

Chapter One

July 1985

Until recently I thought my identity had been formed five years ago at the age of thirteen. That was when I walked into my brother's room, filled a needle with air, and plunged it into one of the many veins bulging beneath his skin. That vision has been a nail sticking out of my imagination since April 8th, 1980.

I'm not sure how many tears I've cried or how many lies I've told since that night. Sometimes I still lie to myself. I have learned never to underestimate the power of denial. Even during my early high school years when I repressed the facts of what happened I never thought of myself as a murderer. I just stepped in after God abandoned my family. That's all.

When my brother Dean was sick my mom would raise her eyes towards the sky and pray for hours. I wanted to tell her she should look in the other direction. It seemed that The One below was holding our fate in his hands. Unlike her, I learned not to depend on God because I was scared to trust someone so unreliable.

I have spent countless hours remembering Dean's dark bedroom and the wrinkled sheets drenched with sweat, the bloody gauze pads, the humidifier puffing away in the corner and the stacks of children's books piled high on his nightstand with their covers becoming unglued. I will never forget the sticky feel of the Vaseline we had smeared on his bald skull. The devastation cancer lays upon the human body continues to haunt me.

Despite how horrible that final night was for me though, I was more petrified of looking into my mother's suspicious eyes after she found Dean lying dead the following morning. Eventually I did look; I had to in order to rescue my parents' marriage. Only with them, I eventually failed.

As a little girl I knew their relationship was fragile. The nights when I squeezed between them while watching Bewitched and licking the icing off a homemade cupcake seemed so perfect. But the nights when my father passed out in the recliner and snored so loudly that Mom couldn't hear the TV were a disaster.

My parents were the couple who raised eyebrows wherever they went. But not for the reason most people would suspect.

At church and school plays other families stared at them and gossiped, wondering what in the world my mom was doing with my dad. It's not that he resembled the elephant man or anything; it's just that my mother was so stunning my father got lost in her spotlight. Her flowing brown hair, sculpted cheek bones and green, almond shaped eyes were irresistible to almost everyone.

My father on the other hand never captivated people with his looks. Most of us don't. His gift was in the ability to make others feel significant. Whenever I talked with my dad he listened as if what I had to say was the most important thing he had ever heard. He was that way with everybody. The sad thing was no one appreciated him like me, which was why so many people wondered why my mom had settled for a man like my father.

They never saw how special my dad was, and they never realized that I was back there pulling the strings, reminding my mom why she fell in love with my father so many years ago.

She used to gush about how they met, of how they both grew up on the mean streets of the Bronx and that my father distinguished himself by mailing anonymous poems to her house. It seemed silly to me when I was younger but now I understand the intrigue. I could imagine my mom hurrying to the mailbox fantasizing about some romantic boy in the neighborhood, anxious

to see if he'd sent her another gift. But that's only one reason why she fell in love with my father.

In the late 1950's my mom had begun doing some print ads for the local Five & Dime. By the spring of '61 she was appearing in newspaper ads posing alongside a Xerox copy machine. She was supposed to symbolize that it was something fresh and exciting and should be desired by all businessmen who wanted to keep their pretty secretaries happy. That's what the advertising firm had told her when she was hired. She did some modeling work standing next to a Ford Fairlane at the New York auto show too, I assume for the same reasons. But it was the ad for Pampers that caught the eye of a representative at The Ford Modeling Agency. She was the impossibly beautiful homemaker who never had to worry because she was using new, carefree disposable diapers from Pampers. Even her hair and lipstick remained perfect. Other ads showed her gracefully tossing the dirty diaper in the trash rather than pricking her finger with a safety pin or saving that used cloth diaper so it could be picked up by the sanitation service. I thought those ads were corny but the man at Ford Modeling had seen something special in Mom and invited her up to his office on Fifth Avenue.

My father was doing a much less glamorous job working the corned beef station at the Carnegie Deli in those days. He's never admitted following her, but the two of them ended up riding the same elevator the morning my mom had her appointment. My dad said he was interviewing for a cook's position at Sparks. It was a new steakhouse and the restaurant group which owned the place had offices in that building. Either way, that was the morning my mom started wearing my dad's ID bracelet on her wrist.

The day was April 17th, and many of the buildings in Manhattan were undergoing surprise emergency shutdowns due to the heightened uncertainty of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

When the elevator jerked to a halt between the thirty second and thirty third floors my mom was petrified. She had always been afraid of heights but told me that the more frightened she became the more composed my father acted. They were stuck in the darkness for an hour, and that's where my dad admitted writing the poems. My mom told me that despite the circumstances, she never doubted that he would protect her. She said when the lights came on my father was holding her hand and she looked into his eyes for the very first time. That was it. A year later they were back from their honeymoon in the Poconos and having little return mailing labels printed up with their new address on them.

I think about that story often, which is why I've been working to keep my mother and father happy for as long as I can remember. It's also why in the years following my family's collapse I wasn't sure what my role was anymore and learned to define myself by what I used to be: a devoted sister, a loving daughter, and although I resisted it at first, a child beauty queen.

I did the pageants because it delighted my mom to see me following in her footsteps. They were something she gravitated to while trying to advance her career as a model.

Although I was told that I was unmistakably her daughter, I never felt beautiful. In fact, it frightened me when people said I was exactly like my mother because I saw the sadness within her. She was so accomplished at masking the truth behind makeup and phony smiles that only my father and I knew how much she quietly suffered.

It's the reason why as a young girl my mom had learned to rely upon beauty as a crutch. Modeling and competing in pageants were a refuge where she could be judged solely on being skin deep. But as she got older she realized she couldn't always hide there.

While some women clung to my mother because of her beauty, others belittled her for it. I'd see my mom trying to assert her opinion at the annual school fundraiser where her voice

often went unheard. When she hosted a meeting at our house many of the other ladies wouldn't look to her for leadership. Even as considerate as my father was, he made the mistake of not asking for her thoughts on ways to promote his restaurant or what new menu items to add. That's why from a young age I felt anxious about my looks. It took me a long time to tell my mom that I hated dressing up like a debutante doll and getting critiqued by retired beauty queens who sold Mary Kay for a living. To my surprise she wasn't too insulted. She said that all her life people had labeled her as one dimensional. The catastrophe of losing her son, however, seemed to make her opinion matter. It's ironic that she had to suffer publicly to be heard. I guess it's the drama in our lives that makes us most interesting.

Suddenly a siren whined in the distance, shattering the thoughts of my past and thrusting me back into the present moment. A car with squeaking brakes pulled up behind me. In the rearview mirror I watched a pretty black lady with tight blond curls applying a shiny coat of lip gloss. Then I stared at my own reflection. I had denied it for so long but I was the living image of my mother. And now I was determined to prove that I hadn't failed her.

My fingers were curled over the steering wheel hoping that the light wouldn't turn green just yet. I wasn't sure if I was ready for this adventure to begin. Reaching into the bag sitting on the passenger seat I pulled out a Boston Crème donut to help calm my nerves. The first bite was so sweet it burned.

When the light flashed green I made a right towards the onramp for the Cross Bronx Expressway which would lead to the George Washington Bridge, the first leg of a long journey that would take me to my new home.

The morning traffic was bumper to bumper, so I sat in line thinking about how random my life has been. My father always said that every life comes down to a few moments and I knew that for me, this was one of them.

Reaching far back into my earliest memories I thought about Mom and the miscarriage she had when I was a little girl. “God took our baby away because it was sick, but He’ll give it back to us once it’s all better, Candice,” my parents had told me. I was only four, or maybe five at the time, but was happy knowing that my baby brother or sister was in God’s hands.

They had broken the news about the miscarriage over milk and cookies at the kitchen table. It seems funny now, but I’ve got to give them credit, those Oreos did soften the blow. I remember handing one to my father because the tears wouldn’t stop streaming down his face. My mother didn’t need a cookie. She hardened herself and didn’t shed a single tear.

My father had told me that before the miscarriage happened my mom was fun and spontaneous and full of smiles. I was too young to remember those days, but in the following years I watched how she used beauty as her armor against anything she could not bear. I’m sure it’s one of the reasons why she had me competing in those pageants.

I’ll never forget all the Saturdays we spent getting stage-ready in cramped hotel ballrooms. Moms would get into shouting matches over the electrical outlets and the air was always thick with hairspray mist and glitter spritzers which moms sprayed so their daughters would twinkle under the stage lights.

At the time it never occurred to me that I was competing so both of us would feel accepted. The greatest moments for me as a young girl were seeing my mom applauding from

the front row. For me and probably most of the other girls competing, it was the surest way to please our moms, and that's what each one of us ached to do.

Now that I'm eighteen I understand so much more. All daughters love their moms, but I don't think most girls acquire a true appreciation for their mothers until they've experienced some of the same self-doubts. I know I didn't. My mom tried protecting me but what I eventually realized is that she was also protecting herself. After helplessly seeing her son wither away during his two-year battle with cancer my mother believed that no matter what else happened in her life, a bad ending was inevitable. But still, she did whatever was necessary to avoid more heartbreak and eventually came to feel almost nothing at all.

These days my mom is still cautious, but she isn't bracing herself for the next disaster to strike. She's learned that tragedy doesn't discriminate. She knows that sooner or later, it chooses all of us.

The traffic was creeping along. I was approaching the top of the onramp and saw thousands of red brake lights glowing in the morning haze. Most kids my age probably won't be up until ten or eleven I thought, while taking another bite of my Boston Crème. By then I might be all the way to Pennsylvania.

Looking around at the soot covered guardrails and abandoned cars on the shoulder of the Cross Bronx I thought about the days my father and I would drive in here from New Jersey to pick up Grandma. He told me that when the Cross Bronx Expressway was being built back in the late 1940's it was nicknamed Heartbreak Highway because of all the families that were displaced, including his. He said the New York real estate laws were lenient towards road construction after World War Two and thousands of people were forced from their homes. I was

five or six when he shared that story and wanted to cry for him because I couldn't imagine having my home taken away.

A sign for Webster Avenue hung from the nearest overpass and stirred up other memories of my father. Webster Avenue was part of the South Bronx but the two of us had nicknamed it the Weak Part because the buildings and residents all looked like they were about to tip over. Everything on that street was filthy except for the White Castle, which always seemed as if it had been scrubbed with bleach and hosed off. My dad told me he used to go there with his friends when he was a kid. He said they'd each get a sack of cheeseburgers and eat them while sitting out on the fire escape taking bets on which one of them could sweat the least. He called them Murder Burgers because after finishing his sack he said it felt as if he'd been kicked in the stomach. My father has always been full of good stories. It's sad how he moved out of the Bronx to give his family a better life, but his mistakes caused mom and me to end up back here anyway.

A car with New Jersey plates merged in front of me and I started thinking back beyond the night Dean died, to the years before we knew what lay in waiting for us. Those were the greatest times for my family. My father's restaurant was doing fantastic business, my mom was thrilled that I appeared on the cover of the 1973 Spring issue of Pageantry Magazine, and I spent almost every afternoon with Jessie and Charlie, my two best friends who I'd met at the bus stop on the very first day of first grade.

For eight years Jessie and Charlie and I were inseparable. They defended me when the older girls mocked me for competing in pageants and called me a whore. And I stood up for them when Jessie got picked on for having curly red hair and when the eighth graders made Charlie push a dime up the school bus aisle with his nose.

Like all kids, our interests changed over the years. We evolved from watching *Let's Make A Deal* to never missing *The Dating Game* to piecing together ideas about sex which we got from watching *Three's Company*.

I'll never forget the look of horror on my mom's face when I asked if Daddy ever gave her a blowjob. She had just picked me up from dance class and I was sitting Indian style on the passenger seat and got tossed right into the door when she swerved to miss oncoming traffic. I told my mom that I heard Bobby Morrow gave one to Susan Slater because they were in love, so I figured Daddy must've given her a bunch of blowjobs.

After composing herself with a few deep breaths my mother wagged her finger and told me it was impossible for Susan Slater, or any woman to get one of those. I asked why, since a blowjob was just another name for a hickie. I remember my mom shook her head and mumbled something about needing to talk with Sister Francis Marie, the principal at St. Vincent's. It wasn't until Jessie got her period and her mom filled her in on the details over chicken fingers at Bennigan's that things finally added up. I haven't thought of a penis the same way since.

All those conversations changed though, after Dean was diagnosed.

Although we were best friends then, it's been years since we've spoken. I wondered what they were doing now. I wondered if they gave me any thought. I haven't seen my old house in a long time but they see it every day: the round bushes lining each side of the driveway, the big evergreen tree casting its shadow over the front lawn, and the concrete porch where the three of us sat during nights when Dean was at the hospital, my father was at the restaurant, and my mom was busy inside dining on the happy lives of the characters in the TV. It's sad how the three of us shared so much together then but would be strangers to each other now.

The traffic was starting to open, which was good because I wanted to outrun these thoughts. The strange thing was I've been looking over my shoulder for so long that the pain of my old life had become a companion of sorts.

Even now as I see signs for New Jersey I remember the afternoon my parents took Dean to the doctor and made me stay home and practice for the upcoming Junior Miss pageant. I was blind then, unaware of the news that was about to crush me and led me to who I am today.

They got home at 6:00 that night. At the time I didn't recognize the panic on their faces. I didn't think anything of it as I watched my parents taking extra care in setting Dean up in front of the TV with a slice of pizza and a soda. And I had no idea they were about to pull me into their bedroom and sink an ax into my heart...

Chapter Two

November 1978, Seven Years Earlier

“Candice, we need to talk,” Mom said as she closed the pizza box on the kitchen table, screwed the cap back on the soda bottle and reversed the roll of paper towels so that the sheets weren't hanging down to the counter.

She did those things whenever she was nervous and I looked over at my father to see what was wrong. That’s when I noticed he had been crying.

Suddenly, my feet started prickling and I felt the pins and needles numbing my hands. Mom kept moving around the kitchen, molding the spoons in the drawer then starting on the forks. Daddy stood looking through the doorway at Dean in the other room. I felt my throat tightening as my breaths began to stutter.

“What, what’s wrong?” I asked, grabbing my mom’s arms as two handfuls of forks rattled onto the countertop. “Mom, Daddy, what is it? Please tell me.”

“Not here,” Mom whispered, grabbing my hand and pulling me up the steps. Her palm was ice cold and shivering. Her sharp fingernails dug into my wrist.

Walking into their bedroom they sat me down in a chair next to their dresser.

“What is it?” I asked, twisting my hands together. “You're scaring me. Is it Grandma? Is she okay?”

“Grandma’s fine,” Mom said. “She’s fine. It’s Dean, Candice,” she mumbled, placing her hand on her forehead as if she just couldn’t believe it.

“Dean? What are you talking about?” I asked, springing up from my seat.

“Candice, you’re only eleven years old so this is very tough to say...”

“Mom please, tell me what’s wrong with Dean.”

“He has leukemia. It’s a type of cancer that...”

Daddy reached for me but I pulled away, feeling my hands and feet tingling. I walked, hurrying towards their bathroom then across to the window then over to the nightstand.

“Candice, we need to -” my mother insisted, trying to get the words out as she let me skirt around the room.

Daddy sat down on the bed with his arms held out and I walked over, falling into him. His big hands ran over my back as I rested my chin on his shoulder and watched Mom pacing in circles behind us. Then Daddy let go and took my hands in his. “Tell me Mommy is wrong,” I whispered as the tears trickled down my face. “You always have the answers, Daddy. Please tell me.”

“Mom is not wrong, Candice,” he whispered. “We need you to please try and understand what we’re telling you. Your brother has to go -”

I couldn’t listen. All I remembered was Dean gasping for breaths in the school yard while trying to keep up with the boys in his class. I’d run over each time but he’d always tell me to get away so the other kids wouldn’t see me babying him. All I wanted during those moments was to protect him. My God, I taught him the alphabet so we could sing it together whenever he was nervous or scared! He’s my little brother, my best friend in the whole world. That’s why Mom and Daddy are wrong. That’s why what they are saying can’t be true! Dean’s okay. They’re wrong, that’s all. God wouldn’t allow anything bad to happen to my baby brother.

“Candice, please listen to us,” Mom said while sitting down and cupping my cheeks in her hands.

“You’re wrong Mom. Daddy you’re wrong!” I said jerking away from them. “How do you know Dean has leukemia? Where did you go with him just now?”

“To see an oncologist,” Mom sighed.

“What’s that?”

“A children’s cancer specialist.”

“What? When I asked where you were going you said nowhere. Why did you say that? Why didn’t you let me go with you? Why was I here practicing for this stupid pageant?”

Daddy collapsed to the bed as Mom fought back her tears.

“We have to tell him Vivian,” Daddy insisted, somehow making me feel irrelevant because the attention was suddenly off me.

“No Don. He’s six years old. He’s too young to understand all this.”

“Well he sure as hell isn’t too young to feel a needle or recognize that we’re taking him to the hospital tomorrow instead of school. I know your instinct is to protect him Vivian, but for Christ’s sake would you quit trying to protect yourself.”

“Then what do you suggest, that we go downstairs while he’s watching cartoons and tell him he’s got... You see? I can’t even say it. How on earth are we going to explain this to him?” Mom said, falling onto the bed.

“Delicately. What choice do we have?” Daddy answered, shaking his head in disbelief.

I stood there staring at my parents and feeling suddenly invisible. Their panic made me panic. I wanted to say something, but I felt so helpless I didn’t know what to do. Looking down at my right hand I realized I had chewed three of my fingernails to the point of bleeding.

“Now is the time, Vivian,” Daddy insisted, reaching for Mom. “You heard what Dr. Reed said. We have to spoon feed him this news.”

Daddy squeezed Mom and me in his arms, but I felt myself slipping through his fingers.

“Mommy, can I please have more orange soda?” Dean called from the bottom step.

His voice shook me with pain, shook all of us. I wanted to cradle it; I wanted to cradle every part of him now.

“Of course, you can honey, I’ll be right down to pour you a cup,” Mom said. “All right Don, we have to tell him but I can’t even imagine where to start.”

I wiped my runny nose and felt the skin burnt from my tears.

“I don’t know where to start either,” Daddy said as he hugged Mom and me. “Let’s just hope the right words come to us.” Then he began praying. ‘...Dear Lord, aid us during this period of extraordinary uncertainty. Help us choose our words wisely so we comfort Dean and enable his young mind to grasp the significance of what we’re about to share. Please guide us Lord, as we face the most turbulent time in our lives.’”

Daddy’s eyes were pinched shut as he spoke, his voice flinching, his hands trembling. Then he wiped the tears on his shirt sleeve and led us downstairs.

Dean was sitting Indian style on the floor watching Bugs Bunny. The room smelled of pepperoni. An empty paper cup was tipped over at his side.

“Hey, my boy...” Daddy whispered, tousling Dean’s hair.

He gazed up with a naïve smile. “Mommy, can I have more orange soda please?”

“Sure honey, but right now Daddy and Candice and I need to talk with you,” Mom said, taking Dean’s little hand in hers.

My father clicked the remote. The silence was intimidating. I wanted cartoon characters with funny voices shouting distractions through the TV.

Daddy sat on the couch and propped Dean up on his knee. “Wow, you’re getting so big,” he grunted. “Can I see those muscles of yours?” Daddy asked, playfully flexing his own arm.

Dean held up his bony arm and all of us pretended to be very impressed.

Mom spoke first. “Dean...” she gulped, cupping his delicate hands so that they disappeared in hers. “Do you remember last week when Dr. Reed took a sample of your blood and said you were the bravest patient he’d seen in a long long time?”

“Yes Mommy, he put a racing car band aid over my booboo and gave me two lollipops.”

“That’s right,” mom smiled. “Well, today Dr. Reed told Daddy and me that he found something funny in your blood.”

“Like what, Mommy?” Dean asked, without a trace of worry in his voice.

“Do you remember the last time you had a cold and your nose was all runny?”

“Yeah, you fed me lots of chicken soup and told me that my guardian angel was watching over me to make sure I got all better.”

“Right again,” she smiled. “Well, germs cause colds and that’s what Dr. Reed found in your blood.”

“Candy, why are you crying?” Dean asked, looking over at me. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No Dean. You’re perfect. Something’s caught in my eye,” I said, pretending to wipe it away. “That’s all.”

“Dean, we need you to listen,” Daddy interrupted. “This germ Mommy is talking about is a bigger pest than the one that makes your nose runny. That’s why Dr. Reed asked to see you tomorrow, and do you know what that means?” he asked with excitement in his voice.

“No Daddy, what?” Dean replied in anticipation.

“It means you’re allowed to miss school for a whole day and can deliver one of those impressive doctor’s notes to Sister Veronica Marie when you go back.”

“But if I’m not going to school where am I going, Daddy?”

“Dr. Reed asked if you could spend a little time with him at the hospital. Candice and Mommy and I are invited, too. The best part of all is you’ll get to eat as much ice cream as you want. And listen to this,” Daddy said, holding Dean’s knee as if bracing him for the best part, “I heard they’ve got a playroom that’s almost as big as Child World! Can you believe it? Plus you’ll meet other boys and girls your age and I bet you’ll even make a bunch of new friends.”

“But I want to play with my friends at school, Daddy. I’m getting better at kicking the ball now. You should see how good I do. Can’t Mommy give me chicken soup and tell my guardian angel to watch over me like last time?”

“I wish it was that easy my boy,” Daddy said sadly, “but this germ is a big bully and Mommy and I don’t know how to fight it. So we’re bringing you to someone who does know.”

“Okay. But Daddy, can you make sure and tell my guardian angel that I’ll be at the hospital this time? I don’t want him looking for me in my room when I’m not there.”

“Of course, Dean. We’ll tell your guardian angel.”

I fought back the tears in my eyes as Mom’s red painted fingernails traced white creases on Dean’s arms. Then my father pulled out a book called, *The Little Bug in Me*.

“Mommy and Candice and I would like to read some of this with you, Dean. It’s about a little boy named Eli who has a bug in his body just like you do,” Daddy said, as his trembling hands folded back the cover. “Page One, ‘What’s Buggin’ Me...?’”

That night Mom packed a bag with Dean’s pajamas, toothbrush, 64 pack of Crayola Crayons with the built-in sharpener and three brand new coloring books.

At 7:30 the next morning the four of us walked out the front door and I saw other kids experiencing a normal Wednesday morning, unfinished homework their biggest concern. Jessie waved from up the street, raising her arms like a question. I shook my head and fell into the car.

Daddy distracted himself with the radio knob before cutting off the obnoxious morning DJ's. We suffered through silence until turning into Chilton Pediatric Medical Center where two caricatures of a boy and girl waved at us from above the entrance.

We're not supposed to be here! I thought as Daddy followed the arrow toward the Oncology Clinic. Why didn't this happen to some other family? Why us?

Moments later we stepped into a lobby with butterfly stickers on the floor, a giant fish tank and colorful mobiles hanging from the ceiling. I stood holding Dean's duffle bag as Mom and Daddy filled out papers at the admittance desk.

"Candy, I don't like it here. It smells funny," Dean said with his lips shaking.

I set down his soft bag and kneeled before him, squeezing his sweaty palms in my hands.

"I never came here the other times I was sick, not even when I had the chicken pox. What's wrong with me, Candy? Please don't leave me," he begged, holding onto my hand. "I'm afraid of this place."

"I'm not leaving you Dean," I said, clamping my teeth and wrapping my arms around him. "I won't leave you until we walk out this door together. Do you want to sing the alphabet with me? It always helped us the other times we were a little scared."

"Dr. Reed is on his way," Mom said, marching over. I knew she was petrified behind that beautifully sculpted face.

Striding down the hallway a moment later I saw the doctor and the tail of his white lab coat waving behind him. He had a thick head of silver hair and perfectly trimmed gray mustache and beard.

“Hello Don, Vivian. Hello Dean,” he said, crouching before my brother. “Thanks so much for seeing me today. I’m sure your Mommy and Daddy told you that we’re going to spend a little time together, right?”

“Yes, they told me about all the ice cream you have here, too.”

“Oh, we’ve got gallons of every flavor you could imagine,” the doctor said, waving his hand as if Dean had nothing to worry about.

“Dr. Reed, this is Dean’s sister Candice,” Daddy said.

“Hello Candice.”

“...Hello.”

“How ‘bout we take a stroll. I’ll show you the room we’ve prepared special for you, Dean. Now let me take a wild guess here,” the doctor said putting his finger to his head as if he was trying to think really hard. “Your favorite color is purple and your lucky number is...thirty-two, because that’s Magic Johnson’s number, right?”

“Yeah! How did you know that?”

“In doctor’s school I had to take a guessing class so I would know what my patients liked most. That’s why I bet you’ve got a giant collection of Matchbox cars at home, and a new Schwinn bicycle with a blue banana seat. Am I close?” Dr. Reed asked.

“Wow! You must have gotten an A in that class!” Dean said, smiling up at Mom and Daddy.

“I did pretty well,” Dr. Reed said as he patted Dean’s shoulder.

He led us down a green and yellow polka dot painted hallway.

We walked by a bony little boy dressed in a fireman's hat and pajamas as he was wheeled around in a red wagon. "Faster! Faster!" he squealed in excitement.

"How are you doing, Joseph?" Dr. Reed asked him.

"I'm great! I got to go outside without my facial mask for the first time yesterday, Dr. Reed. And tomorrow is my last blood transfusion. My whole family is bringing cake so we can celebrate!"

Mom buried her face in her hands as she kept walking.

Each room had the patient's name scribbled in crayon and pasted to the door. I couldn't help but steal glances. Hannah was the name on one of the doors. Inside I saw a metal crib with a baby crying. A man was asleep in the chair next to her.

"This is all yours Dean," Dr. Reed said, stopping at a purple door. The curtain was tucked back, filling the room with sunlight. The walls were a mural of forest animals playing in a field. On Dean's bed was a pillow with the number thirty-two printed like a bull's-eye.

"Wow!" Dean exclaimed. "This is cool!"

Don't fall for this Dean! I wanted to scream. It's a distraction. I don't want your name taped to this door. I don't want you getting a ride in some red wagon, I thought while turning to hide my tears.

"Good morning," said a nurse standing in the doorway. "My name is Lauren. I'm one of the pediatric oncology nurses," she explained to my parents. "Dean, would you like to see the playroom we have for you?"

"Yes please. My daddy told me it's as big as Child World. Is that for real?"

“Well, maybe not that big but I think you’ll be happy. Let’s take a walk so your Mommy and Daddy can speak with Dr. Reed,” she said, holding out her hand.

“I’ll see you soon, right Mommy?” Dean asked as he took the nurse’s hand.

“Of course, you will honey,” Mom said as she bent down and kissed him. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too, Mommy. Daddy, did you remember to tell my guardian angel to come here and not my room at home?”

“He’s on his way right now Dean,” Daddy said while wiping his eyes. “Go have fun with all the games, my boy. Your guardian angel will be here when you get back.”

“Okay,” Dean said as he and the nurse took little steps out the door.

“Candice, stay here while we talk with the doctor,” Daddy said in a sudden and serious voice.

“But how am I supposed to help Dean if I don’t know what’s going on?”

“It’s easier if she knows what to expect,” Dr. Reed responded.

“All right,” my father sighed, rubbing his forehead, unsure about what to do. Then we followed the doctor into his office.

“Did you have a chance to read the literature I gave you yesterday?” Dr. Reed asked as he sat down behind his desk.

“No,” Mom snapped with one hand gripping the arm of her chair and the other pressed over her trembling lips. “I’m sorry,” she uttered, raising her hand as if asking for understanding.

“I need answers Dr. Reed, but not from a brochure.”

“Certainly, I can answer your questions,” he said, poised in his chair. “I understand how a diagnosis of this magnitude disrupts the family, your sense of control and the rhythm of your

routines. That's why I encourage parents to skim those pamphlets prior to coming in. But I understand that it's often difficult. The one thing I must advise, however, is that you do read them, and the other literature I will provide. When a child has leukemia it's critical that treatment starts immediately. And it's vital for parents and siblings to be aware of the procedures, and their repercussions. I've had family members claim that the information was too agonizing. Their ignorance only magnified their anxiety when witnessing the side effects. I'm talking about traumatic consequences like hair loss, not only of the head but the eyebrows, too. Loss of bodily functions. The need to keep a plastic bucket, wet naps and change of clothes in the car due to sudden vomiting episodes. Knowing that certain medications distort taste buds, often making food taste metallic. That's why it will be important to feed Dean spicy foods and not cook with metal pots and pans. Use glass instead."

Mom kept crossing and uncrossing her legs as he spoke, sitting in silence until Dr. Reed finished.

I stared at the doctor wishing it was yesterday or last week, those days looked so good to me now.

Fat leather bound medical books filled the shelf behind him. Pictures of his family sat up there, too. Why doesn't his son have cancer? Why Dean?

Mom kept clasping and unclasping her purse. Daddy's hands tapped the doctor's desk, the arms of the chair, his lap.

"...And then there's the issue of insurance. Mrs. Habersham can answer your questions and give you the appropriate forms to complete."

"I don't care about the insurance, Doctor," Daddy stated. "I just want my son healthy."

“Of course, but I’ve seen families go broke by neglecting the financial aspects of this undertaking. Insurance will not cover everything, and all facets must be considered in maintaining the primary objective: making sure Dean is comfortable and reassured as possible.”

“What now? What is the treatment plan?” Mom urged.

“That depends on the type of leukemia Dean has.”

“There are different types?”

“Many, but the origins are the same. Leukemia is a cancer of the spongy tissue comprising bone marrow. The diseased marrow floods the body with abnormal, immature white blood cells called, ‘blasts.’ These blasts do not perform the infection fighting functions of healthy white cells, but they reproduce at an astonishing rate. Also, the production of oxygen-carrying red blood cells is decreased. And platelets, which form clots to stem bleeding is curtailed. That’s why you noticed the bruise on Dean’s shoulder blade.”

“What bruise?” I asked, looking over at Mom.

“I’ll tell you later, Candice. What’s next, Doctor?” she asked.

“Determining the type of leukemia. This requires a bone marrow aspiration, which we will do today. Also, more blood needs to be drawn and we’re going to take a chest x-ray. Within the next few days we’ll do a spinal tap to determine if any cancerous cells are present in the spinal column. If so, we’ll need to combat them before they damage the central nervous system.”

“Wait! Stop!” Daddy insisted. “What...? What is a bone marrow aspiration?”

“A method of harvesting marrow and determining what percentage of white blood cells is abnormal.”

“Oh Jesus. And you do this with what, a needle?”

“Yes.”

“We have to be in that room with him Doctor,” Daddy said laying his hands on the doctor’s desk.

“I encourage it,” Dr Reed stated as he stood up.

“What about me? What can I do?” I asked, grabbing the sleeve of Dr. Reed’s lab coat as he walked by me.

“Candice, your Mom and Dad told me about your close relationship with Dean. He’ll need a hug from you once this is over. In the meantime, you can sit in the waiting room. We have some books there, and a TV.”

“No, I need to see him now, Dr Reed. Mom, Daddy, I need to see Dean now,” I said, turning to them.

Dr. Reed walked us back to Dean’s room where he was dressed in a loose white gown. I rushed over and hugged him, and then stood alone when they took him away. Closing my eyes, I asked his guardian angel to watch over him now. Then I crawled into his hospital bed hugging the clothes Mom had packed in his bag.

“Dean has Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia, otherwise called ALL,” Dr. Reed informed us when the test results came back late that afternoon. “It’s a common form of leukemia in children his age.”

“So, you know how to treat it?” Daddy asked in a hopeful voice.

“Chemotherapy is the method of treatment along with radiation to curb the chance of tumors permeating the spinal column.”

“Jesus Christ,” Daddy muttered, gripping his head.

“What now?” Mom asked. “When does treatment start? How long does it last? I heard about remission, when can we expect him to go into remission?”

“There are three arms of treatment involved in fighting ALL. The first and most intensive is Induction.”

I glanced through the doorway into Dean’s shadowy room, pasted stars glittering above his bed. Sleep was his escape from reality, our escape. Was unconsciousness all we had left to look forward to?

“...And that varies depending on the patient,” the doctor continued. “But the hospital stay ranges between four and twelve weeks.”

“Four to twelve weeks? Why so long?”

“The purpose of Induction is to destroy the maximum number of cancerous cells in the shortest time. Dean must remain hospitalized for treatments and monitoring. The second stage is Consolidation, where he’ll be treated on an outpatient basis. This involves a different stack of drugs to help kill any remaining cancer cells. The last arm is Maintenance, in which low doses of chemo are administered for two to three years.”

The doctor glanced into Dean’s room then back at my parents.

“He’ll sleep through the night. I suggest you go home.”

“Go home? I’m not leaving him here alone Dr. Reed. What if he wakes up? I’m his mother,” she said, pressing her hand to her chest. “He needs his mommy to be here for him.”

“I understand your feelings, Vivian. But I promise Dean will sleep through the night. It’s been a long day and the three of you need some rest, too. Tomorrow morning I’m going to install a catheter in his chest, enabling all medications to be received through a tube rather than intravenously. Also, his blood test revealed low hematocrit, which indicates a diminished level

of red blood cells. I'll be administering Dean's first transfusion in the morning. These are done often so patients get accustomed to them, but I recommend you being here for the first one. It takes a while to dispense a unit of blood. We have TVs in the lounge but experienced parents reserve those in advance. There are board games you can play to occupy his time."

We sat in the empty chapel before going home. Mom kneeled forward to plead. Daddy reached for my hand as we gazed into each other's eyes. I felt like he was searching for something within me, something I did not have. I looked away, afraid of disappointing him.

"Look at me, Candice" he whispered. "I love you. I'm just glad you are okay."

I offered him a broken smile, all I could give. Mom mumbled her prayers while staring at the candles casting shadows on the cream-colored wall.

"I feel like strapping a pillow to my head and laying down right here," Daddy said when we were within stumbling distance of the car.

Daylight had barely broken when we got here but it was dark now. Crickets chirped in the grass and the street lights shined off the windshields of parked cars. The ride home was a silent defeat.

"Tomorrow will be easier," Daddy whispered while tucking me into bed. "Today we didn't know what to expect but, in the morning, you'll go to school, so that should make you feel a little better."

"But Daddy, I don't know what will happen tomorrow, either."

He hugged me to keep me quiet. I held onto him as if he was a life preserver and our world was the ocean at night. Daddy's hugs always knew the answers but now it seemed he was grasping me for the same reason my fingers were clutching him. Mom came later, asking me to pray with her while she sat on my bed. "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name..."

“Dear Lord,” she added, “I know your healing hands embrace Dean as he sleeps. I know our faith lights the path we must follow and the words we must choose. I know you are always present, my Lord. Our hope and faith rests in your hands.”

Those were her words, not mine. So when Mom left I laid in the darkness and picked a fight with God.

“Are you up there?” I asked. “Are you listening? Why did you let Dean get cancer? For years Mom has prayed that you keep our family safe and healthy. So why have you abandoned us now? Why are you punishing Dean? Well fuck you!”

My anger felt energizing. Bold!

“Who needs God?” I asked while lying there. “Why didn’t God abuse some kid whose family doesn’t go to church? Why us? We obey. We pray! But not anymore! I’ll help Dean. It’s like Daddy said the day Dean was born, ‘There are millions of families just like ours but this is us. We have each other and that matters above all.’”

I lay crying and staring at my raised fists in the moonlight. Then I dropped my hands to the blanket and unlocked my fingers. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, God. I didn’t mean it,” I said, thinking about those stories in the bible where He punished people for betraying Him. I take back what I said, God.”

I begged for fear of His wrath, for fear that Dean needed His help and it was my duty to plead for it. I prayed for God to rescue Dean until I couldn’t keep my eyes open any longer.

Chapter Three

“Candice, please get up,” Mom asked.

The sun warmed my eyelids. I was somewhere between being awake and asleep.

“Candice, please. Come on now. We’ve got to be at the hospital in one hour.”

I wasn’t dreaming. Her words reminded me of what the day meant for us, and for Dean.

It was February ninth, 1980. Fourteen months have passed since Dean lay on that examining table for the first time. Since then he has swallowed 2,126 pills, 1,471 teaspoons of syrupy medication and has been stabbed with 347 I.V. sticks. I know this because every dosage, every meal, even every bathroom visit has been recorded.

I was twelve years old and midway through seventh grade now. Dean had turned seven and attended three months of second grade but the sudden vomiting episodes and overall fatigue forced him from school. Now Mom taught him math while he laid under a blanket on the couch, spitting phlegm into a paper cup.

Every day was a clash against time and I was grateful for each uneventful moment. But we’ve been anticipating today’s arrival ever since Dr. Reed had scheduled Dean for another spinal tap, his third in the past fourteen months. I lay in bed shivering, recalling the *I Dream of Jeannie* episode I watched yesterday and wishing I had the power to blink and turn Dean’s cancer into a tickle at the back of his throat.

“Candice, come on, get up.”

It was Daddy’s voice this time. I stumbled out of bed and into my parent’s room and there, on the dresser, were the stack of journals they’ve been keeping since Dean was diagnosed. Along with the dosages of medicine, they were filled with facts about the color of his toes and

fingers and the dates when his hair turned brittle as burnt toast and began falling out. The pages contained amateur drawings of Dean's body surface area which highlighted new blemishes, pockmarks and blisters.

Dean has been in outpatient care for eleven months, with occasional one or two week stints in the hospital. Grandma visits weekly and Daddy has been back at the restaurant since Dean was on his first prescription of Lorazepam, an anti-nausea drug. We all sampled Dean's oral medication so he wouldn't be the only one suffering that metallic punishment. And we learned to stock bags of Nestlé's chocolate morsels, Dean's favorite treat after choking down his meds. Although Mom was aggressively looking for a job before Dean got sick I haven't seen the classified section in over a year. The word "pageant" is also something that hasn't been uttered since Dean's catastrophic diagnosis. Ever since that first trip to the hospital, each morning has felt like another round of Russian roulette. But today was terrifying because we knew what to expect.

"Hi Dean," I whispered, tiptoeing into his bedroom and seeing his fragile right arm slumped over the blanket. His chalky skull sank into the pillow as his mouth lay gaping. His eyes were staring into some abyss, a place I longed to reach so he could hear the words, "I love you."

"Hi honey," Daddy whispered, laying his sturdy hands on my shoulders. "Big day, huh?"

"...Yeah."

"Why don't you get dressed, I'll put Dean's clothes on for him."

"Do you need help?"

"No, Candice. You go get ready. Dean will need your support today."

I staggered to the doorway and turned; watching as Daddy gently folded back the covers and kneeled at Dean's bedside.

"...Hi champ, how are you?"

No response. Dean faded in and out now. I clenched the doorknob to smother my cries.

I heard Daddy crying but was unable to see his face. Tears trickled onto Dean's arm as Daddy fell to his knees, resting his head on Dean's chest.

"I love you son," he cried. "I love you so much. I am sorry for what's happening to you. I feel so guilty, wishing it was me, wishing I had known sooner and gotten you the treatments you needed. How can I help you now, my son? Dear God, please tell me how I can help my boy. Do you see him lying in this bed? Do you see him Lord? He has no hair. He has no eyebrows."

Daddy slid his hand down Dean's leg, able to wrap his fingers around Dean's thigh.

"Dean, you are a boy...and I am so afraid that you will never have the opportunity to be a man. And I know you would be a good man Dean, a gentleman. I hold so many dreams for you, my son. To carry on our family name, for you to one day marry a woman you love and have a son and love him the way I love you. For you and me to play catch, get tickets to a game. I pray for you, my son. I pray for those things I want so selfishly: time with you, for your life to have a future. I want only for you to get better. I would trade places with you in an instant if I could. I've asked God for that. For Him to give me your illness and let me fight this battle for you. There are so many hopes I have for you, Dean. So many I can't even...but I'm so afraid..."

Daddy sobbed into Dean's chest, kissing his scorched lips. Then he sensed that I was there and peered over his shoulder, locking eyes with me. We just stared at each other and cried, sharing our grief from a distance, for a moment.

An hour later Dean was on the table at the hospital having anesthetic ointment applied to his lower back. As we waited to be called, Mom went to the chapel while Daddy and I sat talking with other parents and patients entangled in the same bitter war.

“Hey Candice, want to play Candyland with me?” asked Joshua, a five-year-old boy who I had known since he had a full head of blond hair.

“Not right now Josh, maybe later.”

He threw a juice box into the mouth of a Daffy Duck garbage pail and tottered back to the playroom wearing ankle high socks and a tiny blue bathrobe with the word “slugger” embroidered on the back. I stood and followed him, watching a dozen children with blotchy skulls playing with toy blocks and scribbling on sketch pads. Their giggles were carefree and I wondered if they were too young to understand their limitations.

Sitting in the corner of the playroom I stared out the window at some man lost in thought, either pleading with God or cursing Him. I had seen him earlier buying deodorant in the gift shop. He probably hadn’t gone home in days. Why doesn’t God ease his pain, my family’s pain?

And then I noticed the copper plaque cemented to a brick wall...

A hundred years from now it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in or the kind of car I drove... But my world may be a different place because I was important in the life of a child...

I had read it many times but wondered what truth it contained if the child died before the next sunrise.

“Candice, its time,” Daddy said, extending his hand out to me.

Just like the nurses, our positions were now well rehearsed. Dean had asked that I be there to hold him after that first episode. It was his wish, so Mom and Daddy let me in. I never told them, but I wished they had said no.

Dean spent the next week in the hospital being monitored. He was supposed to be in the maintenance phase of treatment, but the results of his spinal tap indicated the invasion of new blasts in his spinal column. Dr. Reed recommended another Induction phase, requiring a minimum eight-week commitment in the hospital, more bone marrow aspirations, spinal taps and intensified radiation.

That night my father punched a hole in the living room wall.

“Goddamn it! Why is this happening? Why can’t he just get better?”

I heard Daddy wailing in the basement, slugging a steel-faced hammer into his workbench.

“If you have any mercy then take him now, tonight! I can’t let him suffer the massacre of those treatments again! I can’t listen to his agony anymore!”

At first I didn't know who Daddy was yelling at but then I realized, he was screaming his rage up to God.

“Didn't you hear my prayers? Didn't you see me begging in that empty chapel? Have you listened to a word I said? Why have you abandoned my son? Why...?”

I stood before the basement steps petrified, wanting to comfort him but feeling so scared, scared of his words, scared of his rage. Mom was upstairs in emotional lockdown. I hugged myself in the kitchen, alone, hearing Daddy screaming in frustration and cursing Christ, but all I could see was that needle slipping out of Dean's spine.

We brought him home three days later. Daddy carried him into the house as I held his hand. The doorbell rang a few times - kids from the neighborhood stopping by with their parents. They were forced into coming. “We just want to let you know Dean is in our prayers,” the parent would eventually say, pushing a “get well” card at my mother or father. “If there’s anything we can do...”

Get the hell off our porch! I wanted to yell.

What could they possibly do? There was nothing, so what was the risk in asking? They probably forgot about us before reaching the end of our driveway. Jessie and Charlie were the only ones able to coax a smile out of me.

Aside from day trips to the hospital Dean spent the next two months at home in bed, or under a quilt on the couch watching Star Wars. Outside, the flowers bloomed and school was on break for Easter vacation. Bright colors surrounded us, but our house remained dark since the sunlight burned Dean’s sensitive eyes.

His claustrophobic gasps kept me awake at night. I’d lie crying in my own bed asking why he was being punished. Then the night came when I couldn’t take it any longer and I swung my feet to the floor.

“Mind if I sit with you?” I asked, after grabbing some chocolate from the kitchen. A faint moonlight seeped through the curtain as I fed him the pieces of a shattered Easter bunny.

My hands trembled as I leaned into him, wrapping my arms around his skeleton, feeling his bones stabbing the pads of my fingertips. We were cheek to cheek and I felt his crusty lips graze my skin.

“Years ago Mom and Daddy gave me a plastic Easter egg,” I whispered. “When I opened it a baby bunny plopped out and that’s how they told me Mom was pregnant with you.”

His lips puckered tenderly, pushing against my jawbone then falling away. I felt his tears seep into the crease between our cheeks. So gentle it tickled.

“Is my guardian angel taking me up to heaven, Candy?”

Fisting the bed sheet I sat up and gazed into his eyes. “Don't talk like that, Dean. Don't you...”

“I want to fly, Candy. When will my guardian angel help me fly?” he whispered, trying so hard to speak.

I pinched my eyes but could not stop the tears. My hands caressed his bedridden remains.

“Your guardian angel will help you fly someday,” I whispered.

“Where's my angel, Candy... I want to fly now...”

My head thumped hot with sweat. I reached for the box of tissues. Empty. In his top dresser drawer were the necessities: tissues, pills, syrups, plastic teaspoons, needles, thermometer. There should only be socks in here, I thought. I opened a fresh box of tissues and stared at him from a distance. I heard it again, his dire screaming during those bone marrow aspirations, the spinal taps. His skin had withered around his facial bones. Dried blood caked his nostrils, his body convulsed on the mattress.

How many days can he last? I wondered. How many weeks, months? Our prayers went unanswered. Hope abandoned. The part of me that half believes in God begged for Dean's life to be closed.

I kneeled, wiping the tears beneath his eyes. His hands were on the bed, fingers open and palms up, as if awaiting acceptance.

“I see light Candy. Is my guardian angel here like you promised...?”

Coughing up phlegm, I held the tissue to his lips and pinched off the mucous, unable to tell him it was just the moonlight he was seeing.

“Angels Candy... I feel them touching me.”

I stood, refusing to tell him it was my touch he was feeling. Sliding my hand over the contents of his dresser drawer I touched the caps of medicine bottles, the fuzzy gauze, the rolled-up tube of moisturizer, the oral deodorant tablets and bedside drain-bags.

“Candy...where are you? Don’t leave,” he begged, fighting to lift his head up. “Where did the angels go Candy? I want to see angels. Help me...please.”

His words hung in the air like a cold still breath. “Dean...I can’t. How can I...?” I felt the hypodermic and remembered that nurse teaching Mom and Daddy how to inject Dean with his daily dose of Rasburicase so they wouldn’t have to visit the hospital each day. I remembered her warnings about air in the needle and how it could be fatal if it reached the bloodstream. I stood listening to him gag on blood and spit. Dean! I cried out in a silent shudder of pain. “I want you to see angels.”

“Angels,” he mumbled. “Help me Candy. Where is my guardian angel?”

“Your guardian angel is here, Dean. She’s right here with you...”

Frantic hands peeled back the wrapper and removed the safety cap. I remembered Daddy begging God to spare his son. I thought of the hours Mom spent in that chapel. But God had quit on us. Sleep was Dean’s salvation. “I want you to sleep now, Dean. You deserve to sleep now.”

Tiptoeing through the darkness I stepped into the faint moonlit glow peering through the window.

“Candy...I see the light. I see angels.”

His eyes convinced me of what must be done. I drew back the plunger, unsure if the tube was filling with anything at all.

“I love you Dean. No more pain, right? Just angels...?”

“Angels...” he whispered. “No more... I love you Candy...”

The needle pierced his vein. I pushed the plunger with my thumb. Tears leaked onto my hands, mixing with his seeping blood.

“The angels are here. I love you Dean... I love you Dean...” I kept repeating.

“Angels Candy... They’re here...”

“You’re free to fly now. No more fear... No more pain... No more...”

“I love you Candy...I love you...”

I kissed his blistered lips, skimmed my hand over his face, his bald skull, the nakedness above his eyes. And then I ran headlong into denial, down the stairs and out into the night, away, away. Refusing to look over my shoulder I clutched the syringe in my fist. Blocks removed I flung my hand at the sewer grates. Then I cried, staring at the clouds before running home and collapsing into bed.

Wind rolled through my window. Sunlight. Birds chirped in the bright morning sky.

“Candice.”

Mom and Daddy were sitting on my bed crying.

“What is it?” I asked. “What happened?”

“...Honey... Dean died in his sleep last night.”

I held my head with clenched fists. Daddy cradled me in his arms, sobbing into my shoulder. Mom closed her eyes and reached for my hands.

“Get away!” I screamed, recalling my nightmare of killing Dean.

“I know what you’re feeling,” she whispered, taking my head into her trembling hands.
“I know how much you loved your brother. How much you will miss him.”

Her words were mute as I rubbed my thumb; the one I dreamed had pushed the plunger down on that syringe. Then I buried my crying face in Daddy’s chest and drove that nightmare from my mind.

“I love you honey,” they both whispered.

I wanted to say I love you too, but all I could picture was the hallucination of that needle in my hand, and how our lives had become a poisoned fairytale.

Chapter Four

It was December eighth, 1980; almost nine months after Dean had died. Throughout the world people were burning candles and paying tribute, but it had nothing to do with my brother. John Lennon was killed outside his apartment in New York City and it seemed as if everyone was heartbroken, everyone, except my parents.

They were sitting at the kitchen table debating if we should visit Disney World for Christmas. The conversation was so stupid I didn't know whether to laugh out loud or cry in my mashed potatoes.

"How can you think about going to Disney World, Don?" Mom asked as she shoved away her untouched plate of meatloaf. "We've got a milk crate stuffed with medical bills in our bedroom. Dr. Reed warned us this could happen."

"He warned us to make sure the insurance was handled Vivian, and it was. What were we supposed to do after it ran out, 'Say sorry Dean, but Met Life cut us off and Mom and I don't feel like dipping into our savings.' I know we owe the hospital a fortune but we could use a getaway, too."

"Can I go inside? I want to see what happened to John Lennon."

"No Candice. This is a family decision and we need you here," Daddy replied, poking the table with his finger.

"Then why is no one asking for my opinion?" I mumbled, stuffing my fork in the hill of mashed potatoes and piling a heaping mound into my mouth.

I should tell them about my dream of killing Dean. That would shut them up. I'd confess it if I had the nerve, but I couldn't admit having that nightmare, not after Mom interrogated me about the hypodermic wrapper she found next to Dean's dresser the morning after he died.

"Where did this come from?" she had asked as I watched her hanging Dean's pants with a perfect crease.

“Daddy must have dropped it,” I said, blinking back my tears.

“What do you mean your father dropped it?” I remembered her saying.

“Why are you hanging Dean’s pants?” I screamed back at her. “He died last night. Forget the stupid pants. Pick up his picture instead!”

“I asked you a question, Candice,” she had replied.

“Daddy gave Dean a shot last night because he was so nauseous. It was dark in here. He must’ve dropped the wrapper and never noticed.”

She didn’t respond that morning. Instead, she glared at me for a second then grabbed the hamper in Dean’s closet and went to wash his clothes.

Mom and Daddy’s debate about Disney World continued. I couldn’t listen anymore so I called Jessie. Her parents had taken her out of school for a weeklong family vacation to Washington D.C. and she just got back. “Feel like coming over and hearing me complain?” I asked.

“Meet me outside in fifteen,” she said laughing. “I’ll ride my bike over.”

Upstairs I tried scrubbing the redness from my eyes but it was hopeless. Gripping my head in my hands I tried grappling with the fact that this wasn’t some temporary crisis I’d have to wait out. My stomach clenched in knots as I spit a liquid stream of buttery mashed potatoes into the toilet. Collapsing against the wall a minute later I sat wiping my mouth. Somehow the vomiting acted as a tranquilizer, erasing my thoughts for one brief glorious moment.

Then I heard Mom downstairs still talking about the money. That’s when I spotted her Estee Lauder face lotion on the sink. What a hypocrite. She complains about the bills but can justify buying this? Out of spite I squirted the tube into the toilet and left the empty container on the counter for her to get angry about later.

Storming downstairs I headed straight outside and sat in one of the iron chairs on the front porch while waiting for Jessie.

“Hey Candice!” she yelled, cruising down the hill on her ten speed with the wind in her curly hair.

“How was your trip?” I asked as she dropped the kickstand on my driveway. “Did you see The White House?”

“Yeah, but I’ve seen it a million times on TV. I shared a hotel room with my brothers and they wouldn’t stop farting. On the ride down my father challenged us to see who could come up with the longest list of square food. The contest lasted all week. It was the best part of the trip. Every morning at the Howard Johnson’s we’d study the buffet line. At restaurants we read the entire menu for anything that might be served square. But all I could think of was Wendy’s hamburgers.”

“There’s White Castle’s too,” I reminded her. “French toast before they’re cut it into triangles. Most sandwiches. Brownies, meatloaf, Aunt Jemima waffles, Lorna Doones -”

“Okay, okay. Jesus, the contest is over, Candice. So, what’s going on?” she asked, resting her feet on the porch railing

“My parents are fighting about whether or not we should go to Disney World.”

“Why? Does one of them have something against Mickey Mouse?” she asked with a laugh.

“No,” I said, smiling at her. “They’re debating if we can afford it.”

“So what? All parents fight about money. Why do you think I shared a room with my smelly brothers instead of getting one for myself? You should’ve seen my stupid father at the mint, you know, the place where they print money. He was drooling almost as bad as the time he saw your mother in her bikini. You got any gum?” she asked with her hand out.

“No. I was thinking though, maybe I could get a fake ID and start buying lottery tickets. If I could just win The Pick 6 I’d shove a big check at my parents and say, ‘Here you go, problem solved. Now shut up.’”

“Yeah, but winning the lottery is tough. It’s hard enough winning the 50/50 raffle at the church carnival,” she said, implying that I needed a better plan.

“It’s not just the money Jessie, it’s my mom. Do you know she hasn’t cried once since Dean died? Sometimes I look at her with such hate because I want her to feel something. But other times I’m so sad for her I can barely take it. She needs help, but I don’t know how to reach her.”

“You think she’s that sad? I mean, I’m sure she’s upset but whenever I see her she’s smiling.”

“She’s advertising, Jessie. I think she’s scared to feel anything at all. All she does is pray as if Dean is sitting up there with God and the two of them are playing Nintendo or something. My father’s the opposite. He thinks God is our Judas. He cries and talks about Dean all the time but won’t give God the satisfaction of stepping foot in church. He just works day and night trying to pay off the bills. I want to help somehow.”

“I know what’ll cheer you up,” Jessie said, adjusting herself in the chair. “It’s another game we played on the drive to D.C. If a movie star was going to play you, who would it be?”

“Jessie, I don’t...”

“Come on Candice, it’s fun. My father chose Robert Redford, even though he looks more like Nixon. I picked Barbara Streisand. She could use a nose job, but I liked her in Funny Girl. And she can sing. So, who would play you?”

“I don’t know, Brooke Shields. My mom says I look just like her, only with fairer skin.”

“Yeah, but how about picking someone with talent, like Sally Field?”

“The Flying Nun? She’s too old. But I liked her in Smokey and the Bandit.”

“Who would play your mom?”

“That’s easy. Mary Tyler Moore. Did you see that movie Ordinary People?”

Over an hour passed as we assigned celebrities to play teachers at school and kids in our class.

“Oh my God! It’s ten o’clock!” Jessie shouted after looking at her watch. “I gotta go. Dallas is on! Tonight, they’re revealing who shot JR!”

“I can’t believe you watch that show,” I said, laughing as she hopped on her bike.

“I can’t believe you don’t! I’ll see you tomorrow, Brooke,” she yelled while pedaling down my driveway and into the street.

Stepping back inside I was laughing at Jessie, but then I heard my parents still talking and I didn’t know what to do.

“...It’s not only financial, who’s going to manage the restaurant?” Mom asked. “We can’t afford an increase in labor costs, Don.”

I marched into the kitchen purposely interrupting them. “Remember when Dean first got sick and we took him to that Disney on Ice Show at Madison Square Garden?” I said, pulling up a chair. “We had a great time and forgot about everything for one night. Maybe going to Disney World will do that for us now. Don’t you think?”

“Yes, I do Candice, and that’s why we’re going,” Daddy said. “We’ll even drive down there. It’ll help us save money on airfare and give us a chance to see the country face to face. How about it, Vivian? Come on, if not for us then for Candice,” Daddy whispered, even though I was sitting right there.

Mom looked at me and for the first time I could’ve sworn I saw tears in her eyes. Let them out Mom, please, I wanted to beg her. You’ll feel so much better. But she just clamped down on her back teeth and nodded okay.

The next few weeks passed in a blur and on a bitter cold Sunday morning four days before Christmas we pulled down the icy driveway and left for Florida.

Mom sat in the front holding a Styrofoam cup of coffee in her perfectly manicured fingers. They looked so peaceful but this was our first Christmas without Dean and I knew it took everything she had to keep from squeezing that cup and screaming her agony up to God.

We've got eighteen hours in this car so let's talk about Dean, I felt like saying. But instead something safer came out. "Hey Mom, if a movie star was going to play you, who would it be?"

"I don't know, Candice. Can we just enjoy the quiet for a little while?" she asked, looking over her shoulder at me.

"Sure, we can play the game later Mom," I said touching her.

As the miles rolled on though, I tipped my head into the corner and passed out for a while.

Daddy wanted to see the country but I wondered why. He had bought me a Polaroid One Step but the sights were boring. All we saw was the snow melting away as we headed south; and about a thousand billboards for those Shoney's Restaurants.

At 9:00 p.m. we coasted into a Red Roof Inn somewhere in South Carolina. They only had rooms with queen beds which was great because the three of us would never fit and there was no way Daddy would let me sleep on the floor. He got a second room and asked if I'd mind sleeping alone. I was smiling as he handed me the key.

The air in my room was thick and musty and reminded me of Jessie's parent's dark bedroom with the wrinkled sheets and piles of dirty laundry on the floor. After Mom checked on me I pulled off my clothes, got into a steaming hot shower and fought the wrapper off that tiny bar of soap. The shower curtain was clear plastic and I spotted my naked reflection in the mirror. With my hair pasted against my head and the water running between my breasts it seemed as if I was staring at a stranger. My pubic hair was thicker than the last time I looked. I touched down there. It felt crunchy even when wet.

The hot water ran cold after a few minutes so I wrapped myself in a towel, turned on the TV and collapsed on the bed.

While flipping channels I saw Christopher Atkins spearing fish in his loincloth. Brooke Shields was staring at his tan muscles from a distance. My towel fell open. Stretched out on

that blue bedspread I listened to them whispering in the jungle. I watched them getting naked in the sand. Then...peering down at my own naked body I saw my hand gliding circles around my belly button. Seeing Brooke on that island made my craving rise in waves. She was who I chose to portray me. My nipples hardened. My toes curled. My body stirred from a coma I never knew existed. Opening my legs, I sensed the wetness between.

Is this bad? Can God see me? I heard Dean's voice: I want to fly... Help me see the angels, Candy... That needle in my fist... Mom collapsing at Dean's funeral. Daddy screaming about a four-foot casket.

"Not now," I begged, fondling my nipples with bold strokes and pushing those images away.

Gazing at the TV I watched them making love on the ground. Closing my eyes I listened to their moaning, feeling my silky patch of hair, my dew. A breath leapt from within. I inserted my finger, slid it out, massaging my layers. Blood rushed between my legs. Everything swelled. My left hand fisted the bedspread. Don't ruin this. I rubbed more. They made love before me. "Oh God," I groaned, jerking my back off the bed. More fingers. Faster strokes. Eyes clenched. Sliding my finger inside again I rubbed up and down then in circles, discovering what felt best. My toes were stiff as my back jerked off the bed and my ass clenched. "Oh! Oh my God!" A series of sweet explosions erupted within. "Oh Jesus!" I moaned, stroking faster and faster. They lay naked together on the TV. I kept moaning and touching myself. I heard others moaning. "Oh shit. My parents!" Stiffening at the sound of their voices I leapt off the bed and switched the channel to The Jefferson's. Lying back down I let the minutes pass as I drifted to sleep, grateful that Dean wasn't the last thought on my mind. The best part is; I don't remember what was.

Mom took the steering wheel the next morning. I was in the backseat with the fast food wrappers and empty soda cans but I was on that bed again. I never knew the power of pleasure. How it could overcome guilt, doubt, even fear.

Hours later we cruised off I-4 and into Orlando.

“Guess what,” Daddy said. “I’ve got a big surprise! I didn’t want to say anything until we got here but we’re staying at the Polynesian Resort, not the Ramada like I told you. The place is paradise! Here, take a look,” he said, pushing a brochure at me.

Within minutes we turned onto Seven Seas Drive, the main entrance to the hotel. Tiki lights and lush palm trees framed both sides of road. A bellman in khaki shorts and a Hawaiian shirt hurried to take our luggage as if he was thrilled to see us.

“Your room is in the Tonga wing of the hotel,” the bellman said smiling as he led us through the lobby.

Opening the door to a hotel room was always a surprise. Sometimes I got disappointed, like at so many of the pageant hotels Mom and I stayed in years ago, but this one was great. There were two beds, a table with chairs and a TV hidden inside its own piece of furniture. Bamboo poles lined the walls and a ceiling fan made from dried palms leaves turned above us. Coconut scented soaps and shampoo sat in a woven basket on the bathroom sink.

“I’ve got to say, it is relaxing here,” Mom sighed after the bellman had left. “The warm air alone is terrific. Candice, will you join me for a swim? It’ll feel great to take a dip in December, don’t you think?” she asked while unpacking her bathing suit.

Mom came out of the bathroom a moment later in her banana yellow one piece with a red sarong cinched at her waist. “Aren’t you coming, Candice? I’d really enjoy your company.”

“What about you, Daddy?” I asked, turning towards him as he collapsed on the bed. “Do you feel like swimming with us?”

“No, I’m gonna grab a snooze, Candice.”

I had hoped the three of us would do something together but...

“I’m going down to the pool, Candice,” Mom said as she watched Daddy peel off his sweaty socks and toss them to the floor. Grab your suit and meet me down there. Okay?”

I nodded and watched as the door slammed closed behind her.

“You don’t feel like swimming, do you?” Daddy said while pulling a pillow out from under the bedspread.

“I don’t know. I just...” Why aren’t we doing something as a family, I wanted to say. But instead I told him I was going to check out the hotel.

“Don’t forget to take a key,” he said as I headed towards the door

After grabbing my camera I walked down the hallway and smelled Mom – Chanel No. 5. Since Dean died that’s all she’s been to me: a lingering scent, something beautiful and always there but not in the way I needed.

I visited the Trader Jack’s Gift Shop and took pictures of the giant gingerbread village displayed in the lobby for Christmas. Then I got purposely lost in the maze of bamboo-lined hallways before finding myself in a gigantic ballroom where waiters were setting up for a party.

Some of the dining tables were draped with fancy white cloths and sparkling glasses, but others were stripped bare. Peeking beneath one of the elegant tables I saw that it was just a masquerade. The scarred wood was concealed beneath. Table makeup, I thought.

Stepping back I took a picture of a table decorated with shiny place settings and another one which hadn’t received any attention. The truth is never more than one layer removed. I saw it at the pageants. I see it with Mom all the time. There wasn’t a single day after Dean died that she sat around the house in hair curlers and a bathrobe. Even if she had nowhere to go she looked stunning. The house was always immaculate, too. After Dean’s funeral she hired a team of cleaning women to scour every room, as if our sorrows could be sanitized. But I knew she was trying to create a sense of order as life caved in around her.

Outside I saw her lounging in a chair under the amber lights of the Seven Seas Lagoon. The creamy heels of her feet were tucked between the plastic straps of the lounge chair. I inched closer, unnoticed. Sometimes her beauty surprised even me. But during moments like this when she thought no one was looking I saw how fragile she really was.

The next morning we pushed through the turnstiles to the Magic Kingdom with thousands of other people and were mesmerized by the distractions.

“This place is incredible!” I shouted, seeing the colorful buildings and shops. “There’s the Fire Station, the Plaza Ice Cream Parlor and look, that’s The Main Street Barber Shop! They’re giving real haircuts in there!”

“Yeah, but you’ll probably come out looking like Minnie Mouse,” Daddy joked.

“Hey, check out the Mickey and Minnie cutouts! We can stick our faces in there and take pictures. Come on, let’s do it!”

“How about taking a picture with the real thing?” Mom said smiling, which I was so happy to see. “They’re standing in front of Cinderella’s Castle.”

“Okay!” I said, dragging my parents over.

Together we squeezed between the real life Mickey and Minnie as a park photographer snapped pictures of us with his camera, and then with mine.

“This one turned out great!” I said, watching the picture develop in my hand.

“Look at how big your smile is Mom! You haven’t showed that many teeth in years!”

“How about we head to the Haunted Mansion?” Daddy said. “Its right over there, past the Dumbo Flying Elephant ride.”

We marched to the Haunted Mansion passing by Disney workers wearing red and white striped shirts and carrying long sticks with bags of rainbow cotton candy dangling from them. All around me I smelled that cotton candy being spun, cookies baking and most of all, popcorn popping at little red wagons parked all over the place.

After riding through the Haunted Mansion we stood in line for Pirates of the Caribbean, The Mad Tea Cup Party and Peter Pan’s Flight in Fantasyland.

“Aren’t these rides great?” I said to Mom and Daddy.

They both nodded, knowing I meant that it felt as if our tragedy happened years ago.

After getting off the submarine on 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea we rushed to what I knew would be the best ride in the park - Space Mountain.

Red lights throbbed on the tracks as two space cars were hurled through a starry universe. Planets glowed and comets flashed as if they were crashing through the Milky Way. The line was long and winding but we moved forward as the floor glowed with futuristic grays and blues and gave the impression that we were walking on the moon. Finally we entered the Outer Space Area, where astronauts were loaded onto the rocket for their ride into the galaxy.

"Mom, can you believe it!" I shouted when the group in front of us all climbed aboard the waiting rocket. "We're first in line now. That means we've got the front seat on the next rocket! That's pure luck! Do you want it?"

"Oh no, Candice," she said, watching one of the rockets flying through space. "I didn't realize how high this ride goes. I don't think I can do this, Candice. You know I'm afraid of heights."

"But it's dark in here Mom, so you'll never even see how high we are."

"I may not be able to see anything but I'll feel everything,"

"You can do it, Mom," I said, grabbing her hand. "Do it for me. For us, okay? Please. It'll be fun, I promise."

From her expression I knew I'd convinced her so I stood with my fingers gripping the handrails as the next rocket screeched into the terminal. "Hurry up," I mumbled, eager for the people to get off so I could get onboard.

After they stepped out and the conductor gave the okay I leapt into the front and clutched the safety rails.

"Mom, Daddy, are you behind me?" I asked, looking over my shoulder.

"We're right here Candice," Mom's voice shook as she gripped the handle.

"I'm right behind Mom!" Daddy said with excitement.

The rocket jerked away from the station then launched us through a tunnel of pulsing blue lights. The chains were clinking beneath us and each one made me more and more nervous as we got closer to that giant free fall.

“Are you ready, Candice?” Daddy yelled. “We’re about to take the plunge!”

“I’m ready!” I screamed with my hands in the air.

“Here we go!” Daddy shouted as we plummeted into a black hole.

Feeling the wind pulling my cheeks back I screamed at the top of my lungs while gripping the railing then throwing my hands in the air. “Oh my God!” I yelled, as the sudden turn swung me in my seat. “Raise your hands up Mom! This is the best!”

“I can’t! When will this be over?” she screamed in a high pitched voice.

“Oh my God look out! Asteroids are flying!”

Dropping my hands I grabbed the safety rails as another turn tossed me to the side. Brushing my hair from my eyes I looked down at the flashing red and blue lights, sensing that a deep drop was coming.

“This is awesome!” I screamed as we soared up another peak then nose-dived into a second tunnel of flashing lights.

Moments later, after a final plunge, the rocket wheeled to the right and screeched to a sudden halt at the terminal. I wanted to stay on for another ride but people were waiting for me to get off so I jumped out and got on the people mover, which led to the exit.

“That was the best ride so far! Let’s go again!” I shouted, looking back at Mom and Daddy.

“You two can go, I’ll be more than happy to wait on solid ground,” Mom said, adjusting the collar on her white button down shirt. “That was petrifying.”

“We’ll go again later Candice. Are you enjoying yourself, though?” Daddy asked.

“Oh yeah, thanks for taking this trip Mom,” I said, giving her a kiss as we stepped out of the dark Space Mountain terminal and squinted in the bright Florida sun. “Thank you Daddy.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, squeezing us both in his arms. “We needed this. I just wish Dean was with us. He had a ball at Great Adventure that time, and he would’ve sure loved it here.”

“Especially the Pirates of the Caribbean ride,” I said. “He always liked dressing up as a pirate for Halloween so that would’ve been his favorite.”

By the end of the day I had taken at least two dozen pictures. After watching the Magic Parade of Lights make its way down Main Street the three of us collapsed back at the hotel, exhausted from the day.

The next morning we went swimming in the Seven Seas Lagoon and stretched out at the pool where I laughed at potbellied husbands drooling over mom as she relaxed in a lounge chair.

On Christmas Eve the three of us were back at the Magic Kingdom and didn’t even need a map. We visited our favorite rides and watched The Magic Parade of Lights for the second time. Daddy took us to a Polynesian Luau on Christmas night and the next day we visited the ocean and had lunch at a real beach clambake.

On our last day Daddy and I went deep sea fishing. I knew it was something he would’ve loved to do with Dean so I offered to be his partner. Mom stayed back at the hotel to lay by the pool.

Daddy was hoping to catch something huge but after seeing a big hairy man struggling to reel in his fish I thought if something bit my line it might just pull me overboard. The only thing we ended up catching though, was a case of the giggles. One of the ship’s workers marched by us complaining that some asshole had clogged the only bathroom on board.

“So was it you who backed up the toilet, Candice?” Daddy asked, nudging me.

“Get out of here,” I laughed. “Maybe you did. I hear you at home with your newspapers on Sunday mornings after eating your bacon and mayonnaise sandwiches. Mom says you could retille the bathroom with how long you spend in there.”

When we got back Daddy told Mom about the big one that got away. She just shook her head at his dumb joke and suggested that we pack for the trip home.

On the drive back to New Jersey I thought about the rides, The Magic Parade of Lights and looked at all the pictures I'd taken. But most of all, I thought of Jessie and Charlie. I missed them so much and couldn't wait to tell them about my trip.

"Jessie is over at Charlie's, Candice," Mrs. Monroe told me minutes after we got home. "If you're going there tell Jessie I need her home by six. My sister and her husband are coming for dinner."

After hanging up I grabbed the two T-shirts I got in the hotel gift shop and hurried out the backdoor over to Charlie's. For the next couple of hours we played ping pong and I told them all about my trip.

"Sounds like things are better with your parents," Jessie said.

"Don't jinx me. They seem happy for the first time since Dean got sick."

At a few minutes before 6:00 Jessie and I cut behind my neighbor's house and stomped through the foot of snow covering my backyard. "You want to stay for dinner?" I asked. "We'll probably get a stromboli and antipasto from my dad's restaurant."

"I can't, my stupid aunt and uncle are coming over. Remember? You told me."

"Oh yeah."

"Anyway, thanks for the shirt, Candice. I'll call you tomorrow morning. We can watch *The Price Is Right* together over the phone."

"Okay Jessie. I'll talk with you tomorrow."

On the back steps I stood between the screen and inside doors, balancing myself on that tiny ledge as I kicked off my snow covered boots. I left them out there then stepped inside, smelling the cinnamon scented candle burning on the fireplace mantle. In the kitchen Mom was setting the table for dinner. The scent of that candle made me feel cozy and I hugged her. Daddy walked in just that minute.

“I caught you,” he declared, holding our dinner in his right hand.

He put the pizza box down and joined us. I held onto both of them for longer than expected, but they were patient with me. Then we grabbed our seats and started pulling apart the slices of pizza and spooning antipasto onto our plates. Life wasn’t perfect. Dean wasn’t there so it never would be, but things were better and a tiny part of me was learning to settle for that. I think my parents were, too.

Chapter Five

Late that night I stumbled out of bed to use the bathroom. The kitchen light was on downstairs. I heard Mom and Daddy talking. Holding my pee, I tiptoed down the steps in my pajamas and bare feet then sat on the stairs and listened. Papers were ruffling. Their sighs of frustration carried across rooms. I heard my mother giving him numbers; then I realized they were dollar amounts. My father's fingers were hitting the keys of his calculator. More sighs.

"Where are the medical bills?" Daddy asked.

"In our room," Mom replied. "Leave them there. The hospital can get in line. Plus Candice is sleeping. I don't want to wake her. She doesn't need to hear about this tonight."

"You're right. Goddamn it though, Vivian. I never imagined that the 20% of Dean's treatments not covered by insurance would add up to that much. And the restaurant now..."

I heard the chair creak as Daddy leaned back. I pictured him rubbing his forehead with a pen still trapped between his fingers. He always held a pen when using his calculator. I squeezed my legs together, refusing to get up and miss a single word.

"How did business drop off this much, Don? Weren't you watching it?"

"Yes. November was pretty good, considering. October, too. And December is usually great for us, Vivian. School parties, people picking up dinner on their way home from Christmas shopping. But we still haven't recovered. I wasn't working as much while Dean was sick. Quality went down and labor costs went up. I fell behind in the payments. I've been trying to catch up but haven't gotten the traction yet. You can blame Stefano's. Ever since opening their doors last year I've lost thirty, even forty percent of my regulars. Maybe I should call Phil Abbott at the bank; see about refinancing the loan to keep the heat on."

"No, borrowing more money isn't a solution. It's a bandage. We'll trade past due bills for current ones. Layoffs Don, that's the fastest and surest way to save money now."

“Cutting labor will save money but I need more than two hands, Vivian. I can lose the cleaning crew, do the linens here at home but it all can’t be DIY. I’ve been spreading eighty hours over six days a week since I’m not sure when. I can buckle down and up that to ninety over seven but still, I need someone to make the lasagna, take phone orders, work the register, greet the walk-ins and pick-ups, not to mention bussing tables and doing dishes.”

I heard my mother pacing, then filling the kettle with water. Silence followed. Smoke from a freshly lit cigarette drifted into the hallway near the stairs. I wanted to run down and help but we both had our secrets to keep.

“I know you’ve got people that have been there a while,” I heard Mom saying as she pulled up a chair. I know Jimmy is a great employee and basically ran the place while we were living at Chilton Hospital, but we’ve got to think about our own livelihood now. I’m not being selfish, just practical. It’s our business. It’s our name on the loan, not to mention the mortgage on this house and enough medical bills up there to bankrupt a small country.”

“Fine, so I lay everyone off. Then what, Vivian? What do I do then? Who’s going to give me some relief?”

“I will. Candice will after school. We’re a family Don. All oars in the water now. Let’s put Stefano’s in a pinch and steal some of our business back. How much do we need to cover our expenses at both addresses each month?”

“Fifteen Grand. That’s gross. That’s 500.00 a day,” Daddy clarified. “It may not sound like much but a pizza only costs \$8.00. My lasagna dinner is \$7.00. Where are the receipts for last Monday,” I heard him ask, fumbling for papers on the table. “Last Monday we took in \$152.37.”

“Okay, so cutting labor will close that gap. It’s a sinking ship; we have to toss everyone overboard in order to survive. I feel bad Don, I do, but it’s our only option.”

I heard Mom take the kettle off the back burner. “What am I doing making more coffee. I need to go to bed, I heard her say as she walked out of the kitchen. With the two of us there

morning, noon and night the quality will go back up. We'll reestablish our reputation, offer specials, expand our own menu and rebuild the business. In six months we'll be off probation and can rehire some people. That's what we'll do. Come on, let's go to bed. Tomorrow will be something."

Hurrying back up the steps I ducked into my room and under the covers. I knew my parents would tell me the truth tomorrow, they'd have to. But I wanted to give them the chance to do it on their terms.

After my mom went to bed I used the bathroom then sat at the desk in my room hitting the keys on my own calculator, desperate for a solution.

The next morning I was up before the sun and spotted my Curious George Doll sitting on the shelf. I hadn't noticed it in years but for some reason carried him with me as I peeked into Mom and Daddy's room. His side was untouched. There wasn't even a dent in his pillow. The light was still on downstairs.

Daddy was sitting at the table. His back was facing me as I walked towards the kitchen. Then he glanced over his shoulder, unshaven and with finger tracks through his hair. Papers had exploded everywhere. Daddy's eyes were bloodshot. I'd heard about people being in the red and assumed that's where the term came from. He gave me a hug and invited me to sit down. I knew this was it. I was ready. I had my own set of numbers; ones that I was sure would give him hope.

He explained the situation and even admitted that going to DisneyWorld wasn't the best idea financially, but that we all needed a getaway. I told him it was a brilliant idea. Then I showed him my latest report card which had all A's, plus one B.

"I can help you Daddy," I assured him, "We're a family. We'll all row this boat together," I said, echoing Mom's words from last night. "I can work late at the restaurant and come in everyday after school. I'm doing well, you see?" I said pointing at my grades again, "so don't worry about me. I'll be fine. We'll be fine Daddy," I insisted, looking into his tired eyes

and taking his hands in mine. That's when I felt the raised scars on his fingers from getting burned working that pizza oven. His hard work had to pay off. He deserved that much.

He talked more, told me his plan even though I didn't understand a lot of it - how he charges \$8.00 for a pizza but it costs him \$3.50 to make and if he could somehow lower that cost to \$2.75 or even \$3:00 it would make a huge difference. My math was much simpler.

"Your pizza oven fits five pies at once, right Daddy?" I said, looking up at him. "At 8.00 dollars a pie that's \$40.00 when the oven is filled. If we keep the oven filled 13 times a day that's \$520.00 I told him. That's all we need to do. You see? We can do that! And I'm not even counting your lasagna or stuffed shells that everyone loves so much. When Mommy wakes up lets tell her the good news, okay Daddy? We'll tell her we've got the answer and that she doesn't have to worry anymore."

Daddy smiled and hugged me, took my head into his chest and held it there longer than I expected, but I was patient with him. "We'll be okay, I promise you, Candice," he whispered. "We'll make it through this together."

Until that moment I believed we would make it together. He was my father and I needed to believe him. But his scarred hands were trembling against me. I felt like Half-Pint on *Little House on the Prairie* but my daddy didn't seem to have the answers like Michael Landon always did.

I watched him pick up the Curious George doll I had placed on the table. I read the expression on his face. He was remembering the day he gave it to me, the day Dean was born. Since then our lives have been ruined but that stuffed animal was still smiling and wearing the same little yellow shirt.

For two days Mom and Daddy continued pouring over our expenses. I spied on Daddy while he was on the phone with Mr. Abbott pleading for lower payments, a grace period, anything.

“I’ve been doing business with you for fifteen years Phil,” he begged. “You know how hard it’s been for my family these past few years. You know about my son. Please Phil.”

Daddy was shaking, his voice fraught with panic. I hated Mr. Abbott for making my father beg.

January first was two days away. In the past Daddy was closed on New Year’s Eve but this year he couldn’t take any chances so he, Mom and me were in there working while everyone else was at home watching Dick Clark on TV. Mom handled the pick-up orders and answered the phone. I worked in the back kitchen filling lasagna orders and boiling about a million pounds of spaghetti. Daddy made the pizzas and manned the oven. He let go of all the part-time employees but didn’t tell Jimmy that his head was also going in the cheese grater. Jimmy’s birthday was New Year’s Eve and Daddy just didn’t have the heart to fire him yet. The only other people with us were the delivery guys since they worked solely on tips.

At midnight we heard the horns honking. Suddenly, it was 1981. I had a band-aid on my right index finger, sweat stains under my armpits and marinara sauce stuck in my hair. I didn’t mind one bit. My parents and I, we were greeting the new year with a fight. When I heard those honking horns I was cleaning a sauce bucket in the three basin sink and started crying. When Dean was sick I had a purpose. We all did. Now we did again. The three of us were united, grasping at hope just like we had when Dean was fighting. But this time the circumstances were under our control.

Daddy came into the kitchen, took the scrub brush from my hand and hugged me. He was sweating and stunk of pepperoni and onions. I squeezed him close.

“I love you, Candice,” he whispered while kissing my forehead. “I don’t know how many pies we sold tonight but let me tell you something,” he said, gazing into my eyes, “that oven was filled a lot more than thirteen times.” Then he smiled and winked at me. “Right now, it is a Happy New Year.”

He walked back towards the pizza oven. "I believe in your Daddy. I really do," I mumbled with my hands wrapped in my apron, tears in my eyes and a slice of ham stuck to my sneaker.

Mom came in next and kissed me. She spotted that piece of ham, bent over and threw it in the trash. Despite the nine hours on her feet she could've posed for pictures. Only her finger nails were chipped from punching the cash register keys. "I'm proud of you Candice," she told me. "I admire the strength in you."

Then she poured herself a cup of water from the soda machine and took a seat in the dining room. Things were suddenly quiet. The oven was empty and the phone stopped. We'd close when no one else called or came inside. Daddy splashed his face with cold water he took from the soda machine then sat across from mom and took her right foot in his hands.

"Don't, my feet smell," she said to him, obviously embarrassed.

"In good times and bad, right Vivian?" Daddy joked as removed her sock and shoe then began massaging her foot.

They talked and I listened from around the corner, an unhealthy new habit of mine.

"It's 1981," Daddy said, kneading her foot with his thumbs. "It was a good night. This is our fresh start, Vivian."

"My God, I hope so," she said, shaking her head as I peeked.

I knew Mom was exhausted. I was, too. But I was afraid that all she saw was no end in sight. It was too much like sitting in limbo at the hospital when Dean was sick, not sure what the next minute, hour or day would bring. She said she admired my strength but I wondered how much she had left inside of her.

"I can't help but think if we made some changes six months ago, a year ago, we wouldn't be in such jeopardy now," Mom said as Daddy switched to her left foot. "Look at us here at 12:30 on New Year's Eve. We need to be back in the morning and still have an hour of clean up

ahead of us tonight, not to mention making a tray or two of lasagna, stuffed shells and trimming the cutlets for chicken parmigiana,” Mom stated, pulling her foot out of his hand.

I stood back there wondering if Mom was right, wondering what Daddy did and didn’t tell us. Was he sparing us from the whole truth? Could that be possible?

I thought about how they lied to me in the past. They knew about Dean’s cancer at first but didn’t tell me. They visited Dr. Reed that day while I stayed at home rehearsing for that stupid Junior Miss pageant. Maybe Daddy kept us both in the dark about the restaurant. Maybe Mom knew and just denied it under her charade of phony smiles. But here I am too, hiding the fact that I’m scared to go to bed because I have nightmares of sticking a needle in Dean’s vein and killing him. Maybe we’re all liars. Maybe I’m the hypocrite for accusing them.

We got home at 1:45 a.m. Hurrying up the steps two at a time I ran into my parent’s room and called my helpline.

“Hello,” someone answered above the noise and music.

“Is Charlie there?” I asked, twisting the cord around my finger.

“Hold on.”

Standing in my parent’s dark bedroom I listened to the happy voices blaring through the phone. Charlie had flown with his parents to his uncle’s house in Denver to go skiing. I hated bothering him but had no choice.

“Hello?” Charlie said.

“Charlie it’s me,” I blurted. “How are you?”

“Candice? I wondered who was calling me here. How’d you get this number?”

“411. I knew you were staying at your uncle’s. I’m sorry to call but it’s almost two in the morning here so I can’t call Jessie.”

“It’s okay. What wrong?”

“I don’t know. Nothing. Maybe a lot. Can you help me, Charlie?”

“Hey Charlie, come on!” someone shouted. “Hang up with your girlfriend already!”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” he yelled back, laughing. “Help you? Candice, what do you want me to do?”

Keep me company, I wanted to say. New Years was over for me but it was 11:45 in Colorado. I was hoping Charlie would give me a second chance at welcoming in the New Year.

“I’ll be there in a minute,” Charlie yelled to someone. “Don’t start without me.”

“Forget it. Go with your friends,” I told him. “Can I call you in the morning?”

“Yeah, just don’t forget the time difference.”

I nodded.

“Hey Candice?”

“Yeah Charlie,” I said perking back up.

“Happy New Year, okay.”

“Okay Charlie.”

He hung up but I couldn’t let go of the receiver. The beeping sound lulled me into a trance as I fantasized about what I’d do if I was granted three wishes. It wasn’t until I heard footsteps on the stairs that I hung up and hurried into the bathroom.

January came and went in a blur. Only the two massive snowstorms stood out, both of which happened on a Friday, our busiest night of the week.

By Valentine’s my father finally laid off Jimmy, too. He fired every driver except for Carl, a mailman by day who moonlighted with us every night because he had a baby at home and needed the money. Daddy started charging one dollar per delivery. He got that piece and Carl kept his tips. I had become an expert lasagna maker and sliced so many cold-cuts my future as a butcher was assured, if I wanted it. The worst part was forcing that ten inch knife through rectangular chunks of Polly-O mozzarella the size of a cinderblock. I had to lean over the knife and press with both hands to sink the blade through that stubborn hunk of cheese.

Mom was there every day too, answering the phone and doing eighty numbers a minute on that cash register.

Each time another order came in I wanted to jump for joy. I felt like it was us against the world and that we'd survive this mess and be closer than ever.

But there were frustrating times too, like when Mom forgot to add yeast to the pizza dough and Daddy had to throw the whole batch in the trash. On those days I'd point to the good things, like Mr. Rosewood saying that ours was the best eggplant parmesan he'd ever tasted and that he promised to spread the word. I reminded them how I convinced Sister Francis Marie to let me make a presentation before the fifth through eighth grades so I could tell everyone that their parents should order pizza from our restaurant because it was the best.

Sometimes my parents heard me and changed their moods, but other times their worries made me invisible. That's when I hoped for something big to happen, something to distract them from the food suppliers' harassing calls about past due bills.

On March thirtieth I got my wish. President Reagan was gunned down outside a hotel in Washington D.C. My parents didn't seem to care when John Lennon got shot but they must have really liked Reagan because they didn't argue the whole time he was in the hospital. Part of me was grateful, not just for their truce, but for all the grief stricken faces I saw everywhere I went.

By April Daddy expanded his hours to midnight on weekdays and 2:00 a.m. on weekends. He took out a half page color ad in the new yellow pages and expanded his delivery service to towns as far away as West Milford. He even printed 50% off coupons and had me go to Ben Franklin's and other nearby stores to see if I could leave stacks next to their registers. Jessie and Charlie helped me slide coupons under the windshield wipers of cars at the Ringwood Shopping Centre. It was the only time I got to spend with them outside of school but it wasn't any fun. I'd run from one car to the next while they walked and talked as if they'd forgotten that my family's future was at stake.

Over the next few months the expanded delivery service improved sales but I heard Daddy telling Mom that even though things were better we were still on our backs. Then one

morning in early August Mom and I were going shopping for my school clothes and spotted Daddy hanging a sign outside the restaurant as we drove by.

“ ‘Kids Eat Free’ ” she declared, shaking her head. “What in the world is your father doing?”

“Daddy must have a plan, Mom,” I said, trying to reassure her.

“Candice, you don’t understand. We’re still playing catch up with the bank. Do you know what that means?”

“That they’re angry with us?”

“Yes,” Mom laughed out of frustration. “They’re a little irritated. And then there are the hospital bills we’ve ignored for over a year now. Offering free food isn’t a plan. It’s surrender.”

“So is praying for some stupid miracle to happen,” I argued. “While you’ve been dragging me to church every Sunday morning Daddy’s been making pizzas for all the little league teams in town.”

“I’m not praying for a miracle, Candice. Going to church puts my mind at ease. I need that once a week.”

“Yeah, but you think God wears a cape on his back and will swoop down to save us like some superhero, but He won’t. He didn’t when Dean was sick. And He’s not going to call up and order a meat lover’s pie now. I mean seriously Mom, why don’t you forget church and get a job? Why don’t you sell this car you’re driving? Who says you need a Mercedes now anyway?”

She jerked the car into an empty parking lot. I expected her to yell at me but she just sat there with her lips trembling. I could tell she was trying not to cry. I felt bad but I wanted her to cry. She needed to. And then she spilled those bottled up feelings right into her open hands.

I sat looking, unsure whether or not I should touch her. I felt ashamed, ashamed for wanting her to cry, for making her cry.

“I’m trying, Candice. I’m trying desperately to save our family,” she uttered, wiping her eyes. “I’ve been working so hard at the restaurant. We bought this car when things were good,

Candice. I suggested that we sell it but your father said its old now and we wouldn't get much for it. And for your information, while I've been working at the restaurant I've also been looking for a job, but I haven't worked in years Candice, not since before Dean was born. Time has passed me by. But I am trying. That's why I've enrolled in a real estate certification course. Okay? Are you satisfied?"

"That's good Mom," I said touching her arm. "I'm happy for you. I'm just sad for Daddy. I think he feels like a failure because that's how you see him."

"You're wrong. I just question some of the decisions he's made, Candice. That Kids Eat Free sign is proof of what I'm talking about."

I reached for her fist pressed into the seat cushion between us.

"Do you know what Daddy said about you the day Dean was born?"

"Candice, please." she said pulling her hand away. "Those days feel like someone else's life."

"He told me how much he loves you, Mom. He said you're his angel."

Her shoulders slackened and she wiped a single tear from her eye. "Come on," she said pulling out of that parking lot. "We need to get this shopping done for your school clothes. Their sale ends today."

One hour later we finished shopping and walked to the register with four button-down shirts, some socks, pants, and a pair of jeans. The total was \$106.43. Mom laid her purse on the counter and took out four new twenties, separating them so they didn't stick.

"I'll put the rest on this," she said, handing her MasterCard to the boy behind the counter whose nostrils were wide as bottle caps.

He swiped the card and folded the clothes. "I'm sorry Ma'am, but your card has been declined."

"What? Try it again please," she said looking at the machine.

The three of us waited for an answer. I heard the customer behind me wrinkling her plastic shopping bags.

“I’m sorry Ma’am but...”

Mom laid her purse on the counter. “Put it on this one,” she insisted, slipping out her Visa.

“It won’t accept this one either,” the boy said after running the card.

“There must be a problem with your machine,” Mom said pointing at it.

“I don’t think so. This usually happens when a card is maxed out.”

“Don’t get fresh with me young man. I know when it usually happens.”

Mom pulled out my jeans from the pile of clothes the boy had folded. “Now what’s the total?”

“\$89.64.”

Reaching into her purse she grabbed a ten and laid it on the counter. After taking her change she snatched the bag and huffed out of the store.

“Where are we going?” I asked, trying to keep pace.

“Where do you think?”

Mom pushed open the front door of the restaurant. “When did you max out the credit cards?” she yelled while storming inside.

I took a seat in the empty dining room and laid my sweaty face on the table. Daddy was in the kitchen mixing a batch of pizza dough.

“What’s on the cards, Don?”

“I bought more advertising,” he said after shutting off the mixing machine.

“In addition to that ridiculous sign hanging out front?”

“I’m trying to stay afloat here, Vivian.”

“By giving away free food?”

“The sign is an incentive for parents to bring their kids in for dinner. Stefano’s did it and it worked great for them.”

“Yes, in September when kids are back in school. It’s August. Don. Half the town is down the shore. I questioned some of your decisions but I trusted you, too. Maybe that was my mistake.”

“Mom, stop it! Please,” I shouted, standing up near the table.

“Come on Candice,” she said, tossing an apron my way. “This is our last stand.”

Over the next two weeks the three of us worked day and night. I must have passed out another thousand coupons but it wasn’t enough. On August fifteenth Daddy closed the doors forever.

He unloaded the tables and chairs and most of the cooking equipment. Some man drove over one morning with a truck and two day laborers. Daddy said they worked like thieves, emptying the place and carting it all off within thirty minutes. He sold the building within a week, too. He said the offer price was an insult but he had to accept. The only thing he kept was the Armondo’s pizza sign that hung in the window. He had named the restaurant after his dad and I could tell my father felt like he had not only failed me, but his father, too.

“I’m so sorry, Daddy,” I said while standing with him as he locked the front door for the last time.

“It’s not your fault, Candice. It’s mine. You have no idea how much I regret that you and your mother are paying for my mistakes.” He gripped the keys in his palm then dropped them into the mail slot. “That’s it,” he said. “Every life comes down to a few moments and for us, this is one of them.”

He told me the money went to satisfy the bank, food suppliers who threatened his kneecaps, and a good chunk of the credit card bills. Daddy said all he got for fifteen years of sweat was his signature on some document saying he was no longer the owner, and proof that

there couldn't possibly be a God, but that he was pretty sure the devil did exist. He said scribbling his name on that form was like signing his own death certificate.

At home Mom was sitting at the kitchen table with a piece of paper spread out in front of her.

"What's that?" Daddy asked, afraid of more bad news.

"It's the result of my real estate license test. I passed."

He sighed. "Congratulations. That's terrific, Vivian. It should help us pay the mortgage while I figure out what's next."

"No Don. I'm sorry to say this, but I don't want you to do anything next."

Daddy fell into the nearest chair.

"Mom, Daddy tried as hard as he could to make the restaurant work. We all did. He'll do something else. The important thing is we're together," I said, reaching out for both of them.

"Candice please," Mom said, squeezing my hand resting on the table. "I don't know how to say this but I do want you to know that your father and I have discussed it at length.

"Discussed what?" I asked, feeling pins and needles in my hands and feet.

"We're going to separate, honey. It's not what we ever wanted or thought could happen, but it's the right thing for us now, Candice. I'm sorry for being blunt but there is no easy way to say it, Candice."

Rubbing my hands together I waited for my mom to tell me she was joking, that their love would outlast this.

She stood up to give me a hug but I didn't want that from her, I didn't want anything. It was best for them but did they consider what was best for me? I couldn't even look at my father because now I felt like he had failed me. Turning away I ran out the front door, trying to outrun my fear and anger, my reality. I ran panting into Addice Park five blocks from my house. Hiding under the bleachers I sat hiccupping and wiping my runny nose while grabbing chunks of

grass out of the ground in frustration. Then I felt the dirt smeared on my face. It turned to mud from my tears.

I had no idea know how long I stayed. It was dark when I crawled out from under there.

When I got home I wanted that hug but didn't see either of my parents. I heard the TV on in the basement and knew Daddy would be sleeping down there tonight. I heard mom's footsteps upstairs.

I didn't want to cry to Charlie or Jessie so I sat alone staring at music videos on MTV and wondering what tomorrow would bring.

On August thirtieth my father got a night manager's job at the Moondance Diner on Sixth Avenue in Manhattan and rented an apartment in Weehawken with a view of the traffic heading into the Lincoln Tunnel. After two weeks of seeing my parents ignoring each other I was happy he'd be gone.

"It's not so bad Candice," Daddy had told me about his new job. "I take the PATH train into the city Tuesday through Sunday at five and get home about nine the next morning. I don't mind the graveyard shift. You and Dean keep me company, which I like. It's okay, Candice. I'm okay."

I knew he was just saying that so I wouldn't worry about him and I appreciated it. I already had enough on my mind.

A few days after Daddy began his job at the diner I started high school at Lakeland. Jessie and Charlie were both going to DePaul in Wayne, the catholic high school I was supposed to attend.

Mom dropped me off at my new bus stop the first morning. I was still not used to seeing her in that mustard yellow Century 21 Real Estate jacket.

"Knock em' dead," she said while pulling up to the curb.

"Yeah, sure."

Despite everything that had happened Mom seemed happier. I could tell she was starting to enjoy her new identity: real estate agent, woman with appointments who sold dreams to families who still believed. This was her fresh start, which in a way meant that it was mine, too.

“Enjoy the first day of high school Candice,” she said as I pushed open the car door.

I nodded and gazed at the strange row of faces lining the sidewalk. A peroxide blond with huge boobs eyed me curiously. I turned away. She couldn’t grasp where I’d been, what my journey had made me. The older boys were giants with facial hair, gorillas in football jackets. I glanced at the cracks in the sidewalk and the street sign on the corner. I’ll have to spend four years at this bus stop, I thought. Somehow it seemed like punishment.

Chapter Six

It was March sixth, 1982. Daddy had moved out seven months ago. Since then Mom has been working hard to keep things normal. I was spending most of my time alone.

When Mom first got the job at Century 21 she couldn't help but get caught up in the excitement of a new beginning. I did too, clinging my hopes to hers. But we were quickly reminded that new didn't mean better.

When I came downstairs this morning she was sitting at the kitchen table having a Virginia Slim for breakfast. Credit card statements were stacked on the table in front of her. I wanted to shove them in the trash and pretend they didn't exist but I was already in denial about enough so I reached for the box of Froot Loops instead, and poured myself a bowl.

"Good Morning Honey," she said, looking up from the paper in front of her.

"Morning Mom," I replied, staring at the page and seeing a bunch of ideas written down. I couldn't make out what they were and was too afraid to ask. I ate quietly, watching her hold a pen to her head then quickly scribble something down as if she was on a game show with the clock ticking.

A few months ago I suggested we talk with the credit card people about the bills but Mom said there wasn't any point because we had committed the cardinal sin - getting into debt. When Daddy sold the restaurant much of the credit card bills were paid off but there was still a lot left, more than either of them realized, somehow. Mom said the credit card companies had us right where they wanted us. At the time I thought she was being dramatic but then she showed me how the minimum monthly payment barely covered the interest.

"We'll be okay Candice," she said, more for her own benefit than for mine.

"I know that Mom. I know," I replied, more for my own benefit than for hers.

“How do I look?” she asked, standing up. “My pants are usually wrinkled but I started hanging them from the hem so I think that’s helping. I’ve got this big appointment today and want to look my best. I’m showing a house that’s listed at over \$100,000. Can you believe it?”

“You look great, Mom. The house must be beautiful too, so I’m sure things will go well.”

They didn’t.

That night I sat on the top step eavesdropping on Mom as she spilled her feelings to Grandma.”

“I spoke with an accountant this afternoon,” she sighed. “He leases space two doors down from the Century 21 office where I work. I set the appointment last week during one of my doom and gloom episodes. I hoped I’d make a sale or two and be able to cancel the meeting but I went in there today and faced the music. Long story short he suggested bankruptcy, but I’m not ready to suffer the humiliation of having some rich lawyer tell me I’m unfit to carry a checkbook. ...I know Mom. It’s amazing how fast things turned sour. Five years ago I felt like my life was such a thing. Then Dean got sick and I had blinders on because it was all I could do. Now I’m a forty three year old single woman who spends her days showing luxury homes to young couples whose only complaint is that the fixtures in the master bath aren’t quite what they had envisioned. I want to strangle them but all I can do is smile as if I was a Girl Scout selling them a box of Thin Mints.”

When I heard Mom get off the phone I tiptoed downstairs and pretended to be making a salad for dinner.

The next morning she got up early to get ready for the two open houses she was hosting. She needed to stick the signs in the ground and pick up some balloons, too. Most people did one open house on a Saturday but Mom had been doing two or three of them for the past few months. Usually I’d stay home and do the laundry or pick up a babysitting job, but I didn’t feel like leaving her alone today. I took a book and made myself invisible when people visited the open

houses. From other rooms I'd listen to Mom disguise her desperation under a spruced up voice as she described the types of hardwood floors and how good the schools were in that particular neighborhood.

Three weeks later on a Tuesday afternoon Mom was waiting as I stepped off the school bus. I knew she had come from a meeting at the lawyer's office and I braced myself when I saw her.

"What did he say?" I asked after getting into the passenger seat.

"He said I've got two options: declare bankruptcy or arm wrestle debt for the next ten years. I asked if he was married. I told him that was my third option. He laughed and pointed to a picture of his wife."

"Does he work with any single lawyers you could marry?" I asked, trying to be funny.

"No Candice," she said, hinting at a smile.

"So what happened?"

"Would you mind if we took a drive up to Greenwood Lake," she said to me. "It's pretty there."

I didn't ask again. I didn't mind not knowing. The two-lane road was deserted. My eyes studied the double yellow line.

"You know Candice, when I was a little girl I took a handful of flour and put it in my mouth at your Grandma's bakery. Donuts and cookies tasted good so I thought the flour would, too. It was terrible, and impossible to chew and swallow. The idea of bankruptcy isn't any different."

"What are you talking about, Mom?"

"A lot of the credit card debt was wiped out when we sold the restaurant, Candice. Your father and I split the rest of it fifty/fifty, along with the medical bills from when Dean was sick."

I sat there, unsure what to say. Daddy gave her the house in the divorce settlement, too. That was generous, I thought.

She pushed in the car lighter with her knuckle to avoid breaking a nail and asked me to grab a cigarette from her purse. Slipping one out I held the pack between my fingers, listening to the plastic crinkle.

“Your father sends money each month but it’s not enough, and I’ve defaulted twice on the mortgage payments, Candice. I convinced myself I could earn enough money selling real estate but...”

“But what...?”

She took a drag on her cigarette and looked at me as if she was about to apologize. “We have to sell the house.”

“Our house? But that’s where we’ve always lived.”

“I’m sorry Candice, but there are no other options. We’ve built up enough equity to pay off the credit cards, the medical bills and still have some left over to start a nice little nest egg.”

I watched the crucifix sway from a chain looped over the rearview mirror, wondering where Mom’s God was now.

She didn’t realize she was doing sixty five in a thirty five. The car bumped over ruts and lumpy paving jobs. We vibrated over a one lane wooden bridge where I gripped the door handle and fisted my toes. I decided to risk it. Reaching over I slipped the cigarette from between her fingers and took a drag. I slipped it back. Her hands never left the wheel.

She followed signs to Warwick, a town known for its Victorian estates. Slowing to the speed limit we coasted past houses with golf course style front lawns shaded by massive trees.

“Mom, can we move up here? This place is happily ever after.”

She smiled and reached for my hand. “Daydreaming is all we can afford around here,” she said, swerving left towards The Stone Castle Inn and causing the tires to crunch over the pebbles in the parking lot. “But today we’ll slide our legs under a table and enjoy an early dinner. This place has great views of the lake. And the sunsets are complimentary.”

She smiled brighter than I had seen in months. I’d forgotten how it illuminated her face.

The hostess sat us at a table next to the window. The dock was below us and Mom and I watched boys my age in blue shirts and khaki shorts greet people and secure their boats as they pulled up for dinner. I didn't even try to hide my envy.

When the waiter delivered our iced teas Mom took the lemon wedge off the rim of her glass and tasted it, then plunged it into her drink.

"You know, I never used to enjoy the taste of lemon. I preferred sweet things and couldn't understand why anyone would choose a tart dessert like lemon meringue pie over a rich one, like chocolate cake. But as I got older my pallet changed. Lemon tastes clean and refreshing to me now. Chocolate cake is too dense, it weighs me down. I don't want our past to slow us down, Candice. I want a fresh beginning. I've been thinking a lot about us over the past few weeks but didn't want to talk at the kitchen table. This restaurant was the best Tuesday afternoon getaway I could find."

That's when Mom laid out her plans for us. She said I would finish my freshman year at Lakeland and if the house was sold, God willing, we would move to Grandma's in June until we had enough money to buy a home in Connecticut where she's always wanted us to live. I'd attend Spellman high school in the Bronx next September.

"It'll be an adjustment because of all the blacks Candice," Mom whispered to me, "but it's a Catholic school so I'm sure things will be fine. I'm going to get a job selling commercial real estate in Manhattan because that's where the money is. And even though I don't like garage sales, we're going to have one because what else will we do with all those reminders?"

Things got quiet. I sucked on my lemon but it didn't help very much. Then Mom asked about my worries and my concerns, but there were so many running through my mind I couldn't pin one down. Instead, I looked at the menu and then at the lake in front of me. My seat was comfortable. I liked our table and the waiter seemed nice enough, he brought free refills. I wanted to live right there, but we stayed for just one more hour.

On Friday night we filled Mom's Mercedes with banana boxes from the Grand Union and started dismantling our past. I felt exhausted before I even started. My closet was engorged. My clothes had no breathing room and cardboard boxes were hiding in each corner. One was filled with books from elementary school. Another held tiny pairs of pageant shoes that Mom always wanted to save but would now end up on the curb.

By the following Wednesday we'd made five more visits to the Grand Union for banana boxes and our patience was at an end. The endless trips up and down the stairs, the ringing phone and endless scavenger hunt for forgotten items was exhausting.

"Candice, can you go tackle Dean's room?" Mom asked.

She was on her knees filling a box with serving platters and wine glasses. "Damn it!" she yelled, squeezing the stem of a broken wine glass in her fist.

"My God, Mom! Did you cut yourself?" I asked running over.

"No. I'm fine Candice, just frustrated. Get to work on Dean's room, okay? The garage sale is this weekend and we still haven't touched the attic or the basement."

"Why don't you clean up Dean's room? Why should I do it? You know it's the toughest room in the house."

"Where's your father? He should do it. It's his fault we're in this mess."

"He's working twelve hour shifts at the diner, Mom. Overnight."

"And what am I, relaxing?" she asked.

My footsteps hammered out of the dining room. The stress of the past few days was getting to both of us. From the bottom step I turned and saw her stooped over, mumbling about my father, the broken glass, her life. I knew she never imagined this. She was scared but so was I. I wanted to go over and tell her I believed in her but something else came out, something spiteful. "It's not only Daddy's fault we're in this mess! It's yours, too!"

She didn't respond, which in a way made me angrier.

I hurried up the stairs. Dean's room was at the end of the hall. It felt preserved. Part of me wanted to shove everything in boxes and seal the lids. But I also ached to remove his leftovers one by one.

Hours had passed since our fight.

"How's it going in here, Candice?" Mom asked as she walked in the room. "What have you been doing?" she said, looking around. "Why isn't anything packed?"

"What are we supposed to do, sell Dean's pants on the driveway? He'll never outgrow these clothes, Mom. Seeing all this reminds me how final things are and I can't believe it. I just can't!"

She let out a deep breath and sat down on the mattress next to me.

"I know what you're feeling," she said, pressing my head to her chest. "I'm fighting the same emotional tug of war. I'm sorry for getting upset earlier, Candice. Sometimes I just..."

"It's all right, Mom. I'm sorry for what I said, too."

Mom patted my head then she kissed me. I fell back onto Dean's bed and pulled his pillow out from under the bedspread. I remembered him laying here, his bald skull sinking into this pillow and how at the end, Mom, Daddy and I would lift him with our hands and our encouraging words because he didn't have enough strength or spirit left inside anymore.

I knew that Mom had forgotten I was even in the room. She was gone now, stepping foot in her past. We lived Dean's suffering together, but we all had our own private memories, too. She was visiting with them now, so I let her be and watched in silence.

She reached into his drawer and pulled out a pair of socks. They were folded into a ball. Her back was to me but I could tell by the tightness of her shoulders that her eyes were pinched closed. She was squeezing that ball in her hands, remembering, wishing, praying. I had yelled at God but Mom always spoke with Him in a whisper, begging for His help. She raised the socks to her nose and inhaled. In the end Dean's toes were the only part that still looked normal. They didn't wither away like the rest of his body did. Then Mom unfolded the socks and wiped her

eyes. I ached for my brother but she ached for her son. Until now I thought I carried the heaviest cross but lying there looking at Mom, I realized that her burden was the most crushing by far.

“Mom, do you remember teaching Dean to make cupcakes that time and he picked the hand-mixer out of the bowl and sprayed chocolate batter all over the kitchen?” I asked, trying to coax a smile out of her.

“Yes, I do,” she said laughing and still drying her tears with those socks. “I wanted to scream but Dean was giggling so much it was contagious. “Weeks later I was still scraping hardened pieces of chocolate off the walls. I found it everywhere. Oh, we had some great times,” she said, nodding and looking at those socks in her hands. “It feels good to laugh. Thank you Candice, I needed that. You know what, I have an idea. How about tomorrow we take a ride to the paint store. Your room at Grandma’s house is due for an update. Let’s pick out some fun colors. We can do each wall a different color if you want. We can even make stripes or something. What do you think?” she asked, walking over to the bed and hugging me.

I told her I thought it was a great idea. But at that moment all I wanted was for the two of us to lock ourselves in Dean’s room. She didn’t want to leave either. For the next few hours we placed his little shirts in boxes, his pants, and we reminisced on those days when the future was still ahead of us and happiness seemed assured.

Things got busy the next day so we never did make it to the paint store but there’d be time for that later, we told ourselves. There’d be time.

By Thursday night I had filled at least thirty garbage bags with junk from the attic and basement and was back in Dean’s room, forcing myself to finish.

“Are you almost done up there Candice?” Mom called to me. “I’m going to take a break and watch *Knot’s Landing*. Come down if you feel like it. I’m making tea.”

I kept packing and that’s when I spotted the black shoebox on the floor in the corner of Dean’s closet. I almost missed it in the darkness. Inside was a single black and white

composition notebook. The cover creaked as it unfolded. Scribbled in the upper right hand corner of the first page were the words:

My Diary

by Dean Morgan

November 10th 1979

The heading stunned me. The page crinkled in my fingertips. “How could this...? When did he...?” I mumbled as my tears plunged onto the paper. I smeared them away, afraid of smudging his childish handwriting.

“Candice?” I heard Mom calling for me.

I wiped my eyes and slid the diary beneath his bed as she climbed the stairs.

“I thought you were watching TV,” I said when she walked into Dean’s room.

“*Knot’s Landing* isn’t on tonight. How are things in here?” she asked, seeing the gauze, needles and skin lotion I had dumped in a box.

Picking up one of the needles she stared at me for a second; then dropped it back in the box. “Come on,” she said, “the garage sale is in two days.”

The next day at lunch I sat on the upper deck of the visitor’s bleachers reading Dean’s diary. His thoughts hopscotched from how he hated being the smallest boy in his grade to how he liked Spiderman better than Batman. I broke down crying while reading the alphabet over and over, too. He filled pages with it. I had taught it to him and told him to sing it whenever he got scared, but I never imagined that he would write it down, too. Dean and I sang it together while he was in the hospital. In his journal he wrote about how he’d sing it to himself when the older boys at school would lock him in one of the bathroom stalls. I wanted to skip my next class and just hide but when the bell rang I climbed down from those bleachers and headed back into school.

The next morning at 6:00 a.m. Mom and I started stapling fluorescent yellow signs to what felt like every telephone pole in New Jersey.

“This is crazy Mom,” I said as she made a right onto Cannon Ball Road. “We're not even close to our house anymore. Plus my hand is sore from pushing this stupid stapler.”

“We’ve got to advertise in order to sell everything, Candice. Now come on, we’ll do this area then we’ll head home.”

People were already parked in front of our house when we got back.

“Hurry, Candice,” Mom shouted as she rushed inside and hoisted a box off the floor. “Let’s move it.”

A box of pots and pans sat at my feet. I grunted and slid my hands beneath it and hobbled out the door.

“We’re not starting until ten,” Mom called out as more cars pulled up. “Let’s go, Candice.”

Our signs did the job because by 9:30 we would’ve needed police barricades to stop people from marching up our driveway. Together Mom and I stood behind a card table with an empty tin of peanut brittle filled with fifteen singles in petty cash. Mom squeezed a tennis ball as people scrutinized the items she had chosen for our house. For her it was like standing by as we got robbed.

“We have furniture for sale as well,” she announced. “It’s in the house. Everything is tagged. Candice, go inside and keep an eye out,” Mom whispered to me.

I thought closed doors would be enough of a signal but after catching a man coming out of our bathroom I realized we should have posted signs.

“Excuse me,” I said.

He looked at me startled and pointed at the washer and dryer. “You selling those?” he asked. “I could use a nice set like that.”

I heard the toilet filling with water.

“Yeah, they’re \$79,000. They come with the house, if you’re interested.” Then I held my breath, pulled the bathroom door closed and followed him outside.

“No, I’m sorry. I can’t put this cookie jar on hold. This isn’t a department store,” Mom explained to some woman. “Who are these nuts?” she asked as I stepped over.

By 3:00 we had made \$659.65. A father and his teenage son bought Dean’s bed frame and dresser, carting it downstairs and into a pickup truck.

“We’ve got to sell everything else tomorrow. I don’t care what the price,” Mom said. “Grab a couple of boxes and pack your pageant trophies. We can store those in Grandma’s basement.”

I spent the next hour wrapping dusty trophies in old newspaper even though I could have easily thrown them out. I unhooked the framed issue of Pageantry Magazine with me featured on the cover after I won the Little Miss in 1973. The picture seemed to mock me. I felt sad for the girl in the picture, for how her family would be ruined.

On Sunday after church we sold off the rest of our family’s remains. Our house had become Daddy’s vacant restaurant.

While Mom was out picking up Chinese food I started snooping around, seeing what she was keeping from her past. Stepping into her closet I spotted a green and white yearbook in a box on the floor. Saint Augustine, Class of 1954. The stamp size photos were dreary black and white but the smiles were full of hope. I gazed at the boys and their slicked-back hair, wondering which ones Mom had kissed. The girls wore beehive hairdos and white blouses, some had sweaters. Most wore scarves tied around their necks. Where are Richie Cunningham and The Fonz? I laughed to myself.

Then there it was; the earlier version of me. In the photo Mom’s hair was long and silky and draped over her left shoulder. I’d memorized the confident pose. Her face was unaware of the heartache to come.

My eyes slid off the picture to the caption below. She was voted best looking. Her ambition was to be a broadcast journalist. Her quote was, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

For the first time I saw her from a stranger’s shoes. I had always admired her beauty but I’d enhanced it because she was my mother. Now, without any ulterior motives, I still had to admit she was the most breathtaking woman I had ever laid eyes upon.

When she came home with the Chinese food she pulled out a red and white checkered table cloth and laid it on the floor in our empty living room.

“I thought we’d have a little indoor picnic,” she said while opening the cartons of Mongolian Beef and Chicken Fried Rice.

The two of us sat Indian style while pulling our food out of those cartons with chopsticks and guessing what our fortune cookies might say. In the back of my mind though, was that yearbook picture.

“Why are you looking at me like that, Candice?” she finally asked. “Is something stuck in my teeth?” she asked, playfully pointing at her mouth with her chopsticks.

“I found this upstairs Mom,” I said, leaning over and grabbing the yearbook just around the corner.

“Saint Augustine,” she sighed, shaking her head at the memories. “I was never smarter than when I was in high school.”

“Does that mean I’m peaking now Mom?” I asked with a laugh.

She shook her head no. We both knew I’d been through enough already to know better.

“Let’s talk about what we wanted to be when we were younger,” I suggested.

Mom laughed. “When ‘we’ were younger?” she asked. “You’re only eighteen, Candice. But okay, it’s good dinner conversation. Where should we start?”

“I know your dream wasn’t to be a real estate agent Mom, so what was it?”

“Dreams,” she said, plunging her chopsticks into the carton, “the leading cause of the mid-life crisis. You know my goal was to win a national pageant, be a spokesmodel and use that forum to launch a career in television broadcasting like Barbara Walters.”

“So what happened? I mean, I know things didn’t work out with the Ford Modeling Agency but you competed in pageants against that Kathie Lee woman, didn’t you? I’ve seen her on *Name that Tune* and she’s all over the TV these days. So why didn’t you win Miss America and get on TV like her?”

“I got married and had a family, Candice. That was my other dream – to be your Mom. And along the way I got my communications degree from Hunter College.”

Sitting on the floor in that empty room I was afraid to ask if she had regrets, they seemed pretty obvious, but I risked it anyway.

“Sifting through the closets made me think about the past,” I told her. “If your life was an empty room again, just like this one,” I said, raising my hand, “would you fill it with appearances on Merv Griffin and trips to England where you would interview Princess Diana about life in the palace with Charles?”

“No, no I wouldn’t Candice,” she expressed, taking the chopsticks out of my hand and holding me close. “I have some emotional black and blues, but so does pretty much everyone else walking the planet. I love you and I love Dean more than anything in this world. Being your mom is my greatest role in life. I just never pictured this,” she said, swinging her hand at the vacant walls. “But I’m doing my best to make it work. I don’t have big dreams anymore and maybe I am willing to settle a little bit, but that’s okay. I just want us to be happy.”

“Yeah, me too,” I replied, as we ate our greasy Chinese food.

The following weekend Mom was holding an open house and dropped me off at the Tick Tock Diner in Totowa at 9:00 a.m. Twenty minutes later as I was finishing my corn muffin I felt Daddy’s hands squeezing me from behind.

“It’s great seeing you!” he said as I spun around.

“Hi Daddy,” I said, hugging him then noticing his bloodshot eyes. “God, are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” he said while running his fingers through his hair and standing a little straighter. I was supposed to get off at midnight but the other manager called in sick so I came here straight from work. Luckily I had an extra change of clothes in my locker.”

“Let’s go to your apartment so you can take a nap, Daddy. We can go out later.”

“A nap, are you nuts? I’ve been waiting for this day since we met for hamburgers at Fuddruckers three weeks ago, Candice. Plus I made big plans. We’re going to an outdoor concert at Hamilton Park in Weehawken. It overlooks the Hudson so it’ll be nice for us. After that I thought we’d stop by a carnival at the St. Lawrence Church. Then we’ll have an early dinner at Oddfellow’s in Hoboken. They’ve got great sandwiches and those sour pickles you like. How’s that sound?”

“It sounds good Daddy but you need some rest.”

“I’ll sleep tomorrow,” he said while caressing my cheek.

At Hamilton Park Daddy and I listened to the music while watching the sailboats cruising up and down the Hudson River. After that we hopped on the Tilt-A-Whirl at the carnival and Daddy lost three dollars trying to win me a stuffed animal on the ring toss game.

We got to Oddfellow’s around 3:00 and timed it just right because the hostess sat us at the next available table which turned out to be a cozy corner booth.

“Oh, it feels so good to finally sit down,” Daddy sighed.

“It must. You’ve been on your feet since when, yesterday afternoon?”

“Pretty much,” he laughed. “Enough about that though, how are you doing?” he asked, squeezing my hands.

“I’m all right. Moving stinks. I feel like I’m always on the lookout for boxes. I hate the smell of cardboard and don’t think I’ll eat a banana ever again but...”

“Bananas? What are you talking about?”

“Nothing. Forget it,” I said as the waitress came to take our drink order.

As Daddy looked over the menu I stared at those scars on his hands from working that pizza oven for so many years. I wanted to tell him about Dean’s diary but the selfish part of me wouldn’t allow it. Instead we laughed about the first time he gave Dean a bath in the kitchen sink and accidentally knocked the pepper shaker into the bath water.

“I didn’t want to tell your mother because I was so embarrassed,” Daddy laughed, “but Dean’s little butt was red as a beet so I had to confess. “I tell you, I was pretty frantic trying to rinse the pepper out of there. The poor kid was a trooper though.”

At 4:45 Daddy dropped me off at a Mandeess in Little Falls.

Standing in the parking lot I watched him waving goodbye. I could tell how much Daddy cared just by watching his arm swinging out that window. Whenever I doubted that love exists my father without realizing it, always reminded me otherwise.

“I’ve got great news!” Mom said after picking me up an hour later. “I sold the house! This newlywed couple made an offer, Ryan and Samantha Winslet. Assuming their mortgage gets approved we’ll move out the third week of June.”

Their loan was approved on Friday.

I never told anyone in school I wouldn’t be back next year and when the bus sputtered out of the parking lot on the last day, it was just a formality. I preferred to go away rather than offer explanations to people who would forget about me by dinnertime, anyway.

Saying goodbye to Jessie and Charlie was something else, though. The Bronx was only forty five minutes away but since none of us could drive I might as well have been moving to California. I wondered if it even mattered. After spending a year at different high schools we’d grown apart. It was the uncomfortable truth none of us would admit and became obvious when they expected me to laugh at the stories they told about their friends at school who I didn’t know and would never meet.

That's why I was happy when Jessie told me her folks had rented a house down the shore the same week Mom and I were moving. Charlie was going with her, and I knew that would make things easier for me.

On Saturday, June nineteenth, before they left for Wildwood, Charlie, Jessie and I said our goodbyes and promised to keep in touch.

"Paramus Park Mall is halfway between here and the Bronx," Jessie said after giving me a hug. "They've got a great food court and the biggest Joyce Leslie I've been to yet. We can take the bus and meet up. We've got all summer so we'll see each other a bunch of times, Candice."

"Definitely," I said, even though I knew that somehow none of us would ever find the right day to take a bus to the mall. Something told me they knew it, too.

Three days later Mom and I stood by the front door gazing into empty rooms. The house was so quiet we heard the ice machine pushing another batch into the tray.

"This is an exciting time, Candice. Grandma is thrilled to have us and before you know it we'll be moving to Connecticut and starting our new lives. You believe in me, don't you, Candice? I need you to believe that I can take good care of us," she said, turning towards me and taking my hands.

"Yes Mom, I believe in you," I said wiping my eyes. "I have to," I whispered to myself.

Then we walked out the door for the last time.

The ground was steamy and slick from a sun shower that had just ended. In the car I sat staring at my fists reflected in the passenger window. They were large and distorted, white knuckles braced in my lap. I remembered Daddy saying that every life comes down to a few moments. I knew Mom and I were in the midst of one.

Chapter Seven

Standing in Grandma's bakery I laid my palms against the marble slab. It was ninety seven degrees outside but the heat from the ovens in here sent the temperature soaring over a hundred. My toes were squishing inside my socks. Even the waistband on my panties was sticking to my hips whenever I leaned forward with the rolling pin.

"Madone, it's so hot the chickens are layin' hardboiled eggs," Grandma declared while wobbling over with two dozen sticks of unsalted butter cradled in her flabby arms.

She had some crazy expressions she got from her mom who grew up on a farm in northern Italy.

"Sorry I took so long," she sighed, dumping the butter on the marble table. "I had to take a load off in the ice box."

"That's a good idea. It's boiling in here. If I wasn't wearing shoes I'd be standing in a puddle of my own sweat."

"Me too, honey. My bloomers are soaked through. I'm gonna have to peel them off like one of them fruit rollups."

"Don't you have an air conditioner?"

"It went kaput in '72. I brought in a fan but that thing grew legs a few years ago. I gotta check, I may have one of them table fans under the sink in the water closet. Here, unwrap these sticks of butter to soften and I'll check for a fan. After that I'll teach you how to make croissants for the Feast of St. Anthony tomorrow. You're gonna love it, Candice!" she said, squeezing my hand. "Four hundred booths line Villa Avenue sellin' everythin' from cheesecakes to homemade jewelry and barbecued corn. Thousands of folks come out. It's mostly Ginny's like me but the Paddy's come out too because all they know how to cook is boiled cabbage. Okay, you unpeel this butter and I'll check on that fan, but first I gotta run a knife along my cinnamon raisin loaves so they don't stick."

She kissed me on the cheek.

“Sometimes I gotta pinch myself that you’re here, Candice. You make comin’ to work fun for me again,” Grandma said before waddling away.

“How ya doin,’ darlin,’ ” Carmella asked while lifting a bucket of sugar off the floor.

“I’m okay. Are you making cookies again?”

“Every day for twenty seven years,” she smiled.

I couldn’t help but stare at Carmella’s cankles. Too many years on her feet and too many cookies blended her ankles and calves together so they were thick as coffee cans.

“How’s the butter, Candice?” Grandma asked moments later. “Gettin’ soft?”

I poked a stick and made a dent. “A little,” I said, sucking the fat off my finger.

“I’m gonna ice two cupcakes special for Jimmy Valentine then I’ll be right over.”

While peeling the last stick I thought of Mom hurrying to the train station this morning for an interview at a real estate firm in Stamford, Connecticut.

So much had changed in the past few weeks. During our last month in New Jersey Mom sent her resume to at least a dozen firms in Manhattan and was rejected by each one. She was certain that at least a few Manhattan firms would be eager to offer her a position but they all told her that a year of selling houses in the suburbs didn’t qualify her for the competitive Manhattan market. Mom decided she would pay her dues in the Bronx first, but that didn’t last long either. She said she couldn’t spend her days inching down the Cross Bronx Expressway and said that a gated community around here means there are bars on the windows.

That’s when she started looking for jobs in Connecticut, since that’s where she wanted us to live anyway.

The last stick of butter was sagging in my hand as I wondered what was happening with Mom up there today. Despite everything we’d gone through she believed good things were around the corner and I was desperate for her to be right.

“Oh, the butter is perfect Candice, nice and springy,” Grandma said while handing me a warm slice of cinnamon raisin bread.

She flung a fistful of flour over the marble.

“This is so no butter sticks to our hands,” she smiled before blending the separate sticks until the creases gelled into one huge smooth globe. “Now we use the rolling pin so the butter lies down easy. You see?” Grandma asked as she rolled the butter out until it was thin as a pancake. “The croissant dough is already prepped so now we cut the butter into ribbons and start layin’ each strip of butter on the dough. Here, you try,” she said, handing me a long strip of butter.

It felt soft in my hands, like silly putty, and I quickly laid it down on the dough.

“Good, now we fold the dough over the top then add another strip of butter so each new layer makes a lid. The layers is what makes the croissants so flaky and the butter gives it all the flavor. I tell you I could eat half a dozen of these right outta the oven they smell so good.”

That was the best part about working at the bakery. Everything smelled delicious.

At 4:00, after things were ready for the feast tomorrow, Grandma and I locked the front door and walked down Tremont Avenue passed the florist, the movie theater, and Dino’s Cafe where fat Italian men in jogging suits sipped coffee from tiny cups.

“Bellissima donna! Bellissima donna!” one of them called to grandma. His arms were raised as if he was pleading with her.

“Shut up you,” Grandma laughed. “Candice, this is Antonio, he eats salami and drinks espresso for a livin’. These are his friends, Mutt and Jeff. They’re retired fireman.”

“Let me kiss your hand, Stella,” Antonio said to my grandma.

“You should be kissin’ my granddaughter’s hand. Ain’t she gorgeous?”

“Sublime,” he said, raising his fingers to his mouth then pressing my hand to his warm lips.

“I gotta go home and make the gravy for dinner boys. See you’s tomorrow.”

I smiled at Grandma as we walked down the street. She had some charisma.

“Antonio’s the neighborhood casanova,” she laughed as we kept walking. “Angela Lansbury gave him a hand job at Mr. Chow in Manhattan years ago.”

“What! Angela Lansbury from the show *Murder She Wrote*? Get out of here, Grandma!”

“It’s a true story Candice, I swear on Jesus Himself. My friend Teresa Zito told me. Antonio was a fireman in the city and rescued Angela Lansbury from her apartment. The whole buildin’ was on fire. He pulled her out the window and carried her down that huge ladder. It’s no wonder she played with his thing. All women love a hero, Candice. I would’ve done the same.”

“Well Antonio definitely likes you,” I said, unable to stop laughing.

“He likes all women with big tits.”

“Grandma!”

“What? Who am I, your mother? I ain’t uptight about sex, Candice. Antonio liked you too,” she said, pointing at my chest.

I gazed down at my own boobs. “Mine are nothing like yours though, Grandma. I’m a B cup. You must be a Double D.”

“Yeah, but yours got pizzazz. Mine sag like a pair of socks filled with dirt. I wish I was young again. I’d have Antonio over the house if my twat still worked.”

I shook my head and kept laughing.

“Aaah, what’s it matter now. Antonio’s prick probably don’t work either. That’s why you see old people drinkin’ coffee and playin’ bingo. It’s because none of us can fuck anymore.”

“I can’t believe I’m asking you this, but what were things like when you were younger? I mean with grandpa. You know...”

“Oh, I was a whore for him,” she said laughing. “He was so handsome I couldn’t help myself. But I wasn’t some slut like Doreen Schumazio. That girl used to think who she is. She’d stand around smackin’ her gum and smilin’ at every boy within grabbin’ distance. She was a real cujINETTE.”

“What’s that?”

“A Saturday night tramp. There was this joke that went, ‘What did Doreen’s right leg say to her left leg?’”

“What?”

“Nothin. They never met. I always liked that one. But that was so long ago. I heard Doreen came down with a case of Lou Gehrig’s disease and lives at the Morningside Nursing Home off Pelham Parkway these days.”

“You’ve got some crazy stories, Grandma.”

“You say that because your mom ain’t like me. I know you get upset with her Candice, but that’s just her way. She goes through periods when she has a hard time showin’ her feelings. My father had the same disease. She’s gettin’ better though, right?”

“Yeah, she didn’t cry much at all when Dean died but when we were packing up his room during the move she let it out.”

“When your grandpa died and they were lowerin’ him into the ground I swear on Holy Jesus I almost jumped in there with him. Two of your grandpa’s friends had to pull me off. But your mother, it seemed like she could’ve been washin’ dishes. I didn’t get mad at her though. I thought maybe it was because she was pregnant with you and was scared of gettin’ too emotional. Then I realized that she cries on the inside. That’s what they call heartache Candice,” Grandma nodded looking at me. “I know she loved her father, though. And you know she loves Dean, right?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Then that’s what matters. Now come on, when we get inside I’ll make the gravy for the macaronis and you can watch television.”

At 6:45 Mom barged through the door. “I love Stamford! The shops, the quaint restaurants and all the tree-lined streets, I’ve never seen a place so charming.”

“How was the job interview?” I asked.

She dropped to the plastic upholstered blue couch.

“Mom, when are you getting rid of this plastic couch cover? They sell spray on fabric protectors now, you know?”

“Mom... How’d the interview go?”

“Terrible. They want someone familiar with the area. But I already dropped by another firm and am interviewing tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? But it’s Saturday. What about the feast, Vivian?” Grandma asked.

“The owner wants me to meet his partner tomorrow. What could I say, ‘Sorry, but I’ll be handing out cookies to a sweaty mob in the Bronx?’ Mom joked. “This is a great opportunity. You two go. Have fun and keep good thoughts for me.”

Early the next morning Mom hopped a train to Connecticut and Grandma clutched the wheel while squeezing Mom’s Mercedes onto Villa Avenue where I could see the sun coming up over the Long Island Sound. The block was just as she had described. Blue canvas booths were lined up and down as far as I could see.

“Keep your eyes peeled, Candice. I don’t know where our booth is but there’ll be a sign hangin’ from it,” Grandma said, as she inched down the potholed street.

“Vinnie’s Brothers Pizza, Enzo’s Family Ristorante, The Crab Shanty, Joey’s Place, Tony’s Place, Paulie’s Place,” I laughed, reading the signs as we went by. “Stella’s Bakery! There it is on the left Grandma,” I said, seeing the sign pinned to the front of the booth.

“Oh, this spot is too much! Last year I got stuck way down at the end and felt like the ugly girl at the dance, but this is perfect!”

Grandma double-parked and we started unloading cookies and croissants from the trunk. Items were priced to move. Slices of cheesecake and croissants were seventy-five cents. Rainbow cookies were two for a quarter. Black and whites were fifty cents. The pre-sliced cheesecakes sat on beds of crushed ice so they wouldn't go limp in the heat. Vendors at over a four hundred booths constructed hibachi grills, stoves, soda machines and unloaded vans filled with cold cuts, sausages, kegs of beer and sacks of fresh bread.

"Grandma, what's that?" I asked, spotting a bunch of men erecting a telephone at the next corner.

"That's the Grease Pole. Every year it gets put up right in front of the Villa Bar. Then they cover it in grease."

"Why?"

"That depends who you ask. Some say the grease represents sin and if you can conquer evil and climb to the top of the pole you'll touch the hand of God. Most just think it's fun climbin' a fifty foot telephone pole smeared with oil."

"Has anyone ever made it?"

"I've known two in thirty years. The day after Charlie Tumazo climbed the pole his wife Francine found out he was havin' an affair. They didn't have the money to get divorced so she made him live in their basement. He's still down there now, twenty two years later. Francine said it's the closest to hell she could send him without actually killin' him."

"What about the other person?"

"Mario Bacali. Poor fella had to get his stomach pumped afterward because he kept wipin' the sweat off his face and swallowin' the grease on his hands." Grandma laughed and reached into the trunk. "Come on Candice, let's finish stockin' up. There'll be thousands of hungry mouths walkin' by our booth today. Thousands."

She was right. By 10:00 Villa Avenue was wall to wall Italians. For hours I stood with sweaty palms as customers pointed their fingers, telling me which cookie or pastry they wanted.

“This one?” I’d shout above the crowd.

“Bafongool! No! The big one back there!” they’d insist, irritable from the heat and rude elbows.

Guys walked around in muscle-T’s exposing their armpit hair. The girls wore tube tops and daisy dukes. Everyone was decorated in gold and the ones who thought they needed more got in line at Asanti Jewelers across from Grandma’s booth. They were selling it by the inch.

At 2:00 I took a break from handing out cheesecakes and squeezed past vendors simmering giant sausages in pools of fat, shaving lamb for gyros, roasting chickens on spits, burgers on griddles and deep frying zepolies.

One block ahead the crowd erupted with excitement. A man was hoisted above the mob.

I kept inching closer until I was standing in the shadow of the Grease Pole. Giant brushes fastened to sticks lay on the ground with their bristles shimmering in oil.

“We’ve got you Mickey. Just brace yourself!” someone shouted as a dozen people held his feet and legs.

This guy who must’ve thought he was Evil Knievel used his jeans to snare the notches while hugging the pole as he got ready.

“All right Mickey. You can do it now!”

Flexing his hips he clawed for inches with his fingertips. I could hear him grunting despite the noise from the crowd.

“Good start Mickey! Keep goin’ strong!”

“Push with your legs!”

The crowd’s enthusiasm propelled him higher.

“You’re lookin’ good, Mickey!”

Moments passed. He kept climbing. Every advance was heroic.

“Your twenty feet up now, almost half way! Hang tough Mickey!”

With every inch he climbed the anticipation spread. The crowd swelled to over a thousand at least. People were even shouting from the rooftops.

“I’ve never seen anyone get that high!” someone yelled.

“Come on! Come on!” I found myself rooting for him.

“Push with your legs Mickey! Take a break and hold on if you need to!”

Twenty five feet above the crowd he slipped with his feet scrambling as his arms hugged the pole. After steadying himself he gazed at the mob’s hysteria then turned and climbed.

“Keep fighting it Mick! You can do it!”

“Come on baby!” a girl yelled as she bounced on her toes. She kept making and unmaking fists and I couldn’t help but notice her two inch pink fingernails.

“Your twenty feet from the top now, Mickey. You’ve almost got it!”

Hundreds more converged shouting their support.

“Go for it Mick!”

“You can do it!”

“I think he’s got it!” I exclaimed, smiling at the person next to me.

“He’s ten feet from the top!” a man shouted from the roof of the Villa Bar. “Come on Mickey! It’s yours! Go for it!”

My heart was pounding. “I can’t believe this! He’s going to do it!”

“Oh no, he’s slipping!”

“Grab him!” his girlfriend shouted as he skidded down the pole, leaping into a bed of hands seven feet above the ground.

“Here’s one for the effort,” a friend of his said while thrusting a beer at him.

Mickey took a deep swallow. “Madone that was tough,” he gasped, staring up at the pole. “Sorry I didn’t reach the top for you Gina,” he said to his girlfriend.

“You did great, baby,” she replied, running her pink nails through his grease-smeared hair. And then another contender emerged to challenge the Grease Pole.

Just as this guy started climbing a sudden applause broke out behind me. A statue raised on the shoulders of six men was being carried down Villa Avenue. Rose petals fluttered in the air as kids pinned dollar bills to the red robe draping the statue.

“What’s that, Grandma?” I asked, after shoving my way back to the booth.

“That’s the statue of St. Anthony, the patron saint of travelers. The feast is named in his honor. Everyone’s payin’ homage that their ancestors made it safe from the old country to America. The rose petals are a sign of thanks and the dollar bills mean we got enough to share. You want to throw some rose petals?”

“No thanks,” I said, wishing Dean was here to see the Grease Pole and throw some rose petals. Since he wasn’t, I wouldn’t allow myself to believe in saints or in God. Most of the people here had ancestors who came to America by boat. Thank the captain for the safe journey across the ocean, I thought. St. Anthony had nothing to do with it.

I worked behind the booth the rest of the day. By 6:00 the crowd had thinned enough for kids to walk along the street playing kick the can and beg for free leftovers. A crew of men dismantled booths while others sprayed trash against the curb with garden hoses.

“I’m beat, Grandma,” I sighed while slumping into the car.

“Me too, honey. I could use a day off but tomorrow is Sunday so I gotta drag my bones out of bed at 4:00 and get ready for the after church crowd.”

“You should be on the commercial with the Dunkin’ Donuts guy,” I joked. But then I sat looking at her, remembering how she cared for Dean, and how she comforted me in the aftermath of his funeral. I thought about how she’s easing the humiliation Mom feels after being forced to move back here because life outmaneuvered her. She’s the type of mother we all wish for.

On Monday Mom had another job interview in Connecticut and left before I got up. It was after 10:00 when I finally crawled out of bed. I looked out the window at Grandma’s tiny backyard. The neighbor’s underwear hung on the clothesline next door.

The bakery was closed and I wondered how I would kill the hours until it was time for bed again. My camera was on the dresser. "I should've had this with me at the feast," I mumbled to myself. "What can I take pictures of now, Mr. Rossi's underpants?"

The floor boards creaked as I stepped down the hallway and into the room where Mom was repeating her life. Her bed was made with the pillows fluffed. Inside the closet her clothes were evenly spaced on the wooden slat. Her shoes were lined up on the floor as neatly as those medical instruments at the hospital. She grouped life into two categories: those concerns she could influence, like clothes and shoes, her hair and face. And what she couldn't, like destiny and burying her dead son.

After taking a shower and getting dressed in a pair of white shorts, pink halter top and flip flops I went downstairs.

"Hi Candice," Grandma said as she folded laundry on the kitchen table. "Are these bloomers yours or your mother's?" she asked, holding up a pair of pink panties.

"Those are mom's."

"I thought so. I want to make sure and put them in the right pile. You must be hungry. How about I scramble you some eggs?" she said while getting up from behind the table and giving me a hug.

"No thanks, Grandma," I said, noticing her matted slippers and faded green nightgown. "I feel like taking a walk. I'll be back in a little bit."

Our neighbors in New Jersey left their garage doors open but around here every house looked as if it was under quarantine. The drapes were drawn. The heavy wooden doors were closed and bolted. Garages were shut. These old Italians are nuts, I thought. What do they have against sunshine?

Tremont Avenue was overrun with funeral parlors, pizzerias, bakeries and bars. At the corner of Tremont and Barclay I walked by Fiddler's Elbow where men sat on stools and the smell of rotten beer spilled through the open window. Next door at D'Bari & Son's Funeral

Parlor a black and white picture of a guy in a New York Yankees uniform hung in the window. The name at the bottom said Lou Gehrig, The Luckiest Man on the Face of the Earth. So this is the guy they named the disease after, I thought.

At an auto body shop on the corner a bunch of mechanics sat around pulling slices of pizza from open boxes sitting on the hoods of cars. I felt their eyes on me and chewed the inside of my cheek, wishing I'd worn a cable knit sweater and jeans instead of shorts and a bright pink top. I wanted to run but my stupid flip flops wouldn't let me. So I stared straight ahead and marched as fast as possible without stubbing my toes.

"Hey, check it boys!" one of them shouted. "This one is ripe on the vine."

The others laughed from the backs of their throats. I kept moving and when I reached the corner I took off my flip flops and ran. "Why didn't I wear sneakers?" I shouted as the pebbles stabbed my feet. After making rights and lefts onto different blocks I stopped and looked at the street signs, unsure where I was. Looking for someone to help with directions just made me angrier. Every house had the curtains drawn and the doors closed. Not knowing what to do I kept walking and a few blocks later came across a park I recognized.

"I want out of here!" I yelled while sitting in one of the rubber swings. "Look at this place. Back home the parks have green grass and ponds and picnic tables. Here everything's rusted, the sandbox is overrun with weeds and the noise from LaGuardia and the Cross Bronx never quits. I hope Mom's interview is going good. Who cares if she's hiding her sadness behind makeup and forced smiles? I want her to do whatever it takes to get us away from this place."

"Who are you talking to?"

I gazed up with my teary eyes and saw a chubby little boy with a curious look on his face standing in front of me.

"Augie, don't you go talkin' to strangers," a girl shouted while holding another little boy in her arms.

She glared at me as if I had lured this kid over. Then she stomped forward with her huge breasts leading the way.

“Are you okay?” she asked, crouching down in front of him.

I noticed the choker around her neck. Lola, it said, in gaudy gold lettering. She stared at me, her face softening when she saw my tears. Then she lowered the other boy to the ground and took each one by the hand before walking away.

That night Mom arrived home thrilled that she had landed a job.

“I’ll be working at The Swanson Real Estate Group! They’ve got nine locations serving New England and have been in business twenty four years. Oh, you have no idea how relieved I am! It’s such a weight off my shoulders!”

“When do you start, Mom?”

“Wednesday. The commute is long but on the train ride home today I decided that I would drive up on the first day of my work week and drive home on the last day. That way I’ll have the car for my appointments. It’s not ideal, but at least I’ll be spending my days in Connecticut and not here in the Bronx.”

What about me? I wanted to ask. I’m stuck here, surrounded by people so unhinged they tape their curtains to their window frames for privacy.

A week later on July Fourth the heat landed with the force of a sledgehammer. From my bedroom window I saw Mr. McCormick lying on his cement patio roasting in the unforgiving Bronx sun. The sight of his fat milky white body made me grateful that I could draw the blinds.

That night Mom came into my bedroom before leaving for a party with Grandma.

“I already told you I don’t feel like going, Mom. I’m waiting for Jessie to call. Charlie’s going over her house to watch fireworks and the three of us are going to talk.”

“You’re going to listen to them watching fireworks, Candice? Talk with them tomorrow. Come on, the party will be fun.”

“A bunch of old people who I don’t even know are going to be chewing sausage and pepper sandwiches with their false teeth while asking me how I like living here. Yeah, that sounds like a ball.”

“Not everyone has false teeth, Candice. What’s gotten into you anyway? Why are you so angry?”

“Because I feel like it. Can’t I have a bad day? You’re happy about getting a job in Connecticut but what do I have to look forward to? I want to be back at our house in New Jersey.”

“And I don’t, Candice? Do you think I enjoy sleeping in that tiny twin bed every night? My father bought it for me when I was eight years old. I’m forty four now,” she argued, with her hands on her hips. “But I’m trying, Candice. I’m working hard to make this as temporary as possible for us. I’m just asking you to cooperate with me. Now are you coming, or would you rather sit here and sulk?”

“I’ll sulk.”

“Fine. You’re getting good at it.”

When they left I stumbled downstairs, relying on the TV for company.

I dialed Daddy and flipped channels. The TV blocked the noise of the fireworks outside. I surfed passed Family Ties, Newhart. Columbo was on. Grandma’s favorite. A man was getting choked with a telephone wire. I pictured some creep sneaking up behind Daddy and wrapping the cord around his throat. I slammed the phone down. The man on TV was dead, the receiver beeping on the floor. After the commercial break Columbo fumbled through the victim’s living room questioning suspects and smoking his mangled cigar. I hit the off button and began my own investigation.

I loved Grandma but her bedroom resembled an antique store. Its odor was thick and sturdy, as if it was an object itself. “Why open the windows at my age?” I could hear her saying. There were lamp shades draped with veils, a velour chair with wood carved legs and

embroidered pillows the color of grape jelly. Hanging on the wall next to her bed were black and white photos of dead people. I wondered who they were, and whose wall I would hang on someday.

A picture of my grandpa stood on the nightstand. Dean was named in his honor. He appeared a confident stranger in his Navy uniform. I glanced at his face as if he might wink at me. I knew he died while Mom was pregnant with me. She said he had written me a letter which she had in safe keeping, along with a hundred dollar bill he donated for my college education. She said I'd get both when I graduate from high school. I wanted that letter now. Maybe it was my genie in the lamp. My grandpa loved me without ever meeting me and here I am stealing glances at him, unsure what, or even how I should feel.

Downstairs I stood in the kitchen with my toes bent over the first stair leading to the cellar. I took cautious steps as the rotting wooden planks groaned beneath my bare feet. Behind a curtain on my right was the laundry area where copper pipes disappeared into the jagged cement wall.

On my left was a doorway leading to the rest of the basement which had been converted into a two-room apartment. A sunken mattress filled the first room. I fingered the bedspread and pillows, remembering my Uncle Sonny dying there after smoking too many Newports. Dean was just a baby but I can picture Uncle Sonny's hairless skull, the loose skin draping his skeleton like a pair of pajamas. Grandma spent months sitting on this mattress feeding her brother chicken broth and unconditional love.

Through the doorway next to the bed was the kitchen and living area. I yanked a string attached to a bare bulb in the ceiling. The dim light glowed over a small rectangular room I hadn't seen in years. The same tiny brown stove with just two burners was on my left. It looked like a toy. Next to it was a cracked porcelain sink, cabinets, and an old dented refrigerator. On the right was a table stacked with papers and a big green Frankenstein head sitting on top. I was

surprised it didn't give me the creeps. I just laughed, wondering what crazy story Grandma had to explain how that thing ended up down here.

Inside the cabinet were water glasses coated in film and mugs with the faces of famous entertainers. I grabbed Frank Sinatra by his left ear, the mug's handle, and stared at his three dimensional face. It was cut off just below the hairline. You poured the drink into his empty skull. Sammy Davis and Dean Martin and Elvis were up there too, grinning their goofy stage show smiles. I closed the cabinet door and then reopened it, stupidly wondering if their happy faces would disappear. If they did I'd run screaming, but they just sat there, smiling as if they were thrilled to finally have a visitor.

I opened the refrigerator. Inside were two six packs of Miller Lite and a half-empty bottle of White Zinfandel.

"What's Grandma doing with all this beer and wine?" I asked, smiling to myself. "Maybe Antonio has been down here. Maybe things are working just fine for both of them."

I wove a story about how a neighbor dropped by asking if we had any beer. If that didn't work I could just play dumb; "I don't know why a bottle is missing. I swear." Maybe they wouldn't even ask. I grabbed one of the bottles but the cap felt like it was cemented on. I had dents in my palm from squeezing. I tried the dishtowel next to the stove but it still wouldn't budge. Then I read the top; it wasn't a twist off. After finding an opener I filled up Frank Sinatra's head, his hair was a pillow of white foam. Sipping my way past the suds I leaned back on the couch and closed my eyes.

The beer tasted bitter but I drained Sinatra's head anyway and poured another bottle. As I drank the second beer a numbness came over me.

That's when I spotted the banana box under the table, one Mom and I had taken from the Grand Union. Why did she stash it down here? Stumbling over I fought the lid off and fell to the floor. She had organized these journals as if there was sanity during that time in our lives. The dates of each new entry were scribbled in the upper right hand corners. Results of Dean's

lab tests, what he ate, how often he urinated, shit, vomited, when there was blood, how much. I ran my fingers along the tattered spines, the volumes Mom and Daddy had kept while Dean battled.

I traced Daddy's handwriting. Threw up twice today, stated an entry from March third, 1980. Thumbnail size blemish appeared above right nipple, color of coffee.

I studied the amateur drawings they made of Dean's body surface area. X's marking the areas where new blotches had appeared. O's marking the ones that had been there for a week or longer.

Sitting on the floor finishing that second beer I wondered why Mom hid these from me. I knew they existed. I'd seen Daddy writing in them. Does Grandma know about these books?

I didn't want sober thoughts and considered getting another beer but the refrigerator wasn't within reach. From my seat on the floor I looked through the bathroom door and spotted the edge of the bathtub. An image of years ago appeared in my mind full blown: Dean shivering in the bath and covering his private area while I squatted on the edge of the tub, spilling soapy water over the bones protruding from his corpse-colored skin. Did Grandma sit on the rim of that tub bathing her brother the same way I had bathed mine? Dean was embarrassed to let me wash him, but in time the medication suppressed his energy to fight and he didn't know the difference. Was Uncle Sonny the same way with Grandma? We both lost a brother to cancer. I was comforted knowing that Grandma and I shared that bond.

Pushing myself up off the floor I stumbled over to the fridge. The cork was sticking out of the bottle and made a wet sucking sound as I extracted it. The wine sloshed in my Sinatra mug as my knees buckled. Dropping to the couch I slugged back the tartness and smacked my lips. Sitting with Frank's face between my legs and my head resting on the cushion I stared at the Elvis mug in the cabinet. It wasn't the fat, sweaty Elvis bloated from bingeing on junk food and drugs. It was the heartthrob Elvis.

The beer and wine rumbled and I burped and farted without warning. “Holy crap!” I laughed, startled at the noises coming out of me.

Swinging my legs to the couch I dropped the empty mug on the floor. An old record player sat on the table next to me. I switched the knob and dropped the needle, unsure whose voice would fill up the room. Collapsing back to the couch I enjoyed the crackle of the record spinning as I eyed that Elvis mug on the shelf. Then he sang to me. Love Me Tender. My heavy eyelids settled. I listened and imagined his swaying hips, his cocky smile. I pictured his handsome face, his jet-black hair tickling my nose as he kissed me. The music and the alcohol seduced me. “Why not,” I mumbled. “What else do I have?” My hand roamed down between my legs, Elvis’s hands, Charlie’s. My cotton panties were already so wet.

Energized by the orgasm, I drained the last of the wine into Sinatra’s empty head and swallowed. My stomach churned. The backwash bubbled in my throat. Hurrying to the bathroom I flipped the lid and collapsed to my knees. The wine and beer and spicy sausage Grandma added to the meat sauce spat out of me in a violent surge. I tried keeping quiet, scared Grandma and Mom would find me if they came home. Wiping my face with toilet paper I flushed the evidence and leaned against the bathtub laughing at how pathetic I was.

Outside I buried the bottles beneath an empty carton of eggs and yesterday’s Daily News.

Rain fell overnight. I woke up after 11:00 the next morning in my shirt and panties. Downstairs I found a note taped to the toaster: Bagels are in the bread box and garlic cream cheese is in the ice box. Come by the bakery anytime, honey. Tuesday’s are slow. Love Grandma.

My stomach heaved at the thought of garlic cream cheese.

Mom was at work. The living room was dark. Pushing back the heavy drapes I squinted in the daylight while flaking crust from my eyes.

On the front stoop a puddle of rainwater cooled my toes. Debris from the fireworks pasted the street. I gazed at the neighbors' homes. Curtains drawn, doors bolted. Annoyed and frustrated I drew the drapes, went upstairs and crawled back under the covers.

I thought about Charlie and Jessie. They never called me back. I was losing them and even though I knew it would happen, it didn't make things easier. I thought about my future and where'd I'd be a year from now, two years. But most of all I kept hearing Mom's voice from the night we buried Dean, "What did we do to deserve this, Candice? What in the world did we do?"

Chapter Eight

A fly walked sluggishly along the table. I watched it for a second before swatting it dead with a rubber spatula. It didn't even try to escape. The scorching August heat had sucked the energy out of every living thing.

After brushing the fly into the trash I sat down on a bucket of icing and picked the crusty dough from underneath my fingernails. I couldn't believe the summer was almost over. I had iced at least a thousand cakes and probably killed half as many flies. My best days had been each Monday when the bakery was closed and I roamed the streets with my camera and captured strangers' lives on film. Some of my favorite ones were of a business woman marching to the bus stop in pantyhose, a skirt, and their L.A. Gear sneakers. I loved the pictures I had of a little boy splashing in the cool water spouting from a fire hydrant. Occasionally I'd see a family coming out of one of the funeral parlors on Tremont Avenue. I knew photographing them was wrong but the emotions on their faces were so authentic I couldn't resist. Since my camera didn't have a zoom I had to get up pretty close but no one ever saw me taking their picture, which made me feel as if I was some kind of private detective.

But with only two weeks left of summer I was getting scared about starting school.

"You'll meet people easily," Mom had said with confidence. "You're a beautiful girl. You'll be welcomed into the most popular group in no time."

She'd been so busy with work she didn't realize that was the problem. I'd spent my summer alone, or with those strangers I watched from a distance through my camera lens. I didn't want to meet anyone. I just wanted to get out of here.

"How ya doin' with the cakes, Candice?" Grandma asked while walking over.

"Pretty good," I said, standing up. "I've got one more to ice then I'm done."

"Good for you. I just finished baking fifty cinnamon pecan loaves for Dominick's over on Arthur Avenue. You done sittin' on that bucket? I need to take a load off, honey. My dogs

are barkin' like you wouldn't believe," she said, kicking off her flour coated shoes and grunting her right foot onto her left knee.

Her feet were callused and covered with purplish veins. The nails were chipped and discolored. She caught me staring.

"Good thing I never wanted to model shoes for a livin', right?" she laughed, massaging her toes.

"Why don't you treat yourself to a pedicure at Carmine's Hair and Nails up the street, Grandma? Carmella and I can watch the bakery."

"I don't want that Carmine touchin' anythin' of mine, Candice. Teresa Zito went in there last month and caught him playin' with his prick in the bathroom. And she had an appointment for a facial of all things! God forbid. Teresa said it was the first time in forty-one years she'd seen someone else's thing aside from her husband Freddy's. No, I'll soak these bruisers myself when I get home," Grandma said as she stuffed her feet back in her shoes and grabbed a fifty quart bucket of Bavarian Crème that had just finished mixing.

"Take a break when you're done, Candice. Get yourself some fresh air."

After icing that last cake I washed my hands and headed into the eye-squinting sun. Antonio and his friends were sitting outside of Dino's Café sipping espressos. They had given up their jogging suits for undershirts and shorts with black socks and slippers. Their milky white legs with the varicose veins were dripping with sweat.

Down the street was Optimo Cigar, a store the size of a large walk-in closet that sold candy and cigarettes. The front door was propped open with a brick and the smell of the ink from all the magazines and newspapers seeped into the street. Walking inside I saw a fat Egyptian man with rolled up shirt sleeves and bushy forearms sitting behind the counter watching TV and eating M&M's one at a time. A wall of cigarette cartons loomed behind him. He didn't say a word as I walked down the narrow aisle which led to a tiny room in the back where three boys were playing Pac Man.

On my right, across from where this wooly mammoth ate his candy was a wall-rack of magazines. I scanned the titles but it was the girls on the cover of Hustler and Swank with their open mouths and prodding tongues that caught my attention. And that's when an issue of Playgirl lured me over.

On the cover was a gorgeous Swedish looking man stepping out of a swimming pool. His hands gripped the silver safety rails. The cement edge of the pool ended where my imagination began.

I felt that hippo behind the counter staring at me so I grabbed a copy of Life Magazine and started turning pages. There was an interview with Walter Cronkite, an article about some African tribe called the Bambara. Who cares? I thought, snatching the Playgirl from the rack and hiding it in the oversized Life Magazine.

Flipping the pages I stopped on Mr. September with his blue eyes and blond hair and... All he had on was a pair of red boxing gloves. My eyes widened with curiosity as I stared at Mr. September's dick. Grandma's friend Teresa had seen at least two in her life but I never even saw one. Is this one considered big? It looked so shiny. I knew they airbrushed models like Cheryl Tiegs in Vogue and Cosmo but did they do that to men's dicks in dirty magazines, too?

One of those boys startled me as he walked by to get more quarters.

After he passed I looked back at the page and felt a connection with Mr. September, as if when this picture was taken he was somehow thinking of me, hoping I would find him. I wanted to take him home and tuck him under my pillow but instead I abandoned him inside that Life Magazine and bought a roll of Lifesavers before I left.

Back at the bakery everything was erotic. Bathing donuts in a sugary glaze, icing warm cinnamon rolls and licking butter cream off my fingertips. All I could think about was going back to visit him.

“Hi!”

Startled, I spun around and saw Mom in the doorway. She looked beautiful, as if the heat had no affect on her.

“Candice, are you okay? Did I catch you in a day dream?”

“What? No.” I said, wiping the cinnamon icing off my forehead. “What are you doing here, Mom?”

“I took the afternoon off. I’ve got great news. Where’s Grandma?”

“She’s next door at the florist talking with Angela. What’s the good news?”

“I closed on a big house today! And to celebrate I thought the two of us could spend the weekend together in Boston. You can come to work with me on Friday and afterwards we’ll drive up. How’s that sound?”

“Are you kidding? I’d love it, Mom! I’ve never been to Boston.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that, Candice,” she laughed.

I spent all of Thursday night piecing my outfits together. My Gloria Vanderbilt jeans, black blazer and hoop earrings were a must so I threw those on the bed. “This is going to be so much fun I thought, while deciding on my other combinations. A weekend away, Mom and I really need this!

After choosing everything I wanted for the trip I put it all neatly into my suitcase. That’s when I glanced up and saw a picture on the wall taken years ago. It was a cheap automatic photo but represented how happy we all were at that time. Mom, Daddy, Dean and me were squeezed together as we plunged down the log flume ride at Great Adventure screaming for our lives before getting drenched.

I loved that picture for the same reason I liked taking candid shots of strangers on the street, it was unrehearsed. Back then we had each other but these days only three of us are left and I’d seen my father just once over the summer since he was working so much at the diner. We ate chicken fingers at Houlihan’s and brought flowers to the Brookside Cemetery in Lincoln Park where Dean was buried.

Birds were chirping in the trees that afternoon as I dropped to the ground while fingering the engraving on Dean's memorial: To Our Beloved Son and Brother... The dates were so unfair: 1972 – 1980. Daddy held me as I cried but he had no idea what was on my mind. As we kneeled together in the grass I stroked the pages of Dean's diary which I had stuffed in my bag that morning. I didn't care if keeping it a secret was wrong. I wasn't ready to share it. I'm still not ready.

"We're catching the Metro North train to Stamford at 7:46 tomorrow morning," Mom said, leaning into my bedroom. "I've got two appointments and hope to be on the road to Boston around twoish. I can't wait to spend the weekend with you, Candice."

I turned and smiled at her, then zipped my suitcase shut.

We reached the terminal at 7:40. Trains shrieked into the station filled with commuters stacked so closely together they could've inspected each others' pores. I turned to Mom, expecting to see her amazed at how busy this place was but like so many other commuters, she ignored the crowd and bought a copy of The Post at the newsstand. She had become a business woman.

Swanson Real Estate was a block from the Stamford train station at 545 Washington Boulevard. It was a single story brick building with a giant bay window pasted with pictures of homes for sale.

After loading our suitcases in the car Mom unlocked the front door and flicked the lights.

Movie sized posters of landscapes hung on the walls and metal inserts stuffed with brochures cluttered the lobby. A four foot high partition divided the waiting area from the office section filled with metal desks.

"A couple of my colleagues have the day off," Mom said as we walked towards the back of the room. "Pam and Allison had appointments this morning but might be back before we leave. This is me," Mom smiled, pointing to the desk in the far left corner. "What do you think? Aren't you proud of me, Candice?"

“It’s nice,” I said, unsure how to respond.

The gray metal desk and placemat calendar wasn’t her at all. I noticed the magnetized paperclip holder but didn’t say a word. A Swanson Real Estate mug filled with pens sat next to a paperweight in the shape of frog resting on its hind legs. Then I saw where she had scribbled appointments in pink ink, the real her. A picture of Dean and me stood on the corner of the desk. I almost missed it. She doesn’t want to forget! I said to myself. But then I glanced at the other desks. Except for the empty one on the right, each had pictures of family members and even pets. That’s when I realized Mom would never admit that her son in the photo was dead, or that she lives with her mother in the Bronx. What lie had she told about her marriage? A part of me wanted to ask, but then I told myself that half of the other people here were probably lying about something, too.

“My appointments are at 11:00 and 1:15, Candice. Between now and then I’ll be here making calls. There are magazines up front, or you can take a walk around. Summer Street has some cute shops and is the next block over. ”

“Can I call Daddy?”

“We’re only supposed to make long distance calls for business reasons, Candice.”

“How are they going to know? Don’t people move here from New Jersey?”

“Don’t start,” she said putting out her hand. “You talked with your father last night, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, but some customer was complaining about his meatloaf so he had to go.”

“Call him Sunday when we get home,” she said as the phone rang. “Good morning, thank you for calling Swanson Real Estate,” Mom said in that phony salesperson voice.

I laughed and motioned to the front door. She nodded while reaching for a pen. I walked out.

The day was just starting for the shop owners on Summer Street. A lady hosed down the sidewalk in front of Paisley's Hat Boutique while a woman at an antique store called Sage Rosemary & Thyme added dirt to the geraniums in her window boxes.

"Good morning," each of them smiled and said as I walked by.

"Good morning," I replied, jealous that their lives seemed so perfect.

The block was lined with giant oak trees and shops that had pastel shutters and striped awnings decorating their windows. The whole place felt like make-believe. I walked by a bakery called The Gingerbread House and saw a man pulling trays of enormous blueberry muffins right from the oven. The fresh buttery smell seeped right through his open doorway and into the street.

"God it will be so great when Mom and I move here. I hope it's soon. This place is happily ever after."

New England Jams and Preserves was on the corner and sold jars fitted with red and white checkered bonnets. Inside the display window a woman stacked a pyramid of different colored jams.

I stopped and watched her for a second then heard laughter coming from across the street at a place called Rocco's Coffee Shop – An Adult Day Care Center. The front door was propped open and inside I could see a bunch of fat men sitting on stools. They were talking so loudly I could almost hear their conversation from where I was standing.

"Interesting bunch, don't you think?" the woman who was stacking the preserves said as she walked outside.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"The ROMEO Club," she laughed. "It stands for Retired Old Men Eating Out. They meet there every morning. You see the third man from the left wearing the purple socks?"

"Yeah, I think so," I laughed.

“That’s my husband, Willie. He tells me he’s in there drumming up business for the store but those old timers aren’t the types to spread apple butter jam onto a cranberry scone. Anyway, at least I know where my man is,” she said smiling before heading back inside her store.

About an hour later I got back to Mom’s office and saw one other woman there. Mom sprang out of her chair to make the introduction.

“I’m so happy to finally meet you,” said Pam, a chubby lady with blond curly hair and a big toothy smile. “Your mom talks about you all the time.”

“Really?” I asked in surprise.

“Oh yeah,” the woman said waving her hand. “You’re her pride and joy.”

“We better get going,” Mom said, obviously feeling a little embarrassed.

“Good luck on the appointments and have fun in Boston!” Pam said, waving to us as we headed for the door.

“I didn’t mean to rush but Pam is a real talker,” Mom whispered as we stepped outside.

“It’s all right, Mom. Thanks for telling her about me. That makes me happy.”

“You’re my daughter Candice; of course I’m going to tell people about you.”

I wanted to ask what she said about Dean but I played it safe. “Who is your first appointment with?”

“Roger and Edie Wright. She’s pregnant with their third and they need a bigger house.”

Mom waited inside the four bedroom three bath colonial for thirty minutes before driving us around looking for a pay phone. She found one at a gas station and I could tell she was angry by the way she hung up.

“Pam said they didn’t even call to leave a message,” Mom complained as she slid back behind the wheel. “That’s why I like meeting clients at the office. If they don’t show up at least I haven’t wasted a trip.”

“Where’s the next appointment?”

“Fairfield. The man’s name is Dale something, Osborne I think. He came by an open house I hosted last week and wants a second look. He’s being transferred from Philadelphia and said it’s always been his wife’s dream to live in Connecticut. He wants to buy a house and surprise her with it.”

“Wow. He sounds like the perfect man for you, Mom.”

“A man who wants to buy his wife her dream home, are you kidding?” she laughed.
“He’s every woman’s perfect man.”

Twenty minutes later we arrived. The house had a brick face, a giant wooden front porch and a bay window that I assumed looked out on the park across the street.

“Isn’t it gorgeous?” Mom sighed, switching off the air conditioner and lowering her window.

“It’s perfect. How ‘bout we forget this guy and buy the house ourselves?” I said.

“Believe me Candice, if I could I would. This feels like happily ever after.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking Mom! I felt the same way walking past those stores on Summer Street this morning.”

“Yeah, it’s charming there, too. I love that little bakery, The Gingerbread House. They’ve got the best blueberry muffin I’ve ever tasted, although I’d never tell your grandma. Anyway, I better get inside and make sure the house is ready to show. I should be done around 2:00 and then we’ll take off.”

“Okay Mom. Good luck. I’m going to walk around.”

A bunch of young moms were sitting on benches in the park rocking their baby carriages and watching their older kids playing on the slides.

Across the street I saw a businessman marching up the walkway then ringing the doorbell. Mom appeared as if she was the happy wife greeting her husband home. She closed the door after he went inside and I shook my head and smiled. I got mad at her sometimes

because she was so good at bottling up her feelings but I was proud of her, too. She was determined to build a new life for us. Despite everything that's happened, Mom gave me hope.

Walking around for a while I kicked pinecones and thought about Jessie and Charlie. I hadn't spoken with them in over a month. Our last conversation was full of uncomfortable silences. I tried calling a few times after that but they were never home. The answering machine was keeping our friendship on life support but I knew it was over. Maybe I'll meet two new friends when Mom and I move up here I thought, imagining how great it will be once we get out of the Bronx and live in a town as beautiful as this one.

At 1:45 I glanced back at the house. Maybe Mom will make another big sale before we leave for Boston. That would be great, I thought. She'd be in the mood to splurge.

A few minutes later I saw that man hurrying down the sidewalk as if he was late for another appointment.

That was quick, I thought. It's not even 2:00 yet. Minutes later I pushed open the front door and stepped inside.

"Mom," I called out. "Mom, where are you?"

"Candice! Candice, get out of here! Run Candice! Run now!"

"Mom! What's wrong?" I yelled, hurrying up the steps and following her voice into the master bedroom. "Jesus!" I yelled in a single shudder of fright.

She was on the floor shivering; her blouse ripped open and her skirt torn between her legs. Collapsing to the floor I wrapped her in my arms.

"Mom," I cried, "it's okay." I've got you," I urged, squeezing her as she shivered.

"Candice I told you to run! Is he...? "Is he still here?" she gasped, burying her face in my shoulder.

"No Mom, no. We're alone. We're all alone! My God I can't believe this!"

She prayed into my shoulder. "Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name..."

“Talk with me, please Mom,” I begged, pulling back a little and raising her face to look in her eyes. “Oh Mom!” I cried, seeing that he had beaten her. I held her trembling in my arms.

“Candice, you need to call 911. Please. I need you to call them now.”

“Okay, Okay,” I said getting up but falling back down again and hugging her. Then I ran through the upstairs looking for a phone.

“There’s nothing up here Mom,” I screamed. “I’m going to check kitchen. I’ll be right back! I yelled, bounding down the steps and dashing into the kitchen. The house was empty so I rushed out the front door and ran to those ladies in the park.

“My mom needs help! She was attacked! Please! Help me! Please!”

Stunned and confused the ladies saw me and pulled their strollers closer.

“Please help me!” I begged. “My mom was attacked in that house across the street! Can someone call 911?”

“Oh dear God!” one of them exclaimed when she realized what had happened. “I’ll come with you,” she said, leaving her baby with a friend.

“I’ll call the police!” another woman shouted.

Mom was in the bedroom burying her face between her knees. Falling to the floor I cradled her as this woman dug through her pocket for tissues, wiping the tears dripping down Mom’s cheeks.

“Mom, I love you. Mom, can you hear me? Mom...?”

She had no words. She sat crying, conquered. I squeezed, desperate to protect her now. I gazed into her eyes. The left one was swollen shut. Suddenly I found myself needing to believe in God. I asked Him to reverse time, to make this just a bad dream.

Sunlight spilled through the bare windows. Sirens screamed down the street. Footsteps galloped up the stairs. Police and paramedics huddled around her.

“What was his name? What did he look like?” the police asked.

“I don’t know! I can’t think right now!” Mom spat between bouts of tears.

The paramedics examined her before two police officers escorted her outside.

Emergency vehicles hogged the street. Across the road people gathered.

Mom dropped onto the stretcher in the back of the ambulance. I climbed in and sat clutching her hand, searching for distractions.

We reached Norwalk Hospital in ten minutes. They forced me to sit in the waiting room but I couldn't sit. I stood, reeling with questions of what if. What if I waited in the house with Mom? What if I came back sooner? What if those ladies in the park saw something?

Picking at the buttons on my shirt I stumbled in and out the emergency room door, wondering how we would make it through tonight, tomorrow.

In the restroom I plucked tissues from the dispenser and cried in the end stall. My wet fingers skidded against the white tiled walls as Mom's voice throbbed in my brain. She must have been begging for mercy! She was praying as I held her. Praying to a God that never came! A God that doesn't even exist!

Back in the waiting room I kept picking up and dropping magazines. A boy sat with his mother as she pressed gauze over his right elbow. I could see them watching me, wondering what had happened.

Pacing around I stared at pictures on the walls, the TV. Julia Childs was baking a cake on Donahue. "Grandma! I have to tell Grandma!"

I tried softening the blow but...

"Mom is in the hospital Grandma!"

"Don't you kid around like that, Candice. I just took my high blood pressure pill."

"I'm not kidding. Mom was raped. This man, he...he hit her. He attacked her. I didn't want to tell you all this but I need you Grandma. I need you now. Please!"

"Jesus Mary and Joseph...! Where are you?"

"At Norwalk Hospital in Connecticut."

“Connecticut? Madone-ah-me! I haven’t driven further then Villa Avenue in thirty five years. How am I gonna find Connecticut? Okay, forget about it. I’ll borrow Carmella’s car. I’ll find my way. I’ll be there honey. I’ll be there. You take good care of your mother now.”

The phone went dead and I stood squeezing the receiver until my wrist throbbed. I needed to talk with someone else. I thought of calling Jessie or Charlie but was afraid of what they would say, and wouldn't say. I was about to call Daddy but Officer Sullivan pushed open the door leading to the hallway where I was standing. She had been the first cop on the scene.

“Candice, I've been looking for you,” she said. I went and wrapped my arms around her.

“My grandma is on her way,” I mumbled.

“Candice, I’m sorry to ask but this time is critical. Did you get a look at the man?”

“Just the back of him. I saw him walking into the house then hurrying down the street when he left! He wore a dark suit, that’s all I know. What happens now?” I asked, rubbing my head in disbelief.

“When the doctor is done examining your mom we’ll talk with her. In the meantime, Jennifer Woodward is in the waiting room.”

“Who?”

“The woman in the house with you when I arrived.”

I went and hugged her.

“I can’t tell you how horrified I am,” she said as we held hands. “Sitting in that park while something so dreadful was happening right across the street, I just... I can’t believe it.”

Jennifer stayed with me until Grandma came and I rushed into her arms.

“The police have my number,” Jennifer whispered. “Please call if I can help.”

Grandma and I sat waiting for an hour, holding hands and pacing.

“You can see her now,” a nurse finally told us.

We inched down the hall unsure what to expect. Mom was in a fetal position and wrapped in a dark blue blanket. Her hair was knotted. The right eye was open but the left was

closed shut. Her feet were sealed in plastic blue slippers. Her hands were stuffed beneath her chin.

She teared up when she saw Grandma. “Mom,” she whispered, reaching out for her.

“I love you Vivian,” Grandma cried, leaning over and kissing Mom on the forehead. “Oh my baby, I love you so much.”

The body is our only reality, I thought. Desires, material things...what do they matter when the body has been massacred?

The nurse came in with a Dixie cup of water and two blue pills. Mom pushed them between her lips and sipped the water, choking them down.

“How were the tests?” I asked, resting my hand on my shoulder.

She shook her head no.

Officer Sullivan came in and introduced herself to Grandma. Then she gazed at Mom.

“Vivian, a woman named Pam is in the waiting area. She said you two work together. Would you like to see her?”

“I don’t want to see anyone now.”

“Do you feel up to describing the man who attacked you?”

“Yes,” Mom said, trying to sit up.

“You lay there Vivian,” Grandma told her. “Let everyone else move for you.”

Officer Sullivan waved a skinny gray haired man into the room. He held a pad and case of sharpened pencils.

“This is Arthur Heinz. He’s a sketch artist with the Fairfield Police Department,” Officer Sullivan told us.

“Hello,” the man said as he took a seat. “I promise this won’t take long. All I ask is that you be as precise as possible.” Then he began.

As Mom answered each question the devil took shape on the page.

Grandma stood over the artist's shoulder. "Bastard," she mumbled, looking at the picture. "I hope they string him up by his you know what."

"His arms and chest were very hairy. That stands out for me," Mom told the sketch artist.

Why didn't I see him? I asked myself. I could have added detail. All I saw was the back of his head and that suit he wore as a disguise.

"What about his car?" asked Officer Sullivan.

"I was already in the house when he got there," Mom mumbled. "Candice, you were outside. Did you see the car?"

I ached to say yes but couldn't remember. "The block was lined with cars of people in the park. I don't know."

Grandma stood biting her finger. "How could this happen? Was this, what's the word...? Did he plan this or did this animal just attack her?"

"Real estate women are compelling targets for rapists and thieves," said Officer Sullivan. "The houses are often empty and it's usually in the middle of the day when neighborhoods are quiet. Sometimes these acts are spontaneous but Vivian said this man was at an open house she held last week, so it appears his actions were premeditated."

"What now?" Grandma asked.

"An investigation is underway. Vivian said his name was Dale Osborne, but that could be an alias. We're checking it against those in our database and the records at the real estate office. But this will help us find him," she said, pointing at the sketch the artist had drawn. "We also have photos at the stationhouse we'd like Vivian to browse through when she's ready."

After six hours at the hospital we came home. It was 10:30. The police were holding Mom's car until we could get it. Grandma heated up tea. I ran the bathwater.

"That's all I want," Mom kept repeating, "to scrub him off me."

The water was scalding as she eased into it. She wanted it hot. Hot enough to scorch her memory. I braced her arm as she lowered herself into the soapy water. Grandma placed the tea on the corner of the tub next to the shampoo.

“Oh! Your mother’s ass!”

“What happened, Grandma?”

“My hands are shaking so much I spilled half the tea in the bath.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Mom told Grandma. “It doesn’t matter.”

I turned to the mirror and watched our reflections through the steam. Three generations of women. No man here to help us. It was a man who caused it all. My mind raced. I didn’t know what to think.

Grandma sat on the edge of the tub and I squatted on the toilet. Mom leaned her head against the wall and smoked. Her pink nipples bobbed in and out with the water’s subtle waves.

The ringing phone shattered the silence as we waited for it to stop.

The welt on Mom’s face was pulpy from the steam and her left eye had unsealed a little. Emotions battled for my attention.

“Don’t say a word to your father about this Candice. I don’t want him to know. Promise me.”

“But Mom...”

“Promise me.”

“Okay. Okay.”

“I don’t want anyone to know. All I want is to bury this.”

“You’re gonna talk with the police though, right Vivian?” Grandma asked.

“I’ll talk with the police but I’m not looking at any mug shots,” Mom mumbled, wetting the tip of her cigarette in the water then laying it on the saucer next to the teacup.

“Vivian you have to...”

“Stop it Mom, please. Just stop. I want to rest. I want to rinse my memory. Don’t you understand that?”

Water splashed in the tub. Her battered eye unhinged further.

“Candice, I need to talk with Grandma.”

“But Mom...”

“Candice, please.”

“I’ll refill your tea.”

Outside I put the cup and saucer on the floor and leaned against the bathroom door.

“There’s no shame in what happened Vivian,” Grandma whispered. “Officer Sullivan said you were brave.”

“Brave? How was I brave? What was I supposed to do? He pinned me to the floor. The stench of that shampooed carpet is up my nose even now. And what about Candice, Mom? She saw me right after it happened! Jesus! What about her?”

Water sloshed and I knew she was crying. I pressed my cheek against the door, picturing her face, the tears clinging to her shivering cheeks.

“I want to escape this,” she cried to Grandma. “I want it to be five years from now. Ten years.”

I knew time would not grant her an escape. It’s been three years since Dean died and I relive it as if I’d just run from his bedroom with that needle in my hand. That’s why I know that every day for the rest of her life Mom will think of this savage, and Grandma and I will, too.

I heard water spilling off her and knew she was getting up. Grabbing the teacup I hurried to my room, waiting for her to come out. She stepped into the hallway in a towel, her broken face framed by a wall of pink bathroom tiles.

I opened my mouth to ask, hoping she would say yes. But she asked first.

“Candice, would you sleep in my bed with me tonight?”

We lay down together in that little room with Mom's feet hanging off the edge of the mattress. Our eyes were on the ceiling, hands laced between us, breaths rising and falling as one. Our sadness was the only sound.

I took her fingers and laid them over my heart. "I love you Mom," I whispered.

And then, in the darkness, she clenched my hand and began to cry.

Chapter Nine

Eleven days had passed since the attack. Mom jolted up in bed every night gripping the sheets. The first time it happened I was lying beside her and thought someone had broken into our room. Grandma had hurried down the hall seconds later.

With each night that followed we never knew what to expect. A few times Mom fell asleep quickly but woke up screaming hours later. Other times it took her two or three hours to finally pass out.

Tonight though, was the worst so far. I yelled for Grandma after Mom woke up in a panic. “I’m comin’!” Grandma had shouted as I heard her slippers skidding on the wooden floor. “Vivian hold on, I’m comin’!”

Together the two of us squeezed Mom, trying to block out those flashbacks. We learned that we had to keep talking in order to smother the sounds of his voice in her head. We had to keep touching her too, because she still felt his hands on her body.

The three of us huddled on the bed staring at the lights of the cargo planes landing at LaGuardia. Eventually Mom’s breaths stopped heaving and our voices grew quiet. Her head sagged against my shoulder as Grandma pointed at the clock. It was 4:30 in the morning. I nodded without saying a word, knowing she had to get dressed for work.

Mom and I were just starting to fall back asleep as I listened to Grandma holding the banister on her way down the stairs.

I woke up around 9:00 and made coffee and toast for Mom before leaving for the bakery, too. I hated going but Grandma and Carmella had important deliveries to make and needed me to watch the place.

Time alone was the worst. My imagination ate me alive. Grandma and Carmella had been gone for an hour when I was unwrapping sticks of butter and fantasizing about pouring gasoline over that bastard and tossing a match. I had visions of running into that bedroom and

strangling him with my bare hands. That's when I looked down and saw the stick of butter squished between my fingers.

If I'm imagining this what's running through Mom's head? I thought while scraping the butter off my fingers. What's she going to do when I start school tomorrow?

I wanted to scream but there was no one to hear me. I wanted to lash out and do something reckless. That's when I noticed the sheet tray of lemon custard donuts on the waiting-rack next to me. The sugary smell was so thick I could taste it in the air. Stuffing my mouth was a rabid impulse. The gluttonous swallows sedated my panic. The thick swigs of milk I took to wash it all down numbed me as I collapsed onto an overturned bucket while picturing Mom rubbing her skin raw in the shower days after her attack.

Sitting there shivering, I waited. Five minutes went by. Ten. I felt my stomach rumbling. I didn't plan to binge but I didn't resist it either. Jumping up I hurried to the bathroom and stuffed my middle finger down my throat. My stomach clenched but the donuts wouldn't come up.

"Hello? Is anyone here?"

I caught a glimpse of my bloodshot eyes in the mirror and the lemon filling caked around my lips.

"Hey, is anyone working or what?"

Ignoring the customer's voice I glanced at the mop bucket and imagined slurping that filth. Shoving my middle finger further and further my muscles convulsed as the donuts spilled out of me in a stomach splitting wave.

"What's goin' on back there?" I heard a girl's voice as she peeked around the corner.

"I'll be out in a second!" I shouted, looking over my shoulder.

After splashing my face with cold water I wiped my mouth and staggered out from the kitchen. That's when my jaw dropped and I came face to face with the girl I'd seen in the park

earlier this summer. Her little brothers were with her. I remembered the one boy's name: Augie. Her eyes widened as if she recognized me, too.

"Can I help you," I asked, catching a glimpse of her gold chain. "Lola," it said, in the gaudy gold lettering I remembered.

"Two black and whites."

I placed the cookies in a box and looped it with string.

"One dollar," I said in a hoarse voice.

She pulled a crumpled single from her pocket and laid it on the counter. "What were you doin' back there anyway, hackin' up a boot?"

"I drank some curdled milk by mistake."

"You sounded like a friend of mine who chewed tobacco on a dare."

"Do I look like someone who chews tobacco?"

"With those teary red eyes and drool on your chin you do."

Then she grabbed the box by the string and left.

Lying in bed next to Mom that night I thought about how the vomiting had relieved me, how I didn't think about a thing while in the midst of it. But now I thought about school. The alarm was set for 6:30. The only guarantee tomorrow offered was that it would end. But as Mom's head began thrashing on the pillow I was reminded that not even thick blankets and a loving touch offered protection against your nightmares.

The shrieking alarm went off at 6:30 and I saw that Mom was already up. My first day of school hadn't even started and I already hated it. After turning on the shower I stood in a haze of hot water and steam, wishing it was 3:00.

Downstairs Mom was on the couch drinking tea and watching Good Morning America. Grandma had left for the bakery hours ago.

“Hey Mom, how ‘bout we get pedicures this weekend?” I said, plopping down next to her with my socks and shoes in my hand. It would be a nice treat. I mean, you haven’t left the house since...”

She looked at me without saying anything for a few seconds.

“Maybe. That would be kind of nice. There’s that place Carmine’s up on Tremont.”

“No. Carmine’s is off-limits. Grandma told me about another place. I’ll call now and make an appointment.”

“Candice, stop procrastinating. We both knew this day was coming. Now here, take some lunch money,” she said, handing me two dollars.

Minutes later I walked out the door as Mom waved from the couch. After slipping the lock into place I tested the handle, wishing I could stay. I envied the doormat and the mailbox, anything inanimate.

I trudged down the street lugging my knapsack and wearing my navy blue pleated skirt and white shirt. I thought about the newscaster reporting Mom’s rape. Viewers seeing the clip gave it a fleeting thought. No one worries about Mom except Grandma and me. We suffer the nights and days, the panic attacks. If it wasn’t so sad I would’ve have cracked up when she screamed at the click of the dishwasher changing cycles.

It was obvious unexpected sounds turned her skin to gooseflesh, but she couldn’t stand silence either, which is why she began tapping her nails or clinking a spoon against the side of a teacup.

I’d been making a mental list of her new habits since the night she came home from that hospital. Along with needing noise to prop up her sanity she had developed an obsession with the bed sheets. Each morning she peels off the top sheet and pillow cases then fights off the fitted sheet before pushing it all into the wash.

I thought about those quirks as I walked to school knowing Mom had eight hours until I’d make it back home. While waiting for the “Walk” signal on the corner of Baychester Avenue I

spotted a rack of packaged desserts next to the checkout inside a convenience store and thought of the donuts at the bakery yesterday. The Chinese man behind the counter smoked his Pall Mall and didn't seem to think it was odd when I put a box of Twinkies and quart of milk on the counter. He didn't say a word when I told him I didn't need a bag.

Hiding behind the dumpster I chewed through that first spongy log. The yellowy cake combined with the milk slid down my throat like batter. Standing there for a second I looked at the Twinkie sticking to my fingertips. I knew it was wrong. I wanted to stop but couldn't. Nine Twinkies later I was catching my breath while leaning against the dumpster. Seconds later I jabbed the rear of my throat and inhaled the stench of that garbage but nothing came up.

Then I looked at my watch. It was 7:47. I had eight minutes to get to homeroom.

Rushing from the parking lot I wiped my lips and dug out wet clumps of Twinkie from the corners of my mouth. Rounding the bend onto Needham Ave at 7:54 I hurried up the Spellman High School steps and through a set of bronze double doors. My mind raced from nerves and sugar. At 7:55 a bell blared and hundreds of kids spilled through those same doors and into the wood paneled lobby where I was trying to figure out which way to go.

I poked someone's shoulder. "Excuse me. Do you know where room 104 is?" I asked.

Everyone was pushing and shoving. This girl didn't even realize I was trying to get her attention.

The green painted hallway forked right and left and I looked for numbers on the doors but didn't see any. I took a chance and made a right. My head pounded from the sugar and all the people yelling back to school hellos.

Finally I spotted room 101 and figured my homeroom was three doors down. Thank God it was.

"Hello, I'm Candice Morgan," I said to the enormous teacher wedged behind her desk.

"I'm Ms. Skankerella, the speech teacher," she said while putting her hair up into a bun.

"Are you new?"

My mouth unhinged at the sound of her name but I quickly closed it. “Yes, I am.”

She consulted the seating chart. “You’re in the second row, second seat,” she said pointing with her pen.

She spoke with a lisp. Spit sprayed from her mouth whenever she said the letter ‘s.’ And she’s the speech teacher? I thought.

I took my seat and stared at a poster of Abe Lincoln curling away from the cinderblock wall. I sat alone worrying about Mom until 8:05 when the bell rang and the hallways swelled with gridlock.

“Be careful,” some girl warned as I climbed the stairs. She pointed down. A bunch of freshman boys were huddled at the bottom of the steps trying for a glimpse of my panties.

“Jesus!” I said, holding the hem of my skirt. “Thanks.”

“This school is full of perverts. Watch your ass. Literally.”

Mr. Delancey, the chemistry teacher, was cursed with a neck-snapping twitch that sent his head jerking abruptly backward. It was like someone kept swatting his forehead with a ruler and he never saw it coming.

“Despite its unfavorable reputation, chemistry class can be...it can be fun,” he stuttered as his neck jerked backward. “I’m passing out goggles and want to show you how to light the...the...the Bunsen burners, so you don’t burn down the school and land me in the unemployment office.”

But when his head snapped against the blackboard and everyone started laughing Mr. Delancey warned us to memorize the Chart of Periodic Elements if we wanted to pass the punishment he was giving us on Friday.

By third period I had walked by the phone booths three times but didn’t have a chance to call Mom until lunch.

“Hello?” she answered in a curious voice.

“Mom, are you okay?” I asked, holding the door of the phone booth closed.

“Candice? Where are you?”

“I’m on lunch break at school. How are you?”

“That counselor called again.”

“You should talk with her,” I said.

“You should talk with her too,” she shot back.

“I will, Mom. Let’s go together.”

“Candice, I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Do what?”

“Be alone. I thought I could handle it but then the mailman was putting envelopes in the box and I dialed 911 before I realized who he was.”

I started shaking and faced the corner so no one would see me crying through the glass.

“Candice...are you there? Candice?”

“Yes, I’m here,” I said, trying to make my voice sound convincing.

“I need to try and lie down,” she sighed. “Good luck the rest of the day. Please come home right after school.”

After hanging up I dug through my purse for change and bought a bag of Fritos corn chips and pack of Hostess cupcakes for lunch. In the corner stall of the girl’s bathroom I devoured every word Mom said.

The other girls smoked cigarettes and gossiped about someone named Tracy Biggs who was in the Spofford Juvenile Detention Center after getting her second DUI.

Rapes, teenage alcoholics, what the hell is happening in this world? I flushed the toilet and vomited as the gurgling water blocked out the sounds of my puking.

As I stepped out, a few girls stood leaning over the sinks applying makeup and spraying air freshener. One of them turned to me. “The girls’ locker room is more private. That’s where we go,” she said while shoving mascara in and out of its tube.

“Thanks,” I said after a moment of silence. Part of me wanted to start a conversation because I needed someone to talk to but I couldn’t care less about her or that alcoholic friend of hers, so I walked out.

Art was seventh period. Eight paint-splattered wooden tables filled the room along with easels, stacks of old sketchpads and drawers filled with brushes and tubes of paint.

“I’m Ms. Brill. Welcome to Art Basics,” the teacher announced. “Everyone please grab a seat.”

Twenty clear plastic cups were on her desk, each filled with red, blue or yellow paint. She lobbed three tennis balls to random tables of students and followed that by tossing two plastic red apples and three blue plastic balls.

“If you’re sitting at a table with a tennis ball go get yourself a cup of yellow paint. Those with an apple take a red cup and if you’ve got a blue ball then, I think you know what to do.”

I went up and grabbed a cup of yellow.

“Red, blue and yellow are the primary colors,” said Ms. Brill. “That means every other color originates from a combination of these three.”

“What about black and white?” someone asked.

“Those create shades, they’re not colors,” she responded. “Today you’re going to pair off with someone holding a different color and work on a twenty-by-thirty inch paper canvas. You can blend the colors to create a third or add black or white to influence the mood. You’re not being graded on this so don’t worry about being the next Picasso. Just get a feel for pushing paint around.”

Ms. Brill walked through the room pointing. “You and you. You and you.”

I hadn’t noticed her until we were paired together. I recognized the gaudy gold chain around her neck. Lola.

We met in the middle of the room and walked to a blank canvas in the back right hand corner. She held a cup of blue paint.

“You work at Stella’s Bakery on Tremont. Didn’t I see you there yesterday puking up a layer cake or somethin’?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “I drank some curdled milk. Remember? I told you.”

“Curdled milk. Okay, whatever you say.”

Her Bronx accent was thick and self-assured.

“My grandmother owns the bakery. I’m Candice Morgan.”

“Lola Gutierrez.”

Her skin was coffee-colored and her brown eyes were topped by deep black brows. She had jet black shoulder length hair and smelled like cocoa butter. Her hands could butcher meat but were still pretty. She looked like a girl who could defend herself. “Have you ever painted before?” I asked.

“Graffiti on a few train cars in the rail yard off Pelham Parkway when I was younger. Oh, and my x-boyfriend’s car. How ‘bout you?”

“Just my face,” I said, trying to match her self-assurance.

I couldn’t believe she painted graffiti. All I ever did was stay inside the lines. I was dying to know what it was like painting on public property but was afraid she’d want a new partner if I asked such a naive question.

“All right everyone. There’s only one rule: use your primary colors first then blend the two together.”

Lola handed me a brush and we dipped the bristles into our own cups and applied thick strokes. Icing cakes all summer made the motions familiar.

Something about her was so interesting. I don’t know if it was her self-confidence but I was much more interested in her than painting, so I started asking questions. “Where are you from?” I said while holding the brush in my hand.

“Right here. Four blocks away on Marion Avenue.”

“Those two boys you were with yesterday, are they your brothers?”

“Yeah, Augie and Louie. I was a latch key kid most of my life but I look after the twins since my mom don’t get home until after seven. She’s the head cook at The Bainbridge Nursing Home in Hunt’s Point. I got a brother Anthony, too.”

“Three brothers, that’s a big family.”

“It’s basic, but my mom keeps us hand in hand,” she said, focusing on the canvas.

“What’s your father do?” I asked, looking at her.

“Couldn’t tell you. I’d like to see his name in the obits but he’s still on his feet, far as I know.”

It took me a second but I realized the obits were the obituary pages. I didn’t know how to respond other than letting out an uncomfortable laugh. “How come you’re telling me all this? I mean, we just met,” I said, watching her eyes for a reaction.

She smiled and stopped painting to look at me. “No we didn’t. We’ve known each other since yesterday. Anyway, don’t flatter yourself. What have I told you, that I got three brothers? That my mom’s our rock and that my father’s a bigger drip than the stoop monkeys you see hangin’ on the corners? Around here that’s in character. What about you? I spotted you wiffin’ the crowd in the lobby when the bell rang this mornin’. You looked like some kind of stray cat. Shouldn’t you be swimmin’ in your backyard pool with the other cheerleaders and braggin’ about your cover on Seventeen Magazine? How’d you end up standin’ here in the Bronx holdin’ that cup of yellow paint?”

“I lived in New Jersey until my parents got divorced. My father’s the head chef at a fancy restaurant in Manhattan and my mom manages a real estate firm in Connecticut. We’re moving there in a few months after she finds the right house for us.”

“Connecticut? My mom says you need a gold card just to cross the state line.”

Lola stepped back and studied the painting. “Got any brothers or sisters?”

“...No.”

“I see the ocean,” she said. “What do you see in this?”

“I don’t know, splashes of yellow and blue,” I said, angry at myself for lying to her.

“That’s it? Where’s your imagination?” she asked, blending our paints into a rich forest green and adding an island to an ocean only she could see. Then she dabbed the leftover yellow on the aqua, creating sun-glimmered water.

“Impressive painting girls,” Ms. Brill commented. “Why an island, what’s the connection?”

“I want to visit one,” Lola said.

What could I say; that I feel like one? That Mom is an island now; bound by her own fears and cut off from the world. “It just kind of came together like this,” I replied.

“Take the painting,” Lola said at the end of class.

“No. You did most of the work.”

“It’s blue. Red is my color,” she replied, nodding as if I should know.

I looked at it again and thought of Mom sitting in Grandma's dark living room counting the seconds by tapping her nails.

“Thanks Lola,” I said, taking it off the easel as the bell rang.

“Where are you going now?” I asked.

“Saint Barnabas. I gotta walk the twins home and feed ‘em their snacks.”

“Hey Lola, I saw you in the park over the summer you know.”

“Yeah, I know. You were spooked then too, same as yesterday at the bakery. For someone movin’ to lilywhite Connecticut you got too much agita. Relax. You’ll only be here a few more months. Consider it Purgatory,” she laughed

I wasn’t sure what to say but I wanted to be her friend. Maybe I just needed someone bad enough to take the chance.

“Lola, I know we’ll see each other around school but how about we go shopping sometime? What do you think? Would you like to go shopping with me?” I asked, hoping she would say yes.

“Maybe,” she smiled. “Don’t forget to hang that painting. Maybe I’ll be a famous artist someday and you can sell it and make yourself rich.”

Then she smiled, turned and walked away.

Back home Mom was lying on the couch in the dark watching General Hospital. She squinted from the sunlight when I opened the front door. “Can you shut that, Candice?” she asked.

I closed the door and dropped my bag on the floor.

“How was school?”

“It was actually okay. I have a present for you Mom,” I said, turning on the light and holding the painting in front of me. “I made it with this girl, Lola. Don’t you think it’ll brighten up the room?”

“I was raped, Candice. If I wanted the room brightened up I’d open the door or pull back the drapes but I can’t because I’m afraid.”

“I’m sorry Mom. I thought the painting would... It’s a band-aid I guess. I was hoping it would make you happy.”

“I’m happy you had a good first day Candice,” she said before tucking a pillow under her arms and closing her eyes for a moment.

Upstairs I thumb tacked the painting to the wall above my bed and collapsed on the mattress. I was so tired from getting up with Mom every night that I fell asleep within minutes and woke up hours later from a dream I just missed remembering.

It was dark outside. The clock read 9:34 p.m. “Mom! Where is she?” I mumbled, throwing back the blankets and hurrying down the hall. I found her asleep in bed hugging a pillow. Grandma was already in bed, too.

Not wanting to wake them I crept downstairs into the basement and sat on the musty bed where my uncle had died. The room was dark but the buttons on the phone glowed green when I

picked up the receiver. “Hold on,” some man said when I asked for my father. He dropped the phone and I listened to the chaos of the diner at night.

I could have reminisced with Daddy until the morning but he couldn’t talk. “I’m sorry Candice,” he said above the noise. “I’ve got a full house tonight. I’ll call you tomorrow though, I promise. Sweet dreams, honey. I love you.”

“Goodnight Daddy,” I said, wishing he had asked me about my first day at school.

After hanging up I listened to the rain drumming against the windows. Then I tiptoed upstairs and crawled into bed with Mom, prepared to rescue her from the next nightmare. I knew it wouldn’t be long. Her hand was fisting the sheet.

Chapter Ten

It was Tuesday morning, January twenty eighth. Yesterday marked the five month anniversary of Mom's rape. Her face had healed but the scars were still fresh within, invisible to the world, invisible to everyone except the three of us.

At 7:30 I left for school. My knapsack contained the four essentials I'd begun bringing with me each day: spare change for the phone, a collapsible toothbrush, mini tube of Crest and cinnamon Tic Tacs. On the worst days I vomited two or three times. On the best days I indulged only once.

This morning I threw up on the way to school, and just before Mr. Garibaldi's third period theology class.

He brought up the topic of abortion immediately after the bell rang. Some kids were still taking their seats. He talked at us while staring out the window so I knew he was bored and needed something to keep himself interested.

"Is abortion moral? Immoral? Are there mitigating factors?" he asked.

"Of course it's moral," declared Jonathan Akers. "Have you seen the teenage whores pushing their baby carriages down Hunts Point Ave?" he said, pointing out the window. "My dad's a cop. He says those moms have kids to get an extra government handout and that someday those babies will end up on welfare themselves, or on drugs and in jail. My dad says that aborting those kids will stop the cycle. He knows how to solve society's problems."

"By slaughtering human beings before they're born?" exclaimed Ralph Little, President of the YCFC - Young Catholics For Change. "Who's your father's mentor – Stalin? Abortion is wrong, period. The child can be given up for adoption and an innocent life can be saved."

"But Roe versus Wade granted women the right to choose," Julie Bennett argued while sitting up her chair.

“And that makes it moral for some executioner in a lab coat to grip a baby’s skull with metal forceps and yank it into a plastic bag?” replied Ralph. “Thou Shall not Kill. It’s the sixth commandment,” he stated, thrusting his hand in the air.

“But you’re not killing a human being,” Julie replied. “In the first month the fetus is like a tadpole. It’s like something you’d dissect in biology.”

“Really?” asked Ralph. “You were that small once, Julie. Would you like to be dissected in biology class then tossed in the trash next to some snotty tissues? So many women use abortion as form of birth control and see themselves as the victim when in fact their baby is the true casualty! What those women should do is suffer the penalties of their actions!”

“What actions?” I shouted, unable to sit back after that comment. “What if a woman was raped? Do you expect her to nurture a baby for nine months when the father is some animal who attacked her? Would you expect your mother to suffer those consequences, Ralph? What about your sister? All you’re doing is blaming the woman! What about the man? What about you? Would you sacrifice a college degree for a career at Burger King if you knocked up your girlfriend? Or would you kill that baby instead? Tell us Ralph! Would you accept the penalty of your actions?”

The class was stunned by my outburst. Usually I sat there quietly and talked only when spoken to, but I couldn’t hold back. Most people applauded my argument. A few sat on their hands searching for a rebuttal. I knew they assumed I had been raped, gotten pregnant and aborted the result. I was too keyed up to care.

Lola was there. Her nods of approval were encouraging. Despite the odds, she and I had become close friends.

“You’re harder than I thought,” she said when we met after class. “You’re an uphill battle.”

“He touched a nerve,” I said, waving off her comment.

“From the way you unloaded on him it sounded more like he severed it.”

That debate set off flashbacks. Mom had a breakdown yesterday on the five month anniversary of the attack. I pictured her pacing the house now. I had to call. I needed to check if she was okay.

"I'll catch up with you later Lola," I said before hurrying to the payphone. The line was busy. Who could she be talking to? I hung up and dialed the bakery. It was busy. Okay, Grandma's probably on with her I thought, while shoving open the phone booth door and rushing to study hall which was starting in thirty seconds.

Diane Bristow, a cheerleader with flowing red hair and smooth ivory skin handed out matchmaking quizzes at the start of study.

"The entire sophomore class is participating," she announced. "It's for fun, in addition to seeing with whom you are most compatible. There are twenty questions and the results will be promptly distributed during homeroom this Thursday morning."

I planned on doing my English homework but this social experiment was a lot more interesting.

That night over dinner I asked Mom and Grandma a few of the questions.

"Have you dwelled on an embarrassing moment you experienced in public?"

"No, who cares what some nobody thinks?" Grandma replied. "None of that matters."

"I sure have," Mom said, "many times."

Both Grandma and I nodded at each other and laughed, knowing that was so true. Mom even smiled, poking fun at herself a little bit

"How many outfits would you try on while getting ready for a date with someone you really liked?"

"As many as necessary," Mom laughed. "Sometimes I'd get lucky and the first or second would be perfect but usually it was at least three or four."

"Grandma, how about you?"

“I had two outfits in my day and one was usually dirty from the night before,” she said, smiling as if she was thinking back to those days. “What questions did they ask the fellas?”

“The same ones I think.”

“Come on, you. For the life of me I can’t remember what shirt your grandpa had on when we met, and I’m sure he didn’t put any thought into it. All I know is the second I laid eyes on him I said to my friend Gloria I said, you see that fanny magnet over there, I’m gonna marry him someday. She laughed at me but I was right.”

“A fanny magnet is the man who all the women are after, Candice,” Mom said, touching my hand.

“And you got him, Grandma. Good for you.”

“Of course I got him. I made mouths water in those days, Candice.”

In homeroom Thursday morning my matchmaking quiz was stapled to a copy of Todd Yeager’s. I knew of him. He sat across from me in Geometry chewing his fingernails and spitting the bitten pieces to the floor.

After third period English I bumped into Lola outside the cafeteria and showed her the results of my love quiz.

“I sat next to this jackass in Spanish last year,” she said. “He ate his fingernails the whole semester. When our teacher, Senorita O’Leary asked if anyone spoke Spanish I told her I was half Puerto Rican. That’s when this bonehead took his hand out of his mouth long enough to ask me if I was born in Spain or if my family moved here when I was younger. Can you believe that?” she laughed. “Anyway, I better move out. I gotta go squeeze my knocks into a sports bra before gym class. Ms. Morrie is makin’ us run laps. I’ll see you later, Candice.”

“See you, Lola.”

After eating my tuna sandwich and debating whether or not I should call Mom again, a heavy hand flopped onto my shoulder. Spinning around I stared up at Patrick Norris’s hairy nostrils.

“You’re Sponged,” he stated.

“What?” I said. “Why?”

“You can’t ask questions when you get Sponged.”

“But Patrick, I didn’t mean anything at the pep rally when you asked me out. I just can’t _.”

“Shut up. You’re a sophomore and I’m a senior and its Spellman tradition. That’s why.”

I sighed as the bell rang. Students fled the cafeteria as if they’d heard gunfire.

Tables were covered with puddles of milk, half eaten sandwiches, crumbs and coleslaw.

“You better hurry up or I’ll Sponge you again tomorrow, Candice.”

Two girls and five boys were already running soggy sponges over the tables. After dropping my English book on a chair I dunked my hand into the bucket of suds, grabbed a sponge and started attacking the filthy tables as fast as I could. Cheetos, corn chips and unfinished tuna sandwiches all got shoved to the ground.

“Don’t forget the floor!” one of the seniors shouted.

I glared at Patrick and his friends standing around the Coke machine united by rude comments and pompous attitudes.

“One minute till the bell,” they warned. “Better get out those mops and brooms or you’ll all get JUG.”

JUG stood for Judgment Under God, Spellman’s nickname for detention. I figured the name was coined by some hard little nun who hadn’t cracked a smile in years and got off on beating students’ knuckles with a ruler.

Two blasts from the school bell signaled the start of fifth period. The boys shoved the mops and brooms along the aisles while the two girls stooped with dustpans. I washed my last table, catching crumbs in my hand.

“Good job,” one of the seniors said while flinging our books onto a table.

Rushing forward we dug through them desperate to make class on time. After finding mine I sprinted down the hallway and spun the combination on my locker. “Come on!” I yelled when it wouldn’t open. “Come on!”

Trying the combination again I jerked the handle. “Jesus! Why me? Why now?”

Slowing down I spun with precision then pulled the handle. The locker vibrated open on its metal hinges.

After grabbing World History off the top shelf I shoved my English book inside and ran to class. Mr. Hutchins was pointing at a map of Europe when I entered. Thirty pairs of eyes were on me.

“Did someone get Sponged, Ms. Morgan?” Mr. Hutchins asked smiling. “You know the rules,” he said, peeling a pink slip from the pad on his desk. “You can take JUG today or tomorrow, which will it be?”

“Today, I guess. Thank you.”

What am I, a moron? I thought while walking to my seat with the pink slip. Why did I just thank him for giving me detention?

Sitting through JUG that afternoon I tried not to stare at the delinquent sitting next to me but couldn’t help it. He looked just like Charlie and I couldn’t get him and Jessie out of my mind.

What are they doing? I wondered. I hadn’t talked with either of them since before Mom’s rape, since before I’d started vomiting. How many pounds of food have I thrown up since we last spoke? They wouldn’t even know me now.

I was dismissed from JUG at 4:00 and called Mom.

“I’m doing pretty good today, Candice. Grandma is on her way home. Where are you?”

“At school. I needed to use the library. I’m leaving now but want to stop at Lola’s. Is that okay?”

“Sure, just button up. It must be freezing outside.”

In the five months we've know each other Lola and I had never been to each other's homes. She's asked me over dozens of times but I always had an excuse, afraid that if I went I'd be forced to invite her to Grandma's and my lies would be exposed. But after seeing that kid in detention and thinking about Jessie and Charlie I knew I couldn't wait any longer. I had to tell Lola the truth. She was my only friend and I couldn't risk losing her.

Walking up her front stoop I saw that the heavy wooden door was closed but I knew she was home. She had to baby sit her little brothers and I figured she might be painting, too. Lola had turned out to be a fantastic artist and Ms. Brill encouraged her to paint as much as possible. "It could be your ticket to a college scholarship," she had said after Lola finished this incredible painting of a woman holding her face in tears. In private Lola told me it was a memory she had of her mother.

I rang the bell.

"Whaddya want now?" Lola yelled as her heavy footsteps pounded towards the door.

"Lola, it's me. I want to talk with you."

"Candice?" she said swinging the door open. "Jesus Christ, it is you. Sorry. I thought you were Billy Kuhn again."

"Who?"

"This kid with a lazy eye who lives above the luncheonette down the corner. He's always comin' over and askin' me out."

"With a shirt like that it's no wonder. That gold chain looks like a snake slithering between two giant rocks."

As she looked down at her chest her chin disappeared inside her cleavage. "I got my mom's genes, what can I tell you."

I smiled and followed her into the kitchen.

"Hey Mom, come on up!" Lola yelled into the stairwell leading to the basement.

"Candice is here. I want you two to meet!"

“In a second! I gotta strain my macaronis!”

“Your mom’s here? I thought she worked late at the nursing home.”

“She does, but she got this big order and needs to finish it tonight.”

“Big order for what?”

“She caters on the side. Didn’t I tell you?” Lola said, leaning against the counter.

“No.”

“My mom’s got a second kitchen in the cellar. Actually it’s more like a kitchenette. She caters birthday and retirement parties and cooks meals for the old timers that got arthritis so bad they can’t lift a fryin’ pan no more. My brother Anthony makes deliveries a few times a week after school. Take your coat off, Candice. Throw it in our closet,” she said, pointing to a chair filled with coats. I couldn’t tell if she was being sarcastic or not. “Hey Mom, are you comin’ up or what?”

“Why you hollerin? I said I’ll be right there!”

Everything in Lola’s house was huge. Their voices, the wall mirror with the gold frame hanging above the heavy beige couch. The massive china case stacked with fat photo albums. Even the glass of water she handed me was enough to wash a car.

Lola’s mother was huge too, as she emerged from the basement. Dressed in a blue house coat and open toed pink slippers her face was round and cheery. Her pitch black hair was in desperate need of attention.

“Get over here you,” she said, smothering me in her arms. “What took you so long to visit? I hear all about you from way back in September and now I finally meet you. What happened Candice? You get lost on the way to my house or what?”

“I’m sorry Mrs. Gutierrez, I...”

“Aaah, I’m just playin’. I’m sorry I look a mess. I need to visit Carmine and have him do somethin’ with me. Anyhow, you must be starvin’ ” she said, yanking open the refrigerator.

“I got lasagna, sausage and peppers, fettuccini carbonara, breaded chicken cutlets and tapioca pudding. What sounds good?”

“It all does, but I’m fine Mrs. Gutierrez. Thank you.”

“What do you mean your fine?” she asked in surprise.

“I’m not really hungry right now.”

“Who says you gotta be hungry to eat?”

“Mom, she doesn’t want anything.”

“Of course she does. Look at the poor thing. I could use her leg to pick a crumb in my teeth. Has Lola told you what a good cook I am, Candice? Here, try some tapioca pudding,” she said, scooping a spoonful out of the Tupperware container and pushing it at me.

“Mmmm... That’s great,” I said, after licking it off the spoon.

“You want more? I got a gallon of it.”

“No, that’s perfect Mrs. Gutierrez. Thank you.”

“All right, you two help yourselves to whatever you want. Lola, where’s your brother Anthony? I need him to make deliveries. Is he over Carlo’s again?”

“Probably.”

“Keep chicky with him, will you? I don’t trust that Carlo further than I can throw him. I don’t like anyone with face fins, Candice. You know, mustaches. Somethin’ about them rubs me wrong.”

“That’s because the bastard you married had one.”

“Lola, I told you before, we don’t curse under the roof. If you have to curse do it on the sidewalk. The wind washes it away.”

“I’m sorry, Mom. Come on Candice, let’s go upstairs.”

As we climbed the steps the family portrait on the wall caught me by surprise. I looked at Lola’s father who had dark skin and a thick mustache covering his upper lip. I knew Lola hated him, but since that first day in art class she had never mentioned him again.

“You comin’?” Lola called out from the upstairs hallway.

“Yeah.”

“What are you doin’ here anyway?” she asked as I walked into her tiny green bedroom with just enough room for a twin bed and dresser.

“Lola, can I ask what happened with your father?”

“He left.”

“I know. But when, what happened?”

“He took off five years ago, nine months after the twins were born. The prick went to work and never came back.”

“Are you kidding me?” I said, sitting on the mattress next to her.

“It was the same year The Son of Sam had everyone in New York clenched up.”

“I remember that.”

My father was a sanitation worker in the city. He'd leave at four a.m. and get home about the same time school let out. I'd help him with Augie and Louie while my mom was at work but one day around 5:30 he still wasn't here and Anthony and me were alone with the twins. I was only eleven and didn't know what the hell I was doing so I called my mom and told her he wasn't back yet. ‘Its all right,’ she said, ‘he’s probably earnin’ overtime. Call Rosetta and ask her to help.’ Rosetta is our next door neighbor who watched the twins before they started school. But when my mom came home and he still wasn't here she got panicked and called his buddies from the job. After that she called the hospitals. I thought The Son of Sam may have popped him but I didn't say a word about that. My mom and me stayed up all night waiting for him to come home. I remember seein’ the sun comin’ up over the roof of the Sheridan Avenue apartments. She was breastfeedin’ Louie and I was holdin’ Augie. All I remember thinkin’ was, how can the sun rise on a day like this?”

“That’s it, you never heard from him again?”

“He mailed an excuse two weeks later. My mother lit the stove and burned it. I tell you, she was on the rag for like a year after that. Not that I blame her. I wanted to gouge my father’s eyes out because I figured he left us for some whore. You want to know what’s funny though?”

“What?”

“Even though he stiffed us I used to lie and say he was away for work. I made him important. It wasn’t for him you know, I did it so my mom wouldn’t feel ashamed that people were talkin’ about how her man left her. But still, the crazy thing is I built my father into a success when all he ever did was empty trash cans and quit his family. ‘Never disgrace us by lyin’ to get someone else’s approval,’ my mother said after hearin’ about my stories. Ever since then I told the truth.”

“Where’s your father now?”

“Upstate. Albany? Buffalo? Wherever there’s work. He talked with an old neighbor of ours a few years back and used him to relay a message on why he left. How sixteen years of slingin’ trash had become a death sentence, not a job. The neighbor said my father started blamin’ us because we were the rock he couldn’t crawl out from under. He was growin’ to hate us and didn’t want that to happen, which is how he justified leavin’. Can you believe that shit? I’m amazed at the lies people can swallow.”

“Yeah,” I said, reaching out and touching the broken handle on her top dresser drawer. “I’ve told you some lies myself, Lola. That’s the reason I came here now. I want to tell you the truth.”

“I always knew the story you fed me wasn’t finished. Someone as pretty as you deserves a little drama. Otherwise it just wouldn’t be fair,” Lola said, laughing at her reflection in the mirror.

“I’ve had more than a little drama, believe me.”

My hands were stuffed in my lap. I felt like a windup toy I was so anxious sitting there on Lola’s bed. I barely even took a breath as I started spilling the truth.

“My father doesn't own a fancy restaurant in Manhattan. He's the night manager at the Moondance Diner on Sixth Avenue. And my mom doesn't run a real estate firm in Connecticut. She used to work at one but she was raped a couple of weeks before school started and is still getting through that mess. I found her seconds after it happened. Now I'm vomiting to help block out the flashbacks of all that. As for why I'm here in the Bronx, I used to have a younger brother. His name was Dean. He died of cancer three years ago, even though it feels like a lot longer. Back then we were still living in New Jersey and my father did own a restaurant. Business dropped when Dean was sick though, and we never recovered. My father ended up selling the place to pay off bank loans and other bills. After that my mom's patience ran out and my parents got divorced. My dad gave her the house and even though he sent money my mom couldn't keep up. That's when she sold our home and we moved here to live with my grandmother. It was supposed to be temporary. The plan was to save some more money and buy a house in Connecticut, but now that my mom was attacked I've got no idea what we're going to do.”

“Wow. You win,” Lola joked.

“You think so? Let's call it a tie,” I said smiling and holding her hand.

We laughed and cried at the same time while hugging each other on the edge of her bed. I felt so relieved. The only thing I didn't confess was the dream of killing Dean. I just didn't know how to explain it, and it was something no one in the world knew about except me.

“My mom believes everythin' happens for a reason,” Lola said. “I don't know if I buy that all the way through, but you and me, we were meant to be friends, Candice.”

“Yes we were,” I said while wiping the tears from my eyes. “Can we go downstairs? I want some more of your mom's tapioca pudding. God that stuff was good.”

As Lola and I stood at the counter scooping the pudding from the Tupperware container I thought about Daddy. We made plans for me to visit his apartment in Weehawken on Saturday. It felt so good confessing the truth to Lola I wanted to share everything with Daddy too, but I

knew I couldn't. Mom had made me promise never to say a word about her attack. As for my nightmare though, I had couple of days to figure out a way to break that to my father.

Chapter Eleven

On Saturday afternoon I was sitting at the rickety folding table in my father's studio apartment staring down at the traffic inching towards the toll booths at the Lincoln Tunnel. His place was so depressing I wanted set it on fire but I was still thrilled to be there.

"I bought Jack and Colby cheese, is that okay, honey?" Daddy asked while rubbing my shoulder.

"Sure," I said, turning away from the icy window and looking up at him. "You know I've always loved your grilled cheese sandwiches."

"Yeah, I know," he smiled. "I've got Campbell's tomato soup, too. I even browned some onions for a little kick, okay? Soup is always tasty, especially on a cold day like this one."

As I listened to the butter liquefying in the pan I looked at the kitchen cabinets which were bare, aside from some dead spiders and curled shelf paper. The radiator hissed and rattled in the corner. The walls were cracking and the bathroom toilet was squeezed so tightly between the sink and shower I had to press my knees together when taking a pee. My last time here I found a dead cockroach in that sink. I almost screamed but thought my father would be embarrassed so I closed my eyes, pinched the thing between a clump of toilet paper and threw it in the bowl. Daddy ended up seeing it anyway after the toilet overflowed from all that paper.

A metal sound clinked outside and I saw some man in a heavy blue coat walking down the icy flight of concrete steps.

"That's the mailman, Candice. He probably dropped off my lottery winnings. Can you go grab it? I'll split it with you," he said, winking at me.

"Sure Daddy," I said, smiling at his sarcasm.

Stepping outside I pulled his mail from the box. It was junk, a supermarket circular and coupon for ten percent off at The Golden Buddha in Hoboken.

Back inside I dropped the mail on the couch and saw a warm grilled cheese sandwich waiting for me next to a tall glass of cold milk and a piping hot bowl of tomato soup.

“It’s great having you here, honey,” Daddy said with a smile as he turned to plate his lunch.

I stared at him in his faded blue T-shirt, jeans and dingy white socks. His shoulders were getting narrower and the seat of his pants drooped like an empty trash bag. He seemed fragile somehow, a stump of the man who I once relied on to protect me.

“Luckily I take the PATH train into the city,” he said, sitting down with his lunch and noticing all the cars converging at the toll booths.

“What time do you have to leave?” I asked, biting into my grilled cheese.

“Usually five, but tonight I don’t have to be in until eight,” he added, winking at me again. “I’ll get you on the 7:10 bus which will take you right to the corner of Tremont and Barclay. How’s the sandwich?”

“Great,” I mumbled, “just like I remember.”

“How’s your mom doing Candice, still planning to quit the real estate job? Is the commute too much for her?”

“Yeah,” I said, knowing Mom hasn’t traveled further than the bathroom in months. “She’s sick of the same routine so she’s looking to see what else is out there.”

Daddy nodded his head and gazed out the window. “There comes a time when you realize you can’t have it both ways.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, seeing the worried look on his face. “Quit staring outside and look at me, Daddy. What’s wrong?”

“Candice, I’ve been working the graveyard shift at the diner for eighteen months. I’m on my fourth pair of shoes because the degreaser they use on the floors eats away my rubber soles. A few of the waitresses have been refilling coffee cups since the Kennedy Administration. Some

nights I wonder how many pairs of shoes they've gone through. I can't end up that way, honey. I just can't."

"So what are you going to do, quit the diner?"

He pushed his plate away and reached for my hands. "I've thought of a million ways to try and tell you this Candice and I still don't know how, so I'm just going to tell you. I'm moving to Florida."

My throat constricted as my toes curled inside my shoes. You're leaving me, Daddy? No! How can you do this to me now?

It was all I could think as I pulled my hands away and pressed them against my trembling lips. There were so many things I wanted to say but I just sat staring at the bowl of soup and the grilled cheese, stupidly wondering if this was our last meal together.

"Candice, can you please say something?" Daddy asked, reaching out for me.

I planned on confessing my nightmare about killing Dean but what purpose would that serve now? How would he even react? Maybe he'd stay. But maybe he'd want to run even further away from me. I couldn't risk saying anything. I just couldn't. So I said something that I knew would make him happy. "Who's going to make my grilled cheese sandwiches now Daddy?" I asked, wiping my tears and laughing at the same time.

He leaned back in his chair breathing a sigh of relief. "Thank you for understanding, Candice," he said bending forward to kiss me.

"When are you going?" I asked, poking dents in my crispy grilled cheese.

"March eighth. About five weeks from now. I bought a car from a guy in Hoboken. I pick it up next week."

"Where will you live? What will you do?"

"I'm moving to Marco Island on the southwest coast. Most of the houses there are built on canals that feed right into the Gulf of Mexico. If you've got a big enough boat you can walk out your backdoor and sail to Australia. Sounds amazing, doesn't it?"

“Yes,” I nodded, looking at his Murphy bed folded into the wall and the TV with the rabbit ears sitting on a metal folding chair. It will be a much different world then here, I thought.

At 7:00 we stumbled to the bus stop over jagged patches of ice and snow. The bus sputtered towards us, coughing smoke and crushing frozen puddles.

“I promise to see you before I leave,” Daddy called out above the wind.

“You better,” I shouted back, wrapping him in my arms.

“Here Candice, take this, its ten dollars. Treat yourself to a little something. And if you’ve got any money left over buy your mom one of those gourmet chocolates. She likes Godiva the best, the ones with the soft center.”

“I love you Daddy,” I said before kissing him.

After slipping my change into the fare machine I chose a seat and looked out the window at him trudging down the icy sidewalk on his way to the PATH train and a fourteen hour shift at the diner. How can I blame him for wanting to escape this place?

An hour later my hand was shivering as the key skidded against the metal lock on Grandma’s front door.

Inside, The Love Boat was on TV. Sonny Bono was being greeted by Julie McCoy as he boarded the ship. Grandma was gripping the banister on her way down the stairs. “Madone-ah-me! You must be frostbitten, Candice! Get in here and let me make you a pot of tea.”

“I just filled the kettle,” Mom said as she walked out of the kitchen in her bathrobe. “I’ll pour a cup for both of us.”

“Thanks Mom,” I sighed, throwing my coat and gloves on the chair next to the front door. “God it’s freezing out there.”

“I better put a hat on then,” Grandma said. “Giada asked me to help make gnocchi for her sister’s birthday tomorrow. I hate to sound like a pill but I need this like I need a hole in the head. Its good havin’ you home though, Honey.”

A moment later Grandma locked the door behind her.

“So how was your visit?” Mom asked the second Grandma left.

“It was good,” I said, staring at the TV.

“What’s your father up to, Candice?” she asked, leaning back in the recliner.

I turned to look at her. How could I say that Daddy was moving to Florida? For five months this house has been her prison. She obsesses over the neatness of her closet and washes the sheets so often they’re starting to disintegrate.

“Candice, I asked about your father. Is he still working nights at that diner?”

“Yes Mom, he is. From the bus window tonight I watched him tripping over chunks of ice on his way to the PATH train. It’s a twenty minute walk in this weather and he does it every night. It’s crazy, Mom. He should do something different, don’t you think?”

“We’ve all got our crosses to bear. At least he’s out of the house.”

I didn’t know how to tell her so I just blurted it out.

“Daddy bought a car,” I said, taking a seat next to her.

“A car? Really?” she asked, raising her eyebrows in surprise. “You just said he takes the train to work. What does he need a car for?”

“...Mom, Daddy is moving to Florida,” I said, taking her hand in mine.

She sat silent for a moment, as if she was trying to decide how to feel about his decision.

“Has he met someone?” she asked.

“No Mom,” I said, needing to assure her. “He just wants to start a new life someplace else.”

She nodded and rubbed her forehead. “So do I, but I’m sleeping in the same bed as when I wore feet pajamas. The only difference now is I’m not crawling into bed with my mother when I get scared, and that’s because you’re already lying next to me.”

“Stop it Mom,” I insisted. “I don’t sleep in your bed anymore. I just come over when you wake up from a bad dream. What do you expect anyway?”

“Honestly, much more than this, Candice. I have to do something. I’ve got the TV guide memorized. And if that’s not pathetic enough I know the routines of the disability recipients in this neighborhood,” she laughed to herself. “Every afternoon at 1:30 when The 100,000 Pyramid is over Sal Moreno sits on his back porch with a knife and a stick of salami wearing nothing but his underwear and slippers. The man can’t be much older than fifty and this is what he does? Then he washes it all down with a jug of wine and peaches. I shouldn’t know this. I don’t want to know this. I want to get back out there but I’m afraid to stick my toe in the water so I sit here waiting for the stars to align but who knows when that will happen.”

“Things will work out, Mom. I know they will.”

“When is he moving?” she asked, standing up.

“Early March.”

“So he’s going soon,” she said while lighting a cigarette. “How do you feel about it?”

“I’ll miss him, but I can’t blame him for leaving. He hates it here.”

“Your father hasn’t inspired me in years Candice, but maybe that’s changed. Maybe he is trying to prove something to me. He’s aiming for a better life. Maybe its time I do the same.”

“You want to inspire Daddy?” I asked.

“That would be an added benefit. Most of all I want to inspire myself; and you too, Candice.”

The following Tuesday, the glimmer of hope Mom had been waiting for finally appeared. Angela, the woman who owned the florist next to the bakery called her about a job.

“Angela said she's opening a second store in Yonkers and needs someone to manage this location,” Mom told Grandma and me over dinner. “I warned Angela that I didn’t know the first thing about floral arrangements but she said she’d get me up to speed in a week, two at the most. What do you think?” Mom asked. “It doesn’t pay much but it’s a step out the front door.”

Grandma and I thought anything that got Mom out of the house was a good thing.

Her first day was February Fourteenth. I thought the Valentine's Day crowd would overwhelm her but she came home smiling and full of energy.

"It was nuts all day," she exclaimed, "but I felt invigorated being off the couch. I'd forgotten what a busy world it is out there. The only thing that made me sad was seeing all those husbands and boyfriends buying bouquets for their wives and girlfriends. I want that now. I need that attention. Maybe that means I'm healing."

"You're a beautiful woman, Vivian," Grandma said. "Of course you need that attention. I think its time you went to Sears and bought yourself some new bloomers. Get yourself a frisky pair. Those always made me feel good."

Mom smiled then changed the subject since I was standing right there.

After working at the florist for a week with Angela, Mom was on her own. I was excited to see her out of the house but the six month anniversary of her attack was February twenty seventh. She wasn't blackening off days on the calendar like she did right after it happened but she'd had a breakdown on the twenty seventh of every month so far, and I was bracing myself for it again.

I called Mom from school that Monday, asking if she wanted me to buy three tickets for the drama club's rendition of Guys and Dolls.

"I can't talk now, Candice. Father Connelly ordered bouquets for the church and I've got other arrangements to finish."

Good, I thought after hanging up. At least her mind is occupied.

After school I went straight to the florist and helped her finish the orders. If anything happened I'd be right there for her. Luckily we were so busy she never noticed what the date meant for her.

The following week I saw Daddy for the last time before he left for Florida. We met at Pasqualie's Pizzeria on Tremont where I devoured two huge slices and half the meatball stromboli he had ordered. I didn't care. I'd throw it all up within the hour anyway.

After we finished eating I pushed away the grease-stained paper plate and slipped Dean's diary from my bag.

"Need help with your algebra homework, Candice?" Daddy joked after seeing the composition notebook.

"No," I said looking at him. "This is your going away present, Daddy."

"...My going away present? What is it?" he asked, reaching out for the notebook.

"I'm not telling you. I want you to promise me you won't open it until you've been on the road for a few hours. Okay?"

"Why? Candice, what's in there?"

"Just promise me, Daddy," I said, holding it under my hands.

"But you've got me so curious."

"It's worth the wait. Now promise me."

"Candice, what's in that notebook?"

"Daddy."

"All right. I promise."

"One of the things I'm most scared of is that you'll forget about me after you're gone."

"Candice, there's no way I -"

"Daddy please, let me finish. I have a feeling that you're going to build a great life for yourself in Florida. I think you're going to be happy again but I don't want to lose you either. I'm hoping that what's on these pages will keep the two of us close and make you think about the important people in your life, especially the ones who aren't here anymore."

"Candice, are you talking about Dean?" he asked, and I could see the ears bubbling in his eyes.

"Remember the time you told me that the worst part of having great memories is that you can't hold them anymore?"

"Sure."

“Now I think that maybe you can.”

“Candice, what’s in this notebook?”

“Are you still leaving for Florida tonight like you said?”

“I’m going right from here. Seeing you was the last thing I wanted to do before I left.”

“Then you can find out a few hours from now.”

“You’ve got me so anxious. On the one hand I don’t want to say goodbye but on the other I’m ready to ask for the check.”

“I’m not kidding around, Daddy.”

“Either am I, Candice. Ever since I was a young man I’ve wanted a family of my own, you know that. I told you about the couple who adopted me when I was a baby, and you know I lost them in that terrible car accident when I was ten years old. As a boy I never imagined losing the only family I ever knew, and as a man, as a father, I never fathomed that my family would break apart like it did. That’s why I need us to stay close, Candice. You’re all I have in this world. In the years ahead you’ll finish high school and go to college and then, who knows. I want you to pursue your dreams Candice, whatever they might be, but I don’t want to lose you in the process.”

“You won’t ever lose me, Daddy,” I said, leaning over the table to kiss him.

I wiped the tear spilling down his right cheek. He hadn’t learned to lie about his feelings as well as me, or Mom.

“I think the meter probably ran out so I better get going,” Daddy said as he wiped his eyes with a napkin.

After he paid the check we stood outside next to his car, a green Ford Pinto with a missing hubcap on the front passenger side.

“Remember that day you and I closed my restaurant for the last time and I told you that life all comes down to a few moments?” he asked, holding my hands in his.

“Yes, I remember. I thought the same thing when Mom and I left our house in New Jersey for the last time.”

“This is another one of those moments, Candice. If I live to be a hundred I’ll always remember standing with you right now under this Pasqualie’s Pizzeria sign.”

“It’s okay if you don’t know how to say goodbye Daddy,” I said, taking his hand. “I don’t know either, so let’s just say so long for now. That’s something Grandma taught me. She says goodbyes are too final but ‘so long for now’ means that we’ll see each other soon.”

“Then I guess it’s so long for now Candice,” he said, touching my face. “I love you honey, and I promise we will see each other soon.”

“I know we will Daddy,” I mumbled into his chest, even though deep down I knew time had a way of undoing even the best intentions.

After kissing me one last time he hopped in his car and drove off. I watched the red tail lights disappear in traffic then I hurried behind Pasqualie’s to throw up and let myself cry the tears I refused to let him see.

A few hours later Daddy called me.

“Candice?” I heard Daddy say as I picked up the phone. “Candice, my God! I can’t believe it!” he uttered as I heard him tearing up on the phone. “I feel like I’m holding Dean again, Candice.”

“You are Daddy,” I cried, closing my eyes and collapsing to Grandma’s kitchen floor.

“I can’t believe I never knew about this journal. Where did you find it?”

“In his closet when I was cleaning out his room.”

“What a gift. I wish I could protect Dean now, Candice. I still want to rescue him. I know I can’t but I feel as if he’s in my arms again. I can hear that little voice of his in my mind.”

“I know, Daddy. I know. That’s why I didn’t want you opening the diary until you had left,” I said, squeezing the receiver with both hands. “I told you it was worth the wait.”

“You’re so right, Candice,” he said laughing. “I’m in the lobby of a Roy Roger’s somewhere in South Jersey and all these people are looking at me like I’m some kind of nut.”

“Don’t worry about them,” I laughed. “They could never understand.”

“You’re right. It’s funny because I’ve been driving for hours thinking of you and Dean and our lives together and I kept looking at this notebook on my passenger seat. It took everything I had not to open it but I kept my promise. Little did I know Dean has been with me all along.”

“This is a whole new beginning for you, Daddy.”

“Yes it is, and Dean is on this journey with me now Candice, thanks to you. I love you, honey.”

“I love you too, Daddy.”

We talked until he ran out of spare change for the phone. After hanging up I pictured him driving down some lonesome highway stroking the pages of that notebook and thinking about those years when our family was still whole.

Two weeks later a postcard from Marco Island came in the mail. The picture on the front was a collage of dolphins, flamingos and crystal blue water.

Dear Candice,

I just finished moving in my furniture which I bought at a garage sale this morning. Dean’s diary is on the table next to me and after I mail this postcard I’m going to find a quiet spot on the beach and read his words again. I’ve been through his diary so many times I’ve almost got the whole thing memorized. On Tuesday I’m interviewing for the dining room manager position at a seafood place called The Snook Inn. I’m hopeful Candice, and for the first time in a long time that feels like a good thing. Anyway, I’m running out of room, Honey. I’ll call you as soon as my phone gets hooked up. I love you!

So long for now, Dad.

By the time I received the postcard his phone had gotten hooked up and I knew he was offered that job at The Snook Inn. I was right; things were working out for him. The evidence was in my hands. I traced my father's words with my fingertip. His handwriting was untroubled, and I knew his new life had begun.

Chapter Twelve

“I can’t believe tomorrow is August fifteenth?” Lola said as we sunbathed on the roof of the Sheridan Avenue apartment building near her house. “School starts in three weeks.”

“I know. It’s crazy. The last thing I feel like seeing is Mr. Murdoch strutting around in those polyester gym shorts and watching all the girls drool over him. I don’t get why everyone thinks he’s so hot. I mean, he’s old. He’s got to be at least what, thirty five?”

“At least. I’ll tell you what though, I had him for gym class freshmen year and he was showing us how to do leg stretches when his Hebrew National flopped right out of his shorts and onto the basketball court.”

“Get out!”

“Swear to God.”

“What’d it look like, Lola?”

“Have you ever seen an eagle pullin’ a snake out of the ground on Wild Kingdom?”

“Really! It was that big?” I asked, sitting up on my towel.

“Let’s change the subject. I don’t feel like talkin’ about school anymore.”

“Yeah, okay. I can’t believe it’s been six months since my father moved to Florida.”

“Every summer I tell myself I’m gonna do all these things but what do I do except lie out on this tar beach and baby sit the twins?”

“You painted a lot this summer,” I reminded her.

“I had no choice, Candice. I needed enough pieces for the competition comin’ up in Washington D.C. next week. Back in May when Ms. Brill submitted a couple of my paintings to see if I’d qualify I thought they’d come back with big reject stamps on the front. When she told me I was in and needed fifteen paintings by August I almost had a fit. I didn’t think I had the chops to get ‘em done.”

“You did though, and they’re great. Now you can look forward to next week,” I said, squinting in the sun while looking over at her.”

“Yeah, but I’m nervous, Candice. I know I’ll see a lot on the nine hour bus ride down there, so that’ll be fun. And luckily my mom’s got that friend in Maryland who’s lettin’ me borrow her couch. Otherwise I could never afford to go.”

“It was good of Ms. Brill to pay for your paintings to be shipped down there too, Lola. She thinks you can win it all.”

“Can you imagine?” Lola said sitting Indian style on her towel. “I’d get two hundred bucks. I’d be filthy rich,” she laughed. “Well, maybe not filthy, but I’d definitely be on Easy Street. We could get dressed up and walk into the Big Apple Savings Bank together. They’d slobber all over us. I tell you what though, I’d have to keep a little money aside so I could buy my mom a new pair of work shoes. Hers are so shot the only thing keepin’ her feet from touchin’ the ground is her calluses. You know what, my stomach is buggin’ me from that frankfurter I ate. I’m goin’ down to Gino’s for a seltzer. You want to come?”

“No, I’ll wait here,” I said lying back down on my towel.

“All right, I’ll be right back.”

After Lola left I watched the sunspots and thought about my own summer. Like last year, I spent most of it sweating at the bakery and taking occasional walks over to Optimo Cigar to sneak a peek at the latest Playgirl. I was masturbating at least once a week now and those pictures came in handy. Staring at the magazine was a private thing no one knew about, not even Lola. I felt guilty so I didn’t say anything. Plus she was seeing the real thing with her boyfriend, Joey. They met during a bus ride Lola and I took to City Island. Lola told me that the first thing Joey ever bought her was a wet slice of cheesecake from my grandma’s booth at The Feast of St. Anthony back in June. “The stupid thing was melting so he fed me the first bite, Candice. It was so romantic and you weren’t even there to see it,” she told me later. I missed her at the feast

because I was vomiting in the ladies bathroom at Four Boys From Italy. I kept promising myself I'd quit but everywhere I looked I saw people with far worse habits.

"Jesus!" I shouted, leaping off my towel. "What was that?"

Lola was standing behind me laughing.

"Sorry, I couldn't resist," she smiled. "I grabbed some ice cubes out of the freezer at Gino's. When I came up and saw you sweatin' like a pig out here I got an impulse. Didn't it feel good?"

"I'm sweating like a pig?" I said, looking down at myself

"You know what I mean. I am too. It's not like we're in the Hamptons, Candice. Look around, what's up here but busted TV antennas and scraps of plywood?"

"Whatever," I said laughing. "Just don't tell me you did it because you thought I was too hot. What time is it anyway? We should get going."

"All right," she said, taking a swig of her seltzer.

After grabbing our towels and baby oil we trudged down twelve flights of stairs and out the side door onto 167th Street.

"I can't wait to take a shower," I sighed as we walked back to Lola's. "The soot from that roof got all over my skin. I look like I'm covered with blackheads."

"It's called urban sand."

"Well whatever it is I've got to borrow your bathroom and scrub my face," I said as we walked up to Lola's house.

After rinsing off I came downstairs and saw Lola sitting on her couch looking at the movie section.

"You feel like seein' Flashdance later? It's playin' at the Whitestone. My mom will be home with the twins and I want to get out."

"Okay. Just let me go home and shower first. I'll call you when I'm done."

Ten minutes later I walked into Grandma's kitchen where a pile of skinned shrimps sat on white deli paper. Six crabs were trying to claw their way out of the sink but were gasping their last breaths.

"Hi ya honey," Grandma said as she moved around in her house dress and slippers. "You got good color today."

"Thanks Grandma," I said, looking at my arms. "What are you doing with all this seafood?"

"You know Artie Pastore, that sweet fat neighbor of ours from down the block?"

"Yeah," I said laying my towel on the counter. "He waves hello to me whenever I pass by. Why? What happened?"

"He had a stroke mowin' his lawn."

"He had a stroke mowing one of these tiny lawns?"

"The man's got to weigh four hundred pounds, Candice. Brushin' his teeth is exercise for him. Anyway, his wife went quiet two years ago so I'm makin' shrimp scampi and crab cakes to fill his icebox."

"I'd help you Grandma but you know I'm allergic to shellfish."

"Don't worry about it. Go stand over there. I don't want you gettin' sick."

I watched her cutting open the shrimps' bellies and pulling out the little purple vein buried inside. "Looks like a baby worm, don't it Candice?" Grandma said while holding out the tip of her knife.

"Or a piece of dental floss. It's disgusting. I don't know why everybody loves eating shrimp."

After finishing with the shrimps Grandma grabbed one of the crabs, ran it under cold tap water and cut its face off with a pair of scissors. I'd seen fish being filleted and knew they slaughtered chickens and cows but seeing the crab have its face cut off was too much for me. Grandma seemed to have no problem with it though because she cut off all the crabs' faces and

dropped them into a stock pot of boiling water without batting an eye. But right about then I heard Mom's high heels striking the floor upstairs and knew what was really on Grandma's mind.

"Is Mom going out with Justin again?" I asked.

"Yeah. The prick called an hour ago. When I told your mother who it was she jumped up so quick you'd swear she sat on a tack. I can't stand that gavone with his slicked back hair and phony personality. He reminds me of what's his name; that weasel on the Family Feud who kisses all the women."

"Richard Dawson?"

"That's him. He goes from one lady to the next like they're all gonna orgasm as soon as he comes near. I'd like to give that one a slap right through the TV. Now I'd like to give this Justin Santoro a slap, too. He's lookin' to settle down and start a family my ass. Not for nothin' but does he think we're stupid? How's your mother gonna start a family? For cryin' out loud she's probably got a year of good flows left before she dries up. Not to mention that she needs a baby like she needs a hole in the head."

"It's all right, Grandma," I said massaging her soft shoulders. "Luckily you can take your anger out on these crabs."

"It ain't funny, Candice. Your mother's delicate. I want her to meet someone but they had better have good intentions. This Justin fella, he's out for the lay, you mark my words. Says he came into the florist to buy tulips for his sick mother. Come on. He's a sweet talker. He gives your mother butterflies by showerin' her with attention and sayin' the things she needs to hear. She falls for it because she's starvin' and then what happens? Those bloomers I told her to buy at Sears are in a ball on the floor and thirty minutes later Justin's lightin' a cigarette on his way out the door. I'd like to string him up by his short and curlies, I'm tellin' you. I don't want your mother gettin' hurt, that's all. She's been through enough as it is."

"I'm going to talk with her," I said before kissing Grandma on her sweaty cheek.

“Ask her how many outfits she’s tried on. If it’s more than three we’re in trouble.”

Midway up the steps I could already smell the hairspray. Mom’s perfect legs were flexed in a pair of four-inch black pumps as love songs played on the radio. Her red dress swayed as she stood over the bathroom sink applying a coat of Russian red lipstick. She had always focused on beauty but the rape scarred her self-image and now her obsession for flawlessness was greater than ever.

I thought about what Grandma said and wondered if Mom had slept with this Justin guy yet. She probably figured having sex with him would be a kind of cleansing. I hated how this Justin guy acquired the upper hand by default.

“Candice, what are you doing? I didn’t even see you standing there. How do I look?” she asked, swiveling towards me.

Even at forty five the dress clung to her figure as if she had the body of a mannequin.

“You look amazing, Mom. Where are you going?”

“Justin is taking me to a restaurant in Little Italy with a garden patio and then -”

The ringing phone blared through the house.

“Can somebody get that?” Grandma shouted. “I got a handful of shrimps down here.”

Hurrying to Grandma's bedroom I grabbed the receiver. “Hello?”

“Can I speak with Vivian Morgan please?”

“May I ask who’s calling?”

“This is Sergeant Kennedy with the Poughkeepsie Police Department.”

“Who is it, Candice?” Mom asked from the doorway.

I clutched the phone to my chest. “A policeman from Poughkeepsie.”

“What? Oh Jesus, what does he want?” she asked, pressing her hands to her lips.

“He asked to speak with you.”

Her wheezing carried across the room as her eyes ricocheted from the Cross above Grandma’s bed to the picture of her father on the nightstand. She walked towards me and

gripped the phone in her trembling hands before pinching her eyes shut. “Hello? This is Vivian Morgan.”

I heard mumbling but Mom was breathing too loud for me to make out any words. She kept circling and circling as the cord wrapped around chest.

“Oh my God! Yes! Yes! No, I’ll come now!”

Spinning around Mom untangled herself before slamming the phone down and stomping to the bathroom in those heels.

“What happened Mom?” I screamed, trailing her. She collapsed with her body curled over the tub. “What did he say, Mom?”

“They arrested a man this afternoon. He tried abducting a teenage girl who was walking to a pool party,” she panted. “She’s at a hospital up there. They said he might be the same man who...”

She lashed out at shampoo bottles and mashed a soft bar of soap in her hand.

“Then need me to identify him,” she cried. “I’ve lived this moment a thousand times in my mind but now... Now it’s real...!”

Mascara streaked her face as she cried. I wanted to wipe it away but kept my hands on her arms instead.

“It’s been almost a year, Candice. Part of me wondered if they’d ever find him,” she said falling to the floor and leaning up against the bathtub. “How can I look into that bastard’s eyes?”

Grandma climbed the stairs, pulling on the banister with both hands. “What happened? What is it?” she asked, gasping on the top step.

“They’ve got him.” I said.

“Where?”

“Poughkeepsie. Mom has to identify him tonight.”

“Let’s go.”

Moments later we were on the Taconic Parkway doing eighty miles an hour. Mom was fidgety and crying, tweaking the radio knob and chain smoking cigarettes.

I grabbed a nail clipper from my bag and pulled out the file. I was so nervous I started filing down my right thumbnail but as I heard Mom's cries I closed my eyes and sunk the file into the nail bed, concentrating on the incision as Mom gripped the wheel.

What's going to happen, I wondered. Is he there? Will we see him? I thought about Cagney & Lacey and Hill Street Blues. The one way glass, the line-ups where men stood with numbers around their necks while making right quarter turns. Looking down I saw blood oozing from my nail. I sucked it off and swallowed.

I imagined Justin finding the house deserted. He might think Mom stood him up. What if he doesn't return her calls? But then I looked at Mom and Grandma clutching hands on the armrest. I reached forward and laid my hand on theirs. The moment was bitter and we were fighting through it together, just like the night she was raped, just like every night since.

Barreling through downtown Poughkeepsie on Route Nine we lurched into the police station at 9:14 p.m. Aside from a few shiny white police cars the lot was empty.

The door was locked. Grandma picked up the receiver inside a metal box next to the entrance.

"Can I help you," a voice came through the phone.

"Vivian Morgan and her family is here to see a Sergeant Kennedy."

They buzzed open the door and we walked into a small blue lobby with a few chairs. Mom paced in circles. Unclasping her five pound pocketbook Grandma took out a paper towel holding her high blood pressure pills and pushed one between her lips. Then she pulled out a tissue and handed it to Mom. Her lipstick had smeared over her chin and fingertips. Mom nodded a thank you then made herself look presentable. I looked around at the eight foot wooden counter with bulletproof glass and photos of police officers in uniform. On the wall was

a flyer for a missing boy, tips on crime prevention and an advertisement for a Labor Day chili cook-off at the Culinary Institute in Hyde Park.

A metal door on the left side of the lobby swung open. I jerked around as Mom spun on her heels and Grandma stood.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. I’m Sergeant Kennedy.”

His voice was deep and official. He had broad shoulders and thick arms pushing against his shirt sleeves. His head was round and pink with short blond hair. A roll of fat collected above his belt buckle.

“Hello Sergeant,” Mom said, shaking his hand. “I’m Vivian Morgan. This is my mother Stella and my daughter, Candice. I hope its okay that they came with me.”

“Of course. I appreciate you coming up on a Friday evening. Let’s go to a conference room where we can talk.”

We followed the Sergeant into a white hallway that smelled of fresh paint. After making a few rights and lefts we climbed a flight of stairs and entered a wood paneled room.

“Can I get anyone coffee, or water?” the Sergeant asked.

I studied the holster and gun on his right hip. He could kill us all in an instant, I thought.

“No thank you. We’re fine,” Mom replied to his question.

“Well please, take a seat.”

Mom and Grandma sat on one side of the table and I was across from them, next to the Sergeant.

“How’s the poor girl?” Mom asked. “What is her name?”

“I can’t release her name. As for her condition, I heard she’ll be okay. What you can do is help determine if the man in custody was your assailant a year ago. We think he’s the one who tried abducting this girl and we can hold him on that suspicion, but your corroboration will

reinforce our case. I'd like you to study a few mug books," he said, laying his hand on what appeared to be a stack of photo albums. "And if necessary, we'll conduct a line up."

"A line up? You mean the prick is in the building?" Grandma asked, squeezing her pocket book which was sitting on the table in front of her.

"Yes Mam," the Sergeant responded, trying not to smile.

"Madone-ah-me," Grandma replied, wiping her head.

"Let me see the pictures," Mom said.

The Sergeant slid over the mug books and Mom began browsing through them. I gazed at the photos upside down, studying the ugly faces and stubbled chins, matted hair and pasty white skin. I imagined their evil voices, the agony they inflicted upon their victims, the lives they've destroyed. I hated them all, wanted them executed no matter what their crime.

Mom's shiny red nails stood in contrast to the dull black and white pictures on the page. I stared at my own fingertips. My thumb was pulsating and rimmed with dried blood.

"Huu...!" Mom's breath caught in her throat. "That's him," she stated, shoving the book away. "Bottom row left."

Turning the book around the Sergeant stared at the photo. "You're absolutely sure?" he asked, staring up at Mom.

"Positive."

"All right," he said slapping his hand on the table in satisfaction. "There won't be any need to conduct a line up."

"Is that the fuck you got in custody?" Grandma asked.

"Mom, please! Enough already."

"I'm sorry but what do you want from me, Vivian? The officer understands. Don't you?" Grandma said looking at him.

"Yes, of course I do," he nodded with a smile.

“I’d like to see this son of a bitch wash up on the shore like Coney Island Whitefish. That’s what I’d like to see,” Grandma stated with a nod.

Sergeant Kennedy started laughing but I could tell he was trying to hold it in.

“I’m sorry,” he said, sticking out his hand. “I don’t mean to laugh but I grew up in Sheepshead Bay and haven’t heard that term years.”

“What’s Coney Island Whitefish?” I asked.

“Forget it, Candice,” Mom said.

“Its condoms that wash up on the beach in Coney Island,” Grandma whispered.

“Can we stick to the subject?” Mom asked. “This is hard enough for me as it is.”

“Sorry Mom,” I said, staring down at the mug book which was in front of the Sergeant. His big arm was blocking some of the picture but I could see the devil’s eyes. I tried not to react. I could feel Mom looking at me and I didn’t want to give her another memory to try and forget.

“What else can I do Sergeant?” Mom asked. “I want to make sure every detail is addressed.”

“You’ve done everything you can right now, Ms. Morgan. I’ve seen a lot of suspects go free when there wasn’t sufficient evidence to hold them but thanks to you, this prisoner won’t be going anywhere.”

“Good. I hope he rots in here, frankly. If there’s anything else I can do you will let me know, right?”

“Absolutely.”

It was after 11:00 when Sergeant Kennedy walked us out.

“Are you okay, Mom?” I asked as we reached the car.

“No Candice I’m not, but I will be,” she said, squeezing Grandma and me in her arms. “Thank you both for coming tonight. At least now I don’t have to wait for that phone call anymore.”

The ride home was quiet. Mom would cry a little then stop. I listened to the tires whine under the thin layer of water on the highway. I wondered what Daddy was doing. He'd never believe our night. It's strange how little he knows about my life now.

We got back home around 1:30 in the morning. As Grandma fumbled with the keys I slid my hand inside the mailbox, curious if Justin had left a note. He didn't. The lock clunked back and Grandma nudged the door open.

"What stinks?" I said.

"The shrimps! They must have sperled!" Grandma shouted, rushing to the kitchen. "I turned off the stove when I heard you yellin' but I forget all about the shrimps! Candice, gimme a garbage bag quick," she said while balling the shrimps up in that deli paper. I held out a bag as she stuffed them inside. "I'll take this to the trash. There's air freshener under the sink. Go ahead and empty the can. Open the windows, too!"

Mom sat there oblivious to the smell as Grandma and I rushed around the house. After the commotion Grandma could tell that Mom wasn't ready for bed. "How about a hot cup of tea and a nice slice of blueberry crumb cake Vivian?" she asked.

"Tea sounds nice," Mom replied, "but I can't eat pastry at this hour."

"I'll put it out just in case," Grandma said, waving her hand.

After the teapot whistled and Grandma filled our cups the three of us sat dunking pieces of crumb cake.

"So much for not eating," I said, touching Mom's hand.

"After a night like this I figure I deserve it," she said, taking a bite.

"Me too," Grandma said, cutting herself a second helping. "I tell you what though, tonight opened my eyes. Until now all I had was a picture in my head that I burned at the stake. You wonder who could do such a thing but then you see he's just a man. He could walk into the bakery and order a cupcake and I'd never think to myself that he should be castrated."

"Are you all right, Mom?" I asked, watching her trace the rim of her tea cup.

“I’m sad for that girl Candice, but I’m relieved for me. I think this is one of the steps I needed to go through in order to take my life back.”

Shortly after 3:00 a.m. we all held the banister on our way up the stairs. I rubbed Grandma’s sagging shoulders knowing that she had to be up at 5:00.

“Grandma, why don’t you sleep and let me open the bakery.”

“No no, Candice. You stay with your mother. She needs you. I’ll sleep until half past five and then I’ll get up. So what if I open the bakery a little late.”

“Okay, but if you want my help just wake me and I’ll go with you. Goodnight Grandma,” I whispered, giving her a kiss.

“Goodnight, honey.”

Walking into Mom’s room I found her lying under the covers listening to Neil Diamond singing September Morn.

“Do you want me to sleep in here with you, Mom?” I asked, sitting on her mattress.

“No Candice,” she said, rolling over to look at me. “I feel like being alone right now, but thank you.”

After kissing her goodnight I stumbled into my room and collapsed. For an hour I tossed under the sheets before springing out of bed. Downstairs I devoured three chocolate frosted donuts and a giant chunk of Velveeta cheese that I melted on the stove and scooped with a soup spoon. In the basement I vomited up everything.

Back in bed I laid there waiting for Mom to wake up from a nightmare but instead I heard Grandma getting dressed. I listened as she peeked in on Mom before tiptoeing down the stairs. Get up and surprise Grandma at the bakery, I told myself. But the thought of crawling out of bed was too much so I buried my head under the pillow before falling asleep.

The ringing phone woke me up at 11:30. I showered but was sweating as I stood naked on the bathmat smearing antiperspirant on my already slick underarms.

Plodding downstairs in a thin yellow T-shirt and white cotton shorts I saw Mom smoking and staring out the window into the backyard.

“Lola called fifteen minutes ago,” she said, hearing me approach but never turning around. “She was wondering what happened to you last night. She said you two were supposed to go to the movies.”

“I’ll call her back. What are you looking at, Mom?”

“That green shed,” she said, pointing to it with a cigarette between her fingers. “My father kept his tools in there. It hasn’t been opened since he died, almost seventeen years ago, when I was pregnant with you.”

I stood behind her, staring at the rusted holes and flaking paint. “Do you want to open it?”

“No Candice. I just want to feel safe again, and that made me think of my father.”

“I love you, Mom” I said, hugging her from behind. “It was brave of you to go up there last night.”

She stubbed out her cigarette and turned, peering into my eyes.

“My God Candice, what’s happening to you?”

“Nothing. What are you talking about?”

“Let me see your face,” she urged, clutching my head in her hands and prying my mouth open. “Your eyes are red! And your gums are bleeding!”

Chapter Thirteen

Rushing into the kitchen Mom grabbed the phone. I ran upstairs to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. My gums were inflamed and bleeding. Turning on the faucet I spat blood into the sink and rinsed my face and mouth clean. Then I squirted two shots of Visine into my eyes and hurried back downstairs where Mom was grabbing the car keys.

“Come with me,” she demanded, taking my hand. “We’re going to the hospital.”

“What for? I’m okay Mom. My gums are inflamed, that’s all.”

“No that’s not all. You think I don’t know the symptoms? Now get in the car, Candice.”

She kept shaking her head as we drove, having a conversation with herself. I knew if I even tried to get a word in she’d tell me she didn’t want to hear it. So I flipped down the sun visor and stared at my mouth in the mirror as we headed to Beth Israel Hospital.

“Your daughter has been vomiting for at least six months,” the doctor said after inspecting me. “Her gum tissue is severely inflamed which is indicative of persistent trauma. When was your last episode?” she asked, turning towards me.

“Be honest with Dr. Ambrose,” Mom insisted.

“Around four o’clock this morning.”

“You mean after we got back from Poughkeepsie? My God,” she declared, rubbing her forehead.

“Her eyes are red from the stress vomiting puts on the facial muscles,” the doctor said while taking another look at me. “The acid Candice has been spitting up wreaks havoc on the type of soft tissue lining the mouth and throat.”

“Can the damage spread?” Mom asked, looking at me and then the doctor. “I mean, do you think her stomach is affected? This is how ulcers start, isn’t it?”

“Yes, this is one way ulcers start, but she hasn’t reached that point yet. That could change though, if this behavior continues.”

“How come I didn’t have a clue about this until now, Doctor? I feel like I should’ve noticed,” Mom said, shaking her head.

“Bulimia is a silent killer, Ms. Morgan. You cannot see the affects like you can with anorexic girls.”

I was sitting there with my feet dangling off the edge of the bed wishing one of them would acknowledge me. It’s not that big of a deal I wanted to say. Girls at school are throwing up all the time.

“What should I do, or not do?” Mom asked this Dr. Ambrose.

“Put her on bland foods such as eggs, milk and plain yogurt. These will sooth her mouth and throat. However, I also recommend professional help. Brick Rehabilitation Clinic in Rochester specializes in treating eating disorders. I’ll get you their number.”

“There’s no way I’m going to some rehab facility,” I said as Mom and I walked out of the hospital. “Those are for crazy people.”

“And vomiting for six months doesn’t qualify? We’ve got to tell your father. He can help pay for some of your treatment.”

“No Mom, you can’t tell Daddy! He won’t understand. You didn’t want him knowing about you being attacked and I don’t want him knowing about this. Please Mom!”

She stared at me as we got to the car. “All right. But I’m calling this Brick Rehab place the second we get home. And you’re not leaving the house. Period.”

“What do you mean? Lola is taking a bus to Washington D.C. tomorrow for that art competition. I need to wish her good luck.”

“So pick up the phone and call her.”

As soon as we got back Mom phoned that rehab facility.

“Yes, I need to speak with someone about admitting a new patient. You specialize in eating disorders, correct?”

She stood in the kitchen tapping a pen on a notepad.

“Okay yes, please connect me.”

I pushed against her, trying to hear the person on the other end but all I heard was mumbling.

“What’s the soonest opening you have?” Mom asked. “This Monday? That’s terrific.”

“No way!” I said. “I’ve got school in three weeks. I need to get ready.”

“Can you tell me about the facility? You’re located where, Otis, New York just outside of Rochester.”

“I’m not going Mom,” I said, pacing in front of her. “There’s no way! What about you? How are you going to survive without me? What if you have nightmares?”

“And how long have you been treating eating disorders?” Mom asked, ignoring me. “What about the staff? Are they doctors, psychologists, what...? You’ve got both. And how much is it? All right, okay, I’ll work that out somehow. Yes, I don’t want to lose the slot so please reserve the space for my daughter, Candice Morgan. Yes, I’m her legal guardian. Can you please hang on one second? What is it?” Mom asked, clutching the phone in her hand. “You’re waving your arms like some nut.”

“I just want to talk about this, Mom. Why are you in such a rush to call this place? You don’t know anything about it.”

“That’s why I’m on the phone. Now let me finish. I’m sorry about that,” she said, continuing her conversation. “My name? It’s Vivian Morgan. Yes, I’m her mother. What else can I provide you? That’s all? I just need to call back on Monday morning for directions and to finalize things with the admissions department once they open. You do have her spot reserved though, correct? All right. Thank you.”

“Who were you talking to? There’s no way I’m going up there on Monday.”

“That was the weekend administrator. And yes, you are going. It’s a weeklong intensive treatment and they’ve been dealing with these issues for ten years. The place is close to the Finger Lakes just outside of Rochester and this woman said they have grounds nearby.”

“Grounds nearby? What’s that mean? Unless they’re on an island of course there are grounds nearby. It could be next to a landfill for all we know.”

“It’s in upstate New York, Candice. I’m sure it’s nice. Plus it doesn’t matter. You’re not going on vacation.”

“But Mom, you can’t send me to a rehab facility!” I said reaching for her arms. “Listen to how insane that sounds!”

“What am I supposed to do, let you keep vomiting until your insides rot out?”

“I’ll stop cold turkey. That’s it. I’m done,” I said, slapping my hand on the table.

“Please Mom!”

“Do you think I was born yesterday? You need professional help, Candice.”

“But Mom!”

“I don’t want to hear it. You’re going for one week. After that you’ll come back and have two weeks before school.”

That night Mom told Grandma. I turned the shower on upstairs so they’d think I couldn’t hear them but I sat on the steps listening to every word.

“She’s been throwin’ up?” Grandma asked. “You mean on purpose?”

“Yes. The ER doctor said Candice has been doing it for six months.”

“Oh Madone. Does she not like my cookin’? Am I puttin’ too much garlic in the gravy?”

“It’s got nothing to do with the taste of food. It’s a method of dealing with things she can’t face.”

“What things? Who throws up spaghetti?” Grandma asked.

I imagined her scratching her forehead.

“The eating and vomiting helps her cope,” Mom replied.

“Cope with what? Does this got somethin’ to do with when you were attacked?”

“I’m sure that’s part of it. It could also be that her father moved to Florida. And even though it was years ago, it might have something to do with Dean. She loved her brother like nothing I’ve ever seen. And then there’s the...”

“The what...?”

“I haven’t thought about this for a long time. Maybe I tried blocking it out myself.”

“What Vivian? Don’t keep nothin’ from me.”

“I remember walking into Dean’s room the morning after he died and finding a plastic wrapper from a needle lying on the floor. I couldn’t help but wonder if Candice...”

“What are you talkin’ about?”

“Nothing. Forget it. Candice is struggling and we need to help her.”

“I’m gonna go talk with her,” I heard Grandma say.

That’s when I hurried upstairs and jumped in the shower.

I avoided Mom and Grandma the rest of the night. I couldn’t stop thinking about when Dean died. I remembered Mom finding that stupid wrapper. How could she think I’d ever do such a thing? It’s no wonder I’ve never confessed my nightmare.

The next morning I stayed in bed until after 11:00 and got up to call Lola just before she left for the bus terminal.

“Where you been?” she asked. “You left me flat Friday night and when I talked with your mom yesterday she said you’d call back. Is everythin’ all right?”

“It’s been a weird weekend. I’ll tell you about it after you get back, Lola. I just wanted to wish you good luck.”

“Thanks Candice. I’m late for the bus station so let me go. I’ll talk with you next week!”

I wasted my Sunday moping around the house. I wanted to help Grandma at the bakery but Mom wouldn’t let me near the donuts. While Grandma was still working and Mom was in the shower I called Daddy.

“After four rings his answering machine came on so I left him a stupid message about how I got invited down the shore and that I’d call him next weekend. Then I fell into the kitchen chair and stared at the cheesecake in front of me. I reached for it, but instead of devouring it I grabbed the edges of the table and counted the seconds until my temptation past. At least I proved something to myself I thought. But still, I was petrified about what was happening to me.

The next morning Mom woke me up early.

“I just spoke with the admissions office at Brick Rehab.,” she said. “It’s a long ride up so we have to leave soon, Candice. Come on, get out of bed.”

“I thought about it and I’m not going,” I told her. “You can’t make me. I could’ve eaten a whole cheesecake yesterday and didn’t. I told you I could stop cold turkey.”

“I don’t want to send you there Candice, but you need help. Now come on,” she said tossing back the sheet. “We’ve got to get going.”

After taking a shower I walked downstairs pouting and saw Grandma folding a pile of clothes on the dining room table.

“I have to leave here now, Grandma,” I said, fighting back my tears.

She looked at me while holding a pair of my underpants. “Vivian, how can Candice go up there empty handed? I know you said this place gives her what she needs but that can’t mean bloomers, too. Look, I got clean ones right here. Let me put them in a baggie for her.”

“She can’t bring anything up there,” Mom said to Grandma.

“Not even bloomers? She needs somethin’ familiar to cover her goodies. How’s she gonna walk around?”

“Mom please, I’m just following their rules. Candice, say goodbye to Grandma, okay? I’ll start the car.”

After Mom stepped outside Grandma stood in her slippers and nightgown hugging me at the front door.

“You want to put some underwears in your pocket?” she asked. “They’re so little. Your mother won’t know nothin.”

“No. Its okay Grandma,” I said, holding her hands.

“All right. Whatever you think. Your mother tells me this place is near the Finger Lakes. I was up there once you know. Your grandpa and me, we never had money for a honeymoon so a year after we got married he took me upstate for the weekend. I remember it bein’ real pretty.”

“Yeah, that’s what I heard.”

“Here,” she said, “squeezing money into my hand. “It’s twenty dollars. You know, if there’s somethin’ you want to buy in the gift shop or whatever.”

“Grandma, I doubt if there’s a -”

“Take the money, Candice. I’m not rich but I give what I can. I’ll miss you, and I’ll say the rosary for you every mornin’. I may not go to church but that don’t mean God and me ain’t on a first name basis,” she winked, failing to put a smile on my face.

“Take care of Mom this week,” I said wiping away my tears. “Friday is the one year anniversary of her attack so she’ll probably, you know...”

“I know,” Grandma said nodding. “You worry about yourself. I’ll take good care of your mother.”

Mom was honking so I hurried to the car then turned one last time and saw Grandma on the front porch waving to me with the rosary beads already in her hand.

Mom and I didn’t say much on the ride up. She tried making small talk about how pretty the Catskill Mountains were but I didn’t care. I sat there eating the carton of plain Dannon yogurt she had brought for me. Each time we drove through a toll I looked with envy at the attendant sitting inside their cozy little box.

At a few minutes before 2:00 we saw a sign for the Brick Rehabilitation Clinic and I spotted a gray concrete building behind some trees.

“It looks nice, doesn’t it Candice?” Mom said, nodding her head as if she approved.

My palms were itching so much I couldn’t pay attention to her. Even though all I had in my stomach was that yogurt I felt nauseous as she parked the car. Shoving open the door I gasped the fresh air and tried to keep myself from throwing up right in front of the admissions office.

“Mom, please,” I begged as we stood outside the entrance. “Let’s turn around and go home. I don’t need to go in there, Mom. Don’t make me. I’m better already. Please!”

“Candice, we have to go through with this,” she said while taking my hand then wrapping her arms around me. “I love you,” she said. “That’s why we’re here.” Then she stepped into the lobby and told me to take a seat while she checked me in.

I couldn't sit. I put hands on the glass door and debated whether I should make a run for it and hitchhike to Florida.

“Candice Morgan,” a woman called out as she opened a door that I never even noticed. It was painted the same shade of brown as the wall and didn't have a handle on the outside.

“Yes?” I asked, picking at my nails.

“Please come with me now.”

“But my mother isn’t finished filling out the papers yet,” I said, pointing out the obvious.

“That’s fine. Only patients are permitted beyond this point.”

“Oh Jesus,” I mumbled, feeling my fingers going numb. “Mom, please don’t make me do this,” I said, grabbing the pen from her hand and pulling her towards the door.”

“Candice, please don’t make this harder than it already is,” she asked, taking her arm back.

“Candice, follow me,” the woman said while standing in the doorway.

“Go ahead,” Mom insisted. “It’ll be fine.”

I tried not to cry but the tears streaked down my cheeks. Walking backwards through that door I stared at Mom and scratched my itchy palms. “I love you, Mom. I love you. Don’t forget about me, okay?”

“I won’t,” she said touching her hands to her lips. “Goodbye Candice. I love you.”

“No Mom, No! So long for now!” I yelled, reaching for her as the door slammed closed.

“So long for now Candice,” she called out from behind the door. “I love you honey!” And with those last words I heard the tears in her voice and I cried even harder.

“I need you to remove your watch and ring,” the woman said as we stood in front of a small window which looked into a storage room or something.

“Wait, I forget to tell my mom something,” I said while wiping my eyes. “Can you open that door for me?”

“No. Now please remove your jewelry.”

“But my mom is right there on the other side of this door. She’s five feet away.”

“Remove your jewelry please.”

I huffed and tried taking off my watch but could barely undo the latch. After finally getting my jewelry off I handed it to the man in the window.

“Floyd, you ready back there or what? I need to get this patient to Exam Room F,” the woman said as I stood shaking.

Seconds later a man appeared with a bundle of sweatpants, T-shirts, a night gown and a pair of white slippers.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“The required uniform,” the woman said. “Now follow me.”

The fist-sized jumble of keys dangled from her belt loop as she led me down the hallway. I listened to the man’s footsteps marching behind me.

“Can I ask where we’re going? Can my mother please come? I’m sure she’s still in that lobby.”

“Please step inside,” the woman said, pushing open a metal door.

The examining room was painted a shiny white. The man walking behind me placed the pile of clothes on the counter next to a hand sink and left.

“I need you to remove your clothes and put this on,” the woman ordered, handing me a stiff paper gown folded into a square.

You could scrub cake pans at my Grandma's bakery with that hair of yours, I wanted to say. But instead I asked for my mother again. “Can't you please check and see if she’s still in the lobby? I’m begging you.”

“Put on the gown,” she repeated.

After nudging off my shoes I peeled back my socks. The icy floor turned my skin gooseflesh blue. I could feel her judging me as I unhooked my bra and slid my panties over my ankles.

She grabbed my clothes and picked up a phone.

“The patient is prepped for her exam,” she said as I fumbled with the stupid Velcro neck. I rubbed my feet together while shivering on the examining table. The wax paper ruffled under my rear end.

I was so relieved when the doctor walked in a few minutes later. He looked like a grandpa with his balding head, fat cheeks and potbelly. His double chin rested over his yellow shirt collar and green necktie.

“Hello Doctor,” I said in a friendly voice. But instead of acknowledging me he whispered to this freak in the doorway as if I didn’t exist, as if I couldn't see them standing five feet in front of me. Please look at me! I wanted to scream. Be on my side, don’t talk with her!

“Hello Candice,” he said after they finished and she marched away with my clothes.

“I’m Dr. Kossack,” he said while laying me down with his icy fingers.

“Who are you?” I asked jerking up as someone else walked in the room.

“I’m sorry for startling you, Candice,” she said, smiling. “My name is Elaine. I’m a nurse and will be assisting Dr. Kossack with the examination today.”

“Can one of you see if my mom is in the lobby? They wouldn’t let her come with me.”

“Only patients are permitted in this area,” Dr. Kossack said as he nudged the overhead light causing me to squint.

I felt the nurse spreading apart my toes with her moisturized fingers.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Performing a general check up,” she said with her face inches from my big toe.

This is how those crabs must have felt when Grandma was cutting through their faces the other night, I thought.

“When was your last menstrual cycle?” Dr. Kossack asked while pressing his coarse fingertips along the inside of my arm.

I hesitated at the question. “Four months.”

He nodded as if that was normal. I concentrated on the nurse’s hands prodding the skin behind my kneecaps.

“How often are you vomiting?”

“...Maybe once a day. But days go by when I don’t do it at all. I haven’t done it all weekend. I shouldn’t even be here.”

“What happened to your thumb?” the nurse asked, raising my right hand. “Was this self-inflicted?”

“What...? It’s not what you think. You don’t understand.”

“That’s why I’m asking, Candice. Now, did you do this on purpose or was it an accident?”

“...Yes I did it but... My mom had to go to a police station and identify the man who raped her.”

“So you acted out by injuring yourself?”

“I want to see my mom. Please! Can one of you get her?” I begged leaning up on my elbows.

“Candice, have you ever cut yourself before to unleash some of your pain?”

“No! I’m not some lunatic. Please, just let me out of here!” I begged while panting on the table.

“Please calm down Candice,” the doctor said as he pressed his finger against my wrist.

“Lift up your gown so I can examine your breasts,” the nurse said once the doctor finished taking my pulse.

I jerked the gown from underneath my rear end, ripping it as I pulled it over my hips and held it around my neck.

“In general your skin looks okay,” the nurse said as I laid there fully exposed. “But there is a web of broken capillaries on your upper back and your stomach was tender to the touch. Those are telltale signs. According to the report we received from the ER doctor you saw on Saturday you’ve been vomiting for six months. My guess is it’s been a year.”

“How do you know I saw a doctor on Saturday?”

“I’m going to prune your fingernails now,” said the nurse. “It’s a precaution we take with all patients.”

She rested my left hand on a small table and opened a bottle of nail polish remover to take off whatever paint was left on my fingertips. That smell was a comfort to me somehow.

“Try and be still Candice,” she said before starting with the nail clipper. “Your hands keep shaking.”

Pressing my palms into the table I stretched out my fingers and watched the wide slices of nail peeling back as she dug the metal clipper into the fleshy skin of my nail beds.

“Are you sexually active?” Dr. Kossack asked while dilating my pupils.

“No.”

“Have you ever been sexually abused?”

“What? No!”

The nurse moved to the other side and started on my right hand, avoiding the damaged thumb. Once she finished I raced my stunted nails against my skin. They felt raw.

Dr. Kossack took a seat next to the hand sink and started writing. That’s when this nurse swabbed my arm with a cotton ball and stuck a needle in my vein. I stared at my chipped red painted toes as the blood gushed into the cylinder. All I could think of was Dean.

“We’re almost done Candice,” the nurse said. “Rest for a moment and then I’ll get your height and weight.”

I had noticed the scale in the corner but didn’t see the lock on the adjusting knob until Elaine spun the combination.

“Stand with your back to the numbers, Candice.”

“Excuse me?”

“Face away from the scale. No one is allowed to look at the numbers when they’re getting weighed.”

I listened to the metal platform jimmy beneath my feet as the nurse fiddled with the knobs behind me. Dr. Kossack was still writing.

“All right, Candice. You can get dressed now,” the nurse said, pointing at the pile of clothes.

Dr. Kossack stuffed a pen into his shirt pocket and smiled. “Good luck young lady,” he said as I pulled on a pair of oversized black sweatpants and powder blue cotton shirt. They even removed the stupid draw string. Why, so I wouldn’t hang myself? I folded the waist band over a few times to keep the sweats from falling and slid my bare feet into those ugly backless slippers.

“I need an attendant to escort Candice Morgan to her room,” the nurse spoke into the phone.

A black orderly appeared in the doorway a minute later. He told me to grab my clothes in a tone of voice that was used to telling girls what to do. He was muscular but fat, and had a thick squiggly vein tunneling beneath his nose. I held the pile of clothes in my outstretched arms.

“Your name was Elaine right?” I asked the nurse.

“Yes, Candice.”

“I’ll see you later, right Elaine?”

“No, I’m sorry Candice,” she said, gently shaking her head. “I’m only here on Mondays for new patient exams and blood tests for admitted patients. But they’ll take good care of you. I promise,” she said, taking my hand and patting it, reassuring me that everything would be okay.

“You ready?” the orderly asked.

“Yes,” I nodded while looking at Elaine. I couldn’t take my eyes off her until I followed the orderly around a corner and she was gone.

The only sounds I heard were the plastic soles of my slippers and this man’s jangling keys as we walked down a maze of windowless hallways. After stopping at a steel door he turned the lock back with a heavy thud. The door groaned open and I stepped inside, pushing against the dense smell of Vick’s VapoRub. It reminded me of when I was younger and Mom smeared it on my chest whenever my nose was stuffed. I hated the smell then but was grateful for it now.

Two flimsy mattresses lay on rickety metal frames three feet off the ground.

“You share that dresser with your roommate,” he stated, pointing at the wooden box squeezed between the beds. “The two bottom drawers are yours.”

The last drawer was missing. It was just a hole in the dresser. But I didn’t dare complain.

“Your bed is on the right. Orientation is at 5:30 in the lounge. Someone will come for you. Welcome to Brick.”

The door slammed closed as I stood in the middle of the room crying and shaking with the pile of sweatpants and T-shirts in my arms. I didn't know what to do and fell onto the bed squeezing the clothes and wishing Mom would come and rescue me, but I knew I was on my own.

Chapter Fourteen

A slamming door startled me awake and I jumped out of bed. Where am I? I wondered while staring at the green walls. Then I spotted that dresser with the hole in it and felt the chills running down my neck. How'd I fall asleep? What time is it?

Leaning against the dresser I tried catching my breath. That's when I noticed a piece of paper had been shoved under the door. It was my daily schedule. Orientation was followed by dinner. I was up at 7:00 each morning for inspections, then breakfast. Therapy with a Dr. Goldman was daily from 10:00 'til 11:00. "Is that a man or woman? I'm not confessing my humiliation to some man! Lunch was at 12:30 and dinner at 6:00. Lights out was 9:00.

Sitting back on the bed I pulled the thin pillow out from under the sheet and hugged it. Scanning the room I noticed one of the ceiling panels sagging in the far corner over the other bed. My mind raced. Who sleeps there? What will I have to say? How can they deny me contact with my family? I'm not a criminal! Why can't I be back at the bakery sweating near the ovens? What will Mom do about Justin? What if Grandma forgets to lock the door when she leaves in the morning? What if - ?

The lock gave way. The door slid open. Throwing the pillow down I sprang to my feet. What time is it? It can't be 5:30 yet. There aren't even any clocks or windows in this place!

A girl strode in wearing sweatpants and a shirt and dragging her slippers across the floor. She was the reason the room smelled so bad.

"I was wondering when you'd get here," she said, looking me over.

"Excuse me?"

"They said you'd be here yesterday. Weren't you supposed to be here yesterday?"

"I don't want to be here at all."

"That's original," she laughed, reaching into the top dresser drawer, pulling out a pack of Winston's and extending her arm. "Smoke?"

I wanted to but was afraid of being in this girl's debt. "No thank you."

She lit the cigarette and exhaled through her nostrils. Her short hair was matted and her pointy nipples pierced her shirt, which fell flat against her chest. I tried not to stare. She sat on the bed, catching her heels in the raised seam of the mattress.

"So," she said, with the cigarette caught between her lips. "I'm Shannon."

"I'm Candice Morgan," I replied with my hands folded between my legs.

"Why are you in this human kennel, Candice? Drugging, boozing, bingeing, puking, starving? All of the above? You're not too boney so I assume you're a hog, right, eating hunks of cheese the size of a car battery."

"What?"

"You're bulimic, right? You don't look like any addict I've ever seen."

"Addict? I thought they only treated eating disorders here. That's what they told my mom."

"That's what the brochure would say if they had one. There'd be a picture of a mountain lake and some grassy field where inmates are lying on blankets having a picnic and tossing Frisbees. They'd leave out the pictures of everyone vomiting up egg salad and snorting cocaine off a Dixie plate."

She took a drag from her cigarette and nodded at my hands.

"See you got your fingertips dissected," she laughed. "Weird feeling, right? "You'll get used to it."

I watched her cigarette, the column of ash was an inch long and about to flake off.

"Who marched you down from examination, Nose Veins?"

"Who?"

"The big black guy who looks like he snorted a can of silly string."

"...Yeah."

"That's what I thought. You'll see a lot of him."

“So why are you here?”

“Ain’t it obvious? I’m five foot five and weigh seventy one pounds,” she said, taking a final drag and stubbing the cigarette out on her bed. “My set-point is a buck ten but no way am I fattening up again. I’m outsmarting them all. I know it sounds calculating but if you’re not cute you better be clever.”

“What do you mean by outsmarting them?”

“They keep progress reports. Body weight, calorie consumption, blood and urine samples...you know. They predicted I’d be up to eighty five pounds now but I’ve got them fooled. Now I eat and even the score later.”

“What do you mean?”

Footsteps echoed down the hall.

“That’s Lorna Geegax coming for you. It’s time for orientation,” she laughed. “You’ll meet Wart the Stutterer, too. Just don’t stare at the knuckle on Wart’s middle finger. But now that I mentioned it you won’t be able to look away, right? Have fun, new girl,” she laughed. “And remember, I’ve got seniority. If I find one thing out of place I’ll stub my cigarette out on that perfect face you’re wearing.”

The door swung open and a big boned woman with a flat face looked inside.

“I’m Ms. Geegax. Come with me,” she said, nodding in my direction.

I left my pile of clothes on the bed and followed Ms. Geegax into a TV room stinking of stale cigarettes and popcorn. Three ragged brown couches were positioned in a semi-circle facing two metal folding chairs and the television. I was the first one there.

“Take a seat,” she ordered, “anywhere but the chairs.”

I looked for the safest location and chose the couch on the far left, squeezing against the armrest and glancing down at the slippers they gave me. All I wanted was a pair of shoes, something with laces so I could pull them tight.

Others trudged in, five girls and a boy. Everyone wore black sweatpants and shirts that didn't fit. The boy's head was shaved and red splotches dotted his arms. He took a seat farthest from me. One girl was mousy looking and chewing her decapitated fingertips. Another girl was tall but frail as a sheared kitten. Her kneecaps stabbed her sweatpants as she walked. A fat girl waddled in and dropped down next to me.

"Si...Si...sit down gently..." a man stuttered. I watched him trying to maintain authority while spitting out his syllables. The wart on the middle finger of his right hand was the size of a chestnut.

Two more girls came in: twin sisters with black makeup under their eyes. They stood like conjoined twins and sat so precisely it seemed as if they'd rehearsed it. I could tell they'd be pretty in the real world.

Ms. Geegax and Wart the Stutterer sat in those metal chairs and whispered to each other. Almost everybody stared at the floor while rubbing their fingertips.

"Attention everyone, my name is Ms. Geegax and this is Mr. Spindler. You are new patients at Brick Rehabilitation Clinic and will have your questions answered once we explain the rules. After that, assume the answer is no. In this institution you are the children and we are your parents. Privacy is a privilege not a right, and it does not exist inside these walls. Time has no relevance so I suggest you not dwell on the outside world because for you, it no longer exists. Some of you will be with us for a week, others longer. There is a patio at the rear of the dining hall. You cannot smoke anywhere except in that area. If you brought cigarettes, congratulations. If not, either hold tight or beg. No one is allowed matches. The orderly standing watch in the patio doorway will light your cigarettes. Food is only consumed in the cafeteria. If you consider hiding food keep in mind that we've seen all the tricks. If you are caught smoking or eating outside the designated areas you will be sent to The Chamber for twenty four hours. As for the other rules, you'll learn them as you go. That is all. This is your rehabilitation and it begins now."

“How do we know if we’re getting out when we’re scheduled to?” asked one of the twins.

“Two days before your release date your parents, legal guardian or caseworker is contacted and given a progress report. At that point a suggestion is made on whether you should be retained or discharged.” She glanced around the room. “Dinner is at 6:00. I suggest you head to the dining hall and wait.”

Six round wooden tables filled the cafeteria. Sweaty cooks stood behind a heated stainless steel counter shrouded in gray steam. They liked the twins best. “Double fantasy,” one of them laughed while stripping the fat off a slimy pile of raw chicken breasts. I heard food sizzling. One cook lifted a pan the size of a snow shovel and splashed cream corn into a plastic container. The place reeked of bleach, and something charred. A few of the padded seats were reupholstered in duct tape.

Ms. Geegax came in clapping her hands. “Grab a seat. The dinner rules at Brick are simple: keep your hands above the table and finish every bite on your plate within thirty minutes. When you get on the food line give the orderly your name and he’ll give you an index card with a X, Y, or Z on it. The food is the same for everyone but portion sizes vary depending on your reason for admittance. Once you’ve been served, sit down. And remember our slogan here at Brick: ‘You cannot leave your seat until your meal is complete.’ ”

“I don’t want to go, you can’t make me go!”

“Cynthia, I’m getting tired of going through this! Now quit fighting it!”

Nose Veins and another orderly appeared in the doorway dragging a scrawny girl kicking and screaming.

“You can’t make me eat! Can’t you see I’m fat? The flesh is weak! Hunger makes me strong!”

“Sit down!” Nose Veins yelled as he and the other orderly dumped her in a chair.

She was psychotic looking with frazzled hair and furious eyes.

“You assholes! You can't make me eat this shit!”

“We’ve been making you eat it for a week Cynthia,” replied Nose Veins. “Now are you going to be civilized or should we throw you in The Chamber?”

Someone nudged me in my shoulder. I swung around stunned and scared. It was Shannon.

“That’s Cynthia,” she said. “Everyone jokes that she’s really just starved for attention. They put her on suicide watch because she tried strangling herself with her pillowcase. Let her, I say. Her screams really get under my skin.”

More people stumbled into the cafeteria. Some of the girls kept flailing their hands, trying to burn calories, I guessed. Everyone wore slippers and sweatpants. Some jerked their sweatpants above their knees. They pulled up chairs around me and at other tables.

“They’ll be studying you,” Shannon whispered. “And wait ‘til after dinner,” she laughed.

“What?” I asked. “What happens after dinner?”

“I can’t ruin the surprise. You’re lucky though,” Shannon said. “Today’s Monday. It’s meatloaf night with sides of string beans and cream corn. Best meal of the week except for Friday night’s pizza.”

“All right everyone, grab a tray,” announced Ms. Geegax. “And for you rookies, remember your meal must be consumed in thirty minutes.”

The line wove along the left wall towards a cart loaded with three pans of food and a tray of cups filled with apple juice, milk, or orange soda. Stacks of serving trays were against the wall next to Styrofoam plates and plastic utensils wrapped in cellophane.

“Hey, this cream corn looks like upchuck!” one of the girls shouted.

The joke was a hit. Everyone slammed the tables, laughing at the irony.

I pinched my eyes shut trying to pretend I was at home eating spaghetti with Mom and Grandma.

“Come on Cynthia,” said, Nose Veins, “hold out your plate.”

“I can't eat anything. If you make me I'll just throw it up. I'm already fat, can't you see that! If I put on weight... You don't get it do you?”

“My job is to make sure you eat and you will! Roger, bring her back to the table,” Nose Veins demanded.

Another orderly with huge biceps strolled over and wrapped his hand around Cynthia's boney arm.

“I'm getting your food and you are going to eat it,” Nose Veins shouted, pointing at Cynthia as Roger dragged her back to her seat.

I approached the front of the line and waited as the cook dumped a slice of meatloaf into the largest compartment on my plate. He splashed a spoonful of cream corn into one of the smaller compartments then dropped a helping of green beans he grabbed with a pair of tongs.

After choosing a cup of apple juice I hurried back to the table with my eyes on the floor and my slippers skidding forward.

The string beans were cold and the red sauce slopped over the meatloaf was burnt ketchup. Ms. Geegax, Wart the Stutterer, Nose Veins and that muscle-bound orderly Roger patrolled the room.

What's Lola doing in Washington D.C.? I wondered while pushing my plastic fork through the burnt meatloaf. I'd give anything to be going to the movies with her.

“Cynthia, stop picking at your food!” Roger shouted. “You can set an example for the new patients by finishing your meal or by refusing to eat it and facing the consequences. Which will it be?”

She scooped a spoonful of cream corn and shoved it in her mouth.

“Good,” Roger said, walking away.

“Screw you!” Cynthia screamed, hitting Roger in the head with her meatloaf.

“Goddamn it! Hold her down!” he yelled marching towards her.

“Jack, get over here!” Ms. Geegax yelled. Nose Veins hurried over.

“Brace her head!” Roger shouted. “Now she’s going to finish her goddamn dinner!”

“No! You can’t make me eat this!” Cynthia screamed, squirming in her chair. I’ll choke if I eat it! Stop it! Let me go! Let me go!”

“Hold her still!” Roger demanded.

Wart the Stutterer pinned down her arms as Nose Veins held her head.

“You’re all devils! This place is hell!”

“You better swallow this,” Roger warned as he grabbed the meatloaf off the floor and shoved a piece in Cynthia’s mouth.

Tears streaked her face. Her head twisted. She choked and swallowed. Another orderly approached with a rag and pressed it over her nose. She thrashed then opened wide. Roger dumped a spoonful of cream corn into her mouth.

“Good, now was that so bad?” Roger asked. “Here, try some string beans!” he said, forcing them down Cynthia’s throat.

“Actions and the aftermath, it’s your choice,” Ms. Geegax said as she walked with her hands on her hips. “Finish your food missy,” she ordered, pointing her finger at my plate. “This will be the best meal until Friday night’s pizza so eat up.”

Nose Veins inspected the plates as each person finished. Once he approved they walked outside for a smoke. I finished mine and placed the utensils and empty cup neatly on the plate and walked towards him with my hands shaking.

“Good job. We’ll call you when we’re ready.”

Call me for what? I wanted to ask. But I just dropped my plate in the trash and stepped outside.

Shannon was smoking and held the pack to me. I nodded. She slipped one out, clamped it between her scaly lips and lit the end with her cigarette. I didn’t want to press my mouth around that filter but did it anyway.

“Give me a jump start?” one kid asked Shannon. “Roger’s got the matches but he’s in the can.”

She nodded and lit his cigarette with hers.

The concrete patio was barricaded with a ten foot fence roped in barbed wire. I stared beyond it at the junkyard and the maze of dirt trails weaving through stacks of cars. Is this the nearby grounds they told Mom about?

“There she is!” one of the boys shouted. “Give that girl a round of applause!”

“Hold the applause and let me bum a smoke,” Cynthia said as she laughed.

She was repulsive with sunken eyes and blistered arms. The back of her right hand was callused from rubbing against the roof of her mouth when she induced vomiting. Her slippers skidded up to me.

“So did you get a good look in there or what?” she asked, taking a drag of her cigarette. “I’m a scarred memory for you now.”

Her eyes were red rimmed and swollen. Pieces of green bean were trapped in her teeth.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

I hesitated for a second. “...Candice Morgan?” My response came out like a question.

She smirked. “Cynthia Moorehead. You’ve got my initials. So why are you in? Who had their way with you? Your father’s fishing buddy? Your father himself?”

“No, nothing like that.”

“So you’re in denial. They’ll dig up your soul in therapy. When I told my mother that my stepbrother had this thing about playing doctor with me she told me to go to the library after school and not screw up the good thing she had going with her new husband.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Why not? There are no secrets here. Didn’t you realize that when the orderly watched you getting undressed in the examination room?”

“Candice Morgan! Where’s Candice Morgan?”

I pushed my cigarette into the bucket of dirt next to the fence and raised my hand, afraid to call out and draw attention to myself. Ms. Geegax held up her finger and motioned me over.

“Enjoy,” Cynthia said, grabbing my unfinished cigarette from the bucket and stashing it in her pocket.

Shannon tapped my shoulder. “Good luck.”

Others laughed.

“You called me?” I asked, walking up to Ms. Geegax.

“Come with me.”

I followed her through the cafeteria as one of the cooks splashed a mop to the floor and swished around hot brown water.

“We engage in extreme cure tactics,” she said, talking as I hurried behind her. “That means linking a negative association to your behavior. Our goal is to establish purging not as a method of mental cleansing, but as an act that revolts you. Understand?”

She didn’t wait for my answer. Instead she pushed open the door to a small green bathroom. “Now I want you to induce vomiting.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me.”

Roger walked up behind me, his massive shoulders filling the doorway.

“But why?” I asked, turning towards Ms. Geegax. “I’m here to stop. And I already feel good. I don’t want to do that anymore.”

“You were in orientation. I said there are no questions. Now let’s go.”

“But I can’t...! There is no way I can...!”

“I reviewed your file, missy. You’ve been bingeing and purging in private for about a year. If you’ve got performance anxiety I brought a long handled spoon.”

I stood shivering and staring at the green toilet.

“Ms. Geegax, I can’t. Does my mom know about this? She would never have sent me here if she knew you were going to make me throw up. I don’t know about everyone else in this place but I have a family that loves me. I don’t have a caseworker and I’m not an orphan. I had a normal life!”

“Your parents are divorced, your mother was raped, and you’ve got a dead brother and an eating disorder. It’s time you quit lying to yourself. Most people are never forced to face the lies they tell themselves every day. In here you must, and you’ll be better for it once you leave. As for your mom, she doesn’t know what goes on in here and frankly, no parent wants to know. She sent you here because we get results. Now let’s go. We reserve ten minutes per patient. You’ve got eight minutes left to get your concerns and your dinner out of your system.”

Holding onto the wall I got down on my knees.

“Come on,” Ms. Geegax commanded. “Spit it up.”

“But...!”

“Roger...” she said.

His fingers dangled in my face. They were so close I smelled the meatloaf he shoved in Cynthia’s mouth.

I gazed up into his eyes then at the toilet. “I always did this alone! No one ever watched me!”

“That’s why you have the spoon, in case of stage fright. Now hurry up. Good, crying is good. You’re establishing a negative feeling towards this already. Seven minutes.”

“I can’t do this! Please don’t make me!”

“You can do it and you will. Now let’s go.”

Hot breaths pushed against my fingers as I slid them over my tongue.

“Six minutes. Come on missy,” Ms. Geegax announced, grabbing my right hand and shoving it into my mouth. “Roger, its time.”

“Time? Time for what? Jesus Christ! No!”

“It’s only for a minute,” he grunted, stuffing a bleach-soaked rag over my nose.

“I can’t breathe! Stop it!”

“I’ve got her head in my hands Roger! Hold that rag until she gags!”

“Stop it!” I screamed.

“Vomit and it will all be over. Now come on, missy!”

My feet squirmed on the floor. Mind numbing gusts of bleach scorched my nostrils.

“Please!”

Squirming. Fighting. My left slipper fell off as my toes pressed against the cold tiled floor.

“Come on missy, throw it up!”

Acid formed at the back of my throat. My eyes watered. My feet thrashed and my left foot smashed the pipe beneath the sink.

“Please stop! My foot! My foot! Stop it! Please!”

“Come on girl, spit up that meatloaf! You’ve got two minutes or else we’re throwing you in The Chamber. Keep that rag over her face, Roger!”

Screwing my eyes shut I sniffed the bleach until the food spilled out of me with intestinal ripping heaves. Roger withdrew the rag as I fell forward, hugging the toilet and gasping spastic breaths.

“Good job,” Ms. Geegax said while flushing the toilet. “It may not feel like it, but you’re healing now.”

Leaning against the wall I felt empty, scared and disposable. I stood up and splashed cold water on my face. That girl Cynthia was right, there are no secrets here. I’m fully exposed. Vulnerable as Mom the day she was raped.

An hour later, after having the color of my urine recorded in the bathroom and being allowed to brush my teeth, an orderly walked me back to my room.

Shannon was lying in bed wearing a thin nightgown. Her arms were raised above her head exposing thick patches of brown underarm hair. She caught me staring.

“You’ll need a shave by the end of the week too,” she said. “There are no razors here. The only reason they allow smokes is because it calms nerves.” She lowered her arms and leaned up, picking at her toenails. “So how’d you like the bleach? Relaxing, isn’t it?”

I squeezed my eyes shut and fell to the bed.

“You must be starving after returning the meatloaf. If you’re in the mood for a snack the orderlies working the graveyard shift will unlock the doors around midnight. They’ll have laxatives, pot, and leftovers from dinner. Sometimes they even swipe shots of Demerol or Morphine from Kossack’s medicine cabinet. New fish like you are always frantic the first night. Maybe they’ll reel you in.”

I ignored her and stared at the wall thinking about Mom, Daddy, Grandma and Lola. I wanted to hold Dean’s diary and trace his words with my fingertips. The ceiling light blinked out and I laid there squeezing my pillow and started a conversation with Dean. I asked him questions about heaven, and if such a place really existed.

“Hey big mouth, do me a favor and pray to your God in quiet. I’m tired.”

“I’m not praying.”

“Oh no? Don’t you have a God?”

“What?” I asked, rolling over to look in her direction.

“You probably owned a fairytale life with boyfriends and a family, right? Maybe one of those guys abused you and that’s how you ended up here. Or maybe you saw something so ugly it ruined your view of the world.”

I couldn’t believe how close she’d come to the truth.

“The way I figure it, if there is a God He should be put away for child abuse. Supposedly we’re His children, right? You think God would have gotten involved when my stepfather impregnated me. But then I miscarried his baby. He never knew it was his, though. ‘It must’ve

been one of those druggies from school you latched onto,' my mother screamed, blind to the fact that her husband preferred me to her. 'Better off the baby died,' she said. But I didn't think so. I needed something to love."

She rolled over and punched the pillow. I thought of Mom and my anger at God for letting her get attacked and for letting Dean get cancer. I thought about how I went from having a happy life to this unimaginable existence. I thought about how I had to get out of this place and make things better somehow. I didn't remember falling asleep but the sudden knock on the door startled me awake. Shannon jumped out of bed.

"Come on," she said. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"The lounge."

I was afraid to go but more afraid of staying here alone.

The lounge was dark except for a red halogen lamp burning in the corner. Girls squeezed onto the couches. Boys leaned against the tables in the back. A tray of leftovers from dinner and a cardboard box were guarded by one of three orderlies. I stood near the wall next to Shannon, not sure what was happening.

"Some of you are new but I'm sure you get the idea," one of the orderlies said. "Pledge allegiance to me or one of my colleagues and choose your vice."

"I'll do anything! I'm shaking and starving and cold! Please...please help me!"

It was the tall girl with the bony kneecaps from orientation. I heard her panting from across the room.

"Relax," the orderly laughed. "Service my associate then pick your pleasure."

She dropped to her knees in the corner of the room. The audience laughed and hooted.

Shannon saw me looking in the opposite corner. "Don't act so innocent," she said.

"You'll be on your knees before the week is out."

"Fuck you."

She smiled and turned away.

One of the boys sacrificed himself for a joint. Is he gay? Straight? Then I remembered what Cynthia had said: there are no secrets here, no identities.

I promised myself amidst the chaos that I would never throw up again. But the time I had yet to endure in this place left me breathless and I felt like vomiting over my bare feet, just as Shannon humiliated herself for a key to the bathroom.

Chapter Fifteen

It was Tuesday morning and Nose Veins was walking me to my first therapy appointment with Dr. Goldman. I followed him up a dark flight of stairs then down a long hallway. The panic I felt was trapped in my throat and legs.

“Take a seat until Dr. Goldman comes for you,” he said after walking me into a small room.

There was only one chair so I sat down and watched as he locked the metal door behind him.

After he left I sat wringing my hands and staring at the wrinkly pink skin on the heels of my feet. I felt so exposed in these stupid sweatpants and loose T-shirt. They lied to Mom just to get our money. She has no idea of the insane things happening in this place. I should’ve told Daddy where I was going. He’d come and save me.

Some girl’s voice shattered my thoughts. It was coming from behind another door, across from where I was sitting. Springing up I hurried over and pressed my ear to the door.

“Touch mattered most,” she screamed. “I remember hands but not faces, and never eyes.”

For a moment things got so quiet and all I heard was the sound of my rampant breaths. Then the doorknob turned and I rushed back to my seat. Those twins walked out a second later. At the same time, Roger appeared through that metal door. The twins looked in my direction but didn’t acknowledge me. It seemed they had each other and didn’t need anyone else.

“Girls, come this way. Candice, wait until Dr. Goldman calls you,” Roger said.

I nodded without saying a word.

“Candice?”

“Yes,” I said, jerking my head around.

“I’m Dr. Goldman, please come in.”

“Thank God you’re a woman,” I mumbled, unclenching my fists.

“That makes two of us,” she said smiling.

Following her into the room I stared at her matching beige heels and skirt. She was pretty with shoulder length brown hair, fair skin and eyeglasses. She must’ve been about Mom’s age.

The room was small and painted bright yellow. A wooden desk with a hutch sat in the corner. I was happy to see a potted plant sitting on it. I wanted to walk over and touch its leaves. In the middle of the room was a brown circular rug with two chairs facing one another. Each one had a wooden table next to it.

“Please sit down, Candice,” Dr. Goldman said, pointing at the worn leather chair closest to the door. I wondered where the twins had sat, and what Dr. Goldman had done with the third chair.

As I took my seat she placed a box of tissues on my table.

I stared at her fresh manicure and stuffed my clipped fingers between my thighs.

“So Candice,” she said, sitting in her chair and smiling at me while crossing her legs. “Tell me about the pageants you competed in as a child. That’s fascinating. I never met a beauty queen before.”

“That’s not who I am. I haven’t done those for years,” I said, burying my hands deeper between my legs. “How do you know about them anyway?”

“I read your profile.”

I knew it was something Mom must’ve filled out. “I’m sorry,” I said, “but I know how people judge beauty pageants.”

“I’m not judging you, Candice,” she replied, leaning back in her chair. “I’m just getting to know about you. When did you stop competing?”

“Five years ago when I was eleven. My brother got cancer and everything stopped. After he died the pageants were hardly mentioned.”

“I would think competing in the pageants would have been an outlet following the trauma you experienced with your brother.”

“Not for me. Standing onstage like an ornament and being judged by retired beauty queens who spray perfume at Macy’s for a living seemed so stupid. That’s not who I am.”

“That’s the second time you described who you’re not. How about telling me who you are?” she said, nodding at me to begin.

I sat there squeezing my toes inside my slippers. I wouldn’t answer her. I couldn’t.

“Its okay Candice, we’ll come back to that question. Can you tell me about Dean?”

“How do you know his name?” I asked, looking up at her.

“Can you describe him? What made him unique?”

It was okay. I needed to talk about him. It made me feel closer to home. “The little things, like the dimples in his cheeks made him unique. I used to poke them with my finger,” I said, surprised that I was actually smiling. “And whenever Dean concentrated on something, like practicing his penmanship, his tongue always stuck out the side of his mouth. My parents and I thought it was so cute. Dean had a curly head of brown hair which was always messy but somehow looked good on him. That was before the cancer got its claws in him. He loved playing video games but he read a lot, too. I think it’s because he was never very good at sports. He was a kind and gentle person. I loved him,” I said as my voice cracked and I tasted the tears running over my lips. “I loved my brother more than anything in this world but he was cheated. We all were.”

“Your voice comes alive when you talk about him.”

I nodded and grabbed a tissue. “Its how I bring him to life,” I said looking away from her.

“You see Candice; it’s not so hard describing someone you know well. Just share whatever comes to mind. Now, can you tell me who you are?”

Leaning over to pluck more tissues out of the box my boobs drooped against my shirt. I felt so naked without a bra. I didn't even have underpants on. It's been months but what if I get my period? Will they have tampons? God! Why can't I just go home?

Dr. Goldman unfolded her legs and leaned forward as if she was about to whisper a secret. I looked at her with blurry eyes then stared at the plant on her desk. She must water that thing. She can't be all bad. But for all I know it's a prop. Maybe it's even fake. Why should I tell her anything? I don't want her pity.

The moments ticked by but neither of us said a word. There were no clocks so I started counting the time. Ten minutes past. Fifteen. Thirty minutes went by and still the room was silent. I started wondering how many girls had confessed their stories in here and what made me any better or worse. Then my thoughts roamed and an answer to her question came to mind.

"Do you know who I am?" I said while lacing my fingers together. "I'm the living reminder of my mom's failures. She sees me and thinks about how her life has become the opposite of everything she ever hoped it would be."

"Is that what you think you are; the thorn in your mom's side, so to speak?"

"Yes. I mean look at me in these sweatpants and slippers," I said, yanking at my clothes. "I'm her biggest headache. I'm sure she's wondering what I'm doing here right now. I just want to go back to who I used to be."

"Which was...?"

"I don't know; a source of hope not disappointment. I cared for my brother when he was dying. I worked hard to help my father save his restaurant and I guarded my mom after she was attacked."

"Those are things you did, Candice. They don't encapsulate who you were then, or who you've become."

I couldn't look at her. I just stared at the worn leather on the arms of my chair.

"Who do you confide in, Candice?" she asked, still leaning towards me.

I wanted to fight back but no words would come out.

“Your mom loves you but are you afraid of being honest with her because you might risk losing her love? Is it the same with your father?”

“You and I just met. Why are you talking as if you know my life story?” I asked, loosening my fists and feeling the blood rushing into my fingertips. “Did you talk with my Mom or something?”

“When your brother was sick did people admire you for being strong?”

“Maybe, I don’t know...”

“Are you still living up to that expectation?”

“You’re asking if I feel strong? No, how can I in these clothes?” I said picking at my shirt. “Do you know they took the drawstring out of these sweatpants? Why is that, so I feel helpless and obedient? Or is it so I don’t try and strangle myself?”

“It takes courage to acknowledge your weaknesses, Candice. Ever since you were little you’ve put the needs of your family ahead of your own. That’s admirable, but it has also enabled you to avoid facing certain truths.”

“What truths? Why do you think I’ve been avoiding anything?”

“Your posture for starters. When your hands haven’t been stuffed between your thighs they’ve been balled into fists. And you refuse to make eye contact with me.”

“So?” I said, staring at her out of spite. “This place scares me. Why don’t you sit in this chair and see how it feels.”

“I have been there Candice, that’s how I know what you’re going through.”

“You’ve been here, in this chair?” I asked, staring down at it. “Why? What happened to you?”

“Our time is finished but I’m giving you an assignment,” she stated while reaching back and grabbing a pad and pen off her desk then jotting down some questions. “Before tomorrow’s session ask yourself the following: Why am I here this week? What makes me necessary? Who

have I betrayed and who can I trust? Think hard about these questions, Candice,” she said, handing me the piece of paper. “They’re not as simple as they appear. We’ll talk again tomorrow.”

My mind was reeling as I walked out. Nose Veins was leaning against the wall in the waiting area. That girl with the boney kneecaps who humiliated herself for a piece of meatloaf was next in line.

“You sure have a lot to confess to,” I mumbled to her before Nose Veins walked me outside to the patio where everyone was smoking.

Our sweatpants didn’t have pockets so I stuffed the piece of paper Dr. Goldman gave me into my right slipper then curled my fingers through the fence and stared at the junkyard, wondering if I said too much or too little in there. Maybe none if it even mattered.

“Hey!”

Swinging around I saw Shannon standing there with a smirk while picking at the eczema on her cheeks.

“I just pulled a great scam, something to get me through the night.”

“What did you do?” I asked as she wiped her hands on her sweatpants.

“Show you later,” she said, strutting away as if they had unlocked the front door and called her a taxi. I wished I had reached that level of not caring.

“Weigh-ins! Let’s go girls. Boys, you stay here,” Ms. Geegax shouted, smacking her hands.

Weigh-ins were random, daily evaluations. Shannon told me they alternated the times to keep everyone off guard.

Cynthia was in the corner of the patio pushing an English muffin down her throat.

“Shut up about this,” she mumbled with a mouthful. “It’ll get me through the weigh-in.”

Ms. Geegax rounded up all the girls in a white room with a few chairs and the only mirror I’d seen since getting there.

“You new girls better not get bashful. Consider this a sorority. It’s no different than getting changed for gym class at school.” Then she took the padlock off the scale.

The experienced girls shoved down their sweatpants and peeled off their tops, hurrying for spots in front of the mirror.

“Hey! Be fair about it and you’ll all get a chance!” Ms. Geegax shouted.

“Jesus Christ I’m getting so fat I can’t see my ribs anymore!” one girl screamed.

Others tried straightening their knotted hair and struggled to dig blackheads from their pores despite not having fingernails.

“Take off those clothes missy,” Ms Geegax snapped at me. “You’re showering after this.”

I stepped out of my slippers and stood against the wall.

“Did you hear me?” Ms. Geegax warned.

I inched off my sweatpants and pulled the top over my head.

“Nice tits,” someone shouted as shrieks of laughter filled the air.

“Everyone in line,” Ms. Geegax called out. “We do this one two three.”

As each girl stood on the scale Mrs. Finch, a freckle faced orderly adjusted the knobs before Ms. Geegax jotted their weight down. One by one the girls stepped off the scale and into the shower room. I could hear the sound of water splashing off the tiles.

“So this is your first weigh in, huh missy?” Ms. Geegax said as I stepped onto the scale with my back to the numbers. “Why are you breathing so hard? Don’t worry, you’re healthier than most.”

I heard Ms. Finch toying with the knobs as I stood naked with my eyes squeezed shut.

“All right, go get scrubbed down,” Ms. Geegax said to me.

Hurrying off the scale I grabbed a towel then hid in one of the shower stalls pressing my face into the corner and shivering under the hot water, wishing all my unwanted memories could be rinsed away.

That night after chicken cutlets and having a bleach-soaked rag shoved under my nose I sat in bed watching the wall. I couldn't comprehend how schedules continued outside of these walls.

Nose Veins pushed the door open and Shannon strode in smiling. She waited for the bolt to slam before reaching into her pillowcase and pulling out a fistful of Sweet 'N Low's.

"This was the scam I told you about," she said, squeezing the pink packets in her hand. "I lifted them at breakfast. Can't blame me if the staff door was open, right?"

Ripping open five of them she made a hill of white powder on her tongue then tilted her head back before swallowing.

"I can spare one, if you need it."

I shook my head and she laughed while ripping open another packet.

The lights clicked off at 9:00 and I laid in the dark gripping the piece of paper Dr. Goldman had given me. I couldn't see what was written down but I remembered the questions. They made me angry because she was wrong, the answers were obvious. I'm here because Dean is dead and I was walking in some park while Mom was being attacked across the street. As for why I'm necessary that's simple, I'm not. I used to be, but that was years ago. I can trust Mom and Dad, but not with every frantic thought running through my mind. Why did she ask me about who I've betrayed? Did Mom write something on those papers she filled out? Being loyal is the one thing I've done right.

I feel asleep while having an imaginary fight with Dr. Goldman. Who was she to ask me these questions? I wanted to know how she ended up in here.

At midnight the orderlies unlocked the doors and told us to get in the lounge.

"Aren't you coming?" Shannon asked as she hurried to the door.

"No way, I can't watch anyone humiliate themselves for a piece of chicken."

"You don't want to be here alone, Candice," Shannon warned. "Trust me."

Throwing back the sheet I followed her down the hall. As Shannon walked into the lounge and cheered with everyone else I stood in the doorway stealing glances and knowing that what I was witnessing would scar me forever.

The next morning I woke up in a cold sweat and curled over with stomach cramps.

“What’s the matter with you?” Shannon laughed while lying on her back smoking.
“You’ve been making noises for the past hour.”

“I’m freezing, and my stomach is killing me,” I said with chattering teeth. “Can I borrow your blanket?”

“Not now. I’m comfortable,” she said taking a drag.

“Then can you reach in my drawer and lay my sweatpants on me?”

“After I finish my cigarette.”

“I’m freezing. Please Shannon!” I said, slapping my hand on the mattress.

“All right, hold your horses. If I didn’t know better I’d swear you were in withdrawal,” she said, dropping the sweatpants on top of me. “You probably got a virus.”

“When’s the nurse coming?” I asked.

“Soon,” Shannon said, taking another drag. “She’ll probably put you in the sickle cell, that’s the nickname for the quarantine area. Get it?”

Twenty minutes later the nurse showed up.

“You’ve got a hundred and three fever,” she said after examining me. “Have you been throwing up or had any diarrhea?”

“That’s funny considering where we are,” Shannon exclaimed, sitting on the edge of her bed.

“No,” I answered.

“I’m putting you in sickbay and giving you a shot of Amantadine. It’s an antiviral. You can make up your session with Dr. Goldman tomorrow.”

All I remember was getting my temperature checked and being walked to the bathroom so I could pee. I tried sleeping as much as possible and kept my head under the pillow at night, hoping those orderlies would never find me. The next thing I remembered was waking up when the nurse came in the following morning. She said my fever had broken and that I had to get a move on because she needed the room for someone sicker than me.

After breakfast Nose Veins walked me upstairs for my therapy session.

“Come in Candice,” Dr. Goldman said a few minutes after the twins had left. “How are you feeling?”

“Better than yesterday,” I said while taking a seat.

“Then let’s begin. Is there anything specific you’d like to share?”

I thought about seeing one of the twins blow an orderly for a drumstick on Tuesday night. I wondered if they had shared that in here, or if Dr. Goldman had any clue about what goes on late at night. I doubted it.

“Candice,” she said, holding her glasses in her hand. “I’ve seen a lot of girls sit in that chair who are bitter because they’ve never given their love to someone else and have never received love in return. But you’re different. You know about real loss because you’ve allowed yourself to love, to get so close to someone that a part of you died when they died. Now I need you to redirect that courage within. Did you answer the questions I asked two days ago?”

I pushed back against my chair and gripped the arms rests.

“How did you end up in here,” I asked her. “What happened to you Dr. Goldman?”

“Candice, we’re here to talk about you. Now please answer my question.”

Maybe I could bargain with her, I thought. I’ll answer her then I won’t say another word until she answers me. There’s got to be some give and take here. I won’t let her outsmart me.

“Those questions didn’t do me any good,” I said, sitting up in my chair. “I’m here because my family fell apart. That’s also why I no longer matter. I couldn’t save my parent’s marriage or anything else, so what value do I offer? As for whom I can trust, I’d say my parents

but I can't share every thought with them. Why'd you ask me the question about betrayal? I haven't betrayed a soul. In fact, I couldn't be more loyal."

"Really? How do you define loyalty?"

"Being there for someone no matter what, that's how," I said, thrusting my hands forward.

"And you did this with whom, your brother?"

"Yes. Dean battled cancer for two years before he died, Dr. Goldman. Looking back, the thing that stands out most is how selfish my parents were. If anything, they're guilty of betrayal."

"How so?" she asked, resting her chin on her fingers.

"They never thought to end his misery. Dean was in agony but my parents let the doctor pump Dean full of more and more drugs hoping he'd get better. The ironic part is that the side effects of the drugs were often worse than the cancer itself!"

"Your parents kept Dean alive out of the selfishness hope inspires, Candice. Its human nature to help the ones we love."

"But at what cost? I'm ashamed to admit it but there were times when I wished Dean would just die."

"And that makes you loyal?"

"Yes," I said squirming in my chair. "At least I understood him. I knew when enough was enough."

"Did Dean ever tell you how he felt?"

I was getting angry. For every response I gave her, Dr. Goldman had another question. There didn't seem to be an end in sight.

"Candice...? Did you hear me...?"

I sat there remembering how he begged me to help him fly with the angels. How I somehow heard his last gasp after sticking that needle in his vein. Pulling my legs to my chest I

yanked my T-shirt over my knees and slowly rocked, sobbing with my head buried between my thighs.

“It’s okay, Candice,” Dr. Goldman said as she watched me crying.

“No. It’s not okay. It’s not,” I argued, wiping my eyes.

“What’s not, Candice? Take me to where you are now,” she asked leaning towards me and talking in almost a whisper.

I kept seeing Dean’s hand going limp as I pulled that needle out of his vein. How can I know this? Why am I seeing this?

“Candice, what are you envisioning now?” Dr. Goldman asked. “Is it a memory of Dean?”

“He’s dying Dr. Goldman. I see him. I hear him! I can describe the sound his body made as he drew his last gasp. How can I do that?”

“Has this memory of his death haunted you in your dreams?”

“What? What made you ask me that?”

“Take me back to the night Dean died, Candice. What did he say to you?”

I felt cornered and buried my face. Every ounce of me wanted to fight back but I felt so pathetic I just needed to get the answers out.

“He begged to fly with the angels,” I mumbled while slumping in my chair. “He wanted his freedom, Dr. Goldman. And in my memories I fulfilled his dying wish,” I said, crying in the chair with my legs curled up under my chin.

“That’s enough for now,” Dr. Goldman said, removing her eye glasses. “I can see you’re exhausted. All I want you to do this afternoon is to think about what we’ve just discussed and what your next steps should be. I’m proud of you, Candice.”

After my session Roger was waiting outside the door. I needed fresh air and asked him to walk me to the patio.

It was raining which I was thrilled to see. The patio was empty and I stood alone with my face pressed against the wire fence as the wind and rain lashed my cheeks.

The moment had come and I knew it. I had either reached the level of not caring or cared so much that I couldn't deny the truth any longer.

I thought I had let my feelings run wild in front of Dr. Goldman but that was nothing compared to the quiet storm I felt forming inside of me. I never imagined I could feel so full of emotion and feel so desperately empty at the same time. I wanted to cry out but knew if I did the orderlies would come running and God knows what they'd do to me after that. So I whispered my agonizing confession into the wind and rain while staring up into the swirling gray sky.

"Dean, I am so sorry," I said softly, speaking as if I was at his bedside again. "I don't know if you can hear me now. I don't know what I believe anymore but I love you. That's the surest thing I know. Mom and Daddy love you, too. What I said before was wrong. They weren't selfish, Dean. They didn't betray you. They did their best, I hope you know that. I did my best, too. I did what I thought was right and what I believed you wanted me to do at the time, Dean. Maybe I've denied it for all these years because a part of me was scared that you might have gotten better and I stole away your last chance. I'm not sure. All I know is that I couldn't bear your suffering anymore, Dean. That's why I fulfilled your wish that night," I cried, looping my hands through that fence and staring at a bolt of lightning in the distance.

I heard a voice near the entrance to the patio and gripped the fence tightly; feeling as if the harder I squeezed the less chance there'd be of someone coming out. After a moment the voice disappeared and all I heard was the rain beating against the hoods of those abandoned cars.

My body went limp, collapsing to the concrete floor. I was trapped in this place because I came to him that night. I knew that much now. When Dean was alive everything seemed perfect but now I don't know what's happened to my life. I just know that I want to make it right again but I'm not sure how. I don't have the same courage inside of me that Dean showed when he was sick. I'm not as good as him, I'm not as strong. He was the one. I should've been taken,

not him. God should have punished me and let Dean live, I cried, slapping my hands against the wet concrete and feeling the water soaking through my sweatpants and slippers. Mom and Daddy would've preferred that. I know they love me but I've failed them. Dean was their hero. He was mine, too. Ours.

My salty tears mixed with the raindrops. I wished the two of us could've talked or sang the alphabet. I remembered teaching it to him and how he repeated it to himself whenever he was nervous. A, B, C, D... I laughed as I said it to myself now, feeling so sad and stupid sitting there in the puddle of water.

I couldn't stop hoping that some type of heaven did exist and that Dean was up there now watching my life unravel. Maybe he's become my guardian angel. Maybe somehow he could show me the way and help me understand that this is the road I must take. I laughed to myself, knowing I was the selfish one. I was the one who needed Dean to know how much I was suffering even though I could live my life stuck in here and still not understand the pain he endured.

My thoughts grew quiet as I felt the wind and rain against my back. I needed to make things right. I needed to be a better example. Maybe this place has pushed me to that brink. Maybe it was hearing Dr. Goldman ask if the memory of Dean has haunted me in my dreams. But still, how had she come so close to knowing the truth?

I don't want to fail anymore. I want to be necessary and that means telling Mom and Daddy what I did. It's them I betrayed. They deserve to know what happened that night.

Standing up I tried putting myself together as best I could but my sweatpants and slippers were soaked. I found Roger and asked him to walk me back to my room. He didn't ask any questions. I felt as if he understood me somehow.

The rest of the day I sat alone. The bones in my wrists ached from making fists and my toes were sore from squeezing them so tightly. Even my jaw throbbed from grinding my teeth.

Deep down maybe I always knew the truth, but admitting it was something else entirely. After a few hours I wondered where Shannon was. I was surprised to admit it but I could have used the company.

I was happy when dinner time came.

Shannon stormed into the cafeteria swatting the backs of chairs and cursing.

“Pipe down and get in the food line!” Ms. Geegax demanded.

“I’ll get in line but I’m not eating this slop,” Shannon screamed, stomping up behind me.

“What happened?” I asked. “Where have you been all day?”

“I’m not getting paroled for another a week.”

“What?”

“The blood test I took Monday says I’m borderline anemic.”

“When did you hear this?”

“Wart the Stutterer had me in his office this afternoon. Spit sprayed from his mouth as he tried giving birth to the words on Kossack’s diagnosis sheet. I told him to give me the stupid paper. I said my next week would be up by the time he finished the first paragraph.”

“No talking in the food line,” Ms. Geegax yelled.

“Borderline anemic... Find me someone who isn’t borderline something,” Shannon complained, snatching a tray and Styrofoam bowl.

“How can they keep you here? What if your parents can’t pay for it?”

“My stepfather has money, Candice. That’s the twisted part. Not only is he the reason I’m in here, he’s the reason I’m in here for another week!”

One of the cooks scooped a ladle of stew into my bowl and placed a roll on the rim. I took a seat and Shannon marched behind me, smacking her tray on the table. Beef stew splattered my shirt.

“That’s why you’ve been assigned another week, missy,” Ms. Geegax responded. “Now eat your meal.”

“Fuck you!” Shannon yelled, spitting in her stew.

Roger and Nose Veins grabbed her arms and dragged her from the cafeteria as she lashed out at chairs and sent trays rattling to the floor.

“Lock her in The Chamber!” Ms. Geegax demanded. “We’ll hand feed her later.”

It was my fourth night but only my third dinner, and the third time having bleach shoved up my nose. The room was silent after Ms. Geegax walked me back. I pictured Shannon locked away somewhere in the basement of this place but my singular thought was about the realization I had today. I fell asleep thinking that I’ll never throw up again. But I knew this place had infected me in ways worse than I could have ever imagined.

The lock tumbling back jerked me out of a deep sleep and I sprang to the floor and pressed my palms against the wall. The door opened but no one made a sound. I waited, listening to someone’s footsteps walking away. The night orderlies were getting ready for another display in the lounge. I huddled in bed squeezing my pillow knowing I couldn’t lock the door from the inside. The one year anniversary of Mom’s attack was tomorrow. Would they come for me on the same day? “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be they name...” I prayed for the first time in years. Time crept past but I never knew how long. Finally a key slipped into the door and the lock clunked shut. Falling to the bed I panted nervous breaths, desperate for the morning to come.

When the nurse showed up she asked me why I slept in my sweatpants. I laid there as if she had pulled my body from a cold steel drawer. After stripping them off and inspecting my hairy calves she walked me to the bathroom for a urine sample then to the cafeteria for breakfast. Shannon was still in lock down so I took a seat next to the twins.

I kept looking over at them, hoping they would talk with me, acknowledge me. A part of me felt so relieved about the admission I had yesterday that I wanted to share it.

“Hi,” I said. “My name is Candice. These eggs are the worst, don’t you think?”

They never looked up from their plates.

After breakfast I stood on the patio and stared at the blue sky. I couldn't look at the junkyard or at the people smoking cigarettes and gossiping about Cynthia. They said she had a meltdown last night and was getting shipped to Pennhurst in Goshen, New York. I didn't know what that place was. I didn't want to know.

"Its time, Candice," Nose Veins said to me.

"Time for what?" I asked, feeling my heart racing.

"Your session with Dr. Goldman starts in five minutes."

"Oh, okay," I said, sighing in relief.

Nose Veins walked me upstairs to the waiting room and stood there until the twins stepped out holding hands and wiping their eyes.

"Please come in now Candice," Dr. Goldman said as I watched the twins disappear through the door.

She sat there waiting for me to start. I wanted to confess the revelation I had yesterday on the patio but didn't know where to begin. Then it dawned on me that she probably knew today was the one year anniversary of my Mom's attack.

"If it makes things easier Candice, I know what today means for you," Dr. Goldman said in a sympathetic voice.

I felt a surge of confidence that I was learning to read Dr. Goldman as well as she had been reading me. I had to take advantage of the opportunity.

"If you know what today means then let me call my mom," I said, getting up from my seat. But Dr. Goldman didn't budge. "I know her flashbacks will be bad today," I urged, hoping she would say yes. "Please. If I could just hear her voice it would make things so much better, Dr. Goldman."

But instead of making a phone call we spent the hour talking about the day Mom was attacked and how I had this compulsive need to protect my family.

“You feel guilty for not rescuing your mother,” Dr. Goldman said, “which is why you worked so hard caring for her afterward. It’s how you made yourself feel necessary, Candice. Do you think it’s also why you ended your brother’s life that night, too?”

“What?” I asked feeling blindsided. “How did we get on this all of a sudden? Is that how you operate, by catching me off guard?”

“We were talking about your need to feel necessary by protecting your family. Coming to your brother's aid is a critical part of that. Wouldn't you agree?” she asked.

From the tone of her voice I could tell she was satisfied with where this was leading.

“Please, Dr. Goldman. I can't do this now,” I urged, suddenly feeling scared.

“Yes you can. You're stronger than you realize.”

“No, I'm not. Can't you just let me call my mother? Please.”

“You can do this, Candice. Now think back to that night and share whatever comes to mind.”

I stared at her expressionless face wondering if she somehow knew about my breakdown on the patio yesterday.

“I filled a needle with air and shoved it into Dean's arm,” I said, shocked that I was hearing myself say these words. “Then I ran down the steps, out the front door and into the night.”

“What did you feel as you were running?”

“There were pebbles stabbing my feet. There was wet grass between my toes. I remember hearing the needle clinking against the metal grates of the sewer after I dropped it. I remember leaping back into bed and hugging my pillow so hard I almost ripped out the filling.”

“And what followed?”

I gasped in my chair, stunned at what I was confessing. For so many years I had dreamed about the details but never said them out loud.

“Candice...”

I rocked back and forth in my seat uttering each word slowly. “My parents woke me up the next morning. They said Dean had died in his sleep.”

“There was something in your bed. What was it?”

“What...?”

“You had run barefoot outside. You stepped in the wet grass. Tell me what you saw.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked in an accusing voice.

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. Your admission has been wrapped in a distraction Candice. Its time you unravel it.”

“Why are you making me do this?”

“Because it’s necessary, Candice. Now tell me what was in your bed.”

“Mud. There was mud on feet and on my sheets,” I uttered.

Dr. Goldman nodded in satisfaction.

“How? How did you know?” I asked, crying and flailing my hands.

She took me in her arms. I’m not sure how long the two of us stood there but she let me cry until there was nothing left inside of me to give.

“I admitted all this to myself yesterday, Dr. Goldman,” I finally said, pulling away and looking into her eyes. “Why are you making me do it again now?”

“Because you needed to share it with someone, Candice.”

“Why did I remember it only in my dreams for so many years?” I asked, still holding her hands.

“Until now your conscious mind couldn’t comprehend the truth. That’s why your reality surfaced in your dreams. It’s a defense mechanism known as repression.”

“Why has it come out now?”

“Maybe it was time. The fear and anxiousness of being in this place could’ve forced things to the surface, as well.”

“How did you know there was mud on my sheets?”

“That’s for another day, Candice,” she said nodding as if she was pleased with what we’d done.

“But I need to keep talking. Don’t cut me off, Dr. Goldman. I can’t wait until tomorrow.”

“We’re not meeting tomorrow, Candice. I’ll see you in two weeks.”

“What? No! I’m supposed to get out on Sunday. You can’t make me stay here another two weeks,” I urged, following her as she walked behind her desk.

“I’m not, Candice. I only work here one week per month. The rest of the time I see patients at my office in Fort Lee. You’ll see me there until I feel that you’re ready to move on with your life,” she said, resting her hands on my shoulders and smiling at me. “I’m proud of you, Candice.”

I spent the rest of the day in bed and that night after dinner I sat alone while Shannon watched *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* in the lounge. I pretended to be asleep when she came back.

I never knew if the orderlies unlocked the doors that night or not. I was so exhausted from the day I didn’t wake up until I heard the sound of the dresser drawer being jerked open the following morning.

“So you almost made it. You’re out tomorrow,” Shannon said while lighting a cigarette. “Soon you’ll be puking on your own terms: hiding in the stalls at school and sneaking into the kitchen at midnight to fill your face with sandwich meat. I know the drill.”

“What are you talking about?” I said rubbing my eyes. “I’m better. I won’t do that ever again.”

“We’ll see,” she said, flicking the ashes onto her mattress. “Maybe we’ll do lunch sometime. You like Chinese buffets?”

“Why are you angry at me, because I’m getting out?”

“I see you’ve got the brains to go with those looks.”

Shannon avoided me the rest of the day. I didn't care now. I needed her earlier in the week but I could make it on my own until the morning. I spent the day thinking about everything that's happened and what it will be like when Mom and I lay eyes on each other.

Two weekend orderlies worked the graveyard shift that night but never lured anyone into the lounge.

"They're queers," Shannon mumbled in the darkness. "They watch gay porn and want nothing to do with us."

"You sound disappointed," I said while lying in bed.

"At least the other ones wanted to see us."

"They wanted to use us, not see us, Shannon. Just like your stepfather. Don't you get that? Anyway, who cares. I've got twelve hours left."

My sleep that night was so deep it felt as if I'd been drugged. But even in the midst of my dreams I felt boney hands on my hands and scaly lips on my cheeks. "Dean," I heard myself whispering, dreaming of the night I went to him. I heard him begging for me to touch him and I saw myself wanting to get that needle, but now I couldn't move. I struggled under his hands but they squeezed harder. "Let me go..." I heard myself whispering in my dream. "Dean, let me go..."

"No... I want to hold you."

"What...? Who's that...?" I whispered barely awake. "Shannon! Jesus Christ! What are you doing? Get off me!"

"No, let me kiss you Candice. Keep dreaming of Dean, whoever that is. All that talk about being rejected, it... I need someone to hold. Can't I hold you, Candice?"

"No!" I shouted. "Get away from me!"

"Aren't you lonely?"

"Yes," I said, pushing myself out of bed. "But I don't want you touching me. Are you out of your mind?"

“Nobody cares about us locked in this cell. You’re so pretty, Candice. Bury the memory tomorrow with the rest of this place, with whatever you confessed in therapy.”

“Stay away from me, Shannon.”

“I can’t. I’m so alone, Candice. Please. I’m begging you. Can’t you just touch me?”

“No Shannon. Now leave me alone.”

She started crying and fell back onto her bed.

“Leave me alone. That’s what my mother says when I try sharing things with her. She buys my cigarettes then tells me to have a smoke whenever I want to talk about something besides her pottery. She never asks about me. She doesn’t care about what I do or what I like.”

I waited there, listening to her shake and cry on the bed as she shoved her fingers in and out of the burn holes on her mattress.

“Where do you want to go?” I asked. “You told me that when you turn eighteen you’re going to disappear somewhere.”

“Yeah...to Maine. The winters are long and cold and I can hide under padded coats and hats and gloves. I feel like hibernating. You know that feeling of just wanting to hide?”

“Sure.”

“I want to get a front desk job at some motel on the coast and find a small apartment with a fireplace and a little kitchen with curtains in the window. I’ve got it all figured out. I guess I’m lucky in that sense. I know what I want.”

Neither of us slept. We shared our lives and wished we could see the sky and know if the sun was rising. Only the rattling of keys let us know the morning had come.

An orderly I’d never seen before walked me to the bathroom and stood guard while I peed for the last time.

Breakfast was crusty eggs, cold toast and orange juice so chunky with pulp I could’ve laid a quarter on top of it. After cleaning my plate I dumped it in the trash and the orderly told me to wait in the lounge until someone came for me. Shannon was sitting at a table across the

room and I walked over. Tears were leaking from her eyes. She scratched her cheek and looked at her nails. “Lucky you’re leaving,” she said. “We get declawed again tomorrow.”

“Good luck to you Shannon,” I said, forcing a smile. “I hope you find that little place in Maine. Maybe someday I’ll check into a motel up there and see you behind the counter.”

“I’ll wait for that day Candice,” she said, staring at me then looking away.

“Goodbye Shannon.”

In the lounge I saw the twins sitting together on one of the couches and wondered what they were going home to.

“Candice Morgan?”

“Yes.” I said, looking over my shoulder.

“Come with me,” an orderly replied.

I followed her down a few hallways until she showed me into a small room where I was given my clothes and a brown envelope containing my watch and ring.

Getting dressed never felt so exciting. I drew my shoelaces so tight I almost cut off the circulation to my feet. Then I felt something in my pants pocket and pulled out that twenty dollar bill Grandma had given me.

After slipping on my watch and ring I stepped into the lobby and saw Mom signing forms. Until now I was nervous about seeing her but all I felt was relief as she stood in front of me.

“Hi Mom,” I said, raising my hand. “It’s me.”

“Candice!” she said, hurrying over and wrapping me in her arms. “My God I’ve missed you so much! It’s so good to see you!”

“It’s great seeing you too, Mom. Can we get out of here?”

“Sure, I just finished signing the release forms.”

Outside the ground smoldered from a rain shower that just ended. It reminded me of the day Mom and I left our house in New Jersey for the last time.

“I’m glad it stopped raining. It was coming down like cats and dogs the whole way up here,” Mom said.

It was perfect rainbow weather and I looked all around to see if I could spot one. I didn’t, but the trees were dripping wet and the air smelled so fresh. I took a few deep breaths and slid into the car.

“How about we take our time going home, Candice? We can stop in the Catskills.”

“That sounds great Mom,” I smiled, thinking that I’ll treat her to lunch with the twenty dollars I found in my pocket.

I knew she had questions but for now all I wanted was to roll down the window and enjoy the ride. I’ll get to the truth soon enough I told myself, just not today.

Chapter Sixteen

The pungent aroma of sautéed garlic browning in the pan greeted Mom and I as we shoved open the front door at 7:30 that night. I took a deep breath and inhaled the smell of the meat gravy simmering on the stove, too. God it was good to be home. More than tasting Grandma's cooking I just wanted to enjoy the smell of it, how it made me feel warm and protected.

"Who's there? Vivian, is that you?" Grandma yelled from the kitchen.

"Yes Mom, we're home."

"For the love of Pete, where you been?" Grandma shouted as she skidded over in her house dress and slippers. "I've been a nervous wreck over here," she said pulling the oven mitts off her hands.

"What are you talking about?" Mom asked while dropping her purse on the chair.

"Remember I told you we'd be stopping in the Catskills?"

"The Catskills? I thought you'd be home by four o'clock. I've been cookin' for hours here tryin' to keep my mind off ugly thoughts. I told myself if they ain't back when Carol Burnett comes on that's it, I'm callin' the cops. God forbid. Candice, get over here and gimme a hug."

While wrapping my arms around Grandma's waist I felt her rolls of fat squishing between my fingertips. My cheek slipped against the sweat on her neck and I smelled the garlic seeping through her pores. I couldn't let go.

"I missed you somethin awful'," she whispered. "I'm so happy you're home where you belong."

I stared at the dusty plastic plants on the corner table and the red ceramic log cabin Dean had painted when he was five years old. So much had changed for me in the past seven days but time has stood still in this house. It was good to be back.

“How was your week?” Grandma asked, looking into my eyes. “Are you all better? How were the people? Nice I bet, right?”

“Can I have a glass of ice water, Grandma?”

“Of course, whatever you want. We’ll eat in a minute, too. I got baked zitis. And I want to hear all about your week up there. Did you get out much?” Grandma asked as she turned and waddled back towards the kitchen. “Remember I told you how pretty it was?”

I glanced at Mom and saw her staring at me. The anticipation was mounting, I could feel it.

“Oh Candice, I almost forgot,” Grandma shouted from the kitchen. “Lola called. She’s back from her trip and said she won some contest.”

“Really? Wow. Good for her,” I said holding the back of the dining room chair. “You didn’t tell her where I was, did you Grandma?”

“No, that ain’t nobody’s business. The zitis are comin’ out of the oven now. I got warm bread with butter too, so you can soak up the gravy. Sit Candice, sit.”

I wondered about Shannon as I sat down. She’s probably lying in bed smoking a cigarette. I was sure someone was getting a bleach soaked rag shoved under their nose. I hated being there, but after seven days I knew what to expect and in a weird way I enjoyed the lack of responsibility. Now I had no idea what to do.

“How ‘bout we have root beer Shasta’s? They got bite and will taste good with the zitis,” Grandma said, plunking three cans of soda on the table. “Vivian, sit down already. I been waitin’ for this all day.”

Grandma asked me questions over dinner even though I kept trying to change the subject.

“I remember there was some big lake up there,” she said. “Your grandfather went swimmin’ but you know, I gotta see where I’m steppin’ and that water was too dark, so I sat on the beach and smoked. That was before I quit the habit,” Grandma said, touching my hand and smiling. “Did you do any swimmin’ up there, Candice?”

“No Grandma. I didn’t get out much,” I said, glancing over at Mom.

I couldn’t take all the questions so I ate quickly and headed upstairs after rinsing my plate in the kitchen sink.

“Where are you going Candice?” Mom asked, looking over her shoulder.

“To the bathroom.”

“Wait for me.”

“I have to pee. That’s all, Mom. We’re not going to start this now, are we?”

“Come right back down when you’re done.”

Later that night I sat on my bed staring at my reflection in the window and looking for differences. Who am I? I wondered. Until this past week I never realized it was a trick question. It seemed so simple until I started thinking about it. Most people probably don’t even have an answer. They’d just give their occupation or something.

My first session with Dr. Goldman was a week from Tuesday but I had so many questions I wished it was sooner. She gave me the third degree about the night Dean died but does she really know the truth? Does Mom know? Does Daddy? “I need to talk with her,” I mumbled, reaching over and hugging my pillow. “No one else knows what I’m feeling.”

“May I come in?” Mom whispered as she appeared in the doorway.

“Yeah, sure,” I said, wondering if she had been eavesdropping on me. This can’t be it I thought, feeling the skin prickle on the back of my neck. I’m not ready to make a confession tonight.

She sat down on the bed and spoke so softly it put my fears at ease.

“Grandma is asleep and the house is so quiet now, Candice. I’ve been sitting alone in the dark thinking. Do you mind if we whisper to each other here for a little while?” she asked, taking my hand which was pressed into the mattress.

I nodded, and for the first time in a long time I looked at how beautiful she was. Then I leaned over and laid my head in her lap.

“I know you discussed a lot of things with Dr. Goldman this week Candice,” she said while running her fingers through my hair. “I’m not sure what you shared with her but I hope that you’ll confide in me when you feel ready. In the past I know I wasn’t the easiest person to talk with, but I’m trying. I love you Candice, and nothing you could say will ever change how I feel.”

“I know that, Mom,” I whispered back to her.

“No, I don’t think that you do. I spent all week imagining what your days were like, who you shared your room with and what you thought about while lying in bed at night. Now you’re home and I want us both to move forward, but I don’t think we can do that without talking about the past.”

“I know Mom, but I’m just not ready yet. I do have one thing to share with you, though. I decided that I want to start my photography again. Seeing the world from behind the lens helped me put things in perspective and I need that now. Does that make sense?” I asked, tugging on the bedspread.

“Yes, it does Candice. Maybe tomorrow you and I can stop by the drug store so I can buy you some film.”

“That’d be nice. Thanks Mom.”

“Goodnight Candice,” she whispered in my ear before kissing me on the forehead.

“Hey Mom,” I asked as she walked to the door. “Have you ever asked yourself the question, ‘Who am I?’”

“Yes. I’ve asked that question often since my attack.”

“And...?”

“I’m still working on an answer, Candice,” she said with a smile. “Goodnight Honey.”

I woke up the next day excited to pee without an audience. Mom was at the florist and Grandma made me scrambled eggs with a perfectly toasted English muffin and a giant slice of crumb cake.

“This is too much food, Grandma.”

“Shut up you,” she said smiling at me. “I missed feeding you and got excited. Here, have some orange juice.”

No pulp. Thank God, I thought while taking a sip.

After breakfast I called Lola.

“Congratulations,” I sighed as she picked up the phone.

“That’s it? That’s all I get? What are you, lyin’ in bed?” she asked.

“I’m sorry, Lola. I really am excited for you. I’m just tired from a busy week. Has it hit you yet?”

“Kind of. Somethin’ else happened though, and its givin’ me agita like you wouldn’t believe, Candice. I swear I’m walkin’ bowlegged from two straight days of diarrhea.”

“What’s wrong?” I laughed.

“I can’t talk now. I’m feedin’ my brothers breakfast. Can you come over?”

“Yeah, just give me a half hour.”

After hanging up with her I called my father and forced myself to act happy.

“Hi Daddy!” I said when he answered.

“Candice! Oh, it’s great hearing from you! So tell me, how was the shore?”

I felt bad because his voice was so genuine and mine was full of lies. I wanted to admit the truth but in no way was I ready to face those consequences yet.

“The shore was okay.”

“Well, tell me all about it.”

“It’s the shore Daddy, you know what it’s like...” I said, running my finger over the peeling wallpaper in Grandma’s kitchen.

“Yeah, but I mean what’d you do, where’d you go? Was it fun?”

“It’s a week I’ll never forget. I can tell you that.”

“That’s terrific, Candice. I’ve been thinking about what you said the last time we spoke. You know, about how I’ve been down here for six months and we haven’t made plans to see each other yet. Well, I stopped by a travel agent on Thursday and put a ticket on hold. I’d love to have you visit me for Thanksgiving. Would you like that?”

“Are you kidding?” I said, suddenly immersed in the conversation. “It gives me something to look forward to Daddy!”

“Great. Check with your Mom before I book the ticket. Someone’s knocking on my door so let me run, Candice. I’m working tonight but I’ll call you tomorrow. I love you, honey!”

“I love you too, Daddy.”

After hanging up I stared at the clock. It was 10:34. Shannon probably had her fingernails chopped off already. I bet everyone was on the patio smoking. Ms. Geegax would be calling for weigh-ins soon. I’m sure some new girls will be checking in today and getting examined by Dr. Kossack and Elaine. Last week I had people staring at me while I peed and pooped. I couldn’t even brush my teeth without supervision. Now my day was wide open and I wasn’t sure which situation was more nerve wracking. Thank God Lola was back.

Twenty minutes later I walked up her front stoop.

“Its unlocked!” she yelled when she heard me knocking.

I shoved open the sturdy wooden door and stepped inside.

“My God, what happened?” I asked, seeing milk and cereal all over the floor.

“Augie and Louie ate Froot Loops.”

“Really? Did they get any in their mouths?” I asked as Lola got on her knees to clean the floor. “Do you need help?”

“That’d be great. Take this and wipe up the mess over there, will you?” she said, handing me a clump of wet paper towels. “My hot stuff brother Anthony goes to Crooklyn last night and says he’ll be back this mornin’ but is he here? I betcha he’s gettin’ a fried egg sandwich at Junior’s,” Lola said while tossing two spoons in the sink.

“Crooklyn? Do you mean Brooklyn?”

“Yeah, but they call it Crooklyn because you've got a coins flip chance of bein' shot once you cross the bridge.”

“Do you have any more paper towels?” I asked stuffing a wet handful into the garbage

“No. We're out of everythin'. There's some stale bread on the counter next to the fridge. Use that to soak up whatever's left. Hand me a few slices too, Candice. I got so much to tell you,” she said while dabbing a puddle of milk in the corner. “Come on, that's good enough. Throw the bread in the trash. I'll pick up the Froot Loops later,” she said waving her hand. “Let's talk over a lemon ice at Muncie's.”

“What about your brothers?”

“Gina Sabatino picked them up ten minutes ago. She's takin' 'em swimming with her two boys at that community cesspool on 179th Street.”

I laughed at Lola's sarcasm but she was right. Those pools looked filthy to me, too.

“So tell me about the contest,” I said as we sweated in the heat while walking to get our lemon ices.

“The first three days was a workshop which I didn't even know about until I got there. We listened to professional artists talk about their work and the business side of the art world. Hi Muncie,” Lola said to a fat balding man as we stepped into his air conditioned gelato shop.

“Lola my beauty, how you doin' today?” he asked from behind a glass display case filled with a dozen different colors of gelato. “And how's that gorgeous mother of yours?”

“We're hangin' in there. This is my friend, Candice. Give us two lemon ice, will you?”

“So tell me what's wrong, Lola,” I said as we sat down at one of the four tables in the place. “You won the contest. Things should be perfect.”

“You would think,” she said as Muncie brought over our lemon ices. “A hundred high school students from around the country competed in this thing Candice,” she said before taking a lick. “The workshop lasted until Wednesday and the contest was Thursday through Saturday.

We were all set up in this expensive hotel ballroom. I wish you were there. The wallpaper was the fanciest I'd ever seen. And the chandeliers, forget about it. They were made of real glass, not that shiny plastic crap you see hangin' above every Puerto Rican dinner table. I wish you got a load of the bathrooms. The doors on the stalls went all the way to the floor. I never saw anythin' so classy. I saved my deposits until I got to the hotel. It was like a cozy little room in there."

"Lola, what do you need to tell me?" I asked laughing.

"I was offered a full scholarship to an art school."

"Lola, that's incredible! Congratulations!" I said grabbing her hand. "Where to, somewhere in the city? Don't tell me it's The New York Academy of Art!"

"It's in California."

"Get out! My God!" I yelled, almost leaping out of my chair.

"Yeah, I know," she said shaking her head. "That's what's givin' me agita."

"We haven't even started our junior year of high school and you already know where you're going to college. Where's the school? Los Angeles? San Diego? Lola, do you realize you'll be able to lie out on a real beach instead of the roof of some apartment building!"

"Slow down, Candice," she said, squeezing my hand. "I'm not talking about a college scholarship. It's for high school."

"High school, what do you mean? You already go to Spellman with me," I said, waving my hand in the direction of our school.

"Yeah, but this woman Samantha McCourt from the School of the Arts High School in San Francisco was one of the judges. She came by my area everyday asking me questions about the type of art I like to paint, if I work more with water colors or acrylics. I felt embarrassed because I don't know what I like yet. Then she started askin' about my family and where I've traveled."

"What did you tell her?"

“That steppin’ foot in Washington D.C. was the farthest from my mom’s kitchen I’ve ever been. What else could I say? After I won the contest she made the offer. She told me she was a Dean in the Visual Arts Department at SOTA, that’s what they call the school, and that she visits art contests around the country to see the talent. She said I’ve got some of the most original expressions she’s seen from a young artist in years. I laughed because she was callin’ me ‘the talent.’ Can you believe that?” Lola said laughing.

“But you are the talent, Lola. You won the contest.”

“Yeah, but come on. Anyway, she asked for permission to call my mom and explain her offer.”

“My God, your Mom must’ve freaked. What did she say?” I asked leaning forward in my chair.

“She thought someone was pullin’ her leg at first. Bad news, yeah, my mother expects that. But she didn’t know how to cope with this. Bottom line though, she thinks it’s a once in a lifetime opportunity.”

“Wait a minute,” I said laying my hands on the table. “School starts September sixth. That’s two weeks from tomorrow. Are you saying you need to be at this school in San Francisco in two weeks?”

“That’s what I need your advice on. What should I do?”

Suddenly I felt like throwing up and leaned back in my chair to breathe. I went through this with Daddy six months ago! Why is it that the people I care about the most always leave me? Dean, Daddy, Lola. Even Charlie and Jessie. I moved out of New Jersey but they moved on without me long before Mom and I ever left. What is it about me that pushes everyone away?

“Candice hey, what should I do?” Lola asked shaking my arm.

“I can’t answer that for you, Lola. I’m just thinking about how much I’ll miss you. Does this school have a photography program?”

“That’s a great idea! I’ll find out. You can get enrolled and we can take the bus out to California together.”

“I’m just kidding, Lola. I can’t do that. I’ve got too much going on here.”

“No you don’t.”

“Yes, I do,” I said, suddenly feeling the urge to confess the truth to Mom.

“Candice, what should I do? My stomach’s been havin’ seizures for two days now. After the contest all I wanted was to see some movies and lay out on the tar beach with you. Now I got all this to deal with. I asked Samantha how long the bus ride was to California and she laughed. ‘We’ll fly you out there, Lola,’ she said to me. My whole life I’ve been hearin’ those planes from LaGuardia flyin’ over my house and shakin’ the dishes in the drain board. And now I may be on one. But then I start thinkin’ about my mother. How can I leave her? Who’s gonna help her with Augie and Louie?”

“Don’t compare this to what your father did to you, Lola. This is a great opportunity. It’ll probably help you support your mom someday.”

“Yeah, but my life is here, Candice,” she said pointing out the window. “I know I bad mouth the Bronx but it’s my home. You can touch it, but don’t spit on it. That’s how I feel about the neighborhood. You know? I’ll miss it, Candice.”

“That’s because it’s all you’ve ever known.”

“Thank God Joey and I broke up back in June. At least he’s one less thing. But still I wonder how I can leave. Around here I know where I’m going. Out there when I reach a corner I won’t know whether to make a right or a left.”

“So you’ll learn,” I said, taking her hand in mine.

“What about you?” she asked nodding at me. “You’re like ones of those flowers that grows through a crack in the sidewalk. How you gonna survive without me?”

“I’ll survive Lola. Who knows, maybe I’ll visit you one day.”

“Our lemon ices are melting,” she said, looking at them sitting on the table. “I won’t be able to get one of these out there.”

I glanced at my watch. It was almost noon. They were getting ready for lunch at the rehab. Last week at this time Mom and I were driving up there, probably like some girl is doing with her parents right now.

“What do you got goin’ on this afternoon?” Lola asked. “Feel like walkin’ around Bay Plaza?”

“I can’t,” I said pushing back my chair. “There’s something I need to do. I didn’t realize how urgent it was until just now. I’ve got to go.”

“Right now?” she asked raising her hands.

“Yeah. I’m sorry Lola. I’ll call you later. Thanks for the lemon ice.”

Hurrying out the door I made a right at the corner. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I would confess everything to Mom after Lola moved away but I couldn’t take that chance. The thought of losing another friend frightened me to death and I was scared I might plunge fingers first into old vices, just like Shannon had predicted. Without Lola I’d need Mom more than ever and I couldn’t have this between us. The truth had to come out. And it had to happen now.

Chapter Seventeen

Twenty seven hours after rushing out of Muncie's Mom and I were on our way to Dr. Goldman's office in Fort Lee. I never told her why I pushed up the appointment one week and she hadn't asked, but I knew it was coming.

Mom drove nervously, tapping the gas then the brake while squeezing into the right lane to catch the onramp for the George Washington Bridge. I sat clenching my back teeth and thinking of ways to spill the truth.

Looking out the passenger window I hid my tears by staring at a tugboat chugging north up the Hudson River. I ran my finger up and down the stitching on the side of my pants. I've got a fifty fifty chance that Mom will hate me after this, I thought.

After wiping my eyes I glanced over and saw her burning through her fourth cigarette as if an egg timer was ticking on the dashboard.

"Mom, are you okay? Are you mad that I asked you to come with me today?"

"No Candice no, I'm not mad, just nervous. Maybe we shouldn't do this, talk in front of Dr. Goldman I mean," she said, looking over at me. "A part of me just wants the two of us to talk, without any interference."

"But she can help us, Mom." I didn't want to admit I needed a third person to play interference.

"All right," she said pulling another cigarette out of her pack. "Driving over this bridge isn't helping either. You know I'm scared of heights."

"We'll be across soon," I said, touching her shoulder.

We reached Dr. Goldman's office at 5565 Palisade Avenue in Fort Lee ten minutes after exiting the George Washington Bridge. Mom shoved her fifth cigarette into a potted plant outside the entrance before we rode the elevator to the fourth floor.

Elizabeth A. Goldman Ph.D. was engraved on a gold plate bolted to her door. Until now I never even knew her first name.

I was surprised to see her straightening the selection of magazines in her waiting room when we stepped inside. Somehow it made her seem less qualified and I wondered if I should confess anything at all.

“Hi Candice, it’s good to see you. Hello Vivian,” she said, shaking Mom’s hand.

Had the two of them met already? I wondered after hearing Dr. Goldman call my mom by her first name.

“Please, come on in,” Dr. Goldman said, showing us through another door and into her cozy wood paneled office.

Two brown living room type chairs were sitting across from a straight-backed leather chair. A large wooden desk sat in the far left corner but there was nothing on it, not even a telephone or sheet of paper. Pictures of landscapes hung on the walls; smooth rolling hills, the ocean at sunset and a dense forest of white birch trees. It felt good in here somehow, insulated. But as the three of us sat down Dr. Goldman shoved me right into the spotlight.

“Go ahead, Candice. Why don’t you begin?”

“What?” I asked, feeling my throat constricting. “We just got here. I was just admiring your office. Can’t you give me a minute?”

“Sure, but since you bumped up our appointment I thought you’d be eager to get started.”

“I am. I mean, I want to talk but I can’t just jump right in,” I said, flicking my eyes to Mom then Dr. Goldman. “I’ve got questions too, you know.”

“Like what?” Dr. Goldman asked, settling back into her chair.

“Like...I’m not sure. Can’t you help me Dr. Goldman? I don’t know how to do this.”

“Of course I can help Candice, that’s my role. But you have to play yours, too.”

Gripping the arms of the chair I felt Mom looking at me and waiting. I imagined her hugging me and saying she loved me for confessing the truth. But I saw her storming out of here

too, leaving me stranded and begging Dr. Goldman for a ride back to the Bronx. I had no idea how this would turn out.

“Candice, you need to pick a place to start,” Dr. Goldman said, nodding at me.

“Okay, okay,” I said, squirming in my seat.

I wanted to ask Mom what was going through her mind but I was so scared. I could tell she was frightened too, which was why she hadn't uttered a sound since we sat down. I almost suggested taking a cigarette break but instead I asked the first question that came to mind.

“When we came in here a few minutes ago you called my mom by her first name, Dr. Goldman. Have the two of you talked before or something?”

“Relax your hands, Candice,” Mom said while touching my curled fingers. “The answer to your question is yes. I met with Dr. Goldman after dropping you off at rehab last Monday afternoon.”

I braced myself in the chair, suddenly feeling as if I was the outsider looking in. That's how Dr. Goldman seemed to know so much last week. I came here to make a confession but did the two of them know things I didn't know? My throat locked up as I choked on my own breath.

“I am the one who told Dr. Goldman about your dreams Candice, and that's where I want us to start. Okay? Can you do that for me?”

My eyes bubbled with tears as I stared at her in disbelief and tucked my hands beneath my legs. How can she know? My God, what does she think? After she was attacked I was the one caring for her and all the while she knew about my dream? How can that be?

Mom plucked a tissue out of the box on the table in front of us and wiped my eyes, then her own. With the tissue in her hand she stared at me, awaiting my response.

“I'm so scared, Mom. I have no idea what you're thinking,” I said, looking to Dr. Goldman for help.

“I'm thinking about how much you loved your brother,” Mom said, tucking her hand under my chin and turning my face toward hers. “I used to stand in your doorway watching you

crying and fighting in your sleep. You were talking with Dean about angels and him begging to die. I wanted to wake you but I was so unsure about what to do that I just stood there petrified, waiting for the dream to end. Each morning after this happened I'd wonder if you remembered anything. And if you did, I wondered if you'd come to me, or your father."

"When did this happen, Mom? How often?" I asked, overwhelmed by the idea that she had suspected me all along.

"I saw you a number of times. It was years ago Candice, in the months after Dean died. Your father never heard you and I never told him about your nightmares."

I couldn't stop shaking. The two of them were quiet, staring at me. It was my turn. I sensed the questions. Is the nightmare true, Candice? Did you kill your brother, Candice? Are you a murderer, Candice?

Memories came surging back. I remembered Mom finding the wrapper of that needle on the floor the morning after Dean died. I remembered the look she gave me when she saw the unused needles as I packed up Dean's room during our move. I remembered her talking with Grandma just last week, but even then I refused to accept it. But sitting here now I had no choice. She thinks I killed him! How can I deny this and say it was just a dream? I can't!

"Candice, when we spoke last week you had asked about the mud on the sheets," Dr. Goldman said, looking at me with her legs crossed.

The mud! Mom must've seen that, too! How else would Dr. Goldman know?

Turning in my chair I reached over for Mom's hands, hoping she wouldn't push me away.

I uttered each word slowly, afraid of the answer. "Did you see my dirty sheets Mom, or was it something I talked about in my sleep?"

"I found your muddy sheets the same morning I found Dean's body, Candice. I had no idea where the mud had come from until I learned that you had been running down the street in your pajamas the previous night."

“What? How do you know that?” I asked, pulling away from her in surprise.

“Mrs. Querazzi called me a few hours after Dean had been driven away. She was coming home late the night before and saw you running, Candice. She wanted to let me know.”

“What are you saying Mom; that you’ve know the truth all along? Jesus! Why didn’t you ever tell me?” I begged, sitting on the edge of my chair. “If you just told me we wouldn’t be going through this now.”

“Don’t get selfish, Candice,” Dr. Goldman stated. “You could’ve told your mother, too.”

“But up until last week I doubted if the nightmare was even real. That’s why I never said anything,” I responded, throwing my hands in the air.

“Your mother doubted it too, Candice. Consider her situation. The idea that one of her children had ended the life of the other was impossible for her to fathom, even if she knew it was out of love. That’s why she never questioned you about it,” Dr. Goldman said, leaning forward with her hands in her lap.

“Tell me what happened, Candice,” Mom asked.

“You know what happened, Mom. Please don’t make me tell you. I’m afraid you’ll hate me. I need you to keep loving me.”

“I need to hear what happened.”

I felt defenseless. I wanted to fight back but I only had the will to surrender.

“I couldn’t escape the memories of Dean getting those chemo treatments and spinal taps, Mom. His cries in my head were louder than my own thoughts.”

“I know, Candice. I heard his cries, too.”

“But it wasn’t just his voice, Mom,” I said looking at her. “It was yours. It was Daddy’s,” I said, reaching for her hands. “It was the helplessness we battled every day. My mind ran in circles trying to figure out a way to help, but there was nothing I could do, nothing until the only option became clear,” I said pleading with her. “And that’s when I went to him. He was begging to die as I stood there looking at him convulsing on that mattress. God had

abandoned us so I did what I thought was right,” I cried, holding her hands to my chest. “I saved him, Mom. You have to believe that I acted out of love. Please. I know I’ve lied and done wrong things but I need you to understand. I’m sorry, Mom. I’m so sorry for not telling you sooner,” I cried. “I just need you now Mom, but I’m so afraid of losing you.”

Mom rested her hands on my head as I buried my face in her lap, crying and letting her hold me. Placing my face in her hands she raised me up so we were staring into each other’s eyes.

“You’re not going to lose me, Candice,” she said, catching a few of my tears. “When Dean was sick I felt like I needed to be strong and I associated that with not crying. Maybe it gave me false hope. Maybe I turned myself off to avoid the pain. I don’t know. You never did though. More than anyone else you suffered along with Dean. I wish I had, Candice. I can’t help but cry for my son, for the fear he felt during those years,” she said while holding out her hands as if she was hoping to touch him. “My heart aches for the life he’ll never experience and the things I’ll never be able to teach him. It aches for the years you and I lost too, Candice. I want those back. I want to hold Dean in my arms and run my fingers through his curls. I’d give anything to reverse time and have one more day with my son. I’d give anything for a second chance at my regrets.”

“Mom, I can’t bring Dean back to life but I can give you his words,” I said, taking her hands in mine. “I can give you Dean’s diary.”

“What?” she asked in a high pitched voice. “What diary?”

“Dean kept a diary after he got sick. I found it when I was emptying his room before we moved.”

“Don’t do this, Candice. Dean was eight years old when he died. How could he have kept a diary?”

“He did Mom, I swear. You saw those kids in the cancer ward at the hospital. Somehow they all seemed older than their years. I think facing that disease forced them to mature.”

“Where is this diary? Why didn’t you ever share it with me?”

“When I first found it I wanted to keep it for myself. I was angry at you for divorcing Daddy. I was angry that Dean had died and that we were forced to move. The diary was all I had and I felt like if I shared it I’d lose my connection with Dean.”

“Is it at Grandma’s?”

“No. I gave it to Daddy the day he left for Florida. You and I had each other but he was alone.”

“I want it, Candice. I need to read it,” she said, holding her hands to her cheeks as she cried.

“I’ll get it for you.”

“Does your father know the truth?”

“No, only you and Dr. Goldman know.” I paused for a moment and looked down at my feet curled under the chair. “Mom, what’s going to happen to us now?”

“I have no idea,” she said while rubbing her head and sighing. “Dr. Goldman, I assume this is part of the role you play here.”

“I almost forgot you were there,” I said, looking over at her.

“This is a turning point for both of you,” she said, holding her eyeglasses in her hands. “Vivian, you have to keep in mind that Candice acted out of compassion not just for Dean, but for the entire family. And Candice, you must appreciate your mother’s point of view and respect how hard it’s been for her to come to grips with your actions.”

“What about Candice and her eating disorder, Dr. Goldman? Will talking about all this help or hurt?”

“That remains to be seen. It depends on Candice and her commitment to getting better.”

“I am committed. Can’t you see that? I hated who I had become. I want to prove it to both of you. Just give me time,” I said, trying to convince them.

Mom closed her eyes and took my hand for a moment. I knew she was praying for us. I just didn't know if it would do any good.

After giving my hand a squeeze she opened her eyes and looked at Dr. Goldman. "In a way I feel relieved," she said, as her shoulders slackened. "I know there's a lot ahead of us but we couldn't face those challenges without coming to terms with this one. This next question is going to seem strange Dr. Goldman, but what should Candice and I do after we leave your office today?"

"Don't drive home letting the radio be the only voice in the car. Talk over dinner so that when you do get home you'll feel more relaxed and Candice's grandma won't start asking questions."

"Do you want to come to dinner with us?" I asked.

"No Candice," Dr. Goldman said with a smile. "It's best if you and your Mom talk alone now. The two of us will see each other next week."

After Dr. Goldman showed us to the door Mom and I stood in awkward silence waiting for the elevator.

Where is this thing? I complained to myself. There are only five floors in this stupid building.

"I love you, Candice," Mom said, shattering the anxiety by reaching out for me. "You're my daughter and I will love you no matter what."

I threw my arms around her and we stood hugging each other and crying as the elevator doors opened then closed on us.

"Come on, let's take the stairs," Mom said as she put her arm around my shoulder.

While holding each other's hands our footsteps echoed down the metal stairwell before we shoved open a heavy steel door that led right into the eye squinting sun.

The wind blew in off the Hudson and I felt both happy and sad but most of all, I felt reassured. I knew Lola would take that scholarship and begin her new life. And even though I wasn't moving anywhere, I felt like Mom and I were starting fresh, too.

Chapter Eighteen

A week and a half had passed since Mom and I sat in Dr. Goldman's office spilling our feelings. She's been watching me with a loving but suspicious eye ever since, making sure I didn't sneak into the basement with a cheesecake or that new jar of peanut butter. But I had already buried the person I used to be. I shoved her in the back of the closet with my other skeletons and the memories of the people and places I needed to throw away.

The alarm sounded at 8:30 but I was still lying in bed telling myself I should get up. Rolling over I stared at the painting Lola and I had created in art class last year. That was the beginning for her, and now, in just a few hours, she'll be on a plane to San Francisco.

At 10:00 I walked up Lola's front stoop and saw her suitcase sitting by the door.

"Come on in Candice," she said before I even had the chance to knock.

"Where is everyone?" I asked after stepping inside.

"My mother's at church with the twins prayin' that the plane don't crash and Anthony is in that bunker of his. I'm runnin' around packin' up last minute bits and pieces."

"I see your suitcase is by the door," I said looking over my shoulder.

"Yeah, my Mom bought it for me at a flea market. It's fancy enough for the airport, right? My whole life I've hardly been further than the last subway stop and now I'll be goin' across the country in a plane. How high up does it go anyway, a thousand feet?"

"I think it's more like thirty thousand."

"Oh Madone, I got turned upside down lookin' over the edge of the Empire State Buildin'," she said laying her hand across her chest. "Thank God my Mom gave me one of her valiums. Give me that bag of paints on the table, will you?" she asked, trying to compose herself.

I handed her a plastic shopping bag tied in a knot.

“Can you believe this, Candice? Two weeks ago we sat at Muncie’s talkin’ about what I should do and now I got cab fare in my pocket,” she said, shoving the paint in her duffle bag. “My neighbor Rosetta gave it to me. She said I’ve gotta go to the airport in style. I’ve never had such agita. You’ve flown before right?”

“Yeah, a couple of times.”

“No one I know has ever been on a plane,” she said, shaking her head. “What do I do when I get to LaGuardia?” Lola asked as I followed her into the living room.

“Tell the cab driver what airline you’re flying and he’ll drop you off in front. After that give your luggage to one of the people behind counter and ask them where to go.”

She stopped and stared at me with concern.

“What about on the plane? Do people talk or is it like the bus where everyone ignores each other?”

“Some people talk but some read books or newspapers,” I said, playfully putting my arm around her. “Don’t be so scared.”

“What about the armrest? Who gets it?”

“I don’t know, Lola,” I laughed as she grabbed her toothbrush and deodorant and shoved them into her duffel bag. “Take it if you want it. How do you even know about those?”

“How do I know about armrests? They’re anywhere people sit side by side, ain’t they?”

“What are you so nervous about?” I asked, pulling her duffel closed so she could zip it shut.

“I’ll be surrounded by all these rich people, Candice. What do I got in common with them?”

“Who says they’re rich?”

“If they weren’t they’d be takin’ the bus. My mother made prosciutto and provolone sandwiches and packed them in a baggie with a couple of Dr. Pepper’s. Am I allowed to eat them on the plane or is it like sneakin’ food into the movie theatre?”

“You can eat it. But you’ll get a meal on the plane, too.”

“Really? Wow. That’s good,” she said with a surprised look on her face.

“What else do you need to do, Lola? I’ll help.”

“What else...? What else...?” she asked looking around the house. “Nothin’ I can think of. I wish you could come to the airport. My mom can’t because she’s got the twins.”

“I’m going to miss you so much Lola, you have no idea.”

“Don’t you start cryin’ Candice. If you do then I’ll start cryin’ and I don’t need my face gettin’ puffy.”

“I’m sorry. I just keep wondering what I’m going to do without you.”

“I’m wonderin’ the same things about me out there, Candice. But then I remind myself that you’re one of the reasons I’m even goin’ out there.”

“Me?” I asked in surprise. “What did I do?”

“All that stuff that happened with your brother and how you landed here. You didn’t know from nothin’ but you handled it. I figure if you survived this neighborhood I can make it in San Francisco. I just wish you were comin’ with me.”

“I am,” I said, reaching into my bag and pulling out a picture the two of us took at Jones Beach in June.

She held it for a moment and I saw her eyes filling with tears.

“Up to now most of the friends I had blew hot or cold, and even though we’ve only known each other a year you’re the best friend I ever had,” she said wiping her eyes.

“The best part of your life is about to start. You know that, right Lola?” I asked as we hugged in her doorway.

“It better be, because up to now it ain’t been much,” she laughed. “Maybe I’ll start keepin’ a diary. I would’ve done it already but I was scared it’d look like a complaint letter so I said forget about it.”

“Well, I don’t want you worrying about your family so I’ll pop in once a week to see if I can help with anything.”

“Really? You’d do that for me? Thanks Candice. That makes me so happy.”

We sat there for a long minute staring at each other then at the floor, not knowing how to say it.

“I better go, Lola. My mom is taking my grandma and me to a play in the city this afternoon.”

“Hey, stop the tears you,” she said squeezing my hands. “We’ll see each other again soon.”

“No Lola, we won’t,” I said, biting my back teeth and trying not to cry. “I just hope we see each other again someday,” I said, hugging her then hurrying out the door and down her steps. “I’ll miss you, Lola,” I shouted from the bottom of her stoop. “Hey, I just thought about something. You know that armrest on the plane?”

“Yeah.”

“You take it. The person sitting next to you isn’t flying to San Francisco because they got a scholarship. Remember that, Lola.”

“I will,” she said crying. “Goodbye Candice.”

“No. So long for now. We’ll see each other again someday!”

I couldn’t look at her anymore so I just turned and ran. Six blocks down I stopped to catch my breath and leaned against the wall of the M&M Superette. Inside were boxes of Hostess desserts stacked on a shelf. I stepped through the door and grabbed a box of Twinkies.

“No! I can’t do it! I can’t,” I said, pushing the box back on the shelf and hurrying towards Grandma’s.

“Hey Candice, what’s a matter?” Mrs. Flojean asked as I ran by her house, which was two doors down from Grandma’s. “You look a mess.”

“I’m okay.”

“Wait there, I got a package,” she said, struggling up from the chair on her front stoop and limping inside. “I swear our mailman’s got cataracts,” she said, after coming back out. “He put my social security check in Doris Fostino’s box the other day. Here, this is yours. I thought about walkin’ it over but knew I’d see you sooner or later.”

It was from Daddy. It was Dean’s diary which I asked him to mail the day after Mom and I met with Dr. Goldman. God I needed it now.

“Thanks!” I said before running to Grandma’s and straight up to my room.

I was desperate to read Dean's thoughts and trace his words with my fingers. The pages were brittle but I was so happy to have Dean’s diary back. Flipping through it I read his feelings but knew I had to share it with Mom. She couldn’t wait any longer.

“Mom, I have something for you,” I said while walking into her room. She was already dressed for the play and looked so beautiful in her black skirt and shiny light pink top. She was sitting barefoot on the edge of her bed thinking, praying I guessed.

“What is it Candice?” she asked with her hands folded gently in her lap.

“It’s a gift from Dean,” I said holding the diary out for her to take.

“Oh Candice!” she said springing up, but hesitant to walk over. “My God, ever since you mentioned it that day I’ve been dying to read it, but now I’m so scared.”

“Don’t be. If your reaction is anything like mine and Daddy’s you’ll feel closer to Dean than you have in years.”

“Can you leave me alone for a little while?” she asked, staring at the worn cover.

“Sure,” I said, kissing her on the cheek then closing the door behind me.

Sitting on the top step I ran my finger along a groove in the wooden floor while listening to Mom crying behind the door.

Grandma was downstairs washing her hair in the kitchen sink. It was a habit she never broke from growing up with only an outhouse for a bathroom. She had no clue what was

happening up here. When Mom finally came out my butt had gone numb but she sat down next to me with the diary in her hands.

“I struggled so much after Dean died, Candice. At first I ached because I missed him but after a while my sadness turned to anger. I was angry at circumstance, at the healthy kids I’d see everywhere I went, and I was angry at you, too. At the time denial seemed like my only hope. It shows you how naïve I was just a few years ago. I think we learn more from our struggles than we do from anything else,” she said staring at me with a sad but soothing smile on her face.

“Does that make us geniuses?” I asked, looking into her eyes.

She smiled wider. “We’ve had our share of heartache Candice, no doubt about it, but some people have had much worse. I’m just happy to have this diary because although Dean may be gone, this part of him will always be with us.”

Mom and I sat in silence for a moment, looking at each other then at the diary resting in her hands.

“Where’s Grandma?” she finally asked. “Still washing her hair?”

“Yeah. You know how slowly she moves,” I said, shaking my head.

“She’s funny. Even though she hasn’t gone clothes shopping in years or ever thought about going on a diet she still needs to look pretty. After you left for Lola’s she asked if I could paint her toes. Since it’s hot out she wants to wear open-toed shoes and said she needs her feet to look respectable.”

The three of us went into the city that afternoon and watched the ice skaters at Rockefeller Center then sat in the nose bleed seats of The Imperial Theatre and saw Dreamgirls.

In the days that followed Mom read and reread the diary and I started school. It was lonely without Lola but I went through my routine, which meant seeing Dr. Goldman each Tuesday and taking pictures whenever and wherever I could. I borrowed a Pentax K 1000 from the photo lab at school and it made a huge difference in the quality of my pictures. As the weeks

past my portfolio grew. I still liked candid shots of people the best and imagined their stories as I snapped their pictures.

“Thank you for bringing some of your photographs with you,” Dr. Goldman said during our session on October eighteenth. “They’re stunning. You really do have an amazing eye and the ability to capture the authenticity of your subjects, Candice.”

“You sound like a photographer yourself,” I said.

“It was a hobby of mine in college,” she said while continuing to flip through one of the albums I brought. “What concerns me though is that every picture is of someone you don’t know, not to mention that these people have no clue they’re being photographed.”

“So?” I replied shrugging my shoulders. “It’s not like these photos are going to end up in *The National Enquirer*.”

“That’s not my point. Why don’t you take pictures of landscapes or something?”

“I live in the Bronx, Dr. Goldman. I know even a rusted fire escape has a story to tell but I enjoy photographing people.”

“Or do you enjoy wondering about their lives and where they were going as you photographed them?” she asked, pointing at the strangers’ faces in my photo book.

“So what if I do?”

“It’s a form of projected fantasy, Candice,” she said, closing the cover on my album.

“What’s that mean?”

“It means you’re inventing lives for these people as opposed to living your own life. It means you’re hiding, in a way.”

“And how is taking pictures of landscapes or the city skyline any different?”

“You can visit landscapes and walk into buildings, Dr. Goldman pointed out. “You can never become the people you’re photographing. I know you miss Lola but you need to live your own life, Candice. Don’t hide behind your lens.”

“You told me to find an interest that fulfills me and now you’re knocking it?” I said, flinging my hand in frustration.

“No, just don’t let photography to be your only outlet. Be more sociable.”

“I am sociable. I know people at school but I’m just not friends with them like I was with Lola. What do you want from me?”

“From the tone of your voice I assume Lola hasn’t written you back?”

“Not since I sent her a letter two weeks ago. I check the mail everyday but haven’t gotten a thing. But then again, I can’t trust our mailman so who knows?”

“Maybe she’s busy,” Dr. Goldman said, as if I hadn’t thought of that excuse already.

“She can send me a postcard if she wants. I can’t lose her too Dr. Goldman, not after all I’ve gone through. Do you think I should write her again?”

“If it will minimize your temptation to binge then yes, you should.”

After my session that afternoon I went home and started on a letter. I tried keeping it casual but everything I wrote sounded so phony. Lola would appreciate it more if I came right out and yelled at her for not writing me back. But that wasn’t me.

“Candice, pick up the phone Honey, it’s for you,” Grandma yelled from upstairs.

“Hi Daddy,” I said, after walking into the kitchen and grabbing the receiver.

“Am I your Daddy now?”

“Lola! Oh my God I can’t believe it! The only person who calls me is my father so I figured it was him. What are you doing calling me? It’s so expensive!”

“I’ve had this letter I wrote you sitting here for a week with no stamp and I don’t know where the stupid post office is. Finally I said the hell with it and spilled a bunch of dimes from my change jar and dialed your number.”

“I’m so glad you did! Its great hearing your voice! How are you? Now that we’re on the phone I feel like it’s so much easier to talk.”

“Yeah, I know. We’re better live, you and me. I got to tell you Candice, I just had the time of my life at this art show in the Castro District, which is the gay neighborhood in San Francisco. The gays out here are the best,” she said with a smile coming through in her voice. “They’re like you with a package. I can tell them anythin’ Candice!”

“You crack me up,” I said laughing.

“They got a store out here that sells nothin’ but Barbara Streisand memorabilia. It’s hysterical!”

“I wish I was there. God it’s good talking with you! So were you showing your work at this thing, too?”

“No. San Francisco’s got such a huge art community we go to at least one show a week, but this one was wild. The bone smugglers threw me off because they were so friendly. ‘Come here darlin’ they’d say, grabbin’ my hand and showin’ me their work.”

“Bone smugglers?”

“Yeah, transvestites. In New York they only come out at night but here they go to work like that. I saw two of ‘em eatin’ veggie sandwiches at a sidewalk café this afternoon. They were ladies who lunch, Candice. It’s a riot! You got to move out here! The two of us would have the greatest time!”

“Yeah sure, I’ll go pack my bags.”

“I don’t mean today, I mean when you graduate.”

“In a year and a half?”

“Hey, you were the one who told me two years would fly by. I’ll know the city inside out by then. You don’t even need air conditionin’ here. I’m tellin’ you, I don’t think I’ll ever move back. The other day I went to North Beach for the first time. It’s the Ginni neighborhood. They got great pizza parlors all over the place and I even found a gelato stand that sells lemon ice just like back home.”

“It sounds great,” I exclaimed, thrilled that the two of us were talking.

“It is. So what’s new there?”

“Nothing. I popped in on your mom the other day and she seems good.”

“Yeah, she told me. Thanks for doin' that. Hey, the phone just beeped. My time’s almost up and I got no more dimes. I’m takin’ this bus trip to Carmel on Friday to visit some galleries and artists’ workshops. They say it’s right on the ocean. I’ll write you about it after I get stamps and call you when I get more dimes in my jar. I love you, Candice! Finish that letter and send it to me anyway. I’ll talk with you soon!”

“So long Lola,” I said hanging up with a huge smile on my face.

Falling into my chair I looked at the letter I was writing and shook my head. It was filled with insecurities but I should've known better. Lola and I were two of a kind. I sat with the pen in my hand and thought about what Dr. Goldman had said. I do need my own story to tell, just like Lola has now. Maybe someday I’ll move to California and start my new life, but for now I’ll settle for visiting Daddy in Florida. Thanksgiving was just over a month away and I couldn’t wait for it to come.

Chapter Nineteen

At 10:45 a.m. I stepped to the curb at Miami International Airport overwhelmed with excited but nervous feelings. After nine months I'd be laying eyes on my father any minute. I didn't know whether there'd be a bunch of those awkward silences or if he'd squeeze the daylights out of me and not stop talking.

My palms were so sweaty I set my bag down and wiped my hands on my pants. I felt as if my head was on a swivel as I looked all around for the green Pinto he had parked in front of Pasqualie's the last time I saw him.

"Candice! Candice!" I heard him shouting my name.

"Daddy?" I yelled while spinning around looking for him.

"Candice, over here!" he shouted again, tooting his horn and waving his arm outside a topless Jeep.

"Daddy, my God! What are you driving?" I said, hurrying to the curb.

"Hang on, I'm pulling over!" he yelled before double parking. "God it's great seeing you!" he said rushing towards me with his hands in the air.

"It's great seeing you, too," I said, shying away as he hugged me.

"Hey, come on, let me get a look at you," he said while holding my face with his hands. "I haven't been this excited since I don't know when."

"Daddy, I think that cop is ticketing your car!" I shouted after seeing the man jotting down Daddy's license plate number.

"Oh Jesus, let's go! I'll get your bag!"

"Wait a second officer!" I yelled running over. "My father's just picking me up."

Then we jumped in, Daddy punched the gas and we raced away from the airport.

"That was close," I said laughing as Daddy switched gears and weaved around all the traffic.

“Nothing like a little excitement to start your visit,” he said smiling and squeezing my hand. “So what do you think of your old man? Not bad right?”

“I can’t believe you’re driving a Jeep! What happened to that Pinto?”

“That thing barely crossed the finish line, Candice. I love this though,” he said, waving his hand above his head. “It feels great not having a roof over my head. The doors come off too, but I left them on since I don’t want you falling out as we drive through the Everglades on our way to Marco. You can’t imagine how happy I am that you’re here, Candice. I’ve got a few surprises lined up for us, too!”

“Like what?” I asked, grabbing his shoulder.

“They’re surprises. You’ll find out soon enough.”

“You look so different, Daddy. Your hair is thicker and you’re so tan. Is that a linen shirt you’re wearing?”

“Yeah, the wrinkled look suits me, don’t you think?” he asked, tugging on his shirt.

“When did you start wearing linen shirts with shorts, and most of all, sneakers without socks?”

“I’m a Floridian now, Candice. I threw away all my socks except for one emergency black pair which I use for funerals. I’ve been to two already. I’ve even got sandals at home. And I wear my bathing suit every day.”

“You mean this one?” I asked, pulling it out from between the seats.

“That’s it. I went swimming last night after work.”

“In the ocean? Daddy that’s crazy. What about sharks?”

“You and your mother, you’ve both seen *Jaws* too many times. Speaking of which, how is she? Still working at that florist?”

“Yeah,” I said in a somber voice.

“She’s a smart, beautiful woman. What happened to her, Candice?”

“Nothing happened. Why?”

“She quit her job as a real estate agent in Connecticut to work at a florist in the Bronx. It doesn’t make sense.”

I was happy Daddy and I weren’t having any uncomfortable silences but I didn’t need to be talking about Mom. That conversation could lead to her getting raped and my rehab and I had to avoid those topics at any cost.

Daddy kept talking as we drove through the Everglades with the sun warming my face and the wind blowing back my hair. Everything was so different. There were no buildings. No asphalt. Just miles of scorched weeds and palm trees that looked as if they’d been burned in the sun. I stared at the swampy water hoping to see an alligator but all I saw were herons and cranes perched in the shallow water. I kept expecting some lurking alligator to spring out of the water and snatch one in its jaws.

“That’s the Jolley Bridge up ahead which leads right into Marco Island,” Daddy said, pointing at the lush beachfront hotels with giant green lawns that dropped right into the water.

Sitting up in my seat I stared above the windshield.

“Wow! These hotels are beautiful. I bet they’re expensive.”

“Those aren’t hotels, Candice. They’re people’s homes,” he said, nodding as if even he still couldn’t believe it.

“Get out,” I said dropping back into my seat. “You mean families like ours live there?”

“No, not like ours. Those families have trust funds and money managers. I’ve got a checkbook with overdraft protection.”

“What do those people do for work?”

“Anders Wilhelmsen, the founder of Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines owns that house,” Daddy said, pointing at one of the mansions with a shiny white yacht parked in front of it. He’s probably got more money under his couch cushions than I made my whole life. That pink house with the helicopter belongs to Joe Robbie, owner of the Miami Dolphins. Those people are movers and shakers, Candice. All I had was a good lasagna recipe.”

“Don’t knock yourself, Daddy. You did great.”

“I thought so until I came here. Then I had to convince myself I wasn’t a total failure,” he said laughing.

I just smiled at him and slapped his arm.

“This is me,” he said, making a right into a place called Azalea Park. “I know it sounds like an old age home but this is Marco, otherwise known as Geriatric Island.”

“It looks nice Daddy. I’ve been living in the Bronx so this is paradise to me.”

“I’ve got to warn you though; my place isn’t much bigger than a shoebox.”

After Daddy parked the Jeep we climbed the steps to the second floor. He was holding my bag so I took his keys and unlocked the front door.

“Jesus, what was that?” I asked after hearing the door smash into something.

“My refrigerator.”

“Oh my God, I made a dent. I’m so sorry,” I said while running my finger over the dimple in his fridge.

“Don’t worry, Candice. The dent was there when I moved in. I keep meaning to attach one of those doorstops to the bottom of the fridge but haven’t gotten around to it.”

As Daddy put down my bag I looked around at the lumpy brown couch and the TV sitting on a rickety wooden stand.

“So what do you think?” he asked.

“It’s cozy,” I said, nodding my approval so he’d feel good.

“That’s a nice way of saying it’s tiny. That’s okay. I know its tough coming here after seeing those mansions up the street.”

“The balcony is nice. But what’s with the colors, red and white walls and a green rug?”

“It looks like a Mexican flag, I know. I need to paint but haven’t gotten around to that either. Hey, you must be thirsty,” he said, walking me into the kitchen. “I bought A&W cream

soda since it's your favorite. Grab two glasses in the cabinet next to the sink and fill them with cubes. We'll have a toast."

"Okay," I said, swinging open the cabinet as Daddy grabbed an ice cube tray from the freezer. "Hey, what's this?" I asked, seeing a gift sitting on the shelf.

"That's your first surprise Candice," Daddy smiled. "I didn't have anywhere else to hide it so I put it in there. Hurry up and open it. I got it a week ago and have been waiting for this moment ever since."

After ripping off the red wrapping I looked at the picture on the box. "A Pentax K 1000! Daddy, I've wanted this camera for so long! How'd you know?"

"I didn't. The boy working at the camera store was about your age and said this was the model that all the young photographers were using, so I got it. It's used. I hope that's okay. I couldn't afford a new one. If you want to look at other cameras though the place is right down the street and we can -"

"Are you kidding me? This is perfect. Now I won't have to sign out for the one at school anymore. Thank you so much, Daddy!"

"I bought film, too. I'm hoping you can take a bunch of pictures so I have some memories to hang on these walls after you leave."

"Definitely. I'll make great use of this," I said, peeling the tape off and opening the box.

"I cleared out my top two dresser drawers if you feel like unpacking. After that I thought we'd have lunch at this place where the floor is nothing but beach sand."

"Forget unpacking. Let's go."

Ten minutes later we parked at Tigertail Beach and walked over to the Chickee Hut which had a roof made of dried palm leaves and lopsided bamboo tables and chairs shoved right in the sand.

"Hey Stevie, come on out, I want you to meet someone," Daddy said as we approached the bar.

The place was empty. We stood there waiting.

“Stevie, are you back there or what?”

“Hey Don, how are ya?” a black man in a Hawaiian shirt asked as he stepped out carrying a bag of limes. “Sorry to make you wait but James Brown visited unexpectedly. I reached the age where I can’t even trust my farts no more, Don.”

“J.J., this is my daughter, Candice.”

“Oh, I’m sorry about that honey,” he said shaking his head in embarrassment. “I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“It’s okay. I’m not offended.”

“What are you doing here anyway, J.J.? I thought Stevie was working.”

“He’s away for Thanksgiving. He’s a kosher Jew who don’t eat meat with dairy but put up a fuss about working Christmas and Thanksgiving. Is that something or what? Anyhow, what are you two in the mood for? We got fresh Tilapia that I can batter fry and serve BLT style. Or we’ve got the best turkey club on the island, burgers any which way, chicken wings, tuna melts, deep fried rock shrimp...”

“The turkey club sounds good to me, Daddy.”

“Make that two J.J., and throw in a shrimp appetizer. I’ll have a peach iced tea and bring Candice a virgin Pina Colada. Come on, let’s grab a table and stick our feet in the floor,” Daddy said winking at me.

“You must come here a lot,” I said while squishing the sand between my toes.

“Yeah, sometimes I’ll grab a sandwich after taking a dip.”

“I’m shocked that this is your life now. I’m jealous. Its so beautiful here, and look at the size of those boats out there too,” I said pointing towards the water.

“I bet you’d love to go on one.”

“Who wouldn’t?”

“That’s good, because it’s how we’re spending Thanksgiving tomorrow.”

“Yeah, that’ll be the day. What are you, friends with that Joe Robbie guy?” I asked jokingly.

“I’m serious, Candice. I told you I had some surprises lined up. We’ll cruise the Ten Thousand Islands dotting the southwest coast and dock at Stan’s Idle Hour for a Thanksgiving Dinner of cheeseburgers and mashed potatoes. How’s that sound?”

“You’re not kidding, are you?” I asked, sitting up in my seat.

“No.”

“But how? I mean, whose boat are we using? What do you have, a rich girlfriend or something?”

“This is the part I’ve run over in my mind a million times,” he said after J.J. served our drinks. “I’ve been seeing someone, Candice. She works at a marina over in Naples. We’ve taken a few boat rides together.”

I imagined Daddy and some woman laughing during a sunset cruise while mom walks home passed the bars and funeral homes and the stupid Seven Eleven on Tremont Avenue.

“I know you’re thinking of your mom,” Daddy said while taking my hand, “but she’ll find someone. You know that, don’t you, Candice?”

“What’s this person’s name?” I asked looking at him.

“Abby. She’s a terrific lady, Candice.”

“How long have you been seeing her?”

“Four months or so.”

“And you never told me?” I said, jerking my hand away. “Nine months ago you were working nights at that diner and living in that rotten apartment and now, I mean look at you. Look at all this! The beach, the ocean, the sandy floor in this place, you cruising around on some yacht with your girlfriend, it seems too good.”

“None of this means I don’t miss you Candice. Not a minute goes by when you and Dean aren’t on my mind.”

“I’m not stupid Daddy, how can you be thinking about us when you’ve got all this to replace us?”

“Nothing can replace you, Candice. None of this distracts me from the past. What distracted me was living up north and working nights at the diner. Now I’ve got a sense of peace, Honey. I’ve spent dozens of mornings sitting on the beach reading Dean’s diary and thinking of you.”

“That’s why I gave you the diary, so you’d feel grateful and wouldn’t forget about me. It was selfish but I couldn’t help it.”

“I know you were afraid of losing me, Candice,” he said, reaching across the table for my hand. “And I was afraid of losing you, too. I still am. You’d be amazed at how many of the old timers down here have lost touch with their children and grandchildren. I never want that happening to us.”

“Where did you and this Abby person meet?”

He leaned back in his chair. “She came into the restaurant one night for dinner with a friend. Her calamari chewed like a rubber band so I visited their table and apologized. That was it. I told her I’d buy her dinner if she came back again. She did, and we’ve been seeing each other ever since. She’s got a great sense of humor, Candice. She moved down from Alberta, Canada twelve years ago. I asked her if she was sick of eating round bacon and ice skating to work. She came back with a crack about me growing up in New York and if I got fed up with the garbage strikes and piles of trash on the sidewalks that were higher than the snow banks she dealt with in Canada. We joke around a lot.”

“How come you never did that with Mom?”

J.J. placed the fried shrimp appetizer between us and Daddy waited for him to leave.

“Your mom and I laughed a lot in the beginning, Candice. Things changed for us, he said, shrugging his shoulders. Your mom has a lot of great qualities but let’s be honest, she’s not the funniest person either of us have ever met.”

“I laughed. No, you’re right. That award would go to Grandma. So what time are we leaving on this boat tomorrow?”

“Eight o’clock. Abby works at Gulf Coast Marina in Naples and arranged everything.”

“She knows I’m down here?”

“Of course, everyone knows, Candice. The marina is closed for Thanksgiving but Abby is meeting us there to give me the boat keys. I was hoping the three of us could have dinner Friday night, too. You’ll like her. She’s a good person and she sure does like your old man a lot,” he said smiling and popping a shrimp in his mouth.

After sitting at the Chickee Hut for hours Daddy and I walked along the beach then drove back to his apartment late that afternoon. Since we were leaving early the next morning he suggested making homemade tacos and having dinner on his veranda, which was fine since the news of his girlfriend exhausted me.

“Its nice sitting out here at night, isn’t it?” Daddy sighed as he leaned back in his wicker chair and put his feet up on the audomin. “I love having that one palm tree so close. You can almost touch its leaves right from here.”

“I like knowing its November. I’d freeze doing this up in the Bronx,” I said, taking a deep breath and exhaling.

“I hope you enjoyed the tacos, Candice.”

“Oh yeah, nice and spicy just the way I like ‘em,” I said while nudging my shoulders into the thick seat cushion.

“The mornings are my favorite time. It’s always so quiet. Most days I’ll sit out here with a hot cup of coffee and a fresh newspaper. The best times though, have been spent reading Dean’s diary, and now, sitting here with you.”

“Thanks Daddy,” I said, touching his hand.

“Wait here. I’m going to scoop us two bowls of ice cream. We can use something sweet after those spicy tacos.”

A moment later he came out with two deep bowls of vanilla ice cream covered in chocolate sauce and napkins for each of us.

“Do you think I failed you, Candice?” he asked out of the blue.

“What? No, why would you even ask that question?” I said, sitting up in my chair.

“It’s been on my mind. And to be honest, I can’t stop thinking about what you said at the beach today.”

“What’d I say?”

“...That all of this seems ‘too good.’ It’s been a long time since I lost the restaurant and I can’t help but wonder if you think I failed you. I know you saw how hard I worked back then, but time puts things in perspective.”

“If anything, I appreciate your hard work more now than I did when we were going through all that.”

“Yeah well, the other thing that concerned me was having you come here. I was afraid you'd feel betrayed.”

“Why?” I laughed. “Did you think I’d get mad because you’re living in paradise while I’m stuck up there surrounded by stoop monkeys?”

“Stoop monkeys? God, you have been living in the Bronx a while,” he said shaking his head.

“Seriously Daddy, this trip was all I had to look forward to. What time are we going on the boat tomorrow?” I asked while swallowing a spoonful of ice cream.

“We’re meeting Abby at eight. Remember? I told you earlier. We need to get on the road by seven-thirty, though. Maybe we should hit the sack since we’ve got an early start. I’ll take the couch.”

“No way Daddy, I will.”

“Candice, not in a million years will I let you sleep on that lumpy couch,” he said while taking the ice cream bowls inside. “It molds to the lumps on my body now, anyway. You’ve got the bed, end of discussion.”

“All right. Thanks,” I said, smiling at him.

It’s what I wanted anyway. Ever since hearing about that girlfriend of his all I could think about was snooping through his stuff. After kissing him goodnight and closing the bedroom door I started inspecting everything. I couldn’t help it.

There was a picture of me and Dean on the nightstand but I wanted to see what this Abby looked like. It didn’t matter that I’d meet her in the morning. I needed to know now.

Peeking in his closet all I saw were shirts and khaki shorts, which I assumed he wore to work. I noticed the matching towels and washcloths on the shelf and knew that was her. Daddy would use a dishtowel to dry himself off if it was big enough. He had emptied the top two drawers for me but in the third one I found his underwear, that pair of emergency black socks he told me about, and two pairs of pink panties that I assumed she had left for emergencies, too. I got chills staring at those panties, imagining her slipping them on, or worse, taking them off. Or even worse, my father taking them off! I thought about throwing her panties out the window but was afraid they’d land on the hood of Daddy’s Jeep. How would I explain that one? So I just shoved the drawer closed and pretended I didn’t see them. Tomorrow I’ll check under the bathroom sink for tampons. That’ll tell me all I need to know.

Lying in bed I thought about calling Mom but what would I tell her, that I found some woman’s panties in Daddy’s drawer? I fell asleep with the window open while listening to the wind ruffling through the palm leaves outside.

“Rise and shine Candice!” Daddy said while knocking on my door the next morning.

“What am I, seven years old again?” I mumbled.

“Sorry. I couldn’t resist,” he said, nudging open the bedroom door. “The good part is there’s no school bus to catch, just a beautiful boat. I’ll scramble some eggs while you take a shower. Do you like cinnamon raisin toast?”

“Sure, thanks Daddy,” I said while kicking back the sheet, “and Daddy, Happy Thanksgiving.”

“Yes, Happy Thanksgiving to you, Candice.”

There weren’t any tampons under the bathroom sink, just a bag of cotton balls. What’s she doing, taking off her nail polish here, or her makeup before they get into bed together? Gross.

“I can’t wait to get on that boat,” Daddy said as we ate breakfast. “It’s a fifty-footer with a bathroom, kitchen, two bedrooms...”

“Two bedrooms? It’s bigger than this apartment.”

“People own sheds bigger than this place. Come on, drop the plate in the sink when you’re done and we’ll hit the road.”

Thirty minutes later we drove through downtown Naples passed fancy hotels and cafes where people relaxed at outside patios eating their omelets, drinking fresh squeezed orange juice and reading the morning paper. I couldn’t get over how beautiful everything was. Lush palm trees grew right out of the sidewalks. I lost count of all the jewelry stores and art galleries. I didn’t see a single laundromat. Where are they hiding all the funeral parlors? I wondered. With all the old people down here there must be a whole block of them someplace.

“This is it Candice,” Daddy said as he bounced his Jeep into the parking lot at Gulf Coast Marina. “That Volkswagen Cabriolet is Abby’s car. And that’s Abby!” he said as she walked out of the showroom.

She had long tan legs and wore white shorts with a yellow top and a pair of dressy sandals. I imagined her as a brunette but she was a strawberry blonde with big full lips and

freckles on her nose. Daddy was so nervous he walked three steps ahead of me but kept looking over his shoulder, pointing at me as if I was a display he was showing off.

“Abby, this is Candice,” he said as we met in the parking lot.

“It’s wonderful meeting you, Candice,” she said hugging me. “I’ve seen pictures but you’re even more beautiful in person. How’s your visit been so far?” she asked, holding my hands in hers.

“Great. It’s so beautiful here,” I said, forcing a smile.

“Isn’t it? Wait until you see the view from the water. Come on in, I’m sure you two are excited to get on the boat.”

“We can’t wait,” Daddy replied while stroking her back.

Seeing him touching her sent a shiver up my spine and I wanted to swipe his hand away but couldn't help but spot the genuine smiles on both their faces.

“You might be surprised Candice, but your father’s actually a pretty good captain,” Abby said as she walked us through the marina’s showroom where massive boats gleamed even with the lights off. “I know you’ll probably dock at Stan’s for Thanksgiving Dinner but I put some cold drinks and fresh sandwiches in the galley, just in case.”

“Thank you,” I said as Abby led us out the back door and onto a dock which bobbed in the water with our footsteps.

“Afternoon Delight is all yours,” she said handing Daddy the keys. “Go ahead Candice. Step aboard and take a look around.”

“Okay,” I said, thrilled to climb aboard this giant yacht, hearing my flip-flops squeaking against the white floor.

“If it gets too hot or you feel like taking a nap there are two staterooms below deck.”

I touched the white leather seats with maroon striping and ran my fingers over the knobs on the dashboard, if they even called it that. Towards the front were two built-in lounge chairs for lying out.

“All right, have fun you two! Don, if you need to reach me later I’ll be at Marilyn and Jack’s for Thanksgiving Dinner. You know their number, right?”

“Sure do. Happy Thanksgiving honey,” Daddy said as he waved.

“Daddy, she seems really nice,” I said while watching her walk away.

“She’s amazing, Candice. The drinks and sandwiches she put onboard are typical of her. She never misses the little things. Now let’s you and I get going. We can’t have any fun tied to this pier.”

As Daddy steered the boat away from the dock I took pictures of the other yachts anchored around us, amazed that people lived like this and that my father was one of them.

“You feel like driving, Candice?” he asked once we reached the open water.

“Are you kidding me? Yeah!” I said rushing from the front of the boat back towards the steering wheel.

“The only thing in front of us is Cuba and we’re bound to see that before running into it,” he joked, “so go as fast as you want. To accelerate push the throttle down and to decrease speed just pull it back up. Got it captain?”

“Got it!” I exclaimed, gripping the wheel.

“Okay. I’m going below deck to use the bathroom.”

After he was gone I swung my head in every direction feeling as if anything was possible. Things were eerily quiet, almost scary, and for a minute I listened to the waves slapping the sides of the boat and wondered what giant creatures were lurking beneath me.

Then I closed my eyes and smiled because I knew any second I would shove that throttle down and feel the power of this massive boat in my hands.

“Okay, on the count of three,” I cringed aloud with my eyes squeezed shut. “One...! Two...! Three...! Go...!”

“Oh my God!” I screamed as the engine surged beneath my feet. “This is incredible!” I yelled as the front of the boat leapt out of the water then splashed back down into the waves.

“I’m going twenty miles an hour!” I shouted, looking at the speedometer. “Now I’m doing twenty five! I can taste the salt water on my lips! I’m doing thirty! Look at the wave behind me! Daddy you’ve got to see this!”

“What is it Candice, a dolphin?” he asked, hurrying back on deck.

“What? No! Look at me! Look at how fast I’m going! The waves back there are humungous! I can’t believe I’m driving this giant boat! I’ll move down here in a second if you get a boat like this!”

“I’m sure you would. Hey, do you see those fish jumping over there?” he said pointing out into the water

“No. Where?”

“On your left,” he said stepping to the edge of the boat. “They might be dolphins but I can’t tell from here.”

“Hang on, I’ll chase them,” I said while turning the steering wheel.

“No Candice, don’t chase them. Just enjoy watching them. On second thought, pull back the throttle. I want to talk with you.”

After slowing down everything got so quiet again. All we heard were the waves slapping the boat and some birds chirping in the distance.

“It feels great out here, doesn’t it?” Daddy said softly as he settled into one of the captain’s chairs. “I could shout at the top of my lungs and no one would hear me but it’s so calm that I just feel like whispering.”

I watched as he crossed his bare feet and leaned his head back, letting the sun warm his face. I took a seat across from him and enjoyed the silence, listening only to the sounds of the water and the slight purr of the engine beneath us. I couldn’t remember the last time I felt so at peace. I wished my life could remain in this moment. Then Daddy opened his eyes and smiled at me before glancing around.

“Not bad, is it?” he said with a knowing look on his face.

I just nodded, preferring the silence.

“Marco is back that way, north of us,” he whispered, sitting up and pointing over his shoulder. “It’s the largest of the Ten Thousand Islands. The Isle of Capri is just west of it. Rookery Bay which is a wildlife preserve is east, and about a hundred miles south is Key West.”

I looked at the peacefulness on his face as he pointed towards the different islands, eager to teach me what he’s learned.

“Did Abby show you all this?” I asked.

“Yes, she did. Abby was a tour boat guide for a couple of seasons so I guess it was a hard habit to break. I didn’t mind though. We’d turn off the engine, open a bottle of wine and let the current carry us wherever it wanted, like you and I are doing right now. I told her about Dean while floating around out here, and I told her all about you too, Candice. Something about the ocean makes me feel as if nothing can ever go wrong again. I know that sounds naïve but it’s nice to let yourself think that way for a little while. Maybe that’s why I’m able to ask you about something important that’s been on my mind.”

“What is it, Daddy?”

“Abby turns fifty-three next Wednesday and I’ve chartered a boat for the two of us. What she doesn’t know is that I’m going to anchor us off the Isle of Capri and prepare dinner out here. And Candice, with your blessing, I’m going to ask her to marry me.”

He paused for my response. Tears filled my eyes as I thought of Mom. Suddenly I didn’t notice my surroundings anymore. I just gripped the hot leather seat trying to think of what to say. I wanted to tell him how she’d been raped and had gone to bed lonely and scared so many nights. I wanted to tell him that I was the one who protected her even though deep down she knew I was also the one who had ended Dean’s life. But I couldn’t confess any of those things. Daddy’s hands which had been scarred from working those hot ovens back at his restaurant were waiting for my acceptance, and all I could do was let him hold me.

“Thank you, Candice,” he said, squeezing me. “Thank you so much.”

I couldn't let go. I was holding his joy and his future, the good fortune he had found.

"It feels good to be happy, Candice. I'll never again take it for granted."

I'm not sure how long we sat there holding each other but eventually he laughed and let go of me.

"What are we doing?" he smiled. "We're out here on this beautiful boat and the two of us are getting teary eyed. We're supposed to be having fun."

"I am having fun, Daddy. This is the best day I've had in years."

He looked at me as if he knew what I'd been through.

"I love you Candice," he said, stroking my cheek. "Let's make the day even better. You've seen those empty walls at my apartment. Can take some pictures for me?" he asked. "I'll drive us closer to a few islands where we can see some flamingos. Then, later this afternoon we'll head to Stan's for Thanksgiving Dinner. Sound like a deal?"

"It's a deal," I said, taking my camera as he got behind the wheel.

By 4:00 I had snapped dolphins swimming on the surface, stingrays gliding effortlessly through water and more birds than I could remember. Daddy had docked the boat at Stan's Idle Hour and the two of us were sitting on bamboo chairs eating cheeseburgers and mashed potatoes for Thanksgiving and washing it all down with homemade lemonade. Pumpkin pie was for dessert.

Early that night, after watching the sun settle over the ocean, he let me steer the boat back into the Gulf Coast Marina. He said I did a great job even though his hands were on the wheel the whole time, too.

The rest of the weekend passed so quickly I wouldn't have believed it if not for the proof in the all the pictures I'd taken. I got most of them developed at a Fotomat in Marco and surprised Daddy with a few framed pictures that we hung together on his walls.

On Sunday morning he put my suitcase in his Jeep and we made the two hour drive through the Everglades back to Miami.

“I love you Candice,” Daddy said as we stood curbside at the airport. “I wish I could walk you to the gate but I’ve got a long ride back home and need to be at work by two.”

“It’s okay Daddy. I can handle myself. I’m a big girl now.”

“Yes you are honey,” he smiled while touching my face. “This was the best time I’ve had in years and the great thing is I’ve got the memories on my walls to relive it anytime I want.”

“I love you, Daddy,” I said while hugging him. “Please tell Abby it was great meeting her. You better call me next week after you propose. I want to be the first to know.”

“I will, Candice. I promise you that much.”

After kissing me he hopped in his Jeep and tooted the horn as he pulled away. I watched his hand waving high in the air until he was out of sight. But even after he was gone I stood there, imagining him driving down the quiet road with the wind in his hair and a smile on his face.

“So long for now Daddy,” I whispered. “I love you....”

Both Lola and my father had moved away and discovered new lives for themselves. My time is coming, I thought. And so is Mom’s. I needed to believe that was true.

Chapter Twenty

“Not for nothin’ but I could use a man right now,” Grandma moaned as she plopped onto the couch. “I need a foot rub somehtin’ awful but this’ll have to do,” she said, curling her bare feet on the carpet. “You ever make fists with your toes, Candice?”

“What? No Grandma,” I said laughing.

“Your grandpa did it all the time. Whenever he got home from work hangin’ dry wall the first thing he’d do was peel of his socks and make fists with his toes. His feet stunk worse than the bathroom at the Port Authority but he got this look that’d make you swear I just pleased him. I figured if it felt that good I ought to try it myself, you know?”

“I guess so,” I said, embarrassed that Grandma was hinting at giving blowjobs. Even for her that was a stretch. She must really be exhausted, I thought.

“You know how many cupcakes I made for that St. Raymond’s Easter egg hunt and fund raiser they got this weekend?” she asked while exhaling a deep breath.

“A thousand. You told me last night. That’s a lot of cupcakes.”

“You’re tellin’ me. Father Connelly was late pickin’ them up too, but I held my tongue. I had trays of cupcakes on the tops of my refrigerators, on buckets, I even had ‘em on the tables out front where the customers sit, which turned out to be a blessin’ because a bunch of Canadians came in and I didn’t want them hangin’ around.”

“Why not? What’s wrong with people from Canada?”

“I’m talkin’ about the blacks, Candice. We call ‘em Canadians because their money ain’t no good around here. I had a few come in last week. They ordered a box of this and that then ran out the door.”

“You mean they stole the donuts?” I asked in surprise.

“Oh yeah. It’s happened before. I ain’t sayin’ all the moulignons are crooks. That chubby boy Sylvester, the one who’s the spittin’ image of a teenage Al Sharpton, he’s been

takin' care of my trash cans on garbage day for years now. He's a good boy. I feed him free donuts whenever he stops by the bakery. Enough about that though, tell me about your school. Graduation is almost here. Can you believe? Your mother said you got accepted at Queens College but you're still waitin' on what's it called, NYU?"

"Yeah. You know I love photography, Grandma. I'd like to be a photojournalist and NYU's got a great program. I applied to other schools too, but I don't know."

"What's a matter? What don't you know?"

"I'm amazed high school is almost over. I'm happy to be getting out but time goes so fast. Mom and I have been living here almost three years. And she's been at the florist for over two. I thought she would have found something better by now but..."

"You got to give her time, Candice."

"Yeah, but how much? Daddy celebrated his first anniversary with Abby this past January and Mom and I are still stuck in the same stupid routines."

"We all got routines, Candice. I've had the same one for forty two years now. What is it you want?" she asked, leaning up in her seat.

"That's just it; I don't know what I want. I only know what I don't want. I'm eighteen and feel trapped. Mom and I have been through so much that a part me feels obligated to stay with her until she finds something better, but there's another part of me that just wants to go."

"Go where?"

"Lola will be home from San Francisco for a couple of weeks in June. She keeps telling me I should move out there and go to school."

"Where, California? Are you nuts? You don't know from nothin' out there, Candice. Who needs that nonsense?"

"That's just it, I want something different. Lola loves it out there. Did I tell you she did so well at SOTA, that art high school she's been going to, that she was offered a partial

scholarship to The Academy of Art University in San Francisco? Who knows, maybe she'll be a famous artist one day."

"That would be somethin'," Grandma said. "Good for her that she got a second chance after her father vamoosed. I quit school in the sixth grade to put food on the table for my younger brother and sister but never went back."

"Really Grandma?" I said, watching as she bent over to rub her toes. "I didn't know you quit school. Wasn't that against the law?"

"Not back then. All I remember about school was bein' graded on readin', school spirit and hygiene, which sounds funny but it was the Depression and people were pretty ripe in those days. Don't skimp on your education, Candice. I don't want you workin' on your feet like me and endin' up with toes that look like road kill. I want you to sit down for a livin'."

"Your toes aren't that bad Grandma," I said, waving off her comment.

"Don't give me that. I used to have pretty feet though, back when I was a betty. I'd show them off in my Claudettes. My friend Adeline Zamtucci and me had such a thing for shoes. What a scream she was. Adeline had sex with Milton Berle in the backseat of his Coupe De Ville under the Verrazano Bridge. She said his penis was a doozy. You sure I never told you about her?"

"Positive. I would've remembered hearing about her, Grandma."

"She's in an urn at her daughter's house in Yonkers now. The poor thing had a heart attack and sprouted wings right in the middle of her pedicure, but oh the time we had!" Grandma said, shaking her head and smiling. "The two of us got jobs at The White Castle, not the one over on Webster Avenue but the one that used to be on Pelham Parkway before they tore it down to build a synagogue for the Jews that couldn't squeeze into Brooklyn no more. The boys would come in for their sacks of burgers and flirt with us. Adeline worked the fry station. I did the malts. We both had parents who needed our money for food but we each took five cents from every paycheck we got and hid it away. After about six months when we had enough saved

we'd go shoppin' at Keen's up on Tremont. It's Conti's Funeral Parlor now but in my day it was the place you went for shoes. They played Bing Crosby and Ella Fitzgerald on the radio and had this giant picture of Rudolph Valentino on the wall. Oh how handsome he was. Adeline and me would get all dolled up and make a day of it. We'd try on every pair of shoes in the place before buyin' ourselves a new pair. Then we'd put on our Saturday night best and go swing dancin' to the Jitterbug at Coy's. That was the social club on 181st street where everybody went. It's where I wooed your grandpa."

"I never knew you loved shoes, Grandma. It sounds like you were pretty sexy back then."

"I had bedroom legs and milk wagons from here to Sunday," she said, playfully slapping my hand. "The corner boys would whistle at Adeline and me as we strutted down the block. But that was long ago. Now my tits are in my slippers and my legs got more veins than the sidewalk's got cracks. Whaddya gonna do though, Candice? That's life, right? Hey, does that clock read half past six? Where's your mother? She should be home by now I think."

"The florist is busy because of Easter too, Grandma. She'll be home soon."

"Oh Madone," Grandma said as she pushed herself off the couch. "I better make the gravy. Your mother's gonna be hungry."

"I'll help you," I said following her into the kitchen.

"All right. You set the table. You're a good girl, Candice. I always said that. You're a good girl."

As I set out the plates and glasses I heard Grandma groaning as she bent over to get a pot for the gravy. I wished she hadn't asked me about college. The whole thing is frustrating me. I don't want to go to Queens College and take the train every day. I don't even want to go to NYU. All I want is to move out of this house and quit setting the same table in the same three spots I've been doing for the past three years. I want my family back but since I can't have that I want something so new and different it'll help replace some of what I lost. Daddy's got a great

life in Florida and Lola's got the next four years figured out but I'm in doubt about everything except what's for dinner. A part of me thinks I should take my chances and just move out after graduation but how can I leave Mom? I get upset with her for not wanting to leave Grandma but I'm doing the same thing.

"What's a matter, Candice?" Grandma asked from the kitchen. "I hear you bangin' things."

"Sorry."

"That's all right. Go ahead and curse if you want. I won't tell."

"I'm okay, Grandma," I said while setting the forks and knives.

"Did you see Dr. Goldman this week?"

"I saw her on Tuesday, like every week."

"I think that one's got bells on her teeth. She likes to hear herself talk. Enough's enough with her already, don't you think?" Grandma asked from the kitchen.

I didn't want to tell her that I've enjoyed seeing Dr. Goldman for the past two years. I looked forward to that one hour escape like most people do their favorite TV show.

"Madone, what's that?" Grandma asked as the front door banged open.

Footsteps pounded up the stairs. I heard crying.

"Mom?" I yelled, as she slammed the bathroom door closed.

"Mom! What's wrong?" I shouted while running up the steps. "Why are you crying?"

"Vivian, what's a matter?" Grandma called out as she pulled on the banister.

"Just give me a minute, please."

"Vivian, come outta there," Grandma panted as she reached the top of the steps. "I didn't climb all the way up here to holla through some door."

"That bastard is going to court for what he did to me," Mom said as she swung the bathroom door open.

"What are you talking about? When did you hear this?" I asked, reaching for her hand.

“Thirty minutes ago. I was cleaning the prep area at the florist when the phone rang. I almost collapsed right then and there but I ran home instead.”

“Who called you?”

“Officer Sullivan from Connecticut. You remember her, right Candice?” she said while wiping her eyes with a crumpled tissue.

“Yeah. What’d she say?”

“The Fairfield County D.A.’s office is prosecuting that bastard.”

“Why?” I asked, throwing up my hands. “Last July he was given ten years for trying to abduct that girl in Poughkeepsie. Plus they linked him to some other charge. Armed robbery, wasn’t it? When you asked if they were going to prosecute him in Connecticut they said no. What happened?”

“He appealed and won. Can you believe it?”

“Jesus Mary and Joseph,” Grandma mumbled, shaking her head.

“The judge cut his sentence in half. All they’re giving him is five years,” Mom said flinging her hand in the air. “With good behavior he could be out in three.”

“What are you saying Mom, is there going to be a trial?”

“God forbid,” Grandma said. “He’s guilty. Ain’t that right Vivian?”

“Yes, but he could be free in just a few years. That’s one reason why the D.A. in Connecticut wants to prosecute him there.”

“What’s the other reason?” I asked, pulling on her arm as she started walking away.

“I’ve got to sit down,” Mom said as she stumbled to her bedroom and collapsed on the mattress.

“Why did the judge cut five years off his sentence?” I asked, dropping down next to her. “I don’t get it? What changed his mind?”

“It was a different judge, Candice. Officer Sullivan told me he’s got a reputation for leniency. You hear about this stuff on the news and shake your head but now it’s my life we’re talking about.”

“I was watching L.A. Law last Thursday and they were discussing some appeals case and said that the judge who heard the case in the first place has to hear the appeal, too. If that’s true then why did a different judge hear this case?”

“The first judge is on medical leave, that’s why.”

“So what now? I mean, they know he’s guilty, right?”

“Yes, but there’s more to it,” Mom said, squeezing her pillow against her chest. “The cops in Connecticut linked him to a crime in Hartford from six years ago. Officer Sullivan said the D.A. offered a plea bargain: confess to the crime he committed against me and there won’t be a trial. The defense accepted and he pled guilty. That’s fine with me because I couldn’t bear a trial. The way its being done now means that when he appears in court it’ll just be a formality. That’s the other reason Officer Sullivan called. She asked if I wanted to read a victim witness statement.”

“Meaning you’ll have to see him again?” I uttered, holding her hand.

“...Yes,” Mom said, nodding with her eyes clenched shut.

I didn’t know what to say. I wrapped my arms around her as Grandma stooped over and cradled Mom’s head against her chest.

“What will you do?” I whispered while holding her.

She looked so tired as she stared at the floor, her tears soaking the pillowcase. Grandma stood there looking at me, neither of us not knowing quite what to say.

“I have to see him,” Mom mumbled. “I don’t know how I’m going to do it but I have to. I want that son of a bitch to know he hasn’t broken me. Plus, anything I say in court becomes part of his permanent record. Sentencing is April twenty-sixth, three weeks from Friday.”

For the next few weeks Mom worked on the statement she would deliver in court. She thought about the judge, Grandma and me sitting there, the attorneys, and most of all, she thought about the bastard who did this and if she'd have the nerve to look him in the eye.

Both Dr. Goldman and Mom were concerned that the stress of this whole thing would cause me to start bingeing in the basement at 3:00 a.m. but there was no way I would be a burden on Mom. Not now, not ever again.

The sentencing was scheduled for 10:00 a.m. and we reached the Fairfield County City Hall at 9:15.

The hallways were jammed with police officers and men and women carrying thick briefcases.

"All these people are here for us, Vivian?" Grandma asked. "I didn't know there'd be such hoopla."

"They're not here for us," Mom said to Grandma. "This is City Hall. People are here paying traffic tickets and water bills and God knows what else."

"What about his family, Mom? Do you think he'll have anyone here?"

"How am I supposed to know, Candice? Where are we going anyway?" she asked looking around. "Officer Sullivan said it was Courtroom Three on the second floor. What floor are we on now?"

We found the courtroom a few minutes later after taking the elevator up one level. A sheet of paper was posted outside the door and listed the day's agenda. Sentencing for Dale Osborne, 10:00 a.m. it said, Judge Philip Harrington presiding.

Court was in session. We slipped into the back row.

The room was different then I had imagined. There was no center aisle. The seats were upholstered in blue fabric, nothing like the wooden benches in those TV courtrooms. The light above us was burned out too, making the room extra gloomy.

Two pot-bellied bailiffs stood to the right of the judge's bench. I recognized Officer Sullivan standing against the left wall in her police uniform.

"Are you okay?" Mom asked Grandma.

"I'm worried sick Vivian," she said, squeezing her pocket book in her lap. "I should've taken my high blood pressure pill."

Mom occupied herself by comforting Grandma.

"This is so strange, bein' in this place. I don't know what to do," Grandma said, adjusting herself in her seat.

"You don't have to do anything, Mom. Just keep your eyes on me as I read my statement. If I get scared I may need to look at you and Candice for support."

"I'll try, Vivian," she said while clutching her rosary beads around her fingers. I'll be sayin' the novena while you're up there."

After filling something out, the judge laid his pen down and nodded at the bailiffs.

"Bring in the next prisoner," one of the bailiffs announced.

A door swayed open on the left. Two police officers escorted in some criminal and sat him down next to a man wearing a dark blue suit and sitting at a table which faced the judge. He must be the public defender, I thought.

This prisoner was someone else's nightmare. He wore a red jumpsuit and had metal cuffs around his wrists. I reached for Mom and massaged her icy hands. "It'll be okay," I whispered.

"The defense will rise."

Mom flinched and yanked her hand from mine. Scratching her cheek with one hand she picked at the button on her gray blouse with the other.

"The defendant has been found guilty of aggravated assault and unlawful possession of a firearm. Does the defense have any comments?"

"No, Your Honor," the attorney stated as he and his client stood behind the table.

“Then I am ruling that the defendant be sentenced to three years in Cheshire Correctional Institution,” the judge said before slamming his gavel down.

I watched the prisoner being taken away then stared at the ground. Our six feet were lined in an anxious row. Grandma was making fists with her toes inside her shoes. Mom cupped her hands in her lap then reached for me as her breath heaved. My neck snapped up and I saw him being walked through that doorway with restraints binding his wrists and ankles. His chest hair was coming out the neck of his jumpsuit, just as Mom had described.

The same public defender was sitting there filling something out which I assumed was intended to help his client. I wanted to chop that lawyer’s hand off.

“The defendant has pled guilty to one count of sexual assault. Is this correct?”

“Yes, Your Honor,” replied the defense attorney.

The prosecutor who didn’t say anything during the last case stood up.

“Prior to the sentencing Your Honor, it’s been requested that the court allow a victim witness statement to be heard. I ask permission that this be granted.”

The judge nodded and Officer Sullivan motioned to Mom.

“I love you Mom,” I said as she inched out of the row and walked up the courtroom’s right aisle.

She had on a black suit and heels to go with the gray blouse and looked like a lawyer herself. My eyes flicked from her to that son of a bitch and back again. I watched him glance at her then look away.

Do you remember her screaming in that house? You bastard! Why did you do this to her? To us!

Looking over his shoulder our eyes met but he never blinked. My fists clenched. My heart felt as if it was pounding all the way into my throat. Turning away, he faced the judge. I squeezed Grandma’s hands while Mom waited.

The room was silent. She gripped the statement in her hands. I heard the page crinkling and the rattling of his chains at once.

“Whenever you’d like to start,” the judge stated.

Mom’s shoulders stiffened as she stared out at nothing, and then began.

“I learned of this sentencing date three weeks ago. Since then I have lived this experience, imagining how I would feel, what this room would look like, and what faces would be watching me. I have spent the past few weeks filling a garbage pail with words that didn’t express what I lived through during and after my rape. And now I stand here holding a sheet of paper that I thought expressed everything I wanted to say, but I can’t even look at it. All I want is to look at each of you.

I’ve learned many things since the day I was attacked, but the most profound is that none of us knows what burdens the rest of us are carrying.

For six months after my attack I refused to leave the house. Even though my external bruises had healed, I was afraid that people could see the scars I wore on the inside and I did not want to subject myself to that shame. But the fact is no one knew, and once I stepped back into the world there were times when I wanted everyone to know. I felt like the world had owed me, and that my life should be made easier because of what I’d endured. Everyone in this room knows I was raped but you don’t know what else I’ve had to cope with, and I don’t know what heartaches you have suffered, or are suffering now.

It’s been nearly three years since a part of me has died and I’ve been carrying those remains around with me, and from that I’ve come to understand certain things: the biggest one being that I will always live the violence I suffered that day. I appealed for mercy and received none as I was being attacked. His lawyers have filed an appeal and he was granted leniency. They may file again, perhaps for early release, but I ask that those who determine his fate also consider my fate when weighing their decision.”

I listened, captivated by her emotion and intelligence. For years my mother had kept her feelings closed off but here she was appearing boldly vulnerable at a time when she had every reason to hide. The judge, bailiffs, police, defense and prosecutor hung on her every word.

Turning, she looked him in the eyes.

“I was frightened of coming here because I have seen your face and hands every day. I’ve heard your hateful voice yelling at me in my dreams. But in all those visions you never wore shackles. It didn't occur to me until this moment that I will now own another vision of you - one where you will not play the dominant role in my nightmares, but rather the victim of your own greed. And I will leave you with another vision of me. Not of the woman screaming beneath you, the woman whose pleas you ignored. I will leave you as the woman who has coped with and overcome tragedy. You will see me march out of this courtroom into freedom while you remain here, bound by consequence.”

“Amen!” Grandma whispered.

“Yes Mom! You did it!” I mumbled.

Marching down the right aisle Mom walked straight out the courtroom door. Grandma and I rushed to follow her.

In the ladies room she broke down crying. I gazed at us in the mirror, three generations of women, the same as the night she was raped. But today we held each other in triumph.

Chapter Twenty One

Twelve hours had passed since the sentencing. Things were quiet as Mom and I sat at the table sipping our tea. Only candlelight was burning between us. The orange glow was flickering across her beautiful face. I watched her silently, not wanting to ruin the moment with words. I studied how her hands gently cradled her teacup and how she savored every warm sip. I knew it wasn't really the tea she was enjoying, but rather knowing that this day was behind her. I couldn't imagine the feeling of relief she must've felt, or the pride in knowing that she performed so courageously in that courtroom. But then, after taking another sip of tea she held the warm cup in her hands and told me just what she was thinking.

"I surprised myself today, Candice," she whispered. "I should be smart and take advantage of the momentum while I've got my chin held high."

I looked at her and smiled. I didn't want to ask, but I guessed that today was the first time in years she was able to breathe deeply. I wondered if it would mark a crossroads for us.

"I'm proud of you Mom," I said before sipping from my cup.

She nodded and smiled. "I need to act quickly if I'm going to turn my life into something more than an excuse for the hand I've been dealt."

"What do you mean?" I asked, resting my cup on the table.

"You know exactly what I mean, Candice. You've always refused to admit it but we're very similar. I don't like working at the florist any more than you like filling jelly donuts at the bakery. The only difference is you're eighteen and I'm nearing fifty."

"Age doesn't mean anything, Mom. I need to act quickly, too. I can't pretend that staying here is the best thing for me. Its time I take some chances."

She laid her warm hand on mine and smiled at me with those beautiful eyes of hers. "Tell me what you want to do, Candice."

I paused and laughed. "This is your day, Mom. Let's talk about what you want."

“We are,” she said, raising her lips into a soft smile and waiting for me to continue.

I hesitated, not sure what I was willing to share with her.

“You are right about us,” I said after taking another sip of tea. “We are very similar.”

“And there were times when you didn’t want to admit it, right? Can you tell me when,” she asked, leaning back in her chair.

“No way,” I said smiling. “I’m not falling into that trap.”

“This isn’t about trapping you Candice,” she said, reaching out for my hand. “It’s about me trying to free myself. I’m trying to learn to be better, Candice,” she said, looking at me as if she was asking for my forgiveness. “A mother should always put the needs of her children first but I didn’t always do that. It’s easy to behave with dignity when things are going smoothly. But when Dean got sick I was so devastated I didn’t know how to cope. The irony is that my selfishness made me angry and I got caught in this bitter cycle where I was averse to everything, including myself. A lot has changed since then, Candice. I feel as if I’m starting with a clean slate now, and I don’t want us keeping secrets or harboring any resentment towards each other. Do you?”

I shook my head but didn’t say anything. I was uncomfortable with where the conversation was going and wondered if there’s a penalty to pay for being brutally honest. “I was just amazed seeing you in that courtroom Mom, that’s all.”

“Until today you never thought I had a strong enough backbone. How come? I’ve been fighting for us since the divorce.”

“I’m not sure. Maybe it goes back to the pageant days,” I said, distracting myself by reaching for a biscotti.

“The pageants?” Mom asked in surprise. “What do they have to do with anything?”

“I never liked them,” I said, snapping the crisp biscotti in half. “The girls there were nothing but a bunch of little talking mannequins. Attach the Lee Press-On Nails, smear on some Bonnie Bell Smackers lipstick and bam, you’re in character,” I said, slapping my palms together.

“Even the fat Mom’s had their hair and nails done as if they’d just come from the salon but they couldn’t hide the truth exploding through their stretch pants.

“I know,” Mom said, laughing a little. “You could see every dimple on those women. It looked as if they’d sat down on a bunch of acorns. But didn’t you have fun dressing up and performing?”

“I don’t remember having fun. I remember getting decorated like an ornament and having some middle aged hairdresser with bad skin judging me from behind her fake eyelashes.” I stopped, gauging her reaction for a second. “I mean come on Mom; didn’t everyone’s priorities seem a little out of whack?”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me you felt that way, Candice?” she said, laying her hands out on the table. “I would’ve understood.”

“No you wouldn’t Mom, not in those days. Plus I knew how much you loved seeing me on stage. The funny thing is I used to think the pageants insulated us. I got this crazy notion that being pretty meant we were immune from bad things ever happening to us. But then Dean got sick and I thought he was being punished for all I’d been given so I started bargaining with God. I wanted Him to punish me so things would even out and Dean would get healthy again.”

“Is that why you went to Dean’s room that night Candice, because you felt guilty?” Mom asked, leaning forward and taking my hands.

I nodded. “Maybe, but most of all I didn’t want to see him suffering anymore.”

“You mentioned needing to take some chances. What are they, Candice?”

There was no perfect time to spit this out so I just did it. I looked calm on the surface but my toes were curled under the table awaiting my Mom’s response.

“I want to move to San Francisco and get a job as a photojournalist,” I said, trying not to wince but bracing myself for the backlash I knew was coming.

“What about college?” she asked, picking up her tea and taking a sip.

For a moment I didn't know what to say. I was all set to defend myself but she caught me off guard.

"Um, there are night classes," I said, feeling a sudden burst of hopefulness.

"I don't blame you for wanting to leave, Candice. I feel the same urgency in my bones that you do, but I can't go just yet."

"Grandma will be okay without you, Mom," I said taking her hand.

"No, you're wrong. For eighteen years she's lived a lonely life in this house. Then out of the blue we show up and she felt needed for the first time since before you were born. Remember how happy she was to get those extra house keys made for us?"

"Yeah, I never saw anyone so excited to go to the hardware store," I laughed.

"Why do you think she cooks dinner for us every night after coming home exhausted from the bakery? If I leave, things will be quiet again and she'll sit here with nothing but a cheesecake for company. I can't do that to her, Candice. She'll never admit it, but she deserves so much better."

"I know Mom, but so do you. And you just said you don't want to waste another minute."

"I don't," she said with determination.

"So what's next?"

She poured another cup of tea from the pot sitting on the table.

"Tomorrow I'll start looking through the classified for a new job. That's step one. For fun maybe I'll even check out some homes for sale in Connecticut."

"What about Grandma?"

"I've got some ideas and will work those out," she said, nodding her head.

"After seeing you in court today I don't doubt it, Mom."

"I love you, Candice," she said before taking another sip of tea.

"I know that, Mom. I know. I love you, too."

A half hour later I was lying in bed with butterflies in my stomach. Three weeks ago I told Grandma I only knew what I didn't want, but that was wrong. I know exactly what I want, and now the truth is out and I'm going after it.

Tomorrow I'll visit the library and get the names and contacts of every newspaper and magazine in San Francisco and start applying for jobs. I'll have to find a place to live, too. God, all of a sudden there's so much to do! Plus Lola's coming home in June for two weeks. Maybe we can even fly back to California together. The two of us out in San Francisco, we're going to have the greatest time! I can't wait! I've got to tell her the news!

Flinging back the sheets I hurried downstairs. I hope she's around, I thought while the payphone rang in her dorm room hallway.

"Hello."

"Yeah hi, is Lola there?" I asked after someone picked up.

"Hang on."

I stood pacing in the kitchen.

"Hello," she said a moment later.

"Lola it's me!"

"Candice? Jesus Christ what happened?"

"I'm moving to San Francisco!"

"What?"

"I'm moving!" I said, squeezing the receiver with both hands.

"Candice, don't you con me."

"I'm not Lola, I swear," I said bouncing on my toes.

"Jesus. When this girl Allyson told me I had a phone call I thought it was my mother with black news."

"Sorry Lola."

"Forget about it. When'd you decide this?"

“I’ve been thinking about it for months, you know that, but I just told my mom and she thinks I should do it!”

“Are you puttin’ me on?”

“No! I thought she’d give me a million reasons why I shouldn’t go but I must’ve timed it just right. She had her court date today and everything went great so I think she feels liberated or something.”

“God, that’s right. I forgot all about your mom’s court date. So it went good? Did they give that prick leather or what?”

“Twenty two years in Sing Sing. We’ll take it. Hey, what day are you coming home in June? I need to talk with you about apartments, schools, a ton of stuff. My plan is to get a job as a photojournalist and go to night school, so I’ll need your help.”

“I’m not comin’ home now. I found out yesterday.”

“What? Why not?” I asked feeling suddenly deflated.

“The AAU, that’s what they call the Academy of Art University, is having this open house that all freshmen need to be here for.”

“That stinks. I was all excited for you to come back. I even thought we could fly out to San Francisco together. We could share the armrest, Lola.”

“You think I don’t want to come back? I promised the twins I’d take ‘em for frankfurters on Coney Island. And you should’ve heard my mother. You’d think Murder She Wrote went off the air.”

“Murder She Wrote?” I asked laughing. “The next time we talk remind me to tell you this crazy story about Angela Lansbury.”

“What? Anyway, listen, I’m sorry I’m not comin’ back Candice, but I’ll be here when you get here and I’ll help with whatever you need.”

“Thanks Lola. I still have two months until graduation so there’s time. Thank God you’re there though; otherwise I don’t think I’d have the nerve to do it.”

“Who you kiddin’? Yes you would. We better hang up before your grandma has a fit with these charges. I’ll check on some apartments and we’ll talk next week.”

“Okay. Thanks Lola.”

“I’m so excited your comin’ out Candice! I got goosebumps thinkin’ about it!”

“Me too!” I said looking at them on my arm. “I’ll talk with you next week!”

I could barely sleep that night and got up with the sun the next morning. I spent the weekend working mornings at the bakery and spending the afternoons in the library getting the names, addresses and phone numbers of every newspaper around San Francisco.

On Monday I called Dr. Goldman to tell her I wouldn’t be back.

“Candice, even though you’re planning to move to California it still won’t be for a few months, which gives us time to discuss the outcome of the sentencing.”

“The outcome made me happy Dr. Goldman. So what’s to discuss?”

“Stopping therapy now is premature.”

“The funny thing is I want to keep seeing you Dr. Goldman, but I know it’s not the best thing for me anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Seeing my mom in court inspired me. It made me want to act. I like our weekly sessions Dr. Goldman, but I can’t move forward if I keep talking about the past with you. Anyway, I’m healthy enough to function in the world.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. Find me someone out there who doesn’t have a few issues their dealing with.”

“What about your father, Candice? Are you and your mom ever going to tell him the truth?”

“He’s taking sunset boat cruises with Abby and swimming in the ocean every day. He doesn’t want to hear that I ended his son’s life. As for my mom, she’s anxious to get on with her

life and she can't if she's still living in the past. Either can I Dr. Goldman, and you're a part of that now."

"What about Dean, Candice? Is he just a part of your past?"

"Dean's a part of my past, present and my future. I'll never forget what I did, but thanks to you I've learned to live with that truth. I'm okay Dr. Goldman. And you know what else?"

"What's that, Candice?"

"I'm excited! I forgot how good that feels. I appreciate all you've done for me. Without you I wouldn't have the confidence to face all the uncertainty in front of me but now I just can't wait to experience it."

"I think you're making a mistake but I understand your feelings. You're eighteen years old Candice, no one can force you to continue therapy."

"Thanks for recognizing how I feel."

"Then I guess this is goodbye for us," she said with disappointment in her voice.

"Yes Dr. Goldman, this is goodbye."

"I wish you the best of luck, Candice."

"Good luck to you too, Dr. Goldman."

The receiver was still pressed against my ear as she hung up and I heard the click on the other end of the phone. It was strange thinking that after two years of sharing intimate details, the two of us would never speak again. I knew I'd have to immerse myself in finding a photojournalism job in San Francisco so my decision to move out there would prove to be the right one.

Over the next two months I sent samples of my work to everything from the San Francisco Chronicle to the Korean Crier. With each mailing I included an enthusiastic letter practically begging people to at least speak with me. Just two papers offered interviews.

"Candice, I've been thinkin' a lot about this and I don't know," Grandma said to me one night while dipping her anisette cookie into her cup of tea.

“What is it, Grandma?”

“I don’t like it, you movin' all the way out there. This gay disease, this AIDS thing, its all over the place in San Francisco. That Dan Rather fella was talkin’ about it on his program last night.”

“I know AIDS is dangerous Grandma, but it’s not a gay disease. They thought it was at first, but it can affect anyone.”

“That’s because of your ones who drink from both taps. I say pick the genitals you like best and stick with ‘em, you know? I got nothin' against the queers. I always said Rock Hudson is a doll. And the fruit cups that come into the bakery are polite and always clean up after themselves but still, God forbid you catch somethin.’ ”

“I won’t Grandma. I know it’s hard to understand but I need to do this,” I said getting up from the table.

“Hold your horses, Candice. I don’t want to be the one to stop you even though your mother will miss you awful.”

“Grandma... Don’t try and guilt me into staying.”

“What? I ain’t doin’ that,” she said shaking her head. “I’m just nervous for you, honey. California is so far away. You know I’ve never been west of Monticello? But here,” she said, taking a white bank envelope out of her pocketbook. “If you insist on goin’, take this. It’ll make things easier.”

“Grandma, are you crazy? There’s a thousand dollars here,” I said after opening the envelope. “I can’t take this money.”

“It’s for your apartment. I thought you'd be livin' with Lola but then your mother told me Lola’s got a place at the school. Pay your rent for a few months so there’s one less thing. And make sure you find a nice clean place that’s close by a supermarket so you don’t have to go far for paper towels.”

“Okay Grandma. Thank you,” I said giving her a hug and kiss.

The week of June twenty fourth I picked an apartment from the list Lola had mailed me and sent them a check for the deposit and two months of rent. I also confirmed my interviews with the two papers that wanted to see me. The Pacific Review was a small newspaper based in Mill Valley, a town north of San Francisco. The Foggy Bottom was a paper covering the Financial District in the city. They both scheduled me for July seventeenth, which meant I needed to leave here by the seventh or eighth at the latest.

On Saturday July sixth while Mom and Grandma were working I called Daddy so we could talk in private.

"I'm so excited for you, honey. I'm glad your mother is giving you the car. I just hope that old Mercedes holds up. It's a long way to San Francisco."

"She took it for an oil change and had them check the tires and brakes, Daddy. They said everything is okay. Grandma has no idea why I'm doing this and Mom does a little, but I know you get it."

"Yeah, I do. I just wish San Francisco wasn't so far away. It's a beautiful city though, and now that you'll be out there it gives me the perfect excuse to visit. Did you get the money I sent, and the box of film?"

"Yes Daddy. Thank you."

"Your life is about to change in a big way, Candice. I can't wait to hear about how the job interviews go and what your apartment looks like. You'll have to ride those cable cars once you get out there, too."

"I will. Daddy, I haven't told Mom or Grandma, but I'm scared. It's easy to talk about leaving when the date is months away but now that my suitcase is packed I'm so nervous."

"That's natural. You'll be fine. You've got a great friend waiting for you out there and your mother and I are just a phone call away. Someday, many years from now when you look back on your life this will be one of the highlights, I promise you."

"I hope so."

“I love you, Candice.”

“Me too. Tell Abby I said hello.”

“I will. So long for now, honey.”

“So long, Daddy.”

On Monday morning, July eighth, I stood at the door with the car keys to Mom's old Mercedes in my hand. The trunk was packed with my suitcase, portfolio, and an old duffle bag Grandma had pulled from the hall closet and wiped with a wet dishtowel.

“I got the rosary beads right here,” Grandma said while patting the pocket of her house dress. “I’m keepin’ them close by so I can pray for you whenever I want.”

“I can’t believe this is goodbye,” Mom said as she stood by the front door crying.

“This ain’t goodbye, Vivian. It’s so long for now. Right, Candice?” Grandma said.

“That’s right. We’ll see each other soon. Thank you for everything you’ve done for me over the last three years, Grandma. I love you, and I promise you’re going to be proud of me one day.”

“You stop that. I’m already proud. Now take this and put it in a safe place. It’s a brand new hundred dollar bill,” she said, pushing it into my hand. “For gas or what not,” she winked.

“Thanks Grandma,” I said hugging her.

“And here, take this too,” she said, handing me a white paper bag. “There’s an orange juice and a Boston Crème donut in there. You know, for when you get an appetite.”

“It’s too bad Lola couldn’t come home so the two of you could fly back out there together,” Mom said.

“It’s better this way anyway. I need a car to get to the interviews I’ve got next week, and I’ll need it once I start working. Thanks for letting me have it.”

“You’re welcome, Candice. You have directions on how to get to the apartment once you’re out there, right?”

“I’ve got directions to Lola’s dorm since I’m staying there until I get furniture.”

“That’s what I meant. And the TripTik we got at Triple A?”

“It’s on the passenger seat.”

“Please drive safe, Candice. There are a lot of nuts out there. And make sure you stop for gas when it’s light outside and only stay in motels that have a lot of cars parked in front.”

“Mom, we went through this a million times. Do you know how many kids my age are going to college this August?”

“A lot, but their parents are driving them and they’re living in dorms, Candice. Now I put two rolls of quarters in the cup holder. Promise you’ll call whenever you stop.”

“I promise.”

I knew we could stand there for the next half hour but I was anxious to get going. So after kissing them both I hurried down the front stoop and got in the car.

This is it, I thought while turning on the engine. Daddy always said life comes down to a few moments and for me, this is sure one of them.

As I pulled away from the curb I looked at Mom and Grandma standing on the front stoop.

“So long,” I yelled, waving at them through the passenger window.

“We love you Candice!” Grandma shouted. “You be safe now!”

While wiping the tears from my eyes I drove down the block, passing houses I’ve walked by a thousand times.

At the corner I slowed to a red light and glanced in the rearview mirror and couldn’t help but start laughing. Mom and Grandma were standing in the middle of the street waving their arms high in the air and blowing me kisses. “You two are crazy,” I said as I laughed and cried at Mom in her bathrobe and Grandma in her house dress and slippers.

“So long!” I yelled while rolling down the window and sticking my hand outside. I knew they couldn’t hear me but I kept waving and tooting the horn anyway. Then the light turned green and I stepped on the gas, watching them in the mirror until they were gone.

Chapter Twenty Two

After sitting in traffic long enough to reminisce on the ups and downs that have defined my life and led me to this dramatic moment, things finally started opening up. Gripping the wheel with both hands I sat up in my seat, forced a deep breath into my lungs and exhaled what I hoped was the last bit of anxiety from my body, although I doubted it. My face was wound into a tight smile and my palms were sweaty but I figured that had to be normal considering the circumstances. This was probably the most exciting and insecure moment of my entire life.

Looking over my shoulder I saw that the fast lane was clear so I swung a left, stepped on the gas and let my nerves and adrenaline take over.

Within minutes I past the exit for the Major Deegan and opened the window, feeling the breeze in my hair and coughing on the diesel fumes spewing out of the delivery truck in front of me. I was hoping to capture the romance of the moment, the way they always make it seem so perfect in the movies, but it just wasn't happening, not here in the Bronx anyway.

Moments later I reached the onramp to the George Washington Bridge. The lanes were free and clear so I sailed onto the upper level doing sixty five and glancing at the sun rising over the Empire State Building and Twin Towers to my left.

"Welcome to New Jersey," the sign read as I was halfway over the Hudson River. That's it. I was in another state and all alone with nothing but three thousand miles in front of me. God, that's a lot. I'll be all by myself for at least the next three days. Would it be crazy if I dropped by and rang Jessie's doorbell? We were friends for eight years. She and Charlie were there for me during Dean's whole saga. I could bring them orange juice and crumb cake.

Then I thought of how desperate I'd look standing at Jessie's door at nine in the morning with two pints of Tropicana and a pink bakery box. What would we do anyway, talk on her front porch for ten minutes where I'd lie about how great my life has been since I moved away? Forget that. Maybe I could just drive down my old street. I could see what happened to Daddy's

restaurant, too. Should I do it? I could take Route 4 and relive my old life in twenty minutes or I could jump on Route 80 West and leave my history dead and buried. I squeezed the wheel and felt hot from the sudden anticipation. That's when I spotted the off ramp for Dr. Goldman's office in Fort Lee and remembered telling her how I couldn't drag the past around with me. Swinging towards the exit I veered onto Route 80 and left my past where it belonged.

As I escaped the congestion of the city things quickly changed. The traffic vanished as the three lane highway unfolded before me. The rundown apartment buildings in the Bronx and the skyscrapers in Manhattan were replaced with cookie cutter neighborhoods, strip malls and rest stops with Roy Rogers and TCBY.

I was anxious to get some miles behind me so I drove for hours without stopping. By the time I was deep in the Pennsylvania countryside where there was nothing but rolling hayfields and static on the radio I was already sick of my Air Supply and Bee Gees cassettes. I started noticing the different license plates and thought alphabetizing the fifty states would be a fun game, but that didn't work either. I was bored by Colorado. The only thing that kept my attention was seeing how many exits I could pass before having to get off and pee. I almost stopped at four but pushed myself to five and pulled off in Wentlings Corners, Pennsylvania before jerking left into the Flying J Travel Plaza and running straight for the bathroom. The floor was covered with wet toilet paper and it smelled worse than the public bathrooms at the Jersey Shore but my bladder was about to burst so I couldn't be choosy. I squatted over the toilet without touching it and peed so hard I got lightheaded.

After scrubbing my hands I was back outside pumping my gas and watching huge RV's the size of buses, a convertible red Mustang, and massive eighteen wheelers pulling into the station. All the truckers had big hanging bellies and each one of them headed next door to a place called Vittles which advertised a steak and egg breakfast and clean shower all for \$4.75. I wasn't interested but even to me that sounded like a pretty good deal.

Once the tank filled I grabbed a roll of quarters from the cup holder and stepped inside to pay for the gas and call Mom.

“Thanks for calling Flowers on Tremont.”

“Hi Mom, it’s me.”

“Candice! Oh, I’m so happy to hear your voice! I’ve been thinking about you nonstop since you left this morning. How are you?”

“I’m good,” I said, cupping the phone so Mom wouldn’t hear the sound of the toilets flushing. If she did I knew she’d imagine me in some dump and get even more nervous.

“Where are you?”

“Wentlings Corners, Pennsylvania.”

“Where?”

“A town with a gas station, Mom.”

“What’s all that noise, Candice?”

I sighed. “The pay phone is next to the bathrooms.”

I could hear her breathing deeply. “Candice, please be careful. If you see any men looking at you strangely wave to someone and pretend you’re not alone.”

“Who should I wave to Mom, the cashier? I’m just calling to check in but I want to get back on the road, okay?”

“Where are you stopping tonight?”

“I’m not sure. But I’ll call you later, I promise. I love you, Mom.”

After hanging up I grabbed a bottle of iced tea from the fridge and waited in line behind some guy with the dirtiest fingernails I’d ever seen. He was drinking his chocolate milk and eating his microwave steak burrito before even paying.

“I’ve got gas on pump four,” I said to the anorexic girl behind the counter. I could tell she had just gotten to work. Her hair was still wet and looked as if the strands would pull right out of her scalp if she bothered using a comb.

“That’s \$11.47.”

“I’ll take that recorder and a blank pack of cassettes too,” I said pointing to the glass case behind her.

She groaned and slid off her stool to get what I asked for.

After paying I hopped in the car and pulled onto the highway behind that convertible red Mustang and a silver milk truck with Mayfield Dairy advertised on the back in brown and yellow lettering.

For hours I sat snug behind the wheel staring at the horizon that always seemed beyond reach. The dashboard clock read 5:22 p.m. but a bank clock off the highway read 4:24 and I realized I’d driven into another time zone. It felt as if I’d broken through, as if I’d escaped.

For two days and nights I drove through small towns and the outskirts of cities like Youngstown and South Bend, which I knew I’d never see again. I bought that recorder and blank pack of cassettes thinking I’d come across some fun places I could tell Mom and Grandma about but what can you say about a cornfield or how mundane it is driving in a straight line for two thousand miles?

I can’t go cross-country and have the Tootsie Roll Factory be the most exciting thing I’ve seen. I decided to ignore the TripTik which led me through Omaha and instead I headed south through Kansas, bound for The Grand Canyon. I’m making great time so who cares, I told myself. I can spare a day.

On Wednesday night I arrived in dusty Flagstaff, Arizona. The EconoLodge blinked vacancies and had a bunch of cars parked out front so I checked in and called Lola from the payphone next to the soda machines on the first floor.

“Hey Candice! You just caught me. I’m goin’ to the laundromat so you got clean sheets tomorrow. How’s the drive?”

“Good. It’s long, I can tell you that. I’ve never eaten so many tacos in my life. But don’t worry about the sheets, Lola. My grandma gave me all that stuff.”

“It’s no matter, they’re filthy anyway. So where are you?”

“Flagstaff, Arizona,” I said pushing the buttons on the Coke machine.

“Arizona? What are you doin’ way down there?”

“I decided to stop by and see The Grand Canyon.”

“Come on, where are you really?”

“Lola, I’m not kidding. I’m at a motel in Flagstaff right now staring at a K-Mart across the street.”

“Who just stops by to see The Grand Canyon? You make it sound like you went down the corner to buy milk. I thought you were gonna be here tomorrow.”

“I know. After The Grand Canyon my next stop is San Francisco. I’ll just be a day late Lola, that’s all.”

“You’re a scootch, you know that? I was all excited thinkin’ you’d be here tomorrow night. I stopped by this great furniture store today and looked all around for you. I even put this lamp on hold. You’ll love it. I can’t wait for us to get lemon ices and walk on The Golden Gate Bridge and talk about how we’re gonna dress up your place. I miss you, Candice.”

“I miss you too, Lola.”

“Then be straight with me, will you be here the day after tomorrow or what?”

“Yes. I promise to be there on Friday,” I said laughing.

“All right. Then maybe I’ll even buy that lamp for you. Call me tomorrow or Friday morning and let me know where you’re at. I can’t wait to see you, Candice!”

“I can’t wait either, Lola! I’ll see you soon!”

After six hours tossing beneath those hard sheets I got up, showered, bought a blueberry muffin and twelve pack of panoramic film at the K-Mart and headed north on Route 66.

At 10:00 a.m. I reached the south rim of The Grand Canyon and felt lonely for the first time since crossing the George Washington Bridge and debating whether or not to stop and see Jessie and Charlie. Maybe it was because out of all the cars waiting in line to pay I was the only

one here by myself. Up until now I didn't mind. I enjoyed the strange voices on the radio. I liked talking with the trucker who insisted on buying me dinner the other night because I reminded him of his daughter who he hadn't seen in over a month. But now I just wanted to get excited with someone and say, 'Hey, look at that! Isn't it amazing?' But I had no one.

After giving the ranger my five dollars I drove through the gate, found a parking space and pulled out the tape recorder I had bought twenty five hundred miles ago.

It took me a few frustrating minutes to fight off the plastic wrapping on the pack of cassettes but I finally got one out. Then I grabbed my Pentax camera and stepped outside. Dirt swirled into my eyes as the dry wind snapped the hem of my jeans. Excited kids ran by me with their parents hurrying close behind.

Crossing the parking lot I approached a sidewalk and hit play/record, then shared my experience with the two people who I wished were here...

"Mom, Grandma, it's me! Hi! Are you surprised? I'm at The Grand Canyon right now! Can you believe it? I didn't want to be here alone so I thought I'd take you with me. Plus I know you've never been here so I thought it'd be fun to experience it together. And Mom, don't worry, I promise I'll be careful. I just parked the car and haven't seen anything yet so hang on, here we go! Right now I'm walking through the parking lot towards a sidewalk that's near the edge of the Canyon. This is crazy. It's great though! The wind is so strong it's actually pulling tears from my eyes. I'm approaching the Canyon but can't see into it yet. There's an iron railing about thirty feet in front of me. People are everywhere taking pictures. Wait! I can see the far side of the Canyon! I'm running towards it to get a closer look. Oh my God! Now I can see inside the Canyon! It's amazing! Its cinnamon colored but darker in some spots, just like your gingerbread cookies, Grandma. It looks fake, like a backdrop or something. My left hand is on the railing now. My stomach just dropped out between my legs! God that's such a weird feeling! Since you're afraid of heights Mom this may be the closest you ever come. Birds with massive wings are flying over me. I think they're condors, or vultures maybe. Hold on, there's a

sign here. It says the Canyon is 5,000 feet deep and if we look straight ahead we'll see The Royal Springs and Bright Angels Canyons. I'm looking but I can't tell where they start or stop. That's the Colorado River down at the bottom. I guess it's big but it looks tiny from way up here. A helicopter is circling below me now and there's a giant - !"

"With that kind of enthusiasm you should be a narrator for one of those Grand Canyon documentaries."

Startled, I turned and saw some guy with black wavy hair, khaki shorts and a button down denim shirt standing behind me.

"What did you say?" I asked, annoyed that he interrupted me.

"I said you'd be a good narrator. I couldn't help but overhear you describing the view. That's a great idea. It beats mailing a postcard."

"I guess so," I answered, noticing his blue eyes.

"My name's Eric Shaw," he said, offering his hand.

After hesitating for a second I stuck out my hand. "I'm Candice Morgan."

"It's a pleasure meeting you, Candice. Have you been recording your whole trip?"

"What do you mean my whole trip?"

"You're driving from where, New York, New Jersey?"

"Cute. So you saw me park my car and noticed the license plate."

"No. I saw you at a gas station in Pennsylvania a few days ago. You were on the payphone there. Then I noticed you leaving right behind me. There was a silver milk truck with a brown and yellow logo pulling out the same time as us. I can't remember what it said but -"

"Mayfield Dairy."

"That's it! See, you do remember," he said smiling.

"I remember that truck, not you. Anyway, I'm going to take some pictures now," I said turning away from him.

“Wait a minute. Wait,” he insisted, sticking out his hand. “I didn’t mean to impose or anything. I just thought I’d say hello since I recognized you. The longest conversation I’ve had over the past three days has been when I asked the drive-thru cashier at KFC for extra napkins.”

I laughed, gazing at the view and away from him.

“I took last semester off to do some traveling but now I’m heading back to Stanford. Fall classes don’t start for six weeks but I’ve got a job starting on Monday. How about you?”

I looked out at The Grand Canyon and thought of lying, saying I was heading to Phoenix or Los Angeles. But even though he was just some stranger who didn't deserve the truth, I told him.

“I’m moving to San Francisco.”

“That’s not far from Stanford! Just up the 101. What’s bringing you to the Bay Area?”

I realized the recorder had been taping our conversation and clicked it off.

“It was nice meeting you Eric, but I’ve got to take some pictures now so...”

I heard his footsteps on the sidewalk behind me as I walked away.

“What are you doing?” I asked, turning towards him.

“You can't talk into that recorder all day. And since we’re probably the only two people at the entire Grand Canyon by ourselves let’s keep each other company. I’ve been here before so let me be your guide. If after the tour you’re not fully satisfied I’ll buy you lunch,” he said with a playful smile.

I stood there laughing, not sure what to say. He’s cute, I said to myself. But I had thoughts of Mom getting raped and telling me to be smart on the road. I paused, resisting the temptation.

“Do you know how to use a camera?” I finally asked. “Maybe you can take some shots of me with The Grand Canyon in the background.”

“Just press the button, right? Sure, I can do that for you.”

Eric and I spent the morning hiking down rocky trails and standing on narrow cliffs as I used the panoramic film I'd just bought, and the rolls Daddy had sent me. Thanks to Eric I even caught a few candid shots of two hippies lying in the dirt dipping the ends of guitar strings into ink jars and giving each other tattoos.

I recorded my experiences for Mom and Grandma and mailed the tape from the Desert View Trading Post that afternoon.

"So where are you staying tonight?" Eric asked, as we ordered roast beef sandwiches and root beers from The Bright Angel Restaurant.

"I don't know. Flagstaff, probably."

"Flagstaff? That's south and you're heading north to San Francisco. Follow me to Bryce Canyon, just over the Utah border."

"Bryce Canyon? What for? I've already seen The Grand Canyon. And why would I follow you anyway?"

"Because you're having fun," he smiled. "I'm staying at The Bryce Canyon Lodge. They offer discount helicopter rides to their guests. Have you ever taken a helicopter ride, Candice?"

I thought of Mom again and her warnings about strangers, but Eric made me trust him. Maybe it was how he held my hand as we climbed down those rocky trails. Maybe I was just starved for the company.

I remembered his car when I saw it in the parking lot, that red Mustang convertible.

Following his taillights through the peaks of Northern Arizona and over the Utah border I felt the temperature drop to almost freezing.

It was after 9:00 when we drove down a quiet dirt road and parked in front of a blond wooden porch with loveseat swings and iron lanterns burning. A cozy fire crackled in the stone-walled lobby of The Bryce Canyon Lodge.

Eric pulled a bottle of wine from his trunk after we checked into separate rooms. Rocking on one of the front porch swings we sipped from plastic cups as the metal hinges squeaked while we swayed.

I had spent the past three nights in musty hotel rooms flipping channels and keeping the curtains drawn. Now that I was here I realized how much I wanted this.

“Are you warm enough in that light jacket?” he asked. “The temperature can drop twenty to thirty degrees during the summer nights. I’ve got an extra sweater if you want it.”

“I’m fine,” I said glancing at him and smiling for a second. “The wine is keeping me warm. You sound like you know this area. Did you grow up out here?”

“No, I grew up back east but spent a few summers here with a cousin of mine. What about you, Candice? Tell me something unique about yourself. You didn’t say much this afternoon.”

I laughed and hesitated, playing with the zipper on my jacket. He didn’t know anything about my past and couldn’t recognize my faults yet. I didn’t want to ruin that with the truth.

“Come on, Candice. Tell me something about yourself. You won’t spoil the mystery.”

“...I can’t think of anything,” I said, shying away from him.

“I’ll make it easy. Why are you driving to California alone?” he asked, smiling as he took a drink of wine.

I gazed at the iron lanterns dangling from copper hooks and the horses sleeping in the stables near a pond across from where we were sitting. Here you are, I thought to myself. Eighteen years old and sipping wine with a charming stranger at a ranch hotel in the Utah desert. Is this for real? This gorgeous guy is being so attentive, refilling my cup and asking all these questions. He seems so interested in me. Is he sincere? A part of me didn’t want to know.

“Hey Candice, where’d you go?” Eric asked, touching my hand.

I pulled away and took another sip of wine. “Where did you grow up?” I asked instead.

“On Cape Cod in a town called Chatam. Have you ever been to The Cape?”

“No.”

“Cape Cod is shaped like a bent arm that juts out from the mainland into the ocean. Chatam is right at the elbow,” he said, pointing to his own arm. “It was nice growing up there but the winters are freezing and the summers are packed with tourists. I got tired of it. My older brother Will moved away to college and works at Ogilvy & Mather in Manhattan and my sister Angie is on maternity leave from an art gallery. My folks work together at The Corkscrew, a wine bodega my father opened in Provincetown back in the sixties.”

I gazed into Eric’s eyes looking for the divorce or untimely death he refused to confess, but he didn’t seem to be hiding anything.

“Walk with me,” he said, draining the last of the wine into our cups.

“It’s cold. I’m ready to go in.”

“Just for a second, Candice,” he said taking my hand.

He led me to the edge of that pond on the other side of the parking lot.

“The lodge gives tours on horseback too, you know. This pond is here so the horses can drink from it.”

“How do you know that?” I asked, looking into his eyes.

“I helped dig this pond a few summers ago. My uncle owns this place, Candice. I was planning to surprise him and my cousin but they’re on a white water rafting trip in Montana. I’d hang around a few more days if I could but like I said, I’ve got a job starting on Monday.”

He tossed a stone into the water and we watched the ripples expand further and further until they blurred our reflections in the moonlight. Then without warning, Eric kissed me.

Goosebumps shivered up my arms. His lips were soft and gentle and I dropped my wine to the ground and held him in return. Cupping my cheeks in his hands he kissed my lips and my neck. I encouraged him. My tongue was in his mouth as my body stirred and I felt the wetness between my legs. I wanted him to take me to some faraway place distorted by wine and kisses and the thrill of feeling a stranger so close.

“Come with me,” he mumbled.

I followed, jumping over ruts in the parking lot and questioning my actions.

No one will know. But you just met him and... Who cares...? What could be more perfect than this...?

He led me through the lobby and down the steps to a secluded lounge where a stone fireplace was flickering. Collapsing into an overstuffed leather chair my head plunged into the deep cushion as his body pressed against mine.

“What if someone comes?” I whispered. “We can’t...”

“No one will come,” he said before kissing me.

“But we both have rooms. Why are we...?”

His lips pressed hard against mine. Fighting off our jackets and shoes we were warmed by the heat of the fire. Watching our reflections in the window I saw his face against mine, wanting him to seize the stranger I saw within me.

After pulling off my shirt Eric unhooked my bra. My nipples were stiff and sensitive as he laid his warm chest upon mine. Running my fingers through his curls and over his muscular arms I gazed at the stairway, hoping no one would come. The aching rose between my legs. The waist of my pants skidded along my thighs and over my knees. He stood, staring as I lay in pink cotton panties. I studied his body in the glow of the fire, lean and powerful. Unbuttoning his pants and pulling them down with his underwear he stood before me, naked and erect. I wanted to touch him, taste him. I'd never come this close. Maybe this was too fast but I felt so safe. I'd hold this with me forever. Eric stood as if offering himself, waiting for my acceptance. Tucking my thumbs inside my panties I slid them down over my knees and ankles, wanting him to see me. Bending down he kissed my thighs and spread my legs. His tongue licked me before he rose, kissing my belly, my nipples and my mouth. Holding him tight and gasping in nervousness I watched our bodies in the reflection of that window as he entered me. Counting breaths I felt my fingers sinking into his back as he plunged deeper. While rocking into me he buried his face

in the curve of my neck, feeling my tension and kissing away my pain. His cheeks were sweaty from the fire as I kissed him. Then he slipped off and stood me up before laying his body down. Climbing on top I slid him inside of me. The ecstasy rose within. I saw it in his face and in my reflection. Gripping the leather chair then cupping my breasts in his hands he bucked and squeezed and climaxed into me.

As he sighed and stroked my face with his fingertips he lowered me until our lips touched. And there we stayed, listening to our breaths while the crackling fire warmed us with its heat.

Chapter Twenty Three

Hours later I awoke in Eric's bed feeling restless. It was 4:02 a.m. The wine had worn off. I couldn't sit with him over eggs and toast and think about what had happened. I just couldn't.

Tiptoeing out of his room I grabbed my clothes and prayed that the door wouldn't squeak as I opened it. After stepping into the hallway I hurried back to my room, grabbed my stuff and then marched through the lobby where I spotted the front desk clerk nodding off behind the counter. It was freezing outside so I quickly threw my things in the trunk and drove out of the parking lot and onto the highway. All signs pointed toward Provo and Salt Lake.

"Where's that TripTik?" I asked, fumbling for it amongst the napkins and empty cups on the passenger seat. Then I realized it wouldn't do me any good. I'd have to stop at a gas station and buy a map once it got light out. For now I'll just keep driving.

My eyes studied the checkered yellow line as I thought of Eric undressing me. I remembered his hands touching my breasts and how bizarre it was seeing the top of his head between my thighs. It looked as if he was digging for spare change under the seat cushion. Turning on the light I gazed at my reflection in the rearview. I looked the same now but different. I pressed my hand down there, it felt raw and inflamed.

Out of the darkness a pair of headlights appeared in my rearview. What am I doing out here? Maybe this was a huge mistake. I was so cozy under that heavy blanket. I should've left in the light of day!

The mountain peaks were clear in the moonlight but a mist settled over the deserted highway as I watched those headlights getting closer.

Thank God I've got gas but where do I go from here? What if I have to catch some highway before Provo or Salt Lake? I can't stop and ask for directions now. This is when the

freaks are out I said to myself, studying those headlights coming up on my left side then racing past as my heart thumped and my sweaty palms gripped the wheel.

I turned on the radio for company. The heat was next and I settled in as hot air blew from the vents.

Just head to Salt Lake, I told myself. There's got to be a highway there that'll take me west through Nevada. I'll reach it by sunrise.

The hours past as I kept reliving last night, seeing my naked reflection in that window and feeling as if that couldn't possibly have been me. Wait until Lola hears about this.

After reaching Salt Lake I checked a map at a 7-Eleven and saw that 80 West would take me through Reno then down through the Sierra Mountains into Sacramento and onto San Francisco.

"That's the route on my TripTik. I had it all along and didn't even realize it," I said, while standing across from the cashier who sipped her Slurpee and gazed at me with dull eyes.

"It'll take ya ten hours," she mumbled as I folded up the map I borrowed. "You should Stop and see the Bonneville Salt Flats. 80 West passes just south of it. Most amazing thing you'll ever see," she said before sipping her Slurpee.

I thanked her for the map but since she had three missing teeth I didn't put much trust in her judgment about these salt flats, or how long it would take me to reach San Francisco.

I called the phone in Lola's dorm but got no answer. I tried Mom too, but she didn't pick up either. I thought about dialing Grandma at the bakery or Daddy, but it was almost 7:00 a.m. and I wanted to get out of here before the morning rush hour.

While driving through western Utah I spotted signs for The Great Basin, whatever that was, and places to do something called "boulder climbing." From a rest stop off the highway I was able to gaze down on the salt flats which looked like nothing more than a frozen lake covered in snow. The most interesting thing was spotting cars racing across it at what must've been a hundred miles an hour.

Back on the highway I crossed the Nevada border and drove through Reno past the Silver Legacy and other extravagant casinos just off the highway. Then I headed through beautiful Lake Tahoe and down into Sacramento. It was 2:30 in the afternoon when I finally saw it, my first sign for San Francisco.

"I'm getting close! I'm just an hour away now, maybe. God, I better stop and call Lola!" I said, swinging off the highway and pulling into a Carl's Jr. which I realized was just a Hardees in disguise. I used the pay phone in their parking lot.

"Yeah, hi, can I talk with Lola?" I said as someone picked up.

"She's not here. I saw her go out about ten minutes ago."

"Oh, okay. Can you leave a note letting her know that Candice called and I'll be there around four o'clock I think?"

"Yeah, all right."

"Thank you."

After filling up at the AM/PM next door I got back on 80 West and followed the signs. "This is so incredible!" I said, seeing exits for Napa Valley. "That must be where they grow the wine."

I thought about Eric opening the bottle while we sat on that swing together. He told me about how the grapes are harvested and how aging the wine in French oak barrels has been done for hundreds of years because the oak is porous and allows for some evaporation of the wine, which helps in the fermentation process. I had no idea what any of that meant and just laughed because despite it all, we were still drinking from wrinkled plastic cups.

The signs directed me to an exit for the Richmond Bridge which led to a place called San Rafael and Highway 101. Isn't that the highway Eric had mentioned when he was talking about Stanford?

I thought I'd gotten lost but then I started seeing signs for San Francisco again and headed south past exits for Tiburon and Sausalito. That's where Lola told me she went for some art festival I thought, while approaching a tunnel. I must be close!

"Oh my God! It's The Golden Gate Bridge!" I shouted after coming out of that tunnel. "This is unreal! I'm right on top of it!" I said staring at the orange towers soaring into the clouds. "It's so beautiful! I'm here! After three thousand miles I'm really here!"

Swinging my head every which way I wasn't sure whether to look at the city on my left, the Pacific Ocean on my right or the towers above. It was all so amazing! Rolling down the windows I felt the breeze flowing through the car. "Jesus, it's freezing!" I said while raising the windows back up. "Lola's nuts if she thinks I'm walking out here with a lemon ice. We'll need hot chocolates."

After crossing the bridge I chose a toll lane and got my money ready.

"Excuse me, how do I get to 16th and Potrero?" I asked the attendant.

"Follow this road to Van Ness and make a right, you can't miss it. Take that to 16th and make a left. You'll run in to Potrero."

"That sounds easy enough," I said after thanking him and driving away.

Ten minutes later I was on Potrero Street and looking for Lola's building. "424, 430. There it is, 436!"

After circling for fifteen minutes and getting fooled twice by fire hydrants I found a parking spot and hurried back to Lola's dorm and rang the bell. No one answered.

"Come on," I said ringing it again. "Lola where are you?" I moaned while peeking through the glass.

With nothing else to do I sat on the steps waiting for Lola or anyone to show up. It wasn't long.

"Candice! Is that you?" Lola shouted from the corner.

"Hey Lola! Yeah, it's me!" I yelled jumping up from the steps.

“Holy shit! I can’t believe you’re here!” she screamed while running down the block with her giant boobs bouncing and a plastic bag swinging from her hand.

“It’s so great to see you, Lola!” I yelled while hurrying to meet her.

“It’s great seeing you too!” she said as we ran into each other and hugged on the sidewalk. “I didn’t think you’d be here ‘til eight or nine tonight but then I come around the corner and there you are! At first I thought, ‘what’s this, some stoop monkey is hangin’ on the steps of my building?’ But it was you!”

“I got an early start,” I said laughing. “I called your dorm and asked the girl I spoke with to leave you a note.”

“Ah these people, they say one thing and do another. What time did you leave The Grand Canyon, midnight?”

“No, I left from Bryce Canyon in Utah at four this morning.”

“Bryce Canyon? What’s that? I thought you went to The Grand Canyon?”

“I did. It’s a long and wild story. I’ll tell you later when we sit down.”

“Well come on. You must stink like a refugee. You want to take a shower?”

“I’d love one.”

“Okay. Let’s get your stuff so you can clean up. Then we’ll go out. I know you probably don’t feel like drivin’ anymore but I’ve been here two years and haven’t driven down Lombard Street once and I’m dyin’ to.”

“What’s Lombard Street?”

“The curvy one, you’ve seen it on TV. It was in What’s Up Doc with Barbara Streisand. We can drive through Pacific Heights, too. Keith Partridge lives there, you know, David Cassidy. And so does Mrs. Garrett from The Facts of Life. After drivin’ through there we can go to Columbus Avenue in North Beach.”

“Are we meeting any crazy artist friends of yours tonight?”

“No,” she said laughing. “It’s just us. We gotta catch up.”

“No kidding,” I said grabbing her hand. “I’ve got to tell you about my trip to The Grand Canyon.”

“Oh! Two things before I go blank. One, I stopped by your apartment and got your keys. Two, do you remember Samantha McCourt, the woman I met in Washington D.C. a couple of years ago? She’s the one that offered me the scholarship to SOTA.”

“You’ve told me about her, yeah.”

“We got to know each other pretty good out here and she called yesterday to see how my move into the AAU dorm went. So we’re talkin’ and I tell her my best friend from the Bronx is movin’ out and that you’re some great photographer. She asked what you’ll be doin’ and I said you’ve got interviews lined up at The Pacific Review and The Foggy Bottom and get this, she’s friends with the editor at The Pacific Review! Ruth somethin’... They were sorority sisters at Berkeley.”

“Ruth Mizrachi! Are you serious? I’m interviewing with her next week!”

“I didn’t know who you talked with there but I asked Samantha to give you a boost no matter what. She said she’d be happy to. She just wants you to call her to talk for a minute.”

“Sure. I’ll have to thank her anyway,” I said, eager to make the call.

“We’ll use the phone upstairs.”

“Thanks so much, Lola. God, I’ve been here ten minutes and things are already going well. This must be the right move!”

After grabbing my stuff out of the car Lola and I headed up to her room, which looked like any dorm I’d seen on a TV.

“I haven’t done anythin’ with the place yet,” Lola said. “That’s why it’s got no spice. Here’s Samantha’s number. My savings account is on the floor in the closet,” she said, smiling and pointing to her change jar. “The phone’s down the hall.”

Lola was on her hands and knees shoving a box under her bed when I came back into her room a few minutes later. “How’d it go?” she asked.

“Samantha is so nice. And she sure does love you. She said if I’ve got half the talent as a photographer that you’ve got as an artist I’ll do great.”

“Don’t worry, you’re some kind of photographer,” Lola said as she stood up and wiped her hands. “Did she call that friend of hers yet?”

“No, she wanted to talk with me first. She’s calling tomorrow,” I said while drying the tears in my eyes.

“Jesus Candice, what’s the matter?”

“Nothing. I’m happy Lola. I’m so happy. I just got here and I already have all this good news thanks to you. I appreciate all you’ve done for me. I feel like my life is finally beginning.”

“It is, let me tell you. You’re gonna love it our here, Candice. I promise,” she said while giving me another hug.

“Lola, I know you wanted to drive around and that’s fine, but since you have my apartment keys do you mind if we stop there first? I’m dying to see what it looks like. After that I’m taking you to dinner. I’ve got all my savings from working at the bakery so let’s splurge. Anywhere you want to go. It’s my treat.”

“That’s easy, The Stinking Rose in North Beach,” she smiled. “You know what a garlic fetish I got and this place reeks of it. I just could never afford to eat there. I drooled over the menu in the window a zillion times though. They got this roasted garlic and anchovy appetizer I’m dyin’ to taste. People go nuts over their garlic meatloaf, too. They’ve even got garlic ice cream.”

“That sounds gross but get whatever you want.”

After taking a shower and calling Mom, Lola and I headed to my new apartment.

“I don’t know my way around by car too good,” Lola said as I pulled out of the parking space. “Usually I take the bus, or I just travel by foot.”

“That’s okay, we’ll find it. My apartment is on Pine Street, right?” I asked, merging into traffic.

“Yeah. It’s at the start of the Nob Hill district.”

“Nob Hill? Is that a nice area?”

“Oh yeah. Don’t get me wrong, you won’t find Mrs. Garrett livin’ there, but it’s nice. Just avoid goin’ downhill.”

“What do you mean, downhill?” I asked looking at her.

“The Tenderloin is down the hill from your apartment. It’s the worst neighborhood in the city. People’s incomes drop faster than the slope of the streets. And the crime rate goes up just as quick. Walk through there at night and all you’ll see are eyes and teeth. Make a left here on Van Ness,” she said pointing. “We’ll take that to Pine. I think that’s how the bus driver went yesterday.”

“You’re making me nervous, Lola. Is my apartment in a dangerous area?”

“No, it’s in a prime spot, Candice. Things change block to block around here. California Street is the next one up from your place and that’s where the Fairmont Hotel is. They serve afternoon tea. What’s that tell you?”

I didn’t know how to answer and just imagined having to walk by a bunch of weirdoes when I needed to go get milk.

“Do I keep going straight on this street?” I asked in a nervous voice.

“Yeah. Pine is up there somewhere. Come on, Candice. Get that scared look off your face. Aren’t you excited?” she asked, putting her hand on my shoulder.

“Yeah. But I’m anxious too, Lola. I just want everything to be nice and safe, you know?”

“Yeah, I know. And it is, don’t worry. Here, this is Pine! Make a right!”

“Here? At this corner?” I pointed.

“Yeah! Right now!”

I swung a quick right and started analyzing everything from the store fronts to the people walking by.

“The number is 515. There’s trees out front, that’s how I’ll know it. It’s the only building with trees.”

“Trees are good,” I said, trying to make myself feel better. “Is that it on the left?” I asked, feeling odd asking for directions on where I live.

“Yeah, that’s it! And look, there’s a spot out front. That means good luck.”

After trying four times to parallel park Lola said I finally got close enough to the curb. Then the two of us stepped onto the sidewalk and looked around.

It was nice. The street was quiet which seemed like a good thing to me.

”Welcome home Candice,” Lola said handing me the keys. “One unlocks the front door and the other is for your apartment. I didn’t get the mailbox key yet.”

After we stepped into the small lobby Lola pressed the button for the elevator.

“You’re on the fourth floor,” she said, nodding as if that was the right place to be. “Apartment 4G.”

We just smiled at each other while riding the elevator. Both of us were filled with nervous energy.

“Are you ready?” Lola asked after walking down the hall and stopping before a white door with the sign 4G nailed to it.

“I guess so,” I said, holding the keys in my hand. “But I’m not sure.”

“Well I’m ready,” Lola said, wrapping her arm around me. “I’ve been waiting all week for this. Now hurry up and open the door already!”

Sliding the key into the lock I turned it and pushed the door open. “Oh my God, Lola! What is this?”

“Welcome home, Candice,” she said with a huge smile.

“Where’d all this furniture come from?” I asked rushing inside. “There’s a couch, and a table! My God, there’s a bed in the bedroom!”

“Your mom and grandma bought it all. Checkout the kitchen,” she urged, eager for me to see it all.

“There are glasses, and look, forks and knives and spoons! There’s even a pack of paper towels! Now I know my grandma must’ve been involved. How’d they do all this?”

“I found some furniture stores and mailed them catalogs. They picked out the stuff and I was here when it was delivered on Monday, the day you left the Bronx. Your grandma must’ve asked me five times to make sure I bought you paper towels. I almost took a picture of them sitting on the counter just to shut her up. There’s a frying pan in the stove, too. I mean the oven. Dishes are in the cabinet.”

“I can’t believe all this. Wait a minute, wait” I said, noticing the lamp on the table next to the couch. “Is that that the lamp you told me about?”

“Yeah. That’s my gift to you. It’s one of the reasons I wanted you to get out here and not drive to The Grand Canyon. I couldn’t help but mention the lamp. I was so excited for you with all this stuff, Candice. You have some great family, you know that? I couldn’t wait for you to see what they did for you.”

“This is too much! Thank you Lola,” I said hugging her. “I have to call my mom and grandma and thank them, too. Is there a pay phone outside somewhere?”

“Pac Bell hooked up your phone yesterday. It’s in the kitchen.”

“You’re amazing,” I said shaking my head.

“And you haven’t even seen the hand towels hanging up in the bathroom yet,” she joked.

“I’ve got to call back home,” I said laughing.

“Wait, before you do, your mom asked me to give you this when you got here. She didn’t tell me what it was but she said you’ve known about it for years. Here,” Lola said, pulling a wrinkled envelope out of her back pocket and handing it to me.

“Oh my God, it’s the letter my grandpa wrote to me. He died just a few months before I was born.”

Taking the envelope I unsealed it and saw a hundred dollar bill flutter to the floor.

“Now I’m definitely gettin’ that garlic ice cream,” Lola said laughing.

“You can get whatever you want but I can’t spend this money. My mother told me my grandfather gave me a hundred dollars for college before he died. This is it, the exact hundred. Do you want to hear what he wrote?” I asked, taking the letter out of the envelope.

“You should read that alone, Candice. He meant it for you.”

“Yeah, but your my best friend and I want to share it with you, Lola.”

“All right,” she said, waiting for me to start.

After sitting on the couch I unfolded the single page and began reading.

“I wish I could talk with you my grandchild, and lay your tiny fingers in my hands. I wish I could hear you cry and sit with you in my rocking chair and feed you a warm bottle. Most of all though, I wish I could tell you I love you in person, but I’m so afraid I will never get that chance.

I’m sick as I write this letter. You, at the moment, are still unborn. I felt your kick when I laid my hand upon your mommy’s tummy. That may be the closest I come to touching you.

I don’t know your name or if you are a boy or a girl but I love you. I can’t help but feel any other way. They say that in heaven you’re able to see all things. I pray this is true, because if a place like that does exist I’ll spend all my time there watching over you. Of course, I’ll brag to all my heavenly friends about you.

For me the one good thing about getting old is sharing what I’ve learned, and this may be my only chance with you. Listen to your heart my grandchild, it knows what’s right. When at a crossroads imagine how you’d like to remember that moment and your choice will become clear. And try not to doubt yourself. It’s easier to see the potential in others than it is to recognize the possibilities in ourselves. We know our weaknesses and often use that to our disadvantage. These are things even a simple man like me has learned.

In closing, I want you to know I've lived with just a few regrets, the greatest being that I never looked you in the eyes and knew you were looking back at me. So please my grandchild, on the chance that I can see you, raise your chin and allow me to glimpse my reflection in you.

So long for now,

Grandpa

I collapsed against the couch crying and thinking about that picture of my grandpa in his Navy uniform which was sitting on Grandma's nightstand. Then I glanced out the window, wondering if he was out there somewhere, able to see his reflection in me. I've had my doubts about heaven but what if I was wrong? What if there really is such a place? What if my grandpa was the angel Dean saw that night? They share the same name. Maybe they're in heaven together now. God, I hope so.

"You okay, Candice?" Lola asked as she ripped off a sheet of paper towel and dried her eyes.

"You're crying, too?" I asked with smile.

"What do you want from me?" she said, laughing crumpling the paper in her hand. "That was some letter."

"It's dated January first, 1967. I guess he knew he would die that year, and that I would be born. Did I ever tell you that my brother Dean was named after my grandpa?"

"No. I never knew that," Lola said as she sat next to me.

"I miss my brother, Lola. I miss Dean," I said, crying into my hands and thinking about that night he begged me to fly with the angels.

"It's okay," Lola said hugging me. "Your brother and grandpa are probably hangin' out on some cloud like two stoop monkeys right now. I betcha they're thinkin' you should lighten up and take me out for garlic meatloaf after all I did for you this week."

"You're not supposed to make me laugh," I said holding her.

“Why not? After my father skipped town I got a piñata and dressed it in a wife- beater-T and put a picture of his face on it. My mother and her sister and me all whacked it with a broom stick. We laughed and felt a ton better. The same goes now. The two of us can have dinner at The Stinking Rose, or we can sit here fartin’ into these seat cushions.”

“That sounds terrible,” I said laughing.

“All right, then we’ll eat. But first call your mom and grandma and let ‘em know how much you love them and this furniture.”

“Okay,” I said pushing myself off the couch.

After six rings Grandma finally picked up. “Hello? Who’s there?”

“Hi Grandma, it’s me.”

“Candice? Is that you?”

“Yeah.” I said nodding.

“I was washin’ the dishes, honey. That’s why it took me so long to answer. This phone is a pain in my ass but now that I know it’s you I don’t mind. Where are you, honey? You sound so close.”

“I’m in my new apartment in San Francisco. That’s why I’m calling. I just saw the furniture you and Mom bought me. I love it! Thank you so much. I was so surprised.”

“Use it in good health, honey. Use it in good health. How’s it look? Nice I bet.”

“It looks great. The apartment is small so there’s not much room to move around but it’s nice.”

“That’s all right, too much space is no good anyway. Who needs it? Did Lola get you the paper towels?”

“Yes,” I said, looking at Lola and laughing. “She got me plenty of paper towels.”

“Good. I do what I can, honey. You always have a home here but I want you to be comfortable there, too.”

“I am Grandma. It would be great if you could visit me someday.”

“Send me pictures. I’ll put them on my bureau so I can see where you are.”

“Okay Grandma. Where’s Mom? I want to thank her, too.”

“She went to the market for milk and cheese but I’ll tell her you called.”

“Please thank her for me, Grandma. Lola and I are going to dinner and since it’s already late there I’ll call you both tomorrow. I love you!”

“I love you too, honey. Be safe.”

After hanging up I grabbed the keys as Lola walked into the hallway. With one hand on the doorknob I looked around and wiped my eyes. My grandpa's letter was sitting on the couch next to the money he gave me. Although we never met I felt like I knew him now. Maybe he was sitting on a cloud somewhere watching over me. And who knows, maybe Dean was, too.

Chapter Twenty Four

The noise from the garbage truck and the sound of metal trash cans cracking the street boomed through my window but I didn't care. The paranoid thoughts that came out of nowhere yesterday still had their claws in me. Rolling over on my pillow I checked the clock. It was 4:44 a.m. and I made a wish that things would go great on the two interviews I had today.

I was meeting Ruth Mizrachi at The Pacific Review at 10:00 and Russell Hughes from The Foggy Bottom at 2:00.

For some reason yesterday I got terrified about the holes in my resume and started having visions of serving omelets at Mel's Diner for a living. My fears turned the whole afternoon into one neurotic dress rehearsal. For hours I forced myself to stand in front of the bathroom mirror while I asked and answered questions and tried to decide which facial expressions made me look the most employable. After that I drove to both offices so I knew exactly where they were and wouldn't show up frazzled today.

Now I was curled up under the covers not knowing what to do. How can I kill the next three hours? I could call Grandma. It's almost 8:00 in the Bronx. There's The Depot, that bookstore and café next to The Pacific Review office I saw yesterday. I could sit there, but even that place probably doesn't open for a couple of hours, I thought while burying my face in the pillow and telling myself there was no way I'd ever fall back asleep.

"What the...?" The ringing phone startled me. "Who's calling at this hour?" I complained while tossing back the blanket and squinting in the sunlight streaming through the window. "It's 7:30! I don't remember falling back asleep! What happened to the stupid alarm?" I said swinging my legs out of bed and running to the phone.

"Hello," I answered with panting breaths.

"Rise and shine!"

"Daddy hi," I said, rubbing the crust from my eyes. "You know how I hate that saying."

“I’m sorry honey, but from your voice I could tell you just got up. I’m surprised. I figured you’d be anxious about the big interviews today.”

“I am. And don’t say big interviews. You’ll make me even more nervous.”

“You’ll be great, Candice. That’s why I’m calling. I just got back from a swim and wanted to wish you good luck.”

“Thanks, Daddy.”

“So how’s the apartment? I know we spoke the day after you moved in but it’s been what, five days now? Are you getting adjusted?”

“Yeah. Listen Daddy, I can’t talk now. My first interview isn’t until ten but I don’t know about the traffic so I need to get going.”

“All right. I’ll be rooting for you today, Candice. Call me tonight. I love you, honey.”

“Thanks Daddy. I love you, too.”

After hanging up I fought off my pajama bottoms, pulled the top over my head and dashed to the bathroom. While the water heated up I peed, brushed my teeth, and laid out my clothes on the bed which Lola helped me pick from all the combinations I had tried on for her two days ago. Beige pants, a black button down shirt and matching heels. I still don’t know why it took us two hours to choose something so basic.

Forty minutes later I was walking out the door as the phone rang. I knew it was Mom wishing me good luck but my heart was racing and my hands were full so I kept going.

“Of all days to park downhill why’d it have to be today?” I complained while gripping my heavy portfolio in one hand and my bag and leather folder with my resume and brand new pen in the other. I avoided eye contact with the bums while trying not to get my heels stuck in the metal grates on the sidewalk.

After tossing everything in the trunk I drove up Geary, made a right on Van Ness and then headed north over The Golden Gate Bridge where I felt as if I could breathe for the first time this morning.

“God I love it up here,” I sighed while pulling into Mill Valley’s storybook downtown area which was tucked away at the base of a mountain and nestled under a canopy of redwood trees. Boutique clothing stores, a gourmet cheese and wine market, cozy brick-walled restaurants and a cafe selling homemade pastries and fresh baked bread lined the quaint downtown street. Working here would be a dream, I thought as I smelled the crisp morning air and saw the fog clinging to the tree tops.

I parked and grabbed my portfolio before walking over to The Depot.

It was 8:55. I had one hour to try and relax before my interview. The day’s fresh from the oven sweet rolls and other Danish were written on a blackboard behind the counter. “Try One Before They’re Gone!” the sign read.

I ordered a toasted apple cinnamon muffin and cup of English breakfast tea before settling into a quiet corner table where I could get my thoughts together.

All around me people dressed in shorts and sneakers or sandals and sipped their coffee as if they didn’t have a worry in the world. I was envious. I just wanted to get the day over with so I knew how it ended.

A man took a seat next to me with his cup of coffee and a fresh copy of The Pacific Review.

I walked over to the tiny bookstore section of the café where local authors’ photos hung on the walls and customers sipped from their mugs while browsing the shelves. A large stack of The Pacific Review stood on the floor next to the magazine rack so I grabbed the top copy then nudged back into my corner table and began flipping the crisp pages and checking my watch.

I could’ve sat in that cozy spot all day reading the paper and inhaling the aroma of freshly brewed coffee but at 9:50 I got up and walked next door to 342 Bridgeway and checked the directory. The office was on the second floor.

After taking the stairs I found the door and read a sign which instructed visitors to press the buzzer. I did, and a moment later a man who couldn’t have been much older than me

answered wearing jeans and a wrinkled T-shirt that read, Always Remember You're Unique...Just Like Everyone Else.

“Hi, I’m Candice Morgan. I’m here for an interview with Ruth Mizrachi,” I said, holding my portfolio in my left hand.

“Yeah, you look it. Come have a seat,” he offered, pointing to a single chair.

“Thank you,” I replied as I walked inside. “What’s your name, by the way?”

“Ricky. I write the Op-Ed page, among other things. I’ll tell Ruth you’re here.”

“Is it that time already?” I heard a woman say a moment later. “Show her to the conference room. And Ricky, put the thermostat back on seventy two. It’s a never ending tug of war with that thing.”

“Beth moved it again. Her feet get cold in those Birkenstocks.”

“I know. She looks like Peppermint Patty with those ugly sandals on. And what does she have against socks? I’m sitting over here.”

Ricky came around the corner aware I could hear everything.

“Nice shoes,” he said, smiling and pointing at my heels. “Don’t worry, Ruth’s not as mean as she sounds. Come on, the conference room’s down the hall.”

“How long have you worked here?” I asked while following him and glancing into the offices we walked by.

“Two years. I’m paying my dues like everyone here. My goal is the LA Times but that’s a stretch. I’ll graduate to The Sacramento Bee or Oakland Trib in the next year or two then move up from there. Good luck.”

“Thank you,” I said while laying my portfolio on the coffee-stained table.

Archived issues of The Pacific Review were piled on metal shelves against the wall and a huge July calendar with notes scribbled in each box was thumb tacked to the wall.

“Okay,” a woman sighed as she marched in wearing a white button shirt and blue pants.

“I’m Ruth Mizrachi and you are...?”

“Candice Morgan,” I said, trying to appear confident with the easy questions.

“It’s nice meeting you Candice,” she said, laying her eye glasses on the table then adjusting her pinned back red hair. “So tell me about yourself. Why are you qualified to be the next photographer at The Pacific Review?”

“I um...I’ve been a photographer for the past five years and have a great eye for capturing the truth in a picture. I just moved here from New York but I’ve read a few issues of the paper and feel that my style of photography will compliment the candidness of the writing and the attitude of The Pacific Review overall.” Good answer, I thought.

“How old are you, Candice?”

“Eighteen,” I said, nervous about that question.

“So your experience is limited to what, school competitions and a part time job at Crazy Eddie’s?”

“Well I...” Didn’t your friend Samantha call you about me? I wanted to ask. “My resume is here,” I said, reaching for my leather folder.

“Resumes are a means of exaggeration. The truth lies in the photographs. Anyway, my assistant Maggie screens the applicants and I meet with whomever she feels is qualified. She must have felt you were. So you’re eighteen and moved out here with the hopes of what, landing a job as a photographer at a paper like this?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve got gumption, I’ll give you that,” she nodded. “Why is your name ringing a bell with me?”

“Samantha McCourt, your sorority sister from Berkeley called you about me. She offered my friend Lola a scholarship to the -”

“Right, okay. Sam and I spoke the other day. She went on about your friend. Is this your portfolio?”

“Yes,” I said, opening it for her.

“These are impressive,” she said flipping the pages. “I see you like candid shots.”

“I think people are more honest when they don’t know their picture is being taken.”

“But a good photographer relaxes his subjects, getting them to look honest even while posing. Agreed?”

“Yes I do,” I said, eager to share her opinion.

“I founded this paper six years after graduating from Berkeley with a degree in journalism. I cut my teeth as a beat reporter for The San Francisco Examiner but that paper ignored The North Bay, which is this area all the way up to Sonoma County. I never intended this to be a headline paper, Candice. We don’t break news like the dailies. We can’t since we’re weekly, but that doesn’t mean we’re not news driven. We covered the recall election to unseat San Francisco mayor Diane Feinstein and we have a weekly political section called Chalk Talk. But our emphasis is on riveting human interest stories that get buried deep in the dailies, if they get any ink at all. We’ve also got The Signature, our weekly interview which profiles unique personalities living in The Bay Area. Some are famous; we interviewed David Cassidy a few months ago. You know, Keith Partridge.”

“I heard he lives in Pacific Heights.”

“Yes. We’ve also featured Carl Djerassi who invented the birth control pill, and Gerry Thomas who worked for Swanson Foods and created the original TV dinner. Strangely enough they both live over in Sausalito. Last month we interviewed the singer Huey Lewis, who is a Bay Area native. His music is featured in Back to the Future, which is the number one movie at the box office right now. Since our paper is free its exclusives like that which keep our boxes on the street empty and our ad rates high. Right now we’re working on getting a phone interview with Robert Redford. He founded the Sundance Institute which hosts programs for independent filmmakers. He’s also taking over a tiny film festival in Utah with plans to turn it into the premiere venue for young movie makers to get exposure. I know someone who knows someone close to him.”

“I drove through Utah on my way out here. That would be amazing to get him.”

“Yes it would. So that’s the gist of what we do here. Any questions?”

“On the staff page inside the paper I saw that Mandy Stewart is the current photographer. Can you tell me why she’s leaving and what you like most about her?”

“Mandy’s taking a job at the Peninsula Beacon News in San Diego. She did great work and always respected my time and our deadlines. That’s what I’m looking for in her replacement. Our latest issue hits the streets every Wednesday. Some stories are in the can a week or two in advance. Others are being proofed minutes before press time on Tuesday nights. The same goes with the pictures accompanying the articles. I hate using stock photos and with our weather being so unpredictable outside shoots demand flexibility. There are six full time writers and the photographer shoots for each of their pieces, including the cover. The position offers one week’s paid vacation the first year and benefits after ninety days. The salary is \$18,000. Today’s Wednesday. Our latest edition came out this morning. Have you seen it?”

“Yes. I was reading it at The Depot a little while ago. I thought the interview with Philo Farnsworth was great. Everyone has a TV, but reading about the man who invented it was fascinating.”

“We interview a lot of inventors. Northern California is fertile ground for creative types. You are one of my last interviews so I’ll make a decision by Friday and want whoever I choose to come in next week to meet the staff, get familiar with the equipment and start going on assignments with Mandy.”

“I love photography, Ms. Mizrachi. And if you decide to give me this opportunity I promise I’ll do my best to prove that you made the right choice. I’m excited to be in San Francisco and am hoping to find a position where I can fit in, meet interesting people and be challenged to do my best work. I think this is it.”

She nodded and glanced at her watch.

“Thanks for coming, Candice. One way or the other you’ll get a call on Friday.”

I walked out not knowing how to feel and wished I could go back to that cozy corner table in The Depot to hide and think, but I had to get to my interview at The Foggy Bottom.

After driving south over The Golden Gate Bridge I parked a few blocks from my apartment since downtown was so crowded. Lugging my portfolio the rest of the way I found The Foggy Bottom office on Battery Street and went straight to ladies room in the lobby to fix my hair and makeup.

At 1:55 I walked in the door and knew right away it wasn't for me.

Russell Hughes who interviewed me was some fat guy who ate his lunch during our meeting.

"I hope you don't mind," he said while chewing his In-N-Out burger. "It's the first thing I've eaten all day."

"That's okay," I said, watching as he dipped his hamburger in a glob of ketchup.

"So your pictures are first-rate. Yeah, they're not bad, but this job takes more than a good eye."

"Can you be more specific?" I asked while folding my hands in my lap.

"The job requires taking photos at the PSE, that's the Pacific Stock Exchange. The other biggie is taking portraits of investment bankers for the articles we run, and making them look good. I-bankers are fierce competitors and use looks and money as the yardstick for who's winning. The trick is some of these guys are butt-ugly. If they go to a proctologist there's a fifty-fifty chance the doc will stick his finger in their mouths by mistake. Looks aside though, they've got egos that'd make Castro blush. After seeing those initial shots you sent in I figured why not have you down, but the fact is I can't send you into that snake pit. You're just a kid. Do you even know what an I-banker does?"

The interview didn't last long. Rushing out of the building I was so upset I went straight to the phone booth on the corner and called Mom.

“Yes, of course I’ll accept the charges,” I heard her tell the operator. “Candice what’s the matter? Why are you calling me collect?”

“I’m scared Mom!” I said hiding my face in the corner. “I don’t know what I’m doing. I feel like this place is going to swallow me up.”

“Where are you?” she asked.

I heard the nervousness in her voice and felt so bad for putting her through this.

“Candice, where are you?”

“I’m on a sidewalk in downtown San Francisco surrounded by people with places to be. I just left this interview and didn’t know where to go so I called,” I said, hoping the people passing wouldn’t see the tears in my eyes.

“Which interview?”

“The Foggy Bottom. The funny thing is I didn’t even want the job. I just wanted them to want me, but they didn’t. I wasn’t even considered, Mom.”

“Rejection is part of the process, Candice. At least the feeling was mutual,” she said, trying to make me feel better. “What happened at the other interview? Did Lola’s old teacher call that Ruth person?”

“Yeah. The interview went okay, but who knows. I’d love to work there though. It seems like a great paper and their office is in this little town north of the city that looks like something out of Hansel and Gretel.”

“Well I hope you get it.”

“She’ll make her decision by Friday. I guess I’ll look for some other jobs in the meantime.”

“You don’t have a choice Candice, but keep your chin up. I’ve got a customer and then I’m going to lock up so let me go. I’ll call you tonight.”

The cable cars were running up and down California Street so after hanging up with Mom I dragged my portfolio onto one and felt better the second I sat down. I’ll be okay I said to

myself as the conductor jerked the gears and we climbed the steep hills of California Street. Look where I am, I thought, staring at the busy sidewalks, the massive office buildings and the fancy restaurants with their white table cloths. But a part of me felt so insignificant too, as if I wasn't even relevant in a place as elegant and important as this.

After getting home I got undressed and crawled under the covers.

Hours later the ringing phone woke me up.

"Hello," I said after stumbling to the kitchen in my underpants.

"Jesus Christ, I finally get a hold of you! Where you been?" Lola asked.

"I fell asleep. What time is it?"

"6:30. So tell me, what happened?"

"Not much, Lola. I watched a fat slob at The Foggy Bottom tell me I was unqualified for the job while he devoured his In-N-Out burger."

"Don't knock him for that, Candice," Lola laughed. "Those burgers put White Castles to shame. What about The Pacific Review? Did Samantha talk with that Ruth woman or what?"

"Yeah, they talked. I think it went okay but who knows. She's making her decision Friday."

"All right. There you go. Now come pick me up. Let's do somethin'."

"Like what?" I asked, not in the mood to go anywhere.

"You feel like gettin' a gyro? There's this place in Haight-Ashbury that makes the best ones. We can laugh at all the dirtbags hangin' around the used record stores up there, too."

"No, I really don't feel like it Lola," I said, turning on the faucet and wetting my face with cold water.

"Then let's go to the movies. The Breakfast Club is playin' in that theatre on Chestnut. You can't leave me flat, Candice. And you can't sit around your apartment. You don't even have TV."

"I might just get a newspaper and look through the classifieds."

“I bet if Eric called you’d go out. Hey, I never asked but were you shaved to hook? You’d been on the road a few days by then, right?”

“My legs were fine Lola,” I said laughing at her. “They may have been a little prickly but whatever. I’ve got to call my father so let’s talk tomorrow. Okay?”

“All right, but call me if you think twice.”

“I will. Thanks Lola.”

After hanging up I put on a pair of jeans then went for the paper and picked up some chicken lo mein from Brandy Ho’s. Back at my apartment I stood at the counter pulling noodles from the carton and scanning the classifieds. Worst case I can find something at a camera store, I told myself. It may not pay much but at least I’ll be talking about photography.

I tried Daddy at the restaurant but he’d already left. I didn’t realize it was almost midnight there. I should go pick up Lola, I told myself. I’m not hungry but I can watch her eat. Just as I grabbed the phone there was a knock at my door.

“Who’s there?” I asked, feeling my heart suddenly racing.

“Mrs. Garrett. Now come on Blair, let me in.”

“Lola! What are you doing here?” I asked opening the door.

“I’m takin’ you to The Fairmont Hotel.”

“What? Why?”

“After we hung up I spent ten minutes tryin’ to get a hair off my tongue and all I could think about was you sittin’ around like a bump on a log. Now come on, get your jacket.”

“But The Fairmont is so fancy.”

“That’s why we’re goin’. We’ll sit on those first class chairs in the lobby and look like somebodies.”

“All right!” I said laughing. “I love you, Lola. You’re the best!”

Ten minutes later we were walking past the shiny black limousines parked in front of the hotel.

“Hard to believe that five blocks downhill they’re cashin’ welfare checks, isn’t it?” Lola said as the doorman welcomed us to The Fairmont and we walked into the extravagant lobby decorated with gold marble columns and oriental rugs.

Lola and I found an empty sitting area and started people-watching and guessing what they did for a living.

“I betcha that guy’s a stand-in for Larry Hagman on Dallas,” Lola said laughing. “Look at him. He’s a dead ringer for J.R. Ewing.”

“I never watched, Dallas. I loved him in I Dream of Jeannie, though.”

“Hey, does a stand-in have to be naked if they’re standin’ in for actors doin’ nude scenes?”

“I’ve got no idea but that’s a great question, Lola. I’m so glad you came over. This is so much fun and it’s not costing a dime.”

“I know, but don’t we look uptown? Hey, check out this stooge,” she said pointing to a man walking through the lobby. “Is he the tallest midget you’ve ever seen or what?”

“Keep your voice down,” I said cracking up. “Maybe he’s just a really short regular person.”

“No way. Check out those stubby fingers and that waddle. Those are the marks of a midget. I know. My mom used to work with one at the nursing home. Mr. McGee, was his name. The sad sack was bald, too. He overdosed on Propecia pills and went belly up right as The Lawrence Welk Anniversary show was startin’. My mother said those old timers were sick to their stomachs. They loved that Lawrence Welk.”

Lola kept me entertained as we people-watched at The Fairmont for almost three hours and walked back to my apartment around midnight.

“By the way, I’m sleepin’ over,” Lola said as we got to my door. “Maybe tomorrow mornin’ we can go for fried eggs.”

“Okay, whatever you want. Lola, thanks so much for coming over tonight,” I said while hugging her. “I needed your company more than I realized.”

“That’s why I came,” she smiled. “It’s you and me, Candice. We’re like peanut butter and jelly. Now hurry up and open the door,” she said rubbing her arms. “It’s freezing out here.”

We ended up sleeping ‘til almost 11:00. Lola was starving when we got up so she went for a buttered roll while I took a shower.

As I was wrapping my hair in a towel the phone started ringing so I walked over knowing it was Mom.

“Hello.”

“Hi, is this Candice?”

“Yes.”

“Candice, its Ruth Mizrachi from The Pacific Review. I wasn’t planning on making any calls today but I’ve made my decision. I’d like to offer you the position as our staff photographer.”

“Oh my God! Are you serious? I mean, I know you are I just...! Ms. Mizrachi I'm so excited you have no idea! This is the greatest news! I promise I'll work so hard for you!”

“I know you will, Candice. We run a pioneering paper and I look for that spirit in the people who work for me. I thought your portfolio was very good but what separated you from the others was the chutzpah you showed in driving cross-country in search of something new. I need that attitude in my photographer, someone willing to take risks with the lens. Sam McCourt is a dear friend of mine and her recommendation didn’t hurt either.”

“Thank you so much Ms. Mizrachi.”

“Call me Ruth, Candice.”

“Okay. Thank you, Ruth! This is great! I’ve got goosebumps I’m so excited. So what’s next?” I asked, unable to stoop bouncing up and down in my kitchen.

“Come in Monday at eight. You’ll meet the staff and spend the day with Mandy on her assignment in Napa. For our July thirty first issue we’re doing a cover story on Victor Throckmorton, a businessman and restaurateur who sold Admiral Jack’s, his seafood restaurant in Cape Cod and bought two hundred acres in the Napa Valley four years ago. His winery, Sans Pareil, which is French for ‘without parallel,’ has produced its first yield and they begin harvesting next week. Mandy will be taking photos for the article and the cover and I want you to watch her operate. You’ll spend the first two weeks shadowing her then you’re on your own.”

“That sounds fantastic! Thank you again, Ruth. I look forward to seeing you and meeting everyone on Monday!”

Just as I hung up Lola came through the door.

“Lola, I got the job at The Pacific Review!” I yelled hurrying towards her.

“What? Just now? I went out for a buttered roll ten minutes ago.”

“Ruth Mizrachi called and offered me the position. We just hung up. I’ve got to thank you, too! The recommendation from Samantha helped a lot. I’m in a great mood! Let’s do something! How about we take the ferry over to Sausalito?”

“Forget that. Tomorrow I got this meeting at school but today I’m wide open. Let’s drive to Carmel. Its two hours away but they got this bakery that sells pretzels that are as good as the ones you get from the pushcarts in New York.”

“Two hours for pretzels? Okay, let’s do it! I’ve just got to call my parents and tell them the news.”

“Flowers on Tremont,” Mom said as she picked up.

“Mom, it’s me! I got the job at The Pacific Review!”

“What? Candice, are you kidding? You got the job?”

“Yeah!” I said smiling from ear to ear.

“That’s fantastic! She got the job!” I heard her say to someone. “When did you hear this?”

“Five minutes ago. Who are you talking to?”

“Grandma’s here. So tell me what happened!”

“Ruth Mizrachi offered me the position. I start on Monday. I’m so excited, Mom! Put Grandma on the phone.”

“Candice, it’s me, Grandma. I heard everythin’ honey. I’m so happy. You should be proud, Candice. You done good. We love you back here!”

“Thanks Grandma. I love you, too!”

After talking with Mom I dialed Daddy and shared the great news.

“You’ve got to send me a copy of your first issue!” he said. “I’ll frame it and hang it on the wall. I’m so excited for you honey! You went after what you wanted and got it. There’s nothing better.”

“Thanks Daddy. I can’t wait to get started. The woman who hired me said it was my chutzpah that did it. Can you believe that?”

“Yes I can,” he laughed. “It takes spunk to move out there like you did.”

“She must think so. I’ve got to go but let’s talk over the weekend. I love you, Daddy!”

“I love you too, Candice.”

Lola and I drove to Monterey then Carmel and Big Sur. She got her pretzel with mustard and I don’t know if it was sitting on the white sand beach in Carmel or knowing I got the job, but I had the best chicken salad sandwich I ever tasted.

After dropping Lola off late that night I was happy to find a parking spot a few doors down from my building. Once I got upstairs and everything was quiet I took a moment for myself. I felt so proud. The only problem I had now was making it through the weekend. I was so excited I didn’t know how I would do it. But then I came up with the perfect idea. I’d go sightseeing in my new city. Maybe I’d even do a little shopping too, and treat myself to something special.

Chapter Twenty Five

Ruth told me to be at the office at 8:00 Monday morning but I got to Mill Valley at 6:45 and went straight to The Depot for a toasted blueberry muffin and glass of orange juice.

Although I was a little nervous, it felt great sitting there reading the paper knowing that I had the job. They were baking croissants too, which was such a comfort to me. I recognized the buttery smell drifting from the kitchen and thought of Grandma. Then I looked around at the regulars eating their pastries and drinking their coffee and thought, maybe I'll become a regular, too. This could be my new morning tradition. I took a bite of my muffin and felt as if I was home.

At 7:50 I walked over to The Pacific Review and lost all track of time. Ruth introduced me to the staff and most importantly, to Mandy. Later that morning the two of us left for Napa to photograph Victor Throckmorton at his Sans Pareil Vineyard.

"Not all the shoots are this picturesque," Mandy said as we stood at the peak of a hillside vineyard overlooking the acres of vines below.

"I didn't think so," I said laughing as I stared down at the hundreds of rows of leafy green vines, amazed at how precisely each one had been planted.

"That's Robert Mondavi's vineyard to our left," Mandy said, pointing to a beige stucco building with a Spanish tiled roof. Thousands of rows of vines spread away from it in every direction. "Beringer is up in St. Helena, just north of here a bit," she continued, while inspecting the camera equipment. "I did a shoot there last year. They've got a great wine tour. V. Sattui is my favorite though, and it's just up Highway 29. My boyfriend and I go there at least one Saturday a month. We'll get a bottle of their Petite Syrah, some goat cheese and a fresh baguette then sit under a tree and make an afternoon of it."

I stared at her smiling. It sounded so romantic, except for the goat cheese. I didn't know if I'd like that stuff. For me it was still settling in that I was making a life for myself in a place as beautiful as this. It must've been how Daddy felt when he first got to Florida.

I stayed close to Mandy throughout the morning but was conscious not to get in her way. When she asked me for something though, I jumped right to it.

She started by photographing Mr. Throckmorton crouching over in the sunshine while holding a plump cluster of cabernet grapes still hanging on the vine. After that we walked into his wine cellar which he said was actually a cave that had been carved into the side of the mountain by Chinese immigrants back in the late 1800's. The entryway was a massive wall of stone blocks which were each over one foot thick. Only a few dim lights burned inside the cellar and the temperature dropped over twenty degrees. As Mandy took out her flash and began photographing Mr. Throckmorton standing beside the giant oak barrels I couldn't help but think of Eric. I wondered what he was doing, and if he had thought of me since our night in Utah.

For the final shoot we took pictures of Mr. Throckmorton posing in the colorful tasting garden where the wine tours ended and visitors purchased their own bottles.

Over the next two weeks I followed Mandy and the different writers to Korbel Champagne Cellars, San Francisco City Hall, the grand opening of The Fog City Diner, and to KGO radio where we photographed Ron Owens, their mid-morning talk show host.

Monday, August fifth was the first day on my own. I was so anxious to start I got to the office at 7:00 and went straight to the darkroom on the first floor to begin developing the four dozen rolls of film Ruth needed for next week's edition. The latest issue with the cover story of Victor Throckmorton had been on the newsstands since last Wednesday. Even though I was allowed to take a few copies from our office I visited City Lights Bookstore over the weekend and had tears in my eyes while taking one copy each for Mom, Dad and Grandma. I felt so proud I asked a cashier for a pen and circled my name which appeared on the staff page, right under Mandy's.

I had been working alone in the darkroom for a couple of hours when there was a sudden knock at the door.

"Ruth?" I asked while placing a photo in developing solution. "Is that you?"

“No, it’s an old friend,” the voice said.

“Oh my God,” I whispered, feeling my heart thumping in my chest “Hold on, I’ve got film in here.”

After fumbling around for a minute I turned on the safe light and rubbed away my goosebumps before opening the door. The stinging hallway glare blinded me but there was no denying it. He stood there smiling.

“Hi Candice,” he said with his hands stuffed casually in his pockets.

“Eric. What are you doing here?”

“It’s good to see you,” he said, running his fingers through his hair now.

“What are you doing here, Eric? How’d you even find me?” I asked, nervously swaying the door back and forth.

“Aren’t you happy to see me?” he replied with a hint of sarcasm.

“How’d you find me in this tiny dark room? This can’t be another coincidence like at The Grand Canyon.”

“Remember I told you my folks owned that wine bodega in Provincetown?”

“The Corkscrew,” I said.

“That’s right,” he smiled. “When Victor Throckmorton owned Admiral Jack’s on The Cape he bought all his wine from my father. They’re great friends. And when Victor sold his restaurant and started Sans Pareil in Napa, my father helped him.”

“So you saw the paper.”

“Yeah. Victor’s son Tommy and I have been friends for years. I was over their house this weekend. I couldn’t believe it when I spotted your name on that staff page. I’m driving back to Palo Alto now but nothing was going to stop me from seeing you. Some girl in the office upstairs told me you were down here.”

I watched his lips move as he spoke and remembered him kissing me back in Utah.

“Take a break. I’ll buy you an iced tea at that place The Depot next door.”

“I can’t. I’ve got to finish my work,” I said, pointing over my shoulder.

“So let’s talk while you finish,” he said, stepping forward.

“No,” I urged, putting out my hand. “I don’t want my boss seeing you here.”

“All right, then visit Alcatraz with me this Saturday.”

“I can’t. I’m busy.”

“You ducked out on me in Utah but you’re not getting away that easy this time, Candice,” he said, jokingly wagging his finger. “Alcatraz has a fantastic tour. And you can take great pictures of the city from out there, too.”

“You have to leave, Eric. I just got this job so don’t get me in trouble. Okay?” I said, trying not to smile at him. “Now get out of here,” I laughed.

“So I’ll stop by Fisherman’s Wharf and get the tickets. 11:00 on Saturday works for you, right?”

“Go Eric,” I laughed again, pushing him away.

That night I called Lola to tell her my news.

“You got a tailgater on your hands, Candice! Maybe it was smart leavin’ him flat that night. Now he’s got a real appetite for you. How’d he look?”

“Great. Do you think it’s romantic? I need a second opinion because he looked so good.”

“Oh yeah, there’s nothin’ sexier than bein’ pursued.”

“He said he was buying tickets to Alcatraz for eleven o’clock on Saturday. Should I go meet him? What if I look too needy? And what if he doesn’t show up? That’ll be even worse!”

“Quit turnin’ those butterflies into agita, Candice. You’ll talk this week and work it all out.”

“How? I don’t have his number.”

“This Casanova tracked you down at The Grand Canyon then found you in some dark room that’s probably no bigger than a church confessional. He’s got a knack for findin’ you, Candice. Plus he knows where you work. Did you look happy when you saw him or what?”

“Yeah, after the shock wore off. I laughed a little bit, too.”

“Then he knows you like him. Plus he’s already seduced you. That’s a dead giveaway right there. Go to Alcatraz and raise a smile with him. And make him buy you lunch on the wharf, too. If nothin’ else you could say you visited Alcatraz and ate clam chowder from a sour dough bread bowl. Jesus, is it half past seven? I’m sorry Candice but I gotta run. I’m meetin’ some people about a mural we’re doin’ for this restaurant Moose’s that’s openin’ in North Beach. Let’s pick this up tomorrow.”

“Okay Lola. Goodnight.”

Eric called me at work on Wednesday, just like Lola said he would. He made me laugh. He made me feel significant.

On Saturday morning we met at Fisherman’s’ Wharf. It was cold outside but he brought raspberry croissants and coffee, which we enjoyed while standing on the deck during the ferry ride.

Alcatraz was shrouded in a soupy gray fog but the jagged concrete and rusted guard towers came into view as we neared the island. The freezing water splashing on the rocks added to the ominous feel of this place.

“The fog will burn off,” Eric said, looking back at the city. “I promised you’d get some great shots from out here, and you will,” he smiled while winking at me. “Come on Candice,” he said as the boat docked. “Let’s walk the plank.”

I laughed and took his hand as he helped me down the metal platform and up a steep hill towards the main cell block at the top of the island.

At the entrance we were given headsets used to guide us along the walking tour. Three stories of six by eight foot cells barricaded with iron bars stood eerily before us. Everything felt

so menacing. The smell of the salt air mixed with the musty odor of the cold concrete. Each cell had a small bed chained to the wall with a giant staple, a tiny sink, and a steel toilet, all of which were covered with dirt and chips of cinderblock from the decaying walls. I tried imagining what it must've been like as a prisoner here but then I put the headset on and let the narrator take me back in time.

He posed as a former inmate and spoke about living with Al Capone and Machine Gun Kelly. He described how maddening it was spending twenty three hours a day confined to a six by eight foot cell while knowing that San Francisco was within swimming distance. Sound effects of metal bars slamming shut and men taunting each other were added for realism. Eric and I smiled at each other as we walked along, but didn't utter a sound.

The tour led us through the cafeteria where rows of dented metal tables were bolted to the floor. The narrator then guided us out to the exercise yard where the wind gusts knocked me back a step and right into Eric's arms.

We both laughed and that's when I spotted a beautiful island just north of us.

"What's that called?" I asked Eric after taking off my headset and pointing.

"That's Angel Island. It's a national park," he said, walking me over to a fence surrounding the exercise yard.

"Did you say Angel Island?" I replied, unable to look away.

It looked so peaceful. Narrow dirt trails weaved through the green bushes and trees towards the top of the island. Looping my hands through the wire fence I tried holding back my tears. Maybe I was searching for a sign where there wasn't one but I couldn't help but think of Dean. He begged to fly with those angels and I was the one who set him free. Had we both found homes here? I wondered.

"Candice, what's wrong?" Eric asked, laying his hand on mine.

"Why is it called Angel Island?" I replied, ignoring his question.

From an aerial view it looks as if it's spreading through the water in the shape of an angel. I've hiked to the top a few times. There's a great view from up there."

I didn't want him to see my crying so I turned and distracted myself by looking at the other tourists pointing at things that caught their attention.

"Come on," I said, taking his hand. "The fog is starting to burn off. I want to get some pictures of the city skyline."

I let Eric stay over that night but I didn't sleep with him. I just wanted him to hold me and he did. The next morning we had eggs and toast which I made for us, then we spent the day riding the cable cars and sitting at Baker Beach watching the waves crashing over the rocks.

On Monday morning I was at my desk digging a stubborn poppy seed from my teeth before my 10:00 meeting with Ruth when the phone rang.

"I just got asked back for a second interview with this public relations firm Boozer & Bock!" Mom shouted as I picked up. "I'm so excited I had to share the news!"

"What? Mom, slow down," I said, sitting up in my chair. "What job are you talking about?"

"Boozer & Bock. They're a PR firm in New London, Connecticut."

"You're going back for a second interview? When was the first one?"

"Last week. I've been on a lot of first interviews and some of them weren't worth mentioning, Candice. But since these people called me back I had to tell you!"

"Well congratulations! It sounds great."

"Don't congratulate me yet. I don't want to jinx it. My interview is at nine tomorrow morning. I need you to keep good thoughts for me, Candice. I think this might be it."

"I will. Mom, let me call you tonight though, okay? It's almost ten o'clock here and I've got a meeting with Ruth in five minutes."

After hanging up I ran to bathroom, dug that poppy seed out from my teeth and hurried to Ruth's office because I knew how she was about time.

“You’re not afraid of heights, are you Candice?” she asked as I sat down.

“Heights? No, why?”

“Our annual tourism issue is coming up and our cover will feature a view from the top of the south tower of The Golden Gate Bridge.”

“The south tower, what do you mean?” I asked leaning forward in my seat.

“You’re familiar with the two towers of the bridge, of course.”

“Yeah, I couldn’t stop staring at them when I first drove into town.”

“Well now you’ll be going to the top of the one nearest the city. I’d love to go since the view will be spectacular but I’ve got a meeting with Birkenstock next Monday. I despise their shoes but I can’t bite the hand that feeds. Mike Andrews works for Golden Gate Security and will be taking you up. I just hope the weather cooperates because we’ve only got one shot at this and I’d hate to use stock photos.”

“I can’t believe I’ll be at the top of the tower!” I said raising my hands in the air and smiling. “This is incredible! I didn’t even now there was a way to get up there.”

“You’ll have bragging rights for sure,” Ruth said as she picked up her phone, which was my cue to get going.

The next few days were busy with assignments but I couldn’t get Mom out of my mind. She’s been more determined than ever to find a good job and start the next phase of her life and I wished someone would give her that chance. She said the second interview at that place Boozer & Bock went well but had no idea where things stood. I wished they would make up their minds already.

On Wednesday afternoon Eric called saying that he had to come up because he couldn’t wait any longer to see me. Hearing that gave me chills but I had to photograph the grand opening of Harry Denton’s Starlight Room in the Sir Francis Drake Hotel that night so I told him we’d have to wait until Sunday to see each other.

Lola and I had already made plans to do breakfast at Mama's in North Beach on Saturday then stop by an art festival in Union Square where Academy of Art University alumni were showing their work.

"Did your Mom hear about that job yet?" Lola asked when we spoke Friday night.

"No. I wish those jerks would make a decision already. Even if they told her no it beats leaving her hanging like this."

"Don't worry, Candice. Your mom's a cher. She's got the sass and the smarts. If she doesn't get this job she'll find somethin' soon. What's goin' on with Eric?"

"He's coming on Sunday," I said smiling. "Lola, my hands get tingly just thinking about him!"

"Someone's gonna get laaaaid!"

"Shut up," I said laughing. "It only happened that one night in Utah and you said yourself it was a fantasy come true."

"It was. You know I get those cold sores once in a blue moon, right? Herpes or not, nothin' could've kept my clothes on that night. Someone's knockin' on my door, Candice. I'll come by your place tomorrow around what, eleven?"

"Okay. It'll be great to see you, Lola."

"Yeah it will. See ya, Candice."

I was tired from the week and planned on going to bed early but Eric called at 9:30 and we ended up talking until almost 1:00. It was one of those conversations that I never wanted to end but since I knew he wouldn't do it, I had to cut us both off.

The next morning I got up just before 10:00 and jumped in the shower. As I was drying my hair I heard Lola knocking on my door.

"God, you're early," I said while tightening the towel around my chest and swinging the door open.

"Hi Candice!"

“Mom! Oh my God!” I screamed, jumping up and down in the doorway then catching my towel just before it fell off. “What are you doing here?” I shouted.

“I missed you,” she said, jokingly shrugging her shoulders

“This is incredible!” I yelled hugging her. “I can’t believe it! Come in! Come in!” I said waving her inside. “I’m shocked!”

“I thought you might be,” she said with a giant smile.

“When did you get here?”

“Just now,” she said holding up her bag. “I took one of those shuttle vans from the airport.”

“Mom, this is unreal! I mean, I’m amazed that you’re actually standing in my apartment! I thought you were Lola but then I opened the door and got the surprise of my life!”

“I know. Maybe you and I will go out to breakfast instead of you and her.”

“What? How’d you know Lola and I had breakfast plans? Did I mention it?”

“No. Lola helped me arrange this whole thing. She’ll be busy volunteering at some art festival all day but made plans with you so we knew you’d be home. I didn’t want to fly three thousand miles and have to sit on your front step like those whatever you call them back in the Bronx. Oh, and the best part is I got the job at Boozer & Bock! I start a week from Monday! That’s the other reason I wanted to come see you.”

“You got the job!” I replied with my hands out. “When did you find this out?”

“On Wednesday. I was dying to tell you but Grandma said I should keep the job and my trip a surprise. I hope that was okay.”

“Yeah, it’s fine. I just can’t believe you’re here! Let me throw on a pair of jeans and a shirt real quick. Look around. Do you want something to drink? Sit on the furniture you bought me. It’s so comfortable.”

“I love your place,” Mom called out as I got changed in my bedroom.

“It’s cozy right?” I shouted back through the wall. “I know its small but when I open the door after being gone all day it feels like home, thanks to you and Grandma.”

“The two of us had fun picking out the furniture for you, Candice.”

“Okay, I’m ready,” I said stepping back out into the living room.

Mom was staring out the window and soaking in my view. It wasn’t much, just the street and other apartments but it was mine, and I was happy she was seeing it.

Twenty minutes later we were sitting at Mama’s eating banana bread French toast while I asked her a million questions about her job.

“There are twelve people at the agency and I’ll be focusing on publicity for their real-estate clients,” Mom said as she finished a bite. “This French toast is absolutely delicious. It’s so moist.”

“Forget that,” I said waving my hand. “Tell me more about the job, Mom.”

“Well, along with focusing on the existing clientele I’ll be expanding the business, too. It’s exciting, Candice. I didn’t know what I was looking for but I think this is something I’ll enjoy.”

“It sounds great. Will you move up there?”

“That’s my plan. And I want Grandma to come. Ever since I seriously started looking for work I’ve been trying to convince her to sell the bakery, and the house.”

“Will she do it?”

“I’m wearing her down. It’s scary for her, though. She’s lived in that house for over fifty years and has owned the bakery for almost as long. The Bronx is all she knows, but she’s so exhausted, Candice. And honestly, I could use her help. Connecticut is expensive and I’ll need a big down payment to qualify for a mortgage. Grandma said she can put some money towards that once she sells the house and bakery.”

“It would be great if you two could say goodbye to the Bronx together.”

“That’s what I’m hoping,” Mom nodded while taking another bite.

I paid the check while on my way to the bathroom because I knew Mom would never let me treat. After the waitress took our plates we sat there as Mom relaxed and enjoyed her second cup of coffee.

“Thank you for breakfast, Candice. It was delicious. Between the jetlag and this French toast I could go for a nap but how about we take a walk instead? You can tell me about everything happening here.”

After leaving Mama’s we walked past the cafes and Italian restaurants lining Columbus Avenue.

“I feel like I’m in Little Italy,” Mom said as she pointed at Café Grecco and The Steps of Rome Italian restaurant. “It’s so charming. I bet it’s beautiful at Christmas time.”

“Lola said the whole neighborhood is decorated top to bottom and every Saturday the bakeries set up sidewalk sales where they have fresh pies, cheesecakes and cannolis. She said the only thing missing is the Grease Pole. You should come back and visit me for the holidays, Mom. And bring Grandma, too!” I said turning towards her. “The three of us would have the greatest time. I can even get a little Christmas tree for my apartment.”

She smiled and took my hand. “You seem happy, Candice. More than that, you seem excited, which is such a wonderful feeling.”

“I am, Mom. Look around, what’s not to love? Plus Lola has been great and get ready for this, I met someone, too.”

“You met someone?” she asked, stopping to look at me. “You mean a boy?”

“I wouldn’t call him a boy, Mom. He’s twenty. He goes to Stanford. His name is Eric Shaw.”

“When did this happen?”

I told her about our meeting at The Grand Canyon and how he found me here after seeing my name in The Pacific Review. I left out the part about the hotel in Utah.

“Be careful, Candice,” she said while bracing my shoulders. “You just got out here and don’t need to rush into anything. That’s all I’m going to say. Just be smart. You need to focus on your work right now, and you need to start checking into colleges, too. Those are just my thoughts. This is your time Candice, and I want you to be careful with your decisions. That’s all. I’m done now.”

“You just said I look happy, Mom.”

“You do. You’re living in a beautiful city with a nice apartment, the job you want and your best friend close by. You can’t ask for more, but I don’t want you to lose focus,” she said, distracted by the cable car squeaking past us as it followed the tracks to Fisherman’s Wharf. I laughed at the irony. “Learn from my mistakes,” she continued, “and don’t let time slip away. Now tell me, what have you been photographing lately?”

“Oh my God, I just thought of something! You’ve got to come with me on Monday. I’ll be taking pictures from the top of The Golden Gate Bridge!”

“Candice, you know I’m afraid of heights. I can’t go out on that walkway with all those tourists.”

“No Mom, I’m not talking about where the tourists go. I’m talking about the top of the tower! A security man is taking me up. You have to come!”

“The tower? You mean the part that’s covered in clouds when I see it on TV?”

“Yeah!”

“Are you nuts?”

“It’s a once in a lifetime chance, Mom. The view will be amazing!”

“Even if I wouldn’t be petrified how could I go? You must need clearance to get up there.”

“I’ll say you’re my assistant. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“You could get fired for lying,” she said, looking me in the eye.

“All right, that’s true. Okay, then I’ll just ask him,” I said shrugging my shoulders.

“That can’t hurt. You have to at least come with me to the security office and see what he says.”

“Where’s that curvy street?” she asked. “Is it around here? I’ve always wanted to see that.”

“I think its a few blocks ahead,” I said, letting her change the subject for now.

The two of us spent the day visiting the shops in North Beach before driving to Pacific Heights and fantasizing what it must be like living in those grand Victorian style homes with the bay windows and gated driveways.

That night as we relaxed on the couch Mom reached into her bag and pulled out Dean's diary.

“It’s time I give this back to you Candice,” she said, holding it for me to take.

I hesitated for a few seconds, almost as if I was afraid to touch it. Looking at my Mom I thought about the lies that had been wedged between us for so many years. All those struggles had brought us to this place, though. And now, sitting here together, we had nothing but love and appreciation for one another.

“The diary is yours, Mom. I gave it to you,” I said while reaching out and fingering the cover.

“I know you did, and it helped me through some very difficult times, Candice. It’s not mine though, it’s ours. Keep it for a while and when you’re ready, return it to your father.”

“Okay,” I said, smearing the tears from my eyes and taking the diary from her hands. Folding back the cover I looked at the familiar handwriting and traced Dean's words like I had done so many times. “Mom, sometimes I feel guilty for being happy now. Does that make any sense?”

“It makes perfect sense, Candice. But in my heart of hearts I believe that Dean sees you, and that he’s always wanted you to find happiness.”

Late that night we lay in bed reminiscing.

“Remember the nights after I was attacked?” she whispered.

“Of course I remember Mom. How I could I ever forget?”

She reached for my hand lying on the mattress.

“I still get scared once in a while Candice, and when I do, I reach for your hand. You rescued me. Do you know that?”

I wanted to tell her I didn’t. I wanted to tell her that for years I felt like I had failed her, that I cried for her during the first anniversary of her attack while I was in rehab. But maybe she was right. Maybe I rescued her, too. And now here we are lying together in my bed, in my apartment, in my city, and staring at the cracks in my ceiling. That was the first time I felt like my mom and me were more than mother and daughter. I felt as if we had become friends.

The next morning I made us scrambled eggs with wheat toast and strawberry jam, eager to show her that I had built a life for myself here.

I called Eric while Mom was in the shower and told him I missed him but that we’d have to see each other another day.

At 10:00 Mom and I hopped on the ferry to Sausalito and I kept trying to convince her to come with me up the tower of The Golden Gate Bridge tomorrow morning.

“Look at how beautiful the bridge is Mom!” I said while we stood on deck riding the ferry across the bay. “Going up that tower is the perfect chance to conquer your fear of heights.”

“But I don’t care about conquering that fear. I don’t go any higher than the second floor,” she laughed.

“Then think about the great story you can tell! Come on Mom, you and me together on that tower. If ever there was a once in a lifetime opportunity this is it! I mean, how many people do you know who’ve been up there?”

“No one, of course.”

“Exactly!” I said, feeling as if she was on the verge.

“Okay,” she said shaking her head in disbelief. “If that security man says yes, then I’ll go. I must have a screw loose, though.”

On Monday morning at 9:30 we reached The Golden Gate Security office and I asked for Mike Andrews.

“That’s me,” the man behind the counter said. “You must be Candice Morgan with The Pacific Review.”

“Yes. Thanks for taking me up today, Mike. Before we go though, I’ve got a huge favor to ask. This is my mother, Vivian. She surprised me with a visit all the way from New York and I was wondering if she could come with us.”

His eyes widened and his jaw fell open when he saw my mother stand up and say hello. I just smiled to myself since I was used to it after all these years.

“Please don’t go through any trouble,” Mom said, extending her hand and smiling back at him. “I’ll be more than happy to wait right here on solid ground.”

“No, it’ll be my pleasure,” Mike said. “We don’t have any formal restrictions because frankly, everyone is off limits, but we make exceptions for some press people and friends of the mayor. With the three of us it’ll be a tight squeeze on the ride up. Is either of you claustrophobic?”

“No,” I said.

“I’ve got warn you, it’ll be cold and windy up there, too.”

“It is safe though, right?” Mom asked.

“You’ll be on a four foot wide steel catwalk twelve hundred feet above the water. Its unsettling, but just focus on the view and you’ll be fine,” he said staring at her.

“Four feet wide?” Mom replied, spreading her hands apart to try and get an idea of how narrow that was. “Candice I don’t think I can do this.”

“You can’t turn back now Mom,” I whispered as Mike led us out the door.

After driving in a golf cart to the base of the south tower just past the toll booths Mike parked against the railing on the walkway.

“Don’t mind the tourists,” he said, nodding at the hundreds of people taking pictures. “You’ll see what I mean in a minute.”

He began unlocking a steel door at the bottom of the tower as cars sped across the bridge five feet in front of us. Mom and I stood watching him as a crowd of tourists gathered behind us, wondering what he was doing.

“Step aboard,” Mike said after swinging open the orange door which led to a tiny elevator shaft. Mom stepped on first then I squeezed in next to her. As I turned around I saw a mob of people fighting for a glimpse inside.

“What is that? Where are you going? I want to come!” they shouted while stopping dead in their tracks.

“I feel like a celebrity,” Mom said as Mike nudged his way in next to us and let the steel door slam close under its own weight.

“75,000 cars and 10,000 tourists on foot cross this bridge everyday but no one realizes this elevator shaft even exists,” Mike said while pushing his hand up high enough to flick on the light bulb above our heads.

“I can’t breathe,” I said, trying to adjust myself and accidentally jabbing Mike in the ribs. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay. The three of us would be more comfortable squeezing into the trunk of a car,” Mike laughed as he looked towards the ceiling to avoid breathing in my face.

“We should’ve left our jackets at home Mom,” I said with my collar bunched up around my chin. “That would’ve given us more room.”

“You’ll need it up there,” Mike said. “Okay, now I’ve got to reach across and get a handle on that lever so I can get us moving,” he grunted while extending his arm past my face and pulling on the knob.

I felt the elevator squeak and rattle as we started climbing up through the tower. My nose was buried in his sleeve.

“How long is this ride?” Mom gasped. “You’re not going to believe it but I’ve got an itch on my cheek and my arms are stuck against my legs. People in straightjackets probably have more elbow room than we do,” she joked.

“It’s about fifteen minutes,” Mike said.

For a few moments the three of us were silent and I pictured the outside of the tower and the cars going by below, all of them unaware that we were climbing hundreds of feet above their heads.

“The tower is built to sway a little due to the wind gusts so don’t panic when we get up there,” Mike said. “The bridge was finished in ‘37 and hasn’t suffered any structural damage in all those years so we’ll be fine.”

About five minutes later the elevator jerked to a stop and Mike flipped the lock back and shoved the door open.

“Thank God,” Mom gasped as Mike stepped out and the three of us exhaled a deep breath.

“What’s that whistling noise?” I asked, looking around.

“The wind. I told you it’s strong up here. Now I need the two of you to pay strict attention. Candice, you’re going to step off first. There’s a metal grate here but watch your step since there’s a gap between the platform and the elevator. The drop is over a thousand feet. Okay?”

“I’m listening, Mike. I’ll do whatever you say.”

“Vivian, wait there until I tell you to. This platform is only big enough for two.”

“I’m not going to plummet to my death standing in here alone am I?” Mom asked with her hands bracing both sides of the elevator.

“No,” Mike replied laughing. “The lift is secure. All right Candice,” Mike said holding out his hands. “Step off now.”

Grabbing him I took a giant step onto the platform and gripped the waist-high railing surrounding us. “What are these black walls?” I asked, curious about everything up here.

“Those are the inside of the tower. Now pay attention, Candice. Since there’s only room for two on this platform I need you to climb this six rung ladder behind you,” Mike said, reaching over my shoulder and tapping it with his hand.

“Okay, then what?” I asked looking at the ladder.

“At the top of the ladder is a porthole which leads to the outside. You’ll be coming up through the roof of the tower, the same as if you were popping out of a submarine hatch. It’ll be very windy out there so once you get on top hold onto the railing and wait.”

“All right,” I nodded.

“Vivian, you’re next and I’ll follow right behind you.”

“My life is in your hands,” I heard Mom say as I climbed the ladder.

“You want me to go through the hole, right Mike?” I called out after pushing open the porthole and seeing nothing but blue sky.

“Yes. Then wait on top. Your mom and I will be right there.”

“My God!” I yelled after taking a few more steps and climbing onto the roof of the tower. “This is amazing! Hurry up Mom! Get up here quick!”

“Candice! What’s the matter? Are you all right?” I heard her screaming.

“Yes! I’ve never been better! It’s spectacular!” I shouted into the wind. “I can see all of San Francisco! I can see miles and miles out to the Pacific Ocean! This is the most fantastic thing I’ve ever done!”

“Holy smoke this wind is fierce!” Mom shrieked as she climbed out and hugged the railing. “Candice, this wind is pulling me over the side!”

“No its not, Mom. Just hold on and enjoy it!” I yelled with excitement. “It’s so invigorating!”

“I’m petrified, Candice! I can’t do this!” she shouted with her eyes pinched shut. “I’m going back down.”

“No Mom! You already did it. You’re here. Now open your eyes and look around. You’ll never see another view like this anywhere in the world!”

“What do you think?” Mike shouted as he held Mom’s arm and she found the courage to open her eyes.

“It’s stunning!” I yelled with my hands raised. “It’s the most exciting thing ever!”

“We’ve got ten minutes so take your pictures.”

“All right. Mom, are you okay?”

“What?” she asked, brushing her hair out of her face. “I can’t hear you above the wind.”

“Are you okay?” I yelled while gripping the railing.

“Yes, as long as Mike doesn’t leave my side. This view is spectacular, though. It’s gorgeous!”

“I know. I’m so glad we’re up here together, Mom. Why don’t you let go of the railing?”

“Take your pictures, Candice.”

I could barely catch my breath while snapping photos of the city skyline and the bay with Alcatraz and Angel Island in the background. “There’s so much to see!” I yelled while capturing extraordinary shots of the traffic crossing the bridge below and the breathtaking shorelines of Sausalito and Tiburon to the north.

It’s impossible to get a bad shot up here I thought while taking close-ups of the chipped orange paint and rust of the bridge contrasted with the aqua blue water moving beneath.

In ten minutes I used half a dozen rolls of film and was sure I had plenty of great photos for Ruth to choose from.

“All right, are you two ready to ride back down?” Mike asked.

“Almost. I just need one last shot. Can you take a picture of my mom and me?”

“Sure,” Mike replied, reaching out for my camera.

Holding Mom’s hand in mine we faced the Pacific with Angel Island rising out of the water behind us.

“I love you Mom!” I shouted above the wind.

“I love you too, Candice. I’m so proud of you.”

“That’s all I ever wanted you to be,” I said kissing her cheek.

Mom wrapped her arm around me as the smiles stretched across both our faces.

“Say cheese!” Mike said before snapping the picture.

Here I am, I thought, standing on top of The Golden Gate Bridge with Angel Island in the background and a cloud so close it feels as if I could reach out and touch it.

Everything I am has brought me to this place, this moment in time. Whatever bad decisions I’ve made and whatever sorrows I’ve endured, well, I have blessings, too.

I already knew where I would hang this photo. And I knew it would forever signify a fresh beginning for the two of us, a glimmer of what’s yet to come.