, Joni woke up in the library, sprawled on her reading chair, book on the floor beside an empty mug. The ice cubes had melted into a weak swill that she finished now, a hint of rye on her tongue. She needed a refill. She got up and Stella followed. As they descended the long, curved staircase into the foyer she heard music playing downstairs.

There was Paul in the living room, in the farthest furniture cluster, stretched out on a couch listening to something French—Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin singing "*Je t'aime*" over and over. It was such an unctuous song, Joni laughed before remembering that she was mad at Paul for pressuring her about Val, for breaking that plate on purpose, for denying it.

He shifted to sitting so he could look at her. "You were fast asleep."

“I needed a nap.”

“For some reason I started thinking about this song. Do you want some Champagne? I bought some.”

Today was their actual anniversary. Joni stood there, irritated with herself for the gratitude she was starting to feel for his gesture.

“You bought Champagne? After this morning?”

“I’m sorry. Truce?” His smile was warm, familiar.

Reflexively, she succumbed. “Okay, truce.”

He kissed her cheek on his way to the kitchen to fetch the Champagne—if he smelled any vestige of her earlier cocktails, he didn’t mention it. He returned with a foggy green bottle and a pair of glasses. When he handed her one, she squeezed out a halfhearted smile.

He said, “Can I ask just one question and then I’ll drop it, promise?”

The feeling came over her again, that tipping off an edge toward something she couldn’t yet identify. She took a breath and said, “Fine.”

“Did Val ever accept your friend request?”

She was out of fight, tired of pretending she hadn’t heard back. She nodded. “We chatted a little but we’re not on the same page.”

“Meaning?”

“She doesn’t want to talk about it—to anyone.” Joni took a breath and admitted, “She blocked me.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. But he wasn’t. His face looked too placid, too relieved for someone who was sorry. “Maybe it’s for the best.”

There it was. She couldn’t help herself: “Why?”

“Joni, we’ve been through this. It’ll only stir up trouble.”

*For him.* She turned away.

Paul went to flip the record. She went to the bathroom. They ended up drinking Champagne on the couch and listening to another French love song in what passed for comfortable marital silence but for her, well, wasn’t. After a while she refilled her glass and carried it to the kitchen, ostensibly to make dinner but really to boost the Champagne with something stronger.

She added an inch of rye and sat at the table and thought about Paul. How he probably felt victorious in the Battle of Val. He was always so sure of himself. Certainty, for Joni, was rarely swift or easy; it tended to arrive after tangles of inner negotiation.

Her thoughts turned to Val and to how, back when they were roommates,



they used to talk through all their important decisions together.

Was Val really as sure of herself now as she made out?

What if what she really needed was another push?

And that's when Joni decided, alone with her fortified drink. She took out her phone and searched for an address.

She knew that showing up at Val's home would be a breach of privacy, that it was wrong, that she shouldn't even contemplate it. But she also knew that tomorrow Paul would go to the studio to squeeze out some extra work, even on a Sunday, and that she'd be alone in this big house with nothing much to do and that a car was at her disposal in their driveway and that Maplewood wasn't very far.

SUN DAZZLED ON THE WINDSHIELD, almost blinding Joni when she turned onto the leafy suburban block of small houses. They were tightly packed, separated by slim side yards, and each was unique—Val’s was a two-story colonial, pale gray with sky-blue shutters and front door. A flagstone path drew a straight line from the curb to a short brick stoop. A silver VW station wagon sat in the driveway. Joni hadn’t been to New Jersey in years and had never been to Maplewood; it felt safe and congenial, and she was glad that Val had landed someplace like this, someplace private but not isolated.

Joni pulled up across the street and wondered what the hell she was doing there. *Turn around*, she kept telling herself, *just turn around and go home*. And she was about to, she really was, when the front door swung open and out ran a boy—lithe and towheaded like his mother. Zeke. A lean, knobby sprout who’d only yesterday burgeoned into adolescence.

Zeke held a soccer ball tucked between his arm and his side. The moment he was on the street he dropped it and started dribbling it along the asphalt with quick foot switches that were really impressive. He was a few houses along when another boy emerged from another house and ran to join in. There was no talking, the way boys and men skip words for action. They traded the ball back and forth as they shrank in Joni’s rearview mirror. Her pulse jumped when a car sped around the corner, but the boys knew what to do and stood at the curb until it passed.

She knew she shouldn’t. She never stopped knowing she shouldn’t, but she did it anyway. She got out of the car and tried not to let the door smash too hard when it closed. Still, the loud snap broke the peaceful suburban quiet.

Her shoes clacking along the flagstone toward the house sounded as sharp as cymbals.

She felt short of breath, climbing those three steps, but she didn't stop.

And then she was at the door. Pressing the round white button. Hearing the sound of the Williams family's bell reverberate through the house where Val lived, a series of chimes that were not unpleasant.

The interior sound of footsteps trotting closer—someone jogging down a flight of stairs.

A lock unlatching.

Knob turning.

Door opening.

With every moment, every sound, Joni's brain shouted, *Don't, turn around, just go, be a nice person and leave her alone.* But she didn't.

In the split second before the door opened, she hoped it would be someone else, Val's husband or a friend over for a visit. But.

Val was blurrier, grayer. Still some blond left in her hair. The same easy tilt of her head from when they were young. She froze when she saw Joni standing there, trying (unsuccessfully) to smile as if she'd imagined she'd be welcomed. Joni's cheeks felt stiff and her eyes wouldn't stop blinking until she managed a deep breath.

"Joni," Val said warmly. A flicker of welcome in her eyes, then a shutdown. Her tone hardened. "What are you doing here?"

"I probably shouldn't have come."

"How did you find me?"

"The magic of the internet." This time, Joni's attempt at a smile failed even more miserably.

Val stepped onto the stoop and pulled the door nearly closed behind her, leaving it open a crack. "My son just went out—I thought maybe he forgot his keys."

"Soccer player?"

"That's him."

"He's got your coloring."

"Why are you here, Joni? I already told you—"

"You did. And I know I shouldn't press this, but it's eating at me."

*Don't let it.*

"Are you really that comfortable holding on to it still? When you don't have to?"

"I've never been comfortable holding on to it."

“Then stop. Please. All these years of burrowing into this toxic silence—  
Val, here’s your chance.”

“You don’t understand what you’re asking me to do.”

“I’m asking you to tell the truth.”

“No. Because you have no idea how much it will hurt—not just me, but  
you.”

“Me?”

“Please go.”

“Val, *talk* to me.”

“No. It’s my choice and I’m fine with it.”

“But—”

“Joni, it’s *my* choice. Let it go.”

Val retreated into the house and slammed the door with a crack that hit  
like lightning.

Joni stood there, breathless, ashamed.

There was a sound of distant voices and she turned to see that the boys  
were returning, trading their soccer ball along the asphalt.

She got back in the car and drove to the city with her heart in her throat,  
listening to the radio and then turning it off to see how well she could  
embrace the silence—a silence rattled by the momentum of traffic blurring on  
either side. Past on the left. Future on the right. In the middle, a lone woman  
barreling ahead.

VAL PRESSED HER BACK AGAINST THE DOOR and closed her eyes and hugged herself, replaying their parting words, regretting the meanness of her tone that was nothing like what she felt, wishing she'd had a chance to prepare, to handle it better, so she wouldn't have hurt Joni in an effort to not hurt her.

"Please go."

*I'm not ready for this.*

"Val, talk to me."

*I love you, Joni. But you don't know what you're asking. And I can't.*

"No. It's my choice and I'm fine with it."

*I want to but I can't.*

"But—"

*Please stop pushing me.*

"Joni, it's my choice. Let it go."

*If I give you what you say you want, it will destroy you.*

Val pressed harder into the door and waited for Joni to come barreling back, to force her way into the house, to blaze her path regardless of obstacles, the way she would have decades ago. But the Joni who'd stood at her door just now, the new one, had lacked the old confidence. She'd learned to take no for an answer. Instead of steady eye contact, there had been a skittering gaze.

"Who was that?" Russ trotted down the stairs, gripping his racket.

Val looked at her peachy, freckled husband in his tennis whites, on his way to his Sunday game. She couldn't think of how to explain, so said, "No one."

But Russ wasn't blind; he knew his wife: how she paled when she was upset, how she blanked when she didn't want to discuss something. Before she could move away from the door, it pushed open and knocked her down.

Her right hip smarted when she fell on it.

“Jesus.” Russ set down his racket and hurried to her side, checked her for injury, helped her up. “What just happened?” he asked his son, who now stood gape-mouthed in the open door, a soccer ball wedged under his arm.

“What do you mean, Dad?” An edge in Zeke’s tone: he was ready for whatever accusation was coming.

“What did you just do?”

“Russ,” Val intervened. “It had nothing to do with Zeke.”

“Who was that lady?” Zeke asked his mother.

“An old friend.”

“Zeke,” Russ said. “Go to your room, please.”

“My *room*? Why?”

“Just go *somewhere*. I need to talk to Mom.”

Zeke raised his arm and the ball dropped to the floor, *thwack*. Getting in *the last word* before retreating toward the kitchen. Both parents watched the ball skitter into the living room before coming to rest at the lip of the rug.

“What old friend?” Russ asked.

Val hesitated, then told him, “Joni.”

His forehead bunched as he tried to place the name. “Your roommate from LA?”

She had never told him much of anything about Joni, just that they’d met in college and lived together in LA for a while. Anything more would have triggered the volcanic memories she’d worked so hard to bury. But now she’d seen Joni in person, middle-aged Joni, casually though expensively dressed, a hint of silver at her temples. Joni, *her* Joni, pushing connection on her with the entitlement of true friendship.

Maybe Joni was right: maybe their silence *couldn’t* hold forever.

Maybe it *shouldn’t*.

Maybe Val *had* to tell Joni everything now, even if it was bound to hurt her.

“Russ, listen—there’s something I need to talk to you about.”

“Okay.” He waited.

“It’s a long story. I don’t know where to begin.”

He pulled out his phone. “Let me just see if I can get someone to cover for me. It’s a doubles game today.”

“You don’t have to reschedule. Seriously, go play. We can talk later.” Her

voice was too chirpy; it obviously wasn't okay.

"Hang tight," Russ said, thumbing his phone. "Let me see what I can do."

Stand-in arranged, they settled in the living room, in opposite corners of the long couch. She noticed a ring on the wood coffee table where someone must have put a glass without a coaster, and she felt a spike of irritation. The TV hung like a huge, dark eye on the opposite wall, watching her.

She took a deep breath and just said it. "When I was twenty-five, in LA, I was raped."

Silence avid as a thousand listening ears made her want to shrink into herself and vanish.

Russ kept his eyes on her and offered a single nod. Whatever he felt—shock, sadness, fear—he kept locked behind a stoic facade.

She took another breath and continued until she'd poured out everything she'd experienced back when it had happened—almost everything: the parts that Joni also knew—and just after it had happened, when she and Joni had made their pact.

She held back one thing.

The one thing Joni didn't know.

What happened years later.

When she glanced at a red-carpet shot from a movie premiere and a locked-away memory gushed out and she knew, *knew*, who the second man was.

When the memory-face that had been blank for so long suddenly had a mouth and nose and eyes and ears and cheekbones and a forehead and hair and he was *smiling*—how dare he *smile*, ever again, after what he, Paul Lovett, did to her?

She *couldn't* tell Russ that part before she told Joni. If she owed her old friend anything, it was that she'd be the first to know the whole truth before anyone else, so that it could belong just to her, to them, for long enough to digest it before the vultures swarmed in.

Once, years ago, when Val was in LA for her nephew's graduation from UCLA, she'd invited Joni to lunch with the intention of telling her. She remembered the broiling heat that afternoon, how nice it was to see Joni again, how happy her friend was with her marriage and her children and her work and her life. Val ended the lunch without saying anything, deciding (once again) to put it off until later. What was the point of telling her? What

would it accomplish?

Next time they spoke was the following year, when Val called to say how sorry she was to have heard about the accident. Joni sounded different, somehow not entirely there, and Val knew that *later* had become *too late*—she could never add more hurt to her friend’s suffering. It would crush her.

Russ held Val for a long time, until she stopped crying and her breath regulated.

“It’s okay,” he reassured her. “I’m glad you told me. It’s okay.” He pulled away so he could look at her. “*Is it okay? Are you okay?*”

“Yes and no. Yes. I’m not sure. It feels so complicated.”

He reached for her hand and wove their fingers together.

“Joni found me recently on Facebook. We chatted a little and then I blocked her.” Val cringed, admitting that; it felt so cruel.

“What did she want?”

“She wants me on the Lou Pridgen bandwagon, but I didn’t want to go there yet. I told her to leave me alone.”

“And then she just shows up here today? Wow.”

“No, it’s okay.”

“It’s *not* okay. You have every right to keep this private if you need to. She had no right to turn up at our house.”

Val knew that. She thrived on privacy. But she wasn’t sure if this was just about her—no, it *wasn’t* just about her anymore. It was about every woman Lou Pridgen and Paul Lovett had assaulted together. And every woman Lou had assaulted on his own. And it was about Joni, too.



MAKTA WAS HUNCHED OVER the kitchen sink when Joni came in to put her empty coffee cup into the top rack of the dishwasher. The undersides of the cleaning woman's arms wobbled in the effort of scrubbing a crusted pan.

"I'll see you later today," Joni told her.

Makta turned off the running water and looked at her employer, eyeing the purse slung over her shoulder and the slash of fuchsia on her normally bare lips. "Where you are going so early in this morning?"

Joni pretended not to notice either the garbled sentence or the astonishment that she was dressed and on her way out first thing in the morning. It was clear that Makta saw her as a cosseted housewife, a judgment she resented even if in some ways it was true.

"I have an errand," Joni said. A long-scheduled appointment with a caterer for Paul's big bash. It was good timing—she was restless, agitated, and wanted out of the house and out of her head, where the sound of Val's slamming door hadn't stopped resonating since yesterday.

"Oh?" Makta wanted details, but Joni hesitated.

She had once come *this close* to inviting the older woman to join her for a glass of wine at the end of the day but had stopped herself, sensing she'd regret it. Makta wasn't her grandmother or mother or aunt or cousin or sister or friend. They were an awkward form of colleagues, navigating intimate spaces. Joni's gut told her to hold her boundaries. And lately she'd started to feel as if Makta was watching her, and she didn't like it.

"I'll be back later. If Stella starts hovering by the front door, would you please let her out for a pee in the yard?"

"And if she does number two?"

"You can let me know when I get home." *Or go out there and pick it up.* But that wasn't her job, so Joni didn't say it.

Makta turned the water back on.

Joni was halfway down the driveway toward the front gate when her phone rang. The caterer had a “snafu” and was “so sorry” but “needed to rebook.” They rescheduled for next week and, instead of escaping into Manhattan, Joni took Stella for a walk.

Before long she ended up back in the house, at her desk, in front of a blank screen, trying to embrace a found writing day, but ideas wouldn’t come.

Her mind glommed on to every nettlesome thought: Val, and her refusal to talk; Paul, and the argument that kept circling them like a hungry wolf; the videotapes, and the call from Wally Cobb that never came.

Joni craved a drink but not in front of Makta.

Things looked up when, late in the afternoon, she finally heard from Wally Cobb with a text saying he’d just emailed a link to the digitized files. She checked that the email was really there—it was—and texted back, thanking him and asking when she could get the originals back.

Then, with a feeling of perfect timing, like an island coming into view after a day of slow drowning, she set about preparing for a restorative dive into the comforts of happy memories.

Late afternoon, alone in the house at last, Joni fetched a wineglass and a bottle of Bordeaux and brought them upstairs to the media room. She changed the output from laptop to TV, clicked on the first link, and sank into the deep cushions of their very comfortable couch. She’d start at the very beginning.

Her assumption that the links were listed chronologically turned out to be wrong. Instead of being flung back to the earliest years of their family, she was greeted by a scene—scratchy and distorted, as if the tape had been damaged during transfer—that was hard to make out. She squinted, trying to see despite the poor quality, and there was Alex, gap-toothed at six, wearing a plaid dress with bell sleeves and a black mesh choker, her brown bangs cut straight across her forehead, standing in the front of her first-grade chorus in the school auditorium. She smiled at the camera and the singing started, the kids belting out “Aquarius,” all those chipmunky voices climbing the notes. “When the moon is in the Seventh House / And Jupiter aligns with Mars.” The camera zoomed in on her face. “Harmony and understanding / Sympathy and trust abounding.” Joni’s heart swelled, she wanted *more* of this—then the image jittered and the screen went black.

Panic rose as, clicking on link after link, she discovered that they'd all been poorly transferred (to put it nicely) and were nearly unwatchable. Had the tapes themselves been ruined? She stopped breathing, imagining that, then forced down some air to calm herself, but the churning worry wouldn't stop. Worry and anger—at Wally, who still hadn't responded about returning the originals—and at herself, for not bothering to organize the equipment she would have needed to do the transfers herself at home.

She picked up her phone and opened their thread, then thought, *Screw texting*. She'd call him this time. But she was greeted by a robotic announcement that his voicemail was full and couldn't accept new messages. She only realized how tightly she was gripping the phone when she saw that her fingertips were white, bloodless.

She went downstairs to heat up some leftover chicken and while she was at it finished the bottle of wine. Cleaning up at the kitchen sink, she let the water run and looked out the window. The lawn glimmered an acid green in the riot of refracted light coming from all directions: the nearby bridges streaming traffic, the city across the water, moon glow, stars, an airplane that just then sliced through the sky. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath and turned off the water. The house was too quiet. Paul was working late, as usual.

Upstairs, she got ready for bed so she could crawl under the covers with the next Highsmith novel on her pile, *Deep Water*. The title hit home: that was Joni—tugged by an undertow and coming up for air but not for long before sinking again. When she came out of the bathroom, a text was waiting from a number she didn't recognize.

I know it's last minute but I was hoping to talk to you in person. I'm in the city and could swing by before I drive back. I'm sorry about the other day. It's Val.

Joni read it again and realized that Val meant *tonight*, right now.

She answered with her address, adding, I'm here—but hesitated before sending it. It was late and Paul could come home any time. It would be better to see her alone, without his interference. After a quick search for bars and restaurants that stayed open late on weeknights—it was already past ten—Joni answered: There's a place near me called Superfine. I can be there in half an hour. She followed the text with a link to the restaurant. Val responded with a thumbs-up.

Joni threw off her pajamas and quickly dressed in jeans and an orange shirt, a short-sleeved V-neck with a haphazard floral pattern flung over the left shoulder. In the bathroom she brushed her hair and put on a slash of creamy neutral lipstick. She usually wore her small gold hoops with that top but tonight she wasn't sure. She felt nervous, like she was going on a date, not just wanting but needing to look her best, worried she'd disappoint.

She remembered the pair of silver chain-link earrings Val had given her for her twenty-first birthday; Joni loved them and couldn't remember why she hadn't worn them in years. As soon as they were on, one of the bottoms of the two linked circles fell off into the sink. She stopped it from going down the drain, removed the earrings, repaired the broken one—recalling now how many times she'd done that in the distant past—and pushed them aside. She'd wear the gold hoops.

On her way out she stopped in the kitchen and made an espresso to counteract all the wine. She downed it quickly and put the small white cup in the sink. Stella followed her to the front door, clearly hoping for a walk, whining when she realized she wouldn't get one. Joni hated to deny her sweet pup an outing, but Val had summoned her, *Val*, at long last.

Walking briskly along Water Street, quiet at this hour, the darkness stippled with moonlight, Joni felt her phone shiver in her back pocket. Paul. She let it go to voicemail: she didn't want his voice in her head right now.

In moments, his text arrived: Just got home. Are you out?

Be back soon.

Where are you?

She knew he wouldn't stop asking so she wrote, Meeting someone for a drink. Realizing how that sounded—secretive, elusive—she changed it to Meeting a friend in Dumbo. But he knew she had no friends in New York close enough that she'd impulsively pop out to see them. She imagined him staring impatiently at the three dots dancing on his phone.

Finally, she decided to keep it simple and tell the truth: Meeting Val in Dumbo. Don't worry, I won't make her any promises that would make you uncomfortable.

Her phone rang almost instantly—Paul again. She knew that if she answered he'd reprise their argument, reel her back into his thinking, and she

didn't want that. This was her chance to sit face-to-face with Val and finally talk.

She silenced her phone and slipped it back into her pocket.

She'd never been inside Superfine and was pleasantly surprised by the big old warehouse space transformed by Christmas lights cross-hatched above lots of tables in the center, a long bar toward the back and a pool table tucked into an area at the right. She felt lifted by the voices and laughter and hard click of cues against balls. By the rich, savory smells. By the lull of something jazzy playing in the background. She looked all around for Val but didn't see her.

Joni declined a table and headed for the bar, where she handed over her credit card to open a tab—tonight would be on her. There were no available barstools so she carried her whiskey sour into the back area where half a dozen people were clustered around the pool table. A window at the back of the space offered a clear view onto Front Street, which was perfect because she'd be able to see Val when she arrived.

Minutes ticked by.

An hour.

Joni checked to see if Val had tried to get in touch. She hadn't. Holding her drink in one hand and her phone in the other, Joni leaned against the wall beside the window and kept an eye on the street, as if watching hard enough would force her friend to appear.

VAL STEERED HER CAR off the Brooklyn Bridge and onto the exit for Dumbo. The neighborhood was tucked beneath the roaring over-passes of two bridges, Brooklyn and Manhattan, side-by-side arteries pumping people back and forth between two islands. The traffic was unbearably loud; she wondered how anyone could live there. She remembered the noise from decades ago when she'd visited an artist friend who rented an unheated loft in the then-ghostly district of abandoned warehouses. Now, it was so gentrified she didn't recognize it, with its boutiques and restaurants and glossy high-rises.

She drove up and down the streets for ten minutes before finally snagging a parking spot six blocks from where she was meeting Joni. It was dark and the sidewalks were nearly empty and she felt a piercing loneliness that made her want to flee. She got out of her car, locked the door. A glance at any of the apartment towers showed the flickering blue lights of televisions. It was nearly eleven. The teachers union meeting had gone late and if she were smart she'd be home in bed herself, but she needed to do this.

She studied the map on her phone and turned onto Bridge Street. Her thoughts toggled between two thorny problems: one, whether she should accept her local chapter's nomination to run for national office or opt to stay out of it in favor of her sanity, and two, the conversation she was about to have with Joni. She wished she could choose between what felt like two evils—either devote herself to the union or deliver the horrible news to her friend. One would require sacrificing nearly all her free time for two years and the other would take five minutes. It would be a no-brainer if she really had a choice. She didn't. She'd made her decision. Maybe, to punish herself, she'd accept the union nomination, too.

Decisions had been so much easier when she was younger and life seemed

vast with possibility. She remembered, decades ago, how she didn't hesitate to jump into the lead role of *She Knows* the moment Joni offered it. A job that would take all her time, pay her nothing, and put immense pressure on their friendship. None of that had even occurred to her.

"I wrote the part for you," Joni had declared, the friends facing each other cross-legged on the worn couch of their apartment. Val knew that wasn't true; she'd read the screenplay and obviously Joni had written the part with herself in mind. But Joni was no actress, they both knew that, and Val was not just the obvious but the *only* choice given how close they were then. Not offering her the part would have been a betrayal. "Please, you *have* to do it."

Val didn't hesitate. "I accept!"

"You're gonna be a *star*."

"You're gonna win an *Oscar*."

The months that followed were exhilarating, exhausting, transformative. Joni was a decent fundraiser but still there was never enough money. Friends pitched in on the set. Every minute of sunlight was used. Time on equipment rentals was never wasted. Their apartment became an office and a flophouse. No one slept enough. Everyone lost weight. The happiness level was sky-high.

And there was Joni, at the age of twenty-six, orchestrating the whole thing. She had a vision for her film and the energy and confidence she brought to it infected everyone. Val was sure that her friend would go on to great things; Joni really *would* win an Oscar; she'd be the first woman to win for Best Director.

And then production wrapped and everyone but Joni went back to their lives as waiters and temps. Hoisting cocktails, collecting tips, Val started to wonder if those months on *She Knows* had been a figment of her imagination. Then she'd come home and Joni wouldn't be there and she was sure none of it had been real. But in the morning Joni would appear, bleary-eyed from another all-nighter in a friend's donated editing room, and tell Val how amazing it was, how the film was coming together, how it was going to be great. She never wavered in that.

And then the film premiered at Sundance. And it *was* great.

Joni and Val, arm in arm on the red carpet, stared straight into the onslaught of camera flashes, loving every minute of it, their backs scratchy with price tags for the clothes they couldn't afford and would be returning as

soon as they were back in LA.

Joni won awards.

Val got an agent and was offered good parts.

They were on their way. Hollywood's doors were swinging open—they'd knocked and were being welcomed in. It was like a dream. They couldn't believe it. And yet they'd never doubted it would happen.

Then, one night, they went to a party.

They went to a party.

They went to a party.

Val's recollections never stayed lucid past the moment they stepped into that house: packed bodies, strobing lights, pounding music, a joint pushed into her hand, someone's arm drawing her away from Joni, who vanished into the crowd.

The brilliant young women who were separated that night never saw each other again.

By the next morning, the floor of yesterday's confidence had been demolished beneath them and it was all they could do to hold on to each other in a world suddenly without gravity.

Walking the streets of Dumbo now, toward Joni—Joni, after all these years—Val tried to remember whose idea it had been to keep the rape a secret. Hers, she thought. But maybe not. Maybe it had been Joni's. She wasn't sure and anyway it didn't matter.

She was deep in thought when she saw the sign for Front Street up ahead, a slash of green in the darkness.

She did not want to do this.

She stopped walking and considered turning around and going home but then she thought of Russ. He'd be supportive of her every step of the way—but she *had* to tell Joni first. Then she could push forward, tell Russ the rest of it, and share her experience publicly to bolster the other women who had shared theirs. If she didn't follow through, she'd wake up in the morning disappointed with herself.

She *had* to do this.

Almost at the corner now, she thought she heard something beneath the bridge roar but wasn't sure. She stopped walking and listened.

There it was again: a *swoosh* of something, fabric maybe, then a footstep.

He emerged from the shadow with a scarf wrapped around his face,



smelling like cheap aftershave, his eyes glowering with outrage as if *she* were the one who'd come out of nowhere to assault *him*.

*"Don't you fucking dare,"* he hissed, pushing his thumbs into her neck as she fell backward and her consciousness teetered.

She wondered what he meant by that.

*Don't you dare ... what?*

*Remember what I did to you then?*

*What I'm about to do to you now?*

*Tell Joni?*

*See my face?*

*Exist?*

She knew who it was, felt it in the way he handled and controlled her body, even before she pulled down the scarf and saw him and spat his name at him and saw anger mutate across his face in the moments before she ...

JONI FINISHED HER COCKTAIL and waved down a passing waitress for another.

Just then a tall young man came out of The Shops passageway and loped along Jay Street carrying a plastic bag. Joni couldn't see his face well in the dark, but the hair looked like Wally Cobb's, thick and brown, to his shoulders. He disappeared around the corner onto Pearl Street, where the man in the hat had told her "the guys" sometimes rehearsed in the basement. Wally still hadn't gotten back to her about returning the tapes.

She felt a twist of anger but willed herself to ignore it.

She wasn't there for him.

She was there for Val.

She reread their earlier messages to see if she'd misunderstood something, but no, it was clear that Val had wanted to see her and agreed to meet at Superfine. Was she struggling to find parking? Or had she changed her mind and retreated again behind that slammed door?

Another half hour passed, and another.

Eventually Joni became aware of the edgy buzz that tells you it's time to stop drinking, but she wasn't going anywhere until Val either arrived or got in touch or Superfine kicked her out. She (re) discovered that if you ignored the buzzy feeling of a second drink (on top of caffeine on top of a bottle of wine) and had a third, you'd be delivered into a blissful forgetting, a different kind of mindfulness. The kind where reality can be tailored to make you comfortable when life lets you down.

The restaurant closed at two a.m. and she stumbled onto the sidewalk along with a handful of remaining barflies, who scattered around corners and into Ubers.

It had been hours since she should have accepted that Val wasn't coming, since she should have gone home and buried her head under her pillow, given

up.

But Joni couldn't move, or didn't want to move. She was blasted. There was a sense of sublime silence layered under the incessant bridge roar, and if you paid close attention it could almost overtake the noise and quiet your mind.

Almost.

Even at this hour, in the semi-quiet, the atmosphere was loud and full of energy. And that suited her. She couldn't embrace silence—silence and acquiescence—any more than she could resist another drink.

The overhead traffic thrummed in tune with her body, restless, wired with disappointment.

Joni remembered the basement at 65 Pearl Street, the young man crossing the street, and agitation spiraled into a sharper, more insistent feeling of something she couldn't name. Anger, yes. But also determination. If that man *was* Wally Cobb and he was down in that basement, and her tapes were with him, then the night wouldn't have to be a total loss.

This time when she texted, she didn't ask, she *told*: Just a heads up that I'm in the neighborhood and I'm coming right now for my tapes. I know you're there. Please get them ready.

She crossed Jay Street and turned the corner onto Pearl. The grungy stairs into the basement didn't intimidate her this time. Her phone's flashlight lit the way down.

A sharp smell of mildew made her lift the bottom of her shirt to cover her nose. She kept walking. There was a long, cavernous hall at the end of which dim light spilled from what appeared to be an entrance to somewhere. Her footsteps echoed but then she heard a different sound, something skittering—a rat shot past and vanished somewhere ahead.

She screamed, stopped walking, cowered as the sound of her own voice echoed back at her.

Reminding herself why she was there, she summoned courage.

She wanted her tapes back—*they were hers*. If someone was in that room up ahead, if Wally was there, he'd have heard her. Damn it. Obviously, he was trying to avoid her.

She walked the rest of the hall until she was standing in the entrance to a large, unfinished room. The air was hot, stifling. Tubes of overhead fluorescents flickered gray light unevenly through the space. Half a dozen

enormous boilers and water heaters lined the wall to the left. Tucked in the far right corner was an L-shaped workbench, a pair of battered metal cabinets, a pegboard hooked with tools.

She stepped deeper into the space and noticed the drum set first, far to the left, just behind the boilers, and then three guitar stands but only one guitar. A red light glowed on the front of an amplifier, its electrical cord snaking off into a shadow.

“Wally?”

Behind the drums a sawhorse table held some kind of equipment, a laptop, a bong, several stacks of videotapes, a nearly finished bottle of vodka, and an open plastic deli clamshell puddled with orange grease. A box, *hers*, with HOME MOVIES 1991–2003 Sharpied across the side in her handwriting.

A young man lay on a thin mat beneath the table. She thought of the rat. How could you sleep on the floor of someplace infested with rats? How could you bring the precious memories of people who had trusted you into a place like this?

“Wally?”

He moaned. He wasn’t asleep—he was passed out.

She moved forward and nudged him with her foot. “Wally!”

He turned over; she’d never seen anyone look so wasted. One hand fell open and a little white pill rolled to the floor. His brown hair was matted, eyes bloodshot, lips crusted. There was an orange streak across his forehead.

“Is that mine?” She pointed at the box on the table.

“Oh, yeah.” His voice was as crusty as his lips. “You must be ...”

He forced himself onto an elbow and looked at her with his carved-out eyes and hollow mouth and a shiver went through her. Then he pushed himself more forcefully into the weak light and his eyes and lips and teeth appeared. He had perfect teeth, braces-teeth—somewhere in the suburbs a mother and father were shaking their heads. *If one of my children behaved this way*, Joni wanted to say—no, shout—*I’d* ... what? What would she do? She’d heard that sons could take longer to grow up and that their paths could be circuitous and rough. She had daughters, two fabulous daughters who would never behave this way.

He noticed the pill on the floor, picked it up, dropped it into his mouth, swallowed. Clearing his throat, he muttered, “I was gonna get those back to you tomorrow.”

She came closer. Stooped down. Told him: “Stop bullshitting me.”

“You’re drunk.” He waved a hand in front of his nose and laughed. “Wow. Thought I was bad.”

Lou Pridgen flashed through her mind. And the second rapist. Even Paul. All the men who kept throwing out obstacles and winning.

If she’d been sober, she probably would have just walked away with her box of tapes. But she wasn’t sober.

This wasted asshole thought he could lie there and laugh at her.

And Val had stood her up—even she hadn’t come through.

Joni drew back her foot and kicked Wally hard in the side.

“What the fuck, lady? What do you want from me?”

She wanted her tapes.

She didn’t know what she wanted.

She wanted to take control.

She wanted, suddenly, to make someone feel her pain.

There were tools on that pegboard. There was a coil of rope. There was duct tape. There was a can of turpentine. Who knew what else there was inside those cabinet drawers?

This was the moment when Joni first imagined herself a Highsmith character, heartless, murderous, and wondered what it would be like to kill someone—she was that enraged, that drunk. Here was her chance to find out how she’d do it, if she were to do it, though—she told herself—she never, ever would.

A WARM SENSATION woke Joni, a familiar scent: sweet talc. Paul was breathing near her face. She was lying on something cold and hard and her back hurt, her neck hurt, one of her arms was numb because, she realized, she was lying on it. When she tried to roll over, Paul helped her. Finally her eyes were able to focus and there he was, in his favorite after-work black sweatshirt, struggling to lift her.

“I’m cold.” She opened her eyes to a moonlit darkness: they were outside.

“It’s the middle of the night,” he said. “Can you sit?”

“Yes.” But it was more a claim than a certainty. She pressed the palms of her hands on the ground to steady herself and felt cobblestones. “Shit.”

He stifled a sigh of ... what? Disappointment to find her there? Frustration at being out in the middle of the night? Shame for having such a wife? Whatever he was thinking and feeling, he kept it to himself and continued to help her to her feet. She was woozy and grabbed onto him for support. Her head was starting to hurt.

“Let’s get you home,” he said.

He maneuvered her onto the sidewalk and that’s when she saw the box, *her* box, perched on the curb.

Paul picked it up and told her, with a tone of exasperation, “Our tapes were lying all over the street.”

He didn’t ask any questions but she knew they were coming.

They waited for a black car to gleam toward them and then, in what felt like moments, she was asleep in their bed.

Joni had to blink several times to tolerate the morning light. Her head pounded. Her stomach felt like an angry horse had moved in, all kick and complaint. She was fully dressed, laid out like a corpse on top of the covers.

It was going to be an epic hangover and whatever had happened last night couldn't have been worth it.

She remembered Superfine, the lights, the music.

She remembered watching through the window for Val.

She remembered stumbling along on a Dumbo sidewalk, crossing the street, something about a basement. A bad smell—mildew.

After that was a blank except for a brief interruption of consciousness during which Paul had peeled her off the street.

He lay beside her, arms butterflyed behind his head, his side of the covers wadded beneath his feet.

She covered her face with her hands, ashamed. "How'd you find me?" she asked him.

He turned to her, eyes groggy from sleep. "I logged in and located your phone. You weren't in bed when I got home. I was worried." A lilt in those last three words, a softness, and she felt terrible for what she'd put him through.

"I'm such an asshole." Burying her face in the pillow.

"Joni, come on, stop it." He touched her arm, gently, and when she looked up he was smiling a little. "So, how'd it go with Val?"

"She never showed up."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Are you?"

He let that go and reminded her, "Joni ... I found you lying in the street." A caress of his thumb on her shoulder. "We need to talk about your drinking."

*Not now.*

She squeezed her eyes shut and said, "You worked late last night again."

A ballast of the long marriage: changing the subject. Alcoholic. Workaholic. Both. Either. Neither. Maybe they'd perfected flexibility or taken it to a whole new level, or maybe it was something else. Emotional lassitude. She wondered if sometimes he got lonely, too. She wondered if he still loved her.

He answered, "This new project is really coming together; it's going to be great. I was tempted to stay even later—but I can't anymore. Remember when we were in our twenties?"

She nodded, just a little, because moving her head made the nausea rise.

“Remember when you were finishing *Try Harder* and I stayed up with you in the edit room and then we went right through into the next day? The editor didn’t love me being there. What was his name?”

“Dag Hogan.”

Joni remembered that night clearly. She hadn’t loved Paul being there, either, but didn’t have the heart to tell him to go home. She was the honcho in the family then, scoring the studio deal—writer, producer, director. *A film by Joni Ackerman*. She still felt a pull of pleasure, the way her credit had filled up the screen.

“Think I’ll make us some eggs,” he said. “Not going in until noon.”

The thought of eating made her queasy. “I don’t think I could stomach eggs. Maybe just some toast.”

“You need something substantial,” he said. “Protein.”

“Are you trying to make me vomit?”

He eased himself out of bed as if he were also in pain. She recalled him helping her to her feet in the cool night—maybe he’d pulled a muscle. “See you down there in a few.”

“I’m going to shower first.”

The moment the bedroom door snapped shut she was on her feet to the toilet. The first wave of sick was already bucking upward. It didn’t take long to empty out. She lay, clammy-skinned, on the cool tiles of the bathroom floor until she felt steady. Then she stripped down and got into the shower.

Shampooing her hair, she realized she was still wearing her earrings—well, one earring. But it wasn’t the small hoop she expected; it was something more dangly. She took it off and saw that it was the silver chain-link. She stared at it, and distinctly remembered putting these earrings on and taking them off when one loop fell into the sink, as it was prone to do. She was sure she hadn’t worn them ... and yet here one was in her hand. Apparently her already boozed-up brain had misplaced the memory of changing her mind again, replacing the gold hoops with the chain-link—Val’s gift—because when she saw Joni wearing them it would make her happy ... Of course that was what she’d settled on. Sober now, repentant, Joni cursed herself for the shortsightedness. The other earring must have fallen off at some point during the long, muddled night.

She put the loop on the shelf beside the soap and rinsed her hair. Standing under the hot water, she wondered what else had happened that she couldn’t



recall.

After she brushed her teeth she spritzed herself with perfume then searched the bed, the bedroom, and the bathroom for the other earring. All the way down the stairs she kept looking but didn't find it. A wave of disappointment in herself made her pause for a breath. Disappointment and shame. And now she'd lost half of the only artifact she had left from her years with Val.

A luscious smell of bacon filled the foyer. Joni slowed down to breathe it in, to see if she could tolerate it without gagging, and she could. Chances were that if she got down a little food she'd start to feel better.

About to turn toward the kitchen, she noticed a cardboard box by the front door. She stopped and stared at it: HOME MOVIES 1991–2003.

She remembered Paul telling her that the tapes had been scattered all over the street when he'd found her.

She also remembered seeing a man she thought was Wally Cobb crossing Jay Street, the smells from the Pearl Street stairwell, something about a rat. Had she gone down there?

She must have braved that dark basement and retrieved the box.

She smiled, thinking that in her unhinged disinhibition she'd found a few moments of courageous agency. Val had never shown up, Joni had lost the cherished earring and made a fool of herself—but *something* good had come from the otherwise lost night.

She lifted the flaps and peered at the disarranged pile of a dozen or so eight-millimeter tapes and immediately saw that something was missing. There should have been a larger tape, too, a dinosaur from the olden days when their daughters were babies, but it wasn't there.

Paul was standing at the stove when Joni came into the kitchen.

"There should be one big tape in there with the smaller ones," she said.

He turned with a quizzical look.

She clarified: "In the box you brought home. There was an old VHS tape."

"I don't remember it," he said. "I picked up everything I saw."

"That was our one tape left that showed the house before we gutted it."

"Are you sure it was in there to begin with?"

Of course she was sure; at least she thought she was. Her head pounded. She sat down and drank a full glass of water before starting on coffee and waited for her husband to feed her. She could see through the big kitchen

window that it was beautiful out, blue and breezy, a soft ripple across the lawn.

When they were done eating she made a show of cleaning up (because she wasn't, in fact, a totally useless human being) while Paul went upstairs to shower and dress. Mostly she put the dirty dishes into the sink—she'd load the dishwasher and wipe the counters and table later, when she felt steadier. She was pouring a second cup of coffee when Paul poked his head into the kitchen to say he was leaving for work.

She waited until she heard the front door bang shut before calling Val. There was no answer so she sent a text: I just want to make sure you're okay. I understand if something came up. Joni was willing to give her friend an easy out, a chance to deliver any excuse she wanted, in the hope that she'd decide to reschedule.

\* \* \*

Because it was a Makta-free Tuesday the house was quiet and peaceful but it also felt empty. In her hungover wretchedness, Joni craved her girls—nothing comforted her like her daughters, and if she couldn't be with them in person she'd settle for snippets of their shared past.

Upstairs in the media room she pulled the drapes to blot out the bright sun, turned off the lights, sank into the soft cushions, clicked a link at random, and settled in to watch more of the digitized transfers despite their poor quality. Anything to distract her from her phone while she waited for Val to respond.

The screen filled with a spinning wheel that was replaced by a picture almost too dark to see and an inexplicable strip of fast-forwarding footage along the bottom, like a news zipper. There was no sound. This transfer was even worse than the chorus tape, but still Joni was riveted by what she could make out of baby Alex, round and soft with big, soupy eyes. Crawling. Pulling herself up at the foot of the bed. Letting go—walking on wobbly bowlegs. Falling. Laughing. Getting up.

Hard cut to a new silent day in the same grimy lightlessness and now Alex walked on confident legs, holding a yellow plastic trailer attachment for a toy truck, shouting “Kiss, Kiss”—Chris—at her older sister, who was elsewhere in the room with the coveted rest of the truck. That lost moment now blossomed in crystal memory, how Joni had delighted in their play.

Cut to more obscured scenes of Alex twirling in place, clapping.

Cut to a distortion of Joni propped against pillows on the bed, six-year-old Chris on her lap, toddler Alex on *her* lap, Joni's arms wrapped around them both. She speaks to the person holding the camera—Paul?—and her words are inaudible but her wide smile and glowing eyes show how happy she is in that moment.

She paused on a frame of her (younger) face and was reminded of how proud her children made her and how much she loved spending time with them, especially when they were little. In her old life she was more than a filmmaker, she was a mother, a *good* mother—here was the evidence.

Motherhood, it had seemed then, came on without warning, despite nine months of pregnancy. She remembered her surprise when time morphed in the most startling ways, with minutes flashing by, hours turning into shapeless eternities, days looming like mountains, nights drifting in oceans of sleeplessness. She would do anything for her babies. The intensity of maternal love had come out of nowhere and everywhere; she'd never experienced such single-minded devotion. *This is love*, she'd find herself thinking. *This is it*. Discovery of the capacity to love like that was the most amazing, unexpected gift of her life.

Motherhood showed her that to embrace the abnegation of self was a virtue. You weren't expected to get enough sleep. You weren't expected to take very good care of yourself. You weren't expected to be able to read a book, or see a movie, or finish a conversation, or eat a balanced meal. In fact, the less you did for yourself, the more praiseworthy your motherhood. Seeds of low self-esteem, mostly vanquished by her early successes, blossomed into a massive shade tree for her children. She wanted nothing more than to nurture and protect them. She loved life when they were happy. She hated herself when they were not.

Motherhood transformed her. The less significant she became, the louder the applause from everyone around her. In the early years, she was convinced that her selflessness made her a better person. Eventually she started to wonder if it was part of a preprogrammed taming, a ruination of sorts.

She was once a successful filmmaker. Then a good mother. Then she was awake in her own sarcophagus, *lost and forgotten, angry and silenced*, but alive. She still had something to share: she could teach. She still had something to say: she could write.

To be clear, Joni didn't blame motherhood for the diminishment of her career and all its early promise. A lot of mothers managed both very well, and though she never got another film made, she did sell most of her screenplays, which was something.

Now, looking back, she could begin to recognize a complicity in her own reaction to motherhood: how easy it was to bask in the admiration a young mother automatically receives everywhere she goes. Easier than convincing a room of power brokers—men, always, back then—that your ideas are meaningful and important, that you're worthy of their trust, that you can carry the whole film from beginning to end, that you've got vision and moxie enough to command respect at every stage of the process, and that you *will* bring this to the finish line. *That* was exhausting psychologically, especially when some obstacle appeared that required artful dodging—the subversive wink, licked lip, unwanted touch, once even a whipped-out dick.

Motherhood was exhausting physically, but the force of all that easy approval, those doors just swinging open, was irresistible. How could any young woman, newly softened by the ultimate love, not appreciate that kind of social embrace?

If she had only seen then what she saw now—that no one had explicitly forced her but she *had* reached out her hand and taken that domestic deal—she might have pulled back in time, before motherhood had fused into her identity and *become* her. She loved her children so much that she had lost herself to them. It was a highwire walk without a net. And then, at the first serious wind ...

*No.*

She picked up the remote to restart the video but it wasn't helping anymore; the subversive narrative that had woven into her thoughts wouldn't quiet down. She was trying for comfort in the darkened haze of those transfers but what she was getting was a looping, disturbing complexity that just might drive her crazy.

She clicked Stop and decided: no more videos.

No more looking back.

Forward, only.

She opened the curtains and sunlight flooded in. There was a florist she wanted to check out for the party—she could do it online but it would be better in person. It would give her a time-consuming self-obliterating errand

that, if she was lucky, would distract her from the gnawing renewal of Val's silence.

As she got ready—*definitely* the gold hoops today; she double-checked herself in the mirror—she wondered if maybe she *had* seen Val last night but had blacked that out, too.

No. It was impossible. She was sure that was one thing she would never forget.

AT THE SUBWAY TURNSTILE Joni opened her wallet for her Metro-Card, swiped through, and stood on the platform staring at the empty slash of leather where her everyday credit card should have been.

Had she lost her credit card, too, last night in Dumbo?

Or had she slipped it into the back pocket of her jeans before going out?

Or maybe she'd left it at the bar.

Panicking, she wondered how many pieces of herself she'd shed in the tumult of one night. Then she calmed herself with a plan of action: when she got home, she'd check the laundry, where she'd tossed her jeans, and if the card wasn't there she'd cancel it.

She hadn't been on the subway often since moving to New York and still found it foreign and a little exciting. The dank smell of the tunnels. The rumble of an oncoming train. The bottleneck of people when the doors opened. The rush for a seat. The unspoken rule that if you made eye contact it could put you in some kind of danger so you better not test it. She stood on the F train to Fourth Street and eventually managed to snag a seat.

Nearly everyone was fixated on their phone or plugged into music except for one gray-haloed, craggy-faced man, seated beside her, reading an actual printed copy of the *New York Post* held high and proud in front of him. She leaned over a little to see if she could catch the smell of newspaper and believed she did—dry, woody, suggestive of a vanishing past—as the man shot her an irritated look and folded the paper on his lap. Chastened, she looked away. After a moment her phone vibrated. By the time she fished it out of her purse an alert banner with Val's name flashed away before she could click through. She unlocked her phone and found it: BREAKING NEWS: ATTACK IN BROOKLYN LAST NIGHT. Below it was a photo ... of Val.

Joni gasped and the man beside her ground his jaw.

Finger trembling, Joni typed Val's name into the search bar. There were dozens of iterations of the same news story. She clicked on the first one.

NEW YORK — Valerie Williams, 55, was found unconscious Tuesday in front of a former warehouse building on Bridge Street in the Dumbo neighborhood of Brooklyn. Shortly before 4:00 a.m. a local man noticed her slumped in a doorway and alerted the police.

Ms. Williams, a high school drama teacher in Maplewood, New Jersey, was in Manhattan for a teachers union meeting. Her husband, Russell Williams, didn't know why she drove to Brooklyn later that night. Asked if he worried when his wife failed to return home, Mr. Williams said, "Not at all. There's been a lot going on with her union. I figured they went out after and kept talking."

Ms. Williams was taken to NYU Langone ER in Cobble Hill and later transferred to New York Presbyterian Hospital on the Upper East Side, where she is in critical condition. The extent of the assault is not yet clear, but marks on her neck indicate she may have been strangled.

A reward for relevant information is being offered by NYPD Crime Stoppers.

The train pulled into the Thirty-Fourth Street station and Joni stumbled off in shock just before the doors closed. The platform was crowded, undulating with movement, but she stood still. Someone pushed into her from behind and then turned a fierce look on her.

"Sorry," Joni mumbled.

Val had been *right there*, so close to Superfine, where Joni had been waiting by the window, enjoying the buzz from her whiskey sour(s). Images from last night flashed at her: pool balls clacking, someone's order of french fries falling to the floor, a peal of laughter so sharp it sliced through the cavernous space. Stepping into the cool early-morning air, the bridge roar, the lumpy feel of cobblestones underfoot as she crossed to Pearl Street, the smell of mildew.

Then a new memory: entering the basement, walking, the long dark corridor with a light at the end.

And another: the young man passed out on the floor ... under a table ... a table piled with tapes. Seeing her box.

She remembered the spike of rage and how she yearned to hurt someone,

anyone, whoever was closest. To inflict damage in retribution for all she couldn't control. She remembered how she kicked him. Wally Cobb. *She kicked him.* She nearly doubled over in shame, remembering that.

What else didn't she remember from last night?

What other horrible things had she done?

Was it possible ... ?

*No.* She would *never* do anything to Val. She would *never* hurt her beloved friend.

She started walking just to walk. She couldn't recall where the florist was, which exit to take, so she randomly moved toward the nearest one and climbed the stairs.

Faces blurred past on the crowded sidewalk but she didn't see any of them. A woman festooned with shopping hurried by and bumped Joni with one of her bags, glanced back with a flash of irritation, said nothing, picked up her pace. Joni was standing in the middle of a busy sidewalk blocking foot traffic.

"Sorry," she whispered, but the woman was long gone.

It would be ridiculous to go to the florist now.

She stood against a storefront, out of the flow of foot traffic, and dialed Paul. It went straight to voicemail, which usually meant he was in a meeting. She didn't leave a message—what exactly would she say?

She got back on the F train because she didn't know what else to do.

Got out at the York Street stop in Brooklyn.

Tried Paul again, and again he didn't answer.

For better or worse he was her best friend now and she needed to talk with him, hear his voice, let him assure her she'd be okay and tell her that it wasn't her fault this had happened just because her friend had come to Brooklyn to see her—even though there was no way he could know any of that.

Without thinking, she started walking in the direction of Paul's work and kept going until she reached the Washington Avenue entrance of Steiner Studios.

Why did she still feel at home at a sprawling movie studio when she hadn't worked at one for decades? Especially today, it felt like a place she could



escape into, this twenty-acre wonder of fantasy manufacturing—sound stages, production offices, mill shops, wardrobe rooms, hair and makeup rooms, prop storage. Steiner had everything the major Hollywood studios had plus a wealth of East Coast talent and New York mile-a-minute ambition.

Walking toward the production offices, she passed a pair of familiar women it took a moment to place: Mrs. Maisel tête-à-tête with Candy from *The Deuce*, each tottering on spike heels from a different era. It should have seemed strange but didn't. Everything had been bizarre, distorted, in the past couple of hours.

She hoped Paul would welcome her, not feel she was intruding—but maybe her being here *was* an intrusion. No one liked it when their spouse showed up at work out of the blue. That thought only heightened her confused emotions, the dissonant violence of what had happened to Val and what Joni had done to that young man, all on the same night.

From its very beginning, yesterday had been unpredictable, fraught. She should have known that going out so late, intoxicated, would be a mistake. Val would have agreed to meet another day. Joni could have offered to drive out to her house. None of that had to happen.

She pulled open a glass door emblazoned with Sunny Day's lemon-yellow logo and entered a wide hallway lined along the left side with half-height cubicles. There was a buzz in the air. Dressed-down but stylish, mostly young, people scurried in and out of the offices along the right. Paul had a corner perch at the end of the long hall, with two big windows overlooking the sound stages. As she got closer, a woman in cowboy boots—not pretty but strikingly attractive, with silky blond hair to her shoulders and a stack of bracelets jangling on her wrist—hurried into his office and then his voice, his rich, familiar laughter, bubbled into earshot. The door banged shut behind her.

Joni stopped in her tracks. She wasn't jealous; it wasn't that. Paul was busy, thriving. She couldn't give him a new reason to worry about his career.

"Can I help you?"

She turned toward the voice: another young assistant, this one tall and dark-haired in a sleeveless denim jumpsuit, loomed out of a cubicle.

"I think I'm lost." A stupid thing to say. What if this person came to the party and remembered her? Joni wanted to turn around and keep going and not make eye contact with anyone else. Coming here was a(nother) mistake.

She should have gone home, calmed down, talked to her husband later.

“Wait. Mrs. Lovett?”

How did the assistant know who she was? “Yes.”

The woman smiled and picked up her desk phone. “I’ll let Paul know you’re here.”

Moments later his door swung open and there he was, waving Joni over, saying, “Wow, this is a nice surprise!” She couldn’t tell if he meant it but at least he was acting as if he was happy to see her.

She’d been in his office one other time, before he’d settled in, and now it was filled with *him*—big desk piled with projects, important chair, comfy seating area for sit-downs, table and chairs for meetings, walls checkered with posters of his shows. It was a big space with two broad windows offering sweeping views of the lot.

The woman with the bangles and cowboy boots stood up from a chair at the table and gathered up some papers. “Mrs. Lovett! It’s *really* nice to finally meet you.” She had freckles, Joni noticed, and a slight gap between her two front teeth.

“Blair?”

“Yup.”

They shook hands and Blair told Paul, “Let me know when you’re ready to get back to it.”

He nodded and closed the door behind her. The smile fell from his face. “Joni, seriously, I’m busy. What’s up?”

“I’ll leave. I shouldn’t have come.”

He crossed his arms and looked at her. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. It’s just, well—the reason Val didn’t show up is because she was ... I don’t know. Mugged or something. ‘Assaulted,’ the report said. I was on my way to midtown when I found out and I’ve been kind of freaking out.”

“Jesus.” His forehead crunched. “That’s *horrible*.”

“I tried to call you.”

“I know—I’m sorry I couldn’t answer.” He sighed and came over and put his arms around her. “Is she okay? She’s not—”

*Dead*, he was going to say. “No, thank God. She’s in intensive care.”

“What *happened*?”

“They don’t know—she’s unconscious. I don’t know what to *do*.”

He opened his arms and she lay her head on his shoulder. His hand, warm, familiar, rubbed her back until she began to calm.

On the credenza against the wall, facing his desk, was a framed vacation photo of them together, happy and relaxed—that was why the tall assistant outside his office had recognized her. She let her weight fall into him and he held her and *this* was why she had come, because he was her husband and he loved her unconditionally, because she needed him, because they needed each other.

Joni muttered, “She was on her way to see me. If she hadn’t come to Brooklyn it wouldn’t have happened.”

“Honey, this isn’t on you. Don’t even think that. It’s okay. Everything’s going to be okay.”

“What if it isn’t?”

“It will be.”

“I have to go to the hospital to see her.”

“Hmm.” She felt the vibration of his voice in his chest. “Maybe not such a good idea. Her family probably needs some privacy right now.”

“But Paul—”

His breath was warm on her neck as he whispered, “Shh, shh, shh. It’s going to be okay, I promise.”

“Thank you,” she hummed.

He pulled her closer.

But even in that moment, as he comforted her, as he tried to dissuade her from the self-doubt and restlessness that were her Achilles’ heel, she was already thinking ahead.

WHEN JONI PUSHED OPEN the heavy glass door a bell dinged, and the tone hung in the air the way it always does in hospitals, an eerie sonic bridge that transports you into a place so cold and bright you immediately start calculating the minutes before you can leave. She hated hospitals but felt she *had* to come, because Val had been hurt in *her* neighborhood on the way to see *her* in an urgent unplanned visit—she kept reminding herself of that as she walked into the busy lobby and stopped at the information desk.

Cradling a bouquet of mixed flowers from the gift shop, she rode the elevator then slowly stalked the hall for Val's room. Counting numbers, getting closer, Joni could hear her own heartbeat beneath the fluorescent buzz and electronic beeps animating the broad hall.

She paused when she saw the man in a blue uniform—not a cop but with an official-looking badge on his chest—standing outside Val's door, gaze fixed blankly ahead. His hands were clasped behind his back with protruding thumbs anchoring him to the wall, allowing him to lean back very slightly, just enough to take some of the weight off his feet while maintaining the appearance of standing upright.

Hoping the prickly sensation on her forehead wasn't visible sweat, Joni made sure she was smiling as she approached.

He glanced at her warily.

She nodded and started to walk through the open door.

"Excuse me, ma'am." His voice seemed too deep for the passivity of his job.

She stopped. "Yes?"

His hands opened at his sides as if to suggest that her attempt to enter the room was an absurd imposition. "No visitors allowed."

Through the half-open door she could see Val's legs and feet, ridged under

a pale-blue blanket. Across the room was a window and in front of it a chair holding a forest-green backpack, unzipped, spilling electronics—laptop, headphones, chargers.

“I’m her friend,” Joni explained. “Can I just go in and see her quickly?”

He was about to answer—in the negative, she guessed, judging by the hard cinch of his mouth—when another man appeared from inside the room. He was ginger-pale, with eyebrows so light they were barely visible and a short beard that may have started as a failure to shave that morning, when Val didn’t come home. His eyes sagged with exhaustion.

“You’re Val’s husband, aren’t you? Russ, right?” She extended her hand. “It’s so good to finally meet you. I’m her old friend Joni. She may have mentioned me—”

“Yeah, she did.” He stepped forward and pulled the door shut behind him, forcing her into the hall. “Look, sorry, but you can’t be here.”

“Is she okay?”

A nurse clattered toward them with an equipment-laden cart; they stood close to the wall to make room for her to pass.

Russ said, “She’s in a coma.”

“What happened?”

His mouth tightened like there was something he wanted to say but was holding back. He stared at Joni and didn’t answer.

She asked, “What do the doctors say?”

“That she’ll probably get better but there’s no guarantee.”

“You must be devastated—and your son—and her students.”

“It’s been intense.” He took a breath and his mouth tightened again and she felt so acutely uncomfortable, unwelcome, that an unedited stream of talk babbled out before she could stop it.

“Poor Val. I waited for her a long time. The newspaper said she was in the city for a union meeting. Is she very active with the union? She always had an amazing sense of—”

“It would be best if you just leave.”

“Sorry?”

“Is this her, sir?” the security guard asked.

Without taking his eyes off Joni, Russ nodded. “The way you showed up at our house the other day. And today. Val will talk to you when she wants to, *if* she wants to. Do you understand?”

Joni froze; this man disdained her. “Wait—Val *asked* to see me last night. She was on her way to meet me. Why do you think she was in Brooklyn?”

“Please leave.”

“Let me explain.”

The security guard edged between them and looked Joni in the eye. “Now would be good, ma’am.” His breath smelled of tobacco and mint.

“No, no—this is wrong,” she argued. “Val got in touch with me. I went to see her at her *request*. I was waiting for her and—”

Russ stepped back into the room. The door cracked shut behind him.

“Please listen to me!” She banged the door with her open palm, hard, once. She knew it was wrong as she was doing it but couldn’t stop herself in time.

She was rubbing her stinging hand when the security guard clutched her arm and pulled her away. A doctor hurrying down the hall, white-coated, stethoscope swinging from her neck, glanced quickly before pushing open a patient’s door and disappearing inside. *Wait! Listen to me!* she wanted to shout at the doctor. At the pair of nurses who passed them next. At the orderly who paused to watch the guard hustle her toward the elevator, hovering in case his help was needed.

The guard pushed her roughly into the elevator and as the door closed, he sneered. “Don’t come back.”

The force of shame buckled her against the elevator wall as if she’d been thrown.

Why would Russ do that?

Why would he think that badly of her?

What had Val said to him?

Joni was relieved that she hadn’t told Paul where she was going after she left his office because now she wouldn’t have to suffer his gloating. She took a deep breath and tried to compose herself before the elevator arrived at the lobby.

The door opened and she lifted her chin and stepped into the bustle of hospital staff and visitors and held herself together until she was outside on the circular sidewalk that led to the avenue. She dropped the bouquet into a trashcan. She’d intended to take the subway home but instead raised her hand at the first cab she saw. Sealed inside, she gave the driver her address then collapsed against the seat and covered her face with both hands and wept.

Mercifully Paul was out the next morning when the restraining order arrived, was *served*.

The crisp white envelope with Joni's name on it was handed over dispassionately and unapologetically at the front door by a man, a *boy*, who'd announced himself at the gate with a simple "Delivery," knowing full well that what he had to offer was something she'd never want. Once in front of her he wouldn't meet her eye. He wore black slacks, a white shirt with epaulets, and a Kings County deputy sheriff's badge. A gold six-pointed star.

She was shocked, finding him at her door—but what she didn't know then was that he wouldn't be the last officer of the law to visit her in the coming days.

# **A LOST AND FORGOTTEN PERSON OF INTEREST**

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WHEN JONI WAS COMING OF AGE, during the seventies and into the eighties, the atmosphere was filled with contrary forces. There was what you believed you could do, which was everything, and there were the obstacles that continually sprang up in front of you. Not you, *us*—every woman she knew went through the same things. The guy on the street who ordered you to smile, which made you loathe your serious face. The secretarial job you found yourself in right after college—a placement that informed you that you weren't as smart as you'd thought. The boss who crept up behind you to administer a shoulder massage and made you feel like a prude for not wanting his intimate attention. The raise you were denied without explanation. The mandate to wear stockings and makeup to the office. Submission by a thousand cuts. It humbled you for what came next—the gnawing doubt that you weren't who you thought you were, that you were not just less but somehow tainted.

When she was twenty-six, Joni broke away from all that because she was hell-bent on making a film. She waitressed (and yes, she flirted with the customers to get bigger tips) and worked on her screenplay whenever she could and begged and borrowed a meager budget to get it made. She produced and directed *She Knows* herself. It wasn't hard, it was exhilarating. She'd lost her adolescent arrogance but not her determination.

Her young womanhood, unfolding in an era of blind contradictions, forged in her a steely perseverance that wasn't always well-advised. She tapped it now to get through the confusing days after being blindsided by the restraining order, which, she'd learned, had been initiated by Russ Williams after she'd left the hospital.

One thing Joni knew how to do was keep going. So she kept going.

She tucked away her anguish about Val and carried it next to her heart as she marched forward, chin up.

Her calendar the rest of that week was filled with appointments having to do with the party and she was determined to keep them all. The party became her beacon, a point of focus on which she could train all her attention and (try to) forget everything else.

She established some rules for herself:

Google Val only twice a day, morning and night, to check for updates on her condition.

Meantime, stay busy.

Don't overthink.

If possible, *don't* think.

No booze (if possible).

No: *just no booze*.

That was another struggle going on inside her—the reason she couldn't remember Monday night: when she got drunk she got really drunk, and when she got really drunk she got really angry.

Monday night's episode scared her.

As the hours progressed, a body-memory crystallized of her foot sinking into Wally Cobb's side, and every time she thought of it, she relived the force of that kick. The force of a capacity for violence she'd been unaware of until now. A capacity and a desire. She'd followed an irresistible urge over a boundary so she could feel what it was like to use your power to not just take control but damage another person—the way you want to sink your teeth into the whole chocolate cake, suck smoke from a cigarette, down a bottle of pills just for that forbidden moment of euphoric release.

Alcohol drew her across that line.

She *had* to stop drinking.

And so to manage this reckoning with herself, and to evade the difficult thoughts and fears that kept snapping out of that inner knot, she became an escape artist. Each morning for the rest of that week she showered and dressed, costumed herself as full-on “Mrs. Lovett,” in good clothes and makeup, and was out the door before nine thirty. She became the Confident and Capable Substantial Wife on a Quest that everyone recognized and no one questioned: she was throwing a party, making things nice, spinning happiness for other people.

By Friday she'd met with the caterer, florist, and bandleader—the party's details were all in order. Gradually she felt stronger, less haunted, proud of

herself for her new sobriety, hopeful that *this too shall pass*.

Paul knew nothing about her visit to the hospital or the restraining order, and their lives went back to the kind of normal where she simmered in quiet anxiety and he vanished into his work.

Twice each day she scoured the internet for news of Val's condition, and the lack of it was encouraging.

Val was going to be okay.

And so was Joni.

And so was her marriage.

Those were her mantras as she looked forward only, blinders on tight.

ON SATURDAY MORNING, after Paul had left for the studio, Joni let Stella out and was starting to lock up when the doorbell rang inside the house. Someone was standing at the gate: a bald man in a wrinkled suit so dark blue it might as well have been black.

Stella peed on her tree and Joni walked toward the gate with the leash in her hand. It was another bright spring day, a little chilly, sweater weather. She fumbled for her zipper but finally gave up and held her sweater closed with folded arms.

The man said, "I'm looking for Joni Ackerman Lovett." The simplicity of hearing her full name felt like a veil being yanked aside.

She unlocked the gate. Her sweater fell open and this time she ignored it. "Can I help you?" Up close, he had a lumpy face and head—skin pulled over the prominent bones of his skull, eye sockets, cheeks, jaw. He looked like a hastily created sculpture that might have been called *Bust of a Haggard Man*.

He reached into his jacket pocket as he spoke. "I'm Lito McMullen, Eighty-Fourth Precinct." He handed her his card: DETECTIVE HIPOLITO MCMULLEN, NYPD. There was a picture of a gold shield with a badge number.

A spigot of adrenaline opened and Joni wondered if dread showed in her eyes, on her face, in the way she was standing, in how she looked at him and faked a smile.

"I'm Joni," she said.

"Sorry to bother you, ma'am. Do you have a minute? I have some questions."

"About?" But she knew.

"Okay if I come in?"

"I'd rather stay outside." She glanced at Stella, standing on the lawn, watching them. "She doesn't like to be left alone." Which, of course, wasn't

true at all. She didn't want to bring this strange man into her house. What if he wasn't really a detective? Though she sensed he was.

He stepped onto the driveway and then into the yard. She wanted to keep the gate open but also didn't want Stella to bolt, so she pulled it shut. She met him on the lawn.

"Nice view," he said.

"How can I help you, Detective?"

He turned to her with the sun at his back, which cast his face in shadow. Hers was doused with light and she had to shield her eyes with her hand.

"It's about your friend Valerie Williams." The slopes of his face drank up the shadows, making him look even more severely chiseled. He obviously knew that Joni was aware of what had happened to Val on Monday night or he would have explained.

She sucked in her breath, fearing the worst. "Is she ... ?"

"She's stable. Still unconscious, though. Otherwise I'd be talking to her, not everyone else."

Joni exhaled. "You scared me. I've been worried. I've been wondering but ..."

"Yeah, I know—the husband took out an order and you can't exactly call. Guy's high-strung."

"You met him?"

"He was our first stop."

"You're investigating the attack, *good*. Because that restraining order was really off base."

"Well, that's why I'm here, to understand what happened to your friend. Any idea who might have tried to kill her?"

"Kill her?"

"Looks that way—left for dead, nothing stolen."

"Oh my God."

"Can you tell me why she got in touch with you Monday night, the text she sent you at 9:58 p.m.?"

If he knew the exact time then he'd probably also read their messages. The breach of privacy made Joni's skin crawl. She looked at him, at his thin neck with a prominent Adam's apple that seemed to catch on the knot of his tie, and contained an impulse to reach out and adjust it for him.

"She wanted to meet up with me, to talk."

“About?”

“She didn’t say.”

“But maybe you had some idea.”

She wasn’t sure if she should, but there were too many ways to interpret and imagine Monday night and she was scared. So she told him about Val, the rape they’d kept secret, the Lou Pridgen scandal in the news lately—everything. She finished: “I assumed it had something to do with all that.”

“So you’ve been wanting to talk to her about it,” he noted. “Badly.”

“Well, yes. And apparently she decided she wanted to talk to me too.”

“But when you showed up at her house last week she turned you away, right?”

Joni ground her jaw. Why was he asking when he already seemed to know? “That’s right. But it looks like she changed her mind, Detective—she reached out to me. I tried to tell her husband but he wouldn’t listen.” The edge in her tone drew his gaze to her eyes, overexposed in the harsh light.

“Don’t take any of this personally, Mrs. Lovett—we’re talking to everyone who was around the area that night. That’s how we know you kept an open tab at Superfine for three hours while you waited for her.”

“Yes, I did.”

“And you called them to find out if they still had your credit card, on ...”

“Tuesday, the next day. They didn’t have it.” As if he didn’t already know that. “I had to cancel the card.” Presumably he knew that, too.

“Ever find it?”

“No.” A thought gelled and her pulse rose. “Why? Did you?”

His lips pressed together in the kind of “maybe, maybe not” smile an adult would use to pacify an overcurious child. “So you waited, and she never showed, and eventually you left. But you didn’t call an Uber until two hours after the restaurant closed.”

“It couldn’t have been two whole hours.”

Joni wondered if he knew that Paul was with her in the Uber. He didn’t seem to, unless he hadn’t gotten to that yet. Her instinct was not to mention it unless he did—it was embarrassing enough that her husband had had to find her passed out on the street in a spill of home movies.

“After you left Superfine,” the detective said, “you sent a text to Wally Cobb, a local businessman.”

“He did a video transfer job for me,” she explained. “He screwed it up and

I was really fed up trying to chase him down. He had a whole box full of my videotapes and I wanted them back. I'd seen him cross the street earlier in the night, and after Val didn't show up, since I was right there, I thought I'd get that errand out of the way."

"In the middle of the night?"

"Why not? If he was there."

"Did you get your tapes back?" The question surprised her. Maybe he hadn't spoken with Wally yet; the young man was tough to reach, after all.

"All but one. He didn't tell you?"

"He read your text in the morning, and he noticed that your box was gone, but he says he never saw you in person."

She almost smiled before stopping herself—so Wally didn't remember their brief conversation ... or the kick. "He was pretty out of it, as I recall."

"Yeah, guy's a drug addict. You should check references before you hire someone to do a job for you."

"I did, but clearly not well enough."

"And after you got your tapes back?" the detective asked.

"Most of my tapes—he's still got one of them."

He nodded. "What happened next?"

"I went home. That's it, Detective, that was the whole night."

He lifted his chin and looked at her and smiled with teeth that were disarmingly white and didn't match his face. "Thanks, Mrs. Lovett. Like I said, we're talking to everyone we can. It's a puzzle, it always is." He handed her his card.

Stella heeled protectively at her side and they watched the detective cross the lawn onto the driveway and let himself out through the gate. Joni zipped her sweater all the way to the neck and waited for him to get into an old-model sedan and drive away before she and Stella started on their walk.

It was a bright, beautiful day but Joni felt half blind, stumbling along behind her energetic Doodle, as it sunk in that Val wasn't lying in a coma because a random mugging had gone wrong but because someone had tried to take her life.

Joni forced herself to sit at her desk and try to write, to get her mind off the detective with the ridiculous name—Hipolito McMullen—and his probing

questions and fake-friendly scrutiny, but it was impossible. All the anxiety and uncertainty she'd tried so hard to repress came rushing back.

*Had* he found her credit card somewhere she couldn't remember being?

Did he think *she* may have been involved in what happened to Val?

The way he looked right into her eyes, studying her reactions—it made her shudder.

To busy herself, to stop thinking, she strayed to easy tasks: answered every email, dragged unneeded icons across the screen into the trash, turned to her literal desktop to throw out irrelevant papers and collect the rest in a neat pile. Now everything was organized but when she tried again to write, it still didn't work. Her imagination was in a defensive crouch; to unleash it felt dangerous.

She gave up and made herself comfortable in the living room with a cup of tea and tried to read. She was halfway into a third Highsmith, *Edith's Diary*, but it was hard to concentrate even on that.

Stella jumped onto the couch and Joni buried her face in her pup's soft fur.

She remembered another mindless task she could distract herself with. She went to her purse, in its usual spot in the foyer, and found the slip of paper with the dog walker's phone number she'd torn off the flyer at The Shops. She'd been meaning to arrange a backup dog sitter. Some quick research confirmed that Lynda Montoya, "Dog's Best Friend," was long established in the neighborhood and much loved by her clients. Joni dialed the number and the dog walker answered quickly. They agreed on Monday at four for a trial walk.

Beached on the couch, she longed for her daughters with their laughter and demands and unconditional love. She tried Chris first but her elder daughter didn't answer. Next she tried Alex and of course she didn't answer either.

Joni imagined the opposite scenario: Alex, sitting in her dorm with her phone in her hand, answers right away. She has no dinner plans and, yes, she'd love it if her mother would drive up and take her out.

Half an hour later Joni's in the car en route to Alex's school, formerly Joni's school—*their* school, Val's and hers—just north of the city. She drives over the Brooklyn Bridge, toward the FDR Drive. The river below sparks shards of light and the sky stretches blue, blue, blue. People on foot and on bicycles crisscross the bridge in both directions.



Such a pretty early evening. So much possibility.

Every time that detective's knotty, listening face appears in her mind she forces it away and rekindles the prospect of a daughter in her arms.

Joni's dreams that night were anxious, full of faraway daughters and distant friends and knobby-faced, inquisitive men. When she woke, Paul's side of the bed was rumpled and empty. Groggy, uneasy, she headed downstairs for coffee.

She was shocked to find Makta there, cleaning up from Paul's earlier breakfast.

"Makta. It's Sunday."

"Good morning."

"Isn't it Sunday?" Had Joni stepped into a time warp?

"Yes, Missus. Mister asked me to come today."

"Why?"

Makta shrugged her thick shoulders, bunching the skin on the sides of her neck.

"Where is he?" Joni asked.

"Office." Makta pressed her lips together and nodded solemnly. Joni couldn't tell if the cleaning woman disapproved of his leaving so early, and on a weekend, or of her rising late despite its being a weekend. Makta always seemed to disapprove of something.

Joni decided to have breakfast across the street at one of Cafe Gitane's outdoor tables, with Stella, who never judged.

It was a warm morning and she was grateful to be out. The coffee arrived before the oatmeal. While she waited, she called Paul and greeted him with an annoyed "Why is Makta here today?"

"Didn't I tell you?"

"No."

"I thought I did—sorry about that. She's having a tough time financially so I gave her more days."

"But *Sunday*?"

"She opted to start right away. I was surprised myself."

"When did this happen?"

"Friday. The agency called and said she needed a lot more work."

“I don’t like her being here, Paul. You know that. You should have told them to find her another job.”

“We’ll figure it out,” he promised. “I have a meeting in five minutes—gotta bolt.”

*On a Sunday.* She stabbed the phone with her finger, to hang up on him, but he was already gone. A knot of helpless anger formed in her stomach and she pushed the oatmeal away. She couldn’t stand having Makta in the house. Seven days a week of that woman watching her, judging her, would be intolerable.

She would go home and fire her.

No, she wouldn’t, because she and Paul would fight.

Joni pictured herself back in her real home, in Malibu, without him, and was surprised by the relief she felt: to be alone in a house that was only hers, where decisions didn’t need to be negotiated. She felt, almost heard, an inner *snap*, the breaking of a final straw when an idea presents itself as a fait accompli and you realize that it should have been obvious all along.

She wasn’t happy in New York.

Paul was suffocating her; she could leave him; she *should* leave him.

Sitting there with her uneaten oatmeal, it was suddenly clear. But as soon as she grasped the thought it slipped away—how could she leave? After twenty-six years and two children. And the *cost* of a divorce. She hardly made a living anymore. And there was the restraining order and the detective and wouldn’t she look guilty if she up and left?

And then she thought of Val.

Joni couldn’t leave while her friend was nearby in a hospital bed, hanging by a thread.

She *wouldn’t*.

She ordered more coffee and lingered at the table, reading *Edith’s Diary*. It was becoming clear that Edith was gradually losing her mind—Joni hated how much she was starting to relate to that.

LYNDA MONTOYA, THE DOG WALKER, arrived a few minutes before four on Monday afternoon, as planned. Her short brown hair was thick and wild and she had a friendly smile. She wore pale, glowing lipstick, neon-yellow sneakers, and ripped jeans that looked more accidental than stylish, though Joni wasn't sure she could tell the difference. She was young but not that young—mid-thirties, judging by the blossom of fine lines by her eyes. Joni liked her immediately and invited her in.

“You didn't mention you lived in a castle.” Lynda gaped—everyone gaped when they first encountered this house.

“It doesn't actually belong to us. It's a perk that comes with my husband's job.”

“So he's a king?”

Joni laughed. “Only in his imagination.”

Makta appeared at the top of the stairs, carrying the vacuum cleaner. She pretended not to be interested in their visitor but Joni knew she was.

“Need help with that?” Joni asked. “Your knees.”

“Eh.” Makta waved her off and started to limp down the stairs. Joni went up to intercept her partway and carried the vacuum so the older woman could hold the banister. She sniffed, accepted the help, and at the bottom of the stairs didn't bother with a thank-you.

“Makta, this is Lynda. She's going to help out walking Stella occasionally.”

“Oh?” Makta's tone was loaded with innuendo: *Why on earth would you need help with that when you have so little to do that really matters?* Joni ignored it.

“Nice to meet you.” Lynda noticed the leash hanging on the doorknob in the foyer and asked, “That Stella's?”

“It is.”

She rattled the leash and a moment later Stella skidded into the foyer, then stopped in her tracks when she saw a stranger. Lynda smiled and crouched down and extended her hand to offer a bone-shaped biscuit. Stella hesitated, approached tentatively, took a sniff and then gobbled up the treat. Her tail wagged. Lynda calmly hooked the leash to Stella’s collar and together they walked to the front door.

“You’re good at that,” Joni told Lynda.

The dog walker smiled. “A short walk today since it’s our first time?”

“Whatever works.”

“I’ll play it by ear but we won’t stay out too long.”

Stella glanced at Joni before the door shut behind them.

Makta shook her head. “You give dog to stranger.”

“She’s a professional dog walker.”

Makta lifted her chin and dragged the vacuum out of the foyer by its hose as if walking her own dog.

Joni wanted to work on her screenplay, or at least try, and needed her laptop—but it was in her study and she couldn’t bear the thought of entering Makta’s orbit of disapproval. So she took herself upstairs to the library and settled into the comfy chair with *Edith’s Diary*.

When she opened the book, Wally Cobb flashed through her mind, the ferocity of her kick and other bits and pieces of that night—the strung lights, whiskey sours, games of pool, hump of cobblestones underfoot as she crossed the street.

The yawning lack of Val.

Here it was, almost the end of Monday afternoon—a full week later—and as far as Joni knew Val was still lying unconscious in the hospital and the detective was still nosing around. Thinking about it intensified her craving for a drink. She closed her eyes and waited it out.

She read steadily until she’d finished the novel then stared out the window at the lawn, the river, Lower Manhattan’s silver-and-glass towers reflecting back the light. She was impressed by how well Highsmith got into the head of a wife and mother, considering that the author herself had been a lesbian at a time when homosexuality was considered a perversion and she never married or had children. She was said to have been a drunken misanthrope, which came through in her writing and, it seemed to Joni, was reflected in the

ending she gave poor Edith: the inevitable ending, dished up by one of the strongest, strangest female voices of the time. Joni wondered if the novelist's editors had had a say in it, the way the studio had pressured her to distort the end of her second feature so it better matched reality—the reality in which a woman had to lose her mind or her life or otherwise be punished (or all of the above) so people (which people?) wouldn't feel uncomfortable.

Lynda returned with Stella and unleashed her once they were through the gate. Joni stood in the front door and Stella came running and jumped to lick her face. Makta was just leaving.

"I see you tomorrow," Makta said.

Joni wanted to tell her not to come back but couldn't do it. "Thanks, Makta. Have a good night."

"She's such a nice dog." Lynda bent to rub Stella behind the ears. "No issues at all."

Lynda was clearly in no rush to leave and without thinking Joni asked, "Interested in a glass of wine?" She could have offered tea but old habits die hard and she was lonely. She promised herself to stop after one glass.

Lynda seemed surprised, but only briefly. "Why not? My last walk of the day just canceled."

They crossed through the sitting room and dining room to the kitchen, and then back through to the living room with a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc and a pair of glasses. Along the way, Joni realized that it wasn't just Makta's presence in the house that bothered her but how spotlessly impersonal the place always felt when she left. As she moved through the downstairs with someone who was a potential friend, a new friend who was taking it all in, the place seemed coldly perfect and Joni felt another stab of resentment to have to live in her husband's showplace.

"This feels like a vacation." Lynda sat in one of the armchairs across from the couch in the nearest furniture cluster.

Joni filled both glasses halfway and lifted hers. "Cheers."

"Cheers."

With no effort they were deep in conversation. It turned out that Lynda had been born in Ohio and moved to New York as a child. "When I was a kid my parents bought a fixer-upper in Park Slope that's worth like a gazillion dollars now. I rent the basement apartment—they give me a very sweet deal."

"That's nice of them."

“It is. But let’s face it, the mortgage is all paid off and there’s one other apartment that pays market rate, so they’re set. They always say that buying that house was the best investment they never knew they were making.” They both laughed.

It felt so good to relax with another woman and just talk. The sun was starting to set and they were almost through the bottle of wine (Joni’s fledgling discipline having buckled halfway through the first glass) when the front door swung open.

Paul stood there and stared at them. He rarely came home this early. His eyes looked saggy, exhausted, and a five o’clock shadow sat on his face like a dark cloud.

Joni introduced them. He didn’t smile. He barely even looked at their guest. He radiated something bitter and unwelcoming and a rod shot up Joni’s spine.

Lynda put her glass down. “Guess I’ll get going.” She squeezed out a smile when she passed Paul and was out the door quickly.

Joni sensed what Lynda was thinking—that Paul was the kind of spouse who considered visitors intruders. But he liked meeting new people. He couldn’t wait for hundreds of guests to crash the gates of their new house in a few weeks. Normally he was eager for anyone and everyone to relish his success. Paul was a gregarious host—this was completely unlike him.

“Who was that?” he asked.

“She’s a dog walker. Paul, what’s wrong?”

“Don’t you have a Google alert set up for your name?”

“I do.” He knew she did.

“You didn’t see it?”

She twisted to face him as squarely as she could. “See what?”

“Why didn’t you tell me you talked to a detective?”

She stared at him. He stared back.

As he handed her his phone the snarl on his face tightened.

The news that was upsetting him was a post on something called Patch Media, an item in their Crime & Safety column. Flashing ads for local services—plumbing supplies and birthday clowns—made it hard to find the main content: a block of black-and-white text. Her eyes froze when she saw her own name in the same paragraph with “person of interest” and “reason to believe” and “Dumbo attack” and “Valerie Williams” and “restraining order.”

Joni put down Paul's phone and lay back against the cushion and covered her face with her hands. The dread that lived in her mind had leapt into the world.

PAUL COLLAPSED INTO THE CHAIR Lynda had just abandoned. “What the hell, Joni? A detective came to see you?”

She took her hands off her face and clenched them together on her lap. His eyes were sunk into a face puckered with apprehension.

“Paul, listen to me—”

“I mean, you were there that night.”

“So were you.”

“I was there for two minutes to bring you home,” he said. “What the fuck is going on?”

“I told you,” she said as calmly as she could. “I was waiting for Val in the restaurant across the street, and she didn’t show up. I waited until the restaurant closed down, then I went across the street to get our tapes because that guy wasn’t returning them.”

“What else?”

“I remember going down into the basement. I remember that it smelled like mildew. I remember a rat running past. That’s it, that’s all I remember.” Nearly all. How could she tell her husband that she’d kicked Wally Cobb while he lay on the floor, that she was capable of something like that?

“Val was attacked that night. You have to remember more than that.”

“It’s such a blur.”

“It says the police have reason to think you were at the scene. Why would they say that?”

She shut her eyes, took a breath, and told him: “I can’t find my credit card, the one I used that night at the bar.” When she opened her eyes he was staring at her. “And an earring I might have worn that night is missing.”

“Joni ...” Turning her name into a moan. “I wish you’d told me about all this sooner. I mean, a *detective*.”



“I’m sorry.”

“When did he talk to you?”

“He came here on Saturday after you left for the studio.”

“All weekend long—you said nothing.”

“I was freaking out.”

“You didn’t seem like it.”

How would he know? He was barely home. But she didn’t point that out because it would lead to an argument, another argument, an argument within an argument. Even the detective hadn’t questioned her like *this*, with judgment spiking his tone.

“This is really strange, Joni. It’s really hard to process. I mean, there’s a restraining order against you—*that’s nuts*.” He hunched forward as if he was about to be sick. “Oh my God—the party.”

“The *party*?”

“If this gets out—”

“It’s a local blog, Paul. No one reads it.”

“It doesn’t matter, they’re like seeds: a wind hits and they’re everywhere.”

“What kind of *wind*?”

“Any kind. Online, everything proliferates. Your name leads to my name leads to ... Oh, shit. I’ll have Blair cancel your *Vanity Fair* interview. You’ll need to keep a low profile for a while.” He sounded like a publicist in high gear—unlike Patch, *everyone* read *Vanity Fair*.

“Are you serious? I’d never talk to a reporter about this.”

“You don’t get it.” His tone shifted into meanness. She’d heard him sound that way before, on the phone, jousting with adversaries, but never with her.

“Of course I get it, Paul. I really do *get it*.”

“*Shut up*, okay? Just shut up so I can think.”

Anger flashed and she picked up her wineglass and threw it on the floor, but instead of breaking it only bounced. Then she picked up Lynda’s glass and hurled it at the fireplace, where it exploded against the stone mantle in a starburst of shards.

He sat there, lifted his hands—and applauded. His eyes went cold and her insides withered.

“You’re drunk, Joni.” He stood up. “You’re drunk and you’re crazy. Go sleep it off and we’ll talk in the morning.”

“I am not crazy.” She was hardly even drunk, after two and a half glasses

of wine; it took a lot more than that. But it didn't matter. She'd been drinking (again), that was obvious. And now she was as good as being accused of attacking her old friend.

No, not accused.

Suspected.

*A person of interest.*

*A lost and forgotten person of interest.* How did that even make any sense?

She fled upstairs to their bedroom. It was still early and she wasn't tired and she wanted, needed, to stop replaying that miserable scene with Paul. So she picked up *The Blunderer*, the next Highsmith on the pile, and crawled into bed. She read steadily for hours, losing track of time, forging her way through the first half of the book and into the second. The night grew darker outside the bedroom windows. At one point she heard Paul's footsteps in the hall but he didn't come into their room.

She read and read, lapsing more deeply into the story, drawn by the creeping paranoia woven so artfully into the otherwise normal lives. Two men hated their wives, both women turned up dead, but only one man was a murderer. It was impressive the way Highsmith worked her way into people's minds and managed to pull off tricky situations by tugging on each psychological thread until the whole canvas shifted. It was easy to see why Hitchcock had been drawn to her work. Why Joni had been drawn to it decades ago and felt drawn to it now. Again, both narrators of this story were men. She almost wished Edith could break into this story and tell it her way. But no. The old cliché of the annoying, lazy, hateful wife and the long-suffering husband who can't resist the urge to get rid of her was its own classic genre. She felt a sharp sympathy for the awful wives—you had to ask yourself what distortions had made them so ugly in the first place.

Sometime in the wee hours Joni started to yawn and felt her brain give way to the tug of sleep. The words looked like rows of little black ants. She closed her eyes to banish the image, but instead the word-ants crawled into her mind and all she could think about was Paul and how much happier he'd be if he could lure her into an ant trap where she'd vanish from sight. Or stamp her out. She fell asleep thinking about it, entertaining the fantasy the way a child might dream about life on a distant planet.

The next thing she knew it was morning and a different kind of dream, a

marital nightmare, was floating in and out of her consciousness. She forced open her eyes. The bedside lamp was still on, the book had tumbled to the floor, and she was alone in bed, the covers undisturbed on Paul's side—he hadn't come to bed at all. Her lids grew heavy and fell shut and Paul's dream-voice returned:

"I reached out to Detective McMullen."

A mug filled with whiskey stops midway to her mouth. "Why?" Her dream-eyes bug.

"To touch base, you know—connect."

"What did you talk about?"

"Nothing, really."

"*What did you talk about?*"

He swallows some coffee and wipes his mouth and finally meets her eyes. "You. Obviously."

"You had no right to reach out to that man."

"I'm trying to help you."

"How does that help me?"

"I told him I've known you for nearly thirty years and I vouch for you."

"You vouch for me?" She lifts the mug and guzzles whiskey and her eyes roll back until only the whites show. She is horrifying. She is a monster.

"I also told him that just because you've got a drinking problem it doesn't make you guilty of anything."

"Thank you for that!" Not just oozing but bleeding sarcasm. She stands up. Before leaving the room she turns to say, "Don't you think that makes me seem more, you know, interesting? As a person of interest?"

"I just thought it made sense for him to have some context."

"Context for what?"

"Why you might be out late, alone, at a bar."

"It was more a restaurant than a bar, just for the record, and *you know* I was waiting for my friend."

She spins dramatically toward the door to show that she's leaving him but before she's out she evaporates and he's alone, smiling his assassin smile as if he just won the argument.

And then, suddenly, she was fully awake. Her brain pulsed with an urgency to talk to Lito McMullen and tell him not to listen to Paul. To remind him that sometimes husbands and wives had their own agendas and weren't

necessarily on the same team. That thought was like a whole swallowed seed, an understanding that was suddenly *in* her.

She sat up to make sure she wouldn't drift back to sleep—stretched her arms, blinked, shook her head. It was just a dream, a dream that had merged with last night's argument and a heavy dose of Highsmith. Paul hadn't "reached out" to the detective. He wouldn't risk his own reputation by involving himself more than he had to. He was the ultimate survivor.

She turned off the lamp then reached down to pick up the fallen book. As she set it on the nightstand a strange but delicious thought popped into her mind: *What would happen between us now if we were characters in a Highsmith novel?*

Would Paul calmly plot her demise or would it happen in a burst of rage? Which would he be, her competent husband—a cool soup of planning or a cauldron of reaction?

And if it was *her* plotting *his* demise?

As she pulled on her robe she couldn't stop wondering how, in a situation like theirs, Highsmith would have a wife deal with a husband unwilling to give her the benefit of the doubt in a bad situation, in a marriage that was fraying, when she was already fantasizing about life on her own.

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“JONI ACKERMAN LOVETT!” a voice shouted.

Three people were clustered by the front gate in the crisp spring morning—two men and a woman, all with cameras pointed at the house.

“Do you have a minute to talk?”

“What do you know about the attempted murder of Valerie Williams?”

“Have you hired a lawyer yet?”

Joni shrank back into the foyer and, as soon as Stella ran back in from her morning pee, slammed the door and snapped the lock. She hadn’t thought anyone would see that little Patch post but now it seemed obvious that reporters following the original news report would have an alert set for Val’s name.

Paul was right: a wind had struck and scattered the seeds.

That last question startled her: Did she have a lawyer yet?

*Did she need one?*

She steadied herself with the thought that this wouldn’t last, *couldn’t* last, that it was a mistake and those vultures would fly off as soon as they realized there was no meat to the story.

In the kitchen, she moved around mechanically, brewing coffee, frying an egg, buttering toast.

What kind of lawyer would she need? She had an entertainment lawyer, but wouldn’t she need a criminal defense attorney for something like this?

She sat at the table, mashing the tines of her fork in a yellow slush of yolk on the plate but couldn’t eat.

By the time Paul came down—he’d slept in Alex’s room, the only extra bedroom made up with sheets—he was showered and dressed, looking shiny and fit for the outside world. He poured himself some coffee and sat down across the table but he wouldn’t look at her, this imbalanced woman who occupied space in his home.

*Raise your eyes, just briefly, she’d have directed. Acknowledge your wife.*

Unable, unwilling to read her mind, he gazed into his mug.

“Paul, I’m sorry.” She broke the silence. “But can you imagine what a nightmare the past week has been for me? I’m not excusing myself, but try to understand.”

He sipped his coffee and finally looked at her.

*Several beats too late. Try again.*

“They’ll find out who did it,” he said, “and it won’t be you. Right?”

“Right.”

“Good.”

“Paul, do we need a lawyer?”

“We?”

“Me.”

“I already put out a feeler with Sunny Day’s head of Legal.”

“But they’re entertainment lawyers.”

“He’ll keep it confidential. Let’s wait to see how he steers you before you talk to someone else, okay?” He issued that final word, *okay*, with the force of last night’s *shut up*. Then he stood and poured his unfinished coffee into the sink and left without saying goodbye.

*Poison.* That’s how Highsmith would have the wife do it. Smart. Simple. No blood.

Joni could have warned Paul about the reporters outside the gate, but she didn’t. She resented him for making her feel even more boxed into a corner than she already was. *Let him feel the same shock of opening the door and seeing them. Let his heart jump. Let anxiety drive deeper into his bones.* She sat there knowing that her husband would walk right into the path of those cameras. Her guess was that he wouldn’t talk to the reporters but he also wouldn’t be rude. He’d smile and say, “No comment,” and slide into the back seat of his shiny company car with its tinted windows and uniformed driver that made him seem more important than anyone could possibly be.

A few minutes later the door opened quickly and banged shut. She assumed he was back, but when she reached the front hall she found Makta, frozen, dramatically trying to catch her breath.

“Oh, Makta, I’m so sorry.” It had slipped Joni’s mind that the house cleaner would be coming in today; she was still used to thinking of Tuesdays as private, *hers*.

Makta’s eyes looked hard, embedded like seeds in the rotten apple of her face—an untrusting, and untrustworthy, face.

*How would Highsmith get rid of the housekeeper?*

“It is true?” Makta demanded.

“I don’t know what you heard.”

“These people out there, what they say.”

Joni gathered herself and said, “Go home. You’re fired.”

“You can’t—”

“You’re fired,” she repeated. “*Get out.*”

Makta bent to retrieve the slippers she kept in the front hall. She made sure to slam the door behind her.

AS SOON AS MAKTA WAS GONE, Joni texted Lynda and asked if she had time to take Stella on her daily long walk—she couldn't bring herself to face those reporters. Lynda was at the gate at noon. Joni buzzed her in and waited for the doorbell before quickly opening the front door.

“That’s weird out there,” Lynda said. She didn’t smile. All the warmth of yesterday was gone. She’d probably gone home last night and googled them and found the blog post; and maybe now, with all those reporters, there was more. That Lynda had agreed to come back implied that she hadn’t passed judgment—or maybe she was hard up for cash.

“Thanks for this,” Joni said.

“No problem.” But Lynda’s forehead creased; clearly she had questions she wasn’t asking.

“I’ll pay you extra,” Joni offered.

“Okay. Great.”

So that was how it would be. The door of friendship, briefly open, was now firmly closed, and they’d have a professional relationship, remunerated at a premium. Stella came running, allowed her new friend to attach the leash, and off they went.

Normally Joni relished being alone, so it surprised her when loneliness rushed in like floodwater. It gripped her from all directions and she wasn’t sure what to do now.

Take a shower?

Work on her screenplay?

Clean the kitchen?

Nothing felt right.

She realized that she needed to talk to someone, but she didn’t want to burden her daughters with this, and all her friends back home were connected



to the film business. Paul would freak if word of this filtered to the industry, if it hadn't already—she couldn't call *anyone* she knew in LA. Val was the only friend she'd stayed close with from college, at least for a while. And there was no one left from high school or from her childhood in Rhode Island. Both her parents were gone; they'd never offered much comfort, anyway. And she hadn't spoken with her brother, Marc, in years, not that he was capable of anything remotely resembling comfort. She wasn't even sure where he lived these days and, lonely though she was, she didn't want to know.

Standing alone in the mansion's foyer, she missed Val with fresh yearning. Years ago, they had been like sisters but without family baggage. Why had they let their friendship fade? It was a mistake, a stupid mistake you make when you're young, when you have no idea how much you'll regret it later.

She thought back to the last time they saw each other, soon after the assault, when Val was leaving LA for Philadelphia and her parents' home. Joni had helped her friend pack, stood with her while the movers loaded her stuff into a truck, then driven her to the airport. She would beat the truck by a week. Joni had wanted to park and go in with her; back then, before all the post-9/11 security, you could go all the way to the gate together. Joni would have waited until the flight boarded but Val insisted she drop her at the curb.

"Kiss 'n' fly, baby," she said with a wink. If she was hoping Joni would laugh, she was out of luck. There was nothing funny about her leaving, or their parting.

"Kiss 'n' *don't* fly, Val. Seriously, I'm going to miss you so much it hurts."

"I know. Me too." Val pushed her hair behind her ears, revealing her naked lobes, the hole punctures rarely graced by earrings anymore. Lately she hadn't bothered with things like jewelry or hair brushing or sometimes even laundry. Her depression had lingered too long. In Joni's heart, she knew Val had to leave.

"Let me know when you get there," Joni said.

"I will."

"And we'll talk, long talks, at least twice a week?"

"Minimum."

They hugged for a long time. Val pulled away because clearly Joni wasn't

going to.

“See ya, Joni.”

“Soon, Val.”

Joni sat there watching her dearest friend push through the spinning glass door. Val in. Strangers out. Joni believed that it wasn't final, that they really would talk frequently and manage to see each other occasionally. The talking happened for a while. But looking back, remembering Val vanishing into the airport, Joni understood that when she left, *she was gone*. After that, time moved them both forward, swishing around them like an ocean current that never pushed them back together.

All Joni wanted now was to pick up the phone and talk to her friend—the version of her she used to know, not the one who'd slammed the door, whose husband had slammed another door and thrown up a legal barrier to keep Joni away. She wouldn't assault her friend any more than she'd try to kill her own husband (in reality). The old Val would have listened, would have believed her, would have forgiven her even before all the facts were evident. Once this was over, everyone would see that. But for now, well ... Joni was stuck in this house, in her *lost and forgotten* haze, her *person of interest* bubble where everything, looking in or looking out, appeared distorted.

Standing in this foyer that was as big as a room, she turned to go upstairs. The wide staircase curving toward her looked like a tongue that wanted to lick her into its fold, make her belong to the house: *the woman of the house*. Was that the endgame of her life? To stop right here, an isolated plot point in her husband's burgeoning life story?

*No. It wasn't.*

*She wouldn't let it be.*

Still, like a child left alone while everyone else went out to a party, she felt her eyes water and start to fill. Being this alone, this invisible, she could have allowed herself to let go and have the good cry she needed. But when she looked around herself that morning, a speck in the interior of an oversized house that didn't belong to her, in which she didn't belong, something inside her steeled. She wiped her eyes dry with the heels of her hands.

*No.*

It was chilly in the house and she wanted a sweater.

She walked up the stairs and they didn't eat her.

The sweater she put on warmed her and she started to feel better.

In the library, she opened the door to the observation deck facing the river, stepped outside, and felt the fresh air on her face as she let her eyes roam across the baby-blue sky.

She reminded herself that this was just a house and she wasn't trapped in it.

A glance to her left reassured her that the reporters couldn't see her. She unfolded an old canvas deck chair the previous owner had left behind, sat back, and rested her feet on the edge of the iron railing. (Her pedicure still looked good.) It was lovely out here, peaceful. She took a deep breath and started to exhale when she remembered something.

Val *had* come back to LA once, when the girls were small. Her nephew was graduating from UCLA. She'd stayed in a hotel near the school and managed to peel away to meet Joni for lunch in West Hollywood, their old stomping ground.

That's right, she remembered now: They'd met at an outdoor table at one of Joni's favorite restaurants, one that hadn't been around when Val had lived there. Joni arrived first. It was a hot day and she took a table in the shade. Val was late and Joni was hungry but she didn't want to order until her friend got there so she nursed an iced tea and watched traffic go by.

The familiar voice came from behind: "Sorry I'm so late!"

Joni twisted around and there was Val, rushing up the sidewalk, her pale hair pulled back and her eyes blanched by the fierce sun. She wore jeans and a sleeveless white T-shirt, pearl earrings, pink lipstick—and a diamond engagement ring you couldn't fail to notice.

"The traffic was ridiculous," she said. "Then I had to park like four blocks away." Her chair scraped loudly on the pavement when she pulled it out to sit. "Phew."

"Well, you made it." Joni smiled at her across the table. There she was, Val, after all these years.

"That iced tea looks good." Val waved at the waiter, smiled, and pointed to Joni's glass. She glanced at her watch. "I hate to say this, but I only have about twenty minutes."

"Oh." A bad feeling swelled in Joni's chest. Even if Val had been on time, this was going to be a short visit—not what she'd hoped.

"Go ahead and order food if you're hungry," Val said. "I had a late breakfast, so ..."

“No, that’s okay.” Joni’s stomach grumbled. “I’ll need to pick the girls up from school soon, anyway.” In truth, she didn’t need to retrieve them from their after-school playdates until the end of the afternoon; she’d made special arrangements so her time with Val could stretch and linger.

Val smiled. “I can’t wait to have kids. Is it hard juggling everything?”

“Yes, but it’s okay. They’re great kids and I love—I mean *lovebeing* their mother.”

“Happy marriage, too?” This asked with a tilt of the head that struck Joni as strange.

“Very. I wish you could meet the girls and Paul.”

“I know about him.”

“You do?”

Val sipped her iced tea. The outside of the glass was starting to bead with sweat. “He’s kind of famous.”

“Not really.”

“Maybe not to you.” Val smiled but it was more polite than warm. The strange feeling grew. This wasn’t what Joni had expected of their reunion. She told herself not to be jarred by the awkwardness, to move through it, get to the other side.

“While you’re in town,” Joni suggested, “it would be great if you could come to the house for a barbeque. We just renovated—I’ll give you the grand tour. I’d really like to catch up, Val.”

“I wish I could, but I won’t be here long, and there are all these family things because of the graduation. You know how it is.”

“Sure.”

“I’m sorry.”

Joni hated that her friend kept apologizing, like a stranger who’d knocked her in passing. “We’ll make it short and sweet, then,” Joni tried, but the effort fell flat.

“Listen, I wanted to say something, but now ...” Val trailed off and one side of her mouth pinched in.

“What?”

“Never mind. Maybe it’s not such a great idea.”

“No, tell me. We’re here.” It occurred to Joni that Val had gotten in touch not for a reunion but because she had something to get off her chest. “Is it about what happened? Back then?”

“Never mind. Really, Joni, it’s just nice to see you.”

“It’s why we stopped talking on the phone, isn’t it?” She plowed ahead. “We couldn’t bring ourselves to talk about it so we talked around it and then we just stopped talking. We should have talked about it, really talked.”

“It’s not that.” Val wrapped a paper napkin around her glass, gripped it, but didn’t drink.

“I always wondered if you were mad at me for leaving you alone so long at the party,” Joni said.

“We both wandered off, it was fine. It seemed like a good party ... Well, at first.”

“And it took me so long to find you that night—you were in that room so long before I even started looking for you. I’m so sorry. You must have wondered where I was.”

“I really didn’t. I mean, I was unconscious.”

“I want you to say anything you need to say to me, Val. Please. Just say it. I want you to. You can.”

Val’s attention veered to the street. A red pickup filled with flowers drove by, presumably bound for some event, and left a fog of sweetness in the air. She took a ten-dollar bill out of her wallet and said, “That’s not it, Joni. It isn’t anything you did. You were a great friend.”

“Then what?”

“I have to go now.”

“Please put that back. I’ll take care of it.”

Val left the money on the table anyway. When she leaned for a goodbye kiss, their cheeks hovered an inch apart.

“Let’s stay in touch,” Joni said.

Val pressed out a smile. “I’m glad you’re happy, Joni. Really glad for you.”

“You too. And you’re getting married—we didn’t even talk about that. I want to hear all about him. What’s his name? What does he do?”

“Russ. He’s an architect. I’m really sorry, but I’ll be late.”

Val walked away.

Sitting on the observation deck, gazing at the Brooklyn sky, Joni wondered how she possibly could have forgotten about that non-lunch. That visit when they both knew they weren’t friends anymore. When Val made it clear that she wasn’t there to see Joni but to tell her something—something

she never said.

Joni let her feet drop off the railing, folded up the chair, and went inside.

She knew why she'd forgotten about it. It was the dark side of wishful thinking: willful forgetting.

Because she didn't want to remember.

Because it was a terrible memory and it still hurt, even now.

WHEN LYNDA RETURNED with Stella, it was quickly agreed that they would do another noon walk tomorrow for the same inflated pay. After that the day stayed quiet, just Joni and Stelladoodle, who napped under the desk and warmed Joni's feet while she tried to get her mind off everything and into her screenplay. She was just managing to corral some focus when Paul called.

He informed her, "Makta quit."

"No, I fired her."

"That's not what the agency told Blair."

"Maybe she told the agency she quit, but it's not true." The way he sighed, slowly, heavily—she clenched her jaw. "You don't believe me?"

"I don't know what to believe anymore."

"Believe what you want but she didn't quit—I fired her."

"Why?"

"I don't like her. She makes me uncomfortable."

"What's with you, Joni?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's just, I feel terrible," he said. "We just gave her more hours. She's struggling financially and—"

"They'll fix her up with another job, Paul. It's not our problem."

"I really wish you hadn't done that without discussing it with me first."

"Well, you hired her without discussing it with *me*." Joni remembered how surprised she'd been when Blair had called to say that someone would be coming three days a week to clean the house. Joni had said thanks and tried to sound like she meant it, because it wasn't Blair's fault; she was only following orders.

"We'll get the agency to send someone new," he said. *We* meaning Blair.

"No. I don't want anyone else in this house, not now."

“But—”

“Just ... no.”

“Goddamn it, Joni, how could you—”

She hung up.

*It would be a common household poison, found under any kitchen sink or in a garage—something like bleach or antifreeze.* That’s how Highsmith’s furious wife would dispatch her imperious husband.

Joni couldn’t write; she was too angry and her thoughts were all over the place. In the end the only thing she could do was read. She finished *The Blunderer* in the library chair. And she succumbed to a cocktail because that also helped—just one, though. She was trying to stop, but it was difficult, especially now.

The next morning when she woke up Paul wasn’t there; he’d slept in Alex’s room again after returning late from the studio. By the time she went downstairs he’d already left for work.

So this was what it meant to be *alone together*, to inhabit the same space like passing phantoms.

Stella paced in the foyer—she needed to go out. Hesitating, because she dreaded any hint of the media vultures outside, she opened the door and stood back while Stella ran to her tree, did her business, sniffed the air—and then lay down in the grass without once glancing toward the gate. Surprised, Joni went to the window at the far end of the living room and pushed the curtains aside just enough to see out.

No one was there.

Something else must have happened in the world more interesting than the coincidence of a middle-aged woman having been in the neighborhood of a crime in one of the world’s biggest cities. In the furious spin of the media cycle, she’d been rinsed out with yesterday’s news.

Elated, Joni joined Stella on the lawn and lifted her face to soak in the sun and breathe the fresh spring air. It was going to be a gorgeous day.

“What do you think, Doodlepie?” she asked Stella, who tilted her head and cocked her ears as if understanding. “Should I tell Lynda not to come?”

Stella jumped up and ran to the gate and that was the answer. Joni texted Lynda that she’d be paid for the late cancellation.

Before long, Stella and Joni were climbing a hill in Fort Greene Park. The view from the top was spectacular: rolling lawn and asphalt paths edged with



benches and in the far distance a gray puzzle of Manhattan skyscrapers.

On their way down, Joni's phone rang. DALLAS MILLER, the screen read. She'd saved the reporter's number in her contacts when they'd scheduled the *Vanity Fair* interview. The interview that had been canceled. Why was he calling her now? *Epecially* now? Was he the only reporter who hadn't heard that there was no news here? She turned off her ringer and let the call go to voicemail.

As she walked home, her thoughts meandered to the interview that had been struck from the calendar; had that really been necessary? Obviously she wouldn't have talked about what was going on. It was an article about Paul's brilliant career and his move to New York and all the A-list fabulosos who'd be attending their party, and that's what they would have discussed. Maybe Lou Pridgen's downfall would have come up: Did she know him? What were her thoughts on misogyny in Hollywood? She could have spoken forthrightly on that subject, and she had a lot to say without even mentioning Val. She was a grown-up and a professional and knew how to stay in her lane. It was even possible that Dallas Miller might have asked her about her own career, her past films, all the screenplays she'd written and sold that were never made, the new one she was working on. Exposure like that, in such a high-profile magazine, could have offered her a professional boost.

But. Paul was probably right. It wouldn't be a good idea to talk to *any* reporter right now. Even if she didn't answer uncomfortable questions, they'd be asked. The subtlest reaction could be distorted or taken out of context.

Walking alongside a housing project—a terrain of identical brick buildings, broken benches, and rusted swing sets—she noticed a down-market grocery store across the street and remembered that she needed a few things for the house. She felt a little nervous leaving Stella alone in an unfamiliar neighborhood, but she'd be quick. She tied the leash to a bike rack outside the store and went inside.

The place didn't have an iota of the posh of Whole Foods, where she normally shopped. The fluorescent lighting was harsh but bright. The cracked linoleum floor was scuffed but clean. The shelves held brands she barely recognized but they were full. She felt like she was in a foreign land, unknown and unseen.

She thought of her Highsmith character, the angry wife, and realized that this was the perfect opportunity for her to buy the poison.

It was a store where she'd never shopped before and likely wouldn't shop again.

And she had cash, so the purchase wouldn't be traceable.

Enjoying the trickle of adrenaline as her imagination wandered, Joni pushed her cart through the aisles, collecting bread and milk and bananas, then went in search of antifreeze—it was said to be sweet, easy to camouflage in a cocktail. In the household section she spotted some dusty yellow gallon bottles on the bottom shelf. She heaved one into the cart.

As they made their way back home to Vinegar Hill, Joni barely noticed the weight of the bag. She felt exhilarated, as if she'd gotten away with something, when all she'd done was take a walk and run an errand.

But it was more than that—her fantasy had edged into reality. She was surprised by how easy it was to plan a husband's (imaginary) murder. As easy as it was to kick a junkie in a basement and no one would ever know.

The milk and bread went into the fridge. She stood there holding the antifreeze, thinking she'd put it under the kitchen sink, in the back, beside a half-full bottle of windshield fluid. But would Highsmith approve of her character stashing auto supplies there instead of in the garage? The house didn't have a regular garage. There was an outbuilding where the car could be stored, though they never used it because it was too far from the front door. They always parked in the long driveway between the house and the gate. So yes, the car supplies could stay under the sink with the dish liquid and sponges and Drano and bleach.

Poison stowed, she shut the cabinet door with a decisive snap that pleased her.

After lunch she made a fresh pot of coffee and settled in at her desk with the notes she'd compiled for the new screenplay she hadn't quite managed to start. Writing flowed at last, a relief after a long drought of inspiration. It must have been all the Highsmith reading and channeling that was helping. She turned off her phone and worked in focus mode, blocking out the emails and messages and news flashes that slid across the top of her screen.

For nearly three hours she didn't think of Paul, or Val, or Lou Pridgen, or Hipolito McMullen, or anything else on her menu of disturbances. By the time she looked up she'd written two new scenes and felt as calm as if she'd meditated.

Then she checked her email and was sucked back into the reality she'd

briefly floated above.

Dallas Miller was still trying to reach her. Though he knew that their interview had been “taken off the calendar,” he hoped to write the most “rounded and fair” article he could, and thus wondered if they could still talk. He “knew,” he “hoped,” he “wondered” ... (Didn’t they all?) He had some “quick questions” that wouldn’t “take too much time.” (She had nothing but time!) Was he too young to know that his casual deployment of clichéd entreaties would fall flat with her? That they would, in fact, irritate her? That they’d make her trust him less, not more? It was tempting to answer, but she’d already done one subversive thing that day.

She deleted his email and went back to her work.

THAT NIGHT PAUL RETURNED to their bedroom. Joni was standing at the double sink, brushing her teeth, when he appeared beside her in his pajama bottoms and T-shirt. He picked up his electric toothbrush, squeezed on some paste, pressed the button, and whirred away at his mouth like nothing had happened. Alex was home for the first part of the summer and Joni's cynical mind jumped to the conclusion that Paul didn't feel like making up a bed in one of the guest rooms, but she also wondered if it was something else. Maybe he didn't want Alex to witness him behaving coldly toward her mother, maybe he *did* have a heart, at least when it came to their children.

He rinsed his mouth and broke the silence with "Hi."

She dried her face, looked at him, tried on a smile. It had been days since they'd spoken without arguing.

"I'm back," he said.

"I see that."

"Here's the thing. We have to trust each other, don't we?"

*If we're going to stay married, which looks more doubtful by the day.* But she didn't say that. "Yes," she agreed, because it was easier and she wasn't ready for another fight and she hadn't fully made up her mind about them at that point. "We do."

"This whole thing's been a real shitshow." He ground his jaw, tension coiling just beneath the skin.

"You don't really believe I had anything to do with what happened to Val, do you?"

"No, I don't, Joni—I really don't. I'm sorry I haven't been more sympathetic about what you've been going through. I hope you can forgive me."

Could she? She wasn't sure, but she knew the diplomatic answer. "Of

course I can.”

They leaned in for a crisp kiss and that was that—for now.

In bed, she scrolled through her phone and he leafed through a magazine. She realized that she ought to tell him about Dallas Miller trying to reach her before he found out some other way.

“Paul?”

He lay the magazine on his stomach, cocked his reading glasses atop his head, looked at her.

“That *Vanity Fair* reporter’s been calling and emailing.”

“I thought Blair took care of that.”

“She did—the interview was canceled. I guess he’s going rogue.”

“What did you say?”

“I didn’t respond.”

“Huh. Well, thanks for telling me.” He put the magazine and his glasses on his bedside table and switched off the lamp.

After a few minutes, lying together in the dark, he asked, “What if he starts showing up at the house? That reporter.”

“Would he?”

“He might.”

“I’ll tell him to go to hell.”

“And he’ll print that—and more.”

*More.* Meaning the ambitious reporter would unpack every aspect of every word she spoke and layer them with implied meaning. Joni was still a person of interest, as far as anyone knew, and the fact was that she was married to a man with a public presence.

It was true, Dallas Miller *could* turn up at the house the way the other reporters had and, if he got her attention at the wrong moment or caught her in a bad mood, she was capable of spewing some juicy vitriol. Paul’s reputation aside, and regardless of her innocence, she’d never live down the embarrassment if a major magazine depicted her as a drunken shrew who, by the way, was *somehow involved* in an attempted murder of a former roommate. She had her own career to think about, not to mention whatever was left of her dignity.

“I could stay in for a while, just to be safe,” she said. “Lynda could walk Stella.”

“Good. That’s good. Joni, I’m sorry to ask.”

“No, *I’m* sorry. And you didn’t ask—I offered.”

She was impressed with how civilly they were both behaving. Maybe they were just tired of arguing. Maybe they were summoning their best behavior because Alex was in the house. Whatever the reason, it was a relief.

Another thing Joni didn’t want to do in front of Alex was drink. Her daughter became an inspiration and motivating force on the winding road to sobriety. They watched movies and played board games and had long, meandering mother-daughter talks. Worked out together in the exercise room. Read together in the library (they dragged in a second armchair). Cooked together at dinnertime.

Then, once the glow of her arrival started to wear off, Alex became restless and announced that she was going out the next day. Joni didn’t want her to leave, even for an hour, but how could she argue? Alex was twenty-one and this was a big city with plenty to do—movies, parks, restaurants, museums, concerts—and some of her college friends were around. If Joni was going to be a good mother, and she *was* a good mother, she had to step out of the way.

The next afternoon Lynda retrieved Stella and they left for their daily long walk. Alex was already gone. And so the house was empty again; after days of steady company, the quiet was unsettling. Solitude thickened around Joni. There’d been no sign of or word from Dallas Miller but she was going to stick to the plan.

She managed to settle in at her desk and work on her screenplay for a couple of hours before her attention drifted and anxiety started to percolate under her skin. She couldn’t sit still.

In the living room, she closed all the curtains, turned on all the lights, and queued up a favorite old Pointer Sisters song. She and Val used to play it in their LA apartment when they found themselves together on a Saturday night, pretending they were pining for dates when really they were content to be together. Now, it rained men—*hallelujah!*—at full volume and Joni danced like she hadn’t danced in years.

Dancing with Val had been great but dancing alone had its own charms. The exultant freedom—Joni leapt and twirled and reached her arms as wide as they would go. She didn’t stop until she stepped on something sharp embedded in the carpet and bent down to find it.

It was a sliver of broken glass, probably from when she’d thrown that

glass a week ago when Lynda had stayed for wine. Only a week! It felt like a month. Of course there'd be stray pieces of glass left from that night, with Makta gone.

Joni dragged the vacuum cleaner from the pantry and went over all the rugs in the living room. Then she switched to the hard floor attachment and went over all the wood, too. While she was at it, she used the hand tool to vacuum all the upholstery and, as she lifted cushions and discovered quarters and bits of cracker and dusty knots of hair, she realized two things: Makta had never cleaned beneath the surface; and maybe, if she was lucky, her earring or credit card or both would finally turn up and put those questions to rest. She couldn't think of anything else the police might have of hers to justify suspicion.

Hopeful, sober, energized, she broke out the microfiber cloths Makta kept in a bag in the pantry and moved things aside to spray and dust until the living room glowed. It took three hours to clean that one big room. Three hours and a long stream of music blasting from the speakers. She didn't find her credit card but she was just getting started.

This became Joni's new routine: writing in the mornings, cleaning in the afternoons, a hunt for evidence that Lito McMullen didn't have because (somewhere) she did. She kept cleaning, looking, determined even as day after day nothing turned up besides quarters, stray popcorn, tumbleweeds of lint.

Meantime, in the lull between her name's appearance in Patch and now—the clarifying lull of a (mostly) booze-free brain—a new lucidity was taking root. Breaths lasted longer and seemed to reach a deeper part of her lungs. Thoughts were calmer, with fewer of those sharp turns that led to a clenched jaw and a run to the liquor cabinet.

And then, one afternoon, kneeling in front of the washing machine, preparing a load of darks, she put her hand into Paul's jeans pocket to check for tissues or paperclips or anything else that might clog the pipes—and pulled out a piece of the earring she'd been searching for.

She sat back on her heels and looked at the silver loop that had fallen into the sink before she went to Dumbo that Monday night, the bottom that always detached, the reason she'd stopped wearing the earrings years ago. She held it between pinched fingertips, smooth and hard and familiar, and recalled linking the pieces back together and putting the earrings aside on the

sink and wearing the reliable gold hoops instead.

She remembered that clearly now. She definitely wore the gold hoops that night.

And she remembered showering the next morning, finding one silver earring still in her lobe, the other one gone, the sharp remorse for having recklessly lost a valued keepsake.

How could that be, if she hadn't worn them at all?

Later, she sat at her desk with a mug of tea, her laptop open, and tried to spark connections between details that didn't fit by reconstructing that night on The Page, as if the foreboding emptiness of a blank screen would force her memory to fill up. But by the end of the evening the screen still had little on it, just the newly recalled bits scattered alongside what she already knew, an infuriatingly unconnected collection of pieces that would fit together if she could only see how.

Lying in bed beside Paul that night, Joni studied the darkness of their room. The blackout shades and deliberate lack of anything electronic that might blink them awake rendered the space deliciously sleepable. If you didn't turn on the light when you came in, it would be possible, maybe even likely, that you wouldn't notice your partner's absence in bed.

A chilly sensation moved through her.

She turned to look at her husband, a faceless lump of covers in the dark.

"Are you awake?"

He grunted. "I am now."

"I have to ask you something."

"It's late."

"I found my earring in your pocket, part of my earring, doing laundry."

"And?"

"Why would that be in your pocket?"

"What are you *talking* about, Joni? You woke me up for this?"

"Your old jeans. I'm pretty sure they were the ones you wore that night you found me in Dumbo."

There was a pause in which she could feel his energy shift. Really awake now, he rolled over to face her. The whites of his eyes glowed and his sepia face looked both younger and older at once.

"Right. I forgot. I saw it on the street next to you and stuck it in my pocket."



“Where’s the rest of it?”

“What?”

“The bottom piece falls off, that’s why I never wear them anymore. I found the bottom piece in your pocket but not the rest of it.”

He paused to think. “I didn’t see it. Honestly, I didn’t know to look. Don’t tell me you’re going to blame *me* for losing your earring.”

“Val gave me those a long time ago. I wouldn’t have risked having them fall apart when I was out. I’m *sure* I didn’t wear them that night.”

He sighed and rolled onto his back. “Here we go.”

“I wore my gold earrings, the ones I usually wear.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Paul.” She sat up and dragged the covers over her chest. “Why did I find it in your pocket?”

“Are you serious?”

“What made you look for me that night?”

“I told you. You weren’t in bed when I got home and I—”

“You tracked my phone, I know, but Paul ...” She realized, suddenly, that by suggesting he didn’t care enough to notice her absence in their bed or worry about her or look for her, that if he had looked for her it had been for some other reason, she was opening the door she’d been staring at recently—the door through which she would leave him.

Was she sure that was what she wanted?

They’d been married such a long time.

She was only getting older.

What would she do?

How would she cope?

She pulled the covers over her face and slunk down under them, feeling rotten and ashamed, and said, “I’m sorry.”

He touched her shoulder above the blanket. His hand felt heavy but also comforting.

“Joni, it’s okay. We both know it wouldn’t be the first time you woke up from a blackout and thought stuff happened that never did. Or didn’t happen that did.”

“But my earring—”

“It’s been a shitty couple of weeks—our minds play tricks when we’re desperate.”

“I don’t feel desperate, not anymore. I feel misunderstood.”

“You worry too much. And the party’s coming up—there’s still a lot to do.”

“The party’s under control.”

“You’re doing an amazing job with it, Joni. Let’s keep our eyes on that ball. Streep’s coming now, too—did I tell you she confirmed?”

He hadn’t, but she didn’t care. Thanks to his rising fame, their LA life had long been filled with celebrities and parties. The Commandant’s House would just be a different setting—cityscape instead of palm trees.

“Paul,” she persisted. “Are you *sure* that’s why was my earring in your pocket?”

“It’s really late, can we please get some sleep?” He turned to face the wall.

But Joni didn’t sleep. She couldn’t.

Eventually she got out of bed and poured herself an inch (or two) of rye and curled up on the couch in the dark shadows of the clean, quiet living room that was too big for her, for them.

ON WEDNESDAY THE PHONE RANG. It was Lynda. Joni was halfway through the sitting room, en route to the study, and parked herself on a chair by the window to take the call.

“There’s something I thought you should know,” Lynda said carefully. “Your husband got in touch with me last week.”

It took a moment for that to penetrate. Why would Paul call Lynda? Joni asked, “When?”

“Tuesday, I think it was. His assistant put the call through and then he got on. It was weird.”

“What did he want?”

“He said he was worried about you and that he’d pay me extra to keep an eye on you.”

Joni flinched. “Did you?”

“No way. I’d never do that.”

“Did you tell him that?”

“I said I wasn’t comfortable doing it. I just want to be there for Stella, and between you and me I kind of feel like you need someone in your corner. I didn’t like it when he called me. I probably should have told you sooner but I wasn’t sure whether to say anything. It’s been bothering me, though, and my partner and my parents all agreed I should.”

“Thanks for letting me know.” Joni felt lightheaded and steadied her gaze on the river view, a ferry slicing across the water, leaving a double track of foam in its wake.

After the call she was so upset she couldn’t sit still, couldn’t stay in the house—if she stayed she’d drink (again). Her mind filled with a sickening realization that there hadn’t been a reporter in sight for days, no one was holding her prisoner except herself, and the only person who benefited from

her confinement was Paul.

She hitched Stella to her leash and they headed out. They broke into a trot and followed the curb up and down blocks that were quiet and residential before coming to a Con Edison plant with a wasted view of the East River and Lower Manhattan—the same view as theirs but from a different angle. The plant encompassed two blocks and was surrounded by chain-link fences topped with loops of concertina wire. Intermittent signs warned: DANGER: HIGH VOLTAGE, DANGER: KEEP OUT. Inside the fenced area, towering smokestacks rose out of a nest of components that twisted out of and around each other in an incomprehensible synergy that fed the electric grid.

She picked up her pace and now they were running.

Why did Paul want Lynda to watch her?

Because with Makta gone he needed a fresh pair of eyes?

Is that why Makta had started coming seven days a week—had she been watching Joni, too, as an official part of her job?

She ran faster and her thoughts lit up as if she'd plugged herself into the grid; she could practically hear the gaslight of her acquiescence hissing off, its amber vagueness replaced with bright clarity.

*Everything* was about him: *he* wanted to move to New York; *he* needed to live in a palace; *he* didn't want her to work in television, where she might have staked a new creative claim; *he* didn't want the disgrace of being connected in any way to Lou Pridgen's crimes; *he* was embarrassed by her blackout on the street the night Val was assaulted.

It was all, always, and relentlessly about *him*.

Somehow his interpretations always turned out to be more convincing than her own perceptions. He sold her on his thinking and sooner or later she bought it *because it was easier*.

All those feelings of panic and shame and helplessness when he was willing to believe she had something to do with the attack on Val came rushing back. And his tepid reassurances when he claimed he didn't *really* believe it. And his deflection about her earring—he never gave her much of an answer.

Why was it in his pocket?

What did the police find to make anyone think that Joni had been there?

*She'd poison him at the party. Spike his drink with the antifreeze.* Highsmith's cunning voice was back in her head. *He'd be surrounded by*

*people, hundreds of people, some with professional resentments that could look like a motive. The wife could easily get away with it.*

“No,” she said aloud. To no one. To herself.

She did not want to kill her husband.

At most she wanted to leave him.

But she wanted *more* than that.

What she wanted was ... what?

She ran faster, Stella kept pace, and soon they were heading in a new direction. The closer they got to the Eighty-Fourth Precinct station house, the clearer Joni's thoughts became.

She knew what she wanted.

She wanted answers. Clarity. A chance to say what she had to say and demand what she needed to know.

THE TWO-STORY BRICK BUILDING where Lito McMullen worked was on Gold Street, just on the other side of MetroTech Center and Brooklyn Heights. The curb in front was fringed with blue-and-white police cars pointed nose-out as if ready for a quick chase. Joni and Stella walked past them and through the glass double door into the lobby. A policewoman sat behind a Plexiglas barrier at an unwelcoming reception desk, everything gray and scratched and grimy.

“Is Detective McMullen available?” she asked the officer. PO Suarez, according to a name sign propped on the other side of the window. “My name is Joni Ackerman.”

The officer glanced down at Stella but didn’t say anything, which surprised Joni. She’d assumed that dogs weren’t allowed in here and they’d be asked to leave, but it seemed that (as with so many other things) she was wrong. Officer Suarez picked up her desk phone, talked to someone, hung up, and said, “He’ll be right down. You can wait over at that bench. Cute pooch.”

“Thanks.”

They retreated to the bench. Joni sat while Stella paced to the limit of her leash. There was a smell of old lingering odors in the air. Her nerves felt plucked each time the wall clock’s second hand shivered forward.

Finally a stairwell door swung open and Lito McMullen appeared in his midnight-blue suit, his white shirt, his blue-striped tie. His graceless face broke into a smile as he strode across the lobby’s dull linoleum in her direction. When he was close, he reached out his hand.

“Mrs. Lovett! What can I do for you?”

She stood up but didn’t smile or shake his hand. He pretended not to notice and slipped it into his pocket. But he did notice; his mouth flattened and his eyes clouded. He looked at her and waited for whatever she had to

say as if she were his mother and he knew he had it coming.

“The first thing I want to know is: What’s going on with Val? Is she okay? I can’t get any information about her and I’m so worried.”

He offered a friendly nod but his eyes stayed shrewd. “She’s not out of the woods yet, but I’m told there’s improvement.”

Joni felt a sensation of spaciousness, like a cloud moving to let through a sliver of light. “Thank you.”

A lump rose in his pocket, his hand balling into a fist, as he waited for the rest.

“What do you have of mine?” she demanded. “Whatever it is, I want it back.”

“Mrs. Lovett, this is an ongoing—”

“When you told some reporter that I was a ‘person of interest,’ did you spell out my name so they’d get it just right?”

“Why do you think they found out from me?” He shifted his weight, and she knew.

“It was you, though, wasn’t it?”

“I may have said something.”

“Why? Do you realize the impact it had on my life?”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not.” Stella reacted to Joni’s heightened tone by heeling by her side and staring at the detective.

“I *am* sorry. I never like having to do that.”

“Having to do what? Be an asshole by leaking some innocent person’s name? Pretend you have evidence that I was with Val when I never even saw her that night?” She was almost yelling now but she didn’t care.

“Look, Mrs. Lovett.” He tried out another smile, this one more controlled, almost patronizing. “I thought it might make the other guy relax if he believed we weren’t looking for him. You know, smoke him out. Sometimes we do that and sometimes it works.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that? Warn me. It really threw me for a loop.”

“You *were* a person of interest, Mrs. Lovett, for a while. Whether you want to think so or not.” He slipped his other hand into his pocket now, both hands tucked away, chin tilted so he could look down at her, his face a map of hills and craters. “That all?”

“No, it’s not all.”

He waited, and when she couldn't bring herself to say the next thing simmering on her tongue, he smirked. "I'm doing my job, Mrs. Lovett, okay?"

She blurted, "Paul was there that night, too. In Dumbo. Were you aware of that?"

He lifted his chin and stared down at her. Something flickered in his eyes—she saw it—but he didn't answer.

She repeated, "Were you?"

"I'm glad you stopped by," he said. "I've been meaning to return something to you."

He clopped his way back to the stairwell. She stood there, buzzed with indignation, until the door eased all the way shut. A few minutes later he was back with her lost VHS tape in his hand.

"Here you go."

"*You* had that?"

"Found it on the street."

"Do you have my earring, too? And my credit card?"

That eye flicker again, this time with an upturn of one side of his mouth that could have meant anything. "You're a regular Gretel, aren't you?"

"Gretel wanted to be found. I don't even remember being there because I *wasn't* there." She gripped the plastic shell of the tape so hard she felt it compress. "Just tell me: This boring old tape wasn't the supposed evidence, was it?"

"That's not something I can discuss at the moment."

"What does that mean?"

He mobilized a stiff smile clearly meant to signal that she should leave.

Something occurred to her, and she asked, "Did you watch this?"

"It might have been watched."

"Did someone else watch this?"

"I already said I can't—"

"I'm just wondering how it was watched, if it was watched, by whoever." If they'd had it digitized, she wanted the link.

"We have AV techs."

Which told her nothing but suggested that it hadn't been an issue.

"And?"

"You're free to go, Mrs. Lovett."



She was still shaking when she got home. The feelings were too difficult and there were too many of them all at once—anger, shame, guilt. She'd violated a boundary by plunking her husband smack down in McMullen's spotlight. Despite the detective's unfazed reaction—either he already knew or didn't much care—cracks of remorse were fanning through her conscience. Cracks that thirsted to be filled in, smoothed over, dumbled down, forgotten.

So she did her thing and mixed herself a Manhattan.

Then she poured it down the drain of the kitchen sink.

*Not this time.*

If the detective had watched the tape, looking for something, then she would watch it too. If nothing else, she hoped it would churn her thoughts and bring her closer to a decision she had to make: what to do about her husband.

Ignore his manipulations.

Leave him and move on with her own life.

Revisit that bottle of antifreeze—there was always that.

JONI WAITED FOR THE SOUNDS of Paul's morning leaving—clap of footsteps, clunk of door—before slicing open the Amazon box, lifting out the VCR she'd ordered, and connecting it to the TV with the cable that came included.

It had been years since she'd heard the mechanical gulp and swallow of a tape going in, the click and whir of rewind. She'd never watched this tape, though she remembered making it: both girls trailing her, too young to fathom why Mommy was filming every inch of the inside of every room and corner of their house. The idea had been to document the minutiae of its contents so they'd be appropriately recompensed in case of fire, earthquake, mudslide, or some other West Coast catastrophe. The alternative was to send a copy of every receipt for everything of value they'd ever bought to the insurance company, but they hadn't done that, so they—she—did this instead.

The video started on the interior of the front door—brown, windowless. In the first renovation they undertook, a couple of years later, that door was replaced with glass that welcomed sunlight into the foyer. They eventually also removed a wall to open the kitchen to the main living area, enlarged the living room windows, gutted the three bathrooms, removed carpets and refinished wood floors throughout, and built shelves for the office when it was ceded to Joni after Sunny Day got too big for its britches and their house. The *after* house was prettier, brighter. The *before* house was less striking but very much their home.

Details she'd forgotten came rushing back.

In the kitchen, the tacky feel of the green linoleum floor, the cupboard door that refused to sit evenly on its hinges, the speckled Formica counter, and the slow cooker they still had (she remembered, suddenly, putting up a stew the morning she made the tape), all the pots and pans and utensils and

rolls of paper towels and spray bottles crowded into flung-open cabinets and drawers.

The living room was its own cornucopia of half-forgotten crammed-in stuff, shelves stacked with books and tapes and DVDs and CDs and dust-coated knickknacks many of which later ended up in the trash, the hulking TV with a built-in VCR that was cutting edge when they got it, toys peppered across the carpet.

She took in every inch of it, every moment—it flung her back in time to the woolly sensation of the carpet under her bare feet, the smell of that chicken stew, the pure soprano of her daughters' young voices.

From time to time one of the girls would dart into or across the frame: Alex, sprite that she was at three, thinking she could move unseen by the camera; Chris, confident at seven, facing their mother through the lens to inform her that it was past time for Alex's afternoon nap. Chris was possessive of their "alone time," as she called it, meaning time without the interference of her little sister. If Chris was home during naptime, it meant that Joni had made the tape on a weekend; otherwise, Chris would have been at school. There was no sound or sign of Paul anywhere on the tape, so he must have been out.

They padded up the stairs to the second floor, through the pink-and-purple dream cloud of the girls' bedroom, with its overflow of stuffed animals and dolls and building blocks, through the dumping ground of the master bedroom, with its big bed and mismatched dressers and heaps of unfolded laundry, and finally into the third bedroom, which they used as an office.

The pre-renovation version of Paul's (later Joni's) office was a disorganized mess, which was why they ultimately fitted it with abundant shelving. The walls were decorated with unframed movie posters: Joni's, of course, along with several college dorm classics they'd hung onto—*Rear Window*, *Citizen Kane*, *Rashomon*. A single standalone bookcase overflowed with office supplies. Beside it, a desk was pushed against the wall and heaped with a mass of papers. Also on the desk was a cordless phone docked in its base and a Rolodex with its smoky plastic cover pushed open.

On the floor were chest-high stacks of scripts intermingled with bound galleys—those pre-books that agents sent to producers in the hope of a rights payday. The amount of material that flowed into Paul's office created a visual blur she'd tended not to see when she went in there, which wasn't often when

the girls were little.

There were four distinct piles, each with a sign, in Paul's handwriting, taped to the wall above it: YES, NO, MAYBE, TBR (to be read). The YES and MAYBE piles were the shortest, the NO and TBR piles the tallest. Alex tried to make her floppy bunny sit up straight on the NO pile and it suddenly toppled. MAYBE began to slide. Alex grabbed her bunny by the paw and stood to the side, frozen, as Joni leapt into the frame and fell to her knees to stop the avalanche. Chris picked up the screenplays and galleys and carefully restacked them. The camera kept rolling, but sideways—Joni had hastily put it down on the desk before entering the scene to help. Screenplay by screenplay, galley by galley, Chris with her skinny little arms valiantly rebuilt the piles and her mother straightened them.

On the wall above the piles were half a dozen photos, black-framed in a variety of sizes, that had hung in Paul's home office for years—she'd forgotten all about them. She'd stopped noticing them long before the renovation displaced them to wherever they'd ended up, presumably Sunny Day's new offices, though she'd never noticed them there. Paul was in all the pictures, of course—Paul at work with colleagues, Paul at play with colleagues. All was business for him then as now.

Lou Bridgen's face beamed from the largest frame. She paused the tape and stared at it, a static image within a static image: seven men at a round table in a cloud of smoke, a table scattered with facedown playing cards and drinks with half-melted ice cubes and bowls of pretzels. She'd forgotten all about that Wednesday-night poker game that had gone on for years, until families got too busy and careers got too big.

Each man held a fan of cards close to his chest, literally, except for Paul and Lou, who sat side by side and examined each other's hands. Someone outside the game must have taken the picture—a wife or girlfriend? Joni imagined the woman on the sidelines, serving snacks, refilling drinks, lifting a camera to capture the moment when these two up-and-coming movers and shakers openly tried to deceive each other. Or was it not deceit but a sharing of power? Who was she, and what was she trying to show us with the picture? Joni would never know for sure. But one thing was certain: Paul wouldn't have displayed it if he hadn't been proud of it.

Lou, she noticed, was in one other photo on that wall, a three-by-five that was so small she had to get up from the couch and cross the room and nearly

press her face to the screen to really see it.

There stood Paul and Lou as young men, maybe in their late twenties, with their arms around each other's shoulders. In the background was the Hollywood sign perched in the hills with spotlights crisscrossed in the dark sky—a premiere they weren't invited to, so they'd gone to Griffith Park instead to enjoy the view and dream of their brilliant futures. They hadn't arrived *yet*, but their audacious grins left no doubt that they believed they would.

The photos made Joni uneasy, though she wasn't sure why. She returned to the couch with the intention of watching the rest of the video but instead sat there and tried to think. She sensed the inching forward of a thought that wanted to break through but didn't, a tempting clarity just beyond the ridge of her consciousness—she knew it was there but couldn't quite see it. She sat there and waited, holding her breath, but the thought failed to arrive.

She went downstairs and made herself some peppermint tea. Sitting at the kitchen table, she recalled what Lito McMullen had said to her the day before: “You're a regular Gretel, aren't you?”

Her answer had been wrong, she realized now. At the time, she'd assumed he'd meant that she was like Gretel, leaving a trail of her personal belongings for someone else to follow. But Gretel didn't drop the breadcrumbs, Hansel did. And the night someone tried to kill Val, the breadcrumb wasn't a breadcrumb.

It was an earring—*part* of an earring.

And the someone who dropped the earring was Paul. *Had* to be Paul. Didn't it?

She knew but didn't know, *couldn't* know, because how could she know and still live with herself?

With him?

How could she believe that he, or anyone, had the capacity to be so conniving, so *dangerous*—then sit with her over coffee in the morning and *smile*?

# **BROKEN MOGUL**

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THE ARMY OF HELPERS was in place on the Commandant's lawn, ready for the first guests to arrive. Joni stood outside and gazed over every inch of the party she'd painstakingly imagined and organized—and it was beautiful.

The broad white tent was strung with lights. Each table was its own planet of pale linen and shimmering glass and sparkling silver and glowing flameless candles. There were flowers everywhere, spiking up on tables, reaching and draping from tall urns along the edges of the lawn, twisted in garlands along the front gate. Outside the tent, strands of hanging lanterns created a kind of open-air ceiling, and the lawn was dotted with tall drinks tables. Ashtrays were strategically placed on the stone wall that lined the far end of the lawn so that the inevitable smokers, who smoked whatever they felt like smoking (and she really didn't care), could at least be neat about it. There were clusters of chairs. Waiters were instructed to circulate actively with hors d'oeuvres and fresh drinks—Champagne and Boulevardiers were the evening's signature drinks, and anything else could be gotten at one of the three fully stocked bars.

Paul had come home early to "help" but had spent the whole time on calls. All the doors along the river-facing side of the house were open wide and Joni could hear his voice getting louder and quieter depending on where he was positioned.

This would be the last night of their marriage, though he didn't know that yet.

She had made up her mind.

Alex joined her mother on the lawn, drop-dead gorgeous in a silver sheath, with flowing hair and dramatically lined eyes and bold red lipstick. Alex with her long legs proudly hirsute—it didn't matter, she was beloved.

"Good job," Alex said. "You look awesome, by the way. I love your

jumpsuit—wow, sleeveless, *risqué*.”

Joni laughed and squeezed Alex’s soft, slender hand. “You look great, too.”

“You’re wearing the ring.”

Joni fanned the fingers of her left hand to look at the oval diamond, set in platinum with a diamond-encrusted band, that Paul had given her for their twentieth wedding anniversary. When she learned that he’d paid \$27,000 for it she couldn’t bring herself to wear it except on special occasions—normally it stayed in a safe they kept at the back of a closet.

Alex air-kissed Joni’s cheek. “Have fun, Mom.” And she was off. Alex loved parties, unlike Chris, who’d used the excuse of too much work in San Francisco to cross the continent for this.

A purple darkness drank up the scant remaining daylight—they’d timed the party to start at sundown. As generally happened, it was the younger ones, the assistants and associate producers and indie filmmakers and underappreciated actors and their plus-ones, who were first to arrive. Paul didn’t come out of the house to greet them; Joni could tell he was waiting until he saw someone he knew, someone huddle-worthy—otherwise he’d be eaten alive by all that raw ambition.

She put on her game face and strode right into it, stopping at the nearest bar for a glass of seltzer.

She marched up to three people gathered beside one of the drinks tables. “Hi, I’m Joni.” She’d broken into their conversation, but wasn’t she allowed to do that as their host and elder?

There was a weird momentary silence before one of the two young women spoke.

“Hi. Uh, I’m Alicia Merryman. This is Jeremy Goldsmith and Olive Kim. Are you—are you Joni Ackerman?” Her tone was respectful—Joni appreciated that—and she hadn’t called her Mrs. Lovett.

“I am.”

Jeremy looked into Joni’s eyes as if he knew her and said, “Hi!”

Olive was next, offering a big smile. “I’m really excited to meet you.”

“Me?” But she knew what this was; it had happened before, though not for a while.

“Olive and I went to USC for film,” Alicia explained. She was tall, athletic, clear-eyed, African American. “There’s a professor there, Sally



Bogden, who teaches your early work in her Young Filmmakers course. We turned Jeremy on to both your films and now—”

Jeremy broke in to speak for himself: “I’m a fan!”

“So you’re all filmmakers?” Joni asked.

Alicia nodded. “We’re working on it.”

“We all belong to an indie collective in Bushwick,” Olive said. “I work at Steiner—I’m friends with Paul Lovett’s assistant’s assistant.”

It wasn’t the first time Joni had heard her husband referred to by his full name, as if he were a brand, but it was the first time someone had said it to her face. She didn’t want to talk about Paul Lovett or Sunny Day Productions or Steiner Studios, even though that was why everyone was here.

“I’ve met Sally Bogden,” she told them. “But I had no idea she was teaching my work. I’ll have to teach her work now.”

“That would be so cool,” Jeremy said.

Olive asked, “Where do you teach?”

“I was at Pepperdine for years, but I’m scheduled to teach a course in screenwriting at NYU this fall—since I’m here on the East Coast now.” She’d be gone by then, but that wasn’t a conversation she could have with these charming strangers.

“Maybe we should take your class?” Jeremy flashed an eager look at both his friends.

“No,” Joni said, before they could respond. “Do not go back to study film. Just make films, it’s the best way to learn once you know the basics of how to do it.”

“Or maybe”—Jeremy had another idea—“you could come to the collective one night and, you know, talk to us all.”

“Maybe.” Across the lawn Joni spotted a very tall man: the mayor had arrived. He was grinning like a sycophant in a cluster of high-octane celebrities. “I should probably mingle,” she told her young friends. “It’s been really nice meeting all of you.”

The party’s population had surged while they were talking and now there had to be a hundred guests. She expected another influx at around eight o’clock and had planned for dinner seating to begin at nine, by which time the cocktails-only crowd would have filtered off to other plans or events or just gone home. There had been two levels of invitations: one for drinks, another for drinks and dinner. There was tent seating for the core invitees—

mostly industry elders and hotshots and the well-connected.

She spotted her friend Anne Cooper across the lawn—she was a talent agent, and they'd enjoyed gossipy lunches together in LA. Anne wore her trademark white pantsuit with a colorful scarf, grass green tonight, and was huddled with three other people, two of whom were producers Joni recognized from LA. She tried to catch Anne's eye, even smiled and waved, but Anne didn't notice.

The party was getting packed but there were still channels of space to maneuver through. Joni scanned the crowd for more familiar faces—familiar because she knew them, not because she'd watched them on a screen—but didn't see any. Her lawn was filled with strangers. Strangers and famous people whose faces flashed atop bespoke suits and designer dresses.

There was Ethan Hawke looking handsome beside his slender, blond (second) wife, whose name was on the tip of her tongue ... Ryan.

There was Matt Damon talking animatedly with Spike Jonze.

There was Jordan Peele.

A car pulled up at the front gate and out of the back stepped Daniel Craig and Rachel Weisz.

Eyes passed over Joni and she tried to decide which way to go; it was a bad idea to stand there alone for too long looking out of place at her own party. Her phone vibrated in her pocket and she eagerly consulted it, grateful for any reason not to look adrift.

It was Val calling.

"*Oh my god! How are you?*" Joni kept her voice low. She turned her back to the party and headed toward the house, smiling her way past guests who acknowledged her, moving quickly past others. With relief, she saw that the door to the powder room off the foyer was open.

"Am I catching you at a bad time? It sounds busy there."

"Are you kidding me? *Val!* It's *amazing* to hear your voice!" She locked herself into the small bathroom with its gleaming porcelain fixtures and red-and-white foxhunt wallpaper. Sitting on the closed toilet across from her reflection in the round mirror, she was momentarily startled by the well-turned-out woman facing her, the obscene diamond ring on the hand that held the phone to a face aglow with happiness. "I've been worried out of my *mind*. Are you out of the hospital?"

"I'm on my way home now, we're in the car. I'm okay—I'll be okay. I can

tell you're in the middle of something. I'll call you tomorrow."

"No! I'm so glad you called. I'm so happy to know you're all right."

"If you're sure—"

"I'm positive. It's a party, but it's more Paul's thing. I'd *much* rather talk to you."

Val hesitated, then said, "Joni, I'm sorry."

"*You're* sorry?"

"Russ told me you came to the hospital. He feels terrible about it now. He didn't understand the whole picture but now he does; I've filled him in. He apologizes for the restraining order—he asked me to tell you that."

"Understood and forgiven."

Val hesitated. "There's something I need to tell you."

Joni braced herself on the edge of the difficult silence that now gaped between them, Val in her car (a faint rumble of traffic) and Joni hunkered in one of the many pretty bathrooms in her enormous home (could Val sense how small she felt tonight in her husband's celebrity-packed mansion?). She listened to Val breathe, felt her friend's reluctance to continue, understood that it was love holding her back.

Joni sucked in a breath and plunged into the silence. "I think I know now why you wanted to see me that night in Dumbo. And what you wanted to tell me years ago in LA. You can say it. I want you to."

"It's really hard."

"I know it is. Go ahead."

"Okay, here goes. Your husband is not a good person."

A calm overtook Joni, because she already knew. She knew now. Everything in her resisted believing it but she was done with the blinders she hadn't realized she'd been wearing. Because now she saw. She *knew*.

Bracing herself, she asked, "Was Paul the second man?"

"Yes." One small word, spoken gently.

"When did you realize it?"

"After you were married, when that movie *The Hoax* was released and I saw the red carpet shots—Paul and Pridgen with their arms around each other. That's when I placed him. I almost couldn't believe it, I didn't *want* to believe it, but I was sure—there was no doubt."

Joni felt sick. Paul and Lou had coproduced *The Hoax* eighteen years ago.

"I wanted to tell you but how could I? You had kids together. You were

*happy.* And then—”

“Oh, Val—”

“I love you, Joni.”

“I love you, too.”

“I wanted to tell you in Dumbo that night but suddenly there he was, he was so angry, and he—”

“*Oh, Val.*”

Someone knocked on the bathroom door. “Anyone in there?”

“Be out in a minute,” Joni answered in a voice so chirpy it embarrassed her.

“We’ll talk more soon, if you want,” Val said.

“I do. And Val—I know how hard that was for you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry. *I’m sorry.*”

THE RAMP ONTO THE HIGHWAY was coming up and Russ swerved toward it so suddenly that Val fell against the door.

“Oops,” he said. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” But she wasn’t. She wanted to get *home*. The city was too dark and too bright all at once, unlit where it needed visibility, overbright everywhere else. Val’s eyes hurt, so she closed them, but it didn’t help. Her head hurt, but she couldn’t reach inside her mind to turn off the tumult of guilt. It pained her to know that Joni had to face a party after their painful call—*his* party.

That asshole had never deserved Joni. And she’d never deserved the likes of him. But Val was not one to be self-righteous about other people’s choices, and Joni’s happiness, even if it sprang from wishful thinking, was *hers*. Years ago, that was Val’s thought—that she had no right to shatter anyone’s belief in their choices and their life just to relieve herself of the burden of a hideous memory when it wouldn’t change anything.

Now, looking back, she wondered if telling Joni sooner might have stopped what happened later. Maybe Joni would have taken her girls and left. Then they never would have been at the Malibu house on that ruinous day.

She wished she hadn’t called tonight, that she’d gone home, gathered herself, and made an appointment with Joni to meet in person. But sitting in the car outside the hospital, she’d been so sure of herself when she told Russ she had to do it immediately.

“Now?” He’d hesitated before starting the engine.

She’d exhaled, nodded. “If I don’t do it right away, I’ll lose my nerve.”

She’d sensed his opposition in the moments before the motor rumbled but there was no more argument. He understood as well as she did how things would go once her accusations hit the press. They’d hired a lawyer, who had

hired them a public relations manager. This was happening. There was no more room for secrets. There was only one way forward now.

She'd expected a conversation that would be brutal but necessary. She'd imagined, maybe, raised voices; maybe conciliatory words. She'd also imagined denial and anger from Joni. She hadn't known what to expect when she finally told her the truth. Two truths, since the same man had now attacked Val twice.

He could have killed her that night in Dumbo. He'd certainly tried.

Val opened her eyes to a blur of highway lights and an ache in her heart and asked her husband, "What have I done?"

"What have *you* done?" Russ's eyes flashed at her then returned to the road.

"What if she can't handle it?" On the phone, Joni had sounded calm, even ready. But Val knew from experience that her friend was good at projecting more confidence than she felt.

Russ reached over with a comforting hand on her leg. "I don't think you can protect her anymore, honey."

"I don't want any of this."

"Of course you don't, but it's too late—and it's not your pain to process; it's hers."

PAUL'S LAUGH ROSE ABOVE the din of the party. Joni spotted him at the edge of the crowd, clutching elbows with David Geffen as if they were about to embark on a square dance. Then he noticed her. He watched as she approached. She tried to look composed but feared that he and everyone else could see the sparks of rage coming off her. Paul's cuff was pulled back and she saw that he'd also paid a visit to the safe today; he was wearing what they called his "expensive" Rolex, the one that cost \$34,000. He excused himself from Geffen and met her before she reached the group.

Leaning into her ear, he asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She smiled.

He gazed across the crowded lawn. "Look at all these fucking rubbernecks."

Rubbernecks? "Paul, we invited them."

"Right about now, half of them would kill to be me." His assassin grin, full of pride at the (assumed) envy of others.

She hated him.

She put her seltzer on a passing waiter's tray and snatched a Boulevardier—she had tried her best but couldn't do this sober. The drink tasted miraculous and she took another long sip. Tomorrow, she promised herself, she'd climb right back on the wagon. She'd return to Malibu sober and stay sober. She'd report him—should she? Divorce him—definitely. Sign a tell-all book deal and get rich on her own steam—maybe. Or lay low, do whatever she wanted, stop ruminating on what was past, never think about it again. She was good at that.

Paul linked his arm through hers and pulled her forward, whispering, "Geffen's like a fucking magnet." Geffen, who had been an executive producer on Joni's film *Try Harder* before gathering a lion's share of

Hollywood power, was huddled with Robert De Niro and Grace Hightower, his (second) wife, and Ryan Gosling and Eva Mendes.

Joni felt shaky, confused. She didn't know what to do. She wanted to get away but De Niro turned and saw her. "Hey, Joni!"

"Hey, Bobby." Rallying, she kissed Bobby and Grace, nodded at Gosling and Mendes, shook hands warmly with Geffen. "Nice to see you again."

"You, too." Geffen's eyes slid to Gosling and he asked, "Have you met Paul's wife?"

*Paul's wife.* Had the producer of her big movie forgotten her name?

Gosling turned toward her. "No," he said, with a stiff smile.

Everyone turned their attention away from her, which was just fine. She'd liked it better back with her trio of devotees.

Paul was quiet. She sensed that he was waiting for her to move on, which was also fine with her. This, here, tonight, with him, with all of them, was the last place she wanted to be. But she was the host of this shindig and willed herself to hang on for a few more hours.

"Great to see everyone," she said. "Enjoy."

She pressed past bodies, kissed cheeks, kept moving. Everyone *loved* the party, it was *great*, the drinks were *great*, the food was *great*, the view was *amazing*, the house was *incredible*. She'd *outdone* herself this time.

A crowd had formed around someone and, when she heard the lilting voice, she knew it was Meryl Streep. They'd crossed paths many times and Meryl had always been friendly, but her entourage tonight was a teeming mass and Joni didn't have the stamina to breach it. Reeling, numb, she moved forward on automatic. But then the mass of bodies parted and a hand shot out and grabbed her arm.

"You, come here," Meryl said. They hugged and she smelled like lilacs. "How've you been? How'd the move east go? We've got to get together for dinner now that you're here." She mainly lived in Connecticut and New York, though she also had a place in LA.

"Great. Have you seen Paul yet?"

"Not yet. But you, are you working on anything?"

Joni thought her heart would melt. They hadn't seen each other in years but this movie star remembered her, really remembered—maybe there was still a place for her in the business, without Paul. "I am, actually. In fact, it's something you might be interested in. It's about a woman of a certain age



who decides to reinvent her life and—”

“It sounds wonderful. Will you send it to me?”

She was obviously barely listening, but everyone was drinking and it was loud, so Joni forgave her and said, “Yes, definitely, I will.”

“Joni,” Meryl told her crowd, “made *Try Harder* way back in ... well, it was wonderful. And the other one, the first one ...”

“*She Knows*,” Joni reminded her.

“I saw that at an art house when I was at Yale and wished I was in it, it was just so *good*.”

Joni’s indie was made more than a decade after Meryl famously went to Yale Drama; she was already a star when it came out and none of her handlers would have allowed her anywhere near such a small project. But Joni knew she meant well and wasn’t going to correct her in front of all these people.

“Thanks, Meryl.”

“Send me your script,” someone said.

“Call me when you’re ready,” said someone else.

Business cards shot out at Joni and she took them all.

“Meryl,” Joni said, “I heard you’re doing some television now.”

“It’s a whole new world, isn’t it? Joni, what about you? Have you thought about working in television?”

“I’ve thought about it. I might.” Which wasn’t true at all. Or hadn’t been, because Paul never wanted her in his arena even as the talent pool filled with people (like her) from feature films.

There was a shift of bodies, a kind of reordering in the social choreography, and Joni found herself on the move again. She finished her drink, craved another. Snippets of nearby conversation caught her attention as she passed.

“Did you hear?” a loud female voice asked.

“Hear what?” a man asked.

“There’s a new game show in the works, like the old *Dating Game*, but to find out who Lou’s *silent partner* was back in the day.”

“Oh, get out!”

“Well, if it isn’t true, it *should* be.”

“You know who’d be on the list for sure?”

“Jordan Moreno, for one.”

“What a sleaze. He’s already locked up for embezzlement—what’s the fun in that?”

“And Sergio Cook—*gross*.”

“Also locked up. But still.”

It was just a matter of time before they closed in on Paul.

*Good*, Joni thought.

Then terror swelled in her chest as if she too was about to be caught and skewered for his misdeeds.

No, crimes.

Terror and shame and guilt—but guilt for what?

Her long silence was to protect Val, not Paul. She’d had no idea she was protecting him, too.

If Val had only told her sooner ... then what?

The truth is, Joni wasn’t sure how she would have reacted if Val *had* found the courage to tell her over iced tea in LA, not long after *The Hoax* was released. Would she have believed her, or chosen not to because of the wreckage it would have made of her then-excellent life?

Yes, yes, Joni told herself; she would have stood with Val then just as she’d stand with her now, whatever the cost. But even as she tried to convince herself of that, she wasn’t sure.

“You don’t understand what you’re asking me to do,” Val had said, standing at her Maplewood door before shutting Joni outside.

Even tonight Val had tried to back off, to shield her friend, when she realized they were having a party.

Joni kept moving, angling through passages when she found them, searching for someone she knew at least a little, someone who didn’t talk with swords.

“That’s Paul Lovett’s wife.” A voice, as she passed, rose out of a thick huddle. She kept moving but was still in earshot for the rest: “She used to make films.”

“What’s her name?”

“Joni something.”

“Ackerman.”

There had to be someone who knew her, really knew her, someone she could trust.

Where was Alex? She needed her daughter.

She looked around but Alex was nowhere.

The lawn was a thicket of bodies clad mostly in black with just a few flashes of color—red, gold, silver. Joni spotted Anne Cooper’s white suit and decided that she would be a safe harbor.

On her way over, Joni waved and Anne blinked in what seemed like recognition. She was sure Anne saw her. But then Anne spotted someone else and turned and they threw their arms around each other. They moved away where they could talk alone by the stone wall. The other woman lit a cigarette.

Joni felt a pull in her stomach—Anne was avoiding her.

She had no friends here, not a single one.

She finished her drink and got another.

As she moved through the party and pretended to smile, she heard a low thrum of whispers—everywhere she went, a buzz of quiet talk seemed to heighten the moment she turned her back. Dinner would be soon and she was reeling—from the noise, the booze, the buzz-sawing conversations that unexpectedly cut you in half. She sidetracked into the house to take a break, pay Stella a quick visit, get her bearings.

Going up the long, curved stairs she tripped over the hem of her jumpsuit’s wide pants and caught herself with the heels of her hands on a higher step.

“You okay?” a voice called up to her.

She righted herself and turned to look. It was one of the people who had been grouped around Meryl. They used to know him years ago in LA—Joni almost forgot his name, then remembered it was Brad. Brad Something. He was standing in the foyer with a woman she recognized from earlier.

“Fine—thanks. Good to see you again, Brad.”

“*Great party.*”

She made it the rest of the way upstairs without another lapse and headed toward Alex’s room at the far end of the hall, where they’d stowed Stella so she’d be safe during the party. Joni knew she wasn’t visible anymore from the foyer, and Brad and his friend obviously thought she was gone. Their voices rose:

“... used to be a filmmaker—why’d she stop?” the woman asked.

Joni paused and listened.

Brad lowered his voice and said, “I heard over the years there was interest

from film *and* TV—supposedly HBO was considering a script, but Paul stopped it. Everyone knows she’s a no-fly zone.”

“Why?”

“Fuck if I know. I mean, he’s got an outsize ego, and they’re *married*.” Brad and his friend laughed as if marriage was nothing but a joke.

“But she had real talent,” the woman said. “Nothing else ever got made?”

“Nope.”

“Did she try?”

“Apparently she never stopped trying. It’s sad.”

“This fucking pisses me off,” the woman said. “You know what I heard about Paul?”

“We’re standing in their house,” Brad said. “Let’s not.”

“Fine, but you know he’s as bad as the rest of them.”

“Come on, play nice.”

“You’re right. Hey, did you hear about ...”

Their voices faded; they must have left the foyer, gone back outside to the party.

Joni’s head felt buzzy.

“We both know it wouldn’t be the first time you woke up from a blackout and thought stuff happened that never did,” Paul had said to her, turning down the light (again and again and again) so she couldn’t see her own mind. “Our minds play tricks when we’re desperate.”

But Paul was the one who was desperate, not her.

She stepped into Alex’s room and shut the door. She’d go back downstairs in a few minutes but first she needed to hide.

Stella jumped off the bed and licked Joni’s face. Joni kissed her. Stella was soft and warm: *man’s best friend*. Even that old saw was tainted. Joni buried her face in the thick fur to muffle the sound of her crying.

THE LAST GUESTS FILTERED OUT after midnight and the caterers were packed up and gone by two, leaving behind the tent, strewn with tables and chairs, haunted by secrets. Paul had tossed his jacket over a couch and unbuttoned his shirt and now he paced the living room, talking on the phone with someone in LA, where it was still only eleven at night.

“It was great!” he said. “Sorry you missed it. No problem—next time.”

His eyes shone. It was official: *Paul Lovett had arrived in New York.*

Joni finished off the last of her drink. After her recent days of sobriety, the buzz felt delicious. Parched, craving water, she made her unsteady way to the kitchen—where, on the table, sat a tray with half a dozen untouched Boulevardiers (left behind by some thoughtful waiter who in hindsight deserved a big tip).

How could she resist?

She picked one up and drank half in a single gulp.

The rush was immediate and ignited a tangible sensation of heat, of risk, risk surging through her veins and filling her brain and lighting her skin. She imagined herself standing on the edge of a cliff, almost falling but not falling. It was thrilling.

She thought of the antifreeze under the sink, couldn't *not* think of it now, and as soon as it entered her mind the idea dug in.

What if she added just a little bit to one of the glasses on the tray—maybe Paul would wander along and drink it, maybe he wouldn't—as a dare, the final act in her Highsmith experiment? Just enough to see what it felt like to actually do it. He likely wouldn't drink the spiked cocktail and even if he did it wouldn't be enough to hurt him. With that flimsy reassurance of her fantasy's harmlessness, she moved forward.

She carried the tray to the kitchen counter. When she reached for the

rubber gloves under the sink she knocked a few things over, righted them, pulled on the gloves, and found the antifreeze.

Standing, she steadied herself against the counter, then uncapped the dusty yellow bottle and held it under her nose—it smelled almost like maple syrup. She tilted it carefully over one of the glasses and watched one, two, three drops splash into the brownish liquid as if someone else were pouring it, someone not enraged, someone not drunk.

As soon as she congratulated herself for her restraint, she lost control and another inch slipped into the glass. She bent over the altered cocktail and it smelled just like it was supposed to, a mix of bourbon and vermouth and Campari and orange peel, strong and sweet and just a little bit lethal.

The sound of Paul walking, coming closer, rattled the quiet.

Joni felt hot, nauseous, faint. She turned on the tap and leaned over to drink from the stream of cold water.

He came into the kitchen just as she was stashing the bottle back under the sink and tossing the gloves in after. He spotted the tray of Boulevardiers and said, “Wouldn’t want those to go to waste.”

“Exactly my thought.”

He took one from the tray and sipped. “Cheers.”

Her heart slammed even though he’d chosen one of the other glasses.

“Cheers.” She tapped her glass to his.

“Great party—best one yet.”

“Think I’ll head up to bed. Night.”

“Night.” His phone pinged and he tapped the screen with his thumb.

Leaving the kitchen, she turned and looked at him—the saggy skin of his neck cascading in folds as he gazed down at his phone, its stark light making him look ghoulish. Another irresistible impulse took hold.

“By the way,” she said, “time’s up.”

“What?”

“I said”—she raised her voice—“bottom’s up.”

He faced her. “That’s not what you said.”

She took a deep breath and thought, *Why not? What am I waiting for?*

Lifting her chin, she told him, “I know who you are.”

“I’d hope so, by now.”

“Val called me tonight.”

The color drained out of Paul’s face, his eyes contracted to dark specks

and one side of his mouth twitched. He looked like someone else, a stranger—he looked like he wanted to destroy her.

She felt hot, as if she were standing at the edge of a fire that was creeping closer. She took a step back. But she wouldn't run, not until she said what she had to say.

"She kept you safe for years," Joni said, "to protect *me*. But I don't want to be protected anymore, and you—you never deserved it."

"You are really fucking out of your mind." He drained his glass and slammed it on the counter, a gunshot of glass on stone.

She knew there was no good reason to drive her point home because, once Val spoke up to the world, the law would circle and demolish him. But Joni couldn't help herself.

"You tried to kill her in Dumbo. *It was you.*"

"You're insane."

"You wanted to stop her from telling me, telling everyone. You tried to set me up for it. My earring—"

"Go sleep it off, Joni, please."

"*Listen to me—*"

He laughed.

"Monster!"

"*Bitch.*"

She dragged herself upstairs, hoisting her wide pant legs up at the knee as if she were wearing a ball gown. Alex's door was closed; she must have already gone to bed. Joni peeled off her jumpsuit and fell into bed in her underwear without bothering to wash up. Her mind galloped over every inch of the night, raced in circles, crashed into fences, tried again, wondered if she'd said the right things and made the right moves and heard what she thought she'd heard and knew that she had.

The taste of bourbon still saturated her tongue.

A syrupy haze of antifreeze still lingered in her nostrils.

Eventually her mind must have quieted and she must have fallen asleep.

\* \* \*

Paul looked like a ragdoll tossed halfway down the stairs, abandoned by a heartless little girl who didn't love him anymore. His eyes were closed. Was

he sleeping? Had he, somehow, fallen asleep like that on his way up to bed?

Barefoot and bleary in the morning light that poured into the second-floor hallway, Joni pulled her robe closed. She wasn't sure if what she was seeing was real.

It was.

She hurried down and bent to check for breath at his nose and a pulse in his wrist but she was bad at it, she didn't know how to do this. He was so still. Her mind raced around and around the possibilities.

A drunken fall.

A heart attack.

*The poisoned drink.*

She had to think, to do something—but what?

In the kitchen all the Boulevardier glasses were empty, gathered on the counter beside the sink. A sugary pink haze coated the white porcelain.

How many had he poured out?

Had he drunk any more of them?

Which ones?

She yanked the extension hose out of the faucet and sprayed the sink with hot water until the haze was gone. Then she doused the sink with bleach, turned on the faucet, and let a steady stream of hot water run into the drain while she pulled on the rubber gloves and carried the antifreeze and windshield wiper fluid outside to the detached garage they never used. Her Highsmith logic, when she'd stashed the bottles under the sink, felt shaky now. The police would wonder why they'd store car supplies in the kitchen, wouldn't they? She couldn't take that chance.

The rusted hinges squealed when she pushed open the door. Gray daylight filtered through the single filthy window but it was enough to see by. There wasn't much in there, just a rusty old mower no one ever used—the landscapers who came every two weeks always brought their own equipment. One wall was covered with shelves half full of car and gardening supplies left behind by the previous owner. She made sure not to disturb the cobwebs as she edged the two bottles onto a shelf.

Back at the house, the kitchen was steamy from the running water. She opened a window to let the steam out and suddenly felt lightheaded.

Leaning against the counter, she ordered herself to breathe, calm down—*don't panic.*



In the clarity of morning, with Paul inert on the stairs, the recklessness of what she was doing, playing her Highsmith game as if she could skate along the edge of reality without entering, made her shudder.

*He could be dead.*

The weight of it fell so suddenly and hard that she buckled over and wept. Then she gathered herself and went to find her phone.

AN AMBULANCE ARRIVED in a riot of flashing lights and was followed by an influx of other emergency personnel. The yard now filled with the opposite of a party, the front door flung wide to a flood of new people, somber-faced people in uniforms.

Joni tried to keep breathing, deeply in, slowly out, but the woozy sensation wouldn't stop.

Lito McMullen appeared in the foyer and looked past her to the contorted form of her husband on the stairs, the detective's face its usual dissonant terrain of inscrutability. She was too foggy at that moment to wonder why he'd come in response to an accident, because it *was* an accident—when she'd called 911, she'd reported a fall down the stairs. She reached down to pet Stella, who hovered at her side, then wrapped her arms around herself for warmth.

One of the paramedics who was bent over Paul looked up, took the stethoscope off her ears, and let it hang around her neck. Somberly, she said, "I'm sorry, ma'am—he's gone."

Joni wiped her eyes with the back of her wrists—was she crying again? Nothing felt real. Standing there, watching as if from a far corner of the room, shaking as if her body no longer belonged to her, the thought flitted through her mind that she couldn't have arranged this better if she *had* been a Highsmith character—but she wasn't, and it made her sick to think of it now.

She had never wanted Paul to actually die.

She'd wanted to leave him, that was all, the way regular wives left regular husbands. She *still* wanted to leave him but now she'd never be able to. She'd be his widow for the rest of her life.

The widow of a man she may or may not have killed.

The widow of a man who'd done awful things, which he'd essentially

denied by calling her crazy.

Was she crazy?

No, she *wasn't*—she was good at deluding herself and she was scared but she was not crazy.

Four paramedics worked together in the awkward curve of the staircase. Two held the stretcher, one at either end. The other two lifted Paul's body onto the stretcher and strapped him down. The one who'd pronounced him dead counted, "One, two, three," then they all stood and carried the stretcher down the stairs. At the bottom, they unstrapped him and transferred him into a body bag, zipped it all the way up, and then—and then he was gone.

One of the two police officers, a young man with short black hair and a nametag identifying him as Hager, offered a tissue box with a tissue angled out. It was the box from the downstairs bathroom. Joni took two and wiped her face.

"Can you tell us what happened?" Hager asked.

She cleared her throat but her voice came out a raspy whisper. "I don't know. When I woke up this morning, I found him like this." It was the simple truth.

From behind her, Lito McMullen said, "I'm sorry for your loss, Mrs. Lovett."

She turned and looked at the detective—small, jaundiced eyes buried in the crags of his badly sculpted face. He was studying her, sympathetic, curious.

"Did your husband ever fall down the stairs before?" he asked.

"I don't know—possibly."

"I mean, in this house."

"Not that I'm aware of."

McMullen waited for her crying to cycle through, for Hager to give her another tissue, for her to wipe her face. Then he said, "That's a big tent outside."

"We had a party."

"Did your husband drink a lot at the party?"

"Probably. I don't keep tabs on him." Paul had smelled like he was pickled in whiskey but she wasn't going to tell the detective that.

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

“Did you drink a lot last night?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t count.” She’d lost count. Anyway, he could probably smell it on her breath. Why hadn’t she stuck with seltzer? Stayed sober. Made better choices.

“Anyone else in the house?” McMullen asked.

“My daughter’s in her room.” As soon as the words were out, she regretted them.

“Chris flew in for the party?”

Joni shuddered; of course he knew all about her girls.

He was looking at her, waiting for confirmation, which she couldn’t give—it would be easy for him to find out that Chris was still in San Francisco.

She answered, “Alex,” quietly, as if the name might slide past him unheard.

“Your *daughter* Alex?” he pressed.

“I’ll call Chris.” Changing the subject. “She’ll come.”

The detective and the officer glanced at each other.

“Meet you outside,” McMullen told Hager.

The officer slipped his pad into his shirt pocket and, before leaving, put the tissue box on the bottom step.

McMullen’s silence lingered a moment too long before he spoke again. “Mrs. Lovett, you said Alex before.”

The detective was detecting her, trying to steer her to a place she couldn’t go.

She tried to respond but her mouth wouldn’t work.

Tried to breathe but her lungs were stone.

Her mind an empty sky.

Heart a fathomless ocean.

“Mrs. Lovett,” he said, drawing her name out carefully. “Alex is dead. She’s been dead a very long time. You know that.”

*It wasn’t true, it wasn’t true, it wasn’t true.*

It was a feeling like wind ripping through her, the way that man was looking at her, as if he wondered who she was, what she was capable of, how much wishful thinking she could sustain to separate herself from the worst events of her life—what had really happened to Paul.

And to Alex.

Sweet Alex.

THE CLAP OF THE DOOR CLOSING behind the detective echoed in the big house. Joni sat on the bottom step next to the tissue box. Stella curled at her feet. She hugged herself and closed her eyes but every door, every window inside her was flung open and the bitter wind was rushing in and she was cold. So cold.

Because it was true.

*It was true.*

And now she couldn't stop thinking and feeling and seeing what she'd worked so hard not to think or feel or see.

She'd been in her office, writing, keeping an eye through the window on the girls playing outside, when it happened. Her fingers were poised over the keyboard, about to type the word *bell* (a stage direction for a character entering a shop), when she heard a car roaring along their street.

She looked up and saw Alex on the little bicycle she'd inherited from Chris.

Pink—the bike was pink.

Rainbow streamers flew behind her as Alex whizzed down the slope of their driveway.

Joni leapt to her feet, screaming, "Brakes!"

Climbed onto her desk in a frenzy of scattered pages and banged on the glass, but Alex couldn't hear her.

And then, a hideous thud.

Joni raced outside and there was a man, a stranger, getting out of his car, trying to make sense of the disarranged, lifeless girl on the lawn who had just bounced off his hood.

Alex lay on the asphalt—limbs so slight, bent in all the wrong ways, helmet loose and slanted off her head. She was broken in so many places, the

stillest she'd ever been, even in sleep. The driver's face contorted and his eyes watered and Joni *hated* him.

She turned around and searched frantically for her daughter, for Alex—and there she was, standing on the lawn, waving—as alive in her mother's mind as any child had ever been. Alex smiled with that extra-wide gap where she'd lost her second front tooth the night before, and Joni relaxed.

Meanwhile the man just stood there, motionless, as he stared at the ground, at the small, lifeless body that Joni couldn't bring herself to see.

Joni didn't recall getting herself up the curved staircase to the bedroom, but there she lay for hours, as shadows shifted across the ceiling. Silence was as thick as a blanket. At one point Stella nosed aside the blackout shade to let in a shaft of bright afternoon sun.

Had that much time gone by?

She was sunk inside a single thought, trying to pin down what had happened, if it was her fault, if it was an accident.

Had she killed them both, her daughter and now her husband?

How could she have known that sitting behind a pane of glass while the children played at a distance, so she could get some work done, would cost her beloved daughter her life?

That playing her Highsmith game to the bitter end would (possibly) be fatal for a man who didn't need punishment from her since he was bound to get it from others?

She could have been more careful—she *should* have been.

But she wasn't, *she wasn't*, and now it was too late.

CHRIS'S SPECIAL TONE CHIMED into the bedroom quiet—Joni had silenced her phone to everyone else.

Bleary, she answered, “Honey?”

“I’m outside, Mom. It’s nuts out here—there’s a TV van and people with cameras.”

“I’ll buzz you in. Don’t let anyone follow you.”

She hung up and everything she’d missed now scrolled down the face of her phone, calls and texts and Facebook messages, notice after notice of shock and condolence. She couldn’t deal with reading any of them. Paul had a sister, Deb, in Nevada, and she’d call her later. Meanwhile, she had to pull herself together for Chris’s sake.

Joni went downstairs to greet her elder—only, her only remaining—daughter.

She pulled back behind the door and closed it as soon as Chris was inside. That footage of Chris rushing up the driveway and into the house and Joni peeking out for just a second would run everywhere starting immediately and stay forever online.

Her pixie-haired Chris was in her arms and they held each other for solid minutes, stiffly at first, then their breathing synchronized, then they were weeping. Chris was smaller than Joni and tucked her head under her mother’s chin the way she used to before she grew up. She smelled like California. Joni breathed her in.

“Mommy, what happened?” *Mommy*. Her narrow-chinned face was wan, her brown eyes bloodshot. She’d probably cried all the way on the flight.

Her daddy was gone.

“My baby.” Joni looked into those eyes and ran her hand gently down the side of her face. “I’ve missed you so much.”

“What *happened?*”

“He fell down the stairs.”

How else to explain it? Joni felt gorged on guilt and shame and fear and couldn't, *wouldn't* burden her daughter with the sordid details of what had led to the fall. She knew, though, that Chris would find out eventually. It would hit hard when Val told her story and Chris learned who her father really was, what he'd done.

And if she found out who *her mother* was, what *she'd* done?

Joni's thoughts raced, trying to see it from every possible angle, but nothing was clear.

She said, “He probably drank too much at the party.”

“That tent out there is huge.”

“There were hundreds of people. It was exciting and maybe he couldn't get to sleep. He never should have gotten out of bed in the dark.”

“I can't believe this.”

“Me neither.”

Somehow they got through the hours. Joni craved alcohol but didn't buckle—her drinking had long upset Chris. She made them spaghetti. Neither of them could eat much, but mothering her child was automatic.

That night they lay together in bed, in each other's arms, and attempted to describe the scent Paul had left behind on the sheets.

“Soap,” Chris whispered into the dark.

“Shaving cream.”

“Cinnamon.”

“Leather.”

“Orange peel. Wait, Boulevardiers, right?” Chris knew it was her father's favorite cocktail.

Joni's pulse quickened—what else could her daughter smell with such precision? Could she smell guilt? Was it inevitable now that they'd lose each other, too? Why hadn't she thought of *that* risk sooner?

She took a deep breath to calm herself and answered, “That's right.”

“Was it a good party, Mom?”

*It was a beautiful nightmare.* But that's not what Joni said. She answered, simply, “Very good.”

“Dad loves parties. Loved parties.”

“He really did. You should have seen it—everyone was there. He was in



his element.”

“I did see it. There were pictures all over social media last night. And this morning there were pictures all over everywhere. I didn’t see you anywhere, though, Mom.”

“I floated around. Guess no one managed to capture me.”

“Dad’s a ghost now.”

“Yup. He is. Hi, Paul—if you’re here.”

“Hi, Dad.”

But there was no more Paul crowding the room and Joni became aware, in that moment, not of his absence but of the solidity of her own presence.

Lying entangled in the warm, dark room, she asked her daughter, “How long can you stay?” Chris had been on a location shoot when her father died.

“As long as I want, I guess.”

The uncertainty in her voice raised an alarm. “I thought it was a good project. You seemed excited about it.”

“I am—I was. I don’t know now.”

“Sweetheart, there’s no reason to put your life on hold.”

“I was thinking it would be good to spend some time with you after the funeral.”

“Thank you, I’d love that—but I’m fine. After your project’s done, we could take a trip together.”

“Or spend some time at home in Malibu?”

Joni hugged Chris and patted her back like she used to. “That sounds good.”

But they couldn’t leave just yet; there was more to do here.

A house to pack up.

A husband to bury.

JONI STOOD IN THE DOORWAY and watched Lito McMullen stride up the long driveway. He didn't look at her even once. He looked down at his feet. He looked at the view of Lower Manhattan. He looked at the sky. It was a cloudy day with a hazy bluish light that matched how she felt—confused, bereft, ashamed, terrified.

The detective finally met her eyes when he reached the door. “Good morning, Mrs. Lovett.”

“I'm sorry, but why are you here? This isn't a good time.”

“It won't take long.”

She was just out of the shower and her hair was still wet, soaking the shoulders of her black dress. “I really don't have time right now. We're getting ready for the funeral.” At least she was—Chris was still in bed and needed to be woken.

He pressed out a smile and strode into the foyer. She took a breath; she had to stay calm.

“Ten minutes, okay?” she said, shutting the door.

He followed her into the study, where they sat in the two chairs facing the desk. He crossed his long legs and turned to her.

“Mrs. Lovett ...”

She wanted to say, *It's time to stop calling me that*. But didn't. She looked at him and listened.

“I think you're aware of how much your husband had on his plate.”

“His plate?” Nothing. He was dead.

“When you told me that he was with you in Dumbo the night Valerie Williams was attacked—”

“Oh, so you *did* hear me?” She should have blunted the bite in her tone, because antagonizing this man was a bad idea, but she couldn't help herself.

He held up both hands, palms forward as if in surrender. “That’s partly what I came to discuss.” He reached into his front pants pocket, withdrew her missing earring, and handed it to her. It was unusually clean and shiny, without any of the tarnish the pair had accumulated over the years. It wouldn’t match the bottom loop now.

“What happened to it?” she asked.

“It’s been through a few tests—it was helpful.”

He planted his elbows on his knees, clasped his bony fingers together, and settled his gaze on her face like a doctor about to deliver bad news. She listened with the stoicism of a patient who already knew.

“It provided evidence that your husband was there, with Mrs. Williams, the night she was attacked. We also have him on CCTV in the vicinity. And we have you on camera, too—you were wearing different earrings.”

“My small gold hoops.”

He nodded.

Her spine straightened. “How long have you known this?”

“For a while now.”

Here it was, after all that time. What she’d had to chip through layers of murky thinking and baked-on self-deception to finally see, the detective had seen right away. She felt blindsided and manipulated and wondered if she should trust anything this man said, even now.

Anger bristling to the surface, she leaned forward and asked, “Then why didn’t you arrest him?”

“We were planning to.”

“When?”

“The day after your party.”

“But if you already knew, why the hell would you wait? He’d probably be alive right now.”

There wouldn’t have been a party or a death. Instead, he’d be in a cell or out on bail, hounded by press, consulting with lawyers, trying and failing to control his downfall. She realized that, given a choice, he would have chosen death over that.

McMullen tilted his head in a gesture she couldn’t read, not at first. “It came from above.”

“God told you to wait until after the party?” Though obviously that wasn’t what he’d meant.

“That’s all I can say.”

Suddenly she pictured the tall mayor looming above everyone on the lawn crowded with celebrities in their jewels and couture. The beaming, shoulder-touching, cheek-kissing mayor, doing his thing—a happy politician in a fundraising goldmine.

“Do you mean *the mayor*?”

He answered by not answering but she recognized the unnerving flicker in his eyes from his response, at the police station, when she’d told him about Paul and thought his lack of reaction had been a sign of indifference.

It wasn’t indifference—it was affirmation.

“The mayor told you to wait,” she said, “so he could go to the party. Wow.”

Lito McMullen tilted his head again in that same enigmatic gesture, and this time she understood. It wouldn’t have been the mayor himself—mayors didn’t talk directly to lowly detectives. He would have told someone who told someone else who told McMullen’s superior to get the word through. The mayor pulled his strings, just as Lou Pridgen had pulled strings, and Paul had pulled strings, and everyone beneath them danced.

McMullen smiled, as if now they had an understanding, and the calamity of his face transformed into a perfection as chilling as Paul’s assassin smile. She felt sick.

“Why do you think your husband did it?”

She took a breath. “Val got out of the hospital the night of our party.”

“I’m aware.”

“She called me. She told me that Paul ... that he was the second man ... that he raped her.” Joni felt all the air hissing out of her, saying that out loud. “Val was, *is*, going to name Paul as Lou Pridgen’s accomplice. He found out after the party.”

“All that time, no one else knew?”

“Just me. We were roommates then. She was unconscious and couldn’t remember much. She didn’t want anyone to know about any of it. We kept quiet.”

“You and Paul were together at that point?”

“No. We didn’t meet until the next year. And Val didn’t recognize the second man until much later, but when she put it all together she couldn’t bring herself to tell me who I was married to.”

“I’m sorry for you.”

“*Please* don’t be.”

The detective tilted his head. “How was your marriage?”

“Why would you ask that?”

“There must have been tension, especially lately.”

“Every marriage has tension. Are you married, Detective?”

“Thirty-two years.” He smiled.

“You don’t wear a ring.”

“No.” He didn’t offer an explanation. “Mrs. Lovett, I’d like to go over your husband’s autopsy results with you.”

Her pulse lurched. “There was an autopsy?”

“It’s routine in high-profile cases.”

“My husband fell down the stairs—it was an accident.”

“It’s early, and we only have a preliminary report right now, but we know that the fall down the stairs wasn’t what killed him.”

A cloud must have shifted, because the broad river-facing window suddenly lit behind him. Her impulse was to shield her eyes, but she didn’t.

“He died of poisoning.”

She didn’t move or blink or breathe. “Poisoning?”

“An overdose of ethylene glycol,” he said. “It’s an industrial compound. Basically, he drank antifreeze.”

“Why would he do that?”

“He might not have known.”

“You mean someone poisoned him?”

“If he didn’t poison himself, maybe. Did he have enemies?”

“He was one of the most powerful people in Hollywood. All he had besides friends were enemies, there’s nothing in between. A lot of them were at the house that night.”

“You said he learned after the party that Val was going to name him in her rape—how did he find out?”

“I told him. We were both pretty drunk, we were fighting, it just spilled out.”

“Fighting about?”

She stared at him. It was a ridiculous question. “What *weren’t* we fighting about, you mean?”

A little nod, a little smile: *point taken*.

“I’ve been thinking about it, though,” he said. “When you were a person of interest, at first. If *I* committed some kind of crime and *my* wife became a suspect, I like to think that I’d step out of the shadows, take responsibility.”

“We all like to think the best of ourselves.”

“If I didn’t, I can imagine her really losing it. She’d probably want to *wring my neck*.”

The way he said that, with the casual malice of a Highsmith character, made Joni’s skin prickle. She couldn’t let him take control of this. She had to steer him away.

“You have an active imagination, Detective.” She stood. “It’s been twenty minutes, and if I don’t get moving I’ll be late for my husband’s funeral.”

“Of course. But I’ll need to talk with you about what happened.”

“I told you what happened.”

“Your husband’s death opened a new investigation. I’m sorry, but we have to go over it with you again.”

“Of course.”

“I’ll be in touch.”

He followed her to the door and she watched him walk away until he pulled the front gate shut behind him. A stiff breeze off the river struck suddenly and hard. She closed the door and turned the lock.

In the kitchen she poured herself some coffee and bent down to the cabinet for a generous splash of rye—shouldn’t have, but did. The cat clock watched her, shifting its eyes and swinging its tail, and she turned away from it.

A coil was winding inside her and she had to make it stop.

If she tried to explain herself to Detective McMullen, told the truth—that she’d been playing a long game, fooling around, and when she poisoned the cocktail it was just on a dare and it wasn’t the one Paul drank—it would sound absurd. And maybe, in the end, Paul *did* drink the spiked one.

Obviously he did.

She sat down and tried to think.

What now?

Did she bolt—just get the hell out?

Or stay, line up a team of top lawyers and try her luck in court? Was there any chance she’d be believed?

If she ran, would it make her look guilty?

*And what about Chris?*

Why was it only clear to her now that when she'd bought that antifreeze and opened it and poured it, when she'd crossed that line inch by inch, she'd taken an unreasonable risk—not just for herself but for Chris? Her beloved daughter, who would soon be forced to face some ugly truths about the father she'd adored.

Whose love and respect for him would shatter.

Whose world would tilt and shift as her perceptions muddled and her heart dizzied and she learned to doubt her own judgment.

Who would never fully trust a man again and possibly never find a life partner.

She would need her mother to steady her.

But what if Joni was no longer there because she too had turned monstrous, been found out by that prying detective and revealed to an overcurious press that would devour her and spit her out and move on?

She saw it all—the public revelations about what Paul had done, the vile onslaught about him on social media, the investigation into his death that turned up a murderous wife—the whole horrid circus that would swallow her after Paul and leave their daughter alone and cynical in an unforgiving world.

No. She couldn't let Chris lose both of them.

*She wouldn't.*

She set her mug in the sink and made a decision.

She would run but not run, if that made any sense; viscerally, it did.

She'd make a plan to return to LA, to their house in Malibu, when Chris went back to San Francisco. They'd be closer so it would be easier to see each other; it would put distance between her and Detective McMullen; and no one with a heart would question a new widow wanting to return home to grieve in familiar territory.

They could leave at the end of the week, right after the BAM event. She didn't much want to go to her own retrospective anymore, but Chris had insisted that they savor what she called “your big success”—the same success that felt, to Joni, like a reminder of what she'd failed to accomplish ever since.

She made her way upstairs to finish getting ready, running through the idea again and again, and by the time she reached her bathroom and stood at the mirror blowing out her hair, she'd decided it was a good plan.

Meantime, she'd find a way to nurture the idea that Paul had taken his

own life when he'd found out Val was out of the hospital and about to talk. McMullen himself had admitted that it was a possibility. All she had to do now was plant the seed in people's imaginations and let it grow until it became reality.

She was good at that—she was great at it, in fact.

Once, when they were young, Val told her that her worst weakness was also her best gift and Joni hadn't understood what she meant. But now she did.

Joni could convince almost anyone of almost anything, fact or fantasy, even herself.

Now when she looked back at their long-ago LA lunch, that meeting that was overdue and too brief and painfully awkward, she understood why Val had held back the truth.

Joni had been happy then and happiness was rare and it was precious, even if it was based on a lie.



CAMERAS FLASHED when they pulled up in front of the funeral home on Madison Avenue. Joni felt exposed, *found out*, and nearly shrank back into the taxi—but she didn't.

She had to face this.

She opened the door and stepped onto the sidewalk and waited for Chris to follow, forcing herself to focus on the simple fact that no one knew what she'd done. And if no one knew, it as good as didn't happen.

Chris tugged her mother's hand and they hurried into the building. A silver-haired man in a black suit shut the doors behind them with a finality that ended the chaos. His calm demeanor showed that none of this was new to him. The lobby was dim and elegant, with wood furniture polished to a high glow and a tasteful arrangement of fragrant white lilies on a narrow table against the wall. There were no mirrors—Joni didn't know why she noticed that, but she was grateful. The last person she wanted to see right now was herself.

The man led them down the hall to a set of double doors. That was when she fully realized the impact Paul's death was having on the industry. Hundreds of well-dressed people were crammed into the chapel's pews and an overflow stood against the walls. She recognized faces from the party, some from New York and others from LA who'd stayed, and there were other LA people who must have flown in just for the funeral. Meryl was there, with her husband this time. Bobby De Niro. Geffen, Bruckheimer, Iger ... all the bigwigs from the party except, of course, Paul.

Joni wondered how many of them knew the truth about him, who among them was next in line. Either way, once they found out that the great Paul Lovett was the notorious *second man*, their esteem would be returned for a full refund—there was no doubt about that.

She swallowed down some air, grabbed Chris's hand, and they walked down the center aisle. Two seats had been saved for them in the front row where Paul's sister, Deb, and her wife, Sharon, were waiting in their dark suits. Deb, the taller and thinner of the two, her hair longer and blonder than last time Joni had seen her, stood to embrace Chris. Sharon rose to kiss Joni's cheek. They all sat down half drenched in fresh tears.

There was a hush and everyone turned. A luminous mahogany casket, carried by six young men Joni had never seen before, appeared at the back of the chapel. A spray of white roses and dripping ivy was draped over the casket.

She was confused: Paul was supposed to have been cremated; she'd been told it would be taken care of right there at the funeral home and she'd assumed that meant before the ceremony. Had Blair changed Joni's decision? Her blood boiled at that thought; if she had, she'd be fired. Unless Lito McMullen had stepped in to save the body for future examination. At that thought her blood went from hot to cold. She realized she was sweating when Deb reached over Chris to pass her a handful of tissues, with which she wiped her forehead.

The pallbearers set the casket down on a stand in the front of the chapel. The hush was replaced by music, something Joni didn't recognize—a somber classical piece Paul wouldn't have liked, though it did suit the mood.

What happened next was a blur. People gave speeches. Joni didn't listen. She held tightly onto Chris and tried very hard to avoid thinking about Alex's long-ago funeral, but it was impossible. Every parting was a parting with her, every funeral a requiem for the loss from which Joni endlessly struggled to recover.

Alex's casket had been tiny and white, with one long-stemmed pink rose on top.

Pink like her little bike, mangled in the street at the foot of the hill.

Joni wondered if she might have recognized Paul for who he was sooner if she hadn't been blurred by grief, if she hadn't reimagined her lost daughter as alive and well with the steadfast devotion of a method actor, if she hadn't played with the flaming balls of her rage like it was a juggling game she could control. Her deceits were reckless and her lies were lies of omission, she saw that now, and they were bottomless chasms and they were a mistake.

She only realized that Paul's funeral service was over when people started

to stand up and shuffle into the aisle. A few back-tracked to offer condolences. After a while the place emptied and it was just them, the remaining Lovett family, four women deciding what to do next.

They peeled themselves out of the pew and moved down the aisle. They still had a drive to Long Island and the burial to get through. Blair had said she'd arranged a car for them—but it wasn't a car, it was a stretch limo. Joni felt ridiculous when the driver opened the door so they could climb into the capacious back seat. Chris got in first, then Sharon and Deb. Joni was about to follow when a man spoke to her from behind.

“Joni.”

She turned. It was Dallas Miller, stepping out of the claque of reporters jostling for a view. He looked shrewder in person than he had in his photo online, just as pale but somehow less innocent, with a wizening around his eyes and his mouth pinched at the corners as if something displeased him.

She immediately understood why he was there: he'd need to rewrite his article, given Paul's death. That he'd called her by her first name, as if they were friends, annoyed but also interested her—he'd left off both her last names, as if he was willing to see her as undefined by the names of her father and husband.

“Yes?”

“I'm Dallas Miller, the writer who's been pestering you.” When he smiled, the movement of his face narrowed his eyes.

Her first impulse was to pretend she didn't recognize him, as if she'd never looked him up, then she thought, *Screw it*. “I know who you are.”

“I'm sorry for your loss,” he said.

Here was her chance to plant another seed, one *a wind would hit and replicate and scatter everywhere*, to paraphrase her late husband.

She leaned close to Miller, lowered her voice, and said, “It's not just my loss—suicide hurts everyone.”

The way his eyes blinked told her he'd taken note.

Until the autopsy results were available, Paul's official cause of death would remain undetermined—but she had a feeling that Miller would take her word as a scoop and run with it, and the seed would take root in a million minds, including, if she was lucky, Lito McMullen's. What powerful person wouldn't consider taking their own life on the cusp of downfall and shame? It occurred to her that she was even doing Paul's legacy a favor by imbuing him

with a troubled conscience.

She folded herself into the limo and scooted over to sit beside Chris. Deb and Sharon sat opposite. Four small bottles of water had been plugged into slots in a center caddy. Water? Joni felt a flash of irritation—she wanted a real drink—then gratitude took hold. It was better this way, burying Paul sober. They sipped their water in obedient, exhausted silence and endured the hour-and-a-half drive to Smithtown.

The limo turned into the cemetery and came to a stop behind the hearse. A few other cars pulled up behind them, cousins of Paul's she'd met a few times and some of their children. There were apologies about an elderly uncle who wanted to be there but was unable to travel. Joni asked them to send the old man her love, though she barely remembered him.

They stood in silence while the limo driver and another man pulled the casket out of the back of the hearse and placed it on a hydraulic lift that rose to meet it. The flowers were still there. Four of the cousins stepped up to be pallbearers but it wasn't necessary: the lift had wheels. The hearse driver and another man rolled it up the long, winding drive. The rest of them followed on foot. She remembered this place from the two previous visits when they'd come to bury Paul and Deb's parents.

They arrived at a grassy plot among the headstones, a hole already dug. The two men rolled the lift onto a green tarp. They carefully removed the flowers, then one of them lifted the top of the casket.

Blood rushed to Joni's head—what were they doing?

The men bent in and together, with a sense of ceremony, removed a small casket that was an exact replica of the larger one. It was a cremation urn, or a parody of one.

The mourners encircled the grave and watched as the miniature casket was lowered into the loamy depths.

As people took turns shoveling soil into the grave, eyes downcast and sometimes wet with tears, she realized something: Lito McMullen wasn't there, lurking behind a tree, and he hadn't been at the funeral. She didn't believe he'd stayed away out of respect, given how he'd shown up unannounced at the house that morning, floating his results and theories and questions and seeing how she'd answer.

She took in a breath, sighed it out.

Two more days and they'd be gone—back to California, where they could

recuperate and erase New York.

And over time it would seem as if none of this had ever happened.

WHEN THEY TURNED onto Lafayette Avenue Joni was startled to see a digital poster showing a still from *She Knows* overlaid with an image of her thirty-years-younger face looking sager than she had been back then. What she had been was ambitious, bursting with ideas, unstoppable—well, she'd thought she was unstoppable. Wrong again.

“Mom, look!” Chris spotted the poster.

“It's so strange seeing that.”

“It's awesome.”

They parked the car and decided, since they were early, to eat something at the Mexican place across the street from BAM. It was a warm evening and there were outdoor tables facing the theater, but she didn't particularly want to be seen; there was a chance, in this unique situation, that she'd be recognized.

She'd wondered whether she should let Luis Todd, the series curator, know that she'd be there after all—she'd told him she would have to bow out because of the shock of Paul's death, before Chris convinced her to go if only as an observer—but decided against it.

She'd be mysterious, slip in at the last minute and slip out as soon as it was over.

Then they'd dash to the airport to make their flights.

Seated in a back corner of the restaurant, they ordered tacos. The waiter asked if they wanted to order drinks and Joni declined.

“Want something, Chrissy? Wine? A beer?”

“I actually don't like to drink.”

Mothers could be *reverse* role models, too. Joni wondered in what other ways Chris would strive to be unlike her—she could think of several right off the top of her head.

They finished their tacos and crossed the street to the theater. It was easy finding seats together in the very back row of the large, ornate auditorium. In front of the screen, two chairs and a microphone were set up for the postshow Q&A.

*Q: Did she regret that she wouldn't be the one to represent her own work?*

*A: Yes, a little.*

It was mostly women in the audience but there were also some men. Joni noticed her three young filmmakers—Alicia, Olive, and Jeremy—the first guests she'd encountered at Paul's party, sitting dead center. They would have had to come early to get those seats. She was glad to see them. Maybe someday, when things calmed down, she'd reach out and ask how their own work was coming along, become the kind of proactive mentor she'd never had.

At seven thirty a trim man in jeans and a blazer, with a shaved head and a dark goatee, came out to address the half-full auditorium. The din quieted. He put his hands together, as if he were praying, and she wished he wouldn't. The ingratiating gesture annoyed her.

“Good evening. I'm Luis Todd, curator of BAMcinématek. I'm so glad you could all join us for the launch of a very special program we've put together to honor women filmmakers of the nineteen eighties and nineties. Some of the names you'll recognize and some you might not. A few worked with studio support, but most worked independently, yet each film we'll be showing in this series over the next two weeks shares the rare expression of an auteur's eye at a time when filmmaking was dominated by the male gaze.”

There was a spatter of nervous laughter. Luis's half smile reflected the irony of what he'd said. “I should add: and mostly still is.”

He went on: “By programming these films, some of which are familiar but many of which have been overlooked, our hope is to do what we can to correct their omission from the canon. We open tonight with two works by Joni Ackerman—her only two works, in fact—starting with her first film, *She Knows*, a low-budget indie, followed by *Try Harder*, a big-budget studio feature. We'd hoped to have Ms. Ackerman with us to discuss the films afterwards, but due to a change of plans we'll be speaking instead with Sally Bogden, a professor at the USC film school and an expert on Ackerman's work as well as women's film from the seventies through the nineties. Enough talk from me—thank you and enjoy!”

There was a surge of applause and chatter. The theater darkened. Chris reached for her mother's and squeezed it hard. She'd seen *She Knows* before, when she was about twelve. What would Chris make of it through the eyes of a young woman—a young woman living *now*, after MeToo had burst on the scene like a ninja savior to clean the murk off the lens?

Joni was surprised by how well *She Knows* held up: a woman's discovery of her husband's and another man's conspiracy to kill their wives, turned back on them so that the wives live and the husbands die. The women don't just get to survive—they get away with murder.

She sensed Highsmith's ghost hovering in the theater, smiling—not a warm smile but a crafty grin—in taunting recognition of how much she'd inspired another artist in her work then and her life now.

As soon as Joni thought that, she remembered the syrupy antifreeze swirling into the cocktail and felt lightheaded. She closed her eyes until the sensation passed.

The credits rolled. The lights came up on a wave of raucous cheers and hoots and applause.

She shrank down in her seat, hoping no one saw her. She felt guilty for being there when she'd said she wouldn't be. Guilty for the new, eerie similarities between the film's fiction and her life—except Paul hadn't colluded with just one person; he'd colluded with an entire industry. And the rage she'd channeled at him was really meant for all of them and even for herself.

How had she not seen that?

How had she gone from being the woman who made *She Knows* to being the woman who shut her eyes and her mouth when her friend was raped? Who upheld a status quo of self-destructive silence? Who lived with a monster and didn't know it?

After a ten-minute intermission the lights blinked and people streamed in from the lobby to take their seats.

Her pulse jolted at the sight of Lito McMullen and a flame-haired Asian woman coming through the far-right entrance. She wondered if the woman was the detective's wife, his girlfriend, his sister, his colleague. He scanned the auditorium and Joni turned the back of her head to him. She hoped that they'd only just arrived, that they hadn't been there for *She Knows*, in case he'd interpreted it as a map of her mind. It wasn't. It was a movie she made



when she was young and ambitious and sure of herself and blind to the forces around her. She felt an urge to jump up but didn't, so as not to alarm Chris by acting frightened or guilty, even though she was both.

The lights dimmed and the screen lit up with the opening credits for *Try Harder*.

Everything was bigger and faster and glossier with this film. The studio executives had lured her with money and prestige, then coaxed her into bending her vision until it aligned with theirs—the heroine's fall off the roof of a building, her just deserts for having successfully won her sexual harassment lawsuit. Tonight's response to the film was positive but tempered. They were all sick of losing their battles over and over. It wasn't the message anyone wanted anymore; they wanted real heroes—they wanted to win. She had never hated the film before but she hated it now. She hated the ending. She hated herself for allowing those executives, all men, to coerce her into their comfort zone.

Chris leaned over, tears in her eyes, and whispered, "I'm so proud of you, Mom."

Joni smiled, but she felt like a fool.

Luis Todd reappeared, trailed by Sally Bogden. She was tall, in a flowing batik vest over black slacks and a long-sleeved white top. They settled into the two chairs at the front of the theater. Her long hair had gone gray since Joni had met her eight or nine years ago at a cocktail party in LA. Luis tapped the microphone and a ping reverberated through the space.

Once Sally was introduced, Luis launched in with the first question.

"You teach a course at the University of Southern California that includes the work of Joni Ackerman."

"I do."

"In your view, where do these films fit in the landscape of filmmaking in general at that time, and also of women auteurs?"

Sally cleared her throat and leaned toward the microphone.

"The first thing I'd like to clear up is that Joni Ackerman wasn't a 'woman auteur'—she was an auteur, and she's a woman. Isn't it time to finally drop gender tags?"

Hoots and cheers rose from the audience. Luis smiled and said, "Agreed."

Joni's mind drifted again, wondering what it was like to be a man responding to that question—given that there was only one right answer—

wondering what he really thought but couldn't say. She tuned back in as Sally was responding to something else Luis had said.

“When *She Knows* was released, it got excellent reviews and it won awards. It put Ackerman on the map. You could say that its success was partly thanks to the spirit of its times—it was the third wave of feminism, short-lived but powerful while it lasted.”

Joni reached for Chris's hand and held tight.

“I believe that this film made an impact,” Sally said, “because so few women back then dared to not only seize power but survive the consequences. The consequence was freedom, not punishment. Remember, in 1991, *Thelma and Louise* drive off a cliff at the end because it's their only viable solution. In *She Knows* there's a clear resistance to the classic inevitable ending in which the woman who breaks the rules has to be punished or die. It was a breach of protocol and Ackerman showed her bravery as an artist by making that choice.”

“What about the ending of *Try Harder*?” Luis asked Sally. “That one ended on a very different note.”

“Right, well—I've always been curious about that.”

*Then ask me.* Joni wanted to jump up and say that, but Lito McMullen was there and she didn't want him to see her. If he saw her hunkered down in the back of the theater he'd think she was hiding, and she couldn't allow that. Not with Chris right there. Not with their flights just a few hours off.

Sally went on, “Ackerman was working with the big studio guys at that point, and they could be aggressive, especially with young filmmakers who were women. I can imagine what might have gone on behind the scenes when she was making the film. The significant thing to keep in mind is that it was a truly hostile environment for women back then. That's well-documented. I experienced it myself. My guess is that she kind of cheated with the ending of her second film because she thought, or maybe hoped, that her cooperation would pave the way for the next film.”

Had Joni thought that? She'd felt that she had no choice, that they would shelve the project if she didn't step into line. She was worried about keeping her second film alive, not about making a third one—that was what was on her mind. Val, her closest friend at the time, had been raped by her producers' peers; Joni knew well how cruel the industry could be toward women.

Luis said, “The next film that never came.”

Ouch: that old, brutal fact of her life.

“That’s right. We don’t know exactly why. But she suffered a personal tragedy—the loss of a child. That would be enough to derail anyone.”

Joni clenched her teeth and endured the collective moan that filled the theater and triggered the silent keening that had become the leitmotif of her existence.

The more they mined for truth, the less she could focus.

She couldn’t stop thinking about the detective across the room—questioning her marriage, probably irritated that the media was now ablaze with news of Paul’s suicide though the investigation had barely gotten started.

She squirmed in her seat. Crossed her legs. Recrossed them the other way. Couldn’t get comfortable. Couldn’t breathe.

She leaned to Chris’s ear and whispered, “I have to get out of here.”

“But it isn’t over.”

“I can’t stay.”

Chris’s eyes in the silvery darkness drank in her mother’s distress. She whispered, “Okay.”

They slipped quietly out of the dark theater and headed for the stairs.

In the lobby, Chris hesitated. “I need the bathroom.”

“Okay, but hurry.”

The door to the women’s room swung shut and Joni waited beside it. The lull of the empty lobby was comforting, concession stand untended, ticket takers out of view.

She was thumbing her phone for flight updates when she heard the clacking steps of someone coming down the stairs—someone else leaving before the end of the Q&A.

She looked up and her heart lurched.

It was Val and her husband, Russ. He held back as she hurried down the stairs.

“Aren’t you going to your own party?” Val asked Joni.

“I can’t believe you came!”

Joni stepped forward and impulsively opened her arms. And Val, just as impulsively, hurried into them. They held each other tightly, tightly, until their breathing fell into sync. After the party and Paul’s death, Val had left a

message of condolence, but Joni hadn't found the strength to return the call; every day she planned to and every day she didn't. This was better.

When Val pulled away, Joni saw, up close, the tender webbing of blood vessels in the dark bruise that crept along her friend's neck. It was the second time she'd seen Val like that. Both times because of Paul.

"The film's still great," Val said. "It really holds up."

"You were a gifted actress."

"I was okay." Val smiled, the old smile, wry, self-effacing.

"Any regrets that you gave it up?"

"None at all."

Joni saw that Russ was slowly making his way down the stairs, giving them space, but clearly wary of the encounter. Pulling in close to Val's ear, she whispered, "*I am so so so sorry*. I should never have left you alone at that party. It's all my fault."

Val shook her head and brought their cheeks together long enough for Joni to soak in the tender warmth of her friend's skin. "It's not *your* fault, Joni. It was *his* fault, always. And *my* fault, for not telling you sooner. I kept wanting to, but then the accident—"

"I understand." Joni offered a smile that wasn't really a smile; it was an admission. "I was a handful before and a disaster after. I know that. Please don't blame yourself for not telling me. I wouldn't have told me, either."

"Just so you're aware," Val said, "I hired a lawyer. She's drafting a press release."

"So you're jumping into the fray, after all? You don't have to, you know."

"I want to. And I do have to. I think it might turn out to be harder for you than for me, considering."

"I'll be fine," Joni said, and grinned, and they both understood that that wasn't necessarily true.

"Val?" Russ was crossing the lobby.

She turned to her husband. "Just one more minute, okay?"

He held back and pretended to check out the display of snacks. Joni felt the force field of his impatience and resented it. She wondered if they'd ever trust each other after everything—the hospital, the accusations, the restraining order. If for the rest of their lives he'd be a barrier between her and Val.

Val held onto Joni's shoulders and looked into her eyes. In the quietest

whisper, she said, “If you did it, I’ll never tell.”

Joni knew what she meant—*Paul*—and wasn’t sure how to respond. It shocked her that her friend thought she was capable of something like that, yet she also felt a sharp thrill at the clarity of Val’s understanding of her, the readiness of her complicity.

They were still true friends, willing to carry each other’s secrets.

Val leaned in closer and added, “I *hope* you did it.”

The bathroom door swung open and out walked Chris.

Russ joined them, and in the volley of introductions Val squeezed Chris’s hand and gushed, “I am so incredibly happy to meet you, at last.”

“You were really good in the film,” Chris said politely. “Wait, you’re the one who gave Mom all those weird books, right?”

“The Highsmith novels? Yes, that was me.”

“I read one once and it was just so ... creepy.”

“I had a feeling they’d inspire her.” Val looked from Chris to Joni and smiled. “Was I right?”

Joni smiled back. “You were right.”

Joni had told her daughter some stories about the old days with Val, easy stories about how much fun they’d had together. Soon she’d find the right time to explain everything else: what they’d meant to each other; how they’d understood each other; how they’d protected each other. But now wasn’t the time.

They had to leave for the airport before McMullen realized she was gone.

“We have to get going,” Joni told Val. “I’ll call you soon.”

“I’ll look forward to it,” Val answered as Russ pulled her away.

THE HIGHWAY VANISHED under their car as they kept pace with a ladder of red taillights that stretched as far as they could see. Beside them another stream of traffic was thicker, less hurried: fat white headlights slopping in the opposite direction. They'd be on time for Chris's flight, but Joni's growing sense that she wasn't in control of this continued to gnaw at her.

"Mom, are you okay?"

Chris, in the passenger seat, lowered her phone, extinguishing its weak light against her leg. Stella panted happily in the back seat the way she always did when they drove somewhere. How nice it must be, the oblivion of not knowing your destination, of not needing to know, of trusting that you'll be kept safe.

"Fine."

"We're making good time," Chris reassured her mother.

"I know."

"Then why are you grinding your jaw?"

"Am I?"

Joni followed signs for departures and funneled onto the road for Terminal Five. Cars were three deep. She waited until they could pull up to the curb.

Chris unbuckled and leaned over for hugs and kisses. "What time does your flight leave?"

"Not till two thirty," Joni answered. "It gives me time to deal with the car."

"I didn't know red-eyes left so late—or is that early?"

"Me neither. Who knows? I love you."

"I love you, too."

"Call you when I get there, baby—safe travels."

Chris slid out of the car and Joni watched her disappear into the airport.

She hated not telling her daughter that she wouldn't really be flying to LA, but it was better for her not to know until they'd both safely arrived.

Joni drove to long-term parking, slotted into a space, and turned off the engine. Her hand shook as she held her phone and tapped out a search for flights.

The 2:05 a.m. China Airlines flight to Bali had availability in business class for her and pet cargo for Stella.

In minutes, she had her electronic ticket.

She'd never been to Bali, but from what she understood the island had plenty to recommend it, including (especially) the lack of an extradition treaty with the United States.

All through takeoff and ascent Joni's mind wouldn't stop replaying how bitterly she and Paul had fought—the horrible things he'd done and then denied—how Lito McMullen was out there looking for the source of the poison.

And now that the memory had been unleashed into the relentless loop of her story, she couldn't, couldn't, couldn't stop seeing Alex on her little pink bicycle, whizzing down the driveway.

And she couldn't stop thinking about how her husband, the father of her children, had attacked Val, tried to *kill* her, and left Joni's earring behind at the scene to plant evidence.

He must have put the matching one in her ear when she slept that night—she hadn't really, truly, deeply thought about that before. He'd have had to hold her earlobe between his fingers to press the metal through the tiny hole. The *intimacy* of that. She felt sick imagining it.

The flight attendant appeared. Joni ordered a whiskey (promising herself that she'd stop for good once they landed) and nursed it while she finished reading *A Suspension of Mercy*.

At some point she fell asleep.

When she woke up they'd left the American continent behind and were halfway across the North Pacific Ocean heading toward the Philippine Sea. Taiwan was still six hours away.

She ordered another drink and started rereading *Strangers on a Train*, the first Highsmith novel she'd ever picked up, the one that got her going in the

first place. She wanted to know if it would still resonate or if, after all these years, she would wonder what all the fuss had been about when it had sent her on the path of making *She Knows*. But just a few pages in she fell asleep again.

Next thing she knew, the flight attendant was shaking her awake. They were about to land. She thanked him, straightened herself out, buckled up. Her head was pounding. She hated landings and usually read something until the plane eased to a stop, but when she opened the book her eyes wouldn't focus.

She had to distract herself so she took out her phone and started a game of Solitaire.

She played four rounds and lost them all before the wheels touched down. But they weren't there yet so she played a fifth game with swift taps of her finger.

Suddenly all the cards flew to the top of the screen and a message appeared: CONGRATULATIONS! YOU WON THE GAME.

She felt a rush of gratification.

They landed and the seat belt lights flicked off. A saccharine pop song filtered into the cabin—lyrics she couldn't understand, presumably Mandarin.

Taiwan Taoyuan Airport was foreboding in the way of all giant international airports. She walked, rode the conveyor, walked some more. The signs were all in Chinese and English, the international language, but when she stepped inside a food mart in search of coffee, everything on display was an unfamiliar shape and color. At the counter she pointed to a picture of coffee and left with something lukewarm and sweet. She gulped it as she followed pictures of dogs and cats with arrows leading to the pet relief area. She wanted to visit Stella before the next leg of their trip.

The flight to Bali was easier. A quick jaunt over the South China Sea to the Ngurah Rai International Airport. It was a small airport with intermittent surprises: a stone dragon rising from a planter; the facade of a red pagoda welcoming you to a food court that smelled like spun sugar. Aside from stopping at a restroom, she went straight to the pet center to free Stella. Then she snagged a luggage cart, loaded it up, and they made their way toward the exit.

Almost there, Joni realized that her phone wasn't picking up a signal. She still needed to book a hotel.



They backtracked to the tourist desk, where a young woman set her up with a ride and showed her brochures for half a dozen pet-friendly places. She chose one with individual villas that offered the kind of privacy she wanted. The attendant made the call, reserving one with two beds in case Joni was there long enough for Chris to come visit. She had no idea how many days or weeks or months she'd be away or what would come next for her and at the moment didn't much care.

*She'd made it.*

There would be no inevitable ending for her.

If McMullen *did* figure things out, if he wanted to come for her, he'd never be able to reach her here. Laws were laws and this was safe ground.

They waited outside in the hot Balinese air, then were driven a short distance to a town called Ubud. Tucked away at the edge of what looked like a tropical jungle, the hotel had a quality of secluded, rustic elegance that felt comfortable and just right.

Moments after she stepped into the gracious white lobby her phone latched onto a network and shivered with notifications. There were a few calls and texts from Chris. Joni's breath caught at the sight of a voicemail alert from Lito McMullen—she stood by the front desk and stared at it.

She read Chris's texts and listened to her messages first. Her flight had been fine, she was safe at home in her apartment, looked forward to getting back to work on Monday, was wondering how it felt to be back in their Malibu house. So, she didn't know that Joni hadn't gone home—it didn't sound as if McMullen had gotten to her. Joni sent her a quick text to let her know that all was well and apologized for being hard to reach and promised to call very soon (as soon as her brain was clear enough to work out the time difference).

Then she listened to the detective's message.

“Hello, Mrs. Lovett. Hope you landed safely in Bali. I enjoyed your movies. The professor had some interesting things to say afterwards. Guess you ducked out early and missed the last few questions and answers—if you want to hear about them, give me a call.”

As if she would call *him* to hear about *herself*. As if she'd be stupid enough to sabotage herself like that (again).

She'd bide her time, follow the news online, get in touch with Blair in a day or two and find out what was happening with the production company.

She'd listen to the assistant's tone of voice: Was she as friendly as when they'd met at Paul's office or was there a new edge of distrust?

Joni wondered how many people didn't believe the suicide story. Did anyone think that she might have killed her husband? Or, if fingers were pointing elsewhere, what rumors had already taken root and how far had they spread?

One thing she *did* know was that once the full story came out about the horrible things Paul had done, the media storm would be explosive. She was glad to be far away.

She checked in and picked up the room key.

With Stella at her heels, Joni followed a smiling older woman in a blue dress and slip-on white sneakers to their villa, which was really just a room with a view, and exactly what she needed. A bellboy had already brought the luggage and Stella's carrier. The windows and French doors were flung wide open to a patio lush with tropical foliage in flaming colors and a small private pool, a cool blue rectangle shimmering in the sun.

## Epilogue

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### April 2020

A YEAR IN BALI, a year at home, and Joni still felt homesick sometimes for what was right in front of her: the glorious view from their Malibu deck, the folds of lush green undulating to the distant beach, the vastness of the ever-changing sky that today was pure blue. These days, in the wake of the fires that had devoured the area during the autumn after Paul's suicide—now a settled *fact*—fresh green growth frosted the hills, but it seemed timid somehow, paler, compacted. Unless it was just her, failing to remember accurately. But in her mind the beauty of the place had become reserved, with a muted serenity she shared these days. Still, she loved it there. She'd loved it every minute of every hour of every day since she'd been back.

As she sat at the table on the deck, under the soothing shade of their old, faded sun umbrella, an email shot across her laptop's screen—Chris had joined the four o'clock preproduction meeting early. Joni logged into Sunny Day's Zoom portal and there was her daughter, typing something while she waited for people to appear. Chris's background of framed movie posters showed that she was in the upstairs office. Since the pandemic started and the two of them now ran Sunny Day from home, they played musical chairs between three settings: office, deck, living room.

One by one, faces popped onto the screen until the full checker-board of senior producers was assembled. They all smiled and waved their hellos, then got down to the business of deciding which projects could be salvaged during a lockdown of unknown duration.

The meeting lasted an hour. Joni closed Zoom and noticed that the sky had softened with a veil of clouds and the air was slightly cooler.

After answering a few emails, she took Stella for a short walk down the

road, fed her, and returned to the deck.

She picked up Val's just-published book, which she'd kept beside her all week while she worked as a reminder of how far they'd come.

An old headshot from Val's acting days filled the cover and was overlaid with the title *Behind the Curtain: Why I Kept One of Hollywood's Worst Secrets*. She'd dug into her story with candor and had urged Joni to write her own memoir, assuring her that she'd feel much better if she did, that the relief of it was like setting down a massive weight you'd carried for decades.

Joni wanted that. She did. But she couldn't.

She'd want to tell everything, the good, the bad, and the ugly, but there was one thing she couldn't reveal because it was *too* ugly—a single memory she would never share, ever, with anyone. Except for Val, who had already guessed, who *knew*. Her whispered words—"If you did it, I'll never tell"—resonated painfully in Joni's mind. But she could trust her oldest, dearest friend. Couldn't she?

She closed her eyes and the memory returned in fragments of sound and smell and color. It was like seeing it for the first time, in a movie, though it was a memory of something she herself had experienced.

Something she had done.

The weight of the dusty yellow bottle in her hand as she tilted it over the tray of leftover Boulevardiers.

The quiet drama of each splash as she added inch after inch of poison to glass after glass.

The pops of sweetness that released into the air like candy bubbles.

The swirl of red in the brownish liquid until each drink was as lethal as the next.

Knowing, as Paul joined her in the kitchen for a nightcap after the party, that whichever one he chose would probably kill him.

That she was going to kill him.

That she did.

She opened her eyes and put it away, this final memory she couldn't abide.

## Acknowledgments

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I STARTED *INVISIBLE WOMAN* during a moment, a year, of social upheaval in which women's voices broke out into the open with news and confessions: we'd been fooling ourselves and each other for lifetimes, but no more. We got out there with our stories and no one could tell us to shut up. And then, a shocking political upheaval, and we questioned our ability to judge reality. And then, the pandemic, and we crawled abruptly inward. This novel was honed in the strange tumult of those years with the help of many people.

Early readers, especially Suellen Greal, Miryam Sivan, Sarah Weinman, and Carl Bromley, offered valuable feedback for which I am deeply grateful. And then there was Dan Conaway, brilliant and intrepid literary agent, who stood by this project through revision after revision and worked tirelessly to find it the right home. Home is Grove Atlantic, where editor Joe Brosnan's enthusiasm and keen insights guided the story's final shape. Thanks also to Lauren Carsley and Chaim Lipskar at Writers House, and at Grove Atlantic Morgan Entrekin, Judy Hottensen, Deb Seager, Sal Destro, Cassie McSorley, Alicia Burns, and Natalie Church—all collaborators in the making of this book.

And to Oliver Lief—what can I say? Thank you, once again, for your sharp editorial eye and for knowing how to say the hard but right thing in a way that sticks the landing.

PRAISE FOR

# INVISIBLE WOMAN

“Katia Lief’s *Invisible Woman* is a stunning achievement: it’s not only a taut thriller with a jaw-dropping twist, but also a literary exploration of the complexities of marriage and friendship, and a timely tribute to women who were silenced for all too long. The novel will stay with you long after you finish the last page.”

—ALEX FINLAY, bestselling author of *Every Last Fear*

“Attention, suspense readers: get ready to gasp. Attention, book clubs: get ready to argue. *Invisible Woman* is a wily, provocative literary thriller—classic but timely, retro yet right-this-minute—with brains in its head and ice in its veins. High-tension, high-class, and highly recommended.”

—A. J. FINN, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Woman in the Window*

“From the first page to the last, Katia Lief’s *Invisible Woman* will seize you and never let go. Smart and spellbinding . . . and most certainly your next favorite thriller.”

—JENNIFER HILLIER, award-winning and bestselling author of *Things We Do in the Dark*