

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a bright red coat, is seen from behind, walking away on a path. The path is covered with fallen orange and red leaves. The background is a misty, blue-toned landscape with bare trees and a distant city skyline. The overall mood is mysterious and somber.

FAITH AMONG FRIENDS

FIVE FRIENDS REUNITE TO
REVEAL BETRAYALS AND SECRETS
OF A SHARED PAST

VERA JANE
COOK

Faith Among Friends

For Bert

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FAITH AMONG FRIENDS

A NOVEL

VERA JANE COOK


INDIES UNITED PUBLISHING HOUSE, LLC

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Part I

Chapter One

VIVIAN

Early June 2006

Like an old, frayed leather album of glossy Kodak photos, their faces flipped past her vision, turned over in her mind like words out of sequence – their laughter caught by the blink of a shutter – their sorrows remembered like some vague recollection of a movie that had been so mysteriously compelling, *La Strada*, perhaps; brilliant images standing out against the loss of full sentences.

Has it really been so many years? Years that have passed like breaths, too necessary to notice?

She hadn't planned it, certainly never would have consciously planned it like this – seventeen years to the day since that *seemingly* fatal afternoon. She'd realized the coincidence as she sat listening to the banal drone of a dial tone, hoping Susie wouldn't pick up.

"Lucky day," Vivian uttered after hearing Susie's perky attempt at humor: *Here's the beep. You know what to do. Same old same old ... So do it now and do it quickly.*

Vivian was relieved. She hadn't wanted to take Susie by surprise and startle her into an abrupt refusal. She'd rely on low impact shock therapy; a few tidbits to whet the appetite but not too much information.

"Hi, it's me, a voice from the past." She coughed, certain her nervousness would barely be noticeable. "It's Vivian Forrester. My God, it's been years. I'd love for us to get together, with the others, the rest of the feisty five, wouldn't that be a blast? I've got the time and place. Call me, soon as you can."

One down and three to go; Vivian clicked the phone off quickly. *Seventeen years to the day.* She wondered if they'd make the connection and find the coincidence macabre, in poor taste. But she highly doubted

they'd make any connection to Faith at all. She was the only one of them to carry the weight of it around like a third leg, like something obnoxiously and pathetically freakish.

Vivian had brought it all on herself, truth be told. The choices she made back then could not be undone; the knot was tied and tightened. She was reacting the way she always reacted: she turned the other cheek and said, *And it will go away. If I ignore it, maybe it isn't so, never was so.* But just recently her blatant omission had become too fragile, too close to blowing up in her face. Faith wanted to meet her biological mother. *Oh, shit.*

Vivian reached for the phone. Funny how she hadn't spoken to Ned in years either but being so damn anal, she had transferred all her old phone numbers and there they had remained, after all these years. On speed dial, no less.

"Vivian! God, it's been a millennium. How are you?"

"Fine, just great." She let out a nervous laugh. "I'm calling a meeting of the old tribunal, the feisty five. Wouldn't it be fabulous for all of us to get together after all this time? You know, catch up?"

"Oh? Well, that might be difficult for me right now, Vivian. Not sure if I can make any plans. I've got a lot on my plate these days. My wife is ... not well."

"Sorry to hear. Look, it's about Faith, my niece, Faith," she said, carefully articulating. "There's an incompleteness in all our lives and I need to set it straight."

He paused too long.

"Faith? The girl who drowned? Your niece? What incompleteness?"

"Will you come?" she asked. "I owe you all an explanation. I'll explain what happened when I see you. I should have explained it to you years ago but you know ... life got in the way."

"I'm confused."

"Yes, it is confusing, *was* confusing."

"I'm awfully busy, Vivian."

"It's important."

"For you or for me?"

"Does it matter?"

"That's what you said about the last reunion, that it was important. Well, it was a disaster."

"I'd really like for us all to get together. I need to tell you what really happened seventeen years ago and why I couldn't tell you what really happened seventeen years ago."

"That's very convoluted."

"Yes, I know."

"I'm listening."

"I need to do this in person."

"Why?"

"Because we've carried the weight of this for too long. I certainly have."

"What weight?"

"Faith."

"You're not making sense."

"Look, will you come to the reunion? It will all be explained."

"When are you planning this get together?"

"Saturday after next."

"Are the others coming?"

"Well, I'm counting on that."

"Perhaps I can work it out. It will be fun to see everyone ... I imagine."

"Yes, it will be."

"I'll try to make it," he said, a polite afterthought.

Well, at least he said that, Vivian mused to herself.

"Where are we meeting?" Ned asked. "I'll get a pen."

"No need. The White Horse Tavern, 1:00 P.M."

He reacted just as she thought he would. She heard the nostalgia in his tone.

"Oh, perfect spot. Just like old times, Vivian. Are we going to recapture our lost youth?"

"I'm counting on you," Vivian said before hanging up. Of course, she'd call him three days before and then two days and then the day of. She'd probably have to call Susie back a hundred times too, but she'd get her to show up. The difficult ones would be Kit, of course, and David.

She'd mention Faith each time. She wouldn't harp on it; she'd just mention it. *What more was there to say about Faith's drowning after all these years? The poor girl is dead, leave it be.* But they would agree to come after much pleading; their curiosity piqued, though their displeasure would be obvious, feigned or otherwise.

Vivian was looking forward to seeing them all again, even though she'd probably have to sit through hints of Susie's disappointing third marriage in the affected silences of her unfinished sentences; perhaps an unfair assumption but nonetheless a good guess; she was sure. Then, of course, she would get the scoop on the surprisingly successful maneuvers in business that had gained Ned a Mercedes and an apartment on Park Avenue, a lifestyle that had once been termed a "plastic prison" and had made them all threaten to puke. She'd read an article about Ned in *The New York Times* real estate section about a year after their last reunion, he'd turned out to be quite a mogul.

Time changes all things once young. She too, had settled for a much easier ambition than chasing an elusive and unpredictable career in the theater. Yes, certainly, time had carried them all away, scattered them off into lives preoccupied by dramas with a great deal less turmoil than the old obsessions that had once filled their fantasies, their dreams of impressions in cement on the Walk of Fame. Except, of course, for Kit, the only one among them who'd remained, eyes fixed on the golden ring.

Old friends should not be reminders of how much we bullshit ourselves, but they so often are – oh, the distances between procrastinations – history's rewrites. Vivian wanted to be honest when it came to her old friends. It was her last chance for honesty, to save face in front of Faith. She was doing it all for Faith, coming clean at this reunion. But was honesty really the objective wasn't it more about saving her relationship with her niece? Wasn't it more about not wanting to look bad, even now, so many years later?

So much had changed. Vivian wasn't competing with anyone anymore; the old competitive edges had softened and dissolved with age. Remembering all the subtle psychological tugs of war between them made Vivian smile, especially since she had grown past the age of competition, preferring instead to be known as a doting mentor. It's what happens to older women, they become motherly, no longer fiery youthful competitors on the battleground of ambition and men. It is so much better after fifty – so much less intense. Competing with one's peers had been so damn exhausting.

"I have a theory about competition," she used to tell them. "It begins in grade school, perhaps sooner, and then, it's accelerated by society's preoccupation with success ... and the vacuous commercialism to be

beautiful, commercially beautiful, of course. Yes, actually ... it becomes an obsession to be a winner ... or not to be a loser, or not to be a character actress stuck in ugly sibling roles. It winds up making us all neurotic.”

Vivian’s youthful friendships had been characteristically ambivalent, as all relationships are, she supposed. But she’d been so fond of each of them. She never experienced that again, those bonds, those passionate declarations of love and loyalty. And they all had been intensely loyal to each other in the old days, at least on the surface. Under the surface was a different story. Back then the heart was always up for grabs. Phone buddies were offered in all the midnight hours, there were tissues for tears shed and hugs for all the hurts and disappointing rejections received from one too many myopic casting directors. Between them, the heart was a prism of shifting vulnerabilities taking solace in the crook of Susie’s shoulder, or Kit’s or David’s or Ned’s. They had been so close, even though they held bits and pieces of themselves behind walls of glass, precarious wounds that they shielded from each other ... possibly even from themselves.

One must age in order to realize that once bonds are made, memories churn throughout a lifetime. Things you thought you’d forgotten show up unexpectedly. Youth is a haunting, a tenacious ghost. Vivian had often asked herself if the scars would have healed any sooner had it not been for that wretched weekend long ago, the weekend of Faith’s so-called drowning when they had each scattered indifferently back into their own lives, without the truth. Perhaps a betrayal among friends lingers forever ... left to scar the future. Certainly, it scarred Vivian’s. She was a coward. No, she was worse, she was hiding behind walls much thicker than mere denial because she was dishonest. She was painfully aware of her stupidity and her coming-back-to-haunt-her mistakes.

Vivian’s absurd deceit had clearly scattered them apart with all the fury of a storm intent on separating the earth from its axis. She had hoped to mend the past that last reunion weekend, instead, she had only compounded the confusion ... dug a deeper hole ... and shattered any possibility for reconnections, at least not in the short term. It’s no wonder they never spoke to each other again. Why in god’s name would they want to speak to each other now?

Leave it to the feisty five, as they called themselves in the early days, not to escape their youth unscathed, not to bleed a little blood, not to fuck up

because fucking up was the luxury they were entitled to. They shattered their illusions about life and blamed each other. For what? Who knew?

“Betrayal alters the way in which the world is perceived,” Vivian used to say. “It kills hope. So don’t betray your friends.”

But they didn’t listen. They did betray each other, and their frailties left the startling shadows of ungodly cruelty trailing behind like baggage carried from childhood, refusing to exit the psyche gently. And so, they suffered ... the downside of being young, there is no warning that life is too often a blow to the ego.

Chapter Two

Their paths first crossed in 1970, at HB Studios, an acting school in Manhattan. They became fast friends. They were in their early twenties then, connecting their attractions to each other to their astrological signs and their infamous past lives.

“We’ve known each other before. See the Hangman? We’ve been reincarnated to repair our shattered karmas,” Susie had explained over a deck of Tarot cards.

“We’re destined to merge like bird’s wings against the wind,” Kit had mused dramatically.

“Like music and dance, like seashells and sand,” Vivian sang out, picking up on Kit’s dramatization and swaying lightly on her feet.

“We’re destined for stardom.” Ned grinned, his arm tightly clasping David’s shoulder.

There they were, dedicated thespians, pursuing their careers in the theater, wanting so much to achieve, to win something magical, to capture the gold and toss it back home to Mom and Dad and their high school drama teacher, as was expected of them.

“Broadway, here we come,” they sang out. “Make way!”

Yes, Broadway was always the goal but, oh, Hollywood would definitely do, and regional theater would suffice, not to mention television commercials, voice-over work, extra work in grade B movies, or some unknown little off-off Broadway loft in downtown New York City that smelled like the inside of an old sneaker and showcased the classics. Yes, that would also do.

Vivian could close her eyes at any time and hear them on the stoop of Susie’s brownstone uttering Ibsen and Shakespeare to one another, their studied voices rising in the air, reeking of too many diction classes and obnoxious over-doses of method acting, cueing each other as if it were the last words they’d ever say.

But the theater was a serious calling. It was not to be taken lightly, it had to be considered both an art form and a business and studied as voraciously

as a plunge into religion. They auditioned with serious intent, constantly learning new monologues, and scoping out the opportunity to try them out on jaded and horny producers. They carried beautiful images of themselves, black-and-white prints in large leather portfolios, and ran from one audition to the next, praying that they would be the ones picked to star in some stock production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, or *Mary, Mary*, or whatever old-time revivals were that season's favorites.

Vivian and Susie had become inseparable almost immediately. Ned came along with Susie from Illinois, "the love of her life." Kit followed, meeting the others in scene study class. And when Vivian got involved with David, the five of them were practically glued together. Yes, glued together, the feisty five.

Kit was the odd one out, tall, dark, and glamorous — also, bisexual, and single. It seemed that bisexual was the thing to be during those years. Ned certainly tried to pretend he was nothing more than a hometown boy who liked his women and his draft, but they would all come to know that Ned's sexuality would turn out to be anything but predictable.

They'd all been drawn together back then, depending on one another for support, feedback, and downtime. They owned each other's allegiances; their emotions were passed between them as easily as the last buck in their back pocket. If only Vivian had realized in those days how accessible friendship was — as easy as turning street corners, not yet ensconced behind walls of self-protection and discontent. Aging had altered that wonderful sense of camaraderie, at least for her. Over the years her friendships had become reflections of her own success, pretentious well-off people opportunistically seeking value in who she knew, rather than in who she was. It had been different back in the days of HB Studios. In her youth, her "inner self" had held a more captive audience.



Setting up this present reunion was bringing everything back. Old wounds were resurfacing despite attempts to think of other things. Vivian recalled her dream from the previous night. They were young and it was Susie who jogged beside her. Vivian's son, Brett, was holding Susie's hand and he looked like David, instead of the spitting image of Ian that he was.

"Come on, sleepy head." Ian tossed Vivian her shorts and then proceeded to put his leg on the sill and stretch out toward his toes.

Perhaps she should be grateful to the old group for keeping her thoughts off Ian's indiscretions and onto her youthful past. Truth was, now that Faith had decided to look up her biological mother, Vivian couldn't get her old friends off her mind. Her talented niece had written a very disturbing novel that was selling just enough to be noticed. God, it was not bad enough that Faith wanted to meet her 'real' mother, but Faith was out there, interviewed on TV shows, her name on radio interviews and magazine articles. Vivian knew her old friends would make the connection to the Faith they had known, to the tragedy of her drowning. They were sure to notice her. If Vivian said nothing it would all come out and she'd look so terribly bad. So, why not tell them first and save face? Then she'd explain to Faith what had happened. Her father did not want her to know she was adopted, and she felt obligated to lie, or was it more like threatened into lying because Faith's father was such a bully? Of course she knew that.

"Your sweatshirts on the door," Ian said as he laced his sneakers.

"What's it doing there?" she asked sleepily before sliding it over her head. "Um, smells like male sweat."

"Had to borrow it – laundry is late this week."

"I have none clean then?"

Ian shook his head.

"Well, at least you didn't borrow my shorts," she said and grabbed a pair out of the hamper.



"It will be good to see Susie again," Vivian blurted out as they jogged around the reservoir. "I wonder if she's gone gray by now."

"You mean, like you would be, if not for Clairol's Number Four, Chestnut Brown?" Ian teased.

In the old days Susie had long golden hair and it hung down her back. Sometimes she would braid it into two pigtails. Her eyes were big, unblinking blue eyes that always made her appear intensely interested in what was being said. Yet it was always difficult to know what Susie was really thinking behind her dimples as she gazed out of her huge round eyes and creased her brows, appearing, at least for the moment, so less humorless than she was.

Days forever gone. Youthful Susie. Youthful Vivian. Vivian missed that, the uninhibited passion of a good girlfriend – hours of phone talk, long

afternoon lunches, the comfort of close friendship, like the ones she'd had with Susie and Kit. But she never answered Susie's calls after the last reunion. She didn't answer any of their calls. She couldn't. Then the calls stopped coming. It was as if they'd each made a choice to step back, to disconnect from the depression that Faith's drowning had caused them. But Faith didn't drown and now she'd have to tell them.

"Brett will be home for semester break," Ian broke through her thoughts. "Can't wait. Our son the graduate student, our son the little genius."

"Umm," she said as they puffed toward West Eighty-Sixth Street.

"I've got several meetings to attend this evening. Damned inconvenience. Want to meet me for a late dinner?" Ian asked.

Vivian continued to keep pace beside her husband, though she was tiring. "Yes, I'd like that," she uttered, wondering if he was telling her the truth. "How about Henry's?" she puffed out.

She and Susie used to perspire together with a vengeance, five days a week. It made Vivian laugh to think back on it. Susie was over the top about exercise. Vivian eventually got bored with Susie's routine, got tired of watching Susie sweat to death, so seriously committed to two hours a day of yoga, then a half hour on the Stairmaster and finally, on to a forty-five-minute weight training work-out.

"What's so funny?" Ian asked.

"Oh," Vivian peered up at him. She hadn't realized she'd laughed out loud. "I don't know, just remembering some things."

"Chuckle all you want," he said and pinched her rear end.

She slapped his hand; how flirtatious men can be with their wives when they're screwing someone else. She forced her thoughts off Ian and back on to Susie. It wasn't long before they drifted on to Ned, Ned, and his quiet angst. Then David's sweet, stormy needs filtered through her thoughts as old songs by Carol King and James Taylor so often do. The sweet reminisces of youth ... Kit's sadness, Stockbridge ... the baby.

So, the cat is about to jump out of the bag, as they say. She'd invited them all to another damn reunion.

Chapter Three

Vivian looked impatiently at her watch. The little hand was on the number one. She just happened to glance at her wrist as the big hand crossed over, nudging the little hand like the impolite intrusion of a hiccup. She was surprised that the sound startled her, tiny as it was, just a little hiccup, and yet, it made her heart skip.

The White Horse looked the same as ever, little to no renovation. The crowds were still thick and she assumed the salads were still good. The others were late. Vivian interpreted that as ‘acting out,’ a communication that they didn’t really want to be there, despite their curiosity. They would accuse her of guilt-tripping them into it: *Oh, come on, we were so close*. So, they’d show up with ambivalent hugs, annoyed about her perplexing phone calls but much too manipulated by Vivian to decline, which is how they would explain what they were doing there. Vivian had always been the manipulator, hadn’t she? They would exchange brisk hugs and cheek kisses and sit through a series of *oh, you look wonderful, you’ve lost so much weight, haven’t aged a day, etc., etc., etc.*

Then the silences would follow, and they’d wait for one of them to ask. “What’s this about Faith?” “Is that what this is all about Vivian? Faith?” Then they’d go on and on about how they barely remember that horrid weekend. They’d lie and they’d deny but they wouldn’t even fool themselves, much less each other.

All in due time she’d tell them ... all in due time the sordid little truth would emerge, and they’d get the full story about Faith’s so-called demise, Faith’s true identity; the truth; at last. Maybe, the final chapter would liberate them from grief, and they’d heal, their total absorption with themselves would be forgiven and they’d go on, free to transform, to honor the integrity they’d lost to the twists and turns of life’s roadblocks.

It was practically a sin to shatter the status quo after all this time. But Vivian couldn’t avoid the truth anymore, and besides, she owed them the truth, especially Kit. The ghost had risen to tell her tale and Vivian was forced into being the messenger ... the bearer of incredibly shocking, if not,

preposterous news. Finally, she'd have to admit what she'd done, what she'd done with the best of intentions, but what she'd done, nonetheless.

Vivian reached inside her purse and removed a compact mirror. She studied her features in the glass and smiled, her looks were still intact. She had aged with grace, embracing the years with acceptance, her body still firm because it had become a passion to be so, allowing her crow's feet like a real trouper, an occasional puff under her eyes, too. *What a sport.*

Well, she did know certain things to be true about herself. She had aged so well that younger men still looked and smiled. No, she was not yet invisible. Vivian was approaching sixty, not altogether there, but close enough. Ian compared her to a deep expensive red wine, rich and mellow, older, complex, and much admired. Ian said she was spectacular, like a night under the stars with the Philharmonic. More elegant, and classy as ever, even more appreciated for the laugh lines and the authority she'd gained with each salt-and-pepper sprinkle near her temples as her Clairol color faded.

Vivian had become in middle age, or should she say, 'old age?' – was sixty still middle-aged? – well, she had become what she never was in youth – cool, as in *Wow, man, cool*. Vivian's friends had never thought of her as "cool" when she was young. "You're aloof," they always said, never "cool," never even "groovy." Well, perhaps that's what had kept her looking so well, her ability to detach, even from food.

Vivian hated hearing it said anyway, hated to hear it uttered with such conviction. After all, weren't they intimating that she was cold? Susie kept insisting, "show your vulnerability," and Vivian would scowl back, her deep brown eyes glaring into the map of freckles on Susie's corn-fed good looks, the sweep of her thickly lashed blue eyes and the tip of her tipped-up nose.

"I'm not," Vivian would protest, hurt, and confused. Aloofness was an inability to connect, to love. "I'm not. God, what must you think of me?"

Susie was always good at aiming the arrow; finding the point in which to draw out the blood slowly, avoiding a perfect kill but wounding all the same. She never meant to, or at least she'd always said she never meant to. It was just Susie's way to probe and to get at the truth, to unsettle people.

"You keep the ones who love you away, Viv, withdrawing and withholding your affections. Even in scene study, you're not letting yourself go. You're so perfectly upper-class looking so you have to try harder."

"I don't keep anyone away," Vivian had insisted.

“Yes, you do. It must have something to do with your childhood; you know ... having an alcoholic mother ... but you’ll scare David off if you don’t let your guard down. You can’t be sexy unless you’re emotionally accessible. Lighten up! David is your knight in shining armor. He’s the catch of a lifetime ... like Ned. We’ve won the prize, Viv. Be more affectionate with him, won’t you?”

Ah, David. He was so passionate, so vocal about opposing the war in Vietnam, almost crazy in his defense of civil rights. Life must have knocked it out of him though; he wasn’t at all political at the last reunion, he was sad and detached. But in his youth, he was a fireball. They had had so many arguments right where she was sitting, right there at The White Horse Tavern, so many years ago.

1970

“War is intrinsically wrong, don’t you guys agree?” David looked at them, his pretty eyes intensely riveted on each of them in turn. “I mean, what the fuck are we doing in Vietnam?”

“Of course,” they agreed. It took too much energy not to agree with David.

“Nixon is a creep,” Ned said. “Yep, Nixon is a creep,” he said between bites of his super-sized burger. “I wouldn’t trust him to walk my dog.”

“Very introspective, Ned,” Vivian said. She crunched on a cucumber and gave him her bemused grin. “Care to elaborate on your deeply held political views? Just why is Nixon a creep?”

Ned shrugged and continued to eat. “He supports the war.”

“I see,” she said. “Why don’t you support the war?”

David stopped eating and glared at her. “Give him a break, Vivian. Our guys are getting killed over there, that’s reason enough.”

“The world sucks,” Susie said.

Vivian laughed. “Another profoundly held opinion.”

“I’d go to Canada if I have to ... no way in hell am I going to come back without a leg or an arm. What the hell is wrong with Americans? I’m not going to kill anyone for a war I don’t belong in.” David took a swallow of beer. When he placed the glass back on the table, his lips wore the foam.

“Oh, how I wish I had the time to be more political, David. We could save the world together if I just had the time for it,” Susie lamented.

“You’re full of shit, Susie,” Vivian said. “If you had more time, I’m sure you’d spend it at the gym.”

“Pick your cause and join it,” David said. “Kit is out there handing out pamphlets protesting the war.” David wiped the foam from his lips with his hand. “Just don’t join Vivian’s pro-war cause,” he’d say.

“I’m not pro-war, David; I just don’t believe in lying down for people who want to devour us.”

“We’re the ones who are devouring people ... for oil, for control, for whatever. Stop being so fucking Republican.”

“I am bipartisan,” she said.

“We can’t all save the world, David ... leave that to the politicians. We’re artists.” Ned continued eating his burger.

“We’re killing each other, man. Don’t you give a good fuck?” David snapped.

“We all appreciate your passion,” Susie said. “But, David, not everyone is like you and Kit. Some of us would rather just send money, you know what I mean? What do you want us to do? Caring too much can be depressing.”

“I don’t believe you said that. You believe in this war? You all believe in this war?” David glared at them around the table.

Of course, none of them believed in the war, but according to David, they did because they weren’t doing enough to protest it.

“If you believe we should be in Vietnam, Vivian, I’ll never sleep with you again.” He winked at her and reached out for her hand. “Not sure I mean that.”

“Ketchup on your nose, David,” Susie said.

After a minute they all laughed. “You stupid fucks I love you.” David rubbed the ketchup off his nose. “I love you guys.”

Chapter Four

2006

Funny, how some words came back, nothing Vivian really had control over. There were so many things she wanted to remember and couldn't, but this time in her life was a sudden barrage of remembrances, some made her smile, others felt heavy, like memory bricks, solid and disturbing.

It didn't seem to matter that David had called her a Republican, that he hated her politics, that she was apathetic; he proposed to her anyway. They had just made love; the only time David didn't talk about what a mess the world was in.

1970

"Did you enjoy it? Sometimes, I don't know if you've had an orgasm or not."

"I enjoyed it very much."

"But did you ..."

She cut him off. "Of course."

David kissed her again. "Marry me," he said when his lips finally left hers.

She leaned up on one elbow. "Are you serious?" she whispered.

"I was saving this for Saturday night." He reached inside a drawer next to the bed and handed her a velvet box.

Vivian nearly cried as she stared at the diamond.

"How about a June wedding?" He ran his fingers up and down her arms.

"That's too soon. Let's not rush into it, let's think about Christmas," she said enthusiastically. "We haven't really known each other that long. But the ring is beautiful, David. Thank you."

"I want a summer wedding," David insisted. He was clearly hurt. "Wouldn't you prefer that?"

"I think Christmas is good, too."

“That’s nearly a year off,” he said. “Do you really want to marry me?”
“Don’t be silly,” she answered. “Of course I do.”

2006

How romantically simple it might have been if she’d married David Cranston in the summer of 1970. But it was never meant to be, not fated in the stars or anywhere else, and deep down inside Vivian knew the truth even then, that she would never marry David, that she was rehearsing, waiting for the real opening night, the authentic leading man, her Ian, who would one day turn out to be the complex paradox she would happily share vows with.

Well, she put off marrying David for as long as she could get away with it back then and she couldn’t explain why, she was supposed to want David, he was so handsome, so devoted to her, but she wasn’t ‘in love’ with him, whatever that meant. He was too fragile, too unbearably lacking in self-confidence. So, two years later, while everyone was still waiting for the wedding date, she broke it off.

1972

“Jesus, Viv,” Susie exploded. “You’re kidding, right?”

Vivian thumped her nails on the table and looked into Susie’s expression.

“No, I am not kidding,” she said.

“What?”

“No wedding.”

“What the hell happened?”

“He’s very demanding,” Vivian said simply.

It was painful to admit the end, especially to Susie, who had so many fantasies about how everything was supposed to work out between people.

“I still want us all to remain friends,” Vivian went on tentatively. She’d planned lunch just for that purpose, to break the news to Susie before any of the others, but it wasn’t easy.

“My break-up with David shouldn’t change anything between the rest of us.”

Susie’s eyes were as round as half dollars. “You’re breaking up with him?”

“I already have. I wanted to tell you first.”

“Are you nuts, Vivian?”

“Look, Susie, he’s not my knight in shining armor. He tries to be. He really does. But he can only pretend he’s succeeding at it, but he really isn’t. That’s David’s specialty, pretending that there isn’t a problem between us when there is. He smokes his dope and tells me it’s good for him, insists it doesn’t alter his behavior, and denies that it turns him into the village idiot. Well, I don’t want to live with the village idiot. David is in denial, Susie. He’s too fragile.”

Susie was astounded, her eyes glued to Vivian’s face. “We all smoke a little weed, Vivian.”

“I don’t.”

Vivian couldn’t admit the truth, of course, that she’d lost interest in sleeping with him. Perhaps it was because he wanted her too much of the time. After her lame excuses, he became incredibly insecure, constantly asking, “Do you love me?” But it wasn’t that she didn’t love him. Love had nothing to do with it. It was the task of sex, her mounting disinterest in it, at least with David. She didn’t want to blame David for their break-up but she didn’t know what else to say. She couldn’t come right out and admit that she’d become bored with the act of fornication, that she was probably frigid. So, she blamed it on the weed; his fault, not hers.

“He isn’t going to transform. He isn’t going to become someone that he isn’t, someone that I was expecting.” Vivian knew her justifications were simplistic, but they were reasons that might make sense to Susie. “God, Susie, I gave it two years.”

“Maybe your expectations are unreasonable, Vivian.”

Vivian looked at her nails. David had cheated on her; she didn’t want anyone to know that. It was humiliating to have someone cheat on you. He said he was going to go elsewhere for sex, and she said go on, and he did.

“He’s a spiteful bastard.”

“What?”

“He said I was frigid, even in bed, refusing to be adventurous and contort myself into the most absurd positions. Why does that make me the unreasonable one?” Vivian asked.

“What kind of positions?”

“He cheated on me, Susie.” She sat back and sighed. Susie’s mouth hung open.

“What?”

“He said it meant nothing, absolutely nothing.”

“Except to you,” Susie said.

“Then he tried to justify his indiscretion by insisting that he was suffering on my account. He said that I removed myself, that I constantly called him selfish and self-absorbed and that I was the one who was self-absorbed. He said he craved me ... and it made him mad ... crazy mad, capable of anything. He’s furious that I won’t name the date for our wedding ... so he went out and got laid. Does that make sense?”

“He said he craves you ... what, like chocolate?”

She had known what David meant. She knew she hadn’t let him near her for weeks.

“Yes,” I told him, ‘the way you crave everything, David, especially attention.’”

Susie shook her head from side to side. “I’m sorry, Viv. I never would have expected him to cheat on you.”

“His needs are insurmountable, Susie, especially after he’s had his ‘herbal,’” she said, justifying her feelings of inadequacy – her blatant flippancy once the decision was made “to get on with it.”

“David loves you,” Susie insisted passionately. “Jesus, Vivian. Won’t you reconsider? Cheating is terrible but sometimes it’s justified ... I mean, sometimes you have to suck in your breath and look the other way. He was angry, I would imagine. David wouldn’t just cheat on you.”

Of course, she disagreed with Susie, but she didn’t want to get into her views on infidelity, which didn’t really matter in the long run. She’d already made the decision to leave David and had moved back to her own apartment.

“What about me? What about what I want? Why are you so concerned with David? He’s turned into a maniac, Susie. If I don’t want to have sex, he calls me cold and reaches for a joint, disappears into his own little world. Well, sometimes I just don’t want to have sex.”

Susie sighed. Her crease appeared; her round eyes transformed into straight lines. “Marijuana is not a big deal, Viv. It’s an herb. You should try it, it will make you want to have sex.”

“I just told you, it isn’t about the marijuana,” she said.

“I’m sorry. I guess I just feel badly. I wanted it to work. I love David. He’ll be so hurt, Viv. He’ll never get over you, he’s like gone over you, you know?”

“Hurt is unavoidable, Susie. I mean as long as we’re alive there’ll be pain over something or other.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way, does it? Hurting people is something to avoid, isn’t it? If you can?”

“Yes, hurting people is something to avoid ... if you can help it,” she added quickly. “But people can’t always help it.”

Susie continued to ramble on, taking a real stand on David’s behalf, refusing to accept that Vivian had left him.

“You guys will get back together, I’m sure you will. It’s in the stars.”

Vivian smiled sadly. She had wanted that, too, but then David made her gasp for air, his overwhelming presence in her life shattered any possibility of commitment and she couldn’t wait to get away from him. She began to feel lacking as a woman, lacking in her ability to make him happy. He would always cheat on her; he would have to.

“I can’t make him happy, Susie. I’m not ready for David, for anyone just yet.”

Susie had stared at her, as if she’d said the most ridiculous thing in the world. “How can anyone not want David Aaron Cranston, Vivian? I mean that hair, that beautiful thick dark hair. His looks are sensational and he’s so sensitive. I wish Ned were as sensitive as David.”

Vivian had tried her best with David. My God, it had lasted almost two years. That’s like forever when you’re young. She wanted to tell Susie that, how hard she’d tried but she was sick and tired of repeating herself. Susie didn’t get it. Susie thought that she was indifferent to David’s feelings. Susie thought she was tossing him away. God’s great gift to women and here she was, tossing him away.

“You’re marrying your high school sweetheart, Susie. What do you really know about men? You don’t know a damn thing about them. You’re just taking a leap of faith with Ned.”

Susie looked surprised and her mouth went into a circle. “God, Vivian, what do you think love is? I mean it’s always a leap of faith.”

Chapter Five

2006

Vivian looked around the old landmark bar, her memories like garbled words, playing cards that fell to the floor without rhyme or reason, no laudable hand of gin, no poker win. *It had hurt as much to fail at love as anything, to recount one's affections, to begin with joy, to end with disappointment.* She remembered how she had turned back to Susie's sympathetic expression that day and wondered which emotion had more weight, would leave a deeper scar ... cruelty or dishonesty.

In the beginning, she'd tried to get on the same footing with David, to enjoy him. She was submissive to him but that was a learned behavior ... always agree to agree. She was raised that way. She had her brother, Josh, to thank for her easy acceptance of male dominance. She wanted to please David because she had been brought up believing that men should be pleased, it was their right. She had lain on her back for close to two years, *wasn't that enough for Mr. Cranston?* Vivian had hidden her immediate response to David's sexual demands and tried to be what he wanted. She acquiesced. She suppressed her rage at the way he simply "took her," like an act of entitlement. *Get the hell off me,* she wanted to scream, but didn't.

When she couldn't satisfy any more of his sexual fantasies, it must have come as a shock.

1972

"It isn't you, David, it's me. I'll never please you."

"But you do, you do please me, Vivian."

Why the hell was he lying, she wondered. He knew she didn't please him. She sat on the bed, tears in her eyes, wringing her hands on that fatal day. "I can't be the person you want me to be."

"We can work it out, Vivian. We can work anything out."

Vivian shielded her face from his pained expression. When she finally looked at him, his breath was heavy and his face as red as burning ash.

“I want us to be friends. I’ll always want us to be friends,” she said as she packed her suitcase. “It isn’t that I don’t love you. I just ... I just ... want something else.” He seemed hurt that she would say that. “Fuck it, Vivian, I don’t get you,” he said. “You’re an unapproachable, distant bitch,” he uttered as she closed the door behind her, leaving him alone, his mouth in a terrible sneer.

“If you love me then what the hell are you doing?” he had shouted through the door as he pounded his fists against it. She heard the pounding all the way down to the street.

Leaving someone doesn’t end anything, the physical presence might be gone but the memories have no place of termination and the feelings remain like sink holes in the heart, regrets as big as landfills. After she left David she felt even more inadequate. She was ambivalent. She ached for his nearness, an ache she seemed only to feel when he was absent. It was probably sexual but she wasn’t even sure. There were so many times that she wanted to reinvent herself for him, wanted to be the woman he needed, but then, she’d remember not wanting to lie down for the night for fear he’d want her and she’d fail to respond. His boyish flattery had once swept her up into believing in the youthful illusion that love was easy; just play by the rules ... *his* rules. But sometimes he disgusted her. It was too much, too much. *I want you, God, you’re beautiful, Vivian. I have to have you all the time. Oh, my God, no, David. Please, I’m not feeling particularly sexy. Please, David, no, in the morning. Okay? In the morning.*

“It’s hard to make love every night,” she’d said that a lot and in the end, almost nightly.

“No, it isn’t,” he’d quickly retorted, again and again and again.

His imperviousness reassured her – leaving him had been the right thing to do, the only thing to do. She was simply too ambiguous. With the right man, the correct man, it would all fall into place. She wanted a gentler life, a lover who fitted into the fabric of her days like the things she took for granted ... sunsets, alarm clocks, morning coffee, and a roof that did not threaten to fall if she didn’t please him, didn’t awaken like some sex kitten to his erections, didn’t think that oral sex was as delicious as hard sauce on baked apples. *No, no, I can’t do that, David.*

Too much had become nothing at all. Eventually, in his youthful determination to possess her he lost his own battle. It was then that he became too much pressure on the brain, her brain. He was swept under the carpet, a maddening mistake.

She would simply have to find a more suitable man. She was a child of her generation – in the seventies, you went to bed with the right man and you married him. Despite the “free love” message from the world around her, good girls still didn’t fuck around. David had placed himself in her life forever whether she wanted it or not, choosing her as though part of a tribal ritual in which the woman is treated like a piece of property, picked out like a good tie. *I’ll take the brunette, the pretty one, the one with the long legs and the serious expression. She goes with my mood, she fits my picture.* No, David was not the right man.

Chapter Six

2006

Vivian glanced over the room, everyone looked so young. The restaurant was getting crowded, mostly village people who loved sitting out in the sun. It was clear they wanted to be seen by passing pedestrians as possessing a nonchalant freedom that was absolutely impossible to attain until finding a chair in the sun. Interestingly, Vivian had chosen an inside booth ... just like old times. They always sat inside in the old days. Vivian wondered at what point in her life she preferred the sun, never would have chosen an inside booth over an outside table on such a beautiful day ... but it didn't seem appropriate for the aged feisty five, particularly when the bomb she was about to drop was anything but light.

The distracted waiter poured cold water into her glass. The ice cubes spilled out onto the paper placemat.

"Oh, I'll get that," the harried waiter said quickly.

"Sure." She smiled politely, her eyes on the door. *Oh, David*, she almost said aloud. *I wonder how you are, how you really are.* Over the years she'd always thought back on him with fond ambiguity ... still.

Vivian hadn't seen David since the last time they'd all been together, the 'feisty five,' tripping past the age of forty with the same self-conscious laughter that had marked their youth. That had been seventeen years ago, the weekend they all believed that Faith had been victim to a horrible drowning accident. She'd gone in the lake and never came out. Vivian will never forget their expressions that day. Drowned? *Oh, God.*

They filed home one by one and waited for better news, that Faith had been found. But Vivian never gave them better news. She could have called and told them the truth but it was easier to move on with her life and pretend all was right with the world when it really wasn't. She'd let them assume that Faith had been swallowed up by the sea. She'd been bullied into it, hadn't she?

Vivian had wanted to stay in touch with Susie after that horrific weekend but she couldn't stay in touch with any of them without giving them the truth. She struggled over Kit; wanting so much to reveal the manipulation she'd been subjected to but in the end she'd protected Faith. Josh had begged her to protect Faith, to keep her mouth shut. Vivian had probably been in denial. She did the opposite of what she should have done. Who had she really protected? Why could she never stand up to her fucking brother?



Vivian had been surprised when Kit returned her call. It must have been the message she left. She knew that the only way to get Kit to call her back was to come right out and say that she needed her forgiveness. She told Kit she'd omitted the truth about something, not lied about it exactly, just omitted something. She was sure Kit would wonder what the hell she was talking about.

Sure enough, Kit was curious. She sounded tired when she'd answered Vivian's "odd" message. That was Kit's word. "What an *odd* message you left me, Vivian. What do you mean you omitted the truth, what truth?"

Vivian let out a breath of air. "Yes, I guess it was an odd message. I'll explain when I see you. I could tell you now but there have been other people hurt by this, and I need to include them."

"Are you being philosophical, as in truth is all there is?"

"I will explain when I see you. I promise. I need to tell you with the others present because we ... we owe each other the truth. Maybe I just don't have the courage to tell you each separately. Maybe it's nobody's business but ours but I just have to do it the right way. What I think is the right way, at least."

"Listen Viv, I've just finished a play and I'm taking a break. I can't stand the thought of going back into the city right now. Can't you say what you need to say over the phone? I won't tell the others, I never speak to them anyway."

"You sound worn down, are you?" Vivian asked.

"Would it matter if I said yes?"

"No, it would not matter if you said yes."

"Well, you know how rehearsals can be. Don't be hard on me, Vivian."

"I owe you the truth more than anyone. Please, Kit."



Vivian tapped her nails on the water glass and wondered why the waiter was ignoring her. She was all alone at a table for five and she wanted a drink. Damn it, anything that might relax her. If the waiter hadn't spilled the damn ice cubes he would have thought to ask her. Was being alone at a table for five any reason to assume she wasn't thirsty?

Vivian was thinking about things she hadn't thought about in years, but what did she expect, a blessed amnesia? The past haunts the present and that's just the way it is. If you want to avoid it, live in a cage so you won't have any regrets. Never come out. Play it safe, ignore it all, and avoid friendship; friendship ... that fragile string, pull too hard and you break it.

It felt like only yesterday that Vivian decided she had to tell Susie the truth about Ned and where had that got either of them? Did she regret it? Yes, of course she did. Vivian the Blessed Truth Teller, the blessed 'let me stick a pin in your balloon teller'. But she believed with all her heart that she owed Suzie the truth even if Ned thought she didn't deserve it.

But what had telling the truth gotten her but despised, mistrusted and resented for trying to be a good guy?

They'd been right there at the tavern, she and Ned, the night he told her he was gay. He had been talking about Brando. The memory returned, painfully causing her to blush, even now.

1972

"God, Brando is the greatest living actor. He's incredible," Ned said demonstratively, using his hands to punctuate his admiration.

Susie was performing that evening in an off-off-Broadway play about nothing anyone could understand, and David had gone home for the weekend to visit his parents. Vivian was still feeling guilty about breaking off with David, and her ambivalence and guilt caused her to drink more heavily than usual. David still called her twice a day, trying to win a spot back in her life, selling himself: *No one will ever love you like I do, Viv.*

Ned took a sip of beer and turned to her. "Want to see The Godfather tomorrow night?"

"We've seen it five times, Ned," Vivian said.

"Hey, turn up the volume on that thing, that's Jefferson Airplane." Ned sang out a few lyrics of the song in his perfectly trained voice. "That song is about LSD, don't you think?" he asked her.

“Think it’s more about a bad dream.”

“Well, I could use some drugs.”

None of them ever touched anything harder than marijuana, no sense being in the theater if your head’s not on straight. “Surprised to hear you say that. What’s with you?” she asked.

Vivian had been aware all evening that Ned seemed overly stimulated. He wasn’t usually so nervous. They managed to go through several pitchers of draft together before he got drunk enough for true confessions. Perhaps he’d been planning to tell her all along.

“I’m a weird bastard,” Ned said out of nowhere. “Really, Vivian, I’m a weird bastard.” He became deathly quiet. Then he slumped down in his seat. “I like to sleep with men.”

She really wasn’t in the mood for kidding around. “Don’t be an ass,” she said.

“I can fix it, probably, with a little therapy.”

“Why fix it?” she asked, and giggled, not yet realizing it was inappropriate.

“Because it’s not right. It’s ... sick.”

“My God, you’re serious?”

“I’m serious,” he said.

“Kit sleeps with women, Ned. Do you think she’s sick?”

“I think we both need a shrink.”

“I guess that makes you like most people.”

Ned pulled in his lips and appeared like a small boy; he looked about to cry. “Yeah, being a bisexual is pretty fucked up. Who needs that, you know?”

“I don’t think it’s wrong, Ned,” she said, suddenly thinking of Susie.

“That’s because you’re in the theater, most of the world isn’t as liberal as we are.”

“Does Susie know?” she asked.

“Shit, no.”

“You’ve got to tell her. Maybe she won’t care.”

“I don’t know if I can, Vivian. I have to go ahead and propose to her like I planned. I still love her, you know? I don’t want to be gay, I want to be married.”

“You can’t propose to her now, not unless you tell her who you really are. Not unless you don’t plan on sleeping with any men the whole time

you're married to her."

Ned looked off. "I never would have known about myself if I hadn't come to New York. This city turned me, big time. Queers are everywhere here," he said. "They come on to me constantly."

"I think you should tell Susie, Ned. I think you have to tell her. You can't start a marriage with that kind of omission."

"Not sure I want to tell her."

Chapter Seven

2006

Vivian sat back and crossed her arms around her chest. Susie's wide blue eyes came back so clearly. She thought Susie was completely naïve about men in the old days, never suspecting that Ned liked men, not even wanting to accept that there were alternative lifestyles, even though she knew about Kit. "Kit is pretty, don't you think? She'll grow out of this adolescent bisexual shit," Susie said constantly. "I mean, you're either one damn thing or the other."

Why did Ned share his dirty little secret with her that nigh? They must think of her as maternal. It was like walking around with stolen money, knowing that Ned was into men. He wasn't telling Susie, either. Vivian felt it was her duty to spare Susie a marriage to him. My God, she'd never be happy married to Ned. She'd be devastated when she finally realized the truth, or worse yet, if she caught him in bed with a man.

Maybe she should have kept her mouth shut. She still wondered about it, had it really been her place to tell Susie what Ned had told her in confidence? But in the long run, Susie needed to be saved. How arrogant of her, she thought now, how very arrogant of her.

She and Susie had been having lunch at The Front Porch. Vivian was biting her nails a lot that day. Susie was chewing on a tuna fish sandwich and in between bites she was discussing her character's motivation in *Mrs. Windermere's Fan*. Vivian nodded and commented between sips of ice tea. She remembered it as if it were yesterday.

1972

"How well do you know Ned, Susie?" Vivian blurted out. "I mean, do you know him really well?"

Susie stopped talking and stared at Vivian. "We grew up together, Vivian."

“Have you ever suspected that he might swing both ways?” Vivian asked the question lightly, as if she were joking.

Susie laughed. Of course she would; it was absurd.

“My jock boyfriend?” she said.

“But he does, you know.”

“Does what?” Susie wore a confused expression. “Because certainly you don’t mean Ned swings both ways?”

“I do mean Ned. Ned is bisexual, like Kit. Don’t you know? I mean, I wouldn’t have known if he hadn’t told me. But I would think you would know, have a clue ... or suspect something.”

Susie sat back slowly. Vivian watched the color drain from her face. She and Ned had been High school sweethearts from a small town in Illinois, El Paso, Illinois. “Isn’t that in Texas?” Susie always said it first, knowing people would always ask that. “No, not Texas.” She’d smile broadly. “Illinois. El Paso, Illinois.”

Vivian always thought they made a nice couple, Susie and Ned, so Mid-West, and preppy. Susie appeared so tiny beside him but Ned was graceful for a man of his size, nearly six foot three. The guitar he carried on his shoulder looked small, a gentle thing in his hands as he played on the street and girls gathered, standing around him like a swarm of swooning little bees while he sang out the lyrics of a generation – Neil Diamond, Bob Dylan, Cat Stevens. Ned strummed his guitar, making the emotions his own: *it ain’t me you’re looking for, babe*.

Susie was always there, her eyes on his lips, her hand on his leg.



“Did you hear what I said, Susie? Ned is bisexual. I’m sorry to be the one to tell you, but Jesus, I can’t bear to think of you finding this out after you marry him. But you know, maybe it doesn’t mean anything.”

Vivian was nervous and thumped her fork on the table so loudly she received angry looks from a couple sitting in the next booth. “I don’t want to hurt you but I feel I have to get this off my chest. It’s been driving me nuts, I had to tell you. I’m really sorry, Susie, but you can’t marry him unless you two discuss it. Confront the truth.”

“You’re out of your mind, Vivian,” Susie finally said.

Vivian looked down at her hands. She wanted to be believed; she felt it was important. “He told me, Susie,” she said it like a plea.

“No, he couldn’t have.”

Vivian looked into Susie’s face and saw the sadness. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“I’ll pretend you never said what you said.” Susie tried to keep back the tears. “That’s the most ridiculous thing anyone has ever said about Ned. I won’t let it spoil our friendship though. It’s just too stupid to have that kind of power. Ned can be a real clown, Vivian. If he told you that, he was just making a fool out of you.”



“We’ve set a date,” Ned told her quietly. “Susie and I are getting married in September.” They were standing on the corner of Bank Street and Twelfth. Vivian had the thought that Ned seemed very happy, though terribly uncomfortable. He was probably so sorry he had confessed to her.

“Are you sure, Ned? Are you sure you’re not making a mistake? I mean, if you like men, maybe ...”

“I’m doing the right thing,” he said. “Our marriage is all that matters to me. I’ll deal with my other problem. You won’t say anything, will you? It’s really not such a big deal.”

Vivian shook her head and felt like shit for spilling the beans, but Susie didn’t believe her anyway. “No, I won’t say anything, Ned,” she said.

“Thanks, thanks, Viv.” And he kissed her cheek before crossing to the other side of the street.

Chapter Eight

2006

Vivian tapped a utensil to her glass, hoping to attract the waiter. A cold glass of wine was just what she needed. New York was hot. It was barely June but the city was sizzling, even the air conditioner seemed limp, but the Tavern was crowded. She'd arranged to meet there, just like old times, even though they'd all outgrown it years ago, preferring better food, less noise, more ambiance. In the old days, they used to go to the Tavern most nights, taking up a full booth, getting pitchers of beer, tossing matchbooks at each other, blowing smoke, flirting, keeping secrets, or not keeping them.

Vivian let her light, gray blazer fall off her shoulders as she glanced up, as though she might have sensed his presence. Her breath caught in her throat. He'd always had that effect on her; his good looks were startling. She rose a bit from her seat and waved. He was, after all, her first love, the taker of her heart, the first man who'd treated her body like an endless indulgence, perhaps the only man.

David noticed her right away and smiled. His thick gray hair was brushed back, his boyishness capriciously vanished behind his age. His clothes were casual and he was heavier, but he was even more appealing than he had been seventeen years earlier. Vivian's heart pounded, and her tongue moved across her lips for moisture.

He greeted her like an old friend, a kiss on the cheek, a brief hug. He looked into her eyes. The space between them filled up with old music, his laughter near her ear, his passion and his vulnerability, his devotion and his tender, obsessive love.

"Hello, Vivian."

The moment vanished and the present reappeared. Years harbored behind his smile, other loves were hidden in his heart ... must be.

"So what's new with you, Vivian?" David asked politely, after sitting for a moment and surveying her face. "How the hell did you ever get me to agree to this?"

She sat up straighter in her chair, a stranger under his gaze, as she had always been.

"You're more beautiful now than ever," he said, lighting a cigarette and sitting back. He searched the room for a waiter, his compliment a matter-of-fact observation given with no more attention than "hot for June, isn't it?"

"You still smoke?" Vivian watched as his eyes returned to hers. "They'll probably tell you to put it out."

"I'll take my chances," he said. "A few stolen puffs will be better than none." He grinned and leaned toward her.

She studied his expression. "You're nervous?"

He avoided comment. "What's this about hearing from the dead, Vivian? I don't like coming into the city anymore. Damn traffic, no place to park."

"The others will be here soon. Why don't we wait a bit?"

She looked for the waiter. She really wanted a drink.

"I parked five blocks over. Now I've got to walk back to my car in this godawful heat. What a day you picked for this little reunion. I must still be under your spell. I wouldn't come to the city for anyone else."

He lifted his arms revealing sweat stains.

"Jesus, ten dollars an hour to park downtown. Manhattan is a major rip-off."

David seemed uncomfortable and aloof, disassociated from anything he might have ever felt, words he might have said that were written in stone once ... *Cross my heart and hope to die, Vivian, I love you so much. I'll love you forever.* Memories threatened to tumble out and spill all over the table, but she held her own.

"Who do you expect?" he asked, pensively resting his gaze near her cheek, and then letting his eyes travel over her face, thinking, she was sure, that she was probably still the frigid bitch she always was.

"Everyone will be here. They said they'd be here. Kit is coming in from Rhinebeck. She might have missed her train."

"Ned? Doesn't he live up on eighty-something street?"

"Yes, but he might be stuck in traffic. He said he'd be here, David. I really don't want to have to repeat myself. There's something I have to tell all of you. I'm ... oh, I don't know, I just need to do this. I'm coming clean."

David laughed. "Well, that will get my attention."

"I thought it would."

“You see him much?”

“Ned? No, actually, we just live across town from each other but I haven’t seen him since our reunion.”

“I’m glad he never got AIDS.” David turned away.

Vivian could tell their last reunion was not anything he wanted to discuss.

“Ned married again, you know,” she said. “He’s sometimes written up in the newspaper. It seems he’s a real estate tycoon. Anyway, that’s how I know he’s married again.”

“To a woman?” He grinned as he asked.

“Yes. I think I saw them once on a movie line, years ago.”

“You speak to Kit or Susie?”

“No,” she said. She realized what was different about him, he’d grown a short close-cropped beard and she found it becoming. “I guess life took over.”

“Susie never should have married Ned. She should have left well enough alone, don’t you think? Jesus, he left her for a guy. Remember? Right before their wedding, boom, he decides to come out of the closet full force. We tried to warn her after that,” he said and frowned. “I still say he’s as gay as a fairy tale.”

Vivian didn’t want to smile. It wasn’t fair to refer to gay people as though they were somehow associated with old nursery rhymes. And Ned didn’t seem to be acting on his sexuality, but maybe he and his second wife had some kind of arrangement.

“Look, what’s this about Faith?” David gave her a flirtatious grin, just like old times. “Tell me what the hell is going on so I can get back to Connecticut. You know the others, they’ll find some excuse, pretend they got the date wrong. I’m betting they won’t even show up.”

Vivian looked into his eyes and noticed the color, an unusual charcoal, deeper than she remembered. He was leaning on his hand now, his broad infectious grin challenging her. She glanced around the room. She wanted to see one of them enter. Prove David wrong. He had always been wrong when they were young; more than likely he’d be wrong now. Oh, she remembered that about him so well. If she didn’t agree that he was right and she was wrong, then she was simply not using her common sense. Of course, that explained everything, Vivian’s lack of common sense. But he was the one that rarely used the sense he was born with. He had been wrong

about Ned, insisting that he'd never fuck with Susie's head, never come back and marry her after coming out of the closet. He'd been wrong about *her*, insisting it would only be a matter of time before she realized she was destroying the best relationship of her life.

Vivian suddenly remembered the first time she'd met David and she smiled at him.

"You disagree, you're smiling. You think they'll all show up?" He gave her a cockeyed grin.

"Actually, I was thinking about the day I first met you."

"Really?" David sat back, his cockeyed grin lengthening across his face.

1970

"Hey, wait up," he called out.

Vivian turned. It took a moment, but then she realized that he was the handsome one, the one she had a hard time hearing on stage. "Mr. Mumbles," she'd laughed in Susie's ear.

"Hey, where are you off to?" he asked.

"Home." She raised her eyes as he stood there staring at her. "I've got an audition tomorrow. I need to practice my monologue."

"I think you're the prettiest girl I've ever seen."

"I guess I should say thank you."

"You feel like pizza?"

"Who are you?"

"David. David Aaron Cranston. I thought you knew my name."

"No, sorry, I didn't."

"I know yours. You're Vivian Forrester."

"Uh-uh."

"You should be in movies," he said.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah,"

"What about that pizza?"

"Didn't you hear what I said? I've got to practice my monologue. I've got an important audition tomorrow." She put her hands on her hips and glared at him.

"Let me guess, Saint Joan?"

"What are you, psychic?"

"Want your cards read?"

“Seriously ... how did you know?”

“I heard you practicing with that actor who thinks he’s Steve McQueen. You sounded good. He could use some work, though. I think you can get some pizza. You don’t need too much practice. Too much practice will make you stale. That’s what I think.”

“Thanks for sharing,” she said and started walking away.

“Hey, good looking, I’m not through with you,” he called out.

“Beat it, David. I’m going home.”

“You know you like me, Vivian. You know you’re crazy about me. You know you want that pizza, too. Oooh, yum, yum, yum, can’t you just taste that mozzarella?”



Yes, she had liked him. She had liked him very much. She had liked his persistence and his gray eyes. She liked that he was completely uninhibited. She liked that his smile was always there, until it wasn’t anymore, until she took it away and all he did was scowl and frown, his gray eyes sad and distant.

2006

“I remember too,” David said. “I had to meet you. Whatever it took.”

“I believe it was pizza.”

“Which reminds me, are you hungry?”

“Ravenous.”

“Would it be so terrible if we started without them?” David turned and looked for the waiter.

“At least let’s get some bread, and I could use a glass of wine.”

“Waiter!” he called. He turned back to her after getting the waiter’s attention. He seemed anxious. “Really, Vivian, what’s this all about?”

“Faith.”

“What about her?”

Vivian reached down for her purse. She wondered if she should show him Faith’s book or wait until the others arrived. She could start with the book, explain why she never told them that there was no drowning. She’d blame Josh of course, and then it would have to come out about Kit. But once she told them about Josh, they’d understand. Perhaps David had won her over. Anyway, she wanted to see his reaction, see the relief in his eyes,

there hadn't been a death, Faith just swam to that island off the lake, didn't call ... you know how teenagers are. But then, there would be anger. *Jesus, Vivian, why the hell didn't you tell us what happened to Faith back then?*

David was watching her so carefully that she felt uncomfortable under his scrutiny. She almost pulled her hand away from the soft, glossy book cover, but she didn't. She held onto it tightly, letting her hand sweat onto the paper.

Suddenly, Vivian panicked. She had a burning desire to flee. She would feign a headache and hail a cab. She didn't want to drudge up the past. What the hell would it prove and what difference would it make after all these years? Then again, the damn book was getting attention; they'd all be sure to see it. Maybe they'd remember. Maybe they'd make the connection. They'd hate her. Indifference was one thing, but hate, now that's a heavy burden to bear. No, she didn't want to be the target of anyone's wrath. She had to tell them all before they found out on their own. She had to tell them before Faith found out. It wasn't just because Faith wanted to find her real mother after all these years. No, it was because Vivian owed them all the truth. She had to do the decent thing.

The waiter showed up at their table precisely the moment Kit joined them, nearly knocking him off his feet. Kit had appeared so suddenly, out of nowhere. She stood behind David and stared into Vivian's eyes for several moments before breaking into a slow smile. Vivian was a bit perplexed and tried to interpret Kit's studied expression. The confused waiter probably wondered if she'd ever sit down. Vivian closed her purse.

"Why don't you get settled? I'll be back." The waiter spoke quickly and moved faster, moved through the crowded room like one of those windup toys, gingerly avoiding a crash of trays.

He was gone before Vivian could grab him. "No, no!" She wanted to shout. "I need a glass of wine ... a piece of bread ... something. You don't understand. I'm about to resurrect the dead."

David stood to embrace Kit. She kissed his cheek and smiled slightly. Vivian thought that they looked like a handsome middle-aged couple, if indeed sixty was the new forty. They looked as if they should be married, joined in contentment.

Looks are deceiving, Vivian wanted to say but didn't. People shouldn't be able to hide behind them, she would have added ... like me, perfectly

law-abiding, democratically left-winged, successfully ensconced in the value of living an honest life in the most dishonest of ways.

“You look beautiful, Vivian.” Kit reached over for a hug and a kiss. They were the same height and used to be taken for sisters, but now, Kit was a blonde, her hair spiked and stylish. She looked like an artist, flamboyant Kit, as complex as a Rubrik’s Cube.

Chapter Nine

KIT

2006

Kit played Vivian's message three times, just to make sure she'd heard it correctly. There had been static on the line; static distorts what people hear, so maybe she'd been mistaken. Vivian sounded so matter-of-fact, as if the dead return every day to chat about old times.

"What are you saying, Vivian?" Kit asked. She'd called her back immediately and insisted on information. *What the hell did she mean, Faith didn't die?* "Is that the truth you're omitting, Vivian?"

"Look, I don't want to get into it over the phone, just come to the reunion, okay? I'll explain everything then. I owe you all the truth, especially you."

Kit knew that Vivian was much too sane to make something like that up, something as concrete as there being proof about a dead girl not being dead.

She didn't want to see the others; there had been too many years between them. They'd grown apart. She had nothing to say to any of them, especially David, whom she had once adored, even loved, perhaps. Their affair had been so affectionately connected in the beginning, their passion for politics, which none of the others ever appreciated. And then, it all turned to shit. He fell in love with Vivian, but so did she, so how could she have blamed him? Well, what did it matter? Vivian wasn't going to let her get out of it, wasn't going to let any of them get out of it; Kit was sure of that. Master manipulator Vivian would find a way to guilt trip them all into getting there, getting to the dear ole White Horse Tavern.

She should probably tell Vivian about the phone call from the adoption agency. It wasn't really any of Vivian's business anymore, but perhaps Vivian had a right to know. She had been so much a part of the baby's birth. Sometimes, Kit blamed Vivian for everything that followed, held her

responsible for an anger that grew in propensity until misery was the only thing it hadn't devoured.

"I need us all to be together," Vivian insisted. "I told a lie, well, sort of."

"How could you sort of tell a lie, Vivian?" Kit asked.

"Just come to The White Horse Saturday after next. Please. Will you do that for me?"

Kit wondered if it would be worth it. It meant having to go into the city again. Now that the show had been cast, she could relax a few days, and she needed that. She didn't like driving into Manhattan, but that was the good thing about living in Rhinebeck, the rail station was only five minutes away. The convenience of the rail made her feel like she'd opted for a suburb of the city, despite the cows and chickens she had as neighbors. When all was said and done, her umbilical cord to the Big Apple had never been entirely cut and she loved having the choice, car or rail into Manhattan.

She decided to take the train, get some work done on the way in and not have to fight city traffic. Perfect. Then she wouldn't have to think about anything else, wouldn't have to concentrate on the agency call or on seeing people she hadn't spoken to in years. She could conjure up some ideas for her newest play, a script that the actress Kathy Bates had agreed to do the following season, a thoroughly preoccupying endeavor that would get her mind off the fucking past. Vivian must have some pathological determination to prove them all innocent of indulgence. It had been decided long ago that they'd each been responsible for what happened that wretched afternoon; so what the hell was Vivian doing? Why the hell couldn't she leave it alone? It was history.

Kit walked out to the pool. Morgan was barely visible beneath her enormous straw hat. She was reading her new script for an HBO pilot. Kit watched as she lifted her head and said her lines into the air.

She'd never told Morgan about the baby, not until the agency called. "Your daughter would like to contact you," the woman had said.

No one had ever known about it but Vivian. My God, not even her own family knew. But when the call came, and Kit started to cry uncontrollably, Morgan insisted on an answer. "What's going on?" she asked. "What are you keeping from me?"

Kit assumed her confession would explain away her aversion to having children, but Morgan was young. She didn't get it. She thought that Kit's

daughter emerging after all these years was all the more reason to adopt, so she could make up for the loss.

“It wasn’t a loss, Morgan. It was a mistake. I never chose motherhood. I wanted no part of it. I gave up the baby.”

Morgan shook her head, with the thought, Kit was sure, that Poor Kit was delusional, must be to say that. Motherhood came with being female, came with the territory and being gay didn’t make women immune to it.

“I’ll try not to be long,” Kit said as she walked around the pool toward the lounge chairs. Morgan looked up and smiled as Kit sat next to her.

“Taking the car?” Morgan asked.

“No.”

“Good. Don’t like you driving at night. I’ll wait up.”

Kit leaned over for a kiss. “You’re a greasy mess and you’re getting red.”

“I’m loaded with lotion. I’ll be fine.” Morgan reached for her ice and grinned at Kit. “You can add more if you like.”

“I’ll definitely take a rain check.” Kit looked at Morgan’s long, young body. She kissed her again, lightly on the mouth.

“So, are you okay about this happy little reunion?” Morgan asked, always curious about Kit’s youth, always asking Kit if they would have connected so well if they’d been closer together in age.

Kit had never told Morgan about the girl who drowned during their last reunion, Vivian’s niece. She never spoke about it to anyone after that godawful weekend. It was always just an unfortunate accident, not meant for conversation, one of those omissions from one’s life. She’d thought it was her baby that had died in that drowning, but it couldn’t have been. Her baby was reaching out, couldn’t do that if she’d drowned. Her baby wanted to know her, so she had been so wrong and had suffered so needlessly for nothing.

“It will be a bore, I can assure you, but I feel I have to go. I owe them. We used to be so close.”

“Make the best of it.” Morgan winked. “It might be fun.”

Kit walked back through the kitchen. They had reached an impasse in their fighting, a bit of a truce for Morgan’s upcoming forty-second birthday. Kit was relieved not to have to be on the defensive yet again. It seemed she was constantly defending herself to someone these days. Kemp, the show’s producer, wanted her to cut the script. Kit kept refusing and he kept

insisting, but she knew she had to cave at some point, either cave or face being wrong. If the critics went after the length, she'd be stuck having to deal with the playwright, going over tedious cuts right before they opened in New York. So be it, she'd rather give into Kemp than Morgan.

She and Morgan had been together for five years; five years more than she had ever been with anyone. But now, there was an ultimatum on the table. "I want children," Morgan had suddenly announced two years earlier. "Let's adopt."

Kit did not want children. She had never wanted them. Morgan was nearly sixteen years younger than she was and very persistent now that she'd decided children were so damn important to her. For one full year, that's all they ever argued about. But that soon changed, and now, they were arguing about everything.

Kit decided she'd take the truck to the station and leave Morgan the Saab if she needed to get into town. She impulsively walked back into her office and reached down for her laptop. She wanted a diversion, no looking out of the window with nothing to do but remember things she'd rather forget. Not driving herself crazy trying to put the pieces together. What the hell was Vivian's lie? What had she omitted all those years ago?

She'd work on the train and not think of things that only gave her a headache. Yet, it was shocking how the call from the agency coincided with Vivian's claim about Faith being alive. If there was a connection between the two, Kit didn't want to think about it; it was just wishful thinking. But, leave it to Vivian, she thought, to resurrect the dead.

Still, it was a troubling coincidence that Vivian should decide to bring everyone together now and admit that there had never been a drowning, if in fact, that's what she's hinting at. Why had Vivian not thought it important enough to let them all know the truth seventeen years ago?

Kit still got goosebumps when she let herself think about it, the first time she'd met Faith at the reunion. She remembered the electric connection she'd felt with her when she looked into her beautiful gray eyes. How had she let Vivian talk her out of her own conclusions?

"It's reasonable to think every pretty teenager is your daughter, Kit," Vivian had said. "But Faith is my niece, plain and simple."

Perhaps Kit was simply too numb to let in what Vivian was alluding to now, too much in shock to follow the dots. The call from the agency had been a startling wake-up call, a woman living in Boston, claiming to be the

baby Kit gave up for adoption, wanted to make contact. “I’ll have to think about it,” Kit said slowly. “I’ll get back to you.”

Now another wake-up call: Faith never drowned? The adoption agency hadn’t given her a name but if she agreed to meeting her daughter she’d know everything. The truth was there and it was disturbing, but it wasn’t yet absolute.

Chapter Ten

2006

Kit was talking about her new play. “It’s going to be at the Schubert this fall.”

Vivian listened, though her mind wandered. Kit had gotten more information out of her than any of the others, but when she thought about it, that wasn’t surprising.

“Previews in Westport this summer.” Kit said it very matter-of-factly, she’d had so many previews.

“We should all drive up to see it.” Vivian smiled in David’s direction and noticed he seemed distracted.

“I’ve been offered a position at Bard College, should I take it?” Kit looked at Vivian the way she used to when she needed advice.

David suddenly perked up. “Bard, where’s that?”

“Rhinebeck, isn’t it Kit?” Vivian asked.

Kit nodded. “Yeah. They want me to teach a course on directing. What do you think?”

Vivian had been teaching theater at Columbia for the last seventeen years. She was certainly qualified to tell Kit that college teaching was a dream job.

“I actually love teaching,” Vivian said to David. She was avoiding Kit’s eyes and she knew it. She’d always hated being caught in Kit’s expression. She always saw it there, as clear as day ... the sadness. *Will she get a good home, Viv? Will she be loved? It’s not your fault, Kit. We’ll think of something. Don’t cry. It’ll be okay.*

Vivian kept her attention on David, even though it was clear to her that he had something on his mind. He was looking into his hands, not at Kit, as she spoke. Occasionally, he’d look up and smile affectionately, reacting as if he’d never wanted to kill Kit, never wanted to drain the life out of her for being, as he used to put it, such a “pushy little dike.” It took years for her to learn why he had turned on Kit; he was under the outrageous impression

that she and Kit had been lovers. How incestuous they were. David and Kit had gone out, had no doubt slept together and he had the gall to think she was sleeping with Kit? What youthful insanity, what absolute bullshit.

Like telepathy, Vivian just happened to look up when Ned entered the tavern. It was as if she knew he was there, the same psychic pull she had felt with David. She watched as he surveyed the crowd. She called to him and he reacted with a perplexed frown. Vivian might not have recognized him at all except for his expression, the same dazed look on his face, as if he'd been startled from the pages of a captivating novel and resented the intrusion.

Ned walked toward them, making his way past the increasingly crowded bar. Vivian noticed that his mannerisms seemed more effeminate, the shaved head, and the earring. It was as if the years had finally given him the freedom to be himself.

"You old bastard." David laughed as he hugged him. "You look terrific. You're thin as a rail."

Ned instinctively grinned back, "It's certainly not my diet," he said. Before he sat he reached out for Vivian's hand and leaned over to kiss Kit on the cheek.

Vivian made a quick assumption that he had really gotten his life together in the last seventeen years. She remembered that he had looked like hell at the last reunion; he had been overweight, perhaps even on his way to becoming an alcoholic. Vivian was relieved to see that he'd reclaimed himself. His light beard was gray now; gone were the auburn curls of his youth, and the boyish clean-shaven face, but he looked extremely handsome and self-assured. Vivian might have cried if she stopped long enough to remember his dimpled cherubic smile and his tortured determination to prove his machismo.

"What's this about, Vivian?" Ned asked after the waiter finally took their order for drinks.

"Susie should be here soon, let's wait for Susie." Vivian looked around the room nervously hoping she'd see Susie. She wanted to get it all over with and return to her life, despite the disarray it was presently in. This old life was tired and she really didn't want anything more to do with it, but she owed them. She owed them this, especially Kit. Who the hell was she kidding? She didn't owe anyone; she just didn't want Faith to hate her. She

wasn't going to run away from this. Actually, she couldn't, not with Faith in pursuit of her biological roots.

Ned smiled in her direction. "Are you sure Susie is coming?"

"Yes, she'll be here," Vivian assured him.

As the waiter placed their drinks before them, they eyed each other politely. Vivian noticed that Kit had ordered a coke; she looked so young, sitting there sipping coke-a-cola through a straw while she and David quickly reached for their Chardonnays and Ned sipped on a beer.

Vivian smiled sadly. *Kit, Kit, Kit, God, how young we were once.*

1972

Kit loved Joni Mitchell. That's all she played. She'd sing along to the music in a trance-like state. ... *Oh, Amelia, it was just a false alarm.* But Kit had a pretty voice and the song was nice and it fitted Vivian's mood at the time. She'd just broken off with David, Kit still hadn't found a place of her own and was staying with Vivian. Vivian had let Kit rent her apartment while she and David were living together in his downtown loft, but Vivian was back, and time was passing, and Kit was still there. Vivian was stuck with a roommate she'd never really wanted, but at least Kit wasn't a stranger. Still, Vivian preferred living alone. She hated kicking Kit out after almost two years, but she only had one bedroom, and despite the sleeper in the living room that Kit was using. It was cramping her style.



"I'm sorry, Kit. I really thought David and I would be married last Christmas. I hate to ask you to find another place, but I can afford the apartment on my own."

"Yes, I know, your trust fund."

Vivian stretched her legs out on the couch. "Love sucks," she said.

Kit wiggled her way across the floor until she was close to Vivian. "Was it really just about the grass, Vivian?" she asked, peering into Vivian's pensive gaze with a slightly confused expression.

Vivian turned away. Why not blame the grass; it was better than the truth. "I can't live with someone who's high all the time. It's a weakness. It could lead to other things ... like alcoholism."

Vivian had avoided telling any of them but Susie, that David had cheated on her. His indiscretion had made her feel dirty and incomplete and she

didn't feel like sharing it.

"Can't you get him to stop?"

"No, he thinks I'm overreacting to a perfectly safe medicinal drug. He thinks I'm crazy to call him dependent. Well, at least he's not a drunk, but I don't respect him. He's weak and that's just how I feel about it."

"I think all men are weak," Kit said earnestly. "I prefer women, really. I think every bisexual has a preference."

"I hope that isn't true ... that all men are weak."

"Women are strong," Kit said as she lay back on the floor. "Men don't like strong women, you know? Perhaps you should consider a woman."

"I don't think so."

"Women know what other women want. Men resent that."

Vivian wondered if she was being seduced.

"Perhaps."

Kit went back to singing. Vivian's thoughts returned to David, his frustration with her, his gray eyes glazing over, as if she'd held a gun at his heart.

Vivian thought of her mother. She'd grown up convinced her mother hated her, hated her for being the object of her brother's constant attention. God, if she only had known. Vivian always felt it ... her mother's obsession with Josh. "He's brilliant, she used to say. He's a shoo-in for Yale. Then she'd giggle, clearly obsessed with her son. Obsession disgusted Vivian.

"David is a fool," she heard Kit say when the song was over. She slid back over to Vivian's side. "He's such a fucking fool," she whispered as she placed her hand on Vivian's arm.

As Vivian turned toward her, Kit found her gaze and held it.

"Shit, giving up grass is nothing. I'd do anything you asked me to do. Go on, ask me something."

"Don't worry, I won't ask anything of you, Kit."

"Viv?"

"Yes, Kit?"

"Did you ever wonder what it would be like to kiss another woman?"

"Not really," she said.

Kit moved close and slowly brought her lips down to Vivian's mouth. Vivian instinctively closed her eyes. She felt the pressure of Kit's lips on hers. This is stupid, she thought.

She pushed Kit away with an uncomfortable laugh, but not before touching Kit's tongue with her own.

"Well, did you like it?" Kit asked.

"It was different," she whispered as she turned to Kit.

"I thought you might be curious, that's all. I'm picking up such incredible energy between us."

Vivian stiffened; she didn't want to go there. "I'm not curious, Kit. I'm really not curious about doing anything else, and I don't feel any energy between us. Kissing you was just an impulse not to insult you."



Vivian never should have told Susie anything at all about the kiss. Perhaps it had been so unsettling, that she'd actually allowed it. But Vivian felt that she had to share it; she had to have someone tell her it was no big deal. She'd often thought it might be interesting to indulge in a lesbian fling, but God, not with Kit. Ever since Kit had brought up her attraction for Vivian, had put it out there in the space between them, had hinted at "sexual feelings," things had changed. All of a sudden, Vivian understood what it was like to have another woman staring at her like a moonstruck boy, admiring her mouth when she spoke and finding everything she said deeper than a hole to China, or funnier than a whoopee cushion under someone's ass.

Susie was shocked, like she'd just heard some horrendous news that she couldn't quite let in.

"You didn't?"

"No, of course not."

"She was in love last month. Remember? Phoebe, I think her name was. Phoebe somebody who she met in one of those godawful bars she goes to. Phoebe is a real dike. She wears men's suits."

"Yes, I remember. I don't take Kit seriously, Susie, I'm just another conquest for her. It seems she enjoys rejection. She's on the prowl and I'm her target for the moment."

"Poor Kit."

"She's convinced herself that I'm not letting myself get in touch with my "gay feelings", and so she plods on and on and on, trying to get me into bed."

“Oh, God,” Susie screamed and fell back onto the floor. “Kit is out of control. She really should stick to men.”

“I can’t wait until she finds a place. She’s starting to get on my nerves. I actually think she’s in love with me.”

Susie became unusually quiet. She played with the holes in her jeans until she was pulling on some loose threads.

Vivian had an uneasy feeling watching Susie, seeing the brows knit up and the frown begin.

“Why do I feel you’re keeping something from me?” Vivian said.

Susie reddened and looked away. “Look, I never told you this, but Kit came onto me once,” she said quietly.

Vivian broke out into a series of loud guffaws. “I thought I was so special.”

Susie laughed with her. “I really like Kit, but you have to watch it. She’s worse than a guy.”

“So what did you do? Did you go for it?”

“Fuck you, I told her to bug off.” Susie suddenly got quiet. “It was sort of a joke. She didn’t seem very serious.”

“I think she’s a bit of a poker player. She puts it out there and if you bite, you bite.”

“Do you still think Ned is gay?” Susie asked quickly, but her tone was intense.

Vivian was startled, taken off guard. The subject had not come up again. Their wedding was planned for September. Ned and Susie wanted them all to be part of their big day. They wanted everyone back in El Paso for the wedding and found cousins that Vivian and Kit could stay with and an aunt who would give David a room for the weekend. They had to promise not to miss the ceremony. Vivian didn’t want to go. She felt that being around David would be a strain, but she’d promised Susie.

She didn’t want to say it again. If she didn’t say it again, then maybe it would go away.

“Do you, Vivian?” Susie insisted. “Because we do sleep together, you know.”

“Look, he just said he likes to sleep with men. It probably doesn’t mean anything,” Vivian said softly. “It’s not really a threat, I guess.”

“Kit says everyone is bisexual.” Susie looked at her earnestly.

“Perhaps,” Vivian said.

Susie looked toward the open window. “Ned says all guys do stuff with each other. He says it doesn’t mean anything. He says it starts in grade school.”

They sat in silence for quite some time. Vivian couldn’t think of any comforting words to the contrary. She didn’t know if guys did things with other guys or not, and she didn’t care. It was their business. She tried to imagine David doing something sexy with another man and the image was silly and made her grin.

“What is it?” Vivian asked uncomfortably, suddenly noticing that Susie was staring at her as if she’d hurled an insult.

“Why are you smiling? Do you find it hysterical that all men are faggots?”

Vivian was taken aback. She had never known Susie to react as if she were the enemy. The phone suddenly jarred the uncomfortable reaction she’d had to Susie’s comment. Susie leaped up. Vivian knew it was Ned on the end of the line from the way Susie dropped her sarcasm. She noticed Susie’s frown vanish as quickly as the crazy notion that Ned’s demons weren’t going to come back to haunt him ... and her.

Chapter Eleven

SUSIE

2006

Susie turned the corner of Hudson Street and looked for a parking garage. She knew she was late, probably purposely late, but there had been traffic on the turnpike. She had a legitimate excuse if she needed it. But in all honesty, she didn't really give a damn what Vivian had to say about Faith, and she hoped lunch would be short and sweet. She was really pissed off; why couldn't Vivian call her on the phone and say whatever it was she wanted to say? Why does she have to turn it into another reunion, make a major goddamn drama out of it? Shit, the last time they had had a reunion, it was a disaster. Of course it was a disaster. Faith had drowned that weekend — or so she was led to believe.

God, I hate reunions, Susie thought. That last one, Jesus, what a mess that was. They were all as naïve and confused and as unsettled turning forty, as they had been turning twenty-five, except of course, for Vivian, who was happily married to Ian by that time, and if that wasn't enough, had just discovered her real passion in life: teaching. She'd recently been hired at Columbia and beginning her position in the fall. Vivian seemed so complete, with her perfect marriage, her perfect child, and now, the perfect job.

1989

"God, we're forty!" Ned said, clinking his glass with David's.

Susie thought how difficult it was, how she stared at Ned as if he were a ghost she'd rather not see. But there he was that weekend, a constant reminder of her failure as a woman, especially now that her second marriage had just gone down the tubes.

“We should have it all together at forty.” Susie smirked. “Shouldn’t we?”

“Do you?” Ned swirled the ice around in his glass and grinned at her.

Oh, sure, she thought. First I marry a fairy, and then, Howard. Well, Howard didn’t look a damn thing like the womanizer he turned out to be, so how was I to know? The bastard was nearly bald and paunchy as a beach ball. I assumed he was sincere.

“Depends on how you feel about divorce.” Susie sneered in Ned’s direction.

“Best thing that ever happened to me,” Ned snapped.

“Oh, shut up, Ned,” Kit said quickly.

It was Friday night, that first reunion weekend, and they were all sitting around Vivian’s living room in Stockbridge, trying to cheer up Susie after her second divorce, and doing a dismal job of it.

“What was Howard like?” Vivian asked, taking the seat beside her, and sinking into the lush white cushions on her oh-so-upscale couch, obviously trying to cut the tension between her and Ned.

“Well, definitely straight. Perhaps that’s why I married him, the antithesis of Ned, definitely not gay.”

“I’m not gay, Susie, not wanting to sleep with you does not make me gay.” Ned gave her an angry scowl.

Susie smiled demurely at Ned. “As a matter of fact, Howard was safely homophobic and referred to ‘those homos’ as ‘pansies’ and ‘fruitcakes.’” She laughed loudly.

Ned rose from his seat. “You deserved the homophobic bastard, Susie. Didn’t she, guys?” He extended his arms and bowed in her direction.

“Will you two please make peace?” Vivian raised her eyebrows and glared at Ned.

Susie looked away. Despite a penchant for insensitive remarks, Howard had been a wonderful companion and had somehow charmed her into believing he loved her.

“He told me I was the girl he could never get in High School,” she said as she took a swallow of her drink.

“Oh, so he was a nerd, right?” Kit piped in.

“Yes, he was a nerd,” Susie said.

“Oh, nerds always turn out to be the worst,” Kit said sympathetically.

“He was a little shit nerd. He definitely had a personality flaw that I discovered while we were vacationing in Arizona.” She put her feet on

Vivian's large square coffee table and kicked aside her *Country Living* magazines. She tried to relax. Vivian had promised it would be a soothing, low stress weekend, but so far, no go.

"What happened?" Vivian asked in that sweet, annoying maternal way that had been grating on Susie's nerves since she'd arrived.

"He disappeared, just up and disappeared. Can you believe it?" She finished her drink in one swallow.

"What happened to him?" Vivian asked.

"I thought he might have gotten lost in the desert. I was hysterical. I ran around with the local police to all the neighboring hotels looking for him like a madwoman."

"And?" Kit said into the silence.

"A very polite policeman found him stark naked in the hot tub of a Hilton with some loudmouth blonde from Texas. 'Ah, he's okay, ma'am ... just indisposed.' The poor cop blushed a deep ruby red and stared out over my head. I'll never forget how humiliated I felt."

"Bastard," Kit said. "Howard sounds like a real schmuck."

Susie felt about to cry again. "I soon found out about his secretary, the next-door neighbor, and the next-door neighbor's thirty-year-old next-door neighbor. The marriage was over in less than two years. I'll have another drink, Viv."

"Better luck next time." Ned's obvious sarcasm fell into the room like a bag of concrete rocks. The others turned to glare at him before filling the silence with small talk.



Susie had been in the midst of a good cry when Vivian called to invite her to Stockbridge. Since she'd been caught in the act of feeling miserable, she had to admit to Vivian that Howard turned out to be a major disappointment. Vivian insisted that a weekend in Stockbridge would do her some good.

"It's beautiful here. It's healing," Vivian had said.

Susie reluctantly left the kids with their grandparents and made the long drive. By the time she crossed the border into Massachusetts, she was actually looking forward to seeing her old friends again, with the exception, of course, of her asshole first husband. She'd called before she left the house and swore him to good behavior.

“Let’s not air our dirty underwear, Ned. Let’s be civil for the sake of the others. Will you promise me that?”

“Of course,” he said.

But Ned had never been good at keeping his promises. She should have known. When did he ever tell the truth? He had been such a mess when that little fairy had left him, kept lying, saying it had been the other way around, that he had left the little fairy. Ned was a deep chasm of lies. The memories came back, but not softly; no, more like a horrific blast of thunder

1972

“I’m confused, Susie,” Ned said.

“You lied to me.” Susie had so many tears in her eyes she could barely see. “You’re gay. You had an affair with that boy.”

“No, no, I’m not gay,” Ned said softly. “I don’t like it with men as much, really, I don’t. It’s not as complete, not as deep.”

“I can’t take this, Ned.” She blew her nose for the fifteenth time. “You must promise me that this is it. This is the last of it. I won’t go through this again with you. You left me for a man, Ned. How could you? Right before our wedding? You couldn’t have been decent enough to tell me the truth?”

Oh, he was so sincere, so angry at himself. “This is the last of it. I swear it is. I want children, Susie. I want us to get married. I love you.” He fell to his knees before her and buried his head in her lap. “It was stupid of me to fuck up our wedding plans. Susie. I’m so sorry.”

“Why did you have to flaunt that guy in front of everybody, Ned? All our friends know about it.”

“I’m sorry,” Ned said and looked at her pathetically.

“He spoke with a lisp, Ned. He not only lisped, he swished.”

Ned looked uncomfortable. “Yeah, guess he did.”

“You introduced him to your parents?” She asked incredulously, she could not believe he would be so stupid.

“Yeah.”

“They humiliated you into coming back to me, didn’t they?”

“No, of course not.”

“What then?”

“Well, I did feel a bit embarrassed, Danny told my dad he was devoted to me, like he was going to be my wife or something.”

“Oh, shit.”

“And he told Mom he wanted to take her shopping, she needed prettier clothes. He couldn’t have been more inappropriate.” Ned smiled meekly. “Told her he loved to quilt, too.” He laughed despite himself. “Then he kissed me on the cheek.”

“Oh, my God, what did they do?” she asked. She couldn’t help seeing the humor in it; his parents were so conservative.

“Dad grabbed Mom’s hand and stormed out, after calling us faggots.”

Susie felt his discomfort. She took his head in her hands and held him close.

“I guess they really played on your small-town Baptist background, didn’t they, honey?”

“They made me join the Clearing Community.”

“What’s that?” she asked.

“It’s sort of a detox for men who like to sleep with other men, an organization that turns the gay straight. Guaranteed not to fail. I’ve been going for a week now, Susie.”

“Really?”

“I’m really a heterosexual, honey,” he said. “Honest. Deep down inside, that’s what I am. This other thing is just like getting a bad itch every once in a while.”

Susie ran her fingers through his thick auburn waves and brought him close again. He meant everything to her. She felt needed. He’d obviously gotten it all out of his system. Once they were married and she was pregnant, well then, everything would be fine.

“I feel badly about my parents,” he said. “They’ll never get over it.”

Susie recalled the brief conversation she had had with his mother and silently agreed. *Please, dear, he’s sick. He needs you,* Mrs. Hammond had pleaded. *Yes, of course, Mother Hammond, of course. I won’t leave him.*

“They will, they will get over it, Ned, you’ll see,” Susie said distractedly, unable to control the waves of ambiguity, or the urge between her legs. “Your parents will come around now that we’re getting married for certain.”

Unfortunately, the urge was not for Ned. Her thoughts were on another man. She wondered if she would miss that other man. Her sex life had become spectacular during Ned’s absence. She had gloriously discovered that not all men were sexually perfunctory and politely efficient.

“You’ll see, sweetheart, they’ll come around,” she reassured him once again.



Susie and David had gravitated toward one another, quite innocently at first. Susie patiently listened to his bleeding heart, his woes over Vivian’s departure, and he listened to her fury at Ned for coming out before their wedding.

Naturally, she felt guilty about sleeping with David because she’d manipulated it; she pulled every trick in the book to make it happen. She did whatever it was going to take to weaken David’s loyalty to Vivian. God, Vivian had broken up with him, what did it matter?

“Am I just an ear for you, David?” she asked him.

“Of course not,” he said, reaching out, his hungry reach. God, he was sexy. She knew it was all about sex, a pleasurable desire that burned inside of her, exactly where she had needed the attention. But that hadn’t made it any easier.

After Ned came screaming out of the closet and left her for some guy, Vivian had been there, consoling her, checking in daily, trying to cheer her up, providing comfort.

“Have you noticed your new neighbor? He’s absolutely gorgeous, has a cocker spaniel. Why don’t you buy a dog, Susie? I know when he goes to the park with little Zorro.”

“No thanks, Viv, dogs are too much trouble.”

“Well, we’ll think of another way for you to meet him then.”

Vivian would never have forgiven her for seducing David. Didn’t matter they weren’t together, but David was taboo. David had been hers.

“I was hard on David,” Vivian repeated one too many times. “I guess there’s always the chance we’ll get back together.”

Susie kept her mouth shut and nodded her head. She knew Vivian expected her to insist that she go back with David, but she remained uncharacteristically silent. Vivian must have assumed that she was so distraught over Ned she simply wasn’t herself.

“It’s okay to see someone, Susie,” Vivian kept telling her. “You need some male attention.”

Susie smiled halfheartedly, promising she would, probably reeking of David’s cologne by then, David’s sweet sexy smell. But Vivian never

noticed. She just kept trying to convince her to accept what she referred to as “Ned’s sexual complexities” and move on.

Despite Susie’s affair with David, she was happy when Ned came back to her, citing a successful Clearing House breakthrough and begging her to forgive him. And she did, after all, she still loved him. All the pieces should have fallen back into place then, but they didn’t, they only appeared to take on a sense of normalcy, the way life used to be before Ned became complicated and David became sensational.

Once her engagement to Ned became official, yet again, not a one of their friends was willing to support their marriage.

“Oh, how can you forgive him for joining that ridiculous organization?” Vivian lamented. “Tell him to see a real shrink and stop denying who he is.”

Kit, of course, was beside herself and didn’t understand how Susie could actually go through with a marriage to Ned. “He sees homosexuality as some curable disease of the psyche? He’s an idiot, a coward, Susie.” Ned and Kit could no longer be in the same room without going to battle.

Even David was trying to convince her to move in with him, a fatal mistake she was well aware of, and besides, she’d never want Vivian to know that David had been warming her bed for the last few months. It felt like a betrayal, no matter how many times a day she re-analyzed it, and she swore David to secrecy.

Her friends’ failure to support her marriage to Ned had hurt like hell. David took off a few months after his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer and never even said goodbye, never even wished her luck. She assumed he was angry at her for taking Ned back. Kit and Vivian mysteriously disappeared up to Stockbridge together and didn’t even call with well wishes.

Susie and Ned married without any of the old group present. They found a house in Morristown, New Jersey. They both went to work at the local high school. She taught English and Ned became a drama teacher. In 1974, they had their first child, a son. Two years later, their daughter was born. They tried desperately to make their marriage work, copiously and simplistically, like a prime-time television family drama with resolvable issues and well-delivered lines. Unfortunately, and even after years of couple’s therapy, their show was canceled.

They were drinking a lot the weekend of that first reunion. Perhaps they were all unhappy, all except for Vivian and Kit, who Susie noticed, stayed away from the booze. It was David who got up on Saturday morning and made breakfast – bacon, eggs, toast, and Screwdrivers, a little something to clear their heads from all the wine they'd knocked off the night before. Susie assumed that David's recent divorce was unsettling for him, because every time she turned around he had a drink in his hand.

By noon, they were all pretty looped, all except for Kit and Vivian. Those two kept going off on their own, whispering together like teenagers. Susie found their behavior distasteful.

All Susie wanted that day was a swim. She went out to the lake right after her fiasco with David ... the groping hands, the heavy breathing, and then, nothing; David standing there apologizing, his penis as soft as cotton candy. It was stupid to think he still found her attractive; it had been years.

"Sorry, Susie. I've had too much to drink. Sorry."

Well, what did she expect, their brief affair had been what felt like a century ago and she had aged. Age, the great attraction buster. It had been stupid of her to come on to him. She was embarrassed that David couldn't get it up. It surprised her; he was no longer the stud she remembered. Perhaps he had noticed that she was no longer a perfect size eight. Well, years had gone by, what did she expect? Fireworks?



When she got to the lake, Vivian's niece, Faith, was in, swimming. Kit and Vivian hadn't said where they were going, but as usual, they were nowhere to be seen, but that was good. She just wanted to get away herself, join Faith in the lake, not think about men and what total assholes they were.

She spotted Ned right away, sprawled out on a towel, and her heart sank. She hoped he was asleep, so deeply asleep he wouldn't wake up until it was time to leave Stockbridge. She was so sick of their latest argument. He wanted the kids that summer and wanted to talk about it constantly, wanted to persuade her to talk them out of summer camp. He just wouldn't give it up.

Ned sprang up as she approached the water, as if he'd been lying in wait ... still fuming, hoping she'd appear so he could lace into her, no doubt.

“You are being the biggest asshole bitch,” Ned said, his face so red his freckles looked pink. “You know that, Susie?”

“Screw you, jerk,” She turned her back on him and stared out over Lake Mahkeenac. Faith was swimming away from them, toward Tanglewood.

“Why are you being such a fuck, Susie?” Ned got off his towel and walked up close. He turned her to him.

“The kids don’t want to spend their summer in Manhattan. They want to go to summer camp. Can you blame them?” Susie glared back into his sunburnt face.

“You’re instigating them.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I am not. Charlie has a job as a counselor this year and Melissa wants to learn to ride.” She slipped off her shirt and walked toward the water. *That would shut him up, for the time being.*

But Ned followed her. He stood so close that she could smell the cream he had smeared all over his body. “She can learn to ride in Central Park,” he snapped.

“You’re the one being ridiculous.” Susie shouted. “It’s too hot.”

“You’re turning my kids against me,” Ned said angrily.

“Why would you want the kids to suffer the Manhattan heat, Ned?”

“I want to take them upstate, canoeing,” he said determinedly as he glared at her.

“Ha! That’s a good one. You can’t fit in a canoe anymore, Ned.”

“Look who’s talking? *Oink. Oink. Oink!*” Ned snarled.

She was furious that Ned didn’t even try to keep the peace for the sake of the “retreat,” as Vivian annoyingly kept referring to the weekend. He was such an insensitive bastard. She felt like slapping him, but controlled the impulse.

“Kiss off, faggot,” she screamed, sorry one split second after the words fell out of her mouth.

She felt Ned’s strong grasp on her arms. He took her hands and held them behind her back. She squirmed and managed to wiggle free. She slapped him hard across the face – the hell with control.

“Schmuck!” she yelled.

David had come out of nowhere. “Whoa! I heard that. Want to go for a swim?” he asked. “You two need a cooling off.”

“I’d rather have a stiff drink at this point. Faith is out there. Why don’t you join her?” She scowled at him.

David looked out over the lake. "I don't see her."

"She was right there a moment ago, not too far out," Susie said.

"Why can't we see her?" David said. The three of them stood there looking out over the beautiful expanse of water, staring into the empty distance.

"Come on, Ned," David said as he ran into the water. "She could be in trouble."

Ned must have been in shock. Susie recalled how he seemed to stumble into the lake. She watched helplessly as they swam out looking for Faith, calling her name.

After what seemed like an eternity, she saw Ned and David swim back toward her, but she didn't see Faith.

"Did she come back?" David called out.

Susie shook her head. "No."

"Faith!" Ned yelled.

They both immediately swam back out.

The next thing Susie knew, there were all these people who came out of nowhere and joined the search for Faith. Vivian and Kit joined them, seeming to come out of nowhere as well. Vivian became frantic when she learned that Faith was missing. Kit dove into the lake and started swimming out. "When did you see her last?" Vivian kept asking. "Could you have missed her when she came out of the water?"

Susie knew she and Ned could have missed her; they'd been so engrossed in their argument. "'We might not have seen her,'" she said.

Hours passed and Faith had not emerged from the water. They sat around Vivian's kitchen table sobering up on black coffee, saying little ... except for Kit, who kept asking them what had happened, over and over again. "She couldn't have just disappeared," Kit said.

"She could have gotten a cramp," Ned said.

Kit stared at him in exasperation.

Susie shook her head, she and Ned had been arguing. They'd lost sight of Faith. This all might have been their fault.

"I saw people swimming toward Tanglewood but too far out to tell if one of them was Faith," David said.

"Look, let's not get negative. Maybe she swam down and got out at Kwuniikwat Island," Ned said. "Didn't she mention she had a friend on that island?"

“Where the hell is she?” Vivian screamed out. “Why hasn’t she come home?”

Susie blamed herself for this chaos over Faith. She wanted to blame David or Ned, but she was responsible for Ned’s distraction, and of course, she was the reason David wasn’t even there. If they’d all really been together, Faith never would have been swimming alone. They’d have been with her.

Vivian sent them all home that evening and promised to keep them informed of any news. But she never called any of them again, at least Susie had never heard from her. She asked Ned the next time she saw him if he’d heard anything about Faith. He said Faith must have drowned because he never heard from Vivian. Vivian was probably too distraught to speak to them. She would have told them if she wasn’t so distraught, of course she would have. Then David called and said he’d spoken to Vivian, and Faith had presumably drowned. Susie called Kit and they sat in a stoic silence over the phone. That was the last communication she’d had with any of them except for Ned, who she couldn’t avoid. The subject of Faith never came up again.

It was just one of those tragedies in life; someone dies too young, victim of a ridiculously absurd accident, one that never should have happened. Still, it haunted Susie, the years that girl would never live, the person she would never become.

2006

Susie pulled into a parking garage and turned off the ignition. She and Ned had finally found their truce, though it had taken nearly twenty years. Once their children were away at college, they barely saw one another. Eventually, absence obliterated many of the earlier wounds.

After Charlie’s first child was born, the joy about being grandparents created a renewed bond between them, and they began to speak on the phone regularly. Ned even called when she married Drew, and when she and Drew returned from honeymooning in Europe, Susie came home to a beautiful bouquet of flowers from Ned.

She met Ned’s wife for the first time at their son’s wedding. She thought that Deidre looked like the type to put up with him – self-involved, vain.

She imagined it would be good to see Ned again; it had been three years since their son's wedding. She wasn't sure how she felt about seeing the others, though. It had been a long, long time, not since Vivian's disastrous retreat in 1989.

"Another reunion?" she'd said when she'd answered Vivian's message. "You sure you want to do that? I mean the last one was such a calamity."

Vivian mumbled something into the phone about Faith ... that she was alive? What the hell was that all about? Leave it to Vivian to confuse the issue of death. Despite herself, Susie was just curious enough to show up. Had Vivian really denied them that information after all this time? Didn't she think they would have wanted to know?

Chapter Twelve

NED

2006

Ned looked nervously at the door. He spoke to Susie fairly often these days, but he hadn't seen her since their son Charlie's wedding. By that time, Susie was on her third marriage to a man named Drew Young.

Ned remembered his prediction after meeting Drew; he wondered if there wasn't a modicum of jealousy behind it.

"It won't last," he had said to his wife, Deidre.

Though Drew seemed like a nice enough fellow, he was clearly overly pretentious and an obvious bore, or at least that's how Ned perceived him. Drew was very outgoing and friendly, particularly to Ned, slapping him across the back as he congratulated the father of the groom.

"Some peach Charlie has there, hey Ned?"

Ned wondered if Susie ever complained about him ... his failure to get it up ... his measly teacher's salary. Susie always thought he'd remain a high school teacher. But two years after their divorce, he'd turned an inheritance from his mother into a real estate holding, paying him rents in excess of twenty thousand a month per property. *Put that in your pipe, Susie.*

He and Susie had fought constantly about money during their marriage, but that was just a way of avoiding the real issue. Susie's underlying rage had more to do with the many phone calls he got from men, not to mention his consistent disinterest in her glorious curves. Susie was always trying to manipulate his passion, but it was work for Ned. It always turned out to be work ... a nightly ritual of pretending he was so into sex with her that he could barely catch his breath, but in the privacy of his own mind, he tried to force his erections by thinking of penises and the hair around the nipple of his latest male trick.

Ned had stayed close to Deidre at Charlie's wedding and later on at the reception. He held her hand, refilling her glass with wine when needed. He pulled out her chair at the banquet table. He knew Susie was taking it all in, aware of Susie's reaction when he introduced Deidre as his wife. Susie had that forced smile as she shook Deidre's hand, but Deidre was cool and sufficiently detached, dismissing Susie in much the same way she usually dismissed what she termed "trivial information."

He and Deidre no longer had a consistent sexual relationship. When they'd first met, they pretended sex mattered and went out of their way to fornicate nightly. Then, one day, sex simply wasn't there. Somehow, the memory of passion sufficed, like recalling the over-stimulated pursuits of youth. What was, was.

Ned loved Deidre's looks. She could be defined as the perfectly chiseled wasp. She wore clothes as if draped in them; her dresses and coats flowed around her – earth tones, always subtle, always slightly and flirtatiously revealing. Her cheekbones were high, her legs were long and her stride confident. Her blonde hair fell to her shoulders and her eyes were intelligent ... "an intelligent shade of blue," he often told her. Ned looked upon Deidre as glamorous and urbane, the right to his left ... the yang to his yin, the Chateaufort Du Pape to his palate.

It never ceased to amaze him, the way so many people assumed that liking men in bed meant that he didn't like women. He did like women in bed. It was fine, it was pleasurable, though it was never as passionate or as wildly erotic as with men. It was satisfying and comforting, not concupiscent. But he'd been incredibly hot for Deidre in the beginning, and he loved her. He would have never taken advantage of her love for him, either. He'd been honest with his beautiful wife weeks before buying her the diamond he placed on her finger.

"I like to go to bed with men," he'd said. "It isn't serious ... just for sex."

Deidre had looked at him for a long time. He couldn't read her. She looked bewildered. He wanted to marry her. Certainly, he didn't want to lose her; he loved her.

"Men aren't about love," he added. "Men are about pleasure, about fantasy." It was difficult to explain that to a woman, but he would certainly try.

“Thank you for telling me,” she finally said. “We won’t let it get between us, okay?”

But sexually satisfying his wife eventually became a chore for Ned. Deidre must have noticed. On a certain level, her sexuality intimidated him. He didn’t want to see her passion for him, it frightened him. He didn’t want to feel inadequate with her. Deidre was his wife and sex was a small part of their relationship. Ned’s desire for men was his own cross to bear, as private as masturbation, and just as random.

“Do you mind that I sleep with men?” he’d asked her, after their two-year marriage slipped into one of delightful companionship.

“I like gay men,” she said. “My father may have been gay. I’m not sure.”

Ned was surprised. She’d never mentioned that before. “Really?” he said. She curled herself in his arms and he caressed her hair. “He loved me, too,” she said. “But he kept himself away. He was pulled in different directions, like you. I always thought his secrets made him more important than my mother and me. My mother and I didn’t have a secret life.”

“Secrets can do that,” Ned said. “They separate you from the ones you love, turning their complexities into qualities of admiration and their foibles into attractions.”

Ned was relieved not to have to explain himself to Deidre. She transitioned into their marriage of comfort without blaming him, without the anger Susie had shown him.

“I’m so glad you’re not homophobic, darling,” he told her, once the truth was as common to the fabric of their days as the television shows they watched.

“How can anyone live in New York and be homophobic?” she said in all seriousness.

Deidre worked for a major interior designer and had developed a comfort level with a wide variety of people. Ned admired that about her, debutantes, movie stars and housewives from Scarsdale all adored her, not to mention, of course, the gay elite who invited her everywhere and fawned over her style, and her wealth, and her impressive client list.

“I enjoy gay men.” She always said that. “I can’t imagine a straight man being as much fun, or wearing clothes as well.”

“I’m not gay,” he said. She raised an eyebrow at him. “Whatever,” she said.

Ned wondered if he was hurting her, if secretly she yearned for him to be different, the way she must have yearned for her father's complete attention and lack of ambiguous commitment.

"Do you mind, Deidre ... Peter has invited me to a dinner party this Saturday ... all men, nothing you would find exciting."

"Sorry, darling, I need you this Saturday. It's the lawn party in New Haven, my new client's housewarming. I told them I'd bring you."

"Not a problem. I'll let Peter know."

Ned's friends were always secondary to the comfort of normality that he and Deidre projected to the world. He would be the first to say that he usually preferred the company of men to women, but he had always felt he needed a straight façade more than he needed a gay pride button on his lapel. He truly did not consider himself gay, but as the years passed, he became more and more supportive of gay issues; he sought out gay friends. His life with Deidre would always come first. But change appears in life just as complacency settles.

Ned's recent relationship with Alejandro was forcing him to question everything he thought of as being sane and stable. Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending upon how Ned chose to look upon it, Alejandro wasn't anyone he could laugh off or compartmentalize as a "trick."



"Do you sleep with other men?" he asked Deidre once and noticed the blush that came to her body.

She kissed his mouth. "Just you," she said. "There is just you."

He doubted her, of course. He knew men found her attractive, and he didn't want to deny her the equality of infidelity.

"It's okay, you know. It really is, Deidre."

She looked at him – an expression he couldn't interpret.

"Okay," she said.

She would never allow him to know if she had taken a lover. She would keep it hidden, as he kept Alejandro hidden. Sometimes, he couldn't help it though, and he'd come out with, "Alejandro said the funniest thing the other day. Remember, I mentioned Alejandro? Well, he just bought a brand new Lexus ... show off."

But there was never a name that came up in Deidre's vocabulary that wasn't a client, except for one time ... brief mention of a Robert ...and then,

no more.

Ned decided not to dwell on it. Their world was filled with a meticulously handpicked group of people. Ned and Deidre were tremendously social and mixed their friends together, straight, and gay. Deidre and their Shar-Pei, named Carter, were Ned's immediate family, and his beautiful, interior designer wife provided him with everything he needed, including the sanctity of love and marriage, or the illusion thereof.

Ned wondered how Deidre would feel if he threw it all away and moved in with Alejandro, if he went so far as to go down to City Hall with his new lover, and register as domestic partners like so many of his friends had recently done.

But he couldn't do that to her, wouldn't ever do that to her. God had sent Deidre to him and he respected that. He had spiraled into years of solitude after that girl's drowning, caring only for his children. He felt responsible for what happened to Faith: he should have kept an eye on her that day. But he'd been angry. He'd turned from the God he'd grown up with, and in that darkness, suffered God's vengeance. He could have saved Faith but he was self-involved. God banished him for his sin. Ned was alone ... his children were grown ... men were filling the emptiness of his nights with their unholy bodies. He was lost.

Then, one day on a whim, he went to church and God opened his arms. Ned wept and asked forgiveness. How soon after that did he meet Deidre ... a week ... ten days?

Sent by God to accept him and to love him, God's gift to Ned, sweet Deidre.



Small, familiar fingers, a hand on his back, and Ned turned.

"Hello, honey." Susie smiled. "Good to see you. It's been a while."

Ned quickly got up and embraced her, and with a broad grin, kissed her cheek.

Chapter Thirteen

DAVID

2006

David watched as Kit moved next to Vivian, letting Susie sit beside Ned, an old reflex reaction from the past. David noticed that Susie kept her arm over Ned's shoulder as she sat. It took only a moment before Susie found his amused gaze. He had not been surprised to see her familiar grin, that special little smile coded with passion – her “I want to be fucked” look from the old days. David would never have imagined Susie with short gray hair and crinkles near her eyes, lines above her mouth, and pounds around her middle. She had become the type of woman David had little interest in, one of the “older ones,” a woman of his own age. He observed how she reached for Vivian's hand and squeezed it tightly.

“Viv,” he heard her say, blowing a kiss across the table.

It was odd that David felt completely detached from Susie, considering the passions of their youth ... their brief affair. Vivian had certainly aged, as well, but Vivian still made him lose his bearing, still made him feel like a young man with his heart on his sleeve.

He remembered, he had shown up one night, uninvited, at Vivian's door. The beginning, a bittersweet memory.

1970

“Pizza?” he'd held out the box and grinned.

Vivian stood there staring at him as if he were from outer space.

“It does smell good,” she finally said.

“I brought wine, too.” He followed her into the kitchen.

“You think of everything, don't you?” she teased, grimacing at him as she struggled with the wine opener.

He took the bottle from her hand and popped the cork. He stared into her eyes, knowing he would never love again, could never feel quite this mesmerized ... ever, not even if he lived to be one hundred.

They ate the whole pizza and drank all the wine. They sat around her kitchen table and talked about their families. He was nervous and talked more than she did. He told her that his father was giving him a hard time about living in New York.

“My parents want me back in Hartford. They’re trying to be supportive,” he said. “But they forget themselves and start in with me about going into business with Dad. They think I’m wasting my time here, but I have to give them credit, they send me money. They’re not letting me starve in New York.”

She touched his arm. “Are you wasting your time here?” she asked.

He looked at her, the curve of her lips and the dark, captivating beauty of her eyes. She was tall and it made him think of a poem by E. E. Cummings ... *my girl's tall*.....

His heart had been beating a mile a minute. He wanted to kiss her. He also wanted to jump on her bones and lose himself inside the endless length of her.

2006

David had no choice but to reminisce, watching her now, so many years later, her eyes on Susie, her chin in her hands. God, on a certain level, he was he still in love with her. A thought plagued him ... *and if I had never cheated on her that one stupid time, would she have had my child? Assumed my name?*

“You look wonderful,” he heard her say to Susie. It made him remember being self-consciously naked. “You look wonderful,” Vivian had said. He wasn’t the virgin, she was, or so she had told him, yet he was the one that trembled.

“I love you,” he had whispered in her arms that night. He’d never said that to anyone before, except his mom. This was different. The words made him tear up. “I love you,” he repeated.

It took her days to return the words, to reach for his hand and kiss his neck and agree to be his. When did the darkness fall? A year later? Or had it

only been a moment before she looked at him with disdain ... and disinterest?



Enough with memories, David thought, they're always distorted anyway. He shook his head and cleared his throat, "All right, all right," he said loudly, as he raised his right hand in the air. "It's time to brag."

He reached into his back pocket and produced a wallet full of photos, pictures of his daughters, Sandy and Mia, and his son, Frank.

David watched as Vivian took the wallet from him and scanned through, her eyes caressing his life with hints of tenderness. What was she thinking, he wondered as she flipped through the photos, smiling and grinning as she moved from one photograph to the next.

"Your wife?" she finally asked.

David nodded and noticed her engaging smile. He'd married an Asian woman. He knew what she was thinking, what she'd say to Susie later if she had half a chance.

Doesn't surprise me, Asian women are so submissive; they'd giggle, sure to find that amusing. And she looks young.

"She's pretty," Vivian said as she handed him back the wallet.

"And you? Any photos?" he asked.

Vivian shook her head. "I'm afraid I don't carry photos," she said.

Typical, he said to himself. *That doesn't surprise me at all.*

He stared at Kit across from him. He wondered what her life was like and if she had any interesting photographs in her wallet. He remembered their brief affair and wondered if she thought of it. God, he'd slept with all of them, hadn't he? Well, his affair with Kit was before he'd met any of the others. He and Kit connected right away. She was ballsy, he thought, opinionated. The sex between them had been sweet and sexy but no canons going off. Then she told him she was bisexual and he found that strange, nothing he wanted to deal with. He started to pull back and she noticed. He remembered the night they'd had their long talk and decided they would rather be friends than lovers. Then, when Vivian showed up, there was no contest.

He caught Kit's gaze from across the table and smiled at her, but she quickly looked off.

Chapter Fourteen

VIVIAN

“Well, as long as we’re bragging ...” Susie announced as she reached inside her purse. “The grandchildren.”

Susie proudly produced a wallet full of photographs and passed them on to Kit, who looked through with amused interest.

“Have I seen those?” Ned asked.

“I sent you copies,” she said.

“Oh, yeah, I remember.” Ned stretched his pictures out toward Kit. “Can’t tell the twins apart, can you?”

“You never send *me* copies,” Susie said with a laugh. “Men never think of those things.” She smiled at Vivian.

Vivian smiled back but not before noticing that Ned had turned to make a humorous face at Susie. It was clear that they had reached a transformation at some point in their relationship; they even appeared to like one another again.

“Your son’s name is Charlie?” Kit asked.

“Yes,” Ned said as he leaned over toward Kit and pointed to two boys. “Those are Charlie’s twins. The girls are my daughter Melissa’s girls.” He smiled wide. “Bridget and Carmen.”

“Cute, very cute,” Kit said as she quickly flipped through.

Suddenly, Susie banged on the table and everyone jumped. She’d certainly broken the spell of oohs and aahs over children and grandchildren.

“So, Viv, what’s going on? What’s this big omission?” Susie asked loudly.

Vivian knew she was frowning; she’d been taken by surprise and wasn’t prepared for it. “Let’s order some lunch first, okay?” She took a breath. “I’m really hungry.” She opened a menu, knowing she was putting them

off. It suddenly frightened her to admit the truth. *Whatever possessed me? Is the truth really necessary?*

Ned leaned back in his chair. "I could use some food too."

Susie let out a long exasperated sigh, a sign that she was thoroughly disgusted at being dragged into the city to meet people she didn't really want to see, and eat second-rate food, to boot. But she picked up the menu and studied it like a textbook.

Vivian decided on a Veggie Burger and turned to David. She noticed that he hadn't opened his menu. "Aren't you eating?" she asked.

"Sure." He smiled. "I'm having the usual."

Vivian put her head back and closed her eyes, as if reading off a mental chalkboard. "Let's see. That would be a hamburger, raw onions, ketchup, mustard, lettuce, tomato and fries ... crispy."

"You remember?" He was obviously surprised.

"Looks like I do."

"Amazing." He laughed, apparently pleased.

Ned looked up. "I'll have the same," he said. "We all set?"

"Yes," they answered in unison.

Vivian watched as David motioned for the waiter. She was amazed that she remembered what his "usual" was and had a sudden recollection of what it was like to smell hamburgers and fries in the air. She and Ian were fanatic about avoiding meat, even though she'd allowed Brett to eat whatever he wanted. Fortunately, for Vivian, her son adjusted to his parent's vegetarian diet very early.

Kit ordered a salad and another coke.

"Still a vegetarian?" Susie asked her as she handed her menu up to the waiter.

Kit nodded. "I eat fish now, and chicken, as well, but no red meat ... no veal either, or pork."

"Some things never change." David tapped his fingers on the table and stared at her.

Kit ignored David's remark and looked out over the room.

As the conversation quickly got back to children and grandchildren, behavior problems and education, Kit turned her attention back to Vivian and tugged at her sleeve.

"I have to talk to you, Viv," Kit whispered and met her expression.

"What about?" Vivian asked slowly, feeling the nervousness in her chest.

Kit moved in close. The others were talking, still looking at photographs.

“The adoption agency called me. My daughter wants to contact me,” Kit whispered again.

Vivian looked away. She blushed deeply, all the way down to her neck. She knew that, of course. Faith had discussed it with her.

“Really?” Vivian said as she turned back, trying to show surprise, knowing what a liar the truth would make out of her. Now would be the time to tell Kit, yes, of course she knew that Faith wanted to look her up. She had agreed that she should because she wanted what was best for Faith, despite what the truth would do to *her*.

“Yes,” Kit answered.

Vivian reached out for Kit’s hand and briefly noticed David’s reaction, as if the gesture was still any of his business.

Chapter Fifteen

KIT

Kit put her head back against the booth. She hated all this talk about children, never could understand what the big deal was. *How would they act if she showed them Morgan's picture, beautiful Morgan with her dark movie star looks.* Impulsively, she let go of Vivian's hand and reached inside her laptop case for her cell phone.

"My house," she announced proudly. "We bought it last year."

Vivian took the phone quickly. "My God, it's gorgeous ... would you look at that porch."

"The house was built in the late 1800s. We've just finished the renovation." Kit smiled, the proud parent of a stellar Victorian.

"We?" Vivian raised a curious brow.

Ned reached across the table and took the phone.

"Nice," he said. "Looks big. How many rooms?"

"Oh, four bedrooms, good full-sized ones. The master has a fireplace." Kit took the phone back and went to the next shot, showing it to Vivian. "We had it put in."

"Nice," Vivian reiterated Ned's comment as she scrolled up for the next image.

"That's Morgan and I in the garden," Kit said and quickly added, "the 'we' part."

Vivian was startled. "Morgan Brennan, the actress?"

Kit nodded her head. She knew what they were thinking. *Who would have ever taken Morgan Brennan for a lesbian?*

"You're kidding?" David laughed loudly. "You and Morgan Brennan are in a relationship?"

Kit nodded and gave the phone to Susie.

"Our cats, Max and Millie."

“I want to see that photo of Morgan Brennan,” Susie said eagerly. “How the hell do you work this thing?”

Vivian manipulated the phone for Susie and turned her attention back to Kit.

“Have you been together long?” she asked.

“Five years.”

“Congratulations.” Ned gave her a pleasant smile. “A nice surprise.”

Kit looked up and met his smile. “You mean about Morgan being gay?”

“No,” he said quietly. “I mean about you ... finding happiness, accepting your ... ah ... sexuality.”

Kit smiled back at him and their eyes locked briefly. She watched as he turned his attention back to the others. She’d felt his sadness and was puzzled about why it was there.

Vivian suddenly leaned in toward Kit’s shoulder. Kit felt Vivian’s breasts against her arm. Kit turned to her, briefly caressing Vivian’s face with her expression, the way she used to. Vivian raised her brow.

“Should we visit the ladies room?” Vivian asked. “I want to hear about ... you know,” she whispered confidentially.

“It can wait,” Kit said softly.

She watched as Vivian shrugged and looked back at the others.

Vivian had always been able to unsettle her, arouse her with just an expression, something in her eyes that had always been riveting. Kit was surprised by the same old electric current after all these years. She always wondered if Vivian was ever aware of the power she had over her in the old days – and whether or not she teased her on purpose because it was just so much fun to dangle a lesbian by the toes. She knew she leaned one way more than the other. Yes, she was definitely a lesbian, especially around Vivian.

They had all been a little in love with Vivian back then, for their own reasons. For Ned, she was maternal – a non-judgmental ear for him to bend. Susie was fascinated with Vivian’s sophistication. For David, Vivian was the perfect woman, the elusive Park Avenue class act, but for Kit, it was more acute. She never became a lover, not in the true sense of the word, but she was certainly more deeply bound to Vivian than any of the rest of them.

Ned was the first to learn of Kit’s passion for Vivian and the first to tell her she was being stupid. Of course, her unrequited love had been ridiculous. Of course, she realized that now. But in those days, Kit’s entire

love life revolved around the drama of poor choices, her fascination with Vivian having been one of them.

She and Ned used to meet in Washington Square Park for lunch before he took up with that ridiculous Clearing Community. He always brought his guitar. In those days, he never went anywhere without it. She remembered the first time she had told him about Vivian, how she felt about her.

1972

“Move on. You’ll only be hurt. She’s not gay, Kit.”

“Doesn’t she know what she’s doing to me? She must know. She must be gay.”

“You’re nuts, Kit.”

“I think she has a thing for me.”

“Aren’t you seeing someone?”

She could have sworn it was Vivian in the smoky bar, and then, the woman had turned, disappointment, terrible disappointment. She certainly didn’t have Vivian’s looks, but she was dark and tall, the same small waist. It was really wishful thinking to think she’d see Vivian in a gay bar. That would be like finding a space alien in a church.

“Did you ever come on to Susie?” Ned asked, probably feeling he’d found the perfect moment to satisfy his curiosity.

“God, where did you get that idea?”

“Susie,” he said.

Kit raised her eyes and shook her head vigorously. “Vivian may have said something to her. I kissed Vivian once, God, months ago. She kissed me back, too. She probably told Susie about it, and Susie wants everything Vivian has, including my attention, I guess. She is so competitive with Viv. I’ll bet she wants David, as well.”

“Ouch.”

“Sorry.”

“Glad to hear you didn’t come on to Susie,” Ned said.

“I don’t like perky blondes.”

“Someday, you’ll see, you’ll find someone special.”

“Vivian is special. She’s beautiful, so seductive, don’t you think?”

“And straight as Main Street.”

“Bullshit. Why’d she kiss me?”

“Curiosity,” he said. “And you probably made it impossible for her not to.”

“Bullshit. You don’t understand because you’re in denial. It isn’t about sex. It’s about emotion.”

“You’re wrong, Kit. It isn’t about emotion at all, it’s about sex.”

“So? It’s about sex then. Look, it’s no one’s business who anyone sleeps with. I prefer girls, no big deal. Now, repeat after me, Ned ... it’s no big deal.”

“It’s no big deal,” he said slowly, and then laughed. “You think people are born bisexual?”

“We’re born sexual. We’re born capable of sexual love. Some people love the color blue, others really dig red.”

“I dig both.” Ned laughed. “That’s my problem.” He got up and picked up his guitar.

“It isn’t a problem ... it’s a personal preference,” she yelled out.

“No, it’s a problem,” Ned said and strummed his fingers over the guitar strings.

Kit sat back and put her hands behind her head. “Sing me that song, the one by Joni Mitchell ...” Kit sang a few lines, “*You’re in my blood like holy wine ...*”

Ned put his foot up on the bench and strummed a few notes of the song. He grinned over at her.

“I won’t tell anyone you’ve got a thing for Vivian, Kit. We need to protect your reputation. You tell people you have a thing for Vivian and they’ll question your sanity.”

Kit watched Ned tune up his guitar and thought about the month she and Vivian would be out of town together. She’d been anticipating it so much she could barely sleep.

Kit had just gotten Vivian a job that would take them both to Vermont, out of New York, away from prying eyes. Maybe, then, it would happen between them. It made her feel weird about David though, he was acting jealous, as if he and Vivian were still living together. It was so strange, both of them being into Vivian the way they were. David was getting very aggressive about it.

“Does Viv know how you feel?” Ned asked suddenly.

“Sure, I think. It couldn’t bother her all that much, though. She’s not really pressuring me to find a place of my own, anymore. I think she likes

having me around.”

Kit closed her eyes and fantasized the impossible – another long, lingering kiss with Vivian.

“I think of Vivian as a mother figure,” Ned said. “Maybe that’s why I told her what I wouldn’t even admit to myself ... I felt safe with Mama Viv.”

“Mama Viv?” Kit laughed. “You must be gay.”

“People never reveal the truth about themselves. I can hide behind a lie forever. People tease you with the truth and play with your ego. You’ll never know one way or the other about Vivian. The truth is evasive.”

“Well, I guess you’d know best about that, Macho Man.” Kit grinned and was relieved to hear him break out into laughter.

2006

Kit looked across the table at Ned as the images of them in the park that day faded. It seemed she couldn’t help a ride down memory lane. She looked at Vivian and watched as she turned her attention to David. He was telling her all about toys, and then, they were off onto video games and Harry Potter dolls. Kit went back to her coke, remembering more about David than she cared to.

Chapter Sixteen

1972

The theater looked like an old barn. Nestled on a stream and in walking distance of the boarding house where she and Vivian had a rented room, Kit had been overjoyed to see that she and Vivian would be sharing a king-sized bed. Unfortunately, the rehearsals were so intense that neither one of them had their minds on anything other than the play and the rigorous routine of *Summer Stock*. The days were long, and they were both exhausted, and fell immediately asleep after a quick dinner.

She could tell that Vivian was pretty upset about something because she kept saying how happy she was that the play's schedule was so intense, that it kept her mind off other things.

"What other things?" Kit finally had to ask.

"Guilt," Vivian said sadly.

"Guilt about what?"

"I slept with David right before we left for Vermont," Vivian admitted with a deep sigh. "It was a mistake. It was stupid of me. I had no right to confuse him ... to let him think I wanted us back together. I absolutely do not."

Kit looked away. She felt more than a tinge of jealousy. Her anger at David at that moment made her say something she hadn't wanted to say; but she had no loyalty to David, especially not after the way he'd treated her. Vivian had to know what an asshole he really was. He was a selfish bastard ... and Vivian goes and sleeps with him again?

"He begged me not to recommend you for this role, Vivian," Kit finally blurted out.

Vivian turned white, so white her eyes looked black. "What are you talking about?" she asked.

"I didn't want to tell you but ... Well, you really shouldn't be feeling guilty about anything."

"What are you talking about, Kit?"

“He tried to get me to recommend someone else for the role, other than you. He told me that you shouldn’t be leaving town right now, that if you did, it would fuck up your chances of getting back together. He said that you had just recently reconnected and you needed to go to Hartford with him. He said you two needed time alone.”

“Shit,” Vivian said.

“That must have been right after you were dumb enough to fuck him.” Kit sighed so long she felt faint. “I told him I couldn’t do anything about it, that you were already cast.”

“That bastard. Why didn’t you tell me?” Vivian was so angry that Kit could swear she saw smoke coming from her ears.

“I don’t know.”

“I can’t believe he’d actually fuck with my career.”

“You don’t think he’ll follow you here, do you?” Kit felt as if she were caught in the middle of their turmoil, even though she had no right being put in that position, but David was such a mess, capable of anything. “He’s a loose cannon, you know?”

“Yeah, I know but I don’t think he’s crazy enough to drive all the way up here, and if he does, I’ll just tell him to go away.”

“I can’t believe he wouldn’t want you to do this role,” Kit said. “That’s so unfair ... and he has no right. I never knew he was so controlling. I’m glad I never fell in love with him.”

“I’m not in love with him, that’s the problem. Try and get him to accept that. I thought he might have changed. I had a weak moment.”

“After I told him you’d already been cast, he had a fit, tried to get me to talk you out of doing the role. He kept insisting that I should give Susie the opportunity instead, that Susie would make a better frump than you would.”

“What a jerk.”

“I told him Susie wasn’t right for the role. She’s too blonde and pretty. Not that you aren’t. I mean, God knows you’re gorgeous Vivian, but you’re a better actress. You can make people believe you’re not attractive. Susie can’t do that.”

Vivian’s eyes got small and her face had reddened, bright as a traffic light.

“That’s not the point. I want to do this role. He has no right to try and take that away from me ... and without even consulting me, going behind my back.”

Kit watched as Vivian put her head in her hands. There was no doubt that David was a bastard. She wasn't even telling Vivian the whole truth, how he'd gotten really aggressive, how he had grabbed her arm after class one day and pushed her back behind a building, right into a wall, how he had accused her of screwing up his relationship with Vivian. How he called her a "fucking little dike who was getting in his way."

2006

Kit reached out for her Coca-Cola and blinked her eyes as if she could shut off the memory of David and that time in Vermont. She didn't want to go there, didn't want to remember how it got played out. She lifted her head and surveyed the table. Ned and Susie were talking about their son's prestigious success with Garrett, Willet, Sloane, Lansing, Roth and Miller, and David was still boring Vivian with his expertise on toys. Vivian seemed to be listening, but Kit could tell she couldn't care less. That didn't stop David, though; nothing ever stopped David from anything.

1972

"I never should have slept with him again," Vivian cried. "I'm such a total pushover."

Kit looked at Vivian in disbelief. "What could you have possibly been thinking?"

"His mother has cancer. I know he's in pain over it."

"That doesn't excuse his behavior with me," Kit said.

"He thought I wanted to go back with him but I was just being supportive. *Our relationship is over, David.* How many more times did I have to say that?"

"But you see, Viv, you slept with him again and that gave him renewed hope. You can't do that to a guy."

"It was just a moment of weakness on my part, of believing I could love him the way he wants me to."

"You should have been stronger."

"He thinks you and I are having an affair," Vivian said with a laugh.

Kit felt her back stiffen. She sat down because she felt dizzy. "That's crazy. What did you say to that?"

Vivian glanced at her and winked. "I told him it was none of his business."

Kit sat up and ran her hands through her hair. "Oh, boy, he might have taken that answer as an affirmative. He might think we really are an item."

"He told me his mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer. So I agreed to see him. Wouldn't you? I felt so sorry for him."

"So you gave him a pity fuck?" she said softly.

"His pain touched me, he really loves his mother, they're very close. I put my arms around him and stroked his hair. I always loved his hair, it's very thick," Vivian said tenderly. "He has the softest hair."

Kit remembered that as well. No use ever telling Vivian she'd had an affair with David. What would be the point? None of them knew. It had been irrelevant.

"Sounds like you're still attracted to him," Kit said.

"Physically, now, and then, but not emotionally. We went to bed together because I wanted to. It really surprised me that I would ... that I wanted to. I guess I care for David. I thought of the sex as comfort."

"Really? Comfort?"

Vivian was silent for a moment before she continued, as if she were remembering it vividly. "And after we 'did it,' he sat up on his elbow and said, 'I hear Kit is going to recommend you for summer stock in Vermont?' I just nodded my head. I didn't want to get into it with him."

"What'd he do?"

"He shot out of bed and said, very accusingly, I might add, 'You'd rather be in some ratty old playhouse in Vermont with Kit, than in Connecticut with me?'"

Why did he bring me into it? Kit wondered.

"He seemed madder about me being with you than about me taking the role."

Kit was confused. All of a sudden David was jealous of her? It didn't make sense.

"'You should be supporting me while I'm going through my mother's illness.' He seemed to be crying when he said that. I felt like shit," Vivian said

"He thought you still loved him, I guess."

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I didn't think anything of it. He was just so frightened for his mother, so vulnerable. I did love him ... in the moment."

Kit sat back and looked at Vivian sadly. She knew Vivian was feeling terrible, feeling as if she should be putting David before her career, feeling like shit because she couldn't.

"God, Kit, why won't he just leave me alone? It's been months since we split, I thought he'd be past it by now."

They heard the car that pulled up outside but neither of them thought anything of it. Kit went to the window out of some unconscious impulse.

"Oh, my God, do my eyes deceive me? You're not going to believe who just pulled up in front of our room." Kit turned from the window and stared hopelessly at Vivian. "We open this weekend, Viv. What the hell is that nut job up to? You've got to get rid of him."

"David?" she gasped.

"Fuck, yeah."

"I'll get rid of him," Vivian said as she opened the door.

David ran up the walk, smiling as if he were a welcomed weekend guest. He walked past Vivian without a glance and stood in the middle of the foyer.

"This is nice," he said breathlessly, his eyes going from Vivian to Kit.

"I don't remember inviting you up here," Vivian said.

David glared at Kit. "Will you excuse us? Where's your room, Viv? We need to talk."

"We'll talk after our opening. We're due at rehearsals now."

"You two sharing a room together?" David's face was so red he looked like he'd just come off a grill.

"What are you insinuating, David?" Vivian put her hands on her hips and held in her lip.

Without warning, David picked up a hairbrush and hurled it into the hall mirror. Kit and Vivian stood speechless and stared at the shattered glass. Kit quickly ran to the open door and closed it.

"That's it. Out, David!" Vivian screamed and reopened the closed door.

David went to her apologetically. "Look," he said. "You and I need to talk things through. What the hell are you doing here?" He turned to Kit. "You need to get a hotel room," he said. "I'll be staying with Vivian."

"She will not get a hotel room," Vivian protested. "Leave now," she insisted. "We've got a rehearsal."

David stormed out and rented himself a room at a roadside motel. He followed Vivian around like a puppy dog, honking his horn after her,

following her down the street. Vivian frantically tried to avoid him and kept telling Kit he'd leave if they ignored him.

But David was persistent; he showed up at their rehearsals and followed them back to their room.

"Viv, we need to speak," he called out. "For God's sake, Vivian ... we need to discuss what happened between us."

"I can't see you, David. We open this weekend. Go home. We'll talk when I get back."

David was so furious that Kit feared he'd run them over, snuff them both out for good. But in the long run, he did something just as insidious. On opening night, he crept behind the theater and pounded on the walls of the playhouse during the performance, right at the most climatic moment of all. He knew the play well and must have waited for the exact moment to distract the audience. Instead of weeping, which was what the emotion called for, the audience broke out into peals of laughter. Members of the crew went running around outside and tried to find the animal that was doing all the upstaging. They were shocked to find David instead of a mole or a raccoon. Mortified, both she and Vivian were certain that their reputations were destroyed. The local police ushered David back to his car and told him to leave town. Fortunately, the play had a successful run without another hitch, and Vivian wound up with spectacular reviews.

Kit couldn't stop shaking over the entire experience, David's anger at her ... the idea that he would do something to hurt them both. Kit sat by the open window in their small room, unable to get over the shock.

"I can't believe it," Kit was almost in tears. "This was the last act of *The Heiress*. How could he do that? This wasn't vaudeville, Viv, this was *The Heiress*."

"I'll never forgive him," Vivian sighed.

"I never knew he was violent, Viv, throwing that hairbrush, that damn red face of his, clenching his fist," she said. "You think he's capable of hurting someone?"

"He's harmless," Vivian said softly. "He's never hit me, and besides, it's no one's business, really."



That night Kit felt Vivian turn toward her in bed.

"Asleep yet?" she asked.

“No, can’t sleep.”

“Talk to me,” Vivian said. “Put me to sleep.”

“No, you talk to me ... tell me something I don’t know about you.”

“You’ll hate me if I do.”

“No, no, I could never hate you, Viv,” Kit said and controlled the impulse to turn and stroke her face.

“It’s dark, dark enough for secrets, isn’t it?”

“Tell me your secrets, Vivian.”

She listened to Vivian’s laughter; followed by the softness of her voice, so close ... Kit could smell the minty flavor of toothpaste as she spoke.

Slowly, Vivian began to reminisce about her childhood — her mother’s drinking, her father’s aloofness. She spoke in the dark so quietly, spoke so softly in the pitch-dark room. Kit moved closer in order to hear her better.

Kit listened. Vivian barely stopped to take a breath. She mentioned Josh, her brother. Kit felt uncomfortable without knowing why. She wanted to say, no, don’t tell me anymore, but she didn’t ... she listened.

Vivian talked about violence, actions so painfully difficult to hear, so uncomfortable that Kit wanted to find sleep; she wanted to sleep through Vivian’s secrets.

“Your brother?” Kit whispered. “He hit you?”

Vivian’s voice had settled into a monotone, and showed little emotion. “He bent my hands back until I screamed, kicked me in the leg, pulled the hair from my scalp. He shoved his fingers down my throat, things like that. Then, it was just our game. I thought it was play, rough play. I was too young to understand that he was just a cruel bastard.”

“Did it ever become sexual?” Kit asked. “Sorry, that just popped into my head, that it might have. Sorry.”

Vivian lay silent for several moments. “Yeah, it did,” she said softly.

“Shit,” Kit whispered.

“I never told anyone this before,” Vivian uttered. “I can’t believe I’ve told you. I can’t believe it. It embarrasses me. I knew it was wrong, but when I was young, I thought it was just him loving me, showing his love. But he hurt me. He hurt me so badly.”

Kit slipped in close to Vivian and kissed her. “It should really make you angry, Viv.” She felt Vivian reach for her hand. Kit caressed her gently. She wanted to comfort her.

Kit felt ... so uncomfortable. She felt invisible. This isn't the way it was supposed to be. There was nothing really sexual about it, but Kit made love to Vivian as if it were about the two of them, and Vivian was suddenly into her. But it wasn't about the two of them. The act of sex between them was invaded by another presence, the presence of a dark, perverted bastard. For Kit, it would always be a foggy recollection that she didn't like to think about. She forced herself not to think about it because she knew she had been used. She'd felt substituted, confused by Vivian's rage, confused by Vivian's haunting and shocking secrets. At first, Kit had thought of her caresses as comfort, not sex, just comfort, but Vivian scratched her, pushed her knuckles into Kit's side as if she wanted to hurt her, as if she associated pain with desire. It wasn't passion, though she might have thought she was showing passion. No, it was something sinister and angry. For Kit, it was like a river gushing toward her, silently taking her under, as she struggled to avoid the drowning. It wasn't about sex, certainly not about love. It was an inner rage and Kit wished she could heal the wound that had scarred this woman's soul. No wonder Vivian was a complicated woman.

2006

Kit turned back to the table as the waiter served their food. Some memories never fade. She and Vivian never spoke about that night again. Kit knew better, knew that Vivian would never speak about it. But oh, how she'd like to lean over the table and whisper, she's fucked up, David. She's really fucked up. All these years Kit has been trying to forget the realization of that.

Chapter Seventeen

VIVIAN

Vivian never liked meat or the smell of fried food. Even as a child, she would push the food away and refuse to eat anything that “stank,” a word she used to describe what she called “carcass food.”

Vivian’s mother hired a nanny to care for Vivian, a nanny who hardly knew how to cook anything else but fried beef and greasy chicken. Vivian refused to eat and lost more and more weight. Finally, her mother relieved the nanny of her cooking duties and hired a new cook. From that point on, Vivian picked her own menus, consisting mostly of salads, steamed vegetables, and grilled fish.

Vivian had never wanted to be a nag about it when she lived with David, but she hated smelling the grease when he cooked, the heavy odor of meat. David was a mad carnivore and refused to change his eating habits, calling her a “white rabbit with no palate.”

Vivian watched as David bit into his burger, filled to the brim with onions and ketchup. He smiled at her as he chewed the barely cooked meat, no doubt remembering her aversion to what she termed his “cannibalism.”

Odd, but the smell of the meat made her think of the night she’d found Kit so shaken up. She’d just returned home from an evening with her brother, an evening she couldn’t get out of, when she found Kit sitting in the semi-darkness, angry at something or someone.

1972

“What is it, Kit? For God’s sake, what’s wrong? You look like you want to kill somebody, you’re seething.”

“I made a stupid and horrible mistake,” Kit whispered quietly. “I didn’t think I was still a pushover for the male erection.”

“Oh?” Vivian tried to understand what she meant but surmised she’d slept with a guy. Big deal. She helped Kit into bed that night and sat up making herself a pot of tea. For once, she and Josh hadn’t disagreed that their father’s rapidly failing health needed attention. Josh had decided to send their father to Florida, to an absolutely “upscale” nursing home. Vivian wanted to do the right thing and was relieved that Josh was taking control of all the details, she always let Josh take control; it was easier that way.

1971

“What was your father like?” Susie asked between slurps of her skim milk malted.

“Oh, he was a workaholic,” Vivian said. “He preferred his absorption in market analysis and investments far more than being home with us.”

“Why is that?” Susie finished off her malted and stared at Vivian, her upper lip a sliver of white, like an old man’s mustache.

Vivian had looked away. She hated discussing her parents, but it always came up, all the sense memory exercises she had to do in class, “using” the pain.

“My mother was unstable.” Vivian said it matter-of-fact, as if she’d just revealed her mother’s eye color, or ethnicity.

“You mean the drinking?” Susie asked, reaching out her hand to put over Vivian’s.

“Mother drank constantly, all those self-pitying tears of hers.” She tried to laugh, make light of it.

“God,” Susie uttered. “What did you do?”

“What could I do? I listened. She’d go on and on about my father, how weak he was. She’d go on about me. I was ungrateful. Josh appreciated her – he was the only one who did – Josh, her beautiful son.”

“What a bitch,” Susie said. “How did you feel about your brother?”

“I hated him.”

“Really?” Susie’s eyes looked like sockets.

“I loved my father, though, despite his effort frowns.”

“Effort frowns?”

“Yeah, he always had them. Every time I think of him, I see his effort frowns.”

“Use it all, Vivian ... when you’re acting. You have so much anger you can conjure up.”

She didn’t know if she felt angry. Mostly, when she thought of her parents, she just felt sad. They had left her wanting. They had been so incomplete. But if she had any anger at all, it was directed entirely at Josh, not her father, nor even her mother. They deserved pity more than blame. Truly damaged people, like her brother, are the great manipulators, hardly harmless ... they create wells, they create bottomless pits, emotional drowning pools into which their victims fell.

Her parents had been generous ... giving her everything she could possibly want but themselves. Vivian felt completely unknown to her father. At least, with her mother there had been the intimacy of an emotional quagmire, however unsettling that had been. There were times when she felt more deeply connected to her mother than to anyone else on earth. They were the ones with the sense of humor. Josh and their father had lost their laughter ... had given it up to whatever demons haunted them.

Her mother loved to laugh ... often sober laughter, taking Vivian off guard, filling her with the hope of relationship, companionship ... love. Her mother could be completely sober and laugh at the silliest things. But then, without warning, the tide rolled back and there was Hyde, evil Hyde, transforming her lovable mother into some ugly, frightening monster. Hyde came out of a gin bottle with his sinister magic.

So what was worse, the drama of her mother’s emotions or the emptiness of her father’s? Eventually, Vivian realized that the closest thing to family she had was her brother, Josh, despite his insatiable cruelty. Interestingly enough, the older she got, the more intellectually close their relationship became, not in the least emotional but necessary. When they spoke, it was necessary to do so. They didn’t dwell on the past; that naughty little game between them was never mentioned, the one in which she had to bear pain and humiliation in order to win the game, whatever it was. Josh had even been successful at convincing her that he had never really hurt her, it had been a fantasy of hers. But she knew the truth.

Vivian had been repulsed by her brother’s genitals, which he often touted in front of her like some award he’d just won. She had just gotten her period that year ... what a mess, and it gave her cramps, cramps so bad she had to put her feet up on the wall and lie like that for hours. How come she got cramps and blood and he got erections?

Vivian would hide her eyes behind her hand when he appeared naked and aroused, laughing at her frightened reaction. He insisted she had been obsessed with his genitals and told everyone who would listen that she wanted to fuck him. Poor inferior girl could only look and marvel. They were siblings, couldn't touch. She began to blame herself for having to stare at it all the time, to have to listen to his bragging, biggest cock of all his friends. It had never been her idea to care the least about his penis. She didn't want anything to do with it.

When she got older, Josh insisted she was completely obsessed with him. "You need to be punished," he'd say and he would bend her arm back until she screamed in pain. "You're obsessed with my dick. Sick." And he'd kick her.

She told her mother he exposed himself to her, told her mother he was hurting her, even showed her bruises. Her mother called her a vile liar, a sick child who needed therapy. Her father didn't understand what she was trying to say. He looked bewildered and terribly embarrassed.

"Don't ever speak like that again," he said. "Your brother would never do such a thing."

Josh laughed at her, "Told you they wouldn't believe you."

Their mother died six months after being diagnosed with cancer, when Vivian was eighteen, and Josh was twenty-one. The torture games seemed to stop after that. Her brother had other interests ... how angry it made her feel, how rejected and abandoned. She had been the center of his attention. Now what? Had she become invisible? Of course she was relieved. She was also bewildered.

But then their mother's death seemed to pull them together again, as if they could finally accept that the rivalry their mother had caused between them was over, and the shame of their youth was a sick fantasy that lived only in Vivian's mind ... just like Josh said, it never happened. But happen it did.

Chapter Eighteen

SUSIE

2006

Susie noticed the whispering between Vivian and Kit at the table. They were always whispering together about one thing or another. God, they had been so secretive the weekend of that godawful reunion in '89. Susie had been so preoccupied with Ned's annoying ultimatums back then that she didn't dwell on it much, but she did notice the two of them off by themselves, talking low, excluding the others. If she had been in a better frame of mind, she would have called them on it. She would have told them both that they were being rude.

Of course, Susie wondered what the big secret was, but then again, she had her suspicions. It surprised her though if it had been true. As far as Susie was concerned Vivian was not the type for a lesbian affair; so it was weird that they would seem so intimate.

Susie questioned Vivian that weekend, the way she had just taken off to Stockbridge with Kit. The two of them stayed up there forever, not even bothering to come to Susie's wedding. But she never got an intelligent answer out of Vivian. Vivian danced around the subject and said that she and Kit just needed time out of Manhattan.

Maybe Susie didn't have anything to feel guilty about then. Maybe, it was really true about the two of them being "an item." David certainly didn't hesitate when she told him.

It was probably easier for David to believe that Vivian was gay than to think of himself as having any inadequacies. He'd laid it all at Vivian's door, it was her problems that stood between them, not his. He didn't have problems. He was actually a real bore after he and Vivian broke up. All he talked about was Vivian, and how wonderful she was, but she had issues, so many issues, he said.

The lie Susie told him had been worth it. Maybe her affair with David would never have gotten started without that lie; she'd never really know. Susie felt guilty to this day, but not sorry. After all, Vivian didn't want David anymore, despite what she alluded to. And David had certainly been worth the risk, had certainly left Susie the perfect fantasy to escape to, even after all these years; neither Howard, or even Drew, and certainly not Ned, could touch the memory of what Susie privately termed her "sexual highlight."

1972

Right after Vivian's break-up with David, he came over, night after night, for advice – how to get Vivian back. He had his head in his hands and his shirt was off. He had come for dinner at Susie's invitation and had spilled red wine on his white sleeve. She insisted he remove the shirt so she could wash out the stain.

All he ever did, when they were together was talk about Vivian, how he was being patient with her. They'd been consoling each other for weeks and their conversations had become predictable and repetitious.



"She's a complex woman," David said, looking out into space.

Susie was sick to death of his bleeding heart. She was even prepared to move beyond Ned. Ned was gay ... so be it ... let's get on with it.

She carefully sat beside David and placed her hand on his thigh. She admired his hairless chest, the softness of his skin. She felt the muscle under his jeans. He flinched slightly.

"I have a theory," she said softly. "Well, actually, more than a theory."

"What?" he asked, his dreamy gray eyes landing on her mouth.

"About Vivian," Susie said tentatively, knowing she was quickly treading toward the height of bitchiness.

His expression changed to interest. He sat forward. She watched as he looked at her. She saw the fear in his eyes.

"What?" he asked slowly. "Is there someone else? Does Vivian have someone else?"

"She's a lesbian, David." Susie couldn't believe she'd actually said that. She felt her body heat rise and her heart pound. She wondered how far she would actually take it.

David's brows came together and she thought he might laugh.

"Groovy," he said.

Susie was surprised. "I don't even think she's bi."

"No," he said. "I think she's as straight as the lines on notebook paper."

He reached out for his wine. Susie waited — her hand still on his leg.

"What makes you say that?" he asked as he sat back and glared at her. Now he was annoyed.

Susie removed her hand and reached for the bottle. She poured herself another glass, and then refilled his.

"You know something?" he asked slowly and turned to look at her.

His hair was dark and thick and fell onto his forehead, making him irresistibly dangerous. His mouth was full, his eyes shaded by dark lashes any woman would envy.

"What do you know?" he asked.

"She told me."

"Told you what?"

"She and Kit ..."

David stood up and walked away from her. "That's crazy," he said.

"Vivian told me," Susie said, looking directly into his expression as he turned back to her in disbelief. "Look," she said as she got up and went to him. "I know I shouldn't tell you this, but I hate seeing you suffer so much. Vivian has moved on, David. For months now, I've kept this inside me, not wanting to hurt you."

He walked farther away from her. "How long?" he asked as he paced back and forth, his eyes slanted in pain.

"Right after she moved back into her apartment, after you two broke up. Kit was there, and she never left. She's still there, David, because they're sleeping together."

Susie saw him step back like a trapped animal. "That's ridiculous," he said. "I don't believe it. Maybe she just experimented a couple of times. That's not a big deal."

"She's in love with Kit," Susie said sadly and watched as David glared at her. "I'm sure of it. That's really why she left you."

She went to him and studied his face. Susie knew by his expression that he probably believed her, probably believed every ridiculous word. She took his fists and opened them, bringing them to her mouth; she kissed his open palms. She felt him reach around and hold her, his arms tightening

around her back. Susie moved against him, without stopping, her hips going round like she balanced a hula-hoop on her waist. She stood up straight to find his mouth as he hardened against her, her tongue lashed out before she felt his lips on hers. She reached down for his belt, quickly unbuckling it, lowering his zipper.

They tore at each other's clothes, breathing loudly and quickly, groping at body parts in a mad frenzy, a frenzy that might have been mistaken for endless love, but was, instead, a wild, angry, painful attempt to forget the hurt they felt. *Damn you, Vivian. Damn you, Ned.*

Chapter Nineteen

VIVIAN

2006

Vivian heard the distinctive ring on her cell – the opening notes of *Strawberry Fields*. She reached down for her purse. Her phone was in the Velcro part, stuffed behind the area taken up by Faith Forrester Denton's book, a haunting piece of fiction about a young girl's difficult experience with child abuse.

Bria's number: she could use a breath of air. She scurried past Kit and picked up.

"Bri?"

"How was the reunion?"

"I'm still in it," she said as she moved toward the door of the crowded bar, the stentorian voices temporarily muffling Bria's voice. Vivian hadn't given Bria all the details, but she had mentioned that she was putting together a reunion, having an unpleasant task to perform – atoning for an old omission. In typical Bria fashion, she never pressed Vivian for the whole story, and Vivian was relieved not to have to give it to her.

It was nice to stand outside. The weather had cooled off and the late afternoon sun gave off a gentler heat; a soft, unexpected wind kicked around and blew through her hair. As Vivian turned, she watched them all behind her at the table, eating, making polite and curious conversation.

David looked up and caught her eyes through the glass, his expression a plethora of contradictions. She returned his smile without questioning the thoughts that lay behind it. His thoughts were like surprise endings to otherwise predictable novels, conclusions that jarred and shattered her expectations ... just as they always had.

Bria taught Modern Theory and Criticism at Columbia. Vivian was in the same department but taught what many of her colleagues referred to as the

“lighter courses,” History of the American Theater, The Theater of O’Neill, Renaissance Theater and Shakespeare, which was her favorite course.

Their friendship had emerged from simple chats in the hall, and lunch breaks on Columbia’s large, inviting lawn. They rarely ever discussed anything personal and spent most of their conversations engrossed in theory, literature, and performance. Their intellectual camaraderie eventually led to trips abroad. Every July, they traveled the world together, marveling at mysterious Greek temples, the splendor of Canterbury Cathedral, the allure of Rome. They wept as Puccini reverberated against the magnificent walls of La Scala, and they salivated over French food, drove up and down the coast of Spain, and even took photographs together in the jungles of Africa.

For the most part, the highlight of Vivian’s year was planning her summer vacation with Bria. For fifteen years, they planned meticulous trips, covering every aspect of the most necessary “must see” sights – old and enormous museums, breathtaking scenery, the most exotic ruins, Amazon River boat rides, Egyptian pyramids, and the historical drama of Israel and China.

Ian would not step foot on an airplane and preferred to travel vicariously via public television wildlife shows and the tales of his wife’s thrilling travels with her intellectual companion, Brival Holmes.

Vivian realized very early on that Ian was downright eccentric, an attraction that had since culminated in frustration. There was no doubt she would have preferred traveling with her husband, not that Bria wasn’t an adequate travel companion, but she was often a boring conversationalist, filling Vivian’s days with repetitive chatter on the laborious histories of pantomime and Renaissance art. When Vivian was out of the classroom, she wanted to be out of it. Ian, at least, found an unabashed excitement in the most trivial things, a quality that Vivian enjoyed.

2000

“We should be together this summer, don’t you think? I don’t want to miss you ... I want to be with you, and I want you to want to be with me, not Bria. You’ve had enough trips together, Vivian.”

Ian had surprised her. He’d never mentioned that her summer vacations with Bria had bothered him.

“It’s about time I faced my fears. Let’s go away.”

Vivian decided to apply humor; she couldn’t take him seriously. “Well, where would you like to go this summer, Ian, the outdoor market at fourteenth street ... or perhaps, the Village?”

He laughed uncomfortably. “The Village will do.”

She shook her head and sighed at the same time. “I would really like to vacation some place out of the country with my husband ... every now and then, at least. I only go with Bria because she’s available.”

“You like her better than me?”

He must be kidding. “Of course not.”

Ian dropped his head and his straight silver hair fell forward with an incorrigible bend, hitting the tips of his eyelashes.

“I’m sorry, Vivian, truly I am, but let’s face it, New York City has everything we could possibly want ... parks, lakes ... museums. There is no other city that rivals it. Let’s explore New York together this summer.”

“I don’t want to explore New York, Ian. I have lived here over fifty years.”

Ian didn’t have an answer to that; he grabbed some books from an end table and wandered off into another room to lose himself in a novel.

Brett had grown up very much like his father. Vivian was amazed at how much they resembled each other, right down to the colorless eyeglasses that they both favored, which made them appear even paler than they actually were. Their long, thick hair, with the crooked left side part, the corduroy or khaki that they would never trade for jeans, and their easy, slight swagger, always suggesting that they might bump into a wall, or fall off a cliff, for both of them leaned dangerously to the left as they walked, head down, lost in a distracted myriad of opinions. The only difference was that Vivian insisted that her son get on an airplane and fly with her to cities like Pittsburgh, Chicago ... wherever ... to see regional theater, she told him. But it was really to assure that her son would not grow up afraid ... like his father. Ian was practically agoraphobic.

Vivian and Ian had met four years after Vivian elected to return to college for her Doctorate in Performance Studies. Ian taught in the classical music department, a job he’d had ever since graduating Columbia in the late 60s. Vivian, who was a student at the time, caught his eye on the wide, formidable steps of Columbia’s library in 1983.



“Do you mind sharing?” Ian asked as he eyed her sandwich. “I haven’t eaten for hours and that looks delicious.”

Vivian looked up into a grin that showed well-cared for teeth and realized he’d been kidding. Before she knew it, he had pulled a bag of Frito Lays out of his pocket and joined her. He sat close to her side, holding out the crumbled bag of Fritos, his shoulder mischievously touching hers.

The next thing Vivian knew, she was holding his hand as he led her off to Lincoln Center, his long stride left her breathless and she had to skip a bit to keep up with him.

“Classical music puts me to sleep,” she told him.

“Oh, *pshaw*,” he said. “Let’s start with Mozart’s symphonies. You need an education.”

She liked him; he seemed so effortless, as easy as a day off in June. He attracted people, his smile open, as if a terribly clever idea had just popped into his head and he couldn’t wait to share it.

“What’s this?” Vivian asked as she joined him at intermission. She had just returned from the ladies’ room and was amused to find that Ian had attracted a small crowd.

He took her hand, not as a possessive gesture, but one of friendliness. “I’m telling my friends all about the absurd personality disorders of violin players.”


Vivian surveyed his fascinated new admirers whom he had no doubt just met at intermission. “Do they really have absurd personality disorders?” she asked.

“Oh, watch them,” he said and winked at the others. “They have tics when they’re not playing, most annoying. It’s in their shoulders. They simply can’t stop positioning the damn violins. Their chins are a bit odd as well.”

Ian proceeded to twitch his shoulder and move his chin in an awkward way. Chuckles emerged from his audience of ardent listeners while Vivian slipped her arm around his waist and thought how easy going he was, how uncomplicated.

There had always been a lightness to Ian that Vivian found attractive. He was never at a loss for words and could chat to anyone, anywhere, on any subject imaginable. He would discuss gay marriage on subway platforms as

if he were running for office, argue politics on a park bench with a total stranger, and he had an endless supply of gossip during dinner parties, as if he knew a million people intimately. Ian amused everyone, and Vivian was always pleased to let him take the spotlight.



“When’s your birthday?” he asked, after they’d been dating a few months.

“Why?” She questioned with a degree of apprehension while still struggling to keep up with his frenzied pace.

“Here, a season’s pass to the Philharmonic. Happy Birthday.” He slipped the pass into her purse.


“But I’d prefer seeing The Kinks at Madison Square Garden.”

Ian stopped and wiped his forehead with a white handkerchief.

“I promise to tickle you if you doze off,” he said.


“Didn’t you hear what I just said? I prefer The Kinks.”

“Who are The Kinks?” He shook his head with a quizzical expression, feigning absolute ignorance.



She was falling in love with him, despite his peculiarities. Vivian felt they belonged together; there was a gentle acceptance between them, one for the other. When he proposed, she agreed; she’d made up her mind before he even asked. She had given him hints that he finally took and produced a ring in very typical Ian fashion, over an expensive dinner, a bottle of Champagne, and piped in music from *La Traviata*.

He beamed when she said yes, his bow tie slightly crooked and the smoke from his pipe seductively sweet.



She’d known him only a few months when he suddenly said, “I don’t know how to drive a car.” He shrugged his shoulders and looked off. “I don’t like to leave New York City. It gives me vertigo.”

“Vertigo?”

“Mmm.”

“Oh?” She nodded pensively, trying not to show her disappointment. This was news. He’d never mentioned he didn’t drive. “I hope you’re not afraid to fly. We can always rent a car and I’ll drive us around.”

“Good God, I’m petrified of airplanes.”

Vivian felt her stomach drop. “We can always take a train.” She gave him a sidelong glance and wondered if he were pulling her leg about not flying or driving.

“Ah, trains are long dirty phallic symbols representing man’s preoccupation with speed, Vivian, I detest them.”

“Ocean liners?”

“Good God, I’ve a terrible fear of drowning.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Well, I don’t care if you travel with a girlfriend,” he said. “If you must ... if traveling is so important to you.”

“It is, Ian, would you mind?”

“Of course not, spread your wings, darling. I’ll manage.”

Chapter Twenty

Vivian respected her husband. He covered his inner distress with humor and never let on when he was annoyed or angry. His confidence in himself gave her a sense of her own autonomy. His ever-increasing world of distractions allowed her to live her own life, with all the toppings: home, marriage, a child.

But Bria fulfilled Vivian's need for something else, nearly as gratifying as a marriage. Ian began to feel it too, teasing her, suggesting that Bria had a more intense place in her heart.

"I hope you're not being serious, Ian."

"Of course, of course. She doesn't wear ties as well as I do, and I'll bet she doesn't jog at all, does she? I noticed she should though, getting a bit of an ass, don't you think?"

It was obvious that Ian resented her friendship with Bria, but she ignored it. She avoided over-analyzing Ian's fears and phobias and ignored that, too. She was furious at him for not seeking therapy to identify the root of why he wouldn't travel, why he wouldn't do the one thing that brought his wife enormous excitement and joy. She found satisfaction with Bria's availability to travel, and Ian had no right to resent it. She tried to explain how important it was to be available and to take risks in a marriage, but there was no changing Ian's stance, he was immobile.

It was *his* lack that made her feel that she was ultimately more intricately connected to Bria. Bria shared her passion for discovery, and Ian wouldn't take a subway ride to Fourteenth Street. Sometimes she felt, that as the years passed, she and Ian walked in the same room, frustrated by the other's disassociation, wanting, and needing with silent scorn.

As more years passed, she wished he were different, less eccentric; eccentricity created a distance, an emotional barrier to communicating. It covered something up.

"I'm trying to understand you," she often said.

"Perhaps I don't need to be understood."

"No, perhaps you don't, but I need to anyway."



However, it would take her by surprise, the gentle love she felt for Ian. Not to be dismissed, it wasn't really sexual, it was subtle; it was for his nearness alone, the comfort of it.

He was the anchor she needed in life: Ian was the safe homeport. But just when life took on the calm of early spring for Vivian, Ian would upset the stillness with a whim ... or an obsession, and the homeport would begin to flood.

If nothing else, Ian was at least spontaneous and often very unpredictable.

"I'm going to gun them down like clay ducks, Vivian," he told her one sunny afternoon, when the sun was so perfect in the sky the whole world appeared sane.

"Gun what down, Ian?"

"My phobias. I feel you're disgusted with me."

"No, really, I'm not."

"I want to see the world, Vivian."

"Well, you are missing so much by not seeing it."

"I am starting with my distaste for trains."

"Not all trains are dirty, you can bring your wipes."

"Here's the plan, Vivian."

"Yes?"

"I'm going to take the Amtrak to Boston on Saturday and have lunch in some wonderful little café. Then I will return back to Manhattan a new man. I think I'll even take the Acella. I'm going to enjoy trains so much you won't be able to keep me off them."

"Do you want me to join you?"

"Oh, no, no, no, a man has to do some things alone."



Ian's plan was not successful. He walked through the door at midnight in a totally disoriented and distressed state. Having been on a "dirty train" had upset him to the core.

He went immediately to the bathroom and soaked his body for several hours in Vivian's Caswell Massey's peppermint bubbles.

His very determination to face his fears became, in and of itself, another one of Ian's eccentricities; he became compulsively obsessive about

winning his battles, yet still refused conventional therapy.



“Look at this Vivian.”

“What is it, dear?” she asked.

“Mastering Your Fear of Flying, a 12-part CD series, isn’t this wonderful?”

“I don’t think you can master a fear of flying watching CDs, Ian.”

“Well, how do you do it then?”

“Well, I’d think you’d have to get on a plane.”

“That’s next, after I go through the course. I have to build up to it. I have to want to fly ... and I do ... I truly do want to fly.”

Sadly, for Vivian, but in true Ian fashion, his phobias were stronger than his fantasies about “gunning them down.” He woke her in the middle of the night in a cold sweat.

“I can’t go through with this Vivian. Not under any circumstances.”

“But we leave tomorrow,” Vivian said, her eyes forlornly on the luggage in the corner of their bedroom. She had booked them plane tickets for San Francisco.

Ian sat straight up in bed.

“I cannot, under any circumstances, set foot on an airplane. I’m sorry, Vivian, San Francisco will have to live without me.”

She sighed reluctantly and unpacked their bags the following morning.



Vivian tried to be supportive and as patient as she could possibly be. A few weeks after the flying CD fiasco, she decided to help him succeed. If he wouldn’t seek out a shrink, she would become one for him.

“I’m going to rent us a car this weekend, Ian. We are going for a drive upstate.”

“What a delightful idea. I should have started with cars. Cars are small things, not like planes and trains.”



Ian had his head back on the car seat. The window slightly open, Vivian enjoyed the smell of the cut grass. It was a perfect spring day and the twists

and turns of the Taconic Parkway were magical, like roads to Oz. Unfortunately, for Ian, they were more like roads to hell.

“What is it, Ian?” Vivian asked, watching as her husband sat back with his fingers pressed firmly against his nostrils.

“Hiccups,” he said. “This should help.”

So much for Cold Spring, Vivian thought, only an hour and a half from the city and it has given him the worst case of hiccups I’ve ever witnessed.

“I’ll turn around,” she told him.

“We must do this again.” He tried to smile. “I do like it in the country ...”
Hic.

But the following weekend, Ian developed a terrible case of carsickness during the two-and-a-half-hour drive to Hudson, New York, and decided he would take the “dirty” train back to Manhattan.

“We’re too far off the ground,” he said.

“I thought you’d prefer an SUV, it’s nice and high,” she said as she pulled into the rail station to drop him off.

“No, sorry, dear, but it’s more like a bus, too vertiginous.”



“We need to try again, Ian. I’m going to rent another car ... a little car and we are going upstate.”

This time, Ian was able to survive the four or so hours he spent in the car and believed he had mastered his fear of leaving the city.

“This did it ... I’m fully in control of my phobias. I have beaten the enemy. I’m quite sure of it. Hooray for little cars. Did the trick.”

“I don’t think one successful drive upstate is ample proof of that.”

“I’d like to go cross country this summer,” he announced.

“Cross country?” Vivian looked at him with an exasperated shrug.

“Yes, to the Rocky Mountains this July. We’ll share the driving. You were a splendid teacher.”

“But Bria and I are going to England.”

Ian reached over and kissed her. “Ask Bria if she’ll mind our cats instead. We need a second honeymoon.” He winked.

“We never had a first.” She smiled sadly. They’d spent their entire honeymoon taking picnics in Central Park.



“Look here, Vivian, I stopped into Barnes & Noble today and bought books and books on the Rocky Mountains, and I’ve underlined some stops in between.”

It was a resentment Vivian couldn’t quite put into words.

“I’m not going to relegate my dearest friend to a cat sitter.”

Ian looked surprised.

“I can’t throw my plans with Bria away on a whim.”

“It isn’t a whim, I’ve beaten the enemy.”

Vivian glared at him. “I don’t trust that you have,” she said.

“You must trust me, Vivian, I have done it.”

“I refuse.”

“What?”

“I refuse to alter my set plans. I am going to Scotland and to the Lake District of England with Bria this summer as planned.”

“What about me?”

“You can get on a plane and join us.”

“But I can’t fly yet.”

“I cannot alter my plans. I will not alter my plans.”

“Well, have a good time, then.”

“You do understand, Ian?”

“Yes, of course, don’t worry about me. You can’t disappoint Bria,” he laughed. “It’s a tradition.”

Perhaps, that was when he began to have affairs. Vivian couldn’t really pinpoint it, but she felt it was a very good guess. She was concerned, despite herself, but, eventually, she ignored the many nights he spent away from home with “colleagues.”

“Well, say hello to Matt and Myron for me.”

“Of course, of course.”

She saw it in his eyes as they avoided hers. He reminded her of their son, Brett, when he’d been young and had fibbed about one thing or another.

Vivian hoped it would pass, be over and done with, but she sensed it had become a habit with him, having affairs. She had recently spotted Ian at a Café on Broadway with a young woman. She’d seen the woman’s hand on the button of Ian’s checked blue shirt, her other hand on his arm. Well, Ian was not an unattractive man. He was very tall and always reminded Vivian of a perplexed Jimmy Stewart. His long, lean face was open and friendly.

Women always found him attractive and amusing with the long dimple that graced his left cheek and his strong determined chin, his striking silver hair.

She wasn't jealous, not in the least. Their sex life was hardly active, perhaps only once a month, perhaps every few months, so why shouldn't he enjoy himself, she thought. She was frightened that his affairs would somehow alter her life with him and she wanted the other women to disappear before it did. And that's all she felt. She treated Ian the same as always, avoiding what she termed minor and temporary inconveniences.

Chapter Twenty-One

2006

Vivian looked back toward the restaurant and peered through the glass. She noticed that David had left the table, most likely, she surmised, to use the men's room. As she turned her attention away from the large glass window, she caught Kit out of the corner of her eye; she had gotten out of her chair and was headed outside.

"I don't think I can go through with this," Vivian said into her phone, turning her back from the door.

"Then maybe it's not necessary," Bria responded. "You never did quite tell me what this was all about."

"How can I admit to being cruel and indifferent?"

"Be strong, Vivian. Sometimes people don't care as much as you assume they do."

"Got to go," Vivian said. "Kit's on my tail. I'll call you later."

"Kit?"

"One of the feisty five, Vivian said. "Got to go."

"You'll have to explain all this to me one day." Bria said and the two flipped their cell phones closed.



When Kit was younger, her long-legged gait might have been regarded as "sensual." She still had that air about her, a commanding and mysterious presence that was at once sexy and engaging. Both she and Vivian were at least five feet nine inches, striking women, always noticeable in a crowd. Kit still had the same appeal, though altered by a determination to project an "artistic" and "youthful" demeanor. Vivian decided she didn't like the blonde spiked hair and wished Kit had aged more gracefully, as she and Susie obviously had. There were moments in which Vivian felt that Kit was a caricature of her youth, except gone were the huge hoop earrings and the love beads; they had been replaced by two small tattoos on her arm – a

tilted cross and a religious symbol of something or other, the origin of which was lost on Vivian.

Kit smiled before she spoke, staring at Vivian with the same studied look, as if patiently waiting for a barrage of information to come tumbling out of her mouth.

“Do you want coffee?” she finally asked.

“Yes, yes, that would be nice.”

“Dessert?”

Vivian peered back at the table through the glass. Susie and Ned were deeply engrossed in conversation and David had not yet returned from the men’s room.

“Do the others want dessert?” she asked.

“The others, me included,” Kit began, “want to know what the hell we’re doing here.”

“I’m going to tell you,” Vivian said. “But don’t you think it’s important that we catch up? My God, it’s been seventeen years.”

“Is she alive?”

“Who?” Vivian asked.

“Faith,” Kit said.

“Yes,” Vivian said quickly.

“How could that be?” Kit asked. “You told us she drowned.”

“I didn’t exactly say that,” Vivian said softly.

“Yes, yes, you told Ned she drowned. You let the rest of us assume it.”

Vivian remained silent.

“Is Faith really alive?” Kit asked.

“Yes, she’s really alive.”

“You never let us know?”

“No.” Vivian was uncomfortable and felt as if she might faint. “Will you see her?” she asked.

“Who?”

“Your daughter,” Vivian said and looked into Kit’s eyes. “She contacted you?”

“I’m not sure what to do just yet.” Kit looked off nervously.

“You should see her.”

“You were a mistake. That’s difficult to say to your child. You were the result of a mistake, nothing I chose or wanted. I had too much to drink and I was horny.”

“She’s not a child, Kit. She’s over thirty. And you gave birth to her. You wanted her to have life. You could have chosen another alternative and you didn’t. She doesn’t care how she got here, I wouldn’t think. She just cares that you’re her mother and she’d like to know you.”

“Vivian,” Kit began. “Was Faith my daughter? Do you remember how I felt so strongly about it that weekend, the resemblance she had to my mother?”

Vivian looked at her feet. “We have to tell them about your pregnancy,” she said, avoiding a direct answer. “We have to tell them about the baby you had. We have to tell them everything. We have to be honest with one another at long last. That’s why we’re here. They have to understand why I couldn’t tell them the truth, that she didn’t drown.”

“The past is so far behind us, Vivian. And whatever you’re making of it is so convoluted.”

“All our lives are connected,” Vivian said. “I disappeared from everyone’s life with my omission because my brother led me to believe I had no other choice.”

“What are we really talking about here? What the hell does Josh have to do with anything?” Kit went to her and stood close. “Don’t be so goddamn mysterious, Vivian. I deserve to know if Faith was my child, as I suspected. I don’t give a damn what Josh wanted or didn’t want. Who the hell cares?”

“You do deserve the truth, and the truth is what I’ll give you. But I’m going to tell them about your pregnancy first and you have to trust me, give me the space to do that,” she said softly. “I have to, Kit, so that I can explain myself.”

“You already said that, and I don’t authorize you to tell them my business.” Kit bore her eyes into Vivian’s.

“You’ll see, it will be all right. Getting pregnant as a young woman is nothing to be ashamed of, and it’s been so many years.” Vivian reached out her hand and touched Kit’s arm.

“You’re avoiding giving me the truth, Vivian,” Kit said sharply.

“I’m going to give it to you.”

“Was Faith my daughter or wasn’t she?” Kit glared at Vivian, her eyes suddenly filled with tears. “*Is* she my daughter? Was I right back then? Did your fucking perverted brother adopt my baby?”

Vivian noticed David as he walked outside and stood behind Kit. She gathered he’d heard the tail end of Kit’s question.

“You two are always in a pow-wow,” he said with a grin.

“Yes, David, and you’re always inappropriately present,” Kit said.

David looked startled. Kit walked briskly past him, but not before turning back to Vivian. “I just want the truth, Vivian; no matter how many years too late it is in coming.”



“Jesus, what was that all about?” David asked.

“Nothing.”

“Kit had a baby? Is that what I just heard?”

“Please, David, I’ll explain everything.”

He looked at her, his eyes intense and his mouth firm. “I don’t get it, the girl is either dead or she’s not. If she’s not dead, then we were not responsible for being the cause of her death, and if she is dead, then we did, in fact, kill her with our complete self-absorption. We killed Faith with our own preoccupation with bullshit, with our narcissism, with our empty, aching souls.”

Vivian stared at him in disbelief. He was looking back at her with an odd smile.

“My soul is not empty, David,” she said.

He smiled sadly. “I reached into the deep waters of your heart, Vivian. I pulled out seaweed and sand. I swam in the abyss of your endless bottom and would have drowned, pulled deeper by the currents of yearning, suffocated by the repetitious denial of my affections.”

Vivian could not believe what she was hearing. “You’re still the same, aren’t you, David? You still want me to believe there’s something wrong with *me* because I can’t ... no, *wouldn’t* satisfy your endless needs.”

“Opposites attract,” he said. “Like fire and ice.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” she asked, agitated and angry for being brought back to a time in which she felt inadequate. “Anyway, fire and ice do not attract.”

“Well, they have the potential to destroy each other, an attraction of sorts,” he said as he stepped beyond the boundaries of her comfort zone. “I’ve never quite gotten over you,” he drew her closer, so close she could feel a reaction to his nearness, an unexpected surge of passion. “It’s taken me a long time to love again.”

“Oh, David.” She laughed and stepped back. “Still quite the dramatic actor.”

He smiled softly and cupped her chin. “Oh, Vivian,” he teased. “Still quite the enigma. Some things never change.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

SUSIE

2006

“Deidre had a malignant tumor,” Ned said. “She went through months of chemo and it worked. She's cancer-free now.”

Susie reached out and put her arms around him. He did not pull away. She knew by his willingness to remain captive to her touch that he was clearly distraught.

“But they recently found another cyst and I’m afraid it might not be good,” he said despondently.

“I’ll say a prayer,” Susie said softly.

“I’ll be going to the hospital after lunch.” He checked his watch. “They’re removing the cyst today if they can. There’s always the chance it won’t be malignant,” he said hopefully. “The MRI was negative but it’s still a cyst.”

Susie held him closer in her arms. *I’ve never understood you*, she wanted to whisper. Especially now, witnessing his obvious emotional connection to Deirdre. But she remained silent.

There was no doubt he cared for Deidre. Susie felt an unexpected surge of jealousy. *What makes her different?* Susie wanted to lay out the question like a pupil in earnest need of an answer. Instead, she brought her lips to his ear and said, so very softly, “It will be all right.”

She and Ned had children together. Ned had brought them up with the utmost care, his patience far surpassing Susie’s. He’d read every book on child rearing and he had treated his children with gentle guidance, firm discipline, and a captivating spontaneity that was tender to witness. Perhaps, much of Susie’s rage had to do with the painful imbalance, his incapacity to return that same uninhibited devotion to her.

Ned's sexual incompetence and his insatiable hunger for men had been a fortress against true intimacy. She knew that, and yet no other man had ever touched her as deeply, had ever needed her as much.

Susie wondered what kind of woman Deirdre could possibly be to have captured his heart with such obvious endearment. Clearly, Susie reasoned, she must be a lesbian. She must do her own thing.

There it was – simple connections, no need to pay a shrink. Her anger against both Ned and Howard was clearly responsible for the mess her life was presently in. She was acting out, closing herself off, screwing Drew before he could put the screws to her.

That's it. She certainly wasn't going to take any responsibility for fucking up a good marriage, not when she could go on blaming Ned and Howard for it.

Drew was a wonderful man, yet when Susie compared him to Howard and Ned, which she often did, he fell short. Drew lacked Ned's complexity and Howard's humor. When Susie thought about it rationally, she realized she must be absolutely insane to compare Drew to Howard the prick, or to Mr. Inaccessible Ned, but making those comparisons was her only defense against him.

Perhaps she berated Drew for his lack of everything under the sun because she knew he would eventually disappoint her, so why not protect herself against any surprise endings, any inevitable pain?

So, Susie thought of him as a predictable bore, incessantly repetitious and insanely rigid. But Drew good-naturedly ignored or "fixed" his personality flaws with surprise bouquets from his perfect garden and rich French stews cooked lovingly with his gourmet's touch.

"How's that for my best girl, hey?" he'd ask, and she'd have to smile.

Of course, she smiled, despite herself, and her forgiveness would last a full ten minutes.

Susie believed that all men had sexual skeletons in the closet. God knows there were enough pedophiles, rapists, and deviants in the world, most of them, men. She wondered about Drew, half expecting a wandering eye or a request for some bizarre sexual act. But Drew was a steadying presence, sexually quite satisfying, though unadventurous. He was adoringly even-tempered when it came to his wife and most of the time, profoundly patient.

Yet, Susie was unhappy, not necessarily with Drew, but certainly with herself. Her life had become a lie. She was a betrayer, and once a betrayer, always a betrayer. She had practically idolized Vivian when she was a young woman, but the first chance she got, she lied about her, fucked her ex-boyfriend, and resented her success, couldn't even wish her well for a happy marriage and a prestigious career.

Susie's own career was over and done with inside of two minutes. Her earlier dreams of stardom were as dead as autumn leaves because she'd given her youth to a man who couldn't return her passion, and who eventually betrayed her trust.

Susie had never wanted to give up the theater, but marrying Ned, at the time, had been more important. God knows, she had something to prove. She would cure him – prove his manhood was not tainted with non-conformity or the burgeoning threat of homosexuality.

Two divorces later, Susie had become a typical suburban housewife who cheated on her husband with all the indifference given to garbage removal and housecleaning.

Steve Hoyt was Drew's friend, and hers, as well. Her best friend was Steve's wife, Betty. The two couples barbequed in each other's backyards, took weekend trips to neighboring towns, and got together every Thursday evening to play Trivia Pursuit, Poker, or Monopoly.

Steve was not necessarily more attractive than Drew; both men were appealing in their own way. Drew was light-haired, almost blond in the sun and now graying with age. He showed a beautiful set of white teeth when he smiled. He was slight of build, his arms and legs elegantly slender, his stomach still flat. His eyes were a beautiful shade of green, like viridian glass in the sun.

Steve was solidly built, his salt-over-pepper beard still dark and curly. He was a short man with an overbearing masculine laugh. He walked in a way that often made her giggle, as if his genitals hung too low, his legs slightly spread with too much weight. He was an obvious womanizer, constantly making references to pretty women, flirting with restaurant waitresses and preferring four-letter words to just about anything in the English language, except any words that had to do with food, for Steve could spend hours discussing what he'd eaten for dinner the night before and what he intended to eat for dinner the following evening.

Susie was certainly not in love with Steve. She found him intellectually and emotionally shallow. She never would have chosen him, never would have picked him at a single's social. He was a real chauvinist. Betty rarely had a reaction to his treatment of other women and Susie thought that made her extremely penis-conditioned, a weakness that was certainly beneath any modern woman with even a modicum of self-esteem.

"He shouldn't be allowed to get away with such obnoxious behavior, don't you think?" She'd ask Drew in a fit of frustration. "If I were married to that son of a bitch I would have divorced him years ago."

Drew would shrug his shoulders and look off. He never wanted any part of "feminist" conversations.

"Don't you think Betty should say something to him? I mean, he acts like such an ass. Don't you think, Drew?"

"Well, yeah, he can be a jerk, but it's not our concern, hon."

The fact that Steve was a jerk made it easier for Susie to sleep with him. There wasn't any deep emotional attachment between them. Her husband was undeniably the better man so on the most important level, Susie had not betrayed Drew with her affections, only her body.

Steve worked from home as a copywriter. His wife, Betty, was a sales executive with a technology company and kept late hours. Steve's convenient work-from-home situation obviously gave him a lot of free time, and it was not long before he started showing up at Susie's door with a box of breakfast buns and a request for coffee, always conveniently following Drew's departure for work. It did not take long for them to wind up exchanging spit and sweat as they rolled over each other's bodies and copulated on the bed she shared with Drew.

When the four of them went out on their frequent couple's night, Steve winked at Susie with a knowing smile, grabbed her ass in opportune moments and offered up innuendo only she could interpret. Susie felt badly enough to start drinking in the afternoons, drinking enough to drown out anything else but the need for a good fuck and a little fun.

In sober moments, Susie grasped she had so much anger at men that there was no ax strong enough to crack the iron door behind which her vulnerability, tenderness and affections precariously took shelter. She didn't love Steve, she hardly respected him, she loved Drew though, and she knew that, despite trying to talk herself into believing otherwise. She loved him enough to wonder why she was so intent on hurting him. He was not the

target of her fury at men; that went way back. She was still holding Ned responsible for destroying her confidence, and she still hated herself for trusting a man like Howard, a man so like Steve Hoyt.



Drew wanted to retire. He was only fifty-nine years old but a golden opportunity had fallen into his lap – a buy out from the company he'd been with for over thirty years.

His pension alone would enable them to live a good life and the cash he'd receive would be substantial enough for them to buy and restore a beautiful old house in Savannah, Georgia, that they'd discovered on a trip. They had planned it for years except, when the opportunity finally came, Susie refused to move.

"I don't want to go, Drew," she'd said, and watched as he nearly fell over from the blow.

Susie was not attached to New Jersey, or even the house they lived in. Both of her children were married. Charlie and his family had moved to Connecticut and he was always too busy to visit. Her daughter's husband, an art director for a major ad agency, had recently been transferred to London. The family was only getting together for holidays, and it really didn't matter where they had to fly to spend time together.

"But we've been dreaming about this for years, going online, looking at old houses in Savannah. I don't understand." Drew looked at her pensively as he fell back into the cushions of the couch, as if he wanted to become one with the fabric, turn into foam and disappear.

She didn't know what to say. She didn't understand why she was doing this either.

"We found our house, Susie, one worth hopping on a plane with a down payment. I know you liked Savannah, honey, I know you did, I know you loved that house."

They had spent a glorious week traveling through Georgia and had decided that that's where they wanted to spend their retirement. Drew's passion had always been old houses, gardens and food, and Susie appreciated that about him because she shared the same interests. On some level, Susie knew she wanted to grow old alongside her husband, content to plant rhododendrons, barbeque steaks and sew lace curtains for the village

Victorian that Drew wanted to buy directly from the bank for a “steal.” So what the hell was she doing?

“It’s your dream, Drew, not mine. I never wanted any part of living down south. It was always your idea.”

Drew looked confused. “That’s not true,” he said sadly.

“And now you’re trying to manipulate me into thinking it’s my dream. Well, it isn’t.”

The truth was that Susie didn’t trust it, didn’t trust that she wouldn’t be left alone someday, totally abandoned in a strange state where she hadn’t any friends or family. She believed Drew would leave her; eventually all men left her, and there was no way in hell she was going to be deposited in some little Southern town with a bunch of politically incorrect people.

Drew pouted for months over her lame excuses not to leave the state of New Jersey. Susie wondered if he’d go through with his plans anyway, buy that old house and move south, leaving her alone with Steve Hoyt, a man whose only purpose in her life was to aide her in her self-destructive tendencies, help her down the path of alcoholism and nurture her need to humiliate a man who genuinely cared for her.



Susie looked back at Ned as he smiled at Kit. She wondered if, at some point, he would tell them about Deidre. She wanted to reach out and stroke the side of his face, cup his chin and whisper that he would always be her first love, and the father of her beautiful children. His grief had softened her and made her feel needed. She was surprised to feel a peace within, a space in which no rolling rivers crashed, no cannons roared.

What is this, she wondered. It felt profound, this gentle love for her ex-husband, a love that went way back to the picket fences and church picnics of their youth, back before handsome Ned Hammond was anything other than her best beau.

For just a moment, Susie fantasized that poor Deidre would die, leaving Ned alone and grieving, leaving Ned free to knock on her door, cured of his demons, wanting it all back ... youthful passions ... ardent promises.

Chapter Twenty-Three

DAVID

2006

David saw the scowl across Kit's face, her eyebrows – fierce peaks above her nose. Just as Vivian slipped in beside her, Kit turned her face away, as if annoyed.

There were a lot of things in life he was ashamed of, but that night with Kit was one of the worst, the most unsettling. He never really thought about it, he forced himself not to think about how they'd used each other that night. Seeing Kit again, of course, kept reminding him of the bittersweet connection and the guilty aftermath.

1972

He knocked three times on Vivian's front door. "Hey, it's David."

Kit stepped back from the peephole. "Shit," she said.

"I heard that."

Kit's stare went right through him, her deep blue eyes barely visible over the chain lock.

"Vivian isn't here."

"Fine, I can wait."

Kit undid the chain and glared at him.

"She won't be back until after midnight. She's flying back from Boston," she said as she opened the door just a crack more.

"Boston?" he asked. He had a large paper bag in his hand that looked as if it were stained in grease. He hoped it wasn't fucking with his white slacks.

"I knew I smelled something foul."

"What's she doing in Boston?" he asked.

“Her brother Josh lives there, David. They’re putting their father into a nursing home.”

“Oh, that’s right, I forgot.”

“What stinks?” she said, her expression that of one who has just smelled something foul.

He brought his brows together. “My dinner,” he said. “And yours.”

“I’ve eaten.”

“Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

“No,” she said.

“Look, I thought Vivian would be here. She likes tuna on rye, so I brought her a sandwich. I want to make amends. I acted like such an asshole in Vermont.”

“I smell meat,” Kit said and made a face.

“Well, yeah, I’ve got a hamburger and fries in here for me.”

“Oh, boy.” Kit stepped back. “Well, I don’t want the tuna on rye and Vivian is in Boston, so it looks like you’ll have to eat alone.”

“Come on, we should talk.” He looked at her pensively, and then put his fingers up in the peace sign. “Sorry about what happened up there, but you know, my mother’s illness has me acting crazy. I was horrible to both of you. I’m really sorry, Kit.”

“Really, David, I’m tired.”

“My dinner will get cold. Let’s be friends again. Remember, we were closer than anyone. We were good together.”

Kit reluctantly released the chain lock and opened the door; she was in pajamas. David looked at his watch. “Ready for bed this early?” He laughed. “It’s only eight.”

She didn’t answer him and went into the kitchen. She got down a plate and some utensils.

“I’ll have some of that wine if you don’t mind.” He smiled politely. “You, too. Join me.”

She stared back at him. David knew she couldn’t stand him at this point, but he was genuinely embarrassed about his behavior. He needed her forgiveness. It would make him feel better.

“It’s a French Merlot,” he said as he poured the rich liquid into a wine glass. “You two didn’t finish it?”

Kit sipped on the wine. “You treated us both very badly, David”

"I know. I know. I acted like a jerk. I couldn't feel any worse about it than I do."

"Jerk is too mild a word for you. I don't like the smell of your food," she said, trying to be somewhat socialabe even though she felt like killing him.

"I know you're angry with me, Kit, and I understand that. I don't want you to be angry, even though I deserve it."

"You understand that, David?" she asked and leaned into him. "You really hurt me, and Vivian too. You destroyed our opening night."

"Sit down, Kit. Let me at least apologize."

Kit took her time sitting down. Her frown pensive. She watched him eat. Then she reached out and pushed his French fries away. "Can't you take 'no' for an answer, David?" she asked, clearly agitated with him. "She's over you."

"I can accept that Vivian has broken off with me. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes," she said carefully. "She doesn't want anything to do with you. You've been separated for months now; you need to move on."

"She slept with me."

"To comfort you."

"I know you're sleeping with her," he said. "Is she comforting you too?"

"What?"

"Susie told me you two are an item. She says you're in love."

Kit stood up. It looked to him like she was going to faint. "She lied to you. Oh, brother, did she ever lie to you. I can't believe you would fall for that outrageously stupid lie."

He stared at her. "You mean....you're not....?"

"Jesus, David. How dumb can you be?"

David finished the wine in his glass and put his head in his hands. "Pretty dumb."

"You believed what Susie told you? That's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard. She must have been manipulating you into something, though I can't imagine what. Sex?"

"Well, yeah, maybe. Look, why not believe her? It could have been true."

"No, it could not have been true. It's a crock of shit. I thought you knew Vivian better than that."

David took another bite of his hamburger and poured more wine into Kit's glass.

"Look, David, I was in love with Vivian. I won't deny that."

Kit watched as he poured himself more wine. He brought his gaze up to her face. "I guess that makes two of us."

"Look, eat your frigging hamburger, and get the hell out of here. She doesn't want either one of us."

He looked around. "Let's get a little drunk and play some sad music."

Kit went to the cupboard and took out another bottle of red wine. "Okay, David. I'll indulge you." She turned to him and held out the bottle. "It's a Shiraz, spicy, very good." She put out two fresh glasses. "I guess we can drown our sorrows together."

"I love wine."

"We love a lot of the same things, I guess."

"Yeah, we've established that."

Kit stared at him. "Yeah," she said.

"So, she's not a lesbian?" He chuckled. "Good for her."

Kit stared at him and started to laugh. "Vivian a lesbian? I wish."

Kit had put on some dreamy jazz album, and they sank into the couch and put their feet up.

"I slept with Susie," he said. "But I see you've put that together."

Kit almost jumped up but felt too woozy. "You're an ass, David. Susie wanted to sleep with you, so she lied to get you into bed? You're fucked up," she said softly and cuddled into the soft cushions on the couch. "Made the rounds with all of us, haven't you?"

David moved close to her and put his arm around her. He rubbed her shoulders. "Susie was just a whim, a sudden opportunity. You and I were something special though. By the way, I never slept with Ned." He chuckled.

"Don't be a jackass, David. If you'd found him attractive, you would have."

"You're very sexy."

"Are you seducing me?"

He smiled. "I felt defeated, like I lost something to you, but I didn't lose anything to you. You're not fucking my girl."

"She's not your girl."

David laughed. "No, I guess she isn't."

“Finally coming to your senses?”

They sat around for the next hour or two, finishing the wine and trying to avoid talking about Vivian. He rubbed her feet as she stretched her legs out over his legs.

“Wow, I’m feeling good and mellow,” he said.

“I’m floating away. Good wine. Damn good wine.”

He put his head back and reached for her hand. “Susie is really hot. Are you hot like Susie? I think you may be. As a matter of fact, I know you are. I remember.”

“That doesn’t surprise me, that Susie is hot, Susie is a hot bitch. Let’s put it that way.”

“Look, Vivian had left me by then. It didn’t mean anything between Susie and I, just sex. Ned turned into a fruitcake, can you blame her ... she was hurting.” He stroked her leg. “You’re pretty fucking hot.”

She turned around and found that he had slid over and was so close she could smell the burger on his breath. His mouth was suddenly on hers. They were pretty high by that time. All of a sudden, he wanted to dance with her. When she got to her feet, she tripped. He held her up. He moved into her and heard her breathe. Her breath was rapid and her eyes were closing.

“Get out of here,” she said. “Before I let you fuck me.”

“I could love you. I could really love you, Kit,” he said breathlessly.

“You called me a fucking dike.”

“Let’s shock everybody and get married,” he said.

Kit’s eyes widened and she looked about to cry. He liked that. She was soft and girlish now, a side to Kit he hadn’t seen in a while.

“Get the hell out of here, David, before we do something we’ll be sorry for.”

She was pushing him away, but not pushing him away, kind of rubbing his chest. All of a sudden, she crumpled down to the floor as if she just lost her strength. He wanted to see her naked, tear at her warm flesh, enter her tightly held vagina and turn her head around straight forever. She was almost as beautiful as Vivian; he’d always thought that.

He went to her and pulled her up. “Come on, let’s go to the bedroom.”

“This is crazy, David,” she tried to slap him. David grabbed her arms. He pushed her back toward the bedroom. “No, I don’t want this,” she whispered.

“But I want you like I never wanted anyone,” David said breathlessly.

“Please, David. Please go away. This is crazy.”

“I think you want me, too,” he said as he pushed her onto the bed. He lifted up her pajama top and cupped his hand around her small breast. He then slid off her bottoms. She wasn’t wearing underwear – *how convenient* – and quickly stuck his finger inside her. She was wet as Niagara Falls.

“Nooooo,” she screamed. “I don’t want to do this. David, get off me.”

“You’re beautiful,” he said as he opened his zipper and pulled himself free, hard as a piece of steel. “You like my Superman prick?” he laughed as he slid into her. “I feed it kryptonite. Remember? I used to tell you that. That’s what all the girls used to call it, my Superman prick.”

She was moaning now. He pumped her, gently at first, like a gentleman, and then so hard, he knocked them both off the bed and onto the floor.

David was surprised to come so quickly. “You’re unbelievable,” he said as his seed shot out of him, filling her, and drowning her and consuming him in some mad euphoric bliss – better than a marijuana high – groovier than a carnival ride. *Ah, she liked it. Must have really gotten off. She liked it. She took it so well.*

David stroked her hair and kissed her neck. Oddly, he felt embarrassed now. “It was good,” he said. “It was so good.”

“Oh, God, David. What did you do?”

“Don’t cry,” he said as he tried to smile. “It was good.” His heart was still pounding. “We don’t owe anybody anything.”

“Vivian could have caught us,” she said. “She could have come home and found us on her bed together. I told you no.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I thought you wanted to. We don’t owe Vivian anything, she dumped me.”

“I really didn’t want to. You took advantage of me. I’m inebriated.”

“I like you. I really like you.”

“I don’t like you that way. I’m gay.”

“Sure. I could tell.” He grinned.

“You don’t get it, it’s not all about sex.”

“I thought it might be nice. It was nice. I always loved you, Kit. We were friends.”

“I’m Vivian’s friend too.”

“You going to tell her?”

“Shit, no,” she whispered and watched him stand up and zipper his fly. “I could never tell her this.”

“I’m sorry,” he said again. “I flipped out, but I wanted you so much. You’re sexy and I’m a bit messed up.”

“It was just sex, David. It was just sex. Let’s put this behind us. We are not an item. Get it?”

Chapter Twenty-Four

2006

“I ordered you cheesecake, Viv,” Susie said as she dipped her spoon into a small saucer of chocolate ice cream. “I hope that’s okay. You always loved cheesecake. We can send it back if you don’t want it.”

“Oh, no, that’s okay. I haven’t had cheesecake in a while, I’m looking forward,” she said as she cut a piece off.

“So, Vivian,” Kit began. “Can we have the truth now? Isn’t that why you brought this old tribunal together?”

“Of course, and I’m about to tell all, but can I finish my cheesecake first?” Vivian smiled at Kit, her fork halfway up in the air.

Kit nodded, obviously peeved. “I’ll have sherbet then,” she said as she signaled for the waiter.



David ate his strawberry shortcake silently, licking first the cream from his fork and then tackling the fruit under the soft white cake. He had always felt badly about that night with Kit. He had taken advantage of her; it hadn’t really been fucking by mutual agreement. But he’d been genuinely turned on and Vivian didn’t want anything to do with either of them. But he knew how Vivian would feel. Betrayed. Even though neither he nor Kit owed her anything, she’d feel betrayed because it would have trivialized what they’d had together. He’d considered it a loving moment with Kit, much more than he had with Susie. In those days, everyone was sleeping around. But still, he had to admit he’d wanted to fuck Kit the minute he found her there alone. But it wasn’t anything he ever thought he’d initiate. He hadn’t let himself think about that night with Kit in years, but seeing how she still looked as if she wanted to aim an Uzi at his chest brought it all back. It made him feel like a royal asshole. But it was consensual. She’d wanted him, too. Christ, it wasn’t his fault he turned her on that night.

He didn't see Kit again, didn't see her again until years later, the weekend of that awful reunion in '89.

David had left New York quickly after the "incident" with Kit. He decided that he had had enough of Manhattan, and he really needed to move back to Hartford to support his mother through her bout with cancer, or maybe he was just scared to death that Kit would spill the beans to Vivian and she'd hate him even more, even though she wanted nothing to do with him anyway.

But the next thing he knew, Kit and Vivian had run off to Stockbridge together and he'd eagerly agreed to a partnership in his father's toy store. Life changed very rapidly for David after that.

1973

After David moved home, his high school girlfriend came by almost every day to inquire about his mom. "Hey, stranger," Shari said. "How's she doing?"

David thought she looked good. He watched as she climbed the porch steps and stood there grinning at him, the spaghetti straps of her blouse falling off her shoulder.

"She's resting," he said.

She walked close and kissed his cheek. He smelled the gardenia soap she bathed with and turned his head, catching her kiss on his mouth.

He remembered their high school passion with a smile; they'd slept together every chance they got, usually in David's old Ford. In the summer months, good places to get down and dirty were easier to find and they'd parked in open fields, found secluded places by the sound, and even discovered the skill of underwater intercourse.



"You sorry we broke up before college?" she asked him, leaning in to run her tongue along the edges of his ear.

They'd just made love up in his old room and he moved his hand across her beautifully rounded buttocks.

"It was your idea," he said as he kissed her shoulder.

Truth was, David had been secretly relieved; he'd wanted his freedom. He'd feigned his disappointment for Shari's sake and managed to shed a few dramatic tears.

Shari rolled over on her side and stared at him. "You met a woman in college, didn't you?"

"I told you I didn't want to break up." He looked up at the ceiling, not wanting to meet her eyes; he lied badly. "But you insisted."

"What was she like?"

David laughed at the memory. "She was different, like a passing thought you really shouldn't be having."

"Sounds dirty," she said. "Were you in love with her?" Shari asked.

"No," he said and looked into her eyes, an honest answer was in order. "Lana wasn't the type you fell in love with."

"Oh?" Shari said. "Sounds dirtier than ever now. Tell me about her."

"Oh, you're leading me into dangerous waters." He laughed again, louder this time.

"I won't be jealous, I promise."

"Well," he began, "that girl was a wild sensation of unpredictability, which always left me in a state of tension — not necessarily a bad thing. Actually, it was quite pleasurable because I never knew what to expect."

"You liked that?" Shari asked.

"Well, yeah, I guess I did."

"I'm sorry I asked." Shari turned back and frowned at him.

David played with her hair. It was long and sandy and always smelled crisp, like cold winter air.

"I didn't love her," he teased.

"Tell me more," she whispered low. "I'm feeling masochistic. Was she pretty?"

"She was all right," he mused. "Nothing special."

"What happened to her?" Shari asked. "Did you continue to see her after you guys graduated?"

"Well, she went on to get her PhD at Stanford University and promised to write, which she did. She wrote and told me that after she finished her dissertation on the homosexual metaphors in Greek mythology, she was going off to live in Europe for the next twenty years of her life."

"Did she?"

"I never doubted that she didn't. As far as I know, she has retreated behind the historic walls of some European city, performing her moonlight rituals, and puffing marijuana by the ancient artifacts of the Roman Coliseum."

“So who caught your eye in New York, David?” Shari followed his eyebrows with her finger. “Rumor has it there was someone.”

David frowned. He was only in New York a month or so before he became enamored with the beautiful and talented Vivian Forrester, the girl who’d been reared on Park Avenue, rode English saddle and had been educated in finishing schools abroad. David fell madly in love with her, and assumed she felt the same.

He’d wanted to bend Vivian into shape, fix all the places that didn’t fit with his expectations and will her emotional commitment into being – a feat he found exhaustingly impossible.

Vivian had broken his heart, no need to tell Shari that. She made him more miserable than he’d ever been in his entire life. David didn’t even know the meaning of the word “misery” until Vivian ditched him.

“No one caught my eye in New York,” he told Shari. “I was too obsessed on being an actor to take anyone seriously.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

1974

On a beautiful evening in August when the sky was crowded with stars and the moon was like a sliver of silver, David's mother passed away in the silence, leaving him as softly as the dawn rose. David awoke to his father's tears.

Shari was there, holding him, stroking him, sitting beside him, and holding his hand.

"I'll make dinner," she said.

Every night for weeks, Shari came and cooked, or she brought the food from her own mother's kitchen.

Mr. Cranston winked at his son, trying his best to find the humor his wife had unintentionally taken with her, as her last breath impressed upon him the brevity of life.

"Always liked that girl," he said to David. "Don't you think it's time you found yourself a fine wife like Shari"

Mr. Cranston died of a heart ailment within the year, leaving David the store, the house and a small, but still attractive inheritance.

David relied more and more on Shari after his parents died. There were times he felt completely helpless without her.

"I need you," he told her.

He was unusually vulnerable. He wanted to put a family back in his life. He felt so alone. He wanted to nestle his head on Shari's shoulder every night, raise children, go out and buy a dog and a station wagon and come home each summer evening to barbeques. His father had been right, he needed a wife like Shari.

"Marry me," he asked her.

"Oh, yes," Shari cried. "I love you, David."

David knew, though he still hated to admit it – that both Vivian and the theater would have given him nothing but heartburn and early ulcers. He came to terms with this crossroad in his life, and even welcomed the

mundane and predictable existence in the little old hometown that he'd always referred to as "a royal bore."

Shari was perfect, a willing and devoted wife. David was emotionally and sexually satiated with her. "Eat your heart out, Vivian," he whispered to himself as Shari slipped between his legs.



He still thought about Vivian, almost daily in the beginning, even while he and his new wife made love. Shari did whatever he wanted, sexually or otherwise. She even went to the lake with him to take naked late night swims in the cool waters.

David wondered if he could have ever gotten Vivian to let her hair down, turn wildly extroverted and sexually outrageous, like Shari, who even without the drugs she scorned – thrilled him.

No, Vivian was far too proper for skinny dipping in the Connecticut Sound, far too proper for moonlight blowjobs on the damp sand. God, he could barely get her to fornicate.



Eventually, David's life took on the usual mundane distractions of married life and he thought of Vivian less and less, until she became a distant memory, a fantasy he reworked to his own liking.

Shari and David were happy for the first few years of their marriage. But then their entire relationship became about irreconcilable differences, infidelity and boredom. Their marriage had just slipped into that deadly indifference, without his knowledge or hers, until the divorce papers had been served and each went their separate ways, meeting occasionally in the supermarket to chat about the weather superficially and indifferently.



After his divorce, David played the field for years. He remained aloof and changed his partners often. It was too debilitating to face the possibility of another painful relationship, another face-off with a woman's self-centered bullshit. It was easier and less stressful to remain detached.

Still, he yearned for security, especially children. He wanted to be the center of someone's world. Eventually, he looked at his married friends with envy and decided, several years after his first marriage ended, that he would find a wife.

Chapter Twenty-Six

1990

David turned to the beautiful woman beside him and asked, “Do you like the Dim Sum?”

“It’s not authentic,” she said. “I can do better. I’ll show you. Want to come to dinner tomorrow night? Dim Sum is my specialty.”

“I don’t even know you.” He grinned, admiring her peregrine features, the blatant confidence.

“Gerta Wong,” she said, holding out her hand. “Singles Gourmet member since 1980.”

“David Cranston,” he showed her his best smile. “Singles Gourmet member since I noticed that the women in the club could be as beautiful as you.”

He took her hand and shook it; his gaze lingered on her face, like a schoolboy with a condom in his pocket.

Gerta was of German and Chinese descent, though her Asian features were more pronounced. Delicate, her hair was very black, like silken threads, her skin was amazingly soft, and her eyes slanted and dark. Though Gerta clearly took after her father, with his characteristically high cheekbones and tawny complexion, she was her mother’s daughter, headstrong, demanding, and defiantly self-assured.

Gerta not only knew how to attract David, but she also understood how to weave a web into which he fell, all the while intoxicated by the sticky contours of entrapment.

He was older than she was by a decade, but still, the consummate handsome, leading man. Gerta liked the packaging and pursued David the way in which she attained everything she ever wanted – with total and riveting focus. Her drive and determination had gained her a top executive position at a major publishing company before the age of twenty-seven. She mastered the violin at the age of six, and won her first golf tournament at twenty-one. Gerta also loved to play the stock market and her bulging stock

portfolio, which had grown from her own investment decisions, was her pride and joy. It was that same expertise that won David's attention and drew him to her like a magnet held against an open box of pins; he was enamored of her luxurious lifestyle, and her beauty.



"Come, darling," she whispered. "Your bath awaits."

David got the full treatment, foot soaks and back rubs, Asian dumplings and Champagne dinners, intense sexual encounters in which he was usually the delirious passive receiver of Gerta's erotic expertise. He was fawned over, fussed over, the way it had been with Shari in the beginning, until she turned on him. Gerta would never turn on him, she was the kind of woman who made choices and stuck to them. Gerta understood commitment.

"You are incredible," he told her, "How do you have so much time for me, Gerta? You're so busy and accomplished."

"I know how to manage," she whispered as she rubbed his body in avocado oil.

David wondered if he was being manipulated. Then again, even if he knew he was, he dared not protest. Why should he?

David bought the biggest diamond he could afford. He took Gerta to a romantic little French Bistro with checkered tablecloths and candlelight. Right before coffee, David removed the box from his jacket pocket and handed it to her.

"Wow," she said as she opened it. "Quite an investment."

David was shocked and sat back. He had expected tears.

"Will you ... marry me?" he asked, wrestling with a sudden bout of insecurity.

Gerta smiled coyly and removed the engagement ring from its box. She slipped the ring on her finger. "I'll not only marry you, darling, I'll triple your income. My next diamond will be three times this size."

True to her word, Gerta doubled David's business profits with marketing ideas he never would have thought of.

"What did I tell you?" she said as their portfolio expanded. "Aren't I amazing?"

He had to agree, of course. Over the years, her executive position and crafty investments had earned them enough money to buy a three-million-dollar home in Hartford. Over the next few years, Gerta gave David three

wonderful children; she decorated their enormous new house in shades of white and beige and was even able to have it photographed in *Better Homes & Gardens*. And of course, despite Gerta's many activities and her full-time job, she managed to look alluring and seductive at all times.

But it did not take long for David to discover that his wife was detached, even from their children. Oh, she raised them with the utmost precision, but it was David the children went to with problems, skinned knees, and broken hearts.

"Mia came home from school in tears," David said. "I think someone was cruel to her, said something stupid."

"You deal with it, David. I haven't the time."

Increasingly disconnected and discontent, David slowly understood that underneath his wife's studied attention, there lay a crafty self-absorbed woman who had merely placed a man at her side – fed him, dressed him, and even fucked him, but did not love him. What the hell was love anyway?

"You're adrift from our children, Gerta," he told her.

"Don't be stupid, darling, they amuse me so much."

"Amuse, yes, perhaps ... but you're not really there for them. You don't spend enough time with them."

Gerta threw back her head and her long hair fell back. He heard her bracelets jangle, a sound he had come to despise.

"You are a dramatic man, David. Stop overreacting." She turned on her very high heels and left the room.

David realized that he had the perfect life with a woman he didn't know, had never known. Gerta existed behind perfection, ambition, and objectives he could not even attempt to understand. Emotionally, his wife reacted from the motivations of her own agenda.

"I make the financial decisions, David. You're not good with money."

"Sure, why not, Gerta? You've got the track record."

He was distressed to recognize another failure in his personal life. He spent more and more time at his store, or alone with his children. Gerta had total control and though it hadn't bothered him in the beginning, it began to take its toll on his self-esteem. She made all the decisions, planned their vacations, hired their cooks and nannies, created their menus, and even picked out David's clothes.

"I'd like to shop for myself, Gerta. You've got me looking like a cruise boat captain."

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous. If not for me, you’d wear nothing but sneakers and jeans.”

“Anything wrong with sneakers and jeans? I happen to like sneakers and jeans.”

Gerta laughed. “Then join a rock and roll band, darling.”

Gerta also arranged their social life. She dressed him, tied his ties, and paraded him past her many admirers, her vicious ambitious superiors, and her cast of useful friends.

Despite his unhappiness, David got used to the lifestyle. His wife made enough money to keep him very preoccupied. He didn’t have to question any feelings of despair, though despair is certainly what he felt.

David knew, even before his last child was born, that he hated his wife, yet he was indifferent to changing his circumstances. Why should he want to change anything about his rich and comfortable life? His children made things bearable. Gerta was absent most of the time, just a voice at the other end of his cell phone, a body at the other end of his bed.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

2004

David noticed her right off. She wasn't beautiful in the conventional sense, but she had large, lovely eyes and a smile that made him want to smile back.

Throughout his marriage to Gerta, David had made a point of sleeping with women who were non-threatening – very young women who would be nothing more than a non-committal lay.

His attraction to Lauren came as a surprise. She was clearly over forty and obviously intelligent enough to interest him, even more in conversation than in lust.



"My son loves model boats. Do you have anything?" Lauren asked.

She looked exasperated, as if trying so hard to find the perfect model for her son and kept coming up empty. Her frustration, however, was very becoming, and it made her appear breathlessly sensual.

Something about her face startled him, and he grinned broadly, but not flirtatiously. He stared at her a moment before answering.

"I have a beautiful Captain's Line Atlantic," he said. "Right this way. One hundred percent scratch built."

When she didn't answer, he turned around. "Made from teak."

"I'm afraid I don't know too much about models," she said. "Teddy likes kites, too, though. We go on Saturday to fly them."

He noticed that when she smiled, it was followed by a breathless laugh. She was cute, likable – accessible.

After a brief conversation about Diamond Tie Dye and Flying Fish Kites, David found himself feeling lightheaded, light as the kites he showed her. The blood was flowing through his veins – what a wonderful feeling, excitement is, he thought.

After their first meeting, David looked for Lauren when he ran across the road for lunch, like a schoolboy with a wild crush. He wondered where she shopped, hoped she'd show up at MacDonald's, a place he frequented. He rehearsed their opening conversations, fantasized about buying her a Big Mac and splitting a bag of fries.

Eventually, their paths did cross. It was just as he was making the light at Litchfield Turnpike. He had been on his way home when he spotted her turning into Home Depot. She pulled into a parking space and David dangerously swung his car around, almost going over the curb as he drove back into the lot, quickly pulling in a few rows behind Lauren's car.

"Going my way?" he asked, his breath appearing in gulps as he caught up with her.

"I need Miracle Gro." She stopped and took him in. She seemed happy to see him.

"Coincidence." He grinned as he got his bearing. "I need a new shovel."

They wandered through Home Depot together with the same fascination for plants, mulch, and garden hoses. Of course, David bought more than he needed that day: shovels, ladders, extension cords and a dozen new annuals.

It was innocent, at first. Lauren began to stop by his store with her sons at least once a week.

"It's us again," she announced one day. "Dennis and Teddy have blackmailed me for Nintendo."

"What's the blackmail?" he asked as he smiled at the boys.

"Not to tell you."

"Not to tell me what?"

"That it was my idea to come by, an excuse to see you."

Well, I'll be damned.

"Will you and your fine sons have lunch with me then?" David asked.

"The compliment was well taken."

"I've been saving my appetite all day," she said.



They munched down fries and malteds and bit into their Big Macs, their eyes in a constant game of catch.

"You like the ocean?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. I'm from Boston. We spent many years on the Cape. I miss it."

They moved from the subject of the Cape to old black-and-white films, and then, onto the Boston Braves, which got the most interest from her sons, Teddy, and Dennis.

"I'm married," he said casually. "Gerta, my wife, she absolutely hates baseball."

He noticed that she frowned.

"I'm divorced," she said.

David saw that the boys had moved on and were engrossed now with their new Nintendo. He put his chin in his hand.

"What happened?" he asked.

Lauren glanced toward her sons, noticing their preoccupation.

"I never saw him," she said simply. "He wasn't even a workaholic, he simply preferred hanging out with other men, riding motorcycles, sports, playing poker, whatever men do together. But maybe it was another woman, I really don't know," she said.

"Yeah, men are like that." He grinned. "Well, some of them."

She made a face and David laughed. He had the impulse, not only about kissing the nipples that had hardened against her shirt, but to kiss her mouth and stroke the side of her hair.

Their affair took some time to begin. David didn't quite understand why, but he didn't push it. It was almost as if he knew that once it began, he'd never want it to end. Lauren was forty-six years old and clearly beyond falling for a married man, but inevitably, they found themselves in her bedroom, clinging to each other, tearfully making love, hungry to escape the loneliness they'd begun to feel apart.

"Look, let's just take this for what it is, nothing more," she told him.



Lauren lived in a small Dutch Colonial farmhouse right outside the city with her two boys and worked from her home office as a book editor. As their attraction flourished, David left the store in the hands of an assistant and spent his late afternoons at Lauren's.

"I feel things I haven't felt in years," he whispered in her arms.

And he hadn't, not since Vivian had swung his head around and knocked him off his feet, and made him truly understand the depth of meaning behind the word "foolish."

He was reconnecting, once again, with the excitement of romance. Lauren shocked him into facing his discontent without even trying.

“Care to dance?” he asked, taking her naked body in his arms, moving her around her living room and crooning into her ear.

David found himself yearning to will away his obligations and begin anew. Lauren needed him – his advice, his opinions, his nearness. Eventually, David acknowledged that without her, he would wither and die.

“Would you mind if I told you I loved you?” he asked.

She shook her head and let a tear fall. “Me, too,” she said softly.

Having Lauren’s love was a comfort David hadn’t remembered feeling since his childhood, when old television shows and the scent of brisket brewing on his mother’s stove had made him feel safe and taken care of. Since meeting Lauren, he realized that love should be a kind of safety net, not frenetic and unpredictable, and certainly never distant, the way it became with Shari, the way it was with Gerta.



“You’re not seeing anyone, are you, David?” Gerta asked.

Taken by surprise, David shook his head slowly, perhaps, too slowly.

“Keep your women out of our life, you understand?”

David nodded and did not defend himself.

Gerta made life easy for him. She arranged his days, and he went through the motions of participating in them. Their life went on as usual and Gerta never brought up the subject of other women again.

He continued to react to Gerta’s instructions. If she told him to go left, he would do that, without argument. If she changed her mind and said, “go right,” he would turn and obey, without any interest in whether or not it was the wrong or right thing to do.

But after meeting Lauren, David felt he existed in two worlds. He liked being uncensored, opinionated, boisterous – hearing Lauren laugh and call him a jerk and an ass, tenderly berating his often off-color humor.

He was present for Lauren, guiding her, helping her decide how to reprimand her sons, advising her on where to invest her savings – and when they made love, it was David that led the way, David who made her tremble.

“I never felt so loved,” she said after a rhythmically euphoric climax. “You’re tender, David, so very tender.”

He held her and stroked her hair. He told her that her imperfect body, as she called it, was amazingly beautiful, and he'd never get enough of it, and he meant it from the bottom of his heart.

Gerta, his teensy weensy wife with her ideal weight and her sleek, flawless skin, her petite size zero, was always taking the lead, treating their intimacy like some mechanical operation, never stopping to kiss the tips of his eyes, the lobe of his ear the way Lauren did. Gerta, with her expert touch, got him off, cleansed her vagina in scented water and then gave it a spritz of Summer's Eve and went to sleep.

Lauren wanted his smell, the taste of him, the stickiness of their lovemaking – she wanted it, she said, “all day to recapture at will.”

Lauren had short brown hair and blue eyes. Her nose was undeniably Irish, like her freckles, and her dialect, very Boston. She'd moved to Hartford with her husband right after their marriage and stayed after the divorce because she loved the quaint old house she'd gotten in the settlement.

David had always loved old houses, just like Lauren's sweet little Dutch Colonial – that was half the size of his geometric kingdom with Gerta. He liked that Lauren had a dog that slept on the bed and a cat that walked on her kitchen table. Gerta would never have animals, they were dirty, she insisted, and even though the kids begged for a dog, David was never allowed to bring one home.

Everything had to be clean and new for Gerta, squeaky new like the glistening marble floors in their foyer and the low Asian lines of their furniture. David had not picked out the house, hadn't even liked it, yet he had gone along with it. There was never any sense in disagreeing with Gerta, it was her way, or it didn't happen. It was easier to just let Gerta take charge of it all.

But after he started seeing Lauren, David realized he wanted to be a *significant* other, not just a presence in his wife's home. He wanted an imperfect wife who cried at sad movies, could go a day without makeup and demanded his fidelity.

David never told Lauren that he would get a divorce. He had nothing to offer her but the time he could steal. Lauren wasn't pressuring him either. David knew that eventually Lauren would want more. She deserved more.

He often wished that Gerta would disappear, wither away – leaving him, of course, her vast fortune. He hated himself for having those thoughts, but

he saw no other way out. Divorcing Gerta would be a declaration of war. He couldn't face another divorce. Gerta had all the money under her control, all the power, and though David made a nice living off the store, he wasn't quite sure what he'd be worth after a custody battle with Gerta.

He didn't like confronting the truth, that it would only be a matter of time before Lauren would want the full package; maybe an ultimatum was around the corner.

Then he'd have to give her all his tired excuses. "My kids would suffer." "They mean too much to me." "I wouldn't put it past Gerta to take them away if I ask for a divorce."

Maybe Lauren would understand that. It's not that David didn't think about calling a lawyer, finding out what he'd be entitled to. But he feared some kind of horrible retribution from Gerta, some mean act of revenge. He assumed she'd win, as usual.

"I have nothing to offer you," he told Lauren.

There he was, playing the nice guy, gazing into Lauren's eyes.

"At least not until my kids are older, everything's in Gerta's name. She insisted on that kind of control." He laughed. "Funny, but control was something I always thought I had and never did, not with anyone."

He felt self-conscious. She was looking at him, and in her expression he saw disappointment.

"We'd be terribly middle-class." He felt uncomfortable and avoided her eyes. "If I divorced Gerta now, where would that leave us? We'd struggle to get Teddy and Dennis through college. It's worth it to wait, at least until I can put some money away."

He finally turned to her. She was looking right through him. There he lay – exposed for the pretentious ass he was. Eventually, he would lose the brightest light in his life because he didn't have the balls to fight for his kids, or give up his platinum credit cards. *Just what is the resistance. Why am I choosing to be miserable?*

"Do you love your wife, David?" she asked him.

David looked away again. *No, I love my lifestyle.*

"Well, do you, or is it none of my business?"

"I love my children," he said. "Not my wife." He felt apologetic. "Not my wife," he repeated.

David looked up as the waiter cleared the table and offered them all more coffee. He knew he was afraid of Gerta, what he'd lose if he ever decided to walk out of the door.

"Coffee?" the waiter asked Ned.

Ned nodded and pushed his cup forward. David looked at him distractedly.

When he was really being honest with himself he had to admit that it wasn't just about the kids, it was about the money. Gerta knew about his affair with Lauren, but it didn't faze her. But asking for a divorce would certainly faze her, that's a whole other ballgame. It would rock Gerta's world and David knew that. He didn't know what she'd do to him; probably deny him access to his children, which he would not be able to stand. Of course, she'd cut him off financially if she could. He thought about a lawyer again. It couldn't hurt to speak to one, start the wheels in motion.

As David looked over at Vivian, he suddenly remembered what it had been like to be in love with her, being torn in a million pieces, a strung-out young man, an emotional wreck. Without Lauren, he'd be that same young man again, angry, and sullen, he was sure of that. He was feeling a familiar sense of loss, every time he left Lauren's bed and returned to his enormously sterile home, he felt that loss. He wanted to take his hand and sweep it all away, his whole perfect geometric world; he wanted to sweep everything away but Lauren.

He thought about Lauren's upturned lips, how impish they made her look. She loved him, plain old David Cranston with his little retail store and the fiery temper that Lauren said she couldn't imagine. He laughed and said he'd lost it somewhere between Gerta's intense perfection, and meeting her, her cracks and creases, her lips and eyes, and the amazing enchantment of discovering her smile.



"Coffee, David?" Vivian broke through his thoughts.

"Yes," he said as he held up his cup.

He thought about how he'd loved Vivian, how it had been the highlight of his youth. For two whole years, when he was a very young man, his feet never left the ground. Vivian Forrester had lain in his arms and whispered his name and had come so close to being his forever.

Until he met Lauren, no other woman had given him so much to remember. To think he'd feel like that again. David suddenly felt blessed.

"It is good to see you, Viv." He smiled warmly. "It really is."

"Thank you, David." She smiled back. "It's good to see you, too."

"Now, what's this all about? Why are we here? Let's cut the suspense and get on with it? Huh, Viv?" David met her gaze and held it.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

VIVIAN

2006

Vivian looked around the table; they were all staring at her. She felt herself swallow as she tried to smile. It was so familiar, yes; unbearably familiar – the way it had been in Stockbridge; they’d been sitting around a table, anxiously waiting, seventeen long years ago, waiting for the lie she gave them. But it wasn’t a lie really, not then.

1989

“I think you guys need to get back to the city,” Vivian said softly. “I’ll call you as soon as I hear something.”

Susie stood up, fiery Susie. “You fuck,” she leaned into Ned. “You caused it, Ned. You goddamn drunken klutz. Why the hell didn’t you keep your eye on her?”

“Why the hell didn’t you?” Ned yelled back.

Kit jumped up, her chair falling behind her as she confronted David. “And who were you fucking, David? Where the hell were you? How can you let a fifteen-year-old girl swim alone in a lake?”

“What the hell are you talking about? Jesus.” David yelled and slumped into his chair. “I wasn’t even there when she first went in. I would not have let her.”

Vivian’s entire body was shaking. She needed them to go. She just needed them to go. “Stop it! We don’t know that she’s been hurt. She could be alright.”

They stared at her. Their pessimism was overwhelming.

“Please go home,” Vivian mumbled. “I’ll call you the minute I hear anything.”

“It was a bit self-indulgent for me to drink so much this weekend,” David said. “I should have been there for her. I would have been out there swimming with her if my head didn’t feel like a goddamn brick.”

“Please,” Vivian said, her voice catching. “Please, don’t blame each other. Don’t blame yourselves.”



Had it only been an hour or so earlier that she’d seen Susie leaving David’s room, stark naked? Vivian had just stepped out of her own bedroom. She was headed out to the lake to join Ned when she spotted Susie moving swiftly, her clothes in her hand. Vivian watched as Susie closed her bedroom door, without noticing Vivian.

Vivian wondered what the hell that was all about. What the hell was Susie doing coming out of David’s bedroom stark naked? Vivian knocked lightly on his door.

“Go away,” he said.

She ignored him and stepped inside. She stared at him as he lay on the bed; he appeared so drunk he couldn’t lift his head. Vivian closed the door behind her as he looked up.

“You’re having an affair with Susie?” Vivian asked, her confusion causing her to lean against the wall for support. “I don’t care, of course,” she added. “It’s just that I didn’t know.”

“Of course you don’t care, Vivian, you’re happily married.” He sat up on the bed, as naked as Susie had been. Vivian wasn’t sure what to say next. She watched as he put a sheet over himself, appearing more sober than she had originally thought.

“I *had* an affair with her,” he said and watched her expression. She was embarrassed and looked away. “But it seems I can’t get it up anymore for Susie, too much young tail in my life.”

Vivian could not believe what she was hearing. “When did you have an affair with Susie?”

“Around the time she told me you were having an affair with Kit,” he said solemnly. Vivian looked back at him *How could it still be there after all these years, David’s jealousies?*

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I ever heard.”

“That’s what Kit said.”

“Oh, David,” she said as she came toward him and cautiously sat on the edge of the bed. “I left you because I felt inadequate. It had nothing to do with you. God knows, it certainly had nothing to do with Kit. It was me.”

“Bullshit,” he said angrily.

“It’s true.”

He looked away. “I made you feel like that? Inadequate?”

“No, I simply felt like that.”

He turned back and held her gaze. “I was so fucked up over you that I actually believed Susie’s crap about you and Kit.”

“Why would Susie say such a thing?” Vivian briefly thought about that night in Vermont with Kit ... and dismissed it. That was really nothing. She must have been smashed. It never happened anyway, it had been dreamed, imagined.

“We’ll have to ask Susie.” He looked at her, still a bit too intensely.

She watched as he leaned toward her, his naked body as beautiful as ever. Vivian looked away.

“Viv,” he said. “I still love you.”

She felt him take her arm as she turned to stand. “Are you happy?” he asked and stood up, as well.

“I have a good life,” she answered, self-consciously aware of his nearness.

David smiled more broadly. “The same old Vivian, evasive and illusive. That’s not an answer to my question.”

Vivian pulled her arm away from him. He didn’t let go and she felt his strength as he pulled her back toward him. He looked at her with that dreamy expression he used to give her, he let his gaze travel slowly over her mouth.

She felt the strength of his grasp until his lips were on hers and his body so close against her own, the muscles in his thigh – the scent of his shampoo. Their kiss was deep and warm and she felt his hands on her ass, his closeness arousing her and causing her to want more, to want him inside of her.

What in God’s name was she doing, she asked herself and quickly pushed him away. “I can’t do this, David.”

He stepped back, and she walked to the door. “I can’t go there, David,” she said, not looking at him.

“Why?”

“I’m married.”

“But are you happily married?”

“Please, David, put some clothes on.”

“Won’t you answer me?”

“Yes, I am happily married,” she said softly.

“I need a swim,” he said as he walked past her and grabbed a towel. “I need a fucking swim. I never get the fucking truth from you.”

Vivian watched as he headed toward the stairs. His stride was long and quick.

“David, please put a suit on,” she hollered behind him. “Faith may see you.”

“I left my suit at the lake,” he hollered back. “She won’t see anything but my hairy legs.”

David ran down the stairs. Vivian stared after him, wondering if she should follow, but it was more important to talk to Susie. Yes, of course, he’d had an affair with her. *Jesus. When?*

She started toward Susie’s room. She was confused by the old news ... her best friend and her ex-boyfriend? Maybe it didn’t matter, or shouldn’t matter, but it did. Vivian realized she was shaking, still uncomfortably aroused by having been in David’s arms.

She wondered if Ned had known anything about it ... or Kit. She would certainly question Susie on how long it had gone on between them, and if it had ever been serious.

Vivian knocked twice on Susie’s door and didn’t get an answer. She wasn’t quite sure what she was going to say. “My God, I’m married,” she whispered. “It doesn’t matter... shouldn’t matter.”

She opened the door and looked around. The room was empty, just Susie’s clothes strewn about. Vivian let out a long sigh, relieved. Not seeing Susie would give her more time to think about how she would deal with it. She quietly closed the door behind her and went back down the stairs ... out of the kitchen door.

When she got to the lake she thought they were playing, acting up, screaming at David in jest. But no, the screams were frantic and they were all staring out over the lake, looking for someone. Vivian wondered what they were so upset about. They were yelling out Faith’s name.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

2006

Vivian reached down for her purse and felt the edges of Faith's book, the distinct crepuscular cover. She removed it from her purse and placed it on the table. They all casually glanced at it. Vivian put her hand to her forehead and rubbed it.

"What's that?" Susie finally asked.

"A book," Vivian answered.

"Yes, I can see that, but what does it have to do with anything?" Susie peered at her.

Vivian took a deep breath and turned to Kit. "It's fiction. It's a story about a girl who is physically and emotionally abused by her father. I've read it. It's very moving, but very difficult to read."

Kit's body stiffened and she leaned in and picked the book up.

Ned and David stared at Vivian, clearly confused.

"I don't get it," Susie said. "What's this book have to do with anything?"

"This particular book is all over Barnes & Noble. You haven't seen it?" Vivian asked as she took the book from Kit and held it up.

They all shook their heads as David took the novel from Vivian and turned it over. On the back cover, there was a photograph of a young woman, her thick dark hair brushed back off her face. David stared at the photograph and looked quickly over at Vivian.

"Jesus," he said.

Vivian was startled. "Yes, I guess she hasn't changed much ... she's very recognizable."

"You know her?" he asked.

Vivian was startled; *he* was supposed to know her.

"Well, I'll be ..." David looked back at the photograph.

Vivian felt Kit's shoulder near her own. She took another deep breath and instinctively put her hand on Kit's.

“The author is related to me,” Vivian said. “It’s Faith, my niece, Faith Forrester Denton. She’s become a writer.” She laughed nervously.

1973

There was a thunderstorm rattling around outside, threatening to break the windows. Vivian had been finishing the last few pages of Truman Capote’s book, *In Cold Blood*. There was an album on the stereo; she still remembered what was playing – The Mamas and the Papas *California Dreaming*. She had jumped when Kit walked through the door; she hadn’t heard her key in the lock, the storm was too loud.

“Jesus, you frightened me,” she said.

Kit walked into the kitchen without comment. Vivian felt Kit’s mood without having to see her face. She only had one chapter more to go, but she felt compelled to question Kit; Kit’s depression throwing a darkening pall onto the already dreary day.

Vivian lay back on the couch and put the book on her lap. She waited to see if Kit would come into the living room. She listened to hear if she was making a sandwich – she heard nothing. “Kit!” she called.

After a moment Kit walked into the room. Vivian saw immediately that her eyes were red and swollen; she sat up straight. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Kit started to cry. Vivian watched helplessly as Kit sank into a chair, her sobs increasingly disturbing.

Vivian jumped off the couch and went to her. “God, what is it, Kit?” she asked.

Kit couldn’t answer, she was sobbing too deeply. Vivian ran for Kleenex. Kit blew her nose and wiped her eyes.

“I’m pregnant,” she said softly.

Vivian fell back. She stared at Kit, trying to make sense of what she’d just heard.

“How could that be ...?”

“I am,” Kit said. “Oh, God, I don’t know what to do.”

Vivian took her arms and brushed the hair away from her eyes. “How could you get pregnant, I don’t understand?”

Kit looked up. “Do you remember the night you came back from Boston and you found me sitting in the dark?” Kit asked, her breath catching in her

throat.

“Yes,” Vivian said. Briefly, the awful smell came back of fried food and grease. “You were very upset and said you’d had a weak moment and went to bed with some guy.”

“Yeah, I had a weak moment, a stupid moment.” Kit’s voice broke as she spoke. She looked away. “I never thought in a million years I’d get pregnant from it,” she said. “It was practically rape, I was so drunk. I don’t even remember it.”

“Who was the guy?” Vivian stood up quickly. “You need to notify him.”

“It was a one-night stand,” she said. “I can’t notify him.”

“Oh, my God,” Vivian reached for Kit’s hands. “Who was the guy?” she asked.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters.”

“I’d rather not say,” Kit said sternly.

Vivian’s eyes got wide. “Someone we know?”

“No,” she lied. “I don’t even know him.”

“You don’t know him *anymore* you mean?”

“Yes,” Kit said.

“Well, do you like him?”

Kit stared at her. “No, not at the moment.”

“Jesus, Kit, it’s not the end of the world.”

Kit slid down on the floor. “Then what is?”

“Will he help you with the abortion?”

Kit stared at her a moment. “Vivian, my name is Katherine O’Hare Donovan.”

“So?”

“I’m Irish Catholic.”

“Jesus, Kit,” Vivian said loudly. “So what?”

“So abortion is out of the question.”

Vivian was stunned. “You’re really going to have this child? Does the father know?”

“The father will never know.”

“Look, Kit,” Vivian moved closer to her. “You sleep with women and the Catholics don’t sanction women sleeping with each other, so what difference does it make if you have an abortion? They don’t really consider you a Catholic.”

Kit brought her brows together and glared at Vivian. “I’m not having an abortion ... I can’t ... I just can’t. Oh God, Vivian, I can’t, not under any circumstances.”

They sat in silence for several moments, listening to the thunder and watching the lightning strike in the distance, beyond the city skyline view. Vivian finally turned back to Kit.

“Are you going to keep it?”

Kit put her head down and began to cry. Vivian got up and held her in her arms.

“I’m going to sleep on it,” Kit said. “But I don’t think so.”

Chapter Thirty

2006

“I don’t understand, Vivian,” David said quizzically. “Are you trying to tell us that this woman is Faith, the kid from your house in Stockbridge? Your niece? Let me see if I have this correct ... the writer of this novel is the girl who drowned in Stockbridge in 1989? Is that what you’re saying?”

“She didn’t drown that afternoon. I never said she drowned.”

“Yes, you did. You said she drowned.” Ned leaned into her.

“What really happened to Faith?” Susie asked.

“She turned up on Kwuuiikwat Island ...where she had a friend. She could have drowned, I guess. It was a long way to swim for some, but she’s a competent swimmer.” Vivian looked into David’s eyes. He looked dumbfounded.

Susie leaned as far over the table as she could and faced Vivian. “What are you saying, Vivian? You said you’d call us and tell us what happened. I never heard from you again.”

“But you told me she drowned, Vivian.” Ned looked completely bewildered.

“Yes, Ned told me she drowned after you told him.” Susie stared at Vivian.

“I couldn’t have said that. I don’t remember saying that,” Vivian stammered

“You sent us all home the next morning believing we were somehow responsible for a horrible accident.” Susie stared at her accusingly. “If she lived, why didn’t you let us know? I had to call you weeks later to find out and you never called me back. Don’t you think we had a right to know that she didn’t drown?”

“Well, none of you tried that hard to get the information. You all went off into your own little worlds and I didn’t hear from a one of you, not for years.” Vivian looked at them and realized she was breathing quickly enough to pass out.

“But you told Ned she drowned, Vivian,” Susie screamed.

Vivian shook her head. “No, I don’t think I did.”

Kit reached out and took the book. She turned it over and stared at the author’s picture. Tears ran down her cheeks.

“Jesus, Vivian,” Kit said. “I think I’m beginning to understand. She looked like my mother. I kept telling you that. You didn’t want me to know, did you? You didn’t want me to know who Faith really was.”

“No,” Vivian said in a whisper.

“And her eyes ... the color of her eyes ... Jesus, Vivian, I recognized whose eyes she had that weekend.”

Vivian said nothing and looked down at her hands. It came rushing back, that beautiful morning she’d awoken to the heat of the sun, a welcome burst of daylight after days of rain.

1973

Kit was already up. Vivian could hear her in the kitchen. She reached for her robe.

Kit held her hands around a large mug. Her eyes were still red. “Coffee?” she asked as Vivian entered the room.

Vivian nodded and watched as Kit went to the counter and poured her a cup. She sat back down and pushed the sugar toward Vivian’s hand.

“How do you feel this morning?” Vivian asked.

Kit sucked in her breath. “I haven’t changed my mind, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“What are your plans?”

“I don’t want anyone to know, especially my father.”

“You won’t tell the man you slept with?”

“No.”

“Why not, Kit? If you knew him from school or something, then maybe you can get him to help you financially.”

“I’m not going to keep the baby,” Kit said slowly and her voice broke.

“You’re not?”

Kit shook her head.

“What will you do?”

“I don’t know.”

Vivian had been thinking about it just in case Kit decided to give the baby up. She would help; she would get her out of town, up to Stockbridge.

“Look,” Vivian said. “I’ll help you.”

Kit searched her face. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“We’ll go up to Stockbridge and stay at the house. It’s empty.”

Kit put her head in her hands. “That sounds ... that sounds good. Thank you.”

“We’ll stay there through your pregnancy; no one will know, Kit. I won’t let you do this alone. We’ll get the baby adopted out. Everything will be fine.”

Vivian stroked her hair and held her hand. She got more Kleenex for her nose. Finally, Kit looked up. “You would do that for me?” she asked.

“Sure,” Vivian nodded. “Sure, of course.”

Chapter Thirty-One

NED

1989

Ned finally found Vivian's house after driving around for an hour, looking into the windows of picturesque homes, like a damn voyeur. The sky was black, starless, and that made finding the place even more difficult. Vivian's directions sucked, which didn't help either. He'd given up a weekend in the Hamptons to sit around with a bunch of people he no longer gave a shit about. Well, at least it would give him some time with Susie; he'd reason with her about taking the kids for the summer, try to talk sense into her, get the others to come up on his side.

Vivian's house was impressive, large, and beautiful. The windows were paned and tall. The front yard, littered with trees, graceful and full, which threw mysterious shadows into the summer night. As he followed a stone path toward the kitchen he saw through the glass patio doors. David was at the stove and Susie sat staring at him, saying things that Ned couldn't hear. David looked soused.

Leave it to David to set the scene – there he was in a chef's hat stirring up something that smelled like it had spent a week in the sun.

"*Phew*," Ned said as he walked through the kitchen doors. Susie was sitting at the island drinking what looked like piss water.

"Hey, you old son of a bitch." David smiled. "Haven't seen you in a million years."

Ned glared at Susie, who glared back. David came around and gave him a hug. Ned forced a smile and patted his back.

"Hey, David," he said. "You're looking good."

Ned had heard that David was a real mess after his divorce, going from one woman to the other, one party to the next, acting like a schmuck, like he

was still in college. Ned also noticed he looked like he spent every waking hour in the gym and felt a pang of envy.

“You, too, haven’t changed much.”

Ned laughed. “Just forty pounds or so.”

“This, my friend, is bouillabaisse. I can’t barbeque steaks around here, Vivian and Kit would puke all over the place.” David went back to the pot and bent down low for another sniff.

“Where’s Viv?” Ned asked.

“Went for a walk with Kit, I think.” David took a sip of his brew.

A teenage girl walked in and headed straight for the refrigerator. “Hi.” She smiled at them.

“Hi.” Ned smiled back.

The girl took a coke and opened it. Ned surmised she was around fifteen. She flipped off the top and went outside. “Jesus,” he said. “Is that Vivian’s kid? She’s pretty.”

Susie swung around. “Don’t you ever listen? Vivian had a son.”

Ned stared at her. “So whose kid is it?”

“She’s Vivian’s niece, I think,” David said.

“Oh. I guess there’s a bedroom for me upstairs?” Ned asked.

“Well, you’re the last to arrive, so I guess the empty room upstairs is yours,” David said as he sprinkled salt into his stew. “It’s little but ample.”

“Unless you want to sleep with me, lover boy,” Susie said sarcastically.

“I’d rather sleep with a corpse,” Ned said through his teeth.

“You are a corpse,” Susie sneered. “A fat one.”

“Hey, hey, hey,” David put his hands in the air. “Peace. According to Vivian, this is a ‘retreat.’ You guys are going to have to form a truce.”

“What are you drinking?” Ned asked David, still glaring at Susie. David held up a bottle of red wine.

“I’ll be down in a minute. Pour me a glass,” Ned said as he reached down for his overnight bag and started toward the stairs.

The house was beautiful. Ned could tell the kitchen had just been renovated with elegant yellow cabinets, low hanging lights and a granite island that went on forever. The steel appliances were all top of the line. From the doorway of the kitchen, he caught a glimpse of the parlor, muted and elegantly old fashioned.

Just as he got to the top of the stairs he heard the front door open. He recognized Kit’s voice right away. “She is so terrific,” he heard her say and

wondered who the hell she was talking about, certainly it wasn't Susie.

He heard Vivian laugh. "Yes," she said. "She's quite a kid."

Oh, Vivian's niece. Ned walked down a few steps. "Hey," he called to them. He smiled as the women looked up.

"Ned!" They cried in unison as they all met at the landing. The two of them were both as beautiful as ever, he thought. He felt angry as he took their hands, but he wasn't quite sure why. Maybe it was just because they were women, women friends of Susie's ... no longer his, perhaps.

"You two gals look chic," he said, using his hands. He noticed their discomfort as they looked back at him, clearly put off by the way he said 'chic', very gay.

"You too, Ned," Kit said, a bit apprehensively.

"You mean, not bad for a fat fairy?" He put his hands on his hips and raised an eyebrow.

They stood there a moment, staring uncomfortably at each other. Suddenly Ned reached out and put his arms around Kit. "So, what's the latest dike drama, Butch?" he asked, again, sounding very gay.

"Screw you," she said.

"Screw you, too," he said. "Screw all of you."

Vivian grabbed his arm. "Hey," she said. "What's with you?"

"The usual," he said. "My ex-wife."

"This weekend is about healing, Ned. Think of this house as a retreat," Vivian said softly.

"Then keep the wine coming. Right buster?" He winked at Kit.

"You're acting like an asshole," Kit said.

"I'll pass on the yoga, Madam," Ned said sarcastically as he turned to Vivian, "and don't call me for a prayer group either. Okay?"

Chapter Thirty-Two

2006

Ned raised his eyes and looked across the table at Vivian. What a jerk he'd acted like that weekend. The memory of his behavior embarrassed him. He remembered Faith clearly, though, and he felt like tossing his unfinished ice cream into Vivian's lap.

"Are you telling me that your niece, Faith, that supposedly drowned the weekend of the reunion, seventeen years ago, is the author of this book – which makes her very much alive since it was just published this year?" Ned asked.

"Yes," Vivian said softly. "But I never said she drowned. I never said she was dead."

"We spoke on the phone and you told me she drowned." Ned glared at her.

"I don't remember saying that. I can't imagine I said that." Vivian kept biting her lip.

"You never told any of us what happened. I think we all assumed she drowned because you never told us otherwise." Susie glared at her. "I don't think Ned would lie about something like that."

Ned looked dumbfounded. "Explain, Vivian."

"I don't like twenty questions, Vivian," Susie said briskly. "I want answers. You never called us. You apparently lied to Ned. Why?"

"And you never called me and asked what happened to Faith, did you? Did any of you?" Vivian stared back at them. "Oh, yeah, you called me five years later and never brought Faith up," she pointed her finger at Susie. "Stop making this my fault. Ned is fantasizing that I told him what happened. I didn't."

"What the hell are we doing here?" Susie asked. "We all assumed she was dead. You told Ned she was dead. What are we doing here?"

"Why didn't you let us know that she was okay, Viv? That she was safe?" David asked, more pensive than angry.

“Time just got away from me.” Vivian slowly looked around the table. She took a sip of her wine and stared back at them. “I actually even forgot about it.”

Ned said, “Get on with it then. Let’s hear your true confession.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

1973

The whole time in Stockbridge, Vivian worried about Kit. She was high and giggly one day and deep in despair the next. She was big for just four months and had a hearty appetite. Vivian knew that giving up the baby was difficult for her and it caused her to do all sorts of strange things. She took risks. Vivian wondered if she was trying to fall, to miscarry.

“Don’t take the bike out, Kit,” Vivian hollered. “It isn’t safe on this road. You could be hit by a truck.”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous, I need some time alone.” Kit threw back her head with that haughty dismissal of hers. “And I’m such a good bike rider, haven’t had a fall since I was ten years old.”

And out she would go while Vivian sat on the porch and waited – her heart in her throat until she saw Kit turn the corner again, hours later.

It was hard for Vivian to go through the pregnancy with Kit knowing how much angst there was around giving the baby up. Kit was in pain, trying frantically to separate, failing most of the time. Hardest of all was hearing her change her mind, or touch her stomach and softly stroke it.

But then, Kit would come around and admit that it would be best for the baby to find her a good home. “Yes, of course, the baby should have a wonderful home,” she’d say.

Vivian made all the arrangements with an adoption agency in Boston. There was even the option to connect with her baby when the child became an adult, if both parties agreed to it. It was difficult to get Kit excited about that, but Vivian said it left a means of communication open if they both wanted it.



Vivian looked at the sternness around her brother’s mouth, the lines at the side of his lips. She knew that expression well.

“We’ve decided to adopt,” he said.

Vivian felt every nerve in her body stiffen, as if facing lethal injection. "Have you made arrangements?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing concrete," Janet said, taking Josh's hand.

"We're so happy about this," Josh said, grinning at her. "We've tried for so long now, too many upsetting miscarriages. We're making the right decision. I mean what else can we do, we're not going to have one of our own. We've got to face it."

Josh and Janet couldn't possibly get Kit's baby. *Could they?* Vivian felt her mouth dry up. "Will you know who the mother is?" she asked.

"Not sure if it's important." Josh gave her a wry smile.

Vivian shook the idea out of her head. It was a long shot to think that Kit's baby would wind up with Josh and Janet. She would never entrust a child to her brother. He was a cruel and violent bastard, but maybe he'd outgrown it. He wouldn't touch an innocent child. It was absurd, not likely to happen. She'd been his only victim.

Vivian had always let Josh make the decisions. That's just the way it had always been between them. He handled everything. There was a reserve between the two of them that other people saw and would allude to now and then, as if goading them to repair what was wrong, probably sibling rivalry. Sometimes they lost their defenses and appeared to have an odd camaraderie, sort of like a dog and a cat. But Vivian felt too much fear and anger in her brother's presence to ever reach a comfort level with him.

She told Josh she was using the house that summer but she didn't mention Kit's pregnancy. She didn't even mention Kit was there with her. It was none of his business.

"We'll probably drop by for a visit then," Josh said. "It will be good to see you."

Vivian felt her stomach fall, dip as low as her knees. Josh and Janet were the last people she wanted to have drop in on her but she couldn't tell her brother not to come, it was his house as well.

"Fine," Vivian said.

Josh didn't say anything for several seconds. "Are you there alone?" he asked.

Vivian had known somewhere, in the back of her head, that her brother and his wife might pop in unexpectedly over the summer. They'd notice Kit's pregnancy, of course. But what did it matter? They were getting their

own baby. They weren't getting Kit's. They would never get their hands on Kit's baby.

"I'm with Kit," she said.

"Thought she was gay," he said. "You're not turning on me, are you?"

"She's pregnant, Josh." She knew she had to tell him. He'd come to the house and see for himself and wonder why she hadn't told him. "And we thought it would be nice for her to relax here at the house."

"Who the hell is the father?"

"I think the father was someone she went to school with."

"What do you know about him?" Josh asked. "What color was he?"

"I don't know," Vivian said. "It's none of our business, Josh, so just leave it alone."

A week later, Josh called back and told Vivian he and Janet were going to be getting an infant.

Vivian was pleased to hear it. "That's wonderful news. A girl or boy?"

"They don't know yet. They expect the birth will happen late winter."

A coldness grabbed her in her chest, like she had lain on damp earth in freezing weather. "Why do you have to wait?"

"We want an infant, Vivian. Must be Caucasian. Little white infants are in demand, or haven't you heard?"

"Yes, I imagine they are." Vivian thought quickly. She needed to find out the agency he was working through, and if it were the same, she'd find somewhere else for Kit.

"What agency are you working through?"

"Several," he said bluntly.

Sudden anxiety pumped through her. But it was paranoid of her to think he'd wind up with Kit's baby. Little white babies were born all the time and given up for adoption.

"What are you going to tell the child?" Vivian asked, making conversation.

"I'm not going to tell the baby anything. Who knows who the mother is, Vivian, or the father. It's best that my daughter never has the truth. By the way, we're hoping for a girl."

"Easier said than done." She laughed.

He laughed as well. "Not as difficult as you think to get what you want."

"Of course not," Vivian said. "But how did you—"

"Enough, Vivian. I have my ways, that's all."

Vivian casually mentioned to Kit that Josh and Janet were adopting and she said, "Well, he can't have my baby, that creep."

Vivian sighed; she'd always regretted that weak moment in Vermont when she admitted that her brother was a monster. She remembered that she wanted to be comforted and Kit was there. She'd felt that Kit was forgiving her, as if something were her fault. The next morning she wanted to throw herself in front of a car and die for having been so weak, for having admitted something like that.

Of course, Vivian wanted to know who was responsible for impregnating Kit, but Kit always shut down about it.

"If I wanted to tell you, Vivian, I would tell you. It meant nothing. You don't know him, so what does it matter?"

Vivian assumed that an old boyfriend had shown up that night. She knew that Kit hadn't had her first experience with a woman until her sophomore year in college. There had been a young man in her freshman year she'd dated. He turned out to be a real creep after she 'came out.' Vivian assumed he had come to visit her in New York and she probably had too much to drink. After all, she insisted she was bisexual, so why not?



Josh and Janet visited Vivian in Stockbridge twice during Kit's pregnancy. Vivian could tell that Kit hated them both, especially Josh. Of course, how could one not hate him? He was so overbearing. Kit tried to be polite, but her contempt for Josh was obvious.

"No offense, Viv, but your brother is a bit controlling, don't you think?" Kit said as she helped Vivian load up the dishwasher.

"Not compared to Janet." Vivian laughed.

"How do you stand their politics?" Kit asked.

"I don't know what happened to him, he wasn't raised that way."

"They're such bores, Vivian, so damn pompous," she said.

Vivian didn't blame Kit for her feelings; after all, Josh was a terrible bigot, pretending to all he was a compassionate Liberal, totally dedicated to human rights, but given half a chance, in the privacy of his family, or in some inebriated moment, he'd reveal quite a conflicting point of view.



"Saks has got the most incredible sale on mink. Here, Kit, have a fig, figs will be good for the baby." Janet reached out and handed Kit the bowl.

“Do you want to know how the animals are killed, like the ones that gave you your mink coat?” Kit asked.

Janet laughed, as if Kit had made a joke.

Vivian cringed and watched as Kit avoided the figs and listened uncomfortably to Josh’s comments about Blacks and Puerto Ricans.

“You give minorities an inch, they’ll take a mile. Before you know it, we’ll have a Black president and there won’t be a corporation in America not tied up in discrimination suits.”

“You think minorities don’t have the right to sue people who discriminate against them?” Kit asked.

Josh laughed. “Our country is going down the tubes, Kit. Liberals are responsible for too much welfare – too many immigrants coming over here to ruin our cities, refusing to learn our language. Too many Blacks having babies and polluting our streets with drugs. White people won’t be able to get jobs at some point. They’ll all go to Blacks and Puerto Ricans.”

“If you’ll excuse me,” Kit glared at Josh. “I’m going to bed now.”

Kit raised her eyes in Vivian’s direction and took to the stairs.



“She’s a beautiful woman,” Josh said out of the blue. “Her baby will be gorgeous.”

“Artistic, too, I’ll bet.” Janet grinned.

“She might have a boy, so it won’t matter if it’s gorgeous, will it?” Vivian said.

“I have a feeling,” Josh said. “She’s going to have a girl.”

Vivian felt uneasy and wasn’t quite sure why. Josh was not going to get his hands on Kit’s baby. She hoped he wasn’t thinking that.

Josh smiled at his sister. “If it’s a girl we’re going to name her Faith,” he raised his glass, “You like it?”

Vivian nodded. “Yes, Faith is a good name,” she whispered.

Chapter Thirty-Four

2006

Vivian met their frustrated expressions around the table.

“I told you, I never got back to any of you because life happened. You know? I got busy.”

Their expressions changed from frustration to confusion, except for Susie, who was clearly furious. Vivian tried to avoid looking at her. She felt something emanating from Kit’s presence that was almost too calm, like the sky before being ripped in two by a hurricane.

Ned looked up and called over a waiter. “I guess it’s going to be a long night, and I still have some time,” he said. “Shall we order a nightcap?”

The others nodded their heads and sat silently staring at Vivian as the waiter took their order.

Ned flipped open his cell phone and stood up. “I’ve got to call my wife before she leaves for the hospital. I’ll have a draft. Don’t start without me.”

“The hospital?” Kit asked.

“His wife had cancer a while ago,” Susie said as Ned headed for the door. “They removed a tumor. She was okay after that, but they recently found another cyst, a large one. She’s having an operation later today to remove it ... if they can. If it’s benign.”

“I hope she’ll be okay,” Kit said.

“Ditto.” Vivian sighed.

“Yeah.” Susie nodded.

“Poor guy,” David said softly and leaned back in his chair as the waiter opened his order book.



Vivian decided that her separation from Kit was appropriate after the birth of her daughter. She didn’t know of course who the couple was that had adopted Kit’s baby, not right away. Then she found out that her brother had manipulated it so that he and Janet were the proud parents. It ate away

at her until she forced herself not to think about it or worry about it. Josh and Janet were going to make wonderful parents, she told herself, over and over again, until she believed it.

Faith had a good home in Vivian's family, certainly Josh was a good father, must be a good father. He was stern, but seemed involved, not like their father had been. Josh was present, at least. Of course, she suspected ... he might ... *Oh, no, he wouldn't.* She talked herself out of what she was thinking, must be her own paranoia. Every time she saw Faith, she checked for bruises.

Vivian convinced herself that she could not have altered the circumstances. She had to believe that the baby was safe, it didn't matter that Josh and Janet had adopted it. Vivian told herself every day, that he'd never hurt the baby. Josh would not touch his own daughter. She could always reassure Kit that her baby was in good hands, but she could never reveal who had adopted her baby. It would have killed Kit to know it.

It was unfortunate that Vivian couldn't talk to Kit about Faith's passion for animals, or how much she excelled in English, or how well adjusted she seemed after a rather disturbing bout with rebellion. But she could say that she knew with absolute certainty, that deep down inside, by instinct or 'just a feeling,' that her baby was in a good home, a very good home.

If it hadn't been for that first reunion, everything would have just gone on without incident. Why had she wanted that first reunion anyway? There were moments when she actually thought about canceling it. But she must have been desperately craving something from her youth, something she'd had back then that she needed to recapture – dreams perhaps, or simply time, or simply the excitement of being around people who lived their life on a frenetic tightrope. Maybe she didn't remember those days the way they had really been. She was sure she'd romanticized them. Maybe she didn't need a reason to reconnect with her old friends; she just needed an excuse.

But right out of the blue, the bomb dropped, and there it was: a major screw up. Faith showed up unexpectedly during that reunion in '89.

1989

Faith opened the door of Vivian's Audi and jumped inside. "You don't look happy to see me, am I that much of a surprise?"

Vivian shook her head. "Why didn't you call? This is my reunion weekend. Won't be much fun for you." Vivian took her turn out of the rail station and drove toward the house.

"Sure it will, could be a blast."

Vivian turned to stare at Faith and quickly turned her eyes back on the road. She was nearly a reflection of Kit. The older Faith got, the more she resembled her biological mother.

"Okay. I'll find ways to keep you busy. Does your father know where you are?"

"I had a fight with him. I don't care what he knows."

"I'll call him," Vivian said quickly.

"Look, I won't get in the way. Please don't call him. He knows where I am. He knows where I am every second. He stalks me."

"Okay. I won't call him."

But it wasn't really okay, she didn't want Faith to meet Kit, couldn't let that happen. She'd send Faith out to meet up with girlfriends. Faith had friends in neighboring towns, kids she knew from years of spending summers in Stockbridge.

"Do I know these people?" Faith asked.

"No, theater people, friends of mine from the past, my foolish youth."

"Super cool," Faith said.

"What did you fight with your father about?"

"He says stupid things. You know how he is."

"Yes, I guess I do. Well, it will blow over."

"It always does."

Vivian looked at her niece again; she had a vacant expression, as if she had just shut down her mind.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Faith took a slight pause. "No, it will never change," she said.

Vivian was closer to Faith than she was to her own son, often feeling that the girl was even more hers than Josh or Janet's. She was just being overprotective ... the truth about Faith's birth was safe ... Vivian would make sure of it. There would be no way for anyone to know, especially Kit. If Kit knew the truth, she dreaded her reaction, her anger and her sorrow.

From the time Faith was eight years old, she'd developed an interest in the theater, astonishing Vivian with her resemblance to her biological mother. Vivian took her niece to a Broadway show whenever she came to

town, aware of the interesting connection between Faith and Kit, as if Faith had actually grown up under Kit's influence.

Vivian wanted to pick up the phone and say, "Kit, she's so like you. It's just amazing." But, of course, she never did.

Faith was a gangly teenager, small-boned, and tall for her age. Her most noticeable feature was her eyes, large and gray-blue in color, they expressed a fierce curiosity toward the recipients of her gaze, penetrating and holding their expression to the point of intrusion. Her hair was a deep auburn, which she wore short. It was always apparent that she would grow up to be beautiful. It was also apparent that she was fiercely independent, like Kit.

Josh and Janet adamantly decided from the very beginning that it would be best not to tell Faith that she had been adopted. But when Faith was thirteen, she found the adoption papers in her father's files ... a place he never thought she'd venture, considering he'd kept his files under lock and key.

"You found the key to my safety box?" Josh asked and slapped her across the face.

"I was looking for my birth certificate," Faith said sadly, her eyes questioning and confused. "I need it for school." She rubbed her cheek, tears in her eyes.

"You invaded my privacy, Faith." Josh stared at her, his fist raised. "I think you owe me an explanation."

Faith would not relent and waited until he led her into the living room and called for his wife. She feared he would beat the crap out of her, but she took her chances. She had to.

Josh and Janet reluctantly told her the truth. Faith dealt with it in her own way. She developed a fantasy about her real mother, over-dramatizing the information and giving it a fictional edge.

"My biological mother was a famous writer," she told her friends. "She had a torrid affair with a married man, and in order to spare his reputation, she gave their child up for adoption. Child, being me. Then she drowned herself in the Atlantic Ocean. She put weights in her shoes like Virginia Woolf. Isn't that utterly fascinating?"



Vivian had called Josh in a panic when she discovered that Faith was missing, that she'd gone out to swim and no one knew where she was. She

related the situation through tears as she sat on the bed in her room. “We don’t know anything yet,” she said.

“She’s an excellent swimmer,” Josh said. “Besides, who drowns in a lake?”

“Yes, yes, maybe she’s fine. Oh, God, I pray she’s fine.”

Vivian listened to the silence. Her heart was pounding. She felt like shit.

“What the hell was she doing swimming alone?” he suddenly asked.

Vivian didn’t know what to say. “We were all at the lake. We just lost sight of her. It happened quickly.”

Josh paused for a bit and Vivian waited.

“How’s your dike friend?” Josh suddenly asked.

Vivian sighed. She knew she had to do this. “She thinks Faith resembles her mother, not to mention herself,” she said. “When you see them together, it’s so goddamn obvious.”

“Really?”

“It seems that Faith looks just like Kit’s mother. Uncanny, isn’t it? Kit looked like her mother. There is definitely a family resemblance, Josh. It’s obvious.”

“You said that,” Josh said.

“Look, Josh, maybe it’s time to tell Kit and Faith the truth.”

“Shit, no.”

Vivian wondered how she could get him to change his mind.

Suddenly Josh’s voice came back, stern, and angry. “Let them think she died ... never came out of the fucking lake. I’m going to wring her neck for scaring us like this.”

Vivian was stunned. “I can’t do that. Are you crazy? I’m not going to tell anyone she died.”

“No, I’m not crazy, Vivian, I’m protecting my daughter. You’ll do what I say or Faith’s punishment will be severe. Your dike friend will mess with Faith’s head and I’m not going to let that happen. Christ, she almost ran away from home last year. She’s very vulnerable. Do what I say, Vivian. It’s for the best. Kit is a degenerate, a horrible influence. We must keep them apart.”

“You’re insane, Josh. Kit is not a degenerate, she’s a successful director.”

“What do you think it’s going to do to her when she finds out that her mother is a lesbian?”

Vivian wasn't sure what to say, she needed time to think, but Josh's voice came back like concrete falling to earth, landing in mud, covering her in the filth of it.

"I don't think she'll care."

"Damn it, Vivian, do what I say. It's best for Faith."

Of course, she always did what Josh said: take this you little bitch.

Chapter Thirty-Five

NED

2006

Ned flipped open his phone and stepped outside. His heart was pounding and he didn't know why, probably too much convoluted information.

"Ned," Deidre said quietly. "I am becoming a celebrity in my death."

"You're not dead."

"Yet," she whispered.

He felt like crying but didn't. It was becoming more and more difficult to keep it together ... another cyst, hadn't they been through enough?

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Didn't you hear me? I'm becoming a celebrity."

"A celebrity? What do you mean?"

"I'm being interviewed."

Ned was surprised, then angry. Why were people bothering her?

"Didn't you hear me? I'm going to be famous, darling."

"What are you talking about, Deidre?" he asked. He had a quick thought about the drugs they were giving her – they might be making her a bit confused.

"I hope you don't mind."

"Mind what?"

"I'll keep your name out of it. Well, actually, it will be fiction. Faith only writes fiction, I think."

"What are you talking about?"

"There's going to be a book about me, the basis for a novel, that is. Isn't it exciting?"

Ned took the phone away from his ear and stared at it. He was sick and tired of hearing about books.

"Please explain," he said, putting the phone back to his ear.

“The world wants to know what I see in my husband,” she said carefully. “Shall I tell them the truth?”

“What are you talking about?” he asked. He was amused now, as if she were playing with him, as she often did.

“Shall I tell them that I would rather drink Champagne than beer?”

Ned laughed.

“Look at a Chagall over a crack in the wall?”

Ned laughed harder. “What are they giving you, cocaine? Are you at the hospital already?”

“Avoid the nastiness of sweat, the invasion of a penis, and the ego of a straight man?”

“What an interesting book this will be.”

“Shall I tell them that having beauty in my life is better than balls and blow jobs and that my husband is much better at placating my need for aesthetic satisfaction than for understanding the mysterious island of my clitoris?”

“I do love you, Deidre.” He grinned. “So, how are you feeling?”

“Like shit,” she said. “But strong enough to bear it – if it turns out to be malignant.”

“It will be benign. Keep holding that thought.”

“There’s really going to be a book,” she said.

“You’re kidding, of course.”

“Woman talk, darling,” she whispered.

“So I hear,” he said.

“Interesting premise for a novel, marriage to a gay man.”

“All right, English now, what’s going on?”

“Why do some women marry gay men, love them, and adore them? God, isn’t it obvious ... laughter, humor, and an unrelenting passion for good taste.”

“Get to the point.”

“Or is it because I need to avoid straight men so that I can remain deeply distantly safe? That’s something I’ve recently discovered about myself. I don’t trust men. Straight men, darling, not you.”

“I have to go.”

“There really is a book.”

“I never knew you had any interest in writing.”

“Not me – Faith Forrester Denton.”

Ned stood back. For a moment he thought he might be going a bit insane.

“What did you just say? You know her?” he asked and barely recognized the sound of his own voice.

“Of course, so do you.”

“What?” he asked, as the street he was standing on seemed to cave.

“Faith? My friend from Boston? Christ, Ned. I met her on a train when I went to the Cape to do Orenstein’s house in Touro. She was at our Christmas party, and if I remember correctly, you were quite chatty with her.”

Ned scratched his head and began to pace. Yes, he remembered now, a young pretty girl he barely paid attention to. Shit, he never would have put it together. Deidre had been taken with her. The two of them spoke on the phone quite a bit and met for lunch whenever Faith came into Manhattan.

“Don’t you remember?” she asked. “She’s very young but very together. Ah, if you were straight, darling, you would have noticed.”

“Vaguely,” he said. “I think I vaguely remember her.”

“She’s a writer and she has a book out there. I forget the name of it. Anyway, she’s fascinated with me.”

“Why?” he asked carefully.

“Because I married you, Ned. No offense, but you are gay, remember?”



Ned closed the phone and shook his head. It was just too damn other-worldly, his having met the girl that he thought drowned because of his carelessness that day, because of his stupidity and his self-hatred – all that damn drinking he had done at that stupid reunion back in 89’ – all that anger at Susie for making him feel like shit. He turned back and looked inside the restaurant. They weren’t going to believe this one.

Ned stood close to the glass and observed his old friends. They weren’t speaking; they were all just sitting there staring at the ceiling, remembering that awful reunion weekend, no doubt. Ned closed his eyes. Why hadn’t he recognized Faith? It had only been last Christmas that she’d been in his home? He never made any connection, but yes, of course, Faith Forrester Denton.

Ned recalled sitting beside the girl the night of their holiday party. She was telling him how much she loved New York City, especially at

Christmas, something like that. He wasn't really listening to her. His thoughts had been on Alejandro that night; he realized he was falling in love, and he was a mess over it emotionally. He had never been in love with a man; he just lusted after them. He never felt he needed to love them, or be loved by them. He had everything he wanted without coming out to the world and declaring himself a homosexual. But it was all changing ... his needs were becoming something else entirely.

Alejandro wasn't part of the scene. He wasn't some trick picked up in the Pines, or found on a dance floor gyrating under strobe lights. He was a stockbroker with a major firm and looked as straight as his tie.

It was so strange ... the curveballs life throws. It had been the evening of Deidre's first diagnosis the first time he'd ever laid eyes on Alejandro Rivas. Ned had needed a drink that night, needed time to separate from reality, to forget how frightened he felt.

He wandered into The Townhouse, a gay bar in the East fifties. He stood at the bar, his only interest his Scotch ... and his thoughts ... on poor Deidre.

Alejandro was seated at a table with two other men. Ned glanced over briefly and noticed that one of the men was dark and spoke with a Spanish dialect. He was sipping on a Martini, focused entirely on the people he was with. Ned watched him for a while. The man never noticed Ned. Ned watched him laugh, listened to the sound of it. Ned had a fleeting thought that the stranger's laugh was nice, and that was the end of it. He left after two drinks without giving the man another look.



Deidre had toyed with a more natural defense against her cancer, but both Ned and Deidre's doctor changed her mind. Ned wondered if it had been the right thing to do or not. Perhaps cancer patients always instinctively know the best route to follow ... usually a combination of herbs and science. But at the suggestion of her doctor, she finally agreed to the hysterectomy with a great deal of confidence.

"Of course, you won't be able to have children," the doctor told her sadly.

Deidre laughed and reached out for Ned's hand. "That's not a concern, Doctor," she whispered. "And thank you, I am over forty."

"Not by much." The doctor winked and turned to smile at Ned.

Ned was attentive after the operation and did not leave Deidre's side unless he absolutely had to. After they were told she was cancer-free and going to be fine, they celebrated for days on end, eating at the best restaurants, buying a new car. Ned was so relieved over Deidre's clean bill of health that he even stumbled into a church to thank God.

Several weeks after Deidre's recovery, Ned was back in The Townhouse in need of a male encounter. He noticed a familiar face at the bar, despite the dimly lit crowded room. He couldn't place the face right away, but then ... the Spanish guy ... the night of Deidre's diagnosis.

Ned went home with Alejandro that evening, just another trick, no need to give it a second thought. He favored dark men, and always overtly effeminate. Alejandro was at least dark, a bit conservative looking, but hardly effeminate, a bit too broad shouldered and fleshed out for Ned's taste, but Alejandro was interested, and he was there ... and it would be easy ... not too much talk ... probably had nothing in common.

The weight of Ned's confusion rendered him vulnerable; left him wide open for surprises, the ones that come just when you're quite sure that the path ahead will never twist or turn. One night of laughing and lovemaking was all it took to shatter the status quo. Much to his surprise, Ned ached for Alejandro after that first night. But he didn't get it, didn't understand it. *Boom!* Like a rocket blasting toward the stars, Ned finally tasted the angst of a deep connection when it struggles not to deny itself. It wasn't all about sex; it was something so much more precarious than just being hot for someone.

Ned became unhinged, insecure, and delirious. The denial subsided without much effort, and he succumbed to the longing, the craving for Alejandro's companionship.

After seeing each other for about three weeks, they both agreed there was something there, something worth pursuing beyond their sexual attraction. The connection between them was uncomfortably acknowledged, and they were soon speaking about loving each other as if touching precious china in the middle of an earthquake.

Ned was shocked to find a man as guarded from the world as he was, a man with children, an ex-wife and an appetite for men that rivaled his own. Yes, this was different from anything Ned had ever imagined he'd find.

Alejandro was a private man; perhaps it was his Latin background that caused him to shield his sexuality, his very Catholic upbringing in Spain.

Alejandro lived in a completely heterosexual world, refusing to be publicly seen in the company of overt homosexuals. Since he had divorced his wife, he'd had one long term, very quiet relationship, which he finally shared with his children, who accepted their father's sexuality after some rather traumatic adjustment.

When Alejandro's long-term relationship was over, he discreetly met men in a quiet bar on the Upper East Side, known for its older and more professional clientele, a bar that Ned infrequently went to, mostly finding the men there a bit too conservative and old for his taste.

2004

"You're not my usual type," Ned said the first night they'd been together.

Alejandro smiled. "Don't limit yourself, *mi amigo*."

Ned was surprisingly drawn to Alejandro. He was attractively bearded and only a few years younger than Ned. His thick dark hair had mostly grayed. He wore delicate tortoise shell glasses, immediately identifiable as being expensive, and he dressed neatly and noticeably well. He was also formidable and masculine.

Despite the acknowledgement of love between them, they did not discuss, nor did they hint at anything even resembling commitment, at least not until it became unbearable not to.

"We could be free," Alejandro said. "Deidre deserves a very straight man, one who will appreciate her."

"I appreciate her," Ned said.

Alejandro raised his eyes. "You are too attached to her."

"Yes, I am." Ned walked away. "But I love you."

"Let's join forces then ... be a couple. Deidre is beautiful. She deserves a straight man, Ned."

Ned laughed. "She doesn't like straight men."

"Would she consider a woman?"

Ned laughed louder. "I don't think so, not seriously anyway."

Suddenly, Alejandro reached for Ned and held him. "Marry me," he said.

"I'm uncomfortable with that." Ned looked away.

"Me, too," Alejandro took his hand and kissed it. "But that's only because you are homophobic. What's my excuse?"

"You liar, you're as bad as I am."

“Maybe it’s time to change.”

“Okay, let’s kick open the door of the God damn closet then!” he shouted.

“Let’s go Ned, we’ll march in a Gay Pride Parade.” Alejandro kissed him. “I will do it.”

“I need you,” Ned said softly. “I need you.”



He remembered now, the night of the Christmas party.

“What’s it like being married to such a brilliant woman?” Faith had asked, breaking through his thoughts.

Ned’s smile was wide. “It keeps me on my toes,” he’d told her. They looked around Deidre’s latest remodeling of their Park Avenue Classic Seven, the extraordinarily tasteful placement of Biedermeier tables, creative touches of modern Italian design and the light muted tones of the Persian rugs.

“Pretty place,” she said.

“Thank you,” he answered.

Ned didn’t remember where the conversation went between he and the young woman; he just remembered where it ended.

“And what will your New Year’s resolution be?” she had asked.

“To break no other heart than my own,” he had said.

2006

Ned’s phone rang again and he noticed that it was Deidre.

“Deidre?” he asked quickly.

“It won’t be malignant.”

“I know.”

“Faith has just arrived. She says hello.”

“Faith?” he asked as he turned back to peer beyond the glass of The White Horse Tavern. Susie looked up and smiled encouragingly.

“Yes, Faith Forrester Denton,” she said, losing patience with him. “The one who’s writing the book?”

“So, what will you tell her?” he asked. “Why you married a gay man?”

“I guess you’ll have to read the book.” She laughed low.

Ned laughed with her. Everything in the last ten minutes had become hysterically bizarre. “I’ll be there soon.”

“Do you believe in God?” she whispered.

Ned had found God in his darkest hour. There must be a God. Deidre needed God. Much too often, even he needed God.

“Yes,” he whispered.

“Bye, darling,” she said. “I believe in God, too,” she added as she hung up the phone.

Ned looked back at the restaurant. Susie was still watching him, smiling with an assuring nod. He felt like blowing her a kiss, as if he were still attached to her.

Had he ever loved any woman the way he loved Alejandro? Sweet Susie in her high school cheerleading costume and her round probing eyes; had he loved her? He had wanted to love her, pretended to love her; he even prayed to love her, but it never showed up, not in ways that made her happy.

Yet, a more painful truth, he'd never loved Deidre either, not in the way he loved Alejandro. He adored his amusing, talented wife with all his heart, but he could live without her and he knew it. The thought made him queasy. But he could live without her ... God, forgive him. He would miss her terribly if she passed from this world into the next. Of course he would. He would put her photographs all over the apartment and he would talk about her incessantly to anyone and everyone who would listen. God knows, he owed her. It was because of Deidre that he finally let his hair down and became himself, because she accepted him, because she had allowed him to become expressive and deliciously effeminate in the privacy of their home, in the safety of their summerhouse in the Hamptons. But he didn't love his wife the way a straight man would have. He had short-changed them both. Susie hated him for it, but what about Deidre ... how did she feel about his preference for men ... really feel about it? She was the enigma, not him.

Ned sighed and walked toward the curb. They had been his masks, Deidre, and Susie. They had been his beards, his trophy brides. He cupped his cell phone in his hand. For just a moment, he wanted to call Alejandro and weep – admit that he wanted more, that he'd agree to a full commitment. He just wouldn't tolerate anything less.

I want the works, all the bells and whistles, I want to share my life with you, come stampeding out of my own skin. Oh, Alejandro, Alejandro, Alejandro ... let's take it. Let's go for it.

But Ned knew he wouldn't. God knows, what if Deidre's cyst weren't benign? She would need him then. Besides, Ned already had a life and it

worked perfectly well. It would work perfectly well again after Deidre's operation. His kids and his grandkids loved Deidre; his straight friends accepted them as a couple. It was a dream to think he could live with another man, out in the open like two queens – with their dogs and their goddamn antiques, their fabulous house parties, and their gay pride mentalities. Shit, better to leave well enough alone.

He looked up to Susie's frown, as if she had read his thoughts. He turned his back on the restaurant and flipped the phone up. He had told Alejandro he would be by after leaving the hospital. He wondered how long this damn reunion would take. The weirdness was starting to get on his nerves.

"Nando? Glad I got you."

"Where are you?"

"Still at The White Horse Tavern. Remember? The reunion."

"Oh, yes, of course. Aren't you supposed to be with Deidre?"

"No, not yet. Look, it's bizarre ... about Faith. Shit, I'm not even sure I can explain it."

"Who's Faith?"

Ned turned back to the restaurant. Susie was giving him an exasperated look. He watched as she nodded her head back as if to say, c'mon, you're wasting our time, get back here so Vivian can give us the rest of this sordid little mystery.

"Are you going to go to the hospital?" Alejandro asked.

"Of course. Look, oh, shit, it's so ridiculous I can't even get the words out."

"What's going on?" Alejandro was suddenly concerned. "Is Deidre okay?"

"Yeah."

"What then?"

"Faith Forrester Denton is writing a book about her. She says it's going to be fiction, but she's the prototype. This woman, Faith, is writing it. Faith Forrester Denton, ever hear of her?"

Ned listened to the silence and then Alejandro laughed. "I don't read women's fiction, I'm afraid."

"She's writing a book about her. It's uncanny."

"Okay. Great news, that is sure to give Deidre a reason to stay positive. "

"I thought I had killed her."

"What?"

“This woman ... Faith. I thought I’d killed her, for so many years I believed that I was responsible for a horrible accident. I was tormented by it.”

“I’m not following you, Ned.”

“I was such a goddamn jerk ... when I was younger. God, I hate who I was.”

“Youth is foolish,” he said. “For all of us.”

“I’ve got to go, Nando. I’ll try and explain all of this to you later.”

“Ned, if Deidre is okay ... what then?”

Ned knew what he wanted to hear, what he’d been wanting to hear for weeks now.

“If she’s okay, we’ll talk about it.”

“You are being so non-committal.”

“Alejandro?”

Ned listened to the silence.

“Yes?” Alejandro asked.

“I love you,” he said quietly and closed his phone.



Ned turned back to look at the table inside. They all looked tired. They appeared to be just waiting for him, the drunken oaf who’d lived with Faith’s drowning for years, lived with the knowledge of being responsible for someone’s premature demise. It didn’t matter that it was an accident. It was a haunting. It drove him against himself with a vengeance. It drove him toward success with a blindness to all else. It drowned him in alcohol until God saved him and sent Deidre to his side. He promised God he wouldn’t ever drink again after being given that gift, dear Deidre. He swore to God he wouldn’t sin anymore with men, but he did. He fucked men, but he didn’t love them, didn’t set up house with them. Sex with men was perfectly acceptable because it was quick and easy. Certainly God would agree. God was, after all, a male entity and would understand that men needed to do things like that, but not love each other, honor, and obey each other – that was meant for a woman. That’s the natural law.

But now, God says there never was any drowning. There never was any death caused by his carelessness, his preoccupation with himself. So now he doesn’t owe God anything – or does he? Ned felt confused, and then, content. It seems the truth might set him free.

Chapter Thirty-Six

VIVIAN

2006

Vivian was relieved that Ned had to make a phone call; it gave her a moment to clear her head, rehearse her speech about protecting herself ... protecting her niece.

That first reunion had been an awful weekend. If she'd only known, she'd never have planned it. She remembered picking Faith up at the station, Faith's incessant chatter, the drive up Maine Street. Faith had just come in from Boston, having frantically called Vivian the moment she got there. "Surprise! I'm here. Can you pick me up?"

1989

"Sure you don't want to change your mind, Faith? It's my reunion weekend, could be boring for you."

"Won't be as boring as being home with my parents, especially my Dad, whom you know is the most boring man on earth."

Kit had arrived two days earlier and was already back at the house, buried in a book on Vivian's couch. Of course, Vivian wondered if it would be difficult for Kit ... being at the old house, memories everywhere she turned. But Kit seemed fine. She went on and on about her success, her last review, her next play and didn't seem the least bit sentimental or morose or haunted by memories.



"Come back to the theater, Vivian." Kit shot forward on her elbows. "I've a role for you, a dark and sinister woman who is obsessed by a very destructive man. You'd love it. The character is very multi-layered."

Vivian was distracted. Of course she was distracted, she'd been thinking about Faith, wondering if the similarities between she and Kit would come spilling out all over the place, as obvious as pimples.

"I would rather walk off a cliff at this point in my life than strut and fret any more hours upon the stage." Vivian laughed as she poured herself more of the cold French Muscadet Kit had brought with her.

Kit had offered to cook that night and Vivian had willingly agreed. It was fun being with Kit again. Vivian wished there could have been a way for them to have remained close.

"Do you ever miss the others?" Vivian asked.

"Ned, sometimes. Not Susie though, and definitely not David."

Vivian understood why Kit hated David ... that awful time in Vermont. She wondered what she had against Susie, though, and hoped enough time had passed to keep them all civil with one another.

"You never got over that time in Vermont, have you?" Vivian asked.

"No," she said softly. "I haven't."

"We were young, Kit. David is not so bad."

Vivian watched closely as Kit gazed at a large, framed photograph of Faith on the counter in the kitchen, posing with her dog, Jimmy, an overfed Jack Russell. The dog had been a puppy then, Faith had been nine.

Vivian abruptly started talking, maybe a bit too quickly, about how she was looking forward to seeing everyone again. It had been seventeen years. It took Kit's attention off the photograph. Vivian wondered why she was so damn worried about a photograph when Faith would soon be there in the flesh.

"David has not yet remarried, I think he needs to be married though," Vivian said.

They gossiped for a while about David, how they'd heard he was playing the field ... how they'd heard Susie was on her second divorce. Kit said she still hadn't met the right woman and it was probably because she was too focused on her career.

"So, you've made the decision you're gay?"

Kit nodded her head. "Yep. Quite certain."

"That should make it easier."

"You're the only one who seems to have it together in your personal life, Viv."

Vivian smiled. She adored Ian and she had a wonderful son; that was true. She even had a new teaching job at Columbia. She thought her life was pretty near perfect, except of course, for the lie, never telling Kit that Josh and Janet were raising her daughter.

"I hope the guys don't mind but ..." Vivian began slowly.

"Don't mind what?" Kit asked.

Vivian noticed that she still looked so young. It was the way she dressed and spoke. Vivian felt the weight of the word *maturity* and how she wished she looked more like Kit, more wistful and hopeful, and less important.

"Oh, there was some screw up with my niece's plans and she's going to be joining us over the weekend," Vivian said as nonchalantly as possible.

Kit looked up. She was munching on a piece of corn. Vivian couldn't help but smile, her teeth were yellow from the kernels.

"You have a niece?" she asked, not stopping her attack on the completely kernelless cob.

"Yes, yes," Vivian said as she helped herself to more coleslaw and chicken. "My brother's daughter."

"Josh had a child?" Kit tossed her mutilated cob in the trash. "God help the kid."

"Yes, my niece, Faith. You'll like her, she's great." Vivian purposely got up and went to the refrigerator. If Kit had a reaction, she didn't want to see it.

"I'm sure no one will mind," Kit said.

Vivian breathed a sigh of relief. Kit had no response at all to the fact that Josh and Janet had adopted a child. Of course Kit and Faith wouldn't recognize each other, that was a ridiculous fear. Vivian felt herself relax. "This will be a fine weekend," she said to Kit. "We're gonna have a blast."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

KIT

2006

Kit reached out for the book. She stared at the pretty girl on the back cover, remembering her shock, seeing Faith for the first time that afternoon in Stockbridge.

1989

“My God,” Kit had whispered as Faith flew through the door with Vivian. She cocked her head and laughed. “Hello.” she giggled. “I’m Faith.”

Kit slowly watched as Faith took to the stairs. “I’m Kit,” she called.

Vivian moved away too quickly.

“Viv!” Kit leaped from her chair.

Vivian turned. “Yes?”

“Nothing.”

Later on, as Vivian and Kit were sitting on the porch, Kit turned to her. “That girl is the spitting image of my mother,” she said. “Is that bizarre or what?”

Vivian looked at her with a start, like she’d just sat on glass.

“Really? How weird,” Vivian said, laughing self-consciously

“Faith is Josh’s daughter?” Kit tilted her head and stared at Vivian.

“Yes.” Vivian nodded her head carefully.

“She doesn’t look anything at all like Josh ... or Janet, for that matter.”

Vivian looked back over her shoulder just to make sure Faith was not in hearing distance.

“They adopted Faith, Kit. I told you that, didn’t I?”

“They adopted her? Kit took on a strange expression. “She looks like *my* mother,” Kit said quietly. “It’s uncanny. She has my mother’s face. So she

looks like me.”

“I wondered if inviting you back to this house would be a mistake. I was afraid it would all repeat ... you know,” Vivian shrugged, “about the baby. I’m sorry, Kit, but Faith is my brother’s child.”

“Well,” Kit laughed and fell back into the chair. “You and I used to be taken for sisters so I guess she takes after you. You sure they didn’t have a kid of their own?”

Vivian tried to make herself comfortable on the arm of the chair. “Yes, I’m sure,” she said. “Josh always said that Faith has our mom’s good looks. Good looks are good looks, you know?”

“I can’t believe how much she looks like my mother.”

“Don’t get upset, Kit, but I think you’re hallucinating a little bit.”

“I’m sorry,” Kit said sadly. “I try never to think about the baby I gave up ... but your niece ... just now ... she startled me ... and it came back so vividly.”



It was disturbing for Kit to be back in that house, especially after seeing Faith. Her presence had been unsettling. It brought up all the old feelings – the horrible depression after the baby’s birth, the bleakness that had overtaken her. It was all she could do to get out of bed after that... for three years she was practically a basket case, then it just passed, lifted away like an ailment.

Kit decided to believe Viv when she insisted that Faith was Josh’s child, not the child she had given up. And yet, the girl had been so taken with her. All that weekend, Faith followed her everywhere, staring at her like she was a movie queen. Kit tried to avoid her; it was too unsettling. Faith made her uncomfortable.



“Will you take a walk with me, Kit? I know a great trail,” Faith said.

They were the first two up that day. Kit was eager for an early morning walk and would have preferred going alone, but Faith wouldn’t take no for an answer. She found herself reluctantly following after the girl as she was led onto a narrow dirt path at the back end of Vivian’s property.

She couldn’t get over how much Faith resembled her mother and tried not to obsess on it. She began to think ... to wonder if Vivian hadn’t arranged for her brother to get her baby. But Vivian would never do that,

not after what she'd confided in her about Josh, his cruelty ... his violence ... his perversion.

"You have a pretty name," Kit said as she turned to smile at the girl.

Faith looked up. "You think it's a good stage name?" she asked.

"So you want to be on the stage?"

"Well, I really like books. Maybe I'll be a writer."

"That would be nice," Kit said as she reached down for a tall weed and tore it from the ground.

Faith reached over and did the same, smiling back at her.

"That's the neatest idea. Maybe I could write plays like Lillian Hellman." Faith looked earnest and very serious.

"Why not?" Kit studied the shape of her lips; it was just so damn strange.

"And you'll direct them." The girl grinned.

Kit grinned back. "Sure will."

"My Aunt Viv once took me to a show that you directed."

"Really?" Kit sat straight up; that surprised her.

"Yeah. Aunt Viv told me you used to be good friends."

"Well, we still are. Did you like the show?"

"Oh, yes. It was at the Broadhurst theater. I got a little bored, but I still loved it."

"Thanks for your honesty."

"Aunt Viv kept saying 'my friend directed this,' but she said you weren't there that night, so I couldn't meet you. I was so disappointed. I really wanted to tell all my friends that I'd met a real Broadway director."

"Well, you can certainly tell them now."

Kit wondered why Vivian wouldn't have told her she was catching the show with her niece, they could have met afterwards, had dinner.

Faith had so many questions for her that day ... the same questions that she had bombarded her own mother with when she'd been a teenager: please, tell me how you learn all the lines ... what do you do if one of the actors goes dumb on you? How do you know where to move? Is it hard being on stage, Mom?



"God, she's so like me, Vivian."

"Who?" Vivian asked nonchalantly.

“Faith. Faith is so like me.”

“Better like you than Josh. Remember his politics?”

“I remember a lot about him, Viv.”

Vivian stopped cold and turned to her. “I think you’re making too much of Faith’s resemblance to your mother.

Kit had watched David around Faith that weekend. They had all been outside the night before playing badminton ... laughing like the years had not separated them. It had been the one moment in the whole reunion that they all seemed to be having fun.

It was quite striking, Faith had David’s eyes. Kit saw it plain as day and wondered why nobody else did. David, of course, was flirting with the girl ... telling her she must break a million hearts a minute and Faith was laughing back between blushes. She had whispered in Kit’s ear earlier that she thought David was one of the handsomest men she had ever seen.

Her aunt’s “theater” friends fascinated Faith. She went from one to the other, questioning them all about HB Studios ... asking why they didn’t keep at it and stay in the theater like Kit had. For Faith, it seemed as if the theater was the loftiest profession on earth – as it had been for Kit.



“When’s your birthday, Faith?” Kit had to ask. She had Faith right where she wanted her, away from Vivian.

Faith looked at her strangely. “January 30th, 1974,” she said. “Why?”

Kit felt the color drain from her. She felt faint. Faith saw her expression and held it.

“Why do you want to know?” she repeated. “Are you going to remember?”

Kit couldn’t think of anything to say. This was her child. This must be her child. This girl was born on her baby’s birthday. She looked up into the girl’s eyes. *What the hell had Vivian done?*

“Are you all right?” Faith asked.

“My baby.....?” she began, looking up to smile.

“Your baby what?”

“Nothing ... I’m sorry.”

“You have a baby? I thought you were....”

“I had a baby but I ... had to give it up.”

“You gave it up? I was given up.”

Kit stared at her as if shot with a stun gun.

Faith reacted as if she'd suddenly been called away. "I have to go," she whispered nervously.

Kit watched as she ran back to the house, her long legs moved so swiftly. They both felt it, unarticulated but lingering in the silence ... *you're mine*.

2006

Kit shook herself back to the present and stared around the table. How strangely it was all unraveling. How long had it taken her to forgive herself for giving up her own flesh and blood ... for not being strong enough to raise her own child ... for somehow being responsible for that senseless accident? Had Faith been so lost in thought that she wasn't aware of how far she swam? Had she been too distracted to prevent herself from being taken under by a sudden cramp ... too lost in those disturbing moments with Kit to protect herself from harm?

She looked over at David, the unknowing father of her child. When she looked at him, she wanted to scream in his face, beat her hands into his chest until he hurt, but he looked so forlorn and confused that she almost felt sorry for him ... almost, but not quite. He must have carried around years of guilt over the accident as well. He'd been inebriated the entire weekend, good for nothing but wallowing in his own shit. God, had Vivian really been so callous that she would let them all believe they'd been somehow responsible for that girl's drowning by their selfish self-absorption?

"You look like shit, David," she said spontaneously. "Not in general, just at the moment. Are you afraid of ghosts?"

"I don't believe in ghosts," he said. Then he turned his head toward Vivian.

"I know her," he said softly.

Kit watched as Vivian stiffened, as if she'd been pinched.

"Oh, this is just too weird," Susie said as she glared at David. "Of course, you know her, we all know her."

"No, I mean, I met her recently. I—"

"Shit, Vivian." Susie interrupted. "You've done nothing but keep us in the dark. What the hell is going on here?" Susie asked, her face was so red

she might burst. She had cut David off in mid-stream, but it hardly mattered. "Okay, Faith didn't drown. Can we go now?"

"I'm so terribly sorry," Vivian whispered softly as Ned rejoined them. He looked from one to the other and noticed their obvious distress.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"How's your wife, Ned?" David asked.

Ned looked pensive and seemed nervous. "Her operation is later this evening. They're going to remove a cyst ... they don't know if it's malignant at this point."

"I'll hope for the best," David said.

"Is this all some kind of a joke, Vivian?" Susie glared in her direction again. "For the last and final time, what the hell are we doing here? Faith did not drown. We accept your apology for not informing us of that. Now let's go home."

"Hold off a minute, Susie." Ned sat and glanced around him. Look, I've got something to tell you all." He reached for his beer. "It's the most absurd thing."

Susie turned to him sharply. "What could be more absurd than Vivian wanting us to believe a girl drowned when she didn't?" she asked, obviously annoyed by the interruption. "I mean, it almost doesn't matter."

"You're not going to believe this," Ned said quietly. "Faith is writing a book about my wife. Well, actually it's based on Deidre. It's fiction. Oddest thing is, I've met her. I hadn't remembered that. Well, of course, I wouldn't have associated this Faith with your niece, Vivian. I thought your niece was dead."

"Are you serious?" Susie asked.

"Yes, it was at a Christmas party at our apartment. Can you believe it?" Ned looked at them. "I'm not kidding you."

Susie threw her napkin on the table. "Now I've heard everything," she exclaimed.

Kit sat back; her eyes were like storm clouds. David leaned forward on the table and began to laugh.

"That's more like it," Ned said. "Yes, that's more like it. It's a funny coincidence, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," David smiled. "But I'll do you one better."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

DAVID

2005

David had taken Lauren's dog into the backyard. She had to drop her boys at the Little Indians day camp over toward New London. Her youngest son had lagged behind all morning and Lauren had overslept, so it wasn't entirely the boy's fault that both he and his brother had missed the bus.

"Won't be but forty minutes there and back," Lauren told him breathlessly as she ran out the door. "Oh, by the way, my cousin is in from Boston. She may stop by. Her name is Faith. She's very nice. Will you entertain her? Oh, by the way, she's a writer. Her book was just published and she's doing very well. You might want to congratulate her."

David managed to brush her cheek with a kiss as she flew past him and shuffled the boys into her beat-up old Saturn. He wanted to buy her a new car; but he couldn't figure out how he'd explain the purchase to Gerta.

She'd named the old Spaniel "Ruthie." David had become quite fond of the dog. Ruthie was so used to having him around that she went into a tailspin every time he came through the door.

He picked up a tennis ball and threw it up in the air. Ruthie jumped high to get it. "Guess that's why they call you a Springer Spaniel," he said.

It was cool for a summer day, his favorite type of weather — a breezy wind and a pale, lazy sky haphazardly dotted with whipped cream clouds. Lauren's backyard was enchanting. When he looked east, he saw the willow tree as it fell over the pond with its long branches lingering to the ground. When he looked west, he saw the horse farm across the road. It appeared like an idyllic scene on a country calendar. Her house needed repairs and he wanted to climb up on the ladder that Lauren kept in the barn, and clean out the eaves and repair the splintered wood. He wanted to put a sign up on her mailbox that read "Lauren and David Cranston."

If only she knew that he thought about it all the time, marrying her, and taking her off to Europe on their honeymoon. They'd walk the streets of Paris and he'd break into a dance, just like Gene Kelly. He'd kick up his heels and serenade her with a song. *Our love is here to stay*....

After a half-hour game of catch with Ruthie, David stretched out on a lounge chair and picked up a copy of the Hartford News. He read the paper from cover to cover and fell asleep in the afternoon sun. He dreamed he was swimming in the ocean with goldfish that glittered like stars.

He was startled awake by two car honks; he heard the gravel slide and crunch under the wheels. He rubbed his eyes and stretched as he got up to investigate, remembering something about Lauren's cousin coming in from Boston. He wondered how long he'd been asleep.

"Hey," a young woman called as she came around the side of the house. "Are you David?"

The spaniel ran to her and jumped up. "Hey, Ruthie girl." She held out her hand. "Hi," she said to David and showed a broad smile. "I'm Faith."

"Hi," he said, reaching out to shake her hand, noticing how tall she was.

They went inside after he told her that Teddy, Lauren's youngest, had caused the boys to miss the bus.

"He doesn't like camp." She plopped into a chair and one of her flip-flops fell to the floor. "Teddy hates to leave home and turns getting dressed into an all-day affair."

"You want some iced tea?" David asked.

"Oh, yes," she said and got up to follow him into the kitchen.

David surmised she was quite a bit younger than Lauren. She reminded him of someone, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"So, you're from Boston?" he asked as he got out a glass and poured the tea from a pitcher.

"Yes." She smiled and he noticed that she had one of those glorious broad smiles that he found enchanting, like Farrah Fawcett or Julia Roberts.

"Lauren and I are cousins twice removed, or something like that. My mom's cousin is married to her mom's brother — or something. We've been close forever, though."

"You seem a lot younger." He watched as she finished the glass in one swallow.

"Well, yeah, but so what?"

"So what?" he said and shrugged his shoulders. "More tea?"

“No, that’s okay.”

David poured himself a glass and turned toward her as he sipped it.

“You’re a lot different from Shawn,” she said as she stared at him. “Her first husband, much better looking.”

“Thanks.”

“I think much nicer, too, from what I can tell.”

“Thanks again.”

“I told Lauren I didn’t approve of you, though” she said, scratching the back of Ruthie’s ear.

“Because I’m married?” he asked and sat on one of the kitchen chairs, wondering why she looked so much like someone he couldn’t place. There was no similarity between her and Lauren at all. This girl’s features were very refined and delicate. She looked like she should be a model, showing up on fashion magazines, influencing women to buy everything she wore, smile the way she smiled, walk the way she walked; she was nothing like the pixie Lauren was.

“Well, of course,” she said. “What are your intentions?”

David was startled and sat back. Lauren had not even asked him that.

“I have none,” he said quietly.

“Then I certainly don’t approve,” she said solemnly, as Lauren’s old Saturn pulled into the drive. David looked out of the window. From where he was sitting, he could see how wide Lauren smiled when she noticed Faith’s car.

Faith got up quickly, before he could tell her that he was trapped, he had children ... responsibilities. Suddenly, she turned back to face him.

“She’s already been hurt,” she said.

He opened his mouth; he wanted to say something that would make her like him, but no words came.

“Courage causes change. Bullshit causes just more bullshit,” she said boldly, as she stared into his eyes; she looked away from him as Lauren burst into the room.

“Hey, girlfriend,” Lauren said loudly and the two women hugged each other as David looked on.

“So, you’ve met David?” Lauren asked and winked.

“Sure have,” she said.

David left after that, though they both insisted he stay for lunch. He declined. Faith had certainly gotten her point across, and he didn’t feel like

sitting there under her scrutiny, making small talk.

“I’m sure you two want to spend some time together,” he said as he shook Faith’s hand and gave Lauren a kiss.

He was disturbed on the drive home, as if the girl had the power to take Lauren away, but she was right ... how the hell long could he play this out before Lauren left him in the dust for an available man?

Chapter Thirty-Nine

2006

David put his head down; he had talked himself out. The silence was disturbing, so he picked up his eyes and looked around the table. He'd just finished telling them all about his shitty marriage to Gerta, how deeply he felt about Lauren, how he'd met Faith and she made him feel like shit for only offering Lauren half a life.

They'd gone through another round of drinks as they listened sympathetically. They were all staring back at him now, as if his life were one pathetic mess, especially Kit, of course.

Finally, Vivian spoke. "Faith is related to your girlfriend ... what's her name, Lauren?" Vivian gave him a confused stare. "Are you saying that I'm related to your girlfriend, David?"

"My God, I guess so. Well, through marriage."

"What's her last name?" she asked.

"Kinney," he said and put his chin in his hands. "What a coincidence. Do you know her?"

"My sister-in-law, Janet, has a huge Irish family. I can't remember everyone in it," Vivian said as she broke into a giggle, which rose in volume and transitioned into a raucous laugh. David suddenly joined her. Soon they were throwing themselves back and forth against the booth. Tears ran down their eyes and landed on their lips.

After several seconds, David pulled himself together and reached out for Vivian's hand as the others looked on. "I needed that," he said.

Vivian squeezed the hand in hers and smiled. "As did I."

"This is all too weird for me," Susie said. "I need another drink."

Ned turned around and summoned the waiter.



"Faith is right, David, you need to get a divorce," Susie said as she downed what was left in her glass.

“I can’t afford to fight Gerta in court, and I won’t give up my children.” David looked forlornly up at the ceiling. “I’d be lucky to see them twice a year after Gerta got through with me in a courtroom.”

Suddenly, Ned reached out and put his hand on David’s shoulder. “My son is the best divorce lawyer on the East Coast,” he said. “He’s with a prestigious Connecticut firm.”

“I can’t afford your son,” David answered quickly. “I’m sure Gerta will freeze my assets. Can she do that?”

“I’ll subsidize the fee, David,” Ned said and grinned at him.

They all turned to Ned, staring at him in disbelief. Kit suddenly broke the spell and interjected. “You are a mensch, Ned,” she said with a chuckle.

“No, not a mensch. I just believe in the right people being together ... and we’re old friends.”

“I can’t take your money, Ned,” David said quietly. “But I do appreciate what you’re willing to do for me.”

“I’m going to insist on it, David. I want you to be happy. Charlie will get you the best settlement possible. You won’t lose your kids.”

“I can’t do this,” David repeated.

“You can and you will,” Ned said. “Don’t you agree guys?” Ned looked around the table and raised his glass. “To love,” he said.

“And to the oddest of coincidences,” Susie added.

Chapter Forty

VIVIAN

2006

Vivian turned to Kit, “Please, Kit. It’s time we just got everything out in the open.”

They were all startled and stared at Vivian; then they turned to Kit, confused and curious.

“I heard that,” Susie said. “Tell us what?”

“So you’re going to lay this all on me now, aren’t you?” Kit asked as she gave Vivian a lethal stare.

“That’s not fair, Kit. It just begins with you,” Vivian said.

“Who were you protecting, Vivian?” Kit leaned in and met her eyes.

“You,” Vivian said quietly. “And Faith.”

“No, you were protecting Josh, that’s what I think,” Kit said, her anger rising. “You didn’t want me to know he adopted my baby because... because I hated him.”

“Baby?” Ned said. “You had a baby?”

“I had no idea he adopted the baby, not in the beginning.” Vivian looked earnestly into Kit’s eyes. “I swear.”

“I don’t believe you.” Kit glared at her and clutched the table, as if she might fling something across it.

“I had nothing to do with the adoption.” Vivian looked at the others uncomfortably.

“What the hell are you two talking about? If you don’t start making sense, Vivian, I am going to start screaming at the top of my lungs,” Susie said adamantly, her eyes round as perfect circles. “You’re on. Not Kit and not any of the rest of us. You, Vivian, you owe us an explanation of what we’re all doing here and I mean *now*. You are the one who beckoned us here.”

“No, *I* owe you the truth,” Kit interjected. “It does begin with me.” She took a deep breath and sat forward, her hands around her glass.

“What do you mean?” Susie snapped.

“Go ahead,” Ned said slowly. “What truth? You had a baby?”

“Yes, I had a baby,” Kit started, and paused, avoiding David’s eyes, her words reverberating against the walls. She felt David jolt forward, felt his fear, felt it as if it sat in the pit of her own stomach.

“What?” Susie asked, her brows arched over her forehead.

“I had a baby,” Kit said quietly. “One night in 1973, I slept with a man I shouldn’t have slept with and I got pregnant.”

They all sat in silence, trying to comprehend what Kit had just revealed. Suddenly, Ned reached over and took her hand. “What happened to the baby? Why didn’t you ever tell us?” He looked at Vivian pensively. “Your brother adopted her baby?”

“Vivian took me to her house in Stockbridge to have the child. I didn’t want an abortion and I certainly didn’t want anyone to know I was pregnant.” Kit looked down at her hands.

David sat very still.

“You could have had an abortion,” Susie said, confusion all over face.

“I’m Catholic,” Kit said.

“Oh,” Susie fell back.

“And I knew the father,” Kit added. “Abortion just didn’t work for me.”

“I see,” Susie said. “So that’s why you two took off?” she asked. “So Kit could give birth up there in Stockbridge and no one would know?”

“Yes, precisely,” Kit said.

“My brother and his wife couldn’t have a child.” Vivian took over from Kit, knowing she’d have to admit it now. Jesus, Faith was over thirty years old. It no longer mattered.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Susie glared at Vivian, still genuinely shocked and hurt that she did not confide in her. “Why didn’t you tell me Kit was pregnant?”

“I made Vivian promise not to tell anyone,” Kit said.

“You shouldn’t have been alone. Where the hell was the father?” Ned asked gently.

“I wasn’t alone, I had Vivian.” Kit turned to Vivian. “Josh and Janet adopted my baby, just like I said, didn’t they? And you lied to me?”

“Yes, but I didn’t lie to you.” Vivian said. “Josh wouldn’t let me tell you. He knew you hated him and he didn’t want you to fight it. He was afraid you’d intervene at some point, want her back — take him to court — want to visit. He adopted the baby behind my back, Kit. I had no idea in the beginning, not until the baby was older. I never had a clue.”

“How could he do it behind your back? How could you not have known?” Kit asked, the tears settling in the corner of her eyes.

“I never would have allowed it,” Vivian told her. “He knew I never would have allowed it.”

The rage showed up in Kit’s expression. “You lied to me, Vivian.”

“I don’t understand, so what if Vivian’s brother adopted the baby?” Ned asked.

“Who was the father?” Susie’s question fell into the space between them like a ticking bomb. “Who did you sleep with, Kit?”

Vivian continued to stare at David. She smelled the fried food again ... the grease. Her eyes widened. “David?” she said quietly. “It was you, wasn’t it?”

He looked at her, the color returning to his face, turning his cheeks unnaturally red.

“You just couldn’t keep it in your pants, could you?” Vivian whispered, holding his gaze with her own. Suddenly it was so ridiculously apparent.

“What are you talking about?” David was clearly nervous and looked around, his jaw set, and his eyes narrowed into slits.

Vivian turned to Kit sharply and picked up her face. “It was David, wasn’t it?” she screamed. “Wasn’t it?”

Kit nodded. “A mistake, like I said.”

David stared at Vivian helplessly. “I thought you and Kit were having an affair,” he said. “We were just licking each other’s wounds.”

“You son of a bitch,” Vivian whispered.

David turned away from her and looked at Kit “You went to Stockbridge to have the baby without telling anyone?”

“To have *our* baby,” Kit said through the tears that formed in her eyes.

“Shit,” Ned uttered as he finished what was left of his beer.

“I was angry, Vivian,” David said quietly.

“You had no right to me anymore, David,” Vivian screamed out, unaware of the rise in her voice. “You punished me by sleeping with my friend?”

“Susie told me you two were together ... as lovers,” David said. “Not that that excuses it, but Kit and I were just so vulnerable that night.”

Kit stopped blowing her nose and glared at David, “So that justifies getting me drunk enough to sleep with you, David? You practically raped me. I did say no. I remember saying no.”

Vivian turned sharply to Susie and snapped at her. “Why did you tell David something so ridiculous?”

“We were both drunk,” David said. “I didn’t rape you. It was consensual.”

“Because I believed it,” Susie said. “You seemed like lovers.”

“How ridiculous.” Vivian looked away from her. “Look, I know you slept with David, too, I found out that weekend we were all in Stockbridge. I saw you coming out of his room carrying your clothes.” Vivian leaned toward her. “I was going to confront you, but then, we couldn’t find Faith and I didn’t get the chance.”

“You had no claim on David, Vivian. You were married.” Susie lashed out. “It was years after you two broke up, for God’s sake.”

“You slept with David when we were young, Susie. He told me that weekend.” Vivian looked over at David and watched him sigh.

“That’s true, Susie, I told her about it,” David said and hugged his arms tightly around his chest.

“Well, my boyfriend had just jilted me for a man, Vivian. I was vulnerable. For God’s sake, you didn’t want David anymore. You’d left him by then.”

“So now this is all my fault,” Ned turned to stare at Susie. “You’re blaming me because you slept with David?”

Susie raised her glass, “A toast to the most incestuous group of friends on earth.”

“You’re the one who put the bug up his ass, telling him Vivian was fooling around with Kit. What a bunch of shit,” Ned yelled at Susie ... as if they were still married.

“Why did you tell David that I was having an affair with Kit?” Vivian asked; trying to remain calm as she stared at Susie.

“I told you, I thought it was true.” Susie said; her voice took on a pleading tone. “Jesus, Vivian, it was so long ago.”

“So you cheated on me with my best friend?” Ned asked, confused ... wondering if it mattered.

“You had left me for a man, Ned. We weren’t together at the time. Actually, the only man I’ve ever really cheated on is my present husband.”

Suddenly, Susie had the attention of everyone at the table. She looked as if she’d surprised herself by admitting it so openly.

David had been listening quietly, as though he was trying to figure something out. “So Faith is my daughter?” he asked Kit, breaking the silence that had fallen over the table like the faint entry of nightfall. Before Kit could answer him, David put his head down. He didn’t look at her when he spoke. “Jesus, Kit, why didn’t you tell me you were pregnant?”

Kit stared at him as if she couldn’t believe he would ask that question. “Would it have mattered, David?”

“Yes.” David put his face in his hands. “Yes,” he repeated.

“So when the accident happened ... why did you let us all believe that Faith had drowned, Vivian?” Ned asked. “I still don’t get it.”

“It was because I recognized my daughter and Vivian was afraid I’d intervene,” Kit said quickly.

“Josh insisted, Kit, not me.” Vivian turned to look at her. “He thought it would be best for Faith ... just in case you wanted more of her. He threatened to send Faith away, out of the country, if I told you.”

“Oh, Vivian, she knew that weekend ... I asked her when her birthday was, and I guess something in my expression gave it away. How could she have my baby’s birthday and not be mine? She knew I was her mother. We had a psychic moment.”

“She never mentioned it,” Vivian said quietly.

“Why tell us now?” Susie asked. “Because of the book?”

Vivian nodded. “Yes, I had to straighten this all out. I know we haven’t spoken since 1989 but surely you would have wondered why I never told you the truth, that nothing happened that weekend, that there was no drowning. I felt so guilty. If you’d seen Faith’s book you would have put it all together.”

“No, no, no, no, Vivian,” Kit said. “All of a sudden Faith wants to meet her biological mother, that’s why you called us together. It has nothing to do with coming clean, Vivian. You never wanted me to know you’d left my child in the care of that ... sick son of a bitch.”

Ned looked confused. “Vivian’s brother is a sick son of a bitch?” He stared at Vivian.

“Well, I for one, don’t read anymore. I wouldn’t have known anything about anything,” Susie said. “I never would have seen Faith’s name anywhere.”

“Well, excuse me for thinking of my old friends as being interested in books,” Vivian said sarcastically. “I didn’t want you to find out that way. Faith has been on talk shows. Her name is all over the place. It seems child abuse is a hot topic.”

“Child abuse?” Kit whispered. “That’s what her book is about? Child abuse?”

“It’s fiction,” Vivian said quickly.

“Faith has contacted the adoption agency in Massachusetts and they’ve called me. ‘Your daughter wants to know you,’ they said. She could have always known me. I wouldn’t have hurt her, Vivian,” Kit said.

“Do you want to know her now, Kit?” Susie asked. “Have you called back the agency?”

“No, I wasn’t sure until this moment what I wanted to do, but now, I do know. Yes, I want to see her,” Kit said. “I want to know her...again.”

“I’m sorry, Kit,” Vivian said softly. “I thought I was protecting Faith. Once Faith found out she was adopted, I should have told her the truth then but I didn’t.”

“The weekend after the reunion ... after what I believed to be a horrible accident, I gave up on everything but my work. I had what was later diagnosed as “clinical depression.” Kit rubbed her eyes as she spoke. “I never got over adopting my baby out. I was depressed for years before we had our first reunion, but during that weekend, after seeing Faith and feeling she was mine ... knowing on some gut level she was mine, I felt myself getting something back that I’d given up. It was so short-lived. Faith’s *alleged* drowning threw me over the edge again. My depression returned in spades. I didn’t want to live anymore — life was too cruel, too difficult. By the time I met Morgan, I was too angry and fucked up for anyone ... not even friendships. I became a loner. All I could do was work. I worked so much, I never spent one single Christmas with my father. He died unexpectedly. I don’t even know how long it had been since I’d seen him last. Morgan patched me up after that. She gave me something to believe in. Somehow, Morgan’s love made me feel I was getting a second chance to belong with someone, to be worthy of someone’s love. But now, Morgan wants us to adopt a baby and I can’t deal with a baby,” Kit said,

crying more openly. She put her head down. "I'll probably lose her, too. Maybe if I'd known what happened to Faith, Vivian, I could have healed. If I'd just known she was okay."

"I'm so sorry," Vivian whispered. "I'm so sorry, I just became used to keeping secrets."

Kit held Vivian's eyes. "I loved you, Vivian. I trusted you. Don't you see? I blamed myself for Faith's death ... I thought I'd somehow fucked with that antennae we all have that protects us from harm. I felt that I should never have asked her birthday that day, never reacted the way I did. She saw the shock on my face and she knew. She knew who I was."

Vivian sat back, aware that if she didn't she would fall to the floor in a faint.

Ned held out his hand to Kit. "Come with me," he said, rising to his feet. They all stared at him. "Why?" Kit asked.

"Because Faith is sitting at my wife's bedside right this moment, and if we hurry, we can catch her before visiting hours are over. I'll call over there from my cell phone and tell Deidre not to let Faith go anywhere until I arrive."

"Let me out, Vivian," Kit said. "This isn't your call anymore."

Vivian slid over. "Do you want me to come with you?"

"No," Kit said and bent down close to her face. "I hope I'll find it in my heart to forgive you."

Ned tossed some money on the table, but he kept his attention on Vivian.

"I'm going to call you," he said. "Just to give you hell."

"I guess I deserve it," Vivian said, her face, a deep purple.

"I thought I had been responsible for a death, Vivian. It made me feel I owed God my soul," Ned said as he leaned over the table and stared into her eyes. "I was so caught up in myself that weekend. I should have been there for that girl."

"Don't you owe God your soul anyway?" Vivian asked.

"The God I grew up with doesn't like fairies," he said.

"Then I hope you find a more compassionate God," Vivian said sadly.

"You know I could kill you for making me walk around with that guilt for so many years ... feeling I'd been responsible for a drowning because I was so wrapped up in my own bullshit."

"Do you understand why I couldn't tell you?" Vivian asked, feeling trapped by her own doing. "My brother didn't want me to. He made me

promise to keep it a secret. He threatened me. He threatened Faith.”

“Can we talk sometime?” Ned asked as he took his cell phone out of his pocket. “So I can decide whether or not I want to sue you for years of mental torment?”

“I’d like to talk,” Vivian said.

“Good luck, Ned,” Susie got up to hug him. “I hope Deidre will be all right.”

“So, you didn’t cheat on me?” Ned asked as he pinched her cheek affectionately.

“It was the other way around, darling.”

Ned turned and reached for David’s hand. “You were an overzealous sex maniac, David. We all did stupid things. Okay? Let’s not dwell on it.”

Vivian shot out of her seat. “Why do you men justify each other's bad behavior?” she yelled out.

David stood up and hugged Ned, both of them ignoring Vivian’s outburst. Vivian noticed David’s eyes were misty, possibly full of tears. His obvious guilt did not excuse him. She watched as Kit and Ned quickly exited the rowdy room.

Chapter Forty-One

VIVIAN

2006

Vivian glared at David. “How could you?” she said with such lethal intent that David shuddered.

“It was over thirty years ago,” he said quietly. “Let it alone, Vivian.”

“You slept with two of my best friends,” she said solemnly. “I’ll never forgive you. You are a bastard. You had to get in everyone’s pants. I know you did that to hurt me.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Vivian.” His expression was indignant, as if he had the right to be insulted. “What about Susie? Do you forgive her for lying to me about you and Kit ... for sleeping with me?”

“I’m not talking about Susie, I’m talking about you. I can’t get past *your* actions, David, to give much thought to Susie.” Vivian glared at him, her hands around a glass she felt like throwing at him.

David flinched. “You don’t care that I slept with Susie, but you do care that Susie slept with me? Well, that makes a lot of sense. That’s what you’re really miffed about, isn’t it?” He waited for her response but she sat quietly. Finally, she met his eyes.

“Well, actually ... yes,” she said. “But that’s not the issue.”

David clenched his teeth. Unfortunately, for David, it was the issue. “I knew that weekend, when you came to my room,” he said. “I could tell. It was more important for you to go find Susie than deal with my feelings. Your reaction had everything to do with Susie, and nothing at all to do with me. Isn’t that right?”

“Sleeping with my best friend is a low blow. Why are you trying so hard to get the attention away from what you did?” Vivian said.

“Bullshit,” he said. “Bull ... shit. You would not have cared if I slept with every woman in the city of New York. It was just that it was Susie. I’ll

bet that's why you two never got together again after that weekend. You were too hurt over it. Your best friend betrayed you, not me. I didn't matter. And Kit? She's really a dike, not a real threat."

"Can't you get it through your thick head, David ... you used Kit to get at me. Who cares what you did with Susie?"

David's eyes traveled wherever he could find a safe escape and not meet Vivian's or Susie's expression. "It isn't that I didn't love Kit, I did," he said softly. "I found her attractive. I always found her attractive. And it was consensual, Vivian."

"Oh boy, you are thick. Kit didn't love *you*, David. She said it was rape and I believe her." Vivian shook her head as if his excuse was the most preposterous thing she'd ever heard. "She certainly didn't want to sleep with you. You got her drunk. She could barely stand when I got home that night. You took advantage of her to hurt me. You frigging raped her."

"Why do you think you know everything?" David asked. He put his hands deep in his pocket. "You don't know what went on between Kit and me."

"We were friends, all of us, but you made everything about sex ... because you were jealous ... because you were stupid. Your jealousy drove you into Susie's bed, I'm sure of it." Vivian said.

Susie suddenly picked up her head. "This really is very embarrassing," she said.

"It's all right, Susie," Vivian said softly. "It was over thirty years ago."

"You see, you forgive *her*, but not me?" David said with a sneer.

"I don't forgive you for causing Kit so much pain, David."

"I'd like the check," he said. "Can we get it?"

"That's all you have to say," Vivian said loudly. "I'd like the check? What about Faith?"

"What about her?"

Vivian's hands curled into fists. "You bastard, you owe that girl something," Vivian screamed at him. She was immediately grateful that the room was so loud and no one seemed to notice.

"She's not a girl, she's a grown woman, and she doesn't give a shit anymore, Vivian," David yelled back, rising, and reaching into his back pocket for his wallet.

"Don't you at least owe Kit an apology? She went through all of it without you ... the birth *and* the loss." Vivian grabbed at his arm, to prevent

him from running away, running so far he'd never have to deal with any of this again.

David stepped back and threw a handful of bills on the table. "This should cover it," he said.

"It's not ever going to be the same for you again, David." Vivian searched his face. "You won't be able to smash your fist into a wall and pretend it's the other guy that's wrong."

"You've always had your priorities screwed up, Viv. I was the one you hurt. I was the one who needed you."

"You can't justify using sex as a weapon, David." Vivian's tone was angry, but yet she kept her voice soft.

"She didn't fight me off all that hard," David said. Susie lifted her head and looked at him as if he'd said something absurd, but he continued anyway. "Perhaps Kit thought the best way to get to you was through me. Why's that so difficult to understand?"

"Don't justify what you did, David ... or I swear, I'll....." Vivian was seething now and David was suddenly afraid there would be a scene and she would call him names ... and every eye in the room would be on him.

"Look," David stepped back to the table and leaned over. He pointed his finger at Susie.

"She used me to get at you. Susie always wanted everything that you had ... including me. You don't think Kit was capable of acting out in the same way?"

"She didn't have to work that hard to get me," Vivian said with a curious smile.

David grimaced, as if it still mattered. "This is old rotten news, Vivian," David looked away, his face familiarly contorted in anger. "Old, fucking, rotten news."

Vivian sat back and watched him leave. His gait was fast and angry.

"I hope he's not too pissed to drive," Susie said sadly.

Chapter Forty-Two

The traffic on the Merritt was backed up for miles. In a way, David was relieved; he'd had too much to drink and probably shouldn't be behind the wheel of a car — it was best to have a thirty-mile-an-hour speed limit forced on him by some unfortunate accident, or annoying roadblocks.

He was furious at Vivian. It all came back to him; all those phone calls he'd made to her right after that last reunion. Shit, he'd needed her then. What the hell did she expect of him? Was he just supposed to walk away from that weekend and pretend he hadn't caused a girl to drown? He would have been swimming with her if he weren't so wrapped up in himself.

"Please, Viv, can we talk? I need to talk to you. I feel like shit."

"Sure, David, call me later." "Ian and I are just running out for dinner." "My son just walked through the door." "Whoops, I've got another call." "I'm sorry, I was asleep."

He'd call back ... how many times ... how many excuses did he have to hear before he took the hint and crawled back under the rock she'd dismissed him to.

He'd just wanted to talk ... to hear her tell him that it hadn't been his fault. The fault was with God. God took her. They were all just a bunch of middle-aged self-absorbed assholes, a group of fools acting stupid, trying to capture something that was long gone ... friendship, for one. He remembered how Faith had sat there, taking it all in, looking at them as if they'd really been conversing about important world events and not the bullshit of their youth.

Even mild-mannered Ned had flown off the handle that weekend. He kept saying that he was bored by the reunion, bored by the memory trips back to a time in which they'd been deluding themselves about everything ... sex, fame, commitment, everything. They'd argued for hours, lying about how much they loved one another ... talking about deep bonds and shared youth. Ned and Kit had sat there with scowls and disbelief, calling the rest of them naïve, but there was Vivian and Susie, the two little cheerleaders, insisting that Ned and Kit had become jaded. There was

David, agreeing with his precious Vivian about every bit of dribble that fell from her mouth because he was still so frigging enamored with her. He wanted to believe it, too ... all the bunk. Why, Ned had every right to his sexuality — every right to fuck with Susie's head. He'd listened while Susie agreed with Vivian's opinion, that David was immature, even though Miss Suburbia had practically yanked his penis from his body that weekend trying to arouse his passion. Vivian had every right to break his heart. Yes, they all agreed to that, or at least insinuated that they did. *Well, how's this for an opinion.* He chuckled. *I had every right to screw Kit, she was in the way — how's that for an excuse? And Kit had every right to go down on Miss Goody-two-shoes-Vivian, and she even had the right to have a fucking baby, and not breathe a word of it, not even to the fucking father.* "Shit," David said aloud. "We should have called ourselves 'the Fucked-up Five.'"

Well, if Susie thought he was immature before the reunion, she certainly had even less respect for him after he failed to show her a good time and fuck her brains out in Vivian's guest room. God, she'd been a mess, talking about men that weekend as if they'd each been dredged up from hell. And Kit? Jesus, he could feel her anger every time she was near him. She couldn't get past it, so she lost her cool and let him screw her that night they were both drunk. Big deal.

But what if Kit had told him about the baby? What the hell would he have done? What the hell would he have said? ... get rid of it ... I don't want anything to do with it ... it's not mine.

It took all his strength not to ram the car in front of him off the road, he was so furious. Kit would have gone and had the baby no matter what he'd said to her. So it didn't matter. Maybe, if he'd been a stranger, she would have had an abortion, but he wasn't a stranger, and he knew that's why she'd had it. So now his flesh and blood had grown up to judge him. That pretty young woman, Lauren's cousin, was his daughter, and she thought he was weak ... and he was weak, too weak to fight for his own goddamn happiness.

Suddenly, David wanted a distraction, didn't want to think about all that old bullshit. So he'd been a jerk in his youth ... would they hold it against him forever? He flipped on the CD player, a lively Bruce Springsteen favorite came on and he sang along with it. He felt good for the moment ... Bruce Springsteen never failed to lift his mood ... *one step forward, two*

steps back. David turned it up. Now, that's what life was all about ... it sucked, and then it didn't, and then it sucked again.

Chapter Forty-Three

VIVIAN

2006

Vivian picked up her drink and avoided Susie's eyes. "It was over thirty years ago," she repeated.

"Doesn't excuse it, does it?" Susie said quietly.

They turned away from each other and looked over the crowded bar.

"Are you okay to drive?" Vivian asked. "You've had a lot to drink."

Susie waited for Vivian to turn back to her. "I'll call Drew, he'll come get me."

"You're cheating on him?" Vivian asked.

"I've become like you," she said.

"I've never cheated on my husband."

"You've never cheated on Ian?" she asked, revealing an aura of disbelief that unnerved Vivian for the moment.

"Of course not," Vivian said.

"You and I aren't close anymore," Susie said. "I've missed that for the longest time. We were so close. My best friend now is kind of stupid."

"My best friend now is very unemotional," Vivian said. "I miss emotion."

"Sometimes, that makes me very sad." Susie lifted her eyes and Vivian realized she was more than a bit drunk. "Not about your best friend being unemotional, of course, I mean, about us."

"I think of you a lot," Vivian said. "In the park, especially in the park."

"Central Park?" Susie asked.

"When I jog, you come to mind, and I wonder how you are." Vivian smiled. "I jog a lot. You were so exercise-driven back then."

"Why didn't you pick up the phone more often and ask me how I was?" Susie asked.

Vivian shrugged. "I was hiding, Susie."

"Are you still?"

Vivian avoided answering the question. "I have only cheated on my husband in my mind. Does that count?"

"Really?"

Vivian nodded. "And now he's cheating on me in the flesh."

"Oh? What are you doing about it?"

"Nothing," Vivian said, and breathed deeply. "If that's what he wants." She shrugged again.

"Oh, I'll bet he doesn't like that. Your indifference."

"What do you mean? There isn't a cheating husband out there who wouldn't want my reaction."

"You're cold, Vivian. You're as unemotional as your friend."

"Fuck you," Vivian said and turned away.

"Shit, I've become just like you. I recognize the symptoms."

"Symptoms?" Vivian raised a brow.

"I can't give people what they need me to give them. I'm angry at men. What's your excuse?" Susie asked.

"My husband gets enough sex from me, Susie."

"Ha," Susie laughed. "I mean grief, Vivian. Your husband is having an affair because it doesn't cause you any grief. So why not? He'll continue to do it because you leave him wanting ... drowning in his need for you ... despairing in his love for you. You're an indifferent bitch."

"Jesus, you sound like David."

"The pattern speaks for itself, Vivian."

Vivian sat back, confused.

"Let's talk about you."

"Well, I am afraid to love the only man who has ever loved me," Susie said, finishing her wine and looking for more in the glass.

Vivian reached out for Susie's hand. "I ached for you once, Susie," she said softly. "I knew Ned would hurt you."

"Yes, it was inevitable, wasn't it?"

"Loving Ned the way you did ... knowing it was all going to come tumbling down. I didn't want to see it happen, but I couldn't prevent it. I couldn't protect you. But I tried."

"And I ached for you, Vivian."

"Why?"

“Because you’ve been hurt deeply, and whatever it is that has hurt you, it’s so complex ... you are really very fragile, and the only kind of person who is ever going to understand that is a man like Ian ... a man who cannot express his needs or his grief, a man who can’t frighten you away ... like David, overemotional David.”

Vivian wanted to cry. “Has anyone ever known me as well?” she asked.

Susie squeezed her hand. “We blew it ... the bonds of recognition, the need of a friend. It’s a need that never goes away.”

“Well, I need you back in my life,” Vivian said. “I really do.”

Susie searched Vivian’s eyes. “Tell him what he wants to hear, Vivian ... even if you don’t mean it.”

“I’ve missed you, Susie.”

“I need to make someone happy. How’s that for a cliché?” Susie said.

“What are you going to do?”

“Have you ever been to Savannah, Vivian?”

Vivian laughed and shook her head.

“Will you and Ian visit us?”

“Of course,” Vivian looked confused. “Are you moving?”

“Drew wants that more than anything else in the world. I don’t want to become so hard that all I can be is a bitch. I don’t want to be cold.”

“Friendship is so fragile. It shatters the heart with a word, a deed, it’s so difficult to maintain ... sometimes ... it can vanish over time, as if it were never there.” Vivian picked up her glass and toasted Susie with it. “But it was there.”

“It’s only friendship, Viv ... friendship often hides its head in the sand for a bit, and then, pops up and gets an ‘all clear’ ... so it comes up again and remembers. But, then, the rain comes purging down and friendship gets mad and says, ‘I’ll never come out again.’ But then, it does ... because someone stands over it and says ‘please, I need you.’ I miss you. Friendship is a beautiful thing, a fragile bond, but everlasting.”

Vivian held Susie’s hand for a long while, until the waiter returned to refill their glass.

“He never really wanted me,” Susie whispered. “It was always you for David, the only woman he could see.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Vivian suddenly laughed. “But you won’t come on to Ian, will you?”

Susie took a moment to react before breaking out into laughter. They giggled hysterically for a long, long time, finally wiping the tears from their eyes, and swearing to stay in touch.

Part II

May 2008

Chapter Forty-Four

VIVIAN

Vivian looked at the clock on Doctor Cantor's desk. It was 3:15. It was also Wednesday, her day alone with "Dr. Len," as she called him. Ian's day was Tuesday and on Fridays they saw Dr. Cantor together.

"Time flies when you're having fun, doesn't it?"

Doctor Cantor said nothing. He was staring at her, as he did so often.

"Well?" he asked softly.

"We have just ten minutes," she said.

"And how would you like to fill it?" he asked.

"Profoundly," she answered and grinned at him.

The doctor raised a brow. Vivian knew that expression. The good doctor had only a handful of expressions: the raised brow, the intensity of concern, the challenging smile, the relaxed humdrum and the coaxing nod.

"My brother Josh is seeing someone," she announced, as if it were at all relevant.

Dr. Cantor waited by shifting his legs and sitting back, positioning himself for the regurgitation of emotion ... profound and primal, nothing less. Instead, Vivian sat blankly staring, like a schoolteacher waiting for order.

She'd been visibly upset by the news; even though Ian kept reminding her that Josh's divorce from Janet had been final for months, and he was far better off without that "dragon of a woman," as Ian so delicately put it. Josh hadn't said that, he had merely muttered that he was far better off without the control.

"I know the woman he's seeing now. Well, actually, I don't really know her. I know her ex-husband." Vivian turned away, as if bored by cocktail chatter at a mundane gathering.

"You seem upset," Dr. Cantor said and cocked his head to the side.

“No, no, I’m happy.” Vivian sighed and clasped her hands in front of her. “My brother likes women, it was to be expected.”

“You don’t look happy about it,” the doctor said calmly.

Vivian scowled. She suddenly felt furious at Ian for forcing her into this ridiculous process at her age. Therapy was for the very young ... little impressionable minds that saw everything as disastrous and wallowed in pain like ducks flap around in water. She knew she had to appease her husband now, though, pretend she wanted to get better, whatever that means. God, why had she allowed Ian to manipulate her to this degree? It was guilt; must be. Perhaps, it was also loyalty, believing that she had to follow through on her promise because she owed him ... for his kindness ... his support. She had to let Ian believe she wanted to do the right thing and save their marriage, even though she looked upon therapy as baby dribble, some odd and unnatural form of mental masturbation. Yes, that was a good interpretation.

“What are you thinking?” Doctor Cantor asked.

Vivian said nothing. She stared back at the clock. She’d been sitting in this chair two times a week for close to a year. It was Kit’s fault, of course; everything was Kit’s fault. If Kit hadn’t been drunk that night, if she hadn’t been responsible for David’s jealousy, then there would not have been a pregnancy, and therefore, there never would have been a baby, and therefore, nothing for her to feel guilty about.

Vivian suddenly felt terrible for her thoughts. She loved Faith too much to wish she’d never been born. Then again, it had been Susie who had forced her into confronting Ian. That night at The White Horse it was Susie who’d said, “Jesus, Vivian, how can you be silent about your husband’s affair?”

“Affairs,” she had said. “Years of affairs.”



Vivian stared at Dr. Cantor. “I just wish my brother wasn’t seeing someone I know. Well, sort of know.” She couldn’t help but wonder why anyone would want to make a living endlessly listening to self-centered and impressionable neurotics who simply sought to justify their own intolerable behavior and eternal patterns.

The coaxing nod appeared. The coaxing nod had been constant, ever since she had first laid eyes on Dr. Leonard Cantor, a rather attractive man

in his early sixties with a fine bald head and deep-set dark eyes. Despite other annoying physical habits, like picking his teeth and closing his eyes, as if in a trance state, the man was also a nod robot. She and Ian had appeared in his office like father and child on the first day of school, one looking upon therapy as a fire-breathing monster, and the other, as free, and safe nanny services. The nod robot had stared at them compassionately. Then he tilted his chin up and down after each and every sentence they uttered, airing their dirty underwear in his dimly lit, sparsely furnished Upper West Side rent-stabilized apartment *slash* office.

Ian immediately poured out his soul, gave it all up, everything, while the nod robot did his nod dance. There it was — how systematically Vivian had handled Ian's affairs in the beginning, telling him it was a good thing, and then flying off the handle like a deranged housewife let loose on a pesky rabbit that had trampled through her vegetable garden and totally destroyed her mint and parsley.

Of course, Vivian had wanted to take Susie's advice; she had thought about Susie's words for hours afterwards — her annoying character analysis the night she sat there at The White Horse and referred to Vivian as "cold."

Vivian had called Bria the night she got home from the reunion, as soon as she flew past the doorman, used the bathroom, and removed her shoes. Bria said she should leave well enough alone; let Ian get his jollies off until he got bored with this new mistress. Ian never took any of his fuck buddies seriously. But Susie's words disturbed her, frightened her into believing that Ian just might feel slighted enough to take off with this newest hussy — probably some fly-by-night adjunct unmarried professor of early childhood — and leave poor Vivian divorced, couple-less, just another divorced straight woman over the age of fifty in Manhattan ... heaven forbid.

Well, it was strange, the way she had finally reacted to his infidelity. She had to admit that to herself, at least. For years, she had found Ian's affairs distasteful but somewhat insignificant when compared to the whole of their marriage. Why, then, did she actually choose to confront Ian about something she preferred to ignore? Was there some bizarre connection to seeing her old friends again that had caused her to act like a crazed loony tune the very next morning? Vivian decided that must be the answer; it must have had something to do with that disastrous reunion at The White Horse Tavern. She cared that David had cheated on her, and it had only been once, but then why the hell doesn't she care that her husband is a chronic cheater?

She glanced at Doctor Cantor. He proceeded to lift his head to the ceiling. He was engrossed in a poor attempt to hide an aggressive yawn and didn't seem to notice her silence.

She remembered how Ian walked in the door that night at 2:00 A.M and found Vivian asleep on the couch. She'd woken up with a start when he entered.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

Ian looked startled. Vivian never usually asked, except as an aside the next morning.

"Oh, I've been with Larry. We closed the café tonight, last customers there. Argued over a few things ... as usual." He laughed.

"What things?" She sat up and stared at him. She knew he was lying. Ian seemed perplexed, even a bit amused.

"Oh, you know Larry; he believes that Hillary Clinton is fit to run our country."

"Don't you think so?" she asked.

Ian sat down and stretched his legs. "Ha!"

Vivian turned away. She felt angry. Sometimes Ian was a stupid fuck, as dumb as Josh, just as narrow-minded.

"I assume you'd prefer more years of George Bush," she said. She was surprised that saying that made her heart beat rapidly. "You're seeing someone, aren't you?" she blurted out, thinking of Susie, knowing she had to appear hurt.

Ian seemed momentarily shocked; he quickly looked away.

Vivian waited patiently until he turned back to her. She felt uncontrollably enraged. He was going to deny it. How dare he deny it?

"Does it bother you?" he asked, slowly and carefully, as if not sure that was the correct response.

Vivian was shocked. Why didn't he lie to her? He should have at least been enough of a gentleman to lie.

"I'm going to sleep. I've had a long day," she said quickly, wishing she had kept her mouth shut.

He stared at her. "Vivian ..." he began. "I asked you a question."

She went to him and sat on the floor. She put her hands on his legs.

"Why didn't you lie to me?" she asked.

"I assumed you wanted the truth," he said.

"Be discreet," she said quietly. "I won't be made a fool of."

Ian said nothing as she stood and kissed his cheek.

“Goodnight, darling,” she whispered.

Her hands were shaking and she tripped over her own feet on her way into the bedroom. She knew she was supposed to weep, but weeping was beneath her. Ian’s affairs didn’t touch their lives, unless, of course, he was stupid enough to fall in love. Then, she imagined, she would just have to cope.

Later that evening, she sat up in bed, annoyed that she was unable to fall asleep. She hadn’t done what she set out to do. She hadn’t responded in a way that would have made Ian feel that his wife was a jealous hag. Instead, she was giving him permission to sleep around. Their marriage was stronger than sex, for God’s sake. *How many people could say that? How many people could pretend that the truth is something other than it is?* But that was easy for Vivian; she’d been doing it all her life.

Vivian reached out to put her hand on Ian’s shoulder. Perhaps the rhythm of his sleep would lull her into an unconscious delirium and she’d drift off.

She lay still for only a few seconds. What was it about the quietness of his breathing, the sight of his naked form that made her feel like setting fire to his hair?

Vivian sat for hours and stared at him, watching him turn ... uncomfortably furious at the space he consumed, at the sleep he’d managed to embrace. He snored loudly and with such unbearable contentment. How could he not care that she gave him permission to put his penis wherever he chose? Shouldn’t he be up all night grieving over his wife’s disinterest? Perhaps, after all, it was the other way around and he didn’t give a damn about *her*.

Vivian watched as dawn peeked through the blinds and landed on the whiteness of his skin, the sparse hair on his shoulder ... the occasional freckle. Ian turned and opened his eyes to the sound of the alarm, finally reaching over her to shut it off. He acknowledged her sleepily.

“How long have you been up?” he asked with one eye open.

She didn’t answer. He seemed not to notice. He got up slowly and went into the bathroom. Vivian shot out of bed and followed behind him, roughly turning him to her as he leaned in toward the toilet.

“You don’t give a shit, do you?” she snapped. “You’re as cold as my fucking brother.”

“What’s gotten into you?” he asked as he aimed his penis for morning relief. “Don’t give a shit about what?”

She slapped him hard across the back. “You bastard,” she screamed. “What is wrong with you?”

Ian was sufficiently taken aback and stared at her with a dumbfounded expression. Vivian watched in horror as he urinated on the floor.

“You idiot! What are you doing?” she yelled out as she pounded on his back. “Stop that, stop that right now!”

Ian tried to defend himself, but his back was badly pummeled despite his efforts.

“You’re not supposed to do that.” She swung her arms all over his body as she hit him. “You’re a degenerate!” she screamed.

“Jesus, Vivian,” Ian yelled out. He tried to get away from her hands, uncontrollably swinging toward him.

Vivian finally tired herself out and ran back to bed. She pulled the covers over her head. She heard Ian enter the room. She felt his weight beside her when he sat.

Despite herself, Vivian broke into sobs. Ian, too, began to weep as he lifted her up and put his arms around her. He apologized once, then twice, then over and over again.

“You have every right to be angry,” he said as he stroked her hair. “I deserve it. I’ll never cause you grief again. I swear, I’ll stop seeing her. She means nothing to me, really. None of them ever mean anything to me. But you don’t sleep with me, Vivian.”

Vivian was startled. He believed she cared about his infidelity. It wasn’t that, it was *him*. It was because he was able to sleep and she couldn’t. Of course, she was in a foul mood, she hadn’t slept all night ... or perhaps it was simply because she couldn’t as easily take a lover. Was that it? Perhaps that was all it boiled down to: she needed a lover, too.

“No,” she said. “I don’t care if you want to see other women. I said be discreet, that’s all.”

Ian stood up abruptly. “What? You don’t care? Then what was all this, Vivian? Why did you nearly plummet me to death? Why are you in a rage? You’re jealous, that’s why.”

Vivian looked up with tears in her eyes. “It was that stupid reunion, I think.”

“I don’t understand,” he said.

Vivian threw herself back on the pillow and cried more deeply.

Ian took her in his arms again. "Do you want to stay married?" he asked.

It was as if he'd hit her. She kissed his face and avoided answering his question, it was a stupid question, really.

"Oh, Ian, why didn't I tell them about Faith sooner? Why did I do that to them? They needed the truth and I kept it from them for so many years. Ned seemed about to punch me and David was so forlorn, Susie so confused... and Kit, oh my God, Kit ..."

Ian looked into her eyes.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

Vivian realized she had never told Ian anything, not about the drowning that never happened, not that lie about Faith, or about Kit being her mother .

"I don't know, I don't know what I'm saying."

"Vivian ... you're not being rational. I'm talking about our marriage and you're talking about some ridiculous reunion."

Vivian sat back. "What do you mean ridiculous?" she asked.

"I don't understand, you either love me or you don't. If you'd been unfaithful to me, Vivian, I would want to kill you. Do you want to kill me? Why can't you admit that, you want to kill me."

Vivian thought about her conversation with Susie. *Pretend you care, Vivian. Don't be cold.*

"I love you," she said. "I really do. If you want to cheat, cheat."

"I want you to go into therapy," he said slowly. "We'll go together. I should have gone sooner, if only to cure my fucking phobias."

"What?" Vivian laughed. "Are you insane?"

Ian reached out and took her hands. "I'm trying to save our marriage, Vivian."

She looked at him as if he held a pistol to her heart. "It doesn't need saving," she said.

"Yes, yes, it does. Vivian. I feel so empty ... so terribly empty. I thought it was just about me, something missing inside me that caused me to feel so awful. I wanted to believe it had nothing to do with you."

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "It probably doesn't."

"Sometimes, I feel that you care more for Bria than for me," he said wearily. "All those trips together abroad, those phone calls between the two of you. I often feel left out."

"That's absurd, Ian."

“Yet, finally seeing your rage. Feeling your rage. Ouch.” He laughed. “It has brought me back to life, actually.”

She looked at him as if he were out of his mind.

“Sweet Vivian,” he said as he kissed her hand. “Sweet, sweet Vivian,” he whispered as he wept and touched her body, clinging like a child to her warmth. “Please forgive my foolishness ... my loneliness ... my weakness. Let’s take a fresh start.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” she whispered.

“My dear, sweet woman, I adore you. You feel. You feel as deeply as anyone.”

Vivian stroked the back of his head and sighed.



“I’m afraid our time is up,” Doctor Cantor said apologetically, as if it mattered, as if he was terribly upset to see her go.

Vivian shook her head, moving her thoughts of Ian aside. Josh’s news hit her again, the future his unknowing new bride would face. She should tell Ned so he could warn Deidre. Josh had beaten Janet, he would beat any woman he was with. Should she get word to this woman? Warn her? Tell her he was obsessed with surveillance cameras and she would live under his scrutiny, his dominance, his control, his ridiculous accusations.

Once, in her early twenties, she had faced Josh bravely, and had accused him of fucking with her head.

Josh had stared back at her in horror, and then, he’d laughed.

“You’re nuts,” he said. “You should seek help. Why would I hurt you?”

Vivian believed him then; she was still young enough to believe him. Now, she was totally fucked up because of it. She knew better, and yet, there it was, the horrifying guilt about his new girlfriend, jolting her like a sudden dousing with iced water. She couldn’t omit this information. Janet had left him because he had nearly killed her. She knew he would remain untouched. Josh always remained untouched.

“I’m seeing an absolutely gorgeous woman,” Josh had called to tell her, and the fury almost made her faint. It came back like the first time ... with Janet. Her emotions were stuck in the past, stuck but flowing like an open hydrant. It didn’t make sense. *He’s going to beat her.*



“Goodbye, Doctor,” Vivian said calmly. “I’ll see you on Friday.”

Doctor Cantor nodded. She noticed how he looked up and stared as she turned back, as if she had something to add, but then dismissed what it was she had meant to say.

Chapter Forty-Five

DAVID

2007

After the reunion at The White Horse, David settled into life with Gerta, as it had been. He tried to make the best of it, but since he had verbalized his discontent, his discontent shadowed his days like unanticipated rain and finally led to his decision; he had to divorce her.



“I’m unhappy, Gerta.” There, the words were finally out. He looked at her as she sat under the glow of a side lamp. Her face in profile, her eyes fixated on the tips of her slippers.

“I want a divorce.” The emptiness stirred, as if reacting to his determined need to be free of her.

She barely looked up. Her laughter filled the sleek white room and seemed to bounce off one wall to the other.

“Did you hear what I said?” he asked.

“I never hear what you say,” she said. She got up quietly and left the room.

David picked up the phone. He hadn’t seen Ned since the reunion and wondered if the offer was still good.

“I need to get a divorce,” David said calmly.

“I’ll call Charlie,” Ned said. “He’ll get to you by the end of the week.”

“She can’t take my children from me?” he asked.

“Don’t worry, David. My son is the best divorce lawyer out there.”



Without knowing what his options were, or whether he’d ever see Lauren again, David met with Charlie and was reassured on the settlement

and conditions he might expect. That evening, he sat Gerta down and carefully went through a litany of reasons to justify his unhappiness ... finally getting out the words he'd wanted to say for years ... watching as her face, contorted into angry scowls with each sentence he uttered. "We're not suited ... we never were ... I don't feel you love me ... I feel your disdain for me."

She looked unnatural, like something out of a wax museum. He thought that it was strange that she wasn't screaming her head off; that's what he would have expected, not this intolerable silence.

Gerta refused to speak to him. She refused to discuss it. He had to walk through the rooms as she whisked past him, giving her his explanations, his apologies, telling her he'd be out of the house by the end of the week. Still, she said nothing.

He immediately moved into the spare bedroom. He didn't understand why she was so angry. There was nothing between them but children. A week later, he was uncomfortably living in a small apartment over his store, wondering if Gerta were capable of throwing a hand grenade through his window.

Lauren had not pushed him to ask his wife for a divorce. Lauren was no longer in the picture. This divorce was his decision ... he had found the courage to go through with it on his own, no matter what his future held. It was about doing the only thing that would regain his self-respect. Charlie assured him he'd never lose his kids and he'd even be entitled to a substantial share of their combined assets, but even that wasn't the point. The point was more about just being able to hold his head up.

It was right after that horrific reunion at The White Horse Tavern that he'd driven over to Lauren's. He knew she'd learn all about him soon enough, all the dirty details ... how he'd gotten a woman pregnant, a friend pregnant, and fathered a child, not just any child, but Faith, her second cousin twice removed, or whatever the hell she was. He had to get there first before she heard it secondhand.

Lauren listened while he tried to explain ... tried to justify what he had done. Lauren said very little. Mostly, she just let him talk. She watched him carefully as he stood to grab a grape from the dining room table, or sigh and stare into space a moment before he continued. She watched and gave little reaction. At times, he was frightened; he wondered if she'd ever want his arms around her again.

When he was all talked out, past his affair with Vivian, his anger at Kit, Susie's manipulation ... Lauren stood up and walked over to him.

David looked into her eyes. "If I had known about the baby," he said. "Jesus, I would have done something to help her. We were friends ... we were bonded," he said apologetically as he stared at Lauren and waited for a response.

Lauren sat beside him. She reached out and stroked the muscle on his arm. "You never mentioned Vivian before," she said.

"It was so long ago."

"When I was twenty-three I fell in love for the first time," she said. "We lived together for two years, and the next thing I knew, he was sleeping with my best friend."

"Ouch!" he said.

"I killed his fish."

"What?"

"I killed his fish," Lauren whispered. "It's always haunted me ... what I did, he loved those fish, but I was so angry. Anger makes us do awful things. You must have been awfully angry when you raped Kit."

David sat back and stared at her. "I didn't rape her, Lauren. I wasn't angry, I was confused."

"You were furious at Vivian." She stroked his face. "Listen, you're a good man, David. It isn't love that makes us do evil things ... it's betrayal."

He brought her close and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

"Her father was a monster, David."

He looked at her, clearly not sure of what to say. *What did she mean by that?*

"I need some time ... hearing this, hearing about how you used each other back then, as weapons. That's what it sounds like to me. I just have to clear my head about some things. Faith means a lot to me and I'm angry, angry that she was adopted out, that you didn't raise her. You're a good father, David. Faith had an awful childhood when she might have had a good one."

David felt as if someone had tossed him into an endless ocean. He took a deep breath.

"It was so long ago," he said, knowing his voice broke, knowing he was sinking deeper. "I don't understand."

"It's not just that, David. I'm not sure where we're going together. Just give me some time to think," she said. "I find this all very upsetting. You were quite a womanizer."

"Don't judge me, Lauren," he pleaded. "I was angry. I was young. Everyone slept around."

"I'm trying not to hold anything against you, but I need a bit of space. Please. Let me think things through on my own."

"Can I call you?" he asked.

"No. I'll call you. I promise."

He had no idea then that he would still be waiting by the phone months later. David finally decided he would have to adjust to life without Lauren in it. He would try to enjoy the hand he had been dealt and take pleasure in his children. He would consider his broken heart as something he deserved. The old familiar agony returned ... the failure to capture love.



Clap, clap, clap, Gerta's heels hit the marble floor, a sound he wanted to still ... *clap, clap, clap*.

David shook his head vigorously, as if to silence it. He thought about every sound in the entire world that he hated most ... dentist's drills, nails on a chalkboard, bad drummers, and Gerta's fucking high heels on marble.

He hadn't lived in her monolithic, richly embalmed monastery for months. He was here to see his children, had to see *her* in order to get to them. He tried to avoid it, but during the week Queen Gerta had rules, and she would not let him take the children from the house.

"What are you doing, David?" Gerta asked, her tapered leg bent, her hands on her hip.

David held up his latest dime store novel, an easy-read detective story with a trick ending. "Let's see," he said. "This looks like a good book. What do you think? Perhaps, I'll do a little reading while I wait for you to leave?"

"You're being sarcastic?" Gerta straightened her little tapered legs. Her skirt was short and her barely there halter top revealed her flat, firm stomach. He knew she hadn't dressed for the office.

"Don't go anywhere until the sitter shows up," she said. "And don't be here when I get back."

David laughed.

Gerta walked up close and glared at him. "What's so funny?"

“Why would I be here when you get back?” he asked.

She leaned down close to his face and bit. It was excruciating to feel her mouth on his cheek; She was actually ripping his skin from his jaw. She was like a Pitbull with a meaty steak bone. David managed to pull her hair and free himself from her scissor-like hold. Then he quickly grabbed her arm and twisted it back behind her back.

“Let me go, fuck face,” she screamed out in agony.

He threw her on the couch and raised his fist in the air. He was about to pound, pound so hard he’d never again hear the *clap, clap, clap* on the marble floor, but he heard his daughter scream, just before he made oatmeal out of Gerta’s creamy skin.

“Mia,” he said as he looked up toward the door.

His daughter was frightened. David suddenly felt humiliated. He didn’t like to lose control in front of his children. Shit, he must look like King Kong about to chow down on poor Fay Wray.

“Don’t hurt Mommy.” Mia began to cry.

David pushed himself up with the greatest self-control. He wanted to put his hands around his wife’s neck and extinguish her life. His fucking cheek was killing him, but he wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of rubbing it.

He ran to Mia, sweeping her up in his arms ... kissing her hair. “It’s all right, baby,” he said. “Go back to the den, now. I’ll be in soon,” he whispered and watched his daughter run quickly down the hall.

He turned when he felt the tap on his shoulder. Gerta quickly brought her knee up hard, slamming into his genitals as he turned. David doubled over in pain.

“How do you like your book?” Gerta asked.

David hobbled over to the couch. The pain threw him into a fetal position on the soft plush cushions. From one eye, he watched helplessly as Gerta tossed his novel into the cackling fire. She leaned back from the fireplace mantel and smiled wickedly.

So, fuck her, he thought, he’d buy another fucking copy tomorrow. But he had wanted it tonight, was looking forward to finishing it. He had three possible suspects for the racy whodunit and he was hooked on finding out if he’d nailed it.

“Next it will be the clothes on your back, darling,” she said. “Now I am going out to fuck Harry Cox. Remember Harry ... you two played tennis together last year?”

How large is hatred ... how deep does it fill the pores and muddle the mind, he wondered. How much damage can it do?

He watched as Gerta slammed the door. Out into the night she went with all her fury and her vengeance ... to do what, David wondered ... fuck Harry Cox ... big deal.

Chapter Forty-Six

2008

Charlie had kept his word and David gained much more than he lost. That bothered Gerta most; that really made her ugly. David had his children every other weekend, and a good part of the summer, even evenings during the week. Gerta was actually powerless to hurt him. He could have been such a lucky man ... if only Lauren would take his calls.

After his divorce was final, he'd called Lauren to give her the news, hoping it would make a difference.

"I'm happy for you," she said.

"Can we get together?"

She coughed a little into the silence. David waited patiently.

"Not yet," she finally said. "I'm still getting to know myself, spending quality time with the boys. And I'm working on a large project now ... maybe, some other time."

David wished he'd acted sooner and had asked Lauren to marry him long before the reunion, long before his dirty laundry was aired ... but he hadn't, he'd hung on to his marriage because it was convenient. He'd had his bank account and his mistress. He was home to tuck his children in each night, and he rarely saw his wife, overachieving ass kisser that she was.



Faith was sorry to hear that Lauren "couldn't deal with it," as she put it. David had not been looking forward to meeting Faith again, but of course, he knew her visit was inevitable. She'd want to know her biological father, despite how much of a bastard he was.



Nearly ten months after they had all gotten together at The White Horse Tavern, Faith showed up at David's store. She tried to smile when he found her eyes, but it was a failed attempt. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. He knew immediately that someone had filled her in on all the

dirty details; he wondered who ... was it Kit or Vivian? It might have even been Lauren.

David looked back at her helplessly. He felt bewildered, at a loss for words. They stood motionless for several moments.

“Can we go somewhere quiet and talk?” she finally asked.

He closed the store and drove toward the lake. He would take her to one of his favorite spots on the sound that very few people could find; he’d always thought of it as a great place to be alone. They drove in silence. Finally, she broke it.

“I sort of forgive you,” she said. “Kit referred to it as a moment of passion. That you’d been friends and got drunk together one night ...”

“She called it a moment of passion?” he asked softly, realizing that Kit would want to diminish the self-centered objectives, make it sound romantic, if she could.

“I’m sorry that Lauren had a hard time with it, but loving a man ... and then, finding out what a womanizer he was in his youth is hard to deal with, no matter how long ago it happened. I mean, can she really trust you? I mean, are you still a womanizer? Do people change all that much?”

David felt himself swallow, and for a moment, he was afraid he was going to throw up. “I understand,” he said, though he was furious at Kit for finding it necessary to be so fucking honest about his sex life. He wondered what she’d really said.

“I heard you just got a divorce?” she looked at him sadly.

David was surprised. News had traveled fast. “Who told you?”

“Ned.” She turned and looked out of the window; cars whizzed by at a frightening speed.

“Oh, right. You know Ned’s wife, Deidre, isn’t it?” David asked. He realized he was driving slowly and accelerated a bit.

“Ex-wife, she said.”

“Right,” David said. The news hadn’t really surprised him. In his opinion, any relationship Ned had with a woman was bound to be just a repeat of his marriage to Susie.

“How is Deidre doing?” he asked. He forced himself not to be so damn judgmental; he owed Ned too much.

“Her cyst was benign, did you know?”

“Yes, I heard. That’s good.”

“Yes, yes, it is,” Faith said and took a deep breath.
“Well, I think Ned’s divorce was a good thing,” David said. “People need to be happy.”

“Yes.” She laughed. “It seems that’s all I hear about these days. Almost everyone I know is getting a divorce.”

“You’re not, are you?” he asked, suddenly concerned that she might be going through a stressful life event, even more upsetting, perhaps, than learning she’d been conceived from a drunken mistake.

“Oh, I’m not married anymore. I divorced my husband three years ago. I kept his name as a pen name because I liked it, and I had already been using it professionally.”

She looked at him and he knew she was studying his features.

“I wasn’t even twenty-one when I married Winston,” she said. “If I ever have a daughter, I’ll have to warn her against early marriages.”

David turned to her. “You don’t believe in young love?” he asked, teasing her, but aware that her divorce was probably a painful experience, and the last thing he wanted to do was appear insensitive.

Faith ignored his question. “Actually, my marriage served one good purpose. My husband was very supportive of my writing. I went to Amherst and got a degree in creative writing and he was a mentor to me. He was a writer himself and much older than I was, but we drifted apart eventually. He didn’t understand me and I didn’t understand him, not in the long run.”

“And then you wrote a best seller.” David grinned; he felt pride. She was, after all, his offspring.

“Something like that.”

“You’re very young for such success,” he said.

“Well, if the truth be known, I’ve got a trunk full of unpublished short stories and the beginning of two novels in a bottom drawer. I finally got lucky and hooked up with the right agent for the right book.”

“I’m dazzled by your success,” he said, and watched a smile form on her face, revealing the pleasure she’d received from his comment.

They didn’t speak again until David pulled his car onto a small cliff. The sound lay below them, behind a green and yellow landscape of trees and bushes that scattered lazily toward the sand, as if in no hurry to reach the water’s edge. It was a warm April day, one of those afternoons that teased the approaching summer.

“Can we walk?” she asked. “I like being near the water and it’s such a beautiful day.”

They scurried down through the brush until they were walking in the damp sand. The waves washed up toward their feet, all bubbly and white. Their footprints left impressions kissed by White Sea foam. David waited for her to speak while he skipped back, trying to avoid getting his slacks too wet.

They walked in silence for several minutes before Faith suddenly stopped. He watched as she walked back up to where the sand was dry and nearly lost to a forest of trees. As she sat down and crossed her legs, David followed and did the same, landing a bit below her so he could see her clearly when she spoke.

“You used to be my Aunt Viv’s boyfriend?” She stared at him, as if she were trying to figure it all out, his seedy little past and her conception.

“I was mad for her.” He met her eyes.

“Do you know Ian?”

David shook his head.

“You’re very different.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“You got jealous of my mother because you thought she and Aunt Viv were an item, right?”

David looked off. She wasn’t judging him now. She was searching.

“I loved your mother, too, Faith,” he said, turning back to her.

“Kit was gay ... *is* gay. Certainly you didn’t think Aunt Viv was?”

“No, well, for a while I did. Look, we were all friends back then, and we cared about each other, not that that excuses anything. Besides, your mother was bisexual. Did she tell you that? We dated before I even met Viv.”

Faith was looking at him now; he took in the tears that had formed at the edges of her eyes. He wanted to reach out for her hand, but she was sitting too far away.

“I guess you were a busy guy.”

“Look, Faith. We did stupid things when we were young; we didn’t think about consequences. There was just emotion ... reaction. We were all so volatile back then not that we weren’t old enough to know right from wrong. I never meant to hurt anyone. I guess that’s what I really want to say. Kit and I were vulnerable,” he continued, eagerly grasping for her understanding. “I wish I had known about you, for Kit’s sake, as well as for

your sake,” he uttered, fumbling for the right words, hoping he was somehow justifying his actions. “I would have been there for her.”

He looked out toward the sea. The words to an old song came to mind ... *wish I had a river I could skate away on.*

“I remember you,” she said and smiled. “The weekend you all thought I drowned, you were there in Stockbridge.”

David nodded.

“I thought you looked so nice, like a movie star, but I didn't remember you when we met again at Lauren's. I should have remembered you.”

He reddened, even though he was used to compliments. “You were too young then to remember me.”

“I knew that weekend at your reunion ... I knew about Kit ... about her being my biological mother.”

David looked at her strangely and wondered if Kit had said something specific.

“I felt this really strong connection to Kit that weekend.”

“That's interesting,” David said.

“Yes, it was. We were hiking together and right out of the blue, she asked me when my birthday was. At the time I thought it was because she wanted to remember it ... send me a card, or remember to call. When I told her my birth date, she gave me the strangest look. We stood there staring at each other for what seemed like hours, but it must have been only seconds. The earth opened up for me in that silence. I fell into a deep black hole. I read it in her expression, we were connected by that date. I felt her shock, the recognition of me ... of who I was. There must have been this profound moment of truth between us because we froze at exactly the same time. Standing there, staring at each other. I couldn't deal with it. I thought I could, but I didn't know what to do with my shock, or my confusion. I ran away from her. I guess it was a typical youthful reaction to something I couldn't let in. I'd killed my real mother off in my fantasy, justified her not being in my life, and here she is in the flesh? It didn't compute.”

“Did you say anything to your Aunt Viv about it?”

Faith shook her head. “No. When I never saw Kit again, I just figured she didn't want anything to do with me.”

“Did you go back and confront Kit with it, before you went to the lake?” David asked.

“No, I ran back to my room and changed into my bathing suit. I started singing aloud so I wouldn’t have to think about what had just happened between Kit and me. I think I was trying to downplay it. I ran right into the lake. I probably thought I needed a shock of cold water against my skin. I had to get away from the truth ... that heavy feeling. I swam out, just kept swimming.”

“So you had no idea how frantic we all were?” he asked.

“Aunt Viv told me later.”

“I see,” he said.

“I had a dream that night. I never forgot that dream. I was lying in bed, covered in soft white comforters. The people around me were weeping, acting like I was dead. You were in the dream. You were standing beside Kit. Kit was crying and you were trying to console her, but she pushed you away. I held out my hand to Kit, just to let her know that I was alive, but she disappeared.” Faith turned toward the sound and looked off in the direction of a distant boat. “I never thought about Kit again. I never asked Aunt Viv about her, either. I pretended she didn’t exist. Maybe ... if she’d only come to me, I would have been able to deal with the truth.”

“None of us knew what happened to you. Your Aunt Viv never called us,” he said sadly. “We thought you drowned.”

“Yes, I know that now.”

“You remember that dream? he asked. “It was years ago.”

“I recall it every now and then. It has that sense of being significant in some way, like an omen.”

“And your life went on? You were okay with knowing about Kit, about being adopted?”

“For the most part.”

Faith stood up and walked back toward the water. David watched her for a while before getting up to join her. When he caught up with her, he noticed that their strides matched, and that she was very tall, like Kit, and very lovely.

“How are things with you and Kit?” David asked.

“I like her a lot. We’re very much alike.”

“Yes, I think you are.”

“I like her partner, too. She’s famous.”

“Yes, I’ve heard of her.”

“I think two women being together is no big deal.”

“I guess not,” he said.

“Sometimes, I don’t like men very much.”

David stopped and laughed. “Not all men, I hope.” He looked at her and raised a brow. He wondered why she had said that and considered, just for a moment, whether or not it had anything to do with him.

“My male role models sucked. Does that explain it?”

David stared at her. “What about your father?”

“As I said, my male role models sucked.”

David felt confused. Josh was Vivian’s brother, and even though David had never met him, he just assumed Josh was like Vivian, a pillar of society, a good guy. Of course, Lauren had hinted that he was not so nice, but what does that mean, really? But then he remembered that somebody had referred to Josh as a bastard at the reunion.

“I haven’t entirely given up on men, though.” She grinned.

David continued to stare at her, still bothered by her statement.

“So there’s someone special? Is that how I should interpret your grin?”

“There is someone special ... yes.”

“Does Viv know?”

“Of course,” she said. “But she hasn’t met him yet.”

“I have three children,” he said suddenly. “Would you like to meet them? They’re great kids.”

“I can’t wait to meet them. I mean, they’re my siblings.”

David cleared his throat. “Just give me a chance to break it to them ... about you.”

“Sure.”

“I’m going to tell them that I had a love affair when I was young and—”

“I understand, David,” she said, reassuringly standing before him, meeting his eyes.

David took the air into his lungs and noticed how good it felt to breathe; yet how unnaturally his breath came.

“Does Kit know you came to see me?” he asked.

“No, but I imagine she knows I’d want to at some point, after I got over hating you, hating you for not being there for Kit.”

He put his hands in his pockets and walked away. “I’m glad you came to see me,” he said, as he stopped and turned back to her.

“I wanted to see how you felt about me.”

He saw the resemblance to himself. His feelings were one with the sea, quiet and deep ... and very melancholy ... like her eyes.

“Thank you for your company, David. I needed to get to know you. I wanted to see if you could care for me at all,” she said softly. “I needed to see if I could care for you.” She went to him and took his hand. She held it all the way back to the car and for the entire ride home, they listened to mellow rock on the radio station that David never wavered from, and said nothing.

When they arrived back at his store, and he had turned off the ignition, she turned to face him. “I’m staying with Lauren while I’m here in Connecticut,” she said. “I’ll speak to her on your behalf. I can’t promise anything, though. You do miss her, don’t you?”

David nodded. He reached into his pocket and took out his key chain. Faith watched quietly as he slid a key from the ring and handed it to her. “Just happened to get a spare the other day. Maybe, next time, you’ll stay with me,” he said. “I’ve got a sofa bed in my living room.”

Faith smiled and took the key.

“I live over the store ... just until I find a house,” he said. “Or an apartment.”

“Oh.” Faith slipped the key into her pocket.

He looked at her carefully. “I miss Lauren very much. Should you care to tell her.”

Faith leaned forward and kissed his cheek.

“I’ll mention it,” she said.

David reached for her hand. It was delicate and small in his.

“I’m really not a bad guy,” he said. “I’ve made mistakes. I’m trying to atone ... in my own way.”

She squeezed his hand before getting out of the car. “I like you,” she whispered as she leaned back through the open window. “And I’ll be back to see you. I promise.”

Chapter Forty-Seven

SUSIE

2008

Susie listened to the phone message Vivian had left her. So, she was in therapy. They should probably have all been in therapy, years ago, when they were still malleable, still capable of change.

Susie looked out toward the pool. The sight depressed her. She'd never really liked pools. They were so suburban. She was still living in the house that she and her second husband, Howard, had bought together years ago. Drew moved in when they got married, even though he hated ranches. He'd always talked about buying something else someday, something with character. They often took drives, complementing old Colonials and Victorians that sat back from the road, characteristically complex.

Susie looked around her. She felt depressed. She'd recently forced herself into taking classes at the Culinary Institute, just to be doing something. As she looked at her living room, she wondered if she should have chosen an interior design course instead. Her furniture appeared drab, the creams were dirty and the flowers against the fabric seemed surreal, ridiculously stagnant. The once plush carpet beneath her feet was flat and dingy. Drew had been complaining for years about all the crap she'd inherited from her divorce.

She'd always been attracted to men with more taste than she had, with the exception of Howard, who thought corduroy Lazy-Boy chairs were the height of luxury. God, Ned's good taste should have been a dead giveaway. Yet, not all straight men lack flair. Drew was practically a male Martha Stewart and he was as straight as a hand of poker. He loved flea markets and craft stores. Drew knew what to do with a secondhand table and he could spend hours at house auctions. He loved flowers and fresh herb gardens and could fix everything from the roof to the plumbing. Susie

wondered what he was doing with that old house in Savannah. She imagined it was nothing less than spectacular.

What was it about seeing Vivian after so many years that made me change my mind about Savannah, Susie wondered? Perhaps, she was able to recognize the drastic mistake Vivian was making in her own life, the distance she kept from a man who loved her, the uncanny ability to destroy love in one stupid gesture, one profoundly absurd moment.

Well, whatever made her come to her senses didn't matter: it only mattered that she had. Once she decided to actually go through with the move down south, Susie savored it. She would turn the surprise into something special for Drew; God knows; he deserved it. To think she had actually wanted to prevent him from being happy. "What a fool I've been," she'd uttered to herself.

Susie didn't mention a word about her change of heart to Drew the night he came to pick her up at The White Horse; she was still mulling it over but she knew she had something worth saving and the realization hit her hard. Maybe she'd been influenced by the rest of them, hearing about David's messed up marriage, or Vivian's inability to be intimate with Ian. And of course, Ned, the enigma, married and appearing by all accounts as normal as Chevrolets in downtown El Paso ... Kit's pain over her baby. Well, Susie's life didn't need to be all that confusing. She had a good man and she didn't want to blow it, and if that meant moving to Savannah, then to Savannah she'd go.

The transformations of age had failed to tighten the loose screws of egos and emotions ... the ghosts of old angst ... perfect Vivian being so less than perfect ... and David had looked through her the way that most men did now that she wasn't some perky little blonde under thirty. Susie thought it was absurd that Kit would be in a relationship with some vacuous movie star nearly half her age. Well, she wished her well. It was sad ... what had happened ... giving up her baby. Christ, gay people were raising kids all over the place in this generation. Kit could have kept the child. Yet, Ned made even less sense. *Why the fuck can't he figure out who the hell he is? Why drive some other woman through the maze of his unfathomable needs?*

Something clicked for Susie that evening, something that made her long for comfort and trust. She didn't feel like walking on the end of a string, or watching herself develop those ugly little stress lines below her mouth, the ones that gave away her soul and pulled her face down into the revelation of

despair for all the world to witness. Her mother had always said that her face would be the roadmap of every sorrow, every nasty deed, and every negative feeling harbored since birth. "Age either makes you ugly," her mother told her, "or it makes you gracious and lovely."

Susie didn't feel gracious and lovely. She noticed that her skin was turning blotchy and puffy, signs of age she could not erase with Oil of Olay or a face lift. Even her vagina went on strike after that night at The White Horse. The image of herself furiously fucking another man in her husband's bedroom made her wince, too embarrassed to crave anything other than space and distance from this senseless betrayal. Her decision to accompany her husband to Savannah was quick and spontaneous, like most choices Susie made, and once it became real, it also became exciting and filled with promise.

Vivian had been so impressed that Drew would make the hour-and-a-half drive to pick up Susie in the city, but that was Drew. Shit, Steve Hoyt would have told her to find a gypsy cab that night ... bastard that he was.

2006

A Few Days After the Reunion

She'd make a big deal out of her surprise and spring it on Drew that Saturday following the reunion. Yes, that would be the perfect time. She'd cook something splendid and splurge on the wine. Drew loved Chianti ... she'd find the best.

First, break off with that ass, Steve Hoyt. Leave the creep in the wind. Unfortunately, Steve would not be brushed off so easily. Susie was surprised that he gave a damn.

"I can't let you do that," he said. "I'll never let you do that. It's too hot between us."

Susie sensed an unnerving emotion in Steve's demeanor she'd never felt before. The bastard was mean. In that moment, she grasped he was even capable of brutality, like wife-beating or animal cruelty.

"Let's be friends." She looked at him, trying to appear as sweet as a box full of sugar daddies. "I do love my husband, you know that."

Steve backed her up to the wall and insisted on one last fuck. "One last fuck." He laughed. "Or I'll have to tell old Drew how sweet his honey is in the hay. I don't want to hurt you, but I will."

“You are kidding, aren’t you?” she asked carefully, but his answer was inconclusive.

Susie hated him, but she slept with him that one last time because she feared him. He was the only man in her life she ever hated to the core and fucked anyway.



Drew was so happy when he found her with her open suitcase.

“I’ve been acting like a jerk,” she said.

“Oh, honey bun.” Drew kissed her cheek. “What changed your mind?”

“Perhaps I just needed time.”

“How soon can we leave?”

Susie kissed him. “I love that house, Drew. I’ve been an idiot. Oh, my God ... that beautiful porch.” She took his hand and kissed the tips of his fingers. “How soon can we close?”

“Won’t take but a few weeks, no mortgage, Susie.” He kissed her deeply, the way he had before they were married.

She would be rid of Steve Hoyt forever and that ass’s machismo posturing and obnoxious threats to break her husband’s heart.



Susie came out of the bathroom naked, her skin bristling with cologne and body oil. She’d never wanted her husband more. Her excitement was actually titillating.

Drew smiled as he fell back on the bed. “Ouch,” he said.

“Is that a gun in your underwear or are you just happy to see me?”

“What the hell?” He threw back the bedspread as Susie stared.

“What is it, honey?” she asked.

“What’s this?” Drew turned to her. He sat up and held out a ring.

Susie stopped short. Hatred and rage bubbled up and threatened to drown her.

“I don’t know,” she said, her voice shaking.

“Looks like Steve’s pinky ring ... the one he said he lost. He called me earlier today to ask if I’d seen it. He said that it might have slipped from his finger the last time we played Trivia.”

Susie felt her knees give way and she reached out for support. Drew caught her hand.

“What’s it doing in our bed?” he asked.

“Why that practical joker.” She laughed nervously. “He’s pulling one over on you, sweetheart. Are you sure it’s his?”

Drew looked at her for a long time. “I’ve seen it enough times on his finger, Susie.”

“I have a pinky ring. I think it’s mine.”

“I’m going to kill that bastard,” he said.

“You know I hate him. He’s an ass,” she whispered as she reached between his legs.

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, that he is.”

“All I care about is you,” She nibbled on his ear. “Please, honey, don’t jump to conclusions.”

Suddenly, Drew stood up and turned to her.

“I’ve never cheated on you,” he said. “Please tell me the truth. Have you cheated on me?”

“God, Drew, I wouldn’t let him lay a hand on me. He’s a creep. I told you that a hundred times. I always said that. This is just a nasty joke; you know he’s capable of that.”

“You’re blushing all over your body,” Drew said as he left the room. “You’re lying,” he screamed back at her.

Drew went into one of the spare bedrooms. Susie lay awake for hours. She wanted a drink. She wanted a gun in the house for moments like this ... a short walk to that fuck’s house and two shots to the head ... Betty Broderick the bastard.

Drew left for Savannah that week, leaving Susie behind with the faded flower prints and the swimming pool she’d always hated. She stayed alone a long time, hoping he’d forgive her, but their calls were strained and he made no mention of wanting to see her ever again. Almost two years had passed since Drew left. Finally, her neighbor’s dog had pups and Susie took one ... something to love and care for, something that loved her, as well. Something that she would never purposely harm.

2008

Susie called Vivian back. “I’m happy to hear you’re in therapy, Viv. I think it might be beneficial to discover what makes you tick.”

“I know what makes me tick.”

“Can you come see me next weekend?” Susie asked spontaneously. “I’m lonely as hell, and I haven’t seen you that much since the reunion.”

“Has he called you?”

“Now and again.”

“I’ll spend the weekend. Sounds like fun,” Vivian said. “Escaping Ian’s constant chatter about our emotional growth would be heaven.”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you.” Susie giggled. “I have a new puppy.”

“Great,” Vivian said. “I’ll bring the milk bones and the wee-wee pads. You supply the wine and cheese.”

Chapter Forty-Eight

NED

2008

Ned looked at the Jersey skyline from his wall of windows. Times like this he wished he had wings.

The condo loft was just shy of two thousand square feet and faced New Jersey. Ned could see the West Side Highway, the Hudson River, and the Statue of Liberty ... very dramatic. He was mad for it. He loved the neighborhood; it made him feel young again. He even got out his guitar and played, something he hadn't done in years. He liked going down to the river and sitting at the end of the pier. He played all the old songs, surprised that he still knew the lyrics after so many years of Deidre's passion for mellow jazz. People gathered, young people mostly, but this was Tribeca and everyone was hip to Bob Dylan. Some things never change ... *it ain't me you're looking for, babe*, Ned sang out easily, as if it were still yesterday.

He and Alejandro had paid handsomely for their condo loft on West Street, but that's where they wanted to be ... a far cry from Park Avenue. Ned felt as if he'd been reborn. Life couldn't get more perfect. Deidre had not only forgiven him for loving Alejandro, for making the decision to live his life in an openly gay relationship, but interestingly enough, Deidre had moved on too, and she appeared to be happy, at least, until now, at least, until it all blew up in her face.

2006

Once Deidre received her clean bill of health, change erupted between her and Ned as if it had been lying in wait for years, crying to be heard. Deidre talked about life as if she'd just awoken to it.

“Thinking you might die changes your perception on living.” Deidre almost glowed. “I want to live a complete life, grab all the honesty from it.”

“What are you saying, Deidre?” Ned asked, taking her hand in his.

“I sank into an unbearable darkness when I thought I might die. But suddenly, it was all clear, all those stark realities that fleeting time gives and takes. I want a divorce, Ned, not because I don’t love you ... but because I do.”

To Ned, God had appeared again, a forgiving and loving God, granting him the space to tell her what he’d wanted to tell her for weeks.

“I love someone else,” he said simply, finally getting it out. “I’ve wanted to tell you that for a while. Is that why you’re divorcing me? You knew?”

She took his hand to her lips, her tears landing on his skin. “I knew, Ned,” she said.

2008

Ned listened to Deidre’s sobs. She looked like a little girl to him, a little girl who had just been reprimanded for something she hadn’t done. Ned felt so badly. She had been gloriously happy. He wanted her to be happy. He remembered how Alejandro always said that Deidre deserved to be happy, the way only a straight man could make her. What had this straight man done to her?



Almost two years after he and Deidre divorced, she called to tell him that she was seeing someone special. This was it, he thought, someone to make her happy ... but he was still sufficiently shocked, not that Deidre didn’t deserve a heterosexual male in her life, but he’d been certain she’d remain single; he was bewildered that she’d be interested in a man at all. There were times when he fantasized that he was the only man on earth for Deidre, times when that’s the way he would always want it, selfish creep that he was.

“I never really thought she liked men,” he mentioned to Alejandro.

“Perhaps you didn’t know her as well as you believed you did,” Alejandro said carefully. “I’m happy for her.”



She was sitting in Ned's living room in tears. He didn't understand the tears.

"So that's that," he heard her say. "Aren't I the most naïve woman in the whole world? Too hungry for illusion, I guess."

"I'm so sorry, Deidre." Ned said as he came and sat beside her. Deidre cuddled up in his arms.

"That bastard," she sobbed. "Faith finally told me the awful truth. We were walking up Riverside Drive and I was talking about Josh, telling her that he's nothing like you, Ned, he's so totally dominant."

"I imagine that would take some getting used to." Ned smiled.

"Faith was unusually quiet that day, like something was on her mind, pressing on her mind. She stopped walking abruptly and we sat on a bench that faced the river. She was staring out over the trees, avoiding my eyes. The day was crisp, but clear, and the park was alive with playful little children. Whatever she wanted to tell me, it would be disturbing. I certainly sensed that."

Ned nodded. "And it was?"

"It was," she said. "Out of the blue, she asked me if I planned on marrying Josh. I just looked at her and smiled alluringly. Her facial expression changed into something that made my stomach drop. She told me she never meant for Josh and I to become an item. I was taken aback and wondered why she would say that. It was clear she was disturbed."

"Had she been surprised about our divorce?" Ned asked. Deidre had become quite close to Faith during Faith's work on the book, and he imagined they told each other everything.

Deidre shook her head. "No, I think she expected it. After I told her about our divorce I told her that I'd fallen in love with a straight man. Oh, how we laughed about it."

"What did she say to that?" Ned asked.

"She wanted to know who it was, of course. So, I told her how long I'd been seeing Josh. I thought she'd be thrilled. I didn't expect the reaction I got, which was the opposite of *thrilled*. I hadn't mentioned I was seeing him before that day because Josh had asked me to keep it under wraps for a while. I'll never forget the look on her face when I finally told her. It was as if I'd said I was a serial killer."

"She was probably surprised you even knew him. How did you meet Josh by the way?" Ned asked. "Wasn't it Faith who introduced you?"

“She did, but it was quite by accident. I had run into Faith at Columbus Circle and her father was with her. It was a chance meeting. Faith had told me she was attempting to confront him about some childhood stuff. I knew they weren’t close. Apparently, they’d been estranged for years. Anyway, he suggested lunch, and I was there, and one thing led to another, and Josh and I started seeing each other. He dropped me off in a cab that day and asked me out. The rest is history.”

“Faith must have been upset considering she hates her father and loves you,” Ned said.

. ”Yeah, she sure was upset. She tried to mask it, but I saw it. I just didn’t understand it at the time. I figured their relationship had been pretty broken.”

Ned sat back and gave her a sad look. “I guess you wanted to break it off after you saw her reaction.”

“Yeah, I thought she’d be thrilled. I started to babble that day in the park, kept talking about choices and what a good choice Josh was. But I was processing her reaction.”

Ned held her hand and kissed the top of her head.

“She’d written so much about choices in her book. I told her that I had agonized over my choice to divorce you, but I had to.”

Ned sighed. “And I made a choice to come out of the closet.”

“Then Faith said the strangest thing, strange to me at the time, not so strange now.” Deidre stared at Ned intently.

“What did she say?” Alejandro asked.

”I think you see what you want to see in men,” she said. “I smiled but the comment bothered me. We went on to talk about the book, the release date. She wasn’t showing much excitement, which was odd. She talked about friendship then, telling me that that was what the book was about. And friends should always be honest with one another.”

“I thought her book was about marriage,” Ned said.

Deidre shook her head. “Nope. Friendship,” she whispered. “Life’s deepest bond beyond parenting a child. That’s what she said. That’s what you and I are, Ned, deep friends.”

Deidre turned to Ned and kissed his cheek. “I told her that you and I had been lovers,” and she said that all friends are lovers. She wasn’t talking about sexually, she meant passionately caring for each other. A passionate honesty she called it. I was trying to understand what she was getting at, but

I didn't know what it was. I thought perhaps she was jealous of my relationship with her father. It made me feel terrible. She went off on this thing about monsters after that. I can't remember what she said, but I slowly put the pieces together ... just who was she referring to as a monster?"

"This sounds very ominous," Alejandro said.

Deidre nodded. "Yes, it was ominous. "Why do I suddenly feel that I've fallen off the trampoline, jumped too high, become too cocky? Why do I feel you're going to shatter all my illusions?" I said to her. And that's when she told me, came right out and told me everything."

"What are friends for?" Alejandro said sadly.



"I'm so sorry," Ned whispered as he tried to console her.

"I was shattered. Disgusted," she said through her tears.

Alejandro had gotten up and was walking toward the bathroom — no doubt he was bringing back a box of tissues.

"Not all people disappoint us," Ned said. He sat back and looked at Deidre's profile. He loved Deidre's profile; it was what he'd always referred to as "determined good looks."

"I wonder if we all have a dark side," Alejandro said carefully.

"Josh Forrester is a monster," Deidre said with a frown. "He abused his child. He beat his wife, and he would have beaten me. I don't think many people are that dark."

Deidre sank deeper into the pillows. "I was about to make the biggest mistake of my life." She broke off and began to cry again.

Ned moved closer to her. "Faith spared you from making a big mistake."

"Yes, she said she couldn't just stand by while I got more deeply involved with him. She told me that I had to know who he was ... about his control, all that surveillance shit he put all over their house, his beatings, his sexual abuse."

"Bastard," Ned said with disgust. "Sexual?"

"When Faith was about eleven years old, she was sent to boarding school. Faith told me that being shipped off to Europe was the best thing that had ever happened to her. But when she came home, he beat her, accused her of all sorts of things, sleeping with boys, not studying, not making As on her papers. Any excuse to tie her to her bed. Tie her to her bed and watch her under surveillance. Do you believe it?"

“God,” Alejandro suddenly shouted. “What the hell did her mother do about it?”

“She said her mother was scared to death of him and finally able to divorce him. She was completely intimidated by Josh.”

Alejandro looked furious. Ned was confused. He wondered how any sibling of Vivian’s could have been capable of such deplorable behavior, dangerous behavior.

“Did Vivian know?” Ned asked as he shot forward on the couch. “No, she couldn’t have,” he said, answering his own question. “My God, Vivian would have protected Faith if she’d known. She would have gotten her away from that bastard. Vivian would have done something.”

“Faith told me that she was too embarrassed to ever let anyone know, except some cousin she was close to,” Deidre said. “She said it was blocked from her memory for years until she went into therapy and started writing her first novel.”

“Did she ever confront Josh?” Alejandro asked.

“Yes, but he denied it. He even seemed appalled that she would accuse him of anything so vile. He made her feel like an idiot.”

“What is their relationship like now?” Alejandro looked at Deidre compassionately.

“It’s a nonexistent relationship. She doesn’t want anything to do with him, just wanted to tell him off, confront him with her truth and go on with her life. She’s engaged to a really nice man and they’re buying an apartment in Manhattan. I think that’s a great idea. It will put her some distance from Josh, whom I assume will remain in Boston ... I’m quite sure she’ll never want to see him again.”

Ned suddenly had a thought and wondered if he should confront Kit with this sordid information. Perhaps she should know.

“Wasn’t Faith’s first book about child abuse?” Alejandro asked.

“I found it a painful read, but I guess it was Faith’s way of dealing with her own revelations in therapy,” Deidre said quietly.

“There was incest?” Ned looked at her sadly and she nodded.

“What will you do now, Deidre?” Ned reached out for her hand as he noticed the mascara that had dripped under her eyes and made her appear cute and vulnerable, like an incorrigible raccoon caught with last night’s garbage.

“I’m going to France,” she said with a smile. “I’m going to be working with a French designer. We’ve been commissioned for two jobs. Then I’m going to Nigeria.”

“Nigeria? What on earth for?” Ned asked.

“To help the people, teach the women how to turn fabric into designs they can sell to Americans and Europeans.”

“That sounds like good medicine,” Alejandro said.

Deidre suddenly looked sad. “I fell in love with a monster ... a creep. It makes me feel dirty, having been with him.”

Ned got up and walked back to his wall of windows. He looked out on the Statue of Liberty and the quiet Hudson. “That son of a bitch,” he said.

Ned never would have imagined that any brother of Vivian Forrester’s could abuse his own daughter, beat his wife. Suddenly, Ned thought about Vivian and shuddered. It didn’t make any sense, Vivian not being aware of this kind of abuse in her own family — God knows, if she had been, she would have never handed over Kit’s baby to Josh. The guy must have been really good at camouflage.

“What are you thinking?” he heard Deidre ask and he turned.

“About being good at hiding one’s true nature,” Ned said softly.

Chapter Forty-Nine

DAVID

2008

David looked out over the beautiful old-world charm of the restaurant, and the swirl of people who wore their money on their sleeves. Ned bit into his Tasmanian sea trout and smiled back at David.

“So, how are you holding up?” he asked. “Hear from Lauren?”

David shook his head and reached for more of the French Chablis he’d ordered at eighty-eight dollars a bottle.

“I wonder if I’ll ever hear from her again. It’s been months since I’ve even spoken to her.”

“That long?”

“Yeah. I didn’t think she’d hold it against me, but women are hard to read, especially Lauren. She’s not predictable.”

“Perhaps you should see other women,” Ned said as he continued to enjoy the sorrel cream with his delicately sautéed trout. “It sounds like Lauren might have moved on.”

“I’ve dated some,” David said. “But I feel like a fish out of water. It’s like being back on a bicycle and running into a tree because I can’t remember how to brake.”

Ned laughed. “It’s hard to imagine you being uncomfortable with women, David.”

“Vivian sure is a piece of work, isn’t she?” David asked abruptly, changing the subject. “Not telling us that Faith didn’t drown that day, letting us believe she did. Shit! Why would she want us to believe that Faith drowned?”

“Hum.”

“And why would Kit care so much that Vivian’s brother adopted Faith?”

“You ever meet her brother?” Ned asked.

“No.”

“She ever talk about him?” Ned sipped on his wine and sat back.

David seemed lost in thought as he chewed his double-ribbed lamb chop, but Ned doubted if he’d remember anything at all about Vivian, beyond his own obsession with her.

“Viv said he was their mother’s favorite and that irked the shit out of her.”

“That might explain why she could be such a bitch at times. She’s still angry about it.”

David seemed startled for a moment, then, he broke out into a wide grin.

“Yeah, she hated the son of a bitch. It was in the tone of her voice when she mentioned his name.” David put his head back as if he were thinking about it.

“I wonder why she was afraid of him,” Ned said pensively.

“Afraid of him?” What makes you say that?” David asked. “I don’t think she was afraid of him. I think she resented him.”

“Resented him?” Ned said as he took the last of his trout. “I guess that makes sense.”

“Well, yeah, sure it does. He was the favorite child ... the boy. I’m surprised our Viv didn’t grow up to be gay.”

“You always thought she was, David. You took it out on Kit because you suspected the two of them were having a thing.”

David stared at Ned, his eyes pinched. “I got that from Susie. I told you that.”

They ate the rest of their meal in silence, making occasional small talk about the wine and the one or two celebrities who sat not far from their table in the trendy, and very gracious Tribeca restaurant.

“It’s good to see you, Ned,” David said. “I really owe you. Charlie was one hell of a smooth operator. He danced rings around the big shot Gerta commissioned.”

“I’m glad it all worked out.”

“It’s good to be able to pay you back for what you did for me,” David said as he brought the wine to his lips. “Charlie is one hell of a divorce lawyer.”

“He’s a great kid, too,” Ned said.

David laughed. “I don’t drive all the way into the city for just anyone, but I sure do owe you.”

Ned reached for more wine. The news Deidre had given him had weighed heavy on his mind for the last few weeks, and he wondered if he should bring it up, and if so, how would he bring it up.

“So, how are you and Faith hitting it off?” Ned asked once the waiter had brought over coffee and dessert. He bit into a piece of his *fromage blanc*.

“I really like her. I think she likes me, too,” David said. “She’s met my other kids, they’re crazy for one another.”

“How did you explain her to your kids?” Ned asked.

“The byproduct of young love. How’s the fromage?”

“Great. How’s the pyramid?”

David nodded, a mouthful of the chocolate pyramid dessert filled his cheeks. “Fantastic,” he managed to get out.

Ned continued to eat in silence. They finished their desserts and sat back and surveyed the very pretty room.

“So, what kind of family life did she have growing up?” Ned asked out of nowhere, catching David a bit off guard. “She ever tell you?”

“Who, Faith?” David asked.

Ned nodded.

“Well, she didn’t like her father ... that’s what I get from a couple of things she said,” David said quietly. “They hadn’t spoken in years but she recently confronted him about her childhood and he denied being anything but stellar.”

Ned leaned forward. “He sounds pretty creepy.”

David shrugged. “Maybe he was too demanding.”

Ned sat back and removed the napkin from his lap. “Shit, David,” he said as he tossed the napkin to the middle of the table.

David looked up, a bit startled. “What’s up?” he asked.

“It’s Faith,” Ned said quietly.

“What about her?”

Ned took a deep breath. “She was abused as a child ... by her father. Aside from beating the shit out of her, he raped her.”

David stared at Ned, his eyes wide, rounder than Ned had ever seen them.

“What?”

“Yes, Josh, her father, raped her and beat her.”

“Her father? Josh? Vivian’s brother? He what? Raped her? Hit her? When she was a kid?”

“I’m afraid so.”

David looked as if he was trying to delete what he’d just heard — eradicate it from the conversation.

“How the hell do you know that?” he finally asked, with an expression on his face that Ned interpreted as anger, but was probably utter shock.

“Deidre told me ... a few weeks ago. She didn’t marry the guy because of it. She met him impromptu when she ran into Faith and her father at Columbus Circle one day.”

Ned felt sorry for David — here the poor guy fathers a kid he had no idea he’d ever conceived, and the kid winds up with an adopted father from hell. “Don’t feel guilty, David. It’s not your fault.”

David looked away. “Fucking son of a bitch!” he blurted out.

Ned wondered if he should have opened his mouth. Now David looked furious.

“Fucking son of a bitch,” David said again.

“I’m sorry, David,” Ned said quietly. “I thought you should know. Apparently, the beatings were severe. He had surveillance cameras all over the house, too, constantly accusing her of doing the wrong thing.”

“Jesus. Did he ... did he really rape her?”

Ned sat silently for a moment. “Maybe. I don’t really know, but apparently Faith told Deidre he had.”

David slammed his fist into the palm of his hand. “Bastard. Does Kit know?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Vivian?”

Ned thought for a while before he answered. “How could she know?” he finally said.

“Yeah, yeah,” David said quickly. “How could she know? She would have done something. Gotten the kid away from him.”



David was driving way over the speed limit. He slowed down; the last thing he needed now was some cop pulling him over and finding the gun. He had dropped Ned off at his loft, and then he’d sped up the Cross Bronx toward I-95. He kept a .38 magnum in his store, in a drawer behind the cash

register. David had never used the gun, but he knew how to shoot if he had to. He wasn't going to kill the fuck, but he sure as hell was going to threaten him. He sure as hell was going to punish that son of a bitch for being such a sick prick.

David located Josh Forrester's phone number and address from information and put the gun in the pocket of his leather jacket. He locked up the store and jumped back into his Ford Explorer. Boston would have been an easy ride. Unfortunately, the creep was up on the Cape, something David hadn't considered. When he'd showed up at Josh's stately townhouse on Beacon Hill, the houseman told him that Josh was at his vacation house, taking some time off. The uptight servant would not give David an address. David called every small-town directory from his cell phone until he located an address for Josh in the small lake town of Touro.

He found himself in Touro at 5:00 A.M. on Sunday morning. He had stopped at an all-night gas station for directions to Prince Valley Road. Now, he had perfect light and he found his way easily. Josh Forrester's second home was twice the size of anyone else's. There were other houses around the huge glass beach house, but Josh's palace was well hidden behind large, beautiful trees and a privacy fence.

David smelled the ocean as he sat in his car and stared at the quiet road. The spring colors reflected in hi-tech vivaciousness, had more high-tech vivaciousness than nature's own, a bit strange, almost like a techno-color induced dream.

David turned off his ignition. It was a perfect time to confront the bastard — everyone else would be asleep. He got out of his car and walked up Josh's long and winding driveway. He took in the brilliant colors of flowers bordering the lawn, the deep rich color of the grass.

A black BMW was in the drive, newly washed and waxed. David assumed that Josh was definitely at home; he hoped the bastard was alone. Carefully, he pressed the bell and waited. After a moment, David heard activity from within. It appeared that Josh was an early riser, for he opened the door fully dressed in stiffly pressed jeans and a neat, stripped pullover shirt. He looked at David apprehensively.

"Yes?"

David was shocked at the man's size. Josh Forrester was huge. His shoulders took up all the doorway space, and his height was that of a Harlem globetrotter. David was six feet, but Josh towered over him. He

noticed that Josh's hair was still very blond, neatly parted, and still quite wet from his shower. He looked nothing at all like Vivian.

"Josh Forrester?" David asked, garnering his nerve. He had rehearsed what he was going to say. He wanted to humiliate Josh, shame him by what he had done to Faith, but Josh was a formidable presence.

Josh nodded and shifted his weight, clearly annoyed.

"Yes, what do you want?"

"My name is David Cranston."

Josh took a deep breath. The name obviously didn't register, but there would not be any reason for David's name to be recognizable.

"Do we know each other?" Josh asked.

"We're related." David smiled.

Josh took a step outside and closed the door behind him. He stared at David.

"I don't remember you," he said quietly, probably thinking that he might be on the verge of being robbed.

"Your daughter is my biological daughter." David stood up as tall as he could.

Josh's eyebrow arched, and David knew he had his attention.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm Faith's biological father," David uttered, looking squarely into Josh's face, noticing the chiseled but harsh lines.

"You don't say?" Josh said, no doubt noticing a resemblance as he stared into David's gray eyes.

"I know what you did to her, you sick fuck." David almost whispered the words. Josh's body stiffened like an animal before an attack. "You beat her. When she was a baby, you beat her. Oh, did I forget to mention you molested her, too, you bastard?"

"Get the hell out of here," Josh commanded and turned back toward his door.

David grabbed the gun from his pocket and quickly cocked the trigger. Josh turned at the sound; the color slowly drained from his face.

"You're sick," David said. "You hurt any other little girls?"

The two men stood there, staring at each other like archenemies, but it was Josh's eyes that were filled with rage, not David's. David felt sad, as if he might burst into tears.

“What kind of nutcase are you,” Josh asked as he took a cautious step forward. David raised the gun higher, so that it was pointed at Josh’s forehead.

“You need help,” David said and walked closer.

The movement was quick, like the leap of an animal. David would never be able to remember how it happened. Josh’s arm came up fast, knocking the gun right out of his hand. It flew to the end of the long pine porch, too far for either man to reach. David lunged for Josh’s neck and tried to push him to the ground, but Josh was unmovable.

“Get the fuck off my property,” Josh yelled as he brought his knee up into David’s stomach. The pain forced David’s hands free and he fell backward. Josh jumped on top of him and straddled his legs. David tasted blood as his face was punched, once then twice ... then once again. David tried to rise, but Josh rolled over, grabbing David around the rib cage, and pressing him against his own body with such force that David felt he was about to lose consciousness. When he went limp, Josh released him. As David regained clarity, he crawled away, but then, he jumped back like an angry lion. He leaped onto Josh’s back just as Josh tried to rise to his feet. Josh was too swift, grabbing David around the neck and dragging him by his hair toward the pine porch. David heard the sound of his head as it hit the wood. He had the thought he’d been broken in two. The last thing David saw before he blacked out was the pressed cuff of Josh’s jeans, and the bright magenta flower that had fallen on his shoe.

Chapter Fifty

KIT

2008

Kit didn't want to run into Morgan, not after she'd moved out of the house they'd shared together in Rhinebeck. Morgan was close by, too close by, in the little neighboring town of Red Hook. Kit did not want to see Morgan with the children. It was just too difficult. So she moved back to her small top-floor brownstone apartment in Manhattan, a city full of people to whom she was not on a first name basis. It wasn't easy living back in Manhattan. Kit had gotten used to the quaint country town of Rhinebeck and she missed the easy lifestyle, the small-town ambiance, where everybody knew her name and the quiet back roads that took her home.

Kit had never given up her lease on her West Village apartment; it was just too much of a hassle not to have an easy place to flop when she was involved in late rehearsals. Now it was odd to think of the small brownstone apartment as home.

In the same week that Kit reconnected with her flesh and blood daughter, she lost her lover to two little babies from Russia. Morgan didn't exactly walk out the door right away, but she went ahead with the adoption, despite Kit's protests, and the next thing Kit knew, two of their bedrooms were being turned into Disneyworld and Morgan was more obsessed on reading books about childrearing than she was about reading scripts.

"I don't want these children," Kit said sadly.

Morgan was determined to be a mother, but Kit's mind would not be changed. Kit simply did not want her life altered in any way by two beautiful little babies, no matter how much they meant to her lover.



Before Kit met Morgan, she'd always thought of Morgan as way too "Hollywood" — a term that usually turned off most East Coast theater directors. It was Kemp who insisted she cast Morgan in a play they'd been trying to get produced for years. If Morgan and Kemp hadn't gone on a secret mission to snare an audition from Kit, she and Morgan might never have gotten together.

Walter Kemp was a successful theatrical producer, tough as nails but with a soft spot for Kit. He had known her mother and was always willing to take a chance on her because of it. When Kit went to England in the late 80s and came back with a play she absolutely "had to do," it was Kemp she went to. Though it would take years to produce, and wouldn't open off Broadway until the fall of 1999, Kemp never gave up on raising money for it.

2001

"I want Morgan Brennan for the lead," Kemp said as he sat across from Kit in a neighborhood coffee shop. They were feeling pretty damn good, after years of false hope, they finally had an opening date for a new play by an up-and-coming playwright.

Kit almost fell to the floor. "No way," she said. "Morgan Brennan is not right for this role, Kemp. My lead is vulnerable, not flakey. Morgan Brennan is borderline bimbo."

"Oh, come on, Kit," Kemp scowled. "Give the woman a chance. She's a wonderful actress and her agent is breathing down my throat like a tyrannosaurus."

"I'm not going to compromise my script for some greedy little agent, or some egotistical starlet that thinks she has the range of Dame Judith Anderson."

"For God's sake, Kit, Morgan has her roots in the theater. She's worked at the Guthrie. She's worked at Kennedy Center. I even think she went to Yale. Now she wants to come home. Her heart is in the theater."

Kit tried to get Kemp off the subject of Morgan Brennan but he wouldn't budge an inch. By the end of lunch, Kit agreed to give the actress a reading just to shut Kemp up.

The next thing Kit knew, she was cornered on Sheridan Square by a woman in old fry boots and jeans.

“Can I just take a minute of your time, Ms. Donovan?” the woman asked.

Kit looked at the actress, she’d barely recognized her; she looked anything but glamorous.

“Morgan Brennan?”

The girl nodded. She wasn’t the least bit self-conscious. “I have just a question or two about the character before my audition, do you mind, Ms. Donovan?”

Kit was clearly annoyed. “How did you know that I’d be on this street corner at precisely this time?”

“Oh, this is purely happenstance.” Morgan smiled. “I live near you.”

“I’d call LA a bit west of here.” Kit laughed sarcastically.

“I’m from New York, Ms. Donovan.” Morgan looked at her coyly. Kit couldn’t help but notice how ordinary she appeared in old jeans and a tank top, looking like any other pretty kid in the village.

Later, of course, Kit learned that Morgan had scoped out her apartment and had waited for her to leave just so she could ‘accidentally’ run into her.

“I think this character is motivated purely by her desire to please Doctor Holly, not by compassion. I think she’s obsessed with him.”

Kit stared into Morgan’s face, which she couldn’t help but silently admire. She disagreed with Morgan’s assumption, but she smiled anyway; it was an interesting choice.

“Just play it as you feel it,” Kit said and walked away. Then she threw over her shoulder, “Don’t over intellectualize it, Morgan.”

“So I’m on the right track?” she heard Morgan call out.

Kit didn’t answer, just raised her thumb up in the air.

One week later Morgan gave an impressive reading, and Kit had to admit that Morgan could do the role. Much to Kemp’s delight, Morgan was cast in the lead. During rehearsals, Kit developed a growing admiration for the way Morgan worked ... carefully and meticulously following direction and taking enormous risks in developing her character.

Kit had heard from the grapevine that Morgan liked girls, and even though she’d sensed the mutual attraction, Morgan was young and she didn’t feel like compromising her play for a hot one-night stand, which is all she assumed it would turn out to be.

Kit’s relationships had a magic number — most of them lasted no more than nine months. She was always disappointed to discover that she

attracted the most damaged lesbians in the city of New York, and she wondered if it was just a byproduct of getting older. Perhaps, the good gay girls were gobbled up early and deposited into long-term relationships, leaving the crazy ones behind, ready to turn into nutty fruitcakes before her very eyes. But then again, her youth had been more of the same. The women Kit found herself embroiled with were completely possessed by the oddest neuroses.

Right after Faith's birth, Kit had little interest in finding a suitable mate. She ached too much over giving her baby up. She didn't have any available emotion after that. There wasn't any room inside her that would have allowed her to include any generosity of feelings for another soul.

Then, seventeen years later, when she'd practically healed ... she meets a teenager that she knows for damn certain is her own flesh and blood — and Vivian lies to her and denies it. Then the girl dies, leaving Kit in an emotional limbo.

Kit went into a real tailspin after that, and by the time Morgan appeared in her life, she was as cold as snow. How Morgan broke through the icy reserve was a wonder in itself. Kit had half expected Morgan to be as crazy as everyone else she was ever involved with, and she initially treated the relationship between them as no more than a sexual highlight and a transient moment in time.

Morgan was relentless, though. She refused to let Kit get away with denial. Falling in love made Kit furious. She absolutely hated the idea that she would have to be responsible to another human being, and she acted out her displeasure in strange ways, forgetting important dates between them, ignoring Morgan at parties, and flirting outrageously with every summer lesbian they encountered in East Hampton.

It took a good six months for Kit to let it in and open up her heart to Morgan. She finally came to the revelation that giving in to love was profoundly precarious, she would have to live her life at the risk of pain, or continue to let love elude her forever.

2006

"I met Faith today," Kit said to Morgan, the evening of the reunion, after she'd returned home from Presbyterian Hospital.

It had been so good of Ned to take her there, urging the taxi driver to “step on it.”

By the time they got to Deidre’s room, Faith was practically out of the door. Kit was breathless as she flew toward Deidre’s bed, stopping abruptly a few safe steps away to stare at Faith.

Deidre was perplexed, and her eyes went quickly to Ned.

Faith was startled. “Ned, didn’t think I’d see you tonight.” She laughed, taking in the harried stranger.

Ned didn’t say anything. He stared back at Kit, who must have looked as nervous as a cornered mouse.

Faith’s eyes remained on Kit. The recognition slowly formed, and a sigh fell from her lips.

“I know you,” Faith said softly.

Kit began to cry. Deidre sat up in bed and looked at Ned. “Is she all right?” she asked.

Faith walked slowly around the bed until she stood before Kit, who seemed unable to lift her head. Faith’s hand went out. “It’s you, isn’t it, the woman from Stockbridge years ago?”

Kit nodded and fell into the girl’s arms. They hugged for a very long time while Ned sat at the edge of Deidre’s bed and quietly tried to explain what was going on.

Faith got the whole story that night at a sparsely populated diner on Third Avenue — the lie and the adoption, even about David being her father. Kit told her tenderly and carefully, avoiding putting any blame on Vivian, or referring to David’s actions as anything other than trying to deal with their mutual feelings for Vivian. Faith listened quietly and without interruption. Kit knew she was confused, but eager to hear the truth.

“Why did you look me up?” Kit asked after she was all talked out and Faith sat silently, her thoughts, a puzzle. “That’s what put this whole thing in motion, your looking me up.”

“The agency called you?” Faith seemed surprised.

“Well, yes. You asked them to, didn’t you?”

“I’ve wanted to do that for years, but I kept putting it off. I didn’t want to be disappointed.”

“I hope you’re not,” Kit said sincerely.

“Oh, no,” Faith responded quickly.

“You remembered me from that weekend?” Kit asked.

“Yes, I mentioned it to my aunt many years later, but she said that you weren’t my real mother. I’m not sure I believed her though. In any event, I hoped someone would respond to the agency request, no matter who my real mother turned out to be.”

Kit looked at her hands, anger rising again, but she assumed that Vivian had to tell them all first, and deal with the bullshit she was handing Faith later.

“I’ve thought about you so much over the years, but I couldn’t come to terms with it. You never came to see me. I thought you didn’t care, didn’t want anything to do with me,” Faith said sadly. “I really assumed you weren’t my mother. I was hoping when I contacted the agency that my mother would be someone else other than you.”

“We thought you were dead, Faith. We thought you’d drowned.”

“What? Why would Aunt Viv tell you that?”

“Vivian told me that your father didn’t want you to know about me, where I was, or who I was. He didn’t want us to be in contact at all, and you were a teenager ... a vulnerable time. I guess I can understand.”

“No, I guess he wouldn’t want us to meet,” Faith said bitterly. “He’s horribly homophobic.”

“So, why did you finally try to find me?” Kit asked.

“I’m engaged to be married.” Faith smiled. “He’s a great guy and I want to have his children. I want my children to know who they are and where they came from.”

“Of course,” Kit said gently.

“I also wanted to ask you why you didn’t keep me.”

“Do you understand why?” Kit asked. “I was young, unmarried, just beginning a career.”

Faith looked sad. “I will never understand why, but I do forgive you.”

“Thank you.” Kit wanted to take her hand, to hold her close, but sat forward instead, giving Faith the opportunity to reach out.

“I wish you had kept me,” Faith said and tentatively took Kit’s hand. Kit squeezed it tightly. “I don’t care that you’re gay. I never would have cared.”

Kit looked at her, her smile slow to spread. “Then will you let me be a part of your new and very liberal family?”

Faith sat back and laughed. “Oh, yes,” she said gleefully, reminding Kit of the teenager she had been. “That is the plan.”



“What's she like?” Morgan asked. “Will I get to meet her?”

“Oh, yes,” Kit said, she was looking forward to that. She told Morgan everything she remembered about the evening, beginning with the reunion at The White Horse, and ending with her conversation with Faith at some coffee shop. They sat and talked until dawn. Morgan listened and said very little, but she was sensitive to Kit for days and didn't bring up the babies for at least a week.

“We've got to start thinking about the adoption,” Morgan finally announced. “I don't want to lose out on getting these kids.”

“I told you that I don't want children.”

“I'm going to give you time to figure out what's important to you, Kit. That isn't to say I'm not going to continue to fix up their rooms. That isn't to say I'm not going to sign the adoption papers next week.”

“Next week?” Kit was stunned and sat in the nearest chair. “What about our careers?”

Morgan looked at her as if she'd just said the most ridiculous thing in the world. “Multitask, Kit.”

“How soon can you get them?”

“We are getting them in three weeks.”

“How old are they?”

“They are infants.”

“Jesus, Morgan, I'm nearly sixty.”

“So what?”

Kit stood up. “I'm moving back into the city,” she said, registering that Morgan was sufficiently shocked. “Just during rehearsals.”

“If that's what you want,” Morgan said softly. “I can get a month-to-month on a house in Red Hook.”

“This is your house,” Kit said angrily.

“No, this is our house and I won't live in it again until it's ‘ours’ again.”

“These babies are not our family,” Kit screamed, hitting her fist against the back of the chair.

“I am over forty and I want children. These kids have no home, Kit. Their parents were killed and the rest of their brothers and sisters are going into an orphanage. I wish I could take them all.”

“I didn’t raise my own flesh and blood, and now you expect me to raise some other woman’s children?”

“Think of it this way, Kit ... every woman’s child is every other woman’s child. If we don’t care for children who need us, we’re not being responsible human beings.”

“Oh, get off the soap box.”

“Call my cell if you have a change of heart,” Morgan said tearfully and started up the stairs. “There really isn’t any more to say.”

The next thing Kit knew, she was back in Manhattan and the Movie Star, Morgan Brennan, was reported as living in the fashionable upstate town of Red Hook, New York, with beautiful little adopted twin babies from Russia that the actress had named Sophia and Nickolas Brennan.

2008

Kit felt her cell phone vibrate and reached into her bag for it. The first day ever that the second act worked and her damn cell vibrates. Kit had just started rehearsals for a new revival of a Tennessee Williams drama, and she hated being disturbed. She snatched up the phone and noticed Faith’s number.

“Hey, what’s up?” she whispered as she snuck out the back and into the lobby of the theater. Outside, she saw people walking by, their shoulders hunched and their collars up. It was unnaturally cold for May and Kit shuddered.

“David is home recuperating,” Faith said carefully.

“Recuperating from what?” Kit uttered and leaned against the wall, a bit exasperated that Faith would bother her about David’s bout with the flu. “Is he all right?”

“Well, it seems he has a cracked rib, a broken nose and a mild concussion.”

“What?” Kit slipped down to her knees. “What happened to him?”

Faith gave her the story as she had gotten it from Josh — that he’d been accosted by her biological father, who approached him in a fit of fury. Kit listened quietly and wondered why David would act like such an ass.

“It seems he went up to my father’s house on the Cape and said he was my real father.”

“And so?” Kit asked slowly, thinking that Josh certainly had a short fuse. She thought back quickly to how much she had disliked him, what a frigging Neanderthal he was.

“Well, I don’t know exactly how the fight started, but my father was furious over the fact that Aunt Viv spilled the beans at the reunion you guys had. He’s furious she told everyone you’re my real mother.”

“Why should he care at this point, you are a grown woman?” Kit stood up and sneaked back inside the theater for her jacket. She caught a glimpse of the rehearsal and felt the magic. This show was another winner. She wished she could call Morgan ... tell her how the actors had finally gotten into it.

Kit listened as Faith mumbled something about her shaky relationship with Josh and how he probably felt threatened by David.

“No reason to beat the shit out of him,” Kit said through her teeth.

“Look, I don’t have all the details,” Faith said, seemingly weighing her words. “Maybe he got some upsetting information.”

“What upsetting information?” Kit asked.

“I haven’t told you everything,” Faith said. Kit listened to the silence between them. “David pulled a gun on him.”

“What?” Kit said quickly and grabbed her heart. “Why?”

“I don’t know. Anyway, I talked my father out of pressing charges.”

“I’m going up to see David,” Kit said, pacing. “Do you have his address?”

Faith gave Kit the address, somewhat apprehensively. “He lives over his store. You don’t have to drive all the way to Connecticut, though ... you could call.”

“You want to come?” Kit asked. “I’m taking a train.”

“No, I can’t. I’m in New Jersey.”

“New Jersey?” Kit laughed. “I’ll never be able to understand why anyone would want to be in New Jersey.”

“I’ve met Eric’s parents,” Faith said with a smile.

“Ah, the fiancée.” Kit grinned. “Did it go well?”

“They are incredible, I love them,” Kit heard the warmth in Faith’s voice. She had a vision of Faith’s full mouth, her own mother’s perfect set of white teeth.

“That’s a good thing,” Kit told her as she buttoned her jacket with her free hand.

“You’ll love them, too,” Faith said.

“I can’t wait.” Kit wondered if Faith had told her soon-to-be in-laws anything at all about her biological mother’s sexuality, and then, having the fleeting thought that it hardly mattered, Morgan was gone, and who cares anymore who older women sleep with.

“I’m seeing Aunt Viv tomorrow, at Susie’s,” Faith said. “I want Aunt Viv to meet Eric. He grew up only one town over from Susie. Why don’t you drive out, too?”

“Vivian is with Susie?” Kit asked, assuming they were getting close again and feeling a bit of a pang over it, despite herself.

“So, will you drive out tomorrow?” Faith asked quickly.

“Why do I get the feeling you don’t want me to see David?” Kit laughed. “He might need some help. He lives alone now.”

“He’s okay.”

Kit had the distinct feeling there was more to the fight between David and Josh than Faith was telling her. “I’m going to Connecticut tomorrow,” she said. “Let’s plan to get Eric into the city to meet me next week? We’ll all have dinner.”

“Of course. Well,” Faith paused for a moment. “Give David my love,” she said as she hung up.

Kit wondered what could have possibly caused David to act so completely insanely. Well, one thing for certain, she was going to find out. David was a wild card, that was for sure, but he needed a damn good reason to pull a gun on someone.

Chapter Fifty-One

DAVID

2008

David looked across the room at Kit. He'd been so surprised to see her that he actually dropped his water glass on his chest. Kit came quickly to his side and helped him dry his shirt.

"Have a seat." He patted the side of the couch.

"You look absolutely awful." She winced a bit at his bandaged nose.

"It only hurts when I breathe," he said.

"What happened, David?" Kit sat carefully at his side and pulled up the blanket to his chest, thinking he might feel cold.

David didn't answer her. He turned instead to the window. Kit was surprised to see tears in the corner of his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Kit," he said. "I'm so fucking sorry."

"Shush, David," she whispered and took his hand. "It might hurt those ribs of yours to expend any energy on tears."

David turned back to her. "I'm so sorry, Kit. I'm sorry for what I did to you. I'm sorry that it wound up hurting you while I went on with my life ... never knowing about Faith. I'm sorry Faith was hurt by it."

Kit reached out and touched his cheek. "I forgive you, David."

"She's wonderful, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is. So we might be grandparents someday, she's getting married."

"Oh, I hope she has a dozen children," he said.

Kit looked around the room. It was mind-boggling knowing that David was someone she'd always see at holidays, someone who would bounce the same child on his knee as she would. All of a sudden, Kit was incredibly lighthearted, immensely thrilled over the idea of a life filled with children,

little bitty people who chased each other through the rooms and uninhibitedly showed affection at the slightest provocation.

Kit shook her head as if to clear away the images. “Actually, I didn’t come all the way up to Connecticut for your apology, though I do appreciate it, but there’s no need for it. I never told you about the baby. And as for creating her to begin with, we were adults.”

David’s smile faded and he tried to sit himself up a bit.

“You want to know why that bastard beat the shit out of me,” he said.

“Yes, I do ... you told him you were Faith’s biological father?”

“Yes.”

“So what?” Kit asked.

“I showed up with a revolver.”

“Yes, I know,” Kit said, raising an eyebrow. “Faith told me.”

“Did she tell you anything else?” he asked.

Kit looked confused. “Like what?”

“He’s not pressing charges,” David said. He looked away. “I guess Faith talked him out of it.”

“You’re changing the subject, David. Why did you show up at Josh’s house with a revolver?”

David said nothing. Kit waited.

“I repeat, David, why did you show up there with a gun?”

At that moment, David was spared having to tell her the awful truth because the doorbell rang.

“Are you expecting anyone?” she asked as she went to answer it.

“No,” he said and sat up further on the couch.

Ned stood in the doorway, surprised to see Kit.

“Kit,” Ned said. “Good to see you.” He gave her a brief hug. “What are you doing here?”

“I heard what happened to David from Faith,” Kit said. “I rushed up here. You too?”

“Yeah, me too. Well, I didn’t hear about it directly from Faith. Deidre told me. Faith called and told her.” Ned sat on the other side of David.

“How are you feeling, old boy?”

David tried to smile. “Awful.”

“Look, I felt like this was all my fault. I shouldn’t have said anything to you about ... about—” He clamped up quickly when he caught sight of David’s expression.

Kit stiffened. Clearly, she was not getting the full story.

“Shouldn’t have said anything about what?” Kit asked and looked from Ned to David.

“Ah,” Ned said. He looked at nothing in particular and clearly avoided her eyes.

“Kit,” David began slowly. “You should know something.”

“Know what?” Kit asked.

“Faith was beaten as a child ... by Josh,” David said quietly.

“Spanked?” she asked innocently.

“No, beaten, severely beaten.” David looked off. “And there’s something else.” He turned back to her. “Josh raped her.”

Kit sat motionless, as if the words she had just heard were being spoken too slowly ... too slowly to hear.

“I’m sorry,” Ned said and reached for her hand.

“What?” she finally uttered.

“The man is a total psychopath,” David said.

Kit stood up and walked around the room like a caged animal. Ned went to her.

“Are you all right?” he asked as he took her by the shoulders.

“I want to see Vivian,” she said softly. “I need to see Vivian.”

David seemed confused. “Why?” he asked. “Vivian isn’t to blame.”

“Then I need to stop blaming her,” Kit said.

“What are you getting at?” David sat up higher and looked at her.

“A secret she once told me about ... shit, it was personal.” Kit could feel the tears well up as the memory returned. That night in Vermont when Vivian had allowed Kit’s hands on her. “If I’d known for sure that she’d given my baby to that bastard I would have—”

“What are you talking about?” David asked.

“I’m talking about the sharing of secrets,” Kit said carefully. “We never discussed it again. Vivian told me in the dark, in a pitch-black room.”

“Told you what?” Ned seemed confused as he stared at her.

“That her brother abused her.”

They sat in silence for several minutes, David’s face was tight and he swallowed several times before he spoke. “So the bastard always had a sick side?”

“So it would seem,” Kit said softly.

David stared at her. "I'm sure Vivian assumed the two didn't necessarily relate. I mean, how can a normal man hurt a child?"

"Vivian is in some strange state of denial, it's where she's been all her life," Kit said.

"Did you take the train to Hartford?" Ned suddenly asked her.

"Yes." She looked at him quizzically.

"Then I'll drive you back to the city. We can get there by late afternoon," Ned said as he zipped up his jacket. "Perhaps you and Vivian need to speak about this."

"She's not in the city. She's in New Jersey with Susie," Kit said as she reached for her shoulder bag.

Ned seemed surprised. "Fine, I'll take you there," he said.

"Wait a minute," David called out. "I need to speak with Vivian, too. She never told me about Josh, why didn't she ever tell me what he did to her?"

"There are things women don't tell men," Kit said quietly. "Might give them ideas."

"You want to join us?" Ned asked and looked at David.

David nodded. "You bet."

"Fine, we'll go in my car." Ned scrutinized David's condition. "Are you all right to travel?"

"I'll make sure I'm all right."

"Then let's hit the road," Kit said slowly.

Chapter Fifty-Two

VIVIAN

2008

Susie put her feet up on the couch; the puppy lay across her chest, staring, soulfully, up into her eyes.

“He looks like a cross between a beagle and a cocker; is that possible?” Vivian laughed.

“Perhaps he’s a beagcock.” Susie laughed with her.

“Let’s assume that.” Vivian giggled as she drank more wine. “I definitely like that, a beagcock.”

“So, I am finally going to see Faith Forrester Denton again?” Susie asked. “Oh, Vivian, why did you let us all believe in that lie for so many years?”

“No lie. It was an omission.” Vivian sat up. “It was stupid. I should have been stronger and not listened to Josh. He’s paranoid.”

“So, why did you listen to Josh?” Susie asked. “His being paranoid is no excuse.”

“Josh,” Vivian said slowly, drawing out each letter. “Can be very persuasive.”

“I guess that makes sense. I guess, since he was adopting Kit’s baby, he had a right to make sure that Faith didn’t know about her real mother.”

“Kit recognized Faith the weekend of the reunion in ‘89. Can you believe it? She knew the minute she laid eyes on Faith. It was uncanny. I made the mistake of telling Josh that the two of them were bonding, and the next thing I knew ... there was Faith’s mysterious disappearance in Lake Mahkeenac ... and he insisted I let you all believe that she drowned.”

“His paranoia doesn’t make sense, Vivian. Faith was fifteen by that time, she knew she was adopted, so why not just let her know about Kit?”

“My brother has been paranoid all his life. He’s just a paranoid prick, that’s who he is.” Vivian sighed.

“I guess that sort of explains it,” Susie said. “But I think Kit should have kept the baby.”

“Gay people didn’t raise babies in those days, Susie. She thought she was doing the right thing.”

“I guess.”

“Of course,” Vivian said adamantly and reached in the bowl for another Macadamia nut.

“So Ned’s ex-wife stopped seeing your brother?” Susie asked and watched as Vivian nodded. “Why, do you think?”

Vivian sat back. “I think she discovered that Josh is a paranoid prick.”

“Ah, makes sense,” Susie said and sat up as the dog jumped from her lap. “I hear a car, do you?”

“Really?” Vivian said as she looked at her wristwatch. “Faith said she wouldn’t be by until later ... perhaps she’s a bit early.”

Susie got up and walked to the window. “It’s Ned’s car,” she called out as she peered through the blinds.

“Ned? What’s he doing here?” Vivian asked.

“Don’t know,” Susie said. “Is that David?” Susie turned and stared back at Vivian. “David is with him.”

Vivian joined Susie at the window and stared out. “My God, David looks awful,” she said. “Is he limping?”

“Shit, Kit is with them, too.” Susie looked at Vivian, bewildered, letting her mouth droop. “What are they all doing here?”

“I don’t know,” Vivian said and started to laugh nervously. She thought back to her brief conversation with Faith earlier that day. She’d called Vivian on her cell phone to confirm directions to Susie’s house. Vivian learned from Faith that David had driven up to the Cape and confronted Josh, and that Josh had beaten the shit out of him. Vivian thought it was because David had been surly ... or belligerent. That was so like him. Vivian thought it was insignificant; she had chalked it up to David’s temper.

“How sweet.” Susie smiled. “A reunion.”

Susie held the front door open as they all marched in, like soldiers on a mission. She watched, as one by one, they made their way inside. David looked around the living room. Vivian was sitting in a large comfortable chair with a faded flower print. Her feet were curled around her and she had

on a man's tailored shirt. David sat on the couch and looked at her pensively. Vivian chewed on her thumbnail and stared at him curiously.

"What a surprise, David," she said, finally filling the silence.

Ned walked into the room after giving Susie a brief hug. He stood behind the couch and acknowledged Vivian with a nod.

Vivian looked over at Susie and raised her eyes, "what the hell is going on?"

Kit joined David on the couch and petted the puppy that had attached itself to her side.

"Kit?" Vivian began. "Are you all right?"

Susie came into the room and put her hands on her hips.

"To what do we owe this unexpected visit?" she asked and stared at Ned.

David looked at the tip of his shoes. "Vivian," he said and sat closer to the edge of the couch. "I have unpleasant news."

"You pulled a gun on Josh?" Vivian said. "I know all about it."

"Do you want to know why I lost my temper?"

Vivian turned away. "Why do you always lose your temper, David? It's because you don't think before you act." She turned back to him. "Did he ignore you at a cocktail party? Did he mispronounce your name? Forget to compliment your good looks?"

David stood up. "Your fucking brother raped my daughter," he said as he glared at her. "When she was only a child. He also beat her up."

Vivian sat upright, as if hit from behind. "What?" she whispered.

"You heard me," David said. "I don't know how often he abused her. I dread to think about that."

Vivian covered her face with her hands. No one said anything. Finally, she looked up. They were all staring at her, waiting for a response.

"What are you talking about?" Susie broke the silence and looked from one to the other.

"How would you know something like that?" Vivian whispered as Susie came to her side and sat on the edge of her chair. "That's so incredibly personal, in my brother's past, not for public knowledge."

"Faith told Deidre," Ned said. "She didn't want her friend to marry a psychopath, so she told her."

"My God." Vivian put her head down. Her suspicions were verified. She'd asked Faith so many times, why a book about child abuse, Faith? Isn't that a strange subject?

Susie reached out for Vivian's hand and held it. Kit rose from the couch and went to Vivian's side, the puppy followed her, oblivious to the unfolding drama.

Oh, Aunt Viv, child abuse is a hot topic. Turn on television. It's everywhere you look. Ah, Vivian had been appeased. No connection.

"I told them," Kit said softly as she knelt before Vivian.

"Told them what?" Vivian asked.

Kit stared at her. "That night in Vermont ..." she whispered.

"Oh, my God," Vivian said as she rocked back and forth. David slid down on the floor at her side as well.

"Tell us you didn't know, Vivian," David said quietly.

Vivian shook her head.

"What are you all talking about?" Susie asked.

"Her brother used to beat her up ..." Ned began. "Did he ever rape you, Viv?" he asked softly.

"What?" Susie gasped, as the implication hit her.

"I insisted she go to boarding school," Vivian wept. "I got her away from Josh when I suspected." She looked at Kit and cried more deeply.

"Why, Vivian ... why did you trust him to raise her?" Kit cried out. "She wasn't in boarding school until she was eleven years old."

"I couldn't admit it. I just couldn't admit it," Vivian screamed. "It wasn't real. He told me it wasn't real and I believed him."

"Damn you, Vivian," Kit said and sat back.

"I loved that little girl," Vivian wept. "I loved her like my own child and I forced Josh to send her to boarding school. I protected her, Kit, I really did."

Kit went to Vivian and raised her face. She stared into her pained expression. "You knew then, you knew that Josh was inflicting harm on her?" Kit asked, her face a red mask.

"Oh, no," Vivian said. "I suspected much later when she was acting out so much as a teenager. I suspected that it might have happened, that's all."

"Jesus," Kit said and stepped away. "You gave my baby to this monster?"

"No," Vivian screamed. "I wouldn't have. I wouldn't have, but he got her."

"You knew and you never told me." Kit threw her head back as if she might scream. "We might have gone to court and gotten her away from

him.”

“He’s my brother. I thought I’d imagined it all. I thought I was the one who had imagined it. I thought my parents were right, it was sick of me to accuse him. Don’t you see, I thought he was the innocent one,” Vivian cried, as the others stood by and looked at her as if they’d never seen her before.

“So when he told you to lie and tell us all that Faith drowned, you followed his orders out of what?” Ned asked.

“I thought I should,” Vivian said frantically.

“Didn’t you tell anyone when you were little what he was doing to you?” David asked gently.

Vivian nodded her head. “A lot of good it did. The bruises were always shrugged off as childhood falls.”

“It was more than just beatings, wasn’t it, Vivian?” Kit stared at her.

Vivian stared back at her and then at the others. “Incest,” she said softly. “It was incest.”

No one spoke for several minutes as Vivian wept.

Ned knelt before her. “It’s all right, don’t cry. It was a terrible thing, and it wasn’t your fault. He’s a very sick man.”

David squeezed her hand. “It wasn’t you, it was him,” he said.

“Why didn’t you tell us about your brother?” Susie asked. “We were your friends.”

“Because I avoided the truth ... it scared me. It still scares me.” Vivian looked at Susie. “I had to be perfect. I wanted to forget anything like that ever happened to me.”

“All of us are ashamed of something,” David said slowly. “Why didn’t you ever trust me enough, Vivian?” David asked and put his arms around her legs. “It would have explained so much.”

“What are you talking about, David?” Vivian picked up her head and wiped her eyes. “I survived, didn’t I? Faith survived, didn’t she?”

They didn’t answer her. Their silence was answer enough. They believed she was screwed up. “None of you have the right to judge me,” Vivian whispered.

“We’re not judging you, Vivian,” Susie said quickly.

“Speak for yourself.” Kit got up and walked away. Vivian’s eyes followed her. “Why now, Vivian?” Kit asked as she turned back to glare at

her. "Why did you bring us all together to tell us about Faith? Why did you feel it was necessary to tell us the truth after so many years?"

Vivian put her head in her hands again. They waited for her to speak. Their patience was commendable. Their patience was intolerable. Finally, Vivian raised her eyes and looked at each of them. "I told you, I thought you'd find out about Faith, that she was alive, that I'd lied about her drowning. I thought you'd recognize her. She was getting so much publicity. I owed it to you. The truth had to come from me."

"You should have told us the truth years ago," David said loudly and slapped his fist into the palm of his hand. "You fucked with our heads, Vivian."

"No, no, I didn't mean to," Vivian said quickly. "I never felt right about it."

"You knew Faith had the agency contact me, didn't you, Vivian?" Kit asked quickly from the corner of the room. "Didn't you?" she screamed. "You had to come clean."

Vivian shook her head.

"Bullshit," Kit screamed as she walked to her. "Don't give me all that crap about the truth. The truth only mattered when Faith decided to find me. You needed to tell us all first, to pretend you were doing the right thing ... finally. But you're full of shit, Vivian ... full of shit. You didn't want to look bad in front of Faith."

"I had no idea she was going to look you up," Vivian said sadly, "no idea at all."

"Bullshit!" Kit screamed again.

"I hear a car," Susie rose from her feet and went to the window.

"I didn't know," Vivian said again and looked at Kit apologetically.

"I think it's Faith," Susie turned back into the room.

Vivian looked around her. They were all disgusted with her, their anger enveloping her. "I look forward to meeting her fiancé, don't you?" she asked Kit and reached out her hand, hoping Kit might take it.

Kit turned away. "If I could only go back," she whispered. "If I could only go back, Vivian. I would have grabbed that baby right out of your brother's fucking hands."

Chapter Fifty-Three

SUSIE

2008

Susie sat in her bedroom chair and faced the window. What a night it had been. Faith was as light and bubbly as a circus balloon. Her young man, Eric, glowed when he looked at her, holding her hand and smiling chivalrously every time she spoke. Yes, that's what young love is supposed to be, full of promise and hope. They were ecstatic when Faith told them all that she was pregnant. David jumped up out of his chair and ran to Faith, almost weeping over the news. Kit started to cry. Interesting, Susie thought, how news of a baby brings with it a euphoric giddiness — opens a doorway on forgiveness. Faith was kind. She went to Kit and hugged her, telling her over and over again that if it was a girl, they were going to name her Kathleen.

Kit and David actually held hands at one point in the evening, as Eric sat there telling the proud grandparents about plans to honeymoon in Italy, because it was Faith's favorite place on earth.

Eric was personable and attractive. His hair was very dark and thick and he wore what most young city men wore, black shirt, slacks and jacket, and boots that made him almost as tall as Faith. He seemed drawn toward David in that manly way that men find each other interesting. Susie divined that he didn't know about Faith's birth, that her biological father had actually screwed her biological mother out of revenge, and now, here they were, David and Kit, sitting together, arm and arm, as if they were the perfect long-term couple and had always been deeply committed to one another, and could probably write their own book on 'making a marriage work.'

Vivian was quiet all evening, making small talk with Eric whenever she got the chance, and Ned was chatty with Faith. Susie heard him talking about his ex-wife, Deidre, and how excited she was about working in

France, and going on to Nigeria. Susie got out the bottle of Champagne that Drew always liked to have around just in case there was something to celebrate. She served them all frozen hors-d'oeuvres, which actually turned out quite well. Susie smiled, knowing how Drew would have reacted to that. He once said he'd rather eat Kennel Ration than frozen food.

The thought made Susie nostalgic for the way life used to be before she decided that being ridiculously reckless was more important than being safe. The puppy picked up his head, as if he could hear the volume of her thoughts, and surveyed the room, making sure his mistress was fine and dandy. Susie went to the bed and kissed the back of his soft white head. She thought of Drew again and felt herself on the verge of another crying jag. Vivian had insisted she hop a plane and surprise him, but Susie knew he hated her, hated her for betraying him. She wouldn't have been able to bear the rejection again.

God, there was so much betrayal in the world. *Is there any one person we never hurt?* Certainly that possibility couldn't be found among her old friends. How could they all sit in the same room that evening, knowing that over the years they had each fucked with the other?

Still, they cared, and they went on caring, each of them surrounding Vivian with a huge bear hug after Eric and Faith left, a hug that went on for at least a half hour or more. Perhaps, it was the Champagne; perhaps, it was the old feelings. Perhaps it was news of the baby. Well, whatever it was, it felt terrific. It felt like nothing she'd felt in years.

There in the center of the circle of their arms, Vivian cried, and they held her more tightly. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Vivian kept repeating in a voice so soft and childlike.

Susie heard each of them respond in their own way, with their own sweet forgiveness.

"I love you, Viv," Kit uttered, probably delirious over Faith's news of a baby, being there for Vivian after so many years, despite her anger.

"It's all right. It's all right." David was soothing, kept stroking Vivian's hair.

When you're down and troubled ... Ned was rocking all of them, singing the old James Taylor hit. The song made Susie cry and it set Kit off again, as well. Before they knew it they were all singing *I'll come running.....you've got a friend*. And after more hugs and squeezes, and after going through the song twice, they then went into a tearful rendition of

Bridge Over Troubled Water, swaying in each other's arms, crying on each other's shoulders.

They finally called it a night with long hugs and promises to keep in touch. Vivian and Susie stood in the doorway and they blew kisses to the others as they left. Susie had to admit; it was like being young again: like summer breezes, fierce promises made with all the passion of being young. Like believing again in the people who are there for you.



Suddenly, the puppy jumped from the bed and ran down the stairs. Susie listened closely, but didn't hear a peep. "Don't pee on my rug, Elvis," she called.

She sat up and looked at the moon, full and so white it appeared perfectly capable of magic.

The puppy barked. "Shit," Susie got up and went to the landing. "Shut up, Elvis," she called out in a loud whisper. She heard the door open and close, and wondered if Vivian had decided to take a midnight walk. "That you, Viv?" she called.

Susie's heart beat quickly. She tried to remember if she had locked the door.

"Who's there?" she yelled. She remembered that Vivian had been too tired for a midnight walk, too strung out. She was probably fast asleep.

"It's me," she heard, a male voice.

Her feet couldn't travel fast enough. Breathlessly, she stopped at the landing.

Drew stood inside the living room. He was on his knees while Elvis stood on his haunches and licked his cheek.

"Drew?" she whispered.

"Who's this?" he asked as he turned to her.

"Elvis," she said.

"Is he ours?"

Susie nodded her head slowly. She felt the tears fall.

"I missed my girl," he said, his voice breaking. "I can't hold on to this anymore."

She went into his arms.

"He'll like Savannah," he said as he hugged the puppy close.

"So will I, my darling," Susie whispered. "So will I."

Chapter Fifty-Four

DAVID

2008

Ned dropped David off at Grand Central Station. David bought a ticket home. He sat at the bar for a quick glass of wine and looked around the magnificent structure, the quiet swirl of tired suburbanites making their way back to places like New Rochelle, Putnam and Pleasant Valley, hardly noticing the beauty and the history of their surroundings.

So, he had lived long enough to be a grandfather. Funny, how it felt — different from what he might have imagined — more like a second chance, like one prideful moment that would last a lifetime.

He thought of them all, his theater friends, each so damn wounded, each so near a healing he could taste their new skin. He thought of all the open tomorrows they promised to fill, all the new loyalties they vowed to respect. And then, there was Faith, much lighter than any of them, and yet, more solid. The feisty five had known their days of passion. Their mangled psyches once tormented by so much drama — melodramas that had finally given way to children, modern technologies, enormous responsibilities, the deaths of too many nice guys, and the emergence of a world they'd created for people like Faith.

"Time to move on," he whispered and boarded his train.



The taxi turned up Salamander Drive. The streets were deserted and dark. David was slumped down in the back of the cab, his shoulders still raw and his head still achy. He reached in his inside pocket for his wallet as the taxi moved close to his store, and stopped just shy of his doorway. He looked up. It was then he noticed that the lights in his small apartment were on. He sat forward. Silhouetted in his window was the image of a woman;

her eyes, he surmised, were on the street below, and her heart, he knew, was welcoming.



“Lauren?” he whispered as he ran breathlessly up the stairs.

She grimaced when she saw his appearance. “Ouch,” she said.

He fell to his knees. “Lauren?”

“I hope you don’t mind, I put the boys to bed in the bedroom and used the key you gave Faith.” She laughed. “I was hoping you’d be alone. If you weren’t, I don’t know what I would have done.”

He looked up at her. “I am terribly alone.”

“I have missed you,” she whispered as she came to him, placing her hands through his hair. “Oh, David, I want to be with you,” she said as she knelt beside him. “That’s the conclusion I’ve come to. I’m sorry it’s taken me this long.”

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

“Do you understand why I had to take the time?”

“She was a victim of child abuse. I never knew. I’m so sorry,” he whispered as he moved the hair from her eyes.

“I was angry that you didn’t raise her, angry that Faith was subjected to Josh. I had to come to terms with it, had to forgive you for it. I had to try and understand.”

“Please don’t leave me again,” he whispered.

“Never,” she whispered back, as she unbuttoned his shirt. They fell to the floor, gently consumed by something so much greater than the quick, but nonetheless, intense release of their passion.

Part III

Later that same year.
Two weeks before Christmas, 2008

Chapter Fifty-Five

KIT

Small towns are beautiful at Christmas. Main Streets alive with paper stars and magic lights, excited shop owners anxiously hoping to lure in their Christmas shoppers as they decorate their windows with angels and ruddy-faced Santa's. And the snow outside is so white and soft that it beckons to be touched.

Rhinebeck is that kind of magical town, affluent and quaint, the kind of place that makes people pull over to the nearest real estate office to dream about Center Hall Colonials, pine trees, and lights in the windows behind lace curtains.

Kit was glad to be home. Morgan had sent her to Wal-Mart's in Kingston and she had laughed for a full three minutes.

"What? Wal-Mart's? My children are boutique babies, only the best."

Rhinebeck had shops for unique parents with plastic in their pockets and a multitude of excitement in their hearts. Soon, Kit thought, the babies would be dressed in baby fashion's best, her Sophia and Nickolas, her sweet loves.

When the heart has been closed for so long, and then it opens, it's like discovering God in your wing chair; it's like being a melting marshmallow on the tongue of your lover. It's like skipping down a garden path and sniffing wisteria, rolling down a green, warm hill of freshly cut grass and finding a river on a hot day. It's like hugging little sweet beings, round and soft, with endless trust and little souls so open to the unknown hurts it will endure, despite your protection, that it breaks your heart, over and over again.

Kit smiled as she turned up the volume on the radio. Joni Mitchell was singing about Chelsea mornings. Old songs are priceless, she thought. She'd be sure to educate her children to music. Somewhere in the distant

future, the sounds of the songs she had loved would alter and change into something unrecognizable. Best never to forget the soul of her generation — lyrical and innocent music, the melancholy and pain of a generation that still believed in a better place.

It never became a better place ... the World Trade Center attack, madmen, needless and senseless killings, wars that went on forever, hatred between people of different skin tones, different religions. The threats were more ominous and the stakes were so much higher now. It was only possible sometimes to find that perfect moment in your own sweet corner of the world: a blue day, a beautiful woman, a talented daughter, two priceless children, a grandchild named baby Kathleen, and a heart that carried nothing in it but music, and love, and forgiveness ... forgiveness for all — David and Vivian, Susie. Perhaps, Kit thought, at least at Christmas, she could even forgive the mistakes of the men who sent us into wars, the unkindness of bigotry and pain, the reckless endangerment of our environment.....well, on the other hand, maybe she couldn't forgive everything, *Let's not get too ridiculous*, She certainly didn't forgive Josh Forrester or any man like him.

No, some things were worth hating and she'd teach her children just what those things were ... anyone who harms a child or causes needless grief is not worthy of forgiveness. Kit was surprised at her own emotion, amused at the way children alter the way in which the world is held accountable for its ugliness, depravity, and lack of compassion.

It would be a good Christmas that year. Faith and Eric were coming for dinner. She'd see her grandchild. David and his new wife Lauren would be there, along with her boys. Morgan's brother would be staying a week and Morgan's parents were coming for New Year, ecstatic over their new grandchildren and very supportive of Morgan's Massachusetts marriage to Kit in November.

Kit parked on Main Street and sat behind the wheel just long enough to hear the end of the song. God, she loved Joni Mitchell. Her thoughts roamed back to that night in New Jersey. She thought about Vivian and her circle of support ... the feisty five again, all in love with each other as before. In another lifetime, Vivian had been so desired ... her cool, her reserve, her unapproachable love as seductive as an old Greta Garbo movie.

Now, even Vivian's suffering was over. Jesus, they were all free of the pain: Ned — who almost drank himself into oblivion, who had lied and

cheated to avoid confronting his own sweet, beautiful truth. Now, he was home free, as well. She guessed they were all home free by now, even Vivian, who in their last phone conversation had sounded almost giddy.

Babies alter the world. Babies alter the psyche and the protective mindset therein. These beings will change the world — perhaps they will even save it.



“Will you have me?” Kit called Morgan the night she returned home from Vivian’s love fest.

“The babies?” Morgan asked.

“I’m going to be a grandmother,” Kit said.

“Congratulations, Granny,” Morgan said gently.

“I can’t justify not loving those babies, not while I want to love my own grandchild so much.” Kit waited for her response, hoping she was making herself clear.

“I’ll be right over,” Morgan said. “Well, first thing in the morning.”

And with the dawn came Morgan, two babies in her arms, one wrapped in blue and the other in pink. It took only a moment before Kit fell hopelessly in love.

“They are so beautiful,” she said as she kissed her partner, and then, as if handling the fragility of her own heart, she took the babies from Morgan and held them in her arms.

Chapter Fifty-Six

VIVIAN

2009

Vivian put down the phone. She could not believe what she had just heard. Bria had refused to travel with Ian. Well, she had certainly alluded to it. Anger brewed as she sat there and realized that her friendship with Bria had been altered forever.

“How deep could it have been?” she asked Ian.

“Well,” he said and smiled slowly. “I understand. A man would upset the balance ... throw things off. I understand.”

“No, that’s not it at all. She wants all my attention.”

Ian seemed startled. “You mean she’s ...?”

“No, no, no,” Vivian said. “Possessive friendship. She wants me all to herself.”

“Perhaps, Vivian, my presence will only remind her of something she’s missing.”

Vivian looked up. Sometimes, Ian really surprised her. “Interesting ... perhaps you’re right.”

He came and sat beside her. “Where shall we go?”

Vivian reached out and took his hand. She admired his willingness to share in her greatest passion, traveling — while she shared in his. It would be difficult for both of them. He would have to face his fear of flying, and she would have to bone up on the history of Beethoven, or at least be willing to hear Ian expound on it.

It had come out in therapy, of course, her horribly damaged relationship with Josh. Ian refused to consider Josh as part of the family any longer and Vivian agreed. “Sometimes you have to turn on your family and hold them accountable,” he’d said.

Doctor Cantor agreed with Ian and advised Vivian to tell Josh exactly why she was withdrawing from him.

“If he won’t listen to you, Vivian, then write it in a letter. Just get it out.” Dr. Cantor said. “He made your childhood miserable.”

This revelation about Vivian’s past had changed Ian considerably. He was less arrogant about his own eccentricities. If he were jealous of Bria’s ability to get on a plane and fly, then, he decided, it was about time he competed for his wife’s affections and face down his fears.



“I want to go with you,” he announced.

“Go where?” she had asked.

“This summer.”

“Don’t be silly,” she’d said.

Ian seemed noticeably crushed. “I want to,” he repeated.

Vivian stared at him a moment, taking in her immediate reaction that Bria, most assuredly, would protest.

“Well, we’ve been speaking about Croatia ... that’s quite a trip.”

“I’m ready,” he had said and gulped.

“All right,” she said.

The jitters she got before calling Bria was a clear sign that her clairvoyance was totally admirable.

“Well, really, Vivian ... Ian is a lot to handle. Are you sure he’ll even get on a plane?”

“Yes, of course he will.”

“Well, you know, Carla Thomas has been hinting that she’d like to join us this summer.”

“Carla Thomas is a colossal bore, Bria.”

“Well, one bore deserves another,” Bria snapped. “She and your husband will be perfect travel companions.”

Well ... so much for Bria. And Vivian slammed down the phone.



That evening, Vivian lay beside Ian. He was reading a book about the castles of Ireland. “Ah, how beautiful Ireland is,” he said with a sigh.

Earlier that week, Vivian had spoken to Susie and they’d spent nearly an hour catching up on the latest news. Vivian was thrilled to hear that Susie and Drew had almost finished all the renovations on their house.

“Do you want to go to Ireland?” she asked Ian.

“I think I’d like that.”

“Ian, I think it might be a good idea if we take a test trip, one not so far away as Ireland ... not at first.”

Ian picked up his head and stared at her. “A test trip?”

“Look at this, Ian,” she said as she handed him the shiny, glossy book that she had been reading.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“It’s called The Houses of Savannah. They’re beautiful, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” Ian said as he took the book from her and leafed through it. “They’re spectacular.”

“My friend Susie and her husband Drew have a big house down there.”

“Yes, I remember you telling me.” Ian continued to look through the book without lifting his head.

“This July 4th, Susie is having a reunion.”

“A reunion?” he said and picked his head up, putting the book down across his lap.

“Yes, Ian.” She smiled. “Faith will be there with Eric and baby Kathleen.”

“Oh, it would be nice to see them.” Ian smiled back.

“Then you want to go?” she asked.

He looked at her. “Do you?”

“Well, Kit and her movie star lover will be there ... with their children.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“And David will be there with Lauren and their kids.”

“Your old beau?”

“Ned and Alejandro will be stopping by on their way to visit Deidre and her new husband in LA.”

“The homosexuals?”

“Yes, Ian.”

“Well, I have nothing against homosexuals.” He patted her thigh.

“I’d really like to go. You’ll like Drew.”

“Yes, I imagine I will.”

“They’ve never met you ... my friends.”

“Lucky them.”

She cuddled in the crux of his shoulder and kissed his arm. The wind from outside her window blew the curtains into the room and out again.

“So, want to go, Ian?”

“Yes, I think I do,” he said.

Vivian smiled. She was young enough to float and old enough to sink, all at once.

“A house full of friends.” She smiled. “How wonderful.”

“How many friends can you count?” he teased her.

“More than I deserve,” she whispered.

“Sweet Vivian.” He kissed the top of her head and hugged her closely.

Sometimes, Vivian thought in the dark as she ran her hand across her husband’s chest. When I’m ninety-five, and I look back on my life, searching for the words I’ve spoken, the things I’ve felt, trying to remember the color of fall, the texture of snow, all I’ll find is them, I think ... the friends of my befuddled youth, the stalwarts of my best intentions.

Also By Vera Jane Cook

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The Fourniers: The Memory of Music
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