

LISA SCOTTOLINE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

"Scottoline is a powerhouse."
—DAVID BALDACCI

BETRAYED

A woman with dark hair, wearing a bright red jacket and dark pants, is running through a forest. She is looking back over her right shoulder towards the camera. The background is a soft-focus blue sky with light rays filtering through the trees. The overall mood is one of urgency and suspense.

BETRAYED

A Rosato & Associates Novel

Lisa Scottoline

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With love and thanks to Laura Leonard and Nan Daley,
my partners in crime fiction

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Acknowledgments

Reading Group Gold

Corrupted Teaser

Also by Lisa Scottoline

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Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact.
Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth.

—Marcus Aurelius

Chapter One

Judy Carrier eyed her reflection in the shiny elevator doors, wondering when mirrors stopped being her friend. Her cropped yellow-blond hair stuck out like demented sunrays, and her pink-and-blue Oilily sweater and jeans clashed with her bright red clogs. Worst of all was her expression, easy to read on a face as flat as an artist's palette, with troubled blue eyes set wide over a small nose and thin lips pressed unhappily together.

Judy tried to shake off her bad mood when the elevator halted and the doors slid open with a *ping*. ROSATO & DINUNZIO, LLC, read the shiny brass plaque, and she crossed the reception area, empty of clients on a Saturday morning. The office was quiet, but Judy knew she wouldn't be the only one in, because lawyers regarded weekends as a chance to work uninterrupted, which was their version of relaxing.

She heard her cell phone ringing and slid it from her pocket because she'd been playing phone tag with a client, Linda Adler. She checked the screen, but it read "Mom calling," with a faceless blue shadow. Judy had never bothered to put in a profile picture for her mother because the shadow seemed oddly perfect. Judy had grown up a Navy brat, but her family never developed the us-against-the-world closeness of a typical military family. The Carriers moved, skied, and hiked together, but their activities were a sort of parallel play for adults, and now they scattered all over the globe and emailed each other photos of themselves moving, skiing, and hiking. Judy clicked IGNORE and returned the phone to her pocket.

She rounded the corner to the hallway and brightened at the sight of her best friend, Mary DiNunzio, who turned when she spotted Judy and came hustling down the hall toward her, grinning from ear to ear. Mary had recently made partner, becoming Judy's boss, but neither of them knew how that would play out over time. Judy avoided thinking about it, and in any event, Mary made the most adorable boss ever in her tortoiseshell glasses, navy sweater, jeans, and loafers, with her little legs churning and her light brown ponytail bouncing.

"Judy, I was waiting for you! I have great news!" Mary reached her, light brown eyes warm with anticipation.

"Hi, cutie, tell me." Judy entered her office, and Mary followed her excitedly inside.

"Actually, I have great news and even greater news. Which do you want first?"

"The great news. We'll start slow." Judy slid her woven purse from her shoulder, tossed it onto the credenza, and went around to her chair. She sat down behind a desk cluttered with a laptop, case correspondence, a Magic 8 ball, ripped Splenda packets, and an empty can of Diet Coke. Law books, case reporters, notes, and files stuffed her bookshelves. She was going for creative clutter, but lately worried she was entering hoarder territory.

"First, I have breaking wedding news." Mary leaned back against the credenza, flushed with happiness. "You remember I told you about that high-end salon, J'taime?"

"Yes." Judy was going to be maid of honor at Mary's wedding, though she'd never been in a bridal party before. She was studying by watching bride shows on cable, but none of them told her that being maid of honor was like being executor of a vast and complicated estate, without the fee.

"They had a cancellation, so I got an appointment next Friday night! How great is that? Can you come?"

"Of course." Judy had already been to two bridal shops and seen Mary try on a zillion wedding dresses, but they all looked the same to her, like vanilla soft-serve without the cone.

“They have Vera Wang and all the big names.”

“Cool!” Judy kept her smile in place, but wondered why she felt so negative, the Debbie Downer of bridesmaids. She wasn’t jealous that Mary was getting married, but she wished she had what Mary had, which wasn’t the same thing. It was more that Mary was moving forward, already a partner and soon a wife, while Judy got left behind, stuck. Judy didn’t know how to get herself to the next level or what she was doing wrong. She’d always been on top, earned the best grades at school and succeeded at work. But now she sensed she was blowing her lead, at life.

“You don’t mind going to a third shop, do you? My mother will be there.”

“Great!” Judy answered, meaning it, since she was closer to Mary’s mother than her own. The DiNunzios were warm and loving South Philly Italians, so they’d practically adopted her, whereupon she’d permanently gained ten pounds.

“The only problem is that I put a deposit on the veil at David’s Bridal, and I can’t know if it will go with the dresses at J’taime. But I lose the money, so what?”

“Right, it wasn’t that expensive,” Judy said, though she’d forgotten how much the veil cost. The answer was, probably, a fortune. She’d learned that everything associated with weddings cost the same—a fortune.

“Okay, now to the even greater news.”

“More wedding updates?” Judy braced herself to hear the latest drama with the DJ, the menu, the reception hall, the church, the invitations, or Mary’s future mother-in-law, Elvira Rotunno, whom they called El Virus.

“No, this is about work.” Mary cleared her throat, brimming with renewed enthusiasm. “Bennie told me to tell you, since she’s in prep, that she just got a major piece of business and she’s assigning it to you! Girl, you’ll be a partner in no time!”

“Really?” Judy said, but she felt caught up short. She and Mary never referred to the fact that Judy was still an associate, tacitly saving her face, as if she didn’t know her own employment status. “Great, what kind of case is it?”

“It’s not one case, it’s *seventy-five*.” Mary beamed. “Bennie got them in as referral business from Singer Crenheim in Manhattan. That’s a big league!”

“Why are there so many cases?” Judy didn’t get it. “What are they about?”

“That’s the only bummer.” Mary paused. “They’re asbestos cases, defense side, representing a company called Bendaflex.”

“Oh no.” Judy groaned in dismay. “Nobody likes asbestos cases, even asbestos firms.”

“Judy, these cases will generate *millions* in fees.”

“But they’ll take two or three years to try.” Judy was trying to process the information, which struck her as lawyer hell.

“They won’t take that long because you don’t have to try the whole case, just the damages phase. The liability was already decided.”

“Even worse,” Judy said, aghast. Mass tort trials like asbestos were often bifurcated, which meant that the question of liability was separated from the question of damages. Evidently, their new client Bendaflex had lost on liability, so there were a slew of individual damage cases that had to be tried. Literally the cases were damage control. “How did Bennie get these, anyway?”

“The cases were consolidated in the Southern District of New York, then remanded back to the various states for damages trials. She got all of the Pennsylvania cases, and most of them came out of the Navy Yard.”

“For real?” Judy didn’t think it could get worse. “My father was a lieutenant commander in the Navy, remember? He used to tell me about how there was asbestos all over those ships, in every shipyard in the country. Anything hot was insulated with asbestos, main pipes. Grinders would grind the old asbestos off, and pipe fitters blew the new asbestos on.” Judy remembered her father’s anger, a guilt, when he’d told her the stories, even though nobody knew that asbestos was deadly back then. “These poor guys, they’d be standing in the hull of a ship, sweating their butts off in a *snowglobe* of asbestos. No masks, no ventilation, no nothing. They’re all dead now of mesothelioma. Johns Manville declared bankruptcy, and other companies, like Bendaflex, are fighting not to pay what they owe, decades later. And I’m supposed to help? Is this why I became a lawyer?”

Mary’s smile faded. “I hear you, but we’re lucky to get that much business in this economy.”

“It’s not worth it. The cases don’t even present a legal question, only how much damages each plaintiff is owed, and since we represent Bendaflex, the answer has to be, as little as possible.” Judy flashed-forward, disgusted. “I’ll have to argue down the value of a man’s life, probably in front of his widow and his children.”

Mary sighed.

“My argument will have to be that the plaintiff, who’s dead, wasn’t going to earn that much, because, after all, he wasn’t good

enough to earn a promotion. And as far as pain and suffering, don't pay him for that because he died within a year, so he didn't suffer that long. Too bad he was only forty-three."

Mary frowned, sympathetic. "You don't have to try the cases yourself, just supervise them. With the money that comes in, you can hire whoever you need."

"Still." Judy fought a rising tension in her chest. "You wouldn't want to do it, would you?"

"I couldn't even if I wanted to." Mary shook her head, her tone turning defensive. "The cases came to Bennie, and she assigned them to you. I can't countermand her, as her partner."

Judy felt a twinge that Mary was taking Bennie's side, but she should have known it would happen, someday. Mary and Bennie were the sole partners of this all-woman firm, and nobody in her right mind opposed Bennie Rosato. Bennie was a world-class trial lawyer who'd grown the firm to national prominence and she hadn't reached the top by being a creampuff. On the contrary, the woman owned a coffee mug that read I CAN SMELL FEAR.

Suddenly, there was a commotion outside Judy's office, and they turned their attention to the door. Judy's boyfriend, Frank Lucia, materialized in the threshold, flashing the easy, confident grin that was one of the reasons she'd fallen in love with him. He'd been out of town last night, and she still got a thrill out of seeing him, especially looking so handsome in his puffy black jacket, tie-and-work-shirt combo, and jeans.

"Frank, what a surprise!" Judy said, brightening.

"I had to stay over in Baltimore and I missed my girl, so I thought I'd take her out to breakfast!" Frank burst into the office, threw open his big arms, and bounded around the desk, gathering Judy up and hugging her. "How you doing, babe?"

"Okay." Judy felt a warm rush of love, breathing in his familiar smells of aftershave and mortar dust. Frank was a smart, straight-up Italian hunk who owned a successful specialty masonry company, and they'd lived together for the past few years.

"Let's go eat, I'm starved." Frank raked big fingers through his thick, wavy hair, the same espresso-brown as his large, bright eyes.

Mary beamed. "What a guy! Frank, you have to teach Anthony to surprise me sometimes. He's not exactly spontaneous."

"Ha! Ditch him at the altar, Mare. I'll hook you up with one of my boys!"

Mary grinned. "How's your hand? Did you get the cast off?"

"It's all good, I only have this thing now." Frank showed his left hand, and a black cloth brace peeked from his sleeve. He grabbed Judy's arm. "Babe, let's get out of here."

"Okay." Judy let Frank pull her up, but her gaze fell on her desk clock, which read 10:15, and she remembered something. "Wait, how are you in town this early? Did you drop off the dog at the vet's? You said you would."

"Ruh-roh." Frank's grin turned sheepish. "Don't worry about it."

"What do you mean?" Judy stopped. "She had to get flea-dipped. Did you take her or not?"

"I forgot." Frank shrugged. "Sorry."

"Oh, honestly." Judy felt disappointed, but not completely surprised. She had been trying to figure out whether Frank was marriage material, and she was starting to worry she had an answer. "I just washed the sheets, the comforter, and the towels I put on top of the couch and chairs."

"It's not the end of the world." Frank glanced at Mary, and Judy knew that he hated to fight, especially in front of anyone. "We'll get her dipped tomorrow."

"They're closed on Sunday."

"No worries, we'll do it on Monday."

"That's too late." Judy had explained this to him ten times, but she couldn't seem to make him hear her. "Remember, we have to drop the house and the dog simultaneously? There can't be any delay."

"Okay, we'll treat them both, then. What's the big deal?"

"But you didn't drop her off, so that means that I have to wash everything all over again on Sunday night, if we want to drop her off on Monday."

"Would you rather me go home and try to take the dog in now, instead of taking you to breakfast?"

"Honestly, yes. The dog has to get dipped, and I have to work. I would really appreciate that."

“Okay, fine.” Frank rolled his eyes and waved a cranky good-bye. “We’ll do it your way. See you later. Bye, Mary.”

Judy and Mary held each other’s gaze for a moment then Judy shrugged. “What am I supposed to do? That was the right decision, wasn’t it? Things have to get done but he wants to play all the time.”

“I think he was trying to do a nice thing, but I totally get where you are coming from.”

Suddenly Judy’s phone started ringing, and she slipped it from her pocket in case it was Linda Adler. But it was her aunt Barb calling, and the phone screen came to life with a candid photo of her adored aunt, her mother’s younger sister. “Excuse me, let me get this, it’s Aunt Barb.”

“Tell her I said hi,” Mary said, because everybody loved Aunt Barb. She lived about an hour away, in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania and they’d all been out to her house for beer and barbecue. Last year, Judy’s uncle Steve, Barb’s husband, had passed, and the whole office had gone to his funeral.

“Aunt Barb, hi, how are you?” Judy answered the call, realizing that she hadn’t seen her aunt in a few months, though they talked on the phone all the time.

“Hello, honey,” her aunt said, and Judy knew immediately that something was wrong. Her aunt sounded grave, when she was usually so warm and happy.

“What’s the matter?”

“Am I catching you at a bad time?”

“No, why? What’s the matter, Aunt Barb?”

“Didn’t your mom call you?”

“Yes, but I was busy.” Judy’s mind raced. She regretted ignoring that call from her mother. “What’s going on? Is Mom okay?”

“Yes, your mom’s fine. In fact, she’s here at the house with me.”

“What?” Judy asked, surprised. Her parents lived in Santa Barbara, and her mother rarely visited her or Aunt Barb, and never unannounced.

“We’d love it if you could come out today, too, if you’re not busy.”

Judy’s mouth went dry. Something was up. “Sure, okay, but why? What’s the matter?”

“We’ll talk about it when you come, sweetie.”

“Tell me.” Judy swallowed hard. “Please.”

Aunt Barb hesitated. “Are you sitting down?”

Chapter Two

An hour later, Judy reached Kennett Square, a small town in semi-rural Chester County, and she pulled onto the gravel driveway in front of her aunt's small brick house, cut the ignition, and checked her reflection in the rearview mirror. Her eyes were still wet from crying, but her skin wasn't mottled as it had been when she'd first heard the horrifying news.

I have breast cancer, her aunt had said, and Judy hadn't heard anything else. She sniffled, reached for a crumpled Dunkin' Donuts napkin, and wiped her eyes one last time. She pulled her key out of the ignition, got her purse, jumped out of the car, and hurried down the driveway past the garage. The sun was high in a cloudless sky, and the October air unseasonably warm, the lovely weather incongruous given the heartbreaking news. Judy couldn't imagine losing her aunt. Her aunt was too young to die.

She broke into a jog as soon as she saw her aunt, who looked so different from the last time she had seen her, only five months ago. Barbara Elizabeth Moyer was a tall, strong woman and had always been on the huggably beamy side, but no longer. Her fisherman sweater and jeans drooped on a much thinner frame, and her long, thick silvery hair had vanished, replaced by a red bandanna knotted at her nape, over a newly bald head. She was only in her early fifties, but her face had acquired the gauntness of an older person, emphasizing the prominence of her cheekbones and her large, deep-set blue eyes. She sat alone at her wrought-iron table with a glass top, surrounded by the fading reds, pinks, and yellows of her beloved roses, now past their season.

"Aunt Barb!" Judy called out, tears returning to her eyes. She threw open her arms just as her aunt stood up and gave her a hug.

"Honey, don't worry, everything's going to be all right."

"No it's not!" Judy blurted out, burying her head in her aunt's bony shoulder, knowing that she was saying the exact wrong thing at the exact wrong time.

"Yes, it will, you'll see." Her aunt clucked softly, patting her back. "Don't worry."

"What happened?" Judy sobbed. "When did this ... happen?"

"About nine months ago. Don't cry, really, sweetie." Aunt Barb gave her a final pat on the back. "I'm going to be well again, you'll see."

"You will be, I *know* you will be," Judy said, her words slightly blubby, but her tears subsiding. She let her aunt go and wiped her cheeks with her hand. "So, I mean, can you explain? How did I not know? I mean, what's going on? And where's Mom?"

"In the kitchen. Here, sit down and I'll catch you up." Aunt Barb pressed Judy into the wrought-iron chair opposite her, her eyes glinting in the bright sun. "So ... I found a lump in my left breast, a puckering, kind of. Turns out, it was stage II breast cancer."

"Oh my." Judy swallowed hard, trying not to cry again. Stage II sounded terrifying, though she wasn't about to ask what was the highest stage. She would look it up later online.

"We thought we could get it with chemo, and it melted the tumor considerably, but they still found abnormal cells in my left breast, my ducts." Aunt Barb paused but didn't tear up, strong and in control. "My cancer isn't encapsulated, which means it's not contained in one tumor, but throughout the tissue."

Judy tried to stay calm. She knew she was about to become familiar with terms like *encapsulated*, which she would look up later, too. She noticed for the first time that her aunt no longer had eyebrows and that her fair skin had a grayish tinge.

"The good news is it's not in my lymph nodes, including my sentinel node, so my prognosis is good. Everybody's cancer is different, that's what I'm learning. My doctor expects the mastectomy will do the trick, and I might not even need radiation."

Judy knew radiation was a cancer treatment, but it horrified her to think about irradiating a human being, especially one she loved so much.

“The mastectomy is scheduled for Monday.”

“*This* Monday? In, like, two days?”

“Yes, but don’t let it scare you. It doesn’t scare me. Frankly, after seeing what your uncle went through with blood cancer, I feel lucky to have a surgical solution.” Aunt Barb paused, her forehead etched with grief that was still fresh. “So I try to look on the bright side. I have to lose my breasts, but what I really care about is my life. And after all, every plant needs pruning, so that it can thrive as a whole. I’m just getting pruned, that’s all.”

“There you go,” Judy said, pained. “You’re a rose, Aunt Barb.”

“Exactly.” Aunt Barb smiled. “Besides, I know a lot of women who have had mastectomies, so there’s no mystery. It should last about a few hours, and they’ll discharge me on Wednesday, with a few drains.”

Judy hid her fear. She didn’t know a person could have a drain. Showers should have drains, not people.

“A lot of people have reconstruction, implants, or have expanders put in, but I decided not to.” Aunt Barb set her mouth, a Cupid’s bow, albeit determined. “I don’t want to put myself through that. I hate the idea of more surgeries, or longer recovery, or spending more money. I mean, what’s the point? I’m already so flat, and I can deal with padded bras.”

“I see that,” Judy said, meaning it. She couldn’t imagine a more personal decision, and she didn’t know what she would do, but she knew it was so like her aunt. “Why didn’t you tell me, or Mom?”

“I didn’t want you to worry.” Aunt Barb frowned with regret. “That’s why I canceled dinner on you, last month. Sorry.”

“But on the phone, you never said anything.” Judy talked to her aunt at least twice a week, checking in.

“I hid it.”

Judy tried to think back in time, bewildered, as if understanding the chronology would lend her any comfort. “But I saw you on my birthday. You looked fine. You looked great.”

“I was just starting chemo, and I didn’t tell you then because I didn’t want you to associate your birthday with news like that.”

“Oh no.” Judy almost burst into new tears, at the memory. They had celebrated in this very backyard, sharing a double-cheese pizza and a few cold Miller Lites among the lovely roses, in full bloom. Her aunt was an expert rosarian, and her heirloom Gallica rosebushes drooped now with the last of their massive crimson blooms, shaped more like a peony to the untrained eye.

“Right before I saw you, I had my first treatment. I hadn’t lost my hair yet, that happened on day seventeen, just when they said it would. Chemo was awful, I felt tired and foggy. Chemo brain, they call it. It made my nails weird, dried my skin, and obviously, I’m prematurely bald. I’m going for a Pirate Queen look.” Aunt Barb patted her bandanna. “Not bad, huh?”

“Very Gilbert and Sullivan.” Judy managed a smile, because they both loved G&S operettas.

“My friend gained weight during chemo, but I lost twenty-five pounds. So there’s the good news.” Aunt Barb chuckled ruefully. Then she sighed, tilting her face to the sun. “Anyway, enough. It’s a beautiful day, you’re here, and we’re in the presence of Reine Victoria.”

“You mean the rose you were trying to grow? You did it?”

“Yep, go take a whiff. There’s still one or two blooms left, in the middle, the pink.” Aunt Barb gestured to the rosebushes on her right. “Reine Victoria is a Bourbon rose, one of the most fragrant. It can smell like pears.”

Judy got up, crossed to the bushes, and smelled a rose with pinkish blooms. Its perfume filled her nostrils with a fruity sweetness.

“Wow, that’s so cool. Aromatherapy.”

“Also, its thorns aren’t that bad. I hate thorns. Who needs attitude from a flower?”

Judy heard her phone ringing in her back pocket, reached for it, and saw that the screen read Linda Adler, the client she’d been trying to reach. “Oh, damn.”

“Feel free to get that, honey,” Aunt Barb called to her.

“Nah, I’ll get it later.” Judy let the call go to voicemail because her conversation with Linda would have been a long one, and her aunt deserved her undivided attention. Judy went back to the table and sat down.

“So how’s work, honey?”

“I’m not going to complain, in the circumstances.”

Aunt Barb touched her hand. “No, please don’t act differently around me. Tell me. I’m sick of talking about lymph nodes.”

“Okay, well, I have a cool sex-discrimination case for this woman who just called me, but I also just got dumped with seventy-five new cases, all damages trials.” Judy didn’t add that her goal in the damages cases would be to diminish the value of a lost human life, a heartbreaking thought right now.

Suddenly Aunt Barb turned to face the house, where Judy’s mother was coming out the back door, carrying a floral-patterned tray. Judy didn’t call to her because it was too far away, but she was struck, as always, by her mother’s beauty, even in her late fifties. Delia Van Huyck Carrier had round blue eyes, now slightly hooded, and a squarish face and high cheekbones that bespoke her paternal Dutch heritage. She kept in trim shape and had great style, even in her standard airplane outfit: an oversized gray sweater, black leggings, and black ballet flats. She crossed the lawn toward them, her lips pursed and her head tilted slightly down, showing the top of her head with its loose, lemony blonde topknot.

“Hi, Mom!” Judy stood up, went to her mother, and gave her an awkward hug, around the tray, a pitcher of iced tea, glasses, napkins, and a platter of chocolate chip cookies.

“Hello, honey.” Judy’s mother set the tray on the tabletop, and the glasses clinked. “You might want to wipe your nose.”

“Oops, sorry. How are you?” Judy plucked a napkin from the tray and blew her nose, sensing that her mother seemed oddly cooler than usual. Aunt Barb stiffened as soon as her mother came over, and Judy realized that the two sisters had been fighting, which wasn’t atypical, though she would have guessed there was an exception for breast cancer.

“I’m good.” Her mother’s Delft-blue eyes narrowed in the sunlight, which caught the golden strands of her fine, smooth hair. “Dad says hi. How are you, all right?”

Of course not, Judy wanted to say, but that wasn’t the right answer. “I guess so, but I’m worried about Aunt Barb. You didn’t know about this, did you?”

“No, she kept it from us. I took the red-eye as soon as I found out. Sit down, please.”

Judy sat down. *Taking the red-eye* was code for *showing concern*, even though her mother seemed completely pissed off. “Mom, is something bothering you?”

“No, I’m just determined to get my kid sister through her operation. I’m staying for the duration.”

“You make it sound like a war.”

“It is a war,” her mother shot back, meeting her eye. “And we’re going to win.”

“Delia, it’s not a war, to me.” Aunt Barb shook her head, frowning. “We work on visualization in group, and I don’t see it as a war, or ‘my battle with cancer,’ like the obits say. My cancer is part of me, and I have to work on it to heal myself, the same as my faults or my dark side.”

“You don’t have a dark side, Aunt Barb,” Judy said, her throat thick.

“Nonsense, dear,” her mother interjected. “We all have a dark side.”

Judy recoiled. “Mom, what gives? Play nice.”

Aunt Barb cocked her kerchiefed head. “Your mother and I had words, and now we’re at an impasse, agreeing to disagree.”

“About what?”

“Speak of the devil,” her mother hissed, turning toward the house, as the back door opened.

Chapter Three

Judy looked over, and a middle-aged Hispanic woman with fluffy black hair in a pixie cut came out of the house. She was cute, roundish, and only about five feet tall, but gave the impression of being strong and sturdy as she crossed the lawn on short legs. She had on a faded Eagles T-shirt and jeans and carried a brown tote bag on her shoulder.

Aunt Barb motioned her over. "Iris, come meet my niece!"

Judy turned to her aunt, pleasantly surprised. "So that's the Iris I've heard so much about? Your gardening buddy?"

"Yes." Aunt Barb gestured to Judy when Iris reached the table. "Iris, this is Judy, and Judy, Iris Juarez."

"Hi, Iris, it's great to finally meet you!" Judy extended a hand, and Iris shook it, her grip strong and her nails manicured red, with tiny rhinestones on the tip.

"Please to meet you, too," Iris said, with a thick Spanish accent. She smiled easily, but almost shyly. Her smallish eyes were a rich, earthy brown with deep crow's-feet, and her skin had a dark brownish hue. Thin gold crucifixes dangled from her ears.

Aunt Barb gestured to a chair. "Iris, sit down, please. Join us a second. You have time before work, don't you?"

"Yes." Iris pulled out the remaining wrought-iron chair and sat down, perched on the edge. She placed a silver cell phone, one of the older models, on the table.

Aunt Barb picked up an empty glass. "Would you like some iced tea?"

"No." Iris shook her head, and Judy noticed her mother and aunt exchange chilly glances. Granted, Iris wasn't what Judy had expected, but she seemed like a perfectly nice woman.

Judy asked her, "Iris, where are you from?"

"Kennett Square."

"No, I mean, before that. You're from Mexico originally, right?"

"Yes. Guerrero."

"Where is that?" Judy had been to Mexico, but her Spanish wasn't as good as her Latin, which was excellent, if useless.

"Down." Iris waved her hand toward the ground.

Judy got the gist. "Oh, south. Do you have family there?"

"No, no." Iris winced, and Judy sensed she'd said the wrong thing.

Her aunt interjected, "Iris's husband died six years ago, as did her sons. In a car accident."

"Oh no, I'm so sorry." Judy swallowed hard, and her mother reached silently for the iced tea and poured herself a glass.

Her aunt forced a smile. "Judy, Iris grew corn, back in Mexico. She kept the farm going, all by herself, one of the few women in the village. She can grow anything, anywhere. She's a master in this garden, I tell you, a *master*. I've taken classes from horticulturalists who don't have her touch." Aunt Barb nodded toward the rosebushes. "She should get the credit for Reine Victoria, not me."

"Really?" Judy said, happy to have the subject changed.

Iris was already shaking her head. "No, Barb show me."

“Iris, that’s not true.” Aunt Barb turned to Judy, newly animated, and Judy could tell that her aunt wanted her to get to know Iris, especially since Judy’s mother was giving the woman the silent treatment.

Judy smiled at Iris. “So what brought you here? Why did you leave Mexico?”

“I need work. The police, they take my farm.”

“Why did they do that?”

“I don’t know.” Iris frowned, shaking her head. Her soft shoulders slumped. “The police, not good. I hab no choice, I go.”

Aunt Barb interjected, “Iris is the strongest woman I know. She inspires me every day, especially now.” Aunt Barb faced Iris, touching her arm. “Iris, tell Judy what you went through to get here. It was impossible, truly.”

“Oh no.” Iris waved her off again, shyly. “Is too long a story.”

“No, tell me.” Judy smiled. “How did you get here from Mexico?”

“I run,” Iris answered.

Judy thought she misunderstood. “You ran? Like, running, in a race?”

“Yes.” Iris pumped her arms, as if she were running.

“For how long?”

“Three night.”

“For how long, each night?”

“All.” Iris chuckled, showing a glimpse of a gold tooth in front.

“You ran *all* night, for three nights?” Judy asked, incredulous. The woman had to be fifty-five years old, and she hardly had an athletic build.

“In dessert,” Iris added, and Judy understood that she meant desert.

“What desert?”

“Sonora.” Iris looked at Aunt Barb. “Sonora, is call?”

“Yes, the Sonoran desert in Arizona.” Aunt Barb turned to Judy. “She ran all night for three nights, from seven o’clock at night until seven the next morning. The desert is cold at night. There were ten other people, only two were women, none as old as she was. During the day, they hid inside bushes, despite snakes, rats, and a hundred-and-twenty-degree temperatures, in July.”

“Really?” Judy asked, aghast. Meanwhile, she realized why her mother was so angry. Iris must have entered the country illegally, and her mother didn’t approve. Judy didn’t like the idea either, but she felt rapt by Iris’s story. She asked her, “Iris, why the Sonoran desert? How did you get there?”

“I go bus to Peidras Negros. A man, a *coyote*, I pay him one thousand to go United Stays.”

“A thousand dollars to take you to the United States?” Judy was getting the hang of her accent.

“Yes. Today, is *four thousand*.” Iris’s dark eyes widened at the sum.

“When did you come?”

“Four.”

“Four years ago?”

“I have water, beans, tuna, food with cans, on back.” Iris gestured to her back, indicating a backpack. “Is so hot, we no have water lef’. We see farm with pig, many pig. We are happy, so happy. We drink from water. We fill bottle.”

“You drank the water for the pigs? From *a trough*?” Judy’s stomach turned over.

“*Pera* we see, in sun, water so dirty.” Iris wrinkled her flattish nose in disgust and pantomimed holding up a bottle of water to the sun. “In water, is germ. I am sick, so sick.”

“Oh no.”

“I have my teacher. I use my teacher.”

“Your teacher?” Judy didn’t understand. “Like your leader? Was there a leader?”

"No. Teacher." Iris pulled on her T-shirt and picked up a glass, and put her shirt over the top. "I put water on teacher."

Judy understood. "You used your T-shirt to strain the water?"

"Yes. Yes."

"Where were you going?"

"Phoenix. We go, we see wire." Iris pointed up. "We go under to Phoenix."

"You followed overhead cables to Phoenix, like those big towers?"

"Yes. A lady, she die." Iris winced again. "No water, she die. We go, go, go. We no stop."

"That's horrible," Judy said, meaning it. "You must have been so afraid."

"Yes. Sad. Worry. Nervous," Iris added, pronouncing it like *nairbus*.

"How did you get here, to Pennsylvania?"

"A man, in car, he take us. Five day. Chicago, Las Vegas, Florida, North Carolina." Iris mangled the phrase North Carolina, but Judy got the idea.

"Why did you come?"

"A man say work is here, in Pennsylvania." Iris pronounced it *Pennsylvania*, with a short *a*.

"What do you do here?" Judy asked, but suddenly Iris's cell phone on the table rang.

"Scuse." Iris picked it up and checked it, but her expression changed dramatically. She didn't answer the phone, pressing her lips together tightly, and her forehead wrinkled with concern.

Aunt Barb asked, "Iris, is something the matter? You can take that call if you want to?"

"No, no," Iris answered, but she was obviously worried and the phone went silent. She jumped to her feet and hoisted her tote bag to her shoulder. "Barb, I go work now."

Aunt Barb blinked. "But you don't have to be there until three thirty. It's only two, isn't it?"

"I go, Barb." Iris forced a jittery smile and waved at the table, backing away. "Bye, nice meetin' you."

"You, too!" Judy gave her a wave, wondering what was bothering her.

"Good-bye!" Aunt Barb called after her. "Let me know if you need anything or if I can help."

"Bye-bye!" Iris turned and hurried from the backyard, and Judy waited until Iris was gone to turn to her mother.

"What a story, huh, Mom?"

Judy's mother answered, "She's illegal."

"*Undocumented*," Aunt Barb corrected, bristling.

"Semantics." Judy's mother scoffed. "You can go to jail for employing an illegal. I know, I looked it up online."

"Aunt Barb, Iris works for you?" Judy asked, newly confused. She had assumed that Iris was her aunt's friend, not hired help. Her aunt was a landscape architect and didn't earn that much, and since Uncle Steve's death, she'd had to sell their big house in Unionville and downsize to the rental she lived in now.

"Yes, she works for me part-time." Aunt Barb turned to Judy, touching her arm. "Sorry, honey, I kept it private, I guess because of her status. She used to clean houses, but now she works at one of the mushroom growers."

"How does she work for them if she doesn't have any papers?" Judy started thinking like a lawyer, an occupational hazard.

"The big mushroom growers like Phillips hire only workers with papers, but some of the independents don't. There's a lot of undocumented workers in Chester County, in the mushroom industry and horse farms."

"When did she start working for you?"

"As long as you've known about her."

"How did you meet her?"

"When your uncle got sick, I hired an agency to clean house and she came, every week. One day she mentioned to me that she could weed for me, too. I hadn't gotten to it, taking care of your uncle." Aunt Barb frowned, pained. "I thought that was so nice, that she

noticed the garden was being neglected. I hated looking out the window and seeing the weeds popping up. She began to care for it, and ~~she did a wonderful job, and during chemo, she brought me chocolate milkshakes and cheese goldfish because I had a craving for them.~~ There was a time when that was all I could keep down and—”

“She’s not even a nurse,” Judy’s mother interrupted.

“I don’t *need* a nurse. I just need someone I can rely on.”

Judy’s mother scoffed. “You could have called me, Judy, or any one of your friends from work, like Colleen Connor. We would have helped.”

“Colleen’s busy with young kids, and Iris has become a friend.” Aunt Barb gestured at the platter of chocolate chip cookies. “She baked cookies because she knew I was having my family in. She cares about me.”

Judy’s mother rolled her eyes. “Stop paying her and see how much she cares.”

Aunt Barb pursed her lips. “I pay her, but she *cares*.”

“She doesn’t pay taxes, none of them do. They burden the system.”

“She’d love to become a citizen, but she can’t. She’s not a political issue, she’s a *person*.” Aunt Barb raised her voice, though it sounded reedy and thin. “She goes to church every Sunday, and actually, I go with her. I began going when Steve got sick, and it comforted me.”

“What?” Judy’s mother arched an eyebrow. “You go to a Spanish church?”

Judy cringed. “Mom, don’t—”

“Judy, please, stay out of it,” her mother shot back. “This is between Barb and me.”

Judy clammed up, torn between disagreeing with her mother and upsetting her aunt, their sisterly disagreements in the very DNA of sibling rivalry.

Aunt Barb pursed her lips. “Yes, the congregation is mostly Latino, but so what? Both priests, Father Keenan and Father Vega, have welcomed me. They’re kind and wonderful people.”

Judy’s mother frowned. “So you’re not a Protestant anymore? You’re Catholic now?”

“Do you have to label it?” Aunt Barb shot back, angering. “Nothing gets you to church like a cancer diagnosis, and now I have one of my own. Are you seriously blaming me? And why is it any business of yours, how or where I pray? It’s a very vibrant congregation. In fact, they performed 467 baptisms last year, the most in the Archdiocese.”

Judy’s mother pursed her lips. “Sorry if I’m not overjoyed that they have so many children, because they’ll be in the schools, which I’ll have to pay for.”

“That’s not what’s bothering you, Delia. Not really.”

“Of course it is.”

“Bull.” Aunt Barb turned to face Judy, her thin skin mottled with emotion. “Your mother and I had a fight before you came today, because I would like Iris to help me recuperate after my mastectomy. Your mother wants to do it instead, but I think she should go home after the mastectomy.”

Judy’s mother pursed her lips. “Iris isn’t family.”

Aunt Barb frowned. “She’s a friend.”

“Stop saying that. Friends have things in common.”

“We do.” Aunt Barb threw up her hands. “We’re about the same age, both widows, no children, and we love to garden and bake. She’s teaching me Spanish, and I’m teaching her English. We have fun, and I can depend on her.”

Judy’s mother snorted. “You can depend on me, Barb. When have you *not* been able to depend on me?”

Judy couldn’t take it anymore. “Mom, enough, let’s not fuss. Aunt Barb, I think we can all help, but either way, we should make a truce right here and now. No more quarreling. We need to pull together. Don’t you agree, ladies?”

Judy’s mother fell stone silent.

Aunt Barb only looked worriedly away, where Iris had gone.

Chapter Four

After dinner, Judy ducked out of the kitchen to make some phone calls, leaving her mother and Aunt Barb at the kitchen table over mugs of tea. The afternoon had passed without event, and the interactions had been limited to getting ready for the hospital and making the small talk that came easily to blood relatives. Judy couldn't help but sense that Aunt Barb's illness loomed over their heads all day and she had learned from her experience with her uncle that a cancer diagnosis changed the very air in a room, present but invisible. She'd learned, too, that for all the upbeat chatter about clean nodes and early detection, cancer could be cruelly unpredictable; her Uncle Steve's lymphocytic leukemia had been in remission when it morphed like a shape-shifter into the deadly Richter Syndrome, striking him down within weeks. She prayed she wouldn't lose her aunt to the disease. Judy tried to shake off her anxiety but couldn't, and she headed into the living room for the couch, seeing Aunt Barb's hand everywhere. The living room was tiny but super-cozy, with a loveseat and an easy chair with faded chintz slipcovers, piled with woven jacquard blankets that she collected. Her framed floral needlepoints covered the walls, which were of white plaster, and her gardening books filled the white-painted shelves. A rustic brick fireplace with a blackened surround left a permanently charred, woody smell in the air.

Judy slid her phone out of her back pocket, scrolled to her phone log, and pressed the number to return Linda Adler's call. It rang and rang, but the call went to voicemail and she left a message. Next she pressed in the number for her boyfriend Frank, whom she had already called on the drive to her aunt's, but he hadn't called back. He liked Aunt Barb, and Judy knew he would be upset by the news about her cancer, which was why she hadn't left it on his voicemail or sent him a text.

"What's up, babe!" Frank shouted, when the call connected. The background was noisy shouting and laughing, punctuated by the *thwap thwap thwap* of basketballs hitting a gym floor.

"Where are you? Did you get my messages?" Judy tried to swallow her annoyance. He hadn't listened to her messages, because he never did, which drove her crazy.

"I can't, I'm filling in on a round-robin tournament!"

"You're not supposed to be playing basketball." Judy didn't bother to disguise her dismay. Frank had broken his hand on the job and was wearing a cloth brace for two more weeks.

"Don't sweat it, babe! It's not a problem!"

"Frank, think. Of course it's a problem. It's crazy."

"Don't worry! I know what I'm doing! I shoot with my right hand!"

"Are you serious? What if your hand gets bumped? Or you fall? What about your brace?"

"I removed it! That's why it's removable!" Frank burst into laughter, which got drowned out by wild cheering. "It's an emergency!"

"A basketball emergency?"

"Relax, Mom!"

"I *am* relaxed." Judy tried not to act like his mother, but it was difficult when he acted like a child. "And what about the dog? Could

the vet dip her?”

~~“I couldn’t take her because the guys needed me, Joey got sick! I can’t talk now! We’re about to hit the court! Call you later!”~~

“No, wait, listen.” Judy worried she would be overheard by her mother or Aunt Barb, so she got up and walked around the couch, cupping her hand over her phone. “I won’t be home tonight. I’m staying at Aunt Barb’s—”

“What did you say? I can’t hear you!”

Judy went to the front door, twisted the knob, and went outside, closing the door behind her. It had gotten dark and cold, but she hugged herself. “Aunt Barb’s cancer is stage II—”

“Babe!” Frank shouted, impatient. “Can’t you talk louder? There’s too much noise! I can’t hear you, I gotta go!”

“This is important!” Judy gritted her teeth. “I want to talk to you about—”

“Sorry, babe, I really gotta go! We’re up! Text me!” The line went dead.

Judy pressed END, but wasn’t ready to go inside. She sank onto the front step, holding on to her phone while Frank’s photo faded from the screen. She eyed the sky, in thought. There was no moon tonight, only a starless black blanket that illuminated nothing. She’d learned today that life really was short, and it wasn’t just a cliché. Her biological clock was ticking, and she wondered if she was as happy as she used to be with Frank. He was so terrific and fun when times were easy, but in the rough patches, he seemed to fade away. She didn’t know if he was selfish or if she’d just trained him wrong, being basically independent. And she didn’t know if she had to do anything about it, necessarily.

Suddenly, her attention was drawn by a black police cruiser driving slowly down the street, its high beams on. It paused at the houses, then stopped in front of her aunt’s house.

Judy straightened up, surprised. The cruiser’s powerful engine rumbled into silence, and two uniformed officers emerged, alighting from the driver’s side and passenger seats. The cops met in front of her aunt’s house, then walked up her walkway toward the front door. Judy couldn’t see their features in the dim light, but they made similar silhouettes, about the same size and build. She rose to greet them. “Hello, Officers, can I help you?”

“Good evening, I’m Officer Bart Hoffman, and this is my partner Officer Paul Ramirez of the East Grove Police Department. Are you Barb Moyer?”

“No,” Judy answered. “That’s my aunt.”

“Is she here?” Officer Hoffman’s jaw set in a grim line, but that was all Judy could see of him under the patent bill of his cap.

“Yes, she’s inside.”

“We’ll need to talk to her.”

Chapter Five

The policemen stood in front of the couch, their black Windbreakers and thick black gun-and-radiobelt belts incongruous in the chintzy vibe of the cottage. Both men had taken off their black caps and held them almost identically, in the crook of their elbows.

Judy gestured. "Aunt Barb, this is Officer Hoffman and Officer Ramirez. Gentlemen, Barb Moyer, and my mother, Delia Carrier."

"Ladies, pleased to meet you." Officer Hoffman was the older of the two, forty-something with cool slate-blue eyes and a skinny face, his hair buzzed into an old-school cut. Officer Ramirez was much younger, with warm brown eyes, a wide-open face, and light acne scars pitting his cheeks. He was bald but it looked as if he shaved his head, not came by it naturally.

"So, Officers," Aunt Barb said, blinking. "What can I do for you?"

"We'd like to talk to you for a moment or two." Officer Hoffman nodded. "Do you mind if we sit down?"

"Not at all. Please, have a seat." Aunt Barb eased into the club chair, and Judy stood next to her, hovering protectively at her elbow.

Officer Hoffman cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, but we have to inform you that we found Rita Lopez deceased this evening, in her vehicle in East Grove. The coroner hasn't yet determined the cause of death, but it appears that it was a natural death, a heart attack. Please accept our condolences."

For a minute, nobody said anything. Officer Hoffman looked tense. Aunt Barb blinked. Judy didn't recognize the name, so she stood mute next to her mother.

"This is awkward, Officers." Aunt Barb frowned slightly. "I don't know anyone named Rita Lopez. Are you sure you have the right house?"

Officer Hoffman pursed his lips, which were thin. "Your name and address were listed as her emergency contact in a card in her wallet."

"I was?" Aunt Barb asked, taken aback. "May I see the card?"

"Sorry, we don't have it with us. Hang on a sec." Officer Hoffman extracted a skinny notebook from his back pocket, then produced a ballpoint pen from inside his Windbreaker. He flipped through the pages of his notebook, then read off a phone number. "Is that your cell-phone number?"

"Why, yes, it is."

Officer Hoffman made another note, then looked up. "The deceased had a Pennsylvania driver's license in her wallet, under the name Rita Lopez. The photo was a match, but grainy." He flipped back a few pages in his notepad. "The vehicle she was found in had Pennsylvania plates, TAJ 3039. Is that your friend's license plate?"

"I don't know."

Officer Hoffman flipped a few pages back again. "The vehicle was registered in Arizona under the name of Anna Martinez, 387 Canary Lane, in Mesa. Do you know anyone by that name, Ms. Moyer?"

"No, I don't." Aunt Barb tugged on her head scarf.

"It's possible that Rita Lopez isn't her real name or the name that you know her by." Officer Hoffman checked his notebook. "The deceased is a Hispanic female, mid-fifties, with short dark hair. Height about 5'1", weight about 150 pounds. She was wearing an Eagles T-shirt and jeans."

“Iris?” Aunt Barb recoiled, her hand flying to her cheek.

Judy gasped, horrified. She flashed on Iris, wearing her Eagles T-shirt and jeans, then looked over at her mother, whose mouth had dropped open, her lips parted in surprise.

“Officer. No, wait.” Aunt Barb was shaking her head. “It can’t be Iris. She’s at work now.”

Officer Hoffman consulted his notebook again. “The deceased was found this evening, at about 8:05 P.M., in a vehicle by the side of the road, on Brandywine Way, facing west. The vehicle was a brown Honda, two-door, 1984.”

Aunt Barb kept shaking her head. “That’s Iris’s car, but it can’t be her. Somebody must’ve stolen her car.”

“What is Iris’s last name and her address?”

“Wait, hold on.” Aunt Barb paused, flushing. “I’m not sure I should tell you that. That’s her personal business.”

“Did your friend enter the country legally or illegally?”

“Why?” Aunt Barb pursed her lips.

“If she entered legally and we know the point of entry, we could check her fingerprints, on file there. Usually the undocumented carry a *MICA* or a *matricula*, an identity card from the Mexican consulate, but she didn’t.” Officer Hoffman paused. “Ms. Moyer, we’re not Immigration, we’re the East Grove Police. Our only interest is identifying the deceased, notifying her next of kin, and liaising with the county coroner to return her body to her loved ones.”

“I don’t know.”

Judy swallowed hard, listening. She didn’t like Aunt Barb’s lying to the police, but she understood that her aunt was just protecting her friend. She hoped Iris was alive, but even if somebody had stolen Iris’s car, there was no explanation for how they got her clothes, too. Plenty of people in the Philadelphia suburbs wore Eagles’ regalia, but it was too coincidental that her aunt’s name, address, and cell number were on a card in the wallet.

Judy’s mother returned with a glass of water and offered it to Aunt Barb. “Here we go, honey. Have some.”

“Thanks.” Aunt Barb set the glass down on the wooden coffee table, untouched.

“We do need to get a personal ID.” Officer Hoffman hesitated. “We have an email photograph of the deceased, taken at the scene. We can show it to you.”

“Why didn’t you say so?” Aunt Barb held out her hand. “Let me see that picture. We can settle this here and now.”

Judy squeezed her aunt’s arm. “Aunt Barb, let me look instead. You don’t want to see that.”

“I’m okay.” Aunt Barb faced Officer Hoffman. “Please, let me see the photo.”

Officer Hoffman exchanged a look with Officer Ramirez, who pulled a BlackBerry from his Windbreaker pocket, hit a few buttons, and presumably downloaded the photo, pausing before he handed it over.

Aunt Barb accepted the phone and looked down. “No,” she whispered, hushed. “No, it’s not possible. Iris?”

“Aunt Barb, I’m so sorry.” Judy put an arm around her aunt’s shoulders, feeling a wave of sympathy.

“Oh no, no, no. This can’t ... be.” Aunt Barb burst into tears and buried her face in her hands, dropping the phone.

Judy’s mother grabbed some Kleenexes from a box on the table and handed them to Judy for Aunt Barb, then picked up the phone and handed it to Officer Hoffman.

Aunt Barb sobbed, hoarse sobs racking her frail frame. “She should have been ... at work. Why wasn’t she ... at work?”

Judy hugged her aunt close. “Maybe she wasn’t feeling well, so she left work and went home?”

Judy’s mother nodded, dry-eyed, taking her place behind the chair. “That’s probably what it was, Barb. You never know, she could have been nauseated. Nausea is a sign of heart attack. Jaw pain, too. Shoulder pain. Women often mistake warning signs. They think the problem is the flu, but it’s not. Did you know that?”

Judy knew her mother was talking only to fill the silence, so she didn’t answer, but kept rubbing her aunt’s back.

“No, no ... this is too awful, it can’t be. It just can’t be. I just can’t believe ... it’s her.”

“Ladies, excuse us.” Officer Hoffman rose quietly, and Officer Ramirez followed suit. “We’ll leave now and give you some privacy.”

“Officers, no, wait.” Aunt Barb lifted her face from her palms. Tears filled her eyes, her brow collapsed into deep furrows, and her downturned mouth made a mournful gash. “I want to go, I want to ... see her. Where is she?”

“What?” Judy asked, aghast. She couldn’t imagine her aunt’s going to the scene and seeing the body.

Judy’s mother frowned. “Barb, no, you’re not thinking clearly. You’ve had a shock. Stay home, please. You have so much to do. Your friends from work have been calling. You have to call them back.”

Office Hoffman blinked. “Mrs. Moyer, there’s no need for you to go to the scene. A photo ID suffices for a personal ID, for our purposes.”

“I want to see her.” Aunt Barb took a long final sniffle, but her lips trembled, curling into a miserably wiggly line.

“Aunt Barb, this is too awful to do—”

“No, it’s not, I can do it.” Her aunt shook her head, stricken. “I know what death looks like. I saw my parents. I saw Steve, I was with him. I held his hand.” Aunt Barb pursed her lips, as if what she was about to say physically pained her. “Iris carried my name and number in her wallet. She thought I was there for her. Now I will be. I’m going. I’ll just get my purse, Officer.”

Judy sighed inwardly. Her aunt may have been the baby of the family, but when she wanted to do something, there was no stopping her. It was no accident that she could grow the notoriously tricky heirloom roses. “Aunt Barb, let me go with you then.”

“I’d love that, if you don’t mind.”

Chapter Six

Judy parked her tomato-red Volkswagen Beetle behind the police cruiser, on a long, straight stretch of Brandywine Way, a single-lane backroad through acres of shorn hayfields, which would have been pitch black except for the police activity. Uniformed police officers and men in ties and jackets stood in the street, talking in groups. Several police cruisers parked, with their red, white, and blue lights flashing silently from a light bar atop their roofs. Red flares marked a perimeter, sending smoke trailing into the air, where it vanished. In the center of the scene, its front bumper buried in a huge hay roll, sat an old brown Honda.

Judy looked over at her aunt, who had sobbed softly during most of the ride. “Aunt Barb?” she said, touching her arm. “We’re here.” “Okay.” Her aunt dabbed her nose, then put her Kleenex away in the pocket of her parka. She had on a red knit cap and seemed lost in her maroon parka, which dwarfed her since she’d lost weight. Her skin looked pale even in the dim interior, lighted only by the flashing lights of the police cruiser in front of them. “Thanks for taking me. I just want to see her, for myself.”

“I understand.” Judy patted her aunt’s arm, stuffed in the thick parka.

“I know she’s gone, but I don’t know, in a way. It’s unreal to me, it’s abstract. Does that make any sense?”

“Sure,” Judy answered, meaning it. She knew-but-didn’t-know so many things in her life. She knew-but-didn’t-know that she wouldn’t marry Frank. She knew-but-didn’t-know that she wanted to be a partner. She knew-but-didn’t-know that she wanted to be closer to her mother. She knew-but-didn’t-know that Aunt Barb could die. “I think it’s good that we came.”

“Thanks.” Aunt Barb closed her eyes, and a tear rolled down her cheek, illuminated by the flashing lights. She wiped it away quickly. “Iris was my best friend. I didn’t want to say so before, in front of your mother. I was afraid that she—or my friends at work, whoever—would judge me.”

“I wouldn’t have,” Judy said softly.

“I know that, but shame on me. Iris has such a good heart. She always understood how I was feeling, even when Steve died. She was there.” Aunt Barb frowned, blinking wetly. “Please don’t take that the wrong way. You and your mom were there, too. But after the funeral, when everybody went home and the casseroles were eaten and the phone calls stopped, Iris was there.” Tears brimmed in Aunt Barb’s eyes, threatening to spill over again. “I told everybody at work that my garden healed me after Steve passed, but it was really her.” Aunt Barb’s lower lip puckered, her tears pooled in her eyes. “She’s my best friend. I never even said so, before now. I never even told her, and now it’s too late.”

Judy’s heart broke for her. “Aunt Barb, I’m sure she knew.”

“But still, I should have told her, or you or your mom and people at work. Why didn’t I?” Aunt Barb wiped her eyes, shaking her head. “Because I was ashamed? Was it class or race? Or money? What’s the difference? I’m a moral coward. We got along great. We talked about everything. We laughed and laughed.” Aunt Barb wiped her cheeks and eyes, then seemed to will her tears to subside. “I’ll find a way to make it up to her. I will bury her and I will mourn her.”

Judy touched her arm again. “I’ll help you.”

“I knew you would.” Aunt Barb managed a sad smile. “You know who my emergency contact is, now that your uncle is gone?”

“My mom?”

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