

## CHAPTER ONE

I would have to light my bra on fire.

And my thong.

It is unfortunate that I feel compelled to do this, because I am particular about my bras and underwear. I spent most of my childhood in near poverty, wearing scraggly underwear and fraying bras held together with safety pins or paper clips, so now I insist on wearing only the truly elegant stuff.

‘Burn, bra, burn,’ I whispered, as the golden lights of morning illuminated me to myself. ‘Burn, thong, burn.’

I studied the man sprawled next to me under my white sheets and white comforter, amidst my white pillows. He was muscled, tanned, had a thick head of longish black hair, and needed a shave.

He had been quite kind.

I would use the lighter with the red handle!

I envisioned the flame crawling its way over each cup like a fire-serpent, crinkling my thong and turning the crotch black and crusty.

Lovely.

I stretched, pushed my skinny brown braids out of my face, fumbled under the bed, and found my bottle of Kahlúa.

I swigged a few swallows as rain splattered on the windows, then walked naked across the wood floor of my loft to peer out. The other boxy buildings and sleek skyscrapers here in downtown Portland were blurry, wet messes of steel and glass.

I have been told that the people in the corporate building across the way can see me when I open my window and lean out, and that this causes a tremendous ruckus when I'm nude, but I can't bring myself to give a rip. It's my window, my air, my insanity. My nudeness.

Besides, after that pink letter arrived yesterday, I needed to breathe. It made me think of my past, which I wanted to avoid, and it made me think of my future, which I also wanted to avoid.

I opened the window, leant way out, and closed my eyes as the rain twisted through my braids, trickling down in tiny rivulets over the beads at the ends, then my shoulders and boobs.

'Naked I am,' I informed myself. 'Naked and partly semi-sane.'

I did not want to do what that letter told me to do.

No, it was not possible.

I stretched my arms way out as if I were hugging the rain, the Kahlúa bottle dangling, and studied myself. I had an upright rack, a skinny waist, and a belly button ring. Drops teetered off my nipples one by one, pure and clear and cold. I said aloud, 'I have cold nipples. Cold nips.'

When I was drenched, I smiled and waved with both hands, hoping the busy buzzing boring worker bees in the

office buildings were getting their kicks and jollies. They needed kicks and jollies.

‘Your minds are dying! Your souls are decaying! Get out of there!’ I brought the Kahlúa bottle to my mouth, then shouted, ‘Free yourself! *Free yourself!*’

Satisfied with this morning’s creative rant, I padded to my kitchen and ran a hand across the black granite slab of my counter, then crawled on it and laid down flat like a naked human pancake, my body slick with rainwater, my feet drooping over the edge.

I stared at the pink letter propped up on the backsplash. I could smell her flowery, lemony perfume on it. It smelt like suffocation.

No screaming, I told myself. *No screaming.*

Suddenly I could feel Cecilia in my head. I closed my eyes. I felt abject despair. I felt fear. I felt bone-cracking exhaustion.

The phone rang, knocking the breath clean out of my lungs.

It was Cecilia. *I knew it.*

This type of thing happened between us so much we could be featured on some freak show about twins. A week ago I called her when I heard her crying in my brain. I couldn’t even *think* she was so noisy. When I reached her, sure enough, she was hiding in a closet and bawling her eyes out. ‘Quiet down,’ I’d told her.

‘Shut up, Isabelle,’ she’d sputtered. ‘Shut up.’

We are fraternal twins and our mind-twisting psychic link started young. When we were three, Cecilia was attacked by a dog. He went straight for her throat. She was in our front yard, I was at the grocery store with Momma. At the exact same time she was bitten, I started shrieking and clutched my

neck, which felt as if it had been stabbed. I fell to the ground and frantically kicked the air before I passed out. Momma later told me she thought the devil had attacked my very soul.

Another example: two years ago, when I was working in some squalid village in India, teeming with the poorest of the poor, my stomach started to burn and swell. I had to ride back to the city in a cart with chickens. Cecilia needed an emergency appendectomy.

One more bizarre example: when I was photographing the American bombing of Baghdad, I dove behind a concrete barrier as bullets whizzed by. One grazed my leg. Cecilia's message on my cell phone was hysterical. She thought I'd died, because she couldn't move her leg.

It's odd. It's scary. It's the truth.

I covered my face with my hands. I did not answer the phone, waiting until the answering machine clicked on. I heard her voice – think drill sergeant meets Cruella De Vil.

'Pick up the phone, Isabelle.'

I did not move.

'I know you're there,' Cecilia/Cruella accused, angry already. Cecilia/Cruella is almost always angry. It started after that one terrible night with the cocked gun and the jungle visions when we were kids.

I tapped my forehead on the counter. 'I'm not here,' I muttered.

'And you're listening, aren't you?' I heard the usual impatience.

I breathed a hot, circular mist of steam onto the counter and shook my head. 'No,' I said. 'No, I'm not listening.'

'Hell, Isabelle, I know you're wiggled out and upset and plotting a trip to an African village or some tribal island to

get out of this, but it's not gonna work. Forget it. You hear me, damn it. Forget it.'

I blew another steam circle. A raindrop plopped off my nose like a liquid diamond. 'You swear too much, and I'm not *upset*,' I said, so quiet. 'Why should I be *upset*? I will not do what she says. If I do I will be crushed in her presence and what is sane will suddenly seem insane. Mrs Depression will come and rest in my head. I'll have none of that.' I shivered at the thought.

'And you're scared. I can feel your fear,' she accused. 'Ya can't hide that.'

'I don't do scared anymore,' I said, still shivering. 'I don't.'

'We're going to talk about what happened to you, too, Isabelle. Don't think you can keep that a secret,' she insisted, as if we were having a normal conversation. 'Pick up the damn phone before I really get pissed.'

I loved Cecilia. She did not deserve, no one deserved, what had come down the pike for her last year with that psycho-freak pig/husband of hers. My year had not been beautiful, either, but hers was worse.

'Isabelle!' Cecilia/Cruella shouted, waiting for me to pick up. 'Fine, Isabelle. *Fine*. Buck up and call me when you get out of bed and the man's gone.'

I flipped my head up. *She knew!* So often she knew about the men. She told me once, 'Think of it this way: I don't get the fun of the sex you have, but I sometimes know it's happened by the vague smell of a cigarette.'

See? Freaky.

'I'm already out of bed, so quit nagging,' I muttered.

'Is,' she whispered, the machine hardly picking up her voice. 'Don't leave me alone here.'

‘Cecilia hardly ever whispers,’ I whispered to myself. ‘She is beyond desperate.’ I ignored the tidal wave of guilt.

‘You have to help me. You have to help *us*,’ she said.

No, I don’t have to help. I do not have to help you, or her.

‘I can’t do it without you. I will go right over the edge, like a fat rhino leaping over a cliff.’ She hung up.

I am going to live my own life as sanely as possible. My answer, then, has to be no. No, no, no, Cecilia.

I conked my head against the counter, then tilted the Kahlúa bottle sideways into my mouth. I rarely drink, but Kahlúa for breakfast is delicious. I licked a few droplets right off the counter when they splattered, my beads clicking on the granite.

The man in my bed stirred. I raised my head from the counter, mildly interested as to what he’d do next.

I couldn’t remember his name. Did he have a name? I flipped over and stared at the open silver piping on my ceiling. Certainly he had a name. Because I couldn’t remember it didn’t mean he had no name.

The man turned over. Nice chest!

Surely this man’s mother gave him a name.

For a wee flash of time, I let myself feel terrible. Cheap and dirty for yet another one-night stand.

‘Ha,’ I declared. ‘Ha. This night must end right now.’

I rolled off my counter, grabbed a pan from my cupboard, and filled it with cold water.

When it was filled to the brim, I balanced it on my head, still clutching the Kahlúa bottle with two fingers, and teetered like a graceless acrobat on a wire to the man with no known name. ‘Goodbye to the night, hello to the incineration of my blue-and-white lacy bra.’

I ignored the three- by four-foot framed black-and-white photographs I'd taken hanging on my wall. Everyone in them was traumatised and I didn't need to stare at their eyes today. They were people. They were kids. That bothered me. That's why I hung them in my loft. So they would never, ever stop bothering me.

That nagging question popped up: would I ever shoot photos again after what happened?

The man in my bed had been impressed when he'd found out who I was. I am not impressed with myself. I was not impressed with him.

I put the pan down, tore my white fluffy comforter away from the man, then dumped the cold water over his head. It hit him square between the eyes and he shot out of bed like a bullet and landed on his feet within a millisecond, his fists up. Military training, I presumed.

'That was fast,' I told him, dropping the pan to the floor and swilling another swig of Kahlúa.

'*What the hell?*' He was coughing and sputtering and completely confused. '*What the hell?*'

'I said, that was fast. Most men don't jump up as fast as you did. You're quick. Quick and agile.'

He ran his hand over his face and swore. 'What did you do that for? *Are you insane?*'

'One, yes, I am. Insane. I'm still sensitive about that particular issue so let's not discuss it, and two, I did it because I need you up and at 'em.' I sat down in my curving, chrome chair and crossed my legs. The chrome chilled my butt. 'You can go now.'

I did not miss the hurt expression in his eyes, but I dismissed it as fast as I could.

‘What do you mean, I can go?’ he spat out, flicking water away from his hair.

‘I mean, you can go. Out the door. We had one night. We don’t need another one. We don’t need to chitchat. Chitchat makes me nauseated. I can’t stand superficiality. I’m done. Thanks for your time and efforts.’

I watched his mouth drop open in shock. Nice lips!

‘Out you go.’ See, this is the part of me that I despise. I truly do.

He shook his head, water flicking off like a sprinkler. ‘You’ve got to be kidding.’

‘Nope. No joke. None.’ I got up and went to the front door and opened it. ‘Goodbye. Tra la la, goodbye.’

He stood, flabbergasted, naked and muscley and wet, then snatched up his shirt and yanked it over his head. ‘I thought...’ He ran a hand through his hair. ‘I like you...we had fun...’

‘I don’t do fun.’ No, I was past fun with men. That died when he couldn’t control his nightmares followed by the rake and fertiliser incident.

‘You don’t *do* fun?’

He was befuddled, I knew that – completely befuddled. I love that word.

I felt a stab of guilt but squished it down as hard as I could so it could live with all my other guilt.

‘Tootie scootie,’ I drawled at him. ‘Scoot scoot.’

He wiped trickles of water off his face.

For long seconds, I didn’t think he was going to do what I told him to do. He did not appear to be the type of man who took orders from others well. He appeared to be the type that gave the orders.

But not here.

I took another swig of Kahlúa. Yum. ‘Don’t mess with me.’

‘I’m not going to mess with you. I thought I’d take you to breakfast—’

‘No. Out.’ Out. Out of my life. Out of my head.

He shook his head in total exasperation, water dripping from his ears. ‘Fine. I’m outta here. Where are my pants?’

I nodded towards a crammed bookshelf where they’d been thrown. He yanked them on, his eyes searching my loft.

‘My jacket?’

I nodded towards the wooden table my friend Cassandra had carved. We had met in strange circumstances that I try not to dwell on. There were smiling mermaids all over it, swimming through an underwater garden. She’d painted it with bright, happy colours. Two weeks after that, she jumped off one of the tallest buildings in Portland after a luncheon in her honour. She’d left her entire estate to an after-school program for minority youth, which I administered.

Days later I received a letter in the mail from her. There were two words on the yellow sticky note inside the envelope. It said, ‘Rock on.’

I watched him toss my pretty, blue and white lacy bra off his shoe and onto my red leather couch. It would soon be ashes, taken away by the wind off my balcony. Hey. Maybe my bra would land on a mermaid’s head!

I opened the door wider.

He stared down at me, his eyes angry and...something... something else was lurking there. Probably hurt. Maybe humiliation.

I nodded. ‘Please don’t take offence. It’s not personal.’

‘Not personal?’ He bellowed this. ‘*Not personal?* We made

love last night, in your bed. That's not *personal*?

'No, it's not. This is all I can do. One night.'

'That's it? Ever?' He put his palms up. 'You never have relationships with people more than one night?'

'No.' I tilted my head. He was gorgeous. Cut the hair and you'd have a dad. But I would not be the mom, that was for sure. I closed my eyes against that old pain. 'Never.'

He gave up. 'You take the cake.' He turned to go, his shirt clinging to him.

Poor guy. He'd woken up with a swimming pool on his face. 'I like cake. Chocolate truffle rum is the best, but I can whip up a mille-feuille with zabaglione and powdered sugar that will make your tongue melt. My momma made me work in the family bakery and darned if I didn't learn something, now get out.'

I put a hand on his chest and pushed, leaning against the door when he left.

I would burn the bra and the thong and try to forget.

The rain would help me.

Rain always does.

It washes out the memories.

Until the sun comes out. Then you're back to square one and the memories come and get ya.

They come and get ya.

I grabbed my lighter with the red handle from the kitchen, lighter fluid, a water bottle, my lacy bra and thong, and opened the french doors to my balcony. The wind and rain hit like a mini-hurricane, my braids whipping around my cheeks.

One part of my balcony is covered, so it was still dry. I put the bra and thong in the usual corner on top of a few straggly,

burnt pieces of material from another forgettable night on a wooden plank and flicked the lighter on. The bra and thong smoked and blackened and wiggled and fizzled and flamed.

When they were cremated, I doused them with water from the water bottle. No sense burning down the apartment building. That would be bad.

I settled into a metal chair in the uncovered section of my balcony, the rain sluicing off my naked body, and gazed at the skyscrapers, wondering how many of those busy, brain-fried, robotic people were staring at me.

Working in a skyscraper was another way of dying early, my younger sister, Janie, would say. ‘It’s like the elevators are taking you up to hell.’

Right out of college she got a job as a copywriter for a big company on the twenty-ninth floor of a skyscraper in Los Angeles and lasted two months before her weasely, squirmy boss found the first chapter of her first thriller on her desk.

The murderer is a copywriter for a big company on the twenty-ninth floor of a skyscraper in Los Angeles. In the opening paragraphs she graphically describes murdering her supercilious, condescending, snobby boss who makes her feel about the size of a slug and how his body ends up in a trash compactor, his legs spread like a pickled chicken, one shoe off, one red high heel squished on the other foot. That was the murderer’s calling card.

No one reports his extended absence, including his wife, because people hate him as they would hate a gang of worms in their coffee.

Janie was fired that day, even though she protested her innocence. That afternoon she sat down and wrote the rest of the story, non-stop, for three months. When she emerged from

her apartment, she'd lost twenty pounds, was pale white, and muttering. At four months she had her first book contract. When the book was published, she sent it to her ex-boss. And wrote, 'Thanks, dickhead! With love, Janie Bommarito,' on the inside cover.

It became a bestseller.

She became a recluse because she is obsessive and compulsive and needs to indulge all her odd habits privately.

The recluse had received a flowery lemon-smelling pink letter, too. So had Cecilia, whose brain connects with mine.

The rain splattered down on me, the wind twirly whirled, and I raised the Kahlúa bottle to my lips again. 'I love Kahlúa,' I said out loud as I watched the water river down my body, creating a little pool in the area of my crotch where my legs crossed. I flicked the rain away with my hand, watched it pool again, flicked it. This entertained me for a while. Off in the distance I saw a streak of lightning, bright and dangerous.

It reminded me of the time when my sisters and I ran through a lightning storm to find Henry in a tree.

I laughed, even though that night had not been funny. It had been hideous. It had started with a pole dance and ended with squishy white walls.

I laughed again, head thrown back, until I cried, my hot tears running down my face off my chin, onto my boobs, and down my stomach. They landed in the pool between my legs and I flicked the rain and tear mixture away again. The tears kept coming and I could feel the darkness, darkness so familiar to me, edging its way back in like a liquid nightmare.

I did not want to deal with the pink letter that smelt of her flowery, lemony perfume.

## CHAPTER TWO

She was wielding a knife.

It had a black handle and a huge, jagged, twisty edge.

If evil was in a knife, this was evil incarnate.

She rotated it in front of my face, wearing a fixed, contemplative, detached expression. I whipped my head back, my breath catching.

‘I think she’ll use this,’ Janie said, poking it into the air. ‘This would do the job.’

I rolled my eyes and pushed past her into her houseboat, being careful to avoid the evil one.

‘You need to smile when you come through my door, Isabelle.’

‘I smiled.’ I had not smiled. I wiped rain off my face.

‘You did not.’ My sister stood by the door, her arms crossed, that shining blade pointed towards her ceiling.

‘I smiled in my heart, Janie. Behind the left ventricle.’

She tapped her foot four times.

‘I can’t believe I’m doing this.’ I stalked past her, opened the door, slammed it behind me, knocked four times. More

rain dive-bombed down on my head. She opened it. She smiled.

I smiled with my teeth only, like a tiger in menopause, and sidled by her. She was playing a Vivaldi CD.

‘Thank you,’ Janie said. She patted her reddish hair, which was back in a bun.

Cecilia and I are protective of our younger sister, Janie, and her...*quirks*. As she said one time, ‘The whole planet does not need to know that I have to touch each one of my closet doors in the same place with the same amount of pressure before I go to bed each night and if I do the wrong amount of pressure on one door I have to do it again. And again. Sometimes a third time.’ She’d let a little scream out and buried her face in her hands when she’d told me that one.

‘What do you think of this knife, Isabelle?’ she asked me.

Janie’s eyes are bright green. I mean *bright green*. Luminescent. As usual, she was wearing a prim dress with a lace collar and comfortable (read: frumpy) shoes. She wore sensible beige bras that a nun might wear if she was eighty and blind. She was also wearing a white apron.

‘I think that knife is sharp and twisty.’

She sighed. I had disappointed her.

I headed towards her great room. Janie’s houseboat is located on a quieter part of the Willamette River, although you can see the skyscrapers in Portland from the front decks. The windows are floor to ceiling, and the river rolls right on by, as do storms, ducks, jet skis, canoes, and drunk boaters.

The rain made the view blurry and grey.

‘But do you think it offers up a sufficient amount of blinding fear?’

I turned around. ‘Yes. I’m blindingly scared to death of it.’

Janie uses white doilies and has plastic slipcovers over all her pink chairs. She has pink flowered curtains and has *tea* – tea with scones and cream and honey and sugar – every afternoon, like the British; listens to classical music; and reads the classics, like *Jane Eyre*. If she’s feeling wild, she listens to Yo-Yo Ma. She takes one bite of food, then four sips of tea. One bite of food, four sips of tea.

When she’s done with her tea she goes back to wringing people’s guts out of their stomachs with cattle prods.

‘You know, the next killer in my book is a grandma. She goes after mothers,’ Janie said. ‘She hated her own mother. Her own mother made her work all the time, locked her in closets, and schlepped her around the country in a dirty white trailer. She worked in a bar. The kid got lice.’

I stopped at that. ‘Now that’s special, Janie. *Special*. Think she won’t recognise who that is?’

‘I’ve changed her name.’ She said this with not a little defiance. ‘And we were never locked in closets. We chose to go there all on our own. To hide.’

I put my hands on my hips and stared at the ceiling, imagining how bad things would get once *she* got her hands on it. Oh, it would be ugly.

‘And!’ Janie said, stabbing the knife in the air. ‘The grandma in my book has white hair, she volunteers at the hospital in the gift shop, and at night – whack and stab, whack and stab.’

I groaned. ‘Must you be so graphic?’

Janie put the knife back in a case on her kitchen counter, slammed the lid, and tapped it four times. ‘Well, then. Fine. *Fine*.’

I ignored the tone.

Janie patted that bun of hers. ‘This grandma scares me. Last night, after I finished writing at 2:02 A.M., I went in my own closet and hid.’

‘The woman that *you* created scared *you*?’ Gall. ‘So, even though she’s only in your head, you hid in your own closet from her.’

She stared off into space. I knew she was waiting four seconds to answer my question. Why the obsession with the number four? I had no idea. Neither did she. She told me one time it was the ‘magic number in her head.’

‘She’s so uncontrollable. I can’t even control her when I’m writing about her. She does things and says things and I follow her around and write what I’m seeing and hearing and smelling. She’s a sick person. I don’t like her.’

‘Me neither. Maybe you should embroider her out of your life.’ Janie has to embroider flowers each night or she can’t sleep. When she’s done, she sews a pillow up – always white – and gives them to a group that counsels pregnant teenagers.

She fiddled with her apron. ‘Stop telling me you think my embroidery is stupid.’

‘I didn’t say that,’ I protested.

‘You didn’t need to. I can hear it in your tone.’

‘My tone? My tone?’

‘Yes, that condescending one!’ She turned around and faced the front of her house, then gasped.

‘What’s wrong?’ I got out of my chair.

‘Oh, nothing. *It’s nothing.*’ She turned around, fiddled with her apron.

I moved towards the front window, so I could see the walkway in front of her houseboat. I saw a man. Brown hair. Tall, a loping stride, bigger nose than normal, but not too big.

Not big enough to snarf down a fish. I figured he lived in the houseboat down the way.

I turned around. Grinned at Janie.

‘Don’t even think about it—’ she breathed.

‘Is that?’ I raised my eyebrows, laughed, and made a dart for the door.

‘Oh, no, you do not, Isabelle Bommarito!’

I opened the door and the rain came on in.

‘Come back here, right this minute!’

But I had already stepped over the threshold to the wood walkway. She was right behind me and grabbed me around the waist, both arms. ‘Don’t you dare.’

I whispered, struggling, ‘I can help you to meet him—’

‘*I don’t need your help!*’ she hissed.

‘Let go of me, Janie,’ I whispered. ‘I’m helping you!’

I tried to pursue Big Nose, but she held on to me like a human octopus, one leg twisted around mine, both of us grunting with effort. ‘Get off of me.’

‘Never.’ She tightened her arms and lifted.

I wiggled around and tackled her and we ended up in a heap by her front door. Both of us went, ‘Ugh,’ when the air knocked out of our lungs. I held both her arms down, then whisked myself off her zippity quick and got a few steps. She scrambled up after me, her footsteps thudding, and shoved me to the ground. We rolled twice to the left, twice to the right, huffing and puffing.

She yanked at my ankle, tried to drag me back in. ‘You’re always trying to butt in—’

‘I am not trying to butt in.’ I tried to kick her hand with my other foot as she yanked me halfway into the air. I had no idea how she got so strong. ‘You need to get out of the

house and live,' I panted. 'I've been hearing about that man for months—'

'There you go again! That's your definition of living!' She wiped rain off her face. 'I don't want to sleep with each stud I meet! I want to find common interests, like a love of literature and the orchestra...and scones and tea! Besides, some of us like preserving ourselves for marriage!'

'What marriage?' I shrieked. 'You can't get married unless you date, and dating takes being able to say hello to a person of the male species from this planet.'

She flew at me like a little torpedo and landed on top of me, my face smashed down.

'Do you think it's healthy to stay home all day thinking up ways to kill people?' I huffed out, rain running down my neck.

'Do you think it's healthy,' she huffed back, 'to put a wall between yourself and everybody else?'

I whipped her over to her back. 'Do you think it's healthy to count how many steps you take to the bathroom and tap toilet paper?'

She gasped in outrage. 'Do you think it's healthy to keep a huge secret from your sisters, Isabelle? We know what happened to you, but you shut us out and you hide behind your camera like it's...like it's an eighteenth-century shield!' (I've mentioned her love of the classics?)

'You hide behind your front door, Embroidery Queen!'

She got me with an elbow to my neck for that one.

You might think we would be embarrassed by our behaviour: two grown women rolling around fighting on a deck.

Here's the truth: we are long past being embarrassed.

We kicked away from each other – kick, kick, kick – then Janie dove on top of me and we were face-to-face. She yelled, ‘Sometimes I think I hate you, Isabelle!’

‘Sometimes I think I hate you, too, Janie!’

We both grunted.

‘Well, I know I hate you both,’ another voice cut through, sharp and low. ‘What’s that got to do with anything? Now get the hell up, your neighbours are all spying out their windows wondering why two grown women are wrestling on a damn deck.’

With that, our sister, Cecilia, who has swinging long blonde hair, the voice of a logger, and weighs 280 pounds, *at least*, stepped over us.

Before she entered the houseboat, she smiled at Janie. As soon as she crossed the threshold she turned and scowled at both of us as if we were slimy algae. ‘Get the hell in here. We got big problems. We gotta get this figured out friggin’ quick. And don’t you two think you can say no. Your answer is yes, let’s start with that, damn it. *Yes.*’

She slammed the door.

‘We’re together on this, right?’ I panted. Janie was still laying on top of me, rain streaking down our faces. ‘We’re not going.’

‘Absolutely, positively not. No way.’

‘Our answer is no.’

‘No, no, no.’ Janie shook her head. ‘No.’

We hugged on it.

Within an hour I was contemplating a quick escape by cannonballing into the river. Janie was curled up, rocking back and forth, chanting, ‘I am worthy of praise, not abuse. I am worthy of praise, not abuse.’

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Cecilia shoved a chocolate doughnut into her mouth. ‘Momma wants you home to help.’

Janie wrung her hands, four wrings on one side, four on the other. ‘My therapist said going home was an anti-spiritual, regressive idea for me. It could set me back years on my personal development and social-psycho-ecstasy scale.’

‘Years from what?’ Cecilia demanded. ‘You sit alone in this pink and white houseboat, indulging all your weird habits and number counting and rituals and you write books about torture and murder. Honey.’ She did not say the word *honey* nice and polite. ‘There’s nowhere for you to go but up.’

‘I can’t go. I’m working.’

‘You can kill people in Trillium River, Janie.’

Cecilia shook her head at Janie, then fixed me with those blue eyes. ‘You’re coming, Isabelle.’

I snorted. Leave my loft with the view of the river? Live somewhere else when I’m still fighting all the blackness lurking around the edges of my life? Live with *her* again? ‘I don’t think so. Nope. Can’t come. Won’t come.’

‘You can keep the lingerie companies in business in Trillium River.’ Tiny doughnut pieces flew from her mouth in her fury. ‘I need you there.’

‘I’m working,’ I lied.

‘Give me a break, Isabelle. You’re not working. You’re too screwed up. You two mice are leaving the city and coming to the country. Hey, maybe you’ll learn there’s more to life than yourselves.’

‘That is unfair,’ Janie sputtered.

‘That’s so like you, isn’t it?’ I stood up and faced her. ‘You attack when you don’t get your way. You use fury to

control anyone who pisses you off. You get mean and nasty and believe that *your victim* deserved your attack and you sit back and hate them, never considering for one second that you might be wrong, never considering that, gee, you might do things that tick people off—’

‘*I attack?*’ Cecilia pointed at her chest. ‘*I attack?*’ She turned red, and I could tell her Mrs Vesuvius-like temper had triggered.

‘Yes, you attack. You hold grudges, you remember each tiny thing people did to offend you, you exaggerate to the point of lying—’

‘Listen up, you braided mental case and you wacko, tea-slurping crime writer, I have spent years, *years*, handling her and Henry and Grandma while you two indulged your weirdness and forced me to handle everything.’

‘That is not true.’ I wanted to smash that mouth of hers shut. ‘When the house needed a new roof, I paid for it. Janie paid for a remodelled kitchen. I paid for Momma and Grandma and Henry to stay at a beach house last summer. Janie sent them to the mountains because she knows that Henry loves the snow—’

‘You’ve sent *money*. Big deal. You’re both swimming in it. Janie, you’ve got so much money you could buy France. Neither one of you has hardly been home since you left for college and you live only an hour away. You know Momma reopened the bakery and you’ve done nothing to help!’

‘Cecilia,’ I snapped. ‘Janie and I paid for a live-in caregiver for Grandma and Henry. In fact, we interviewed a bunch of them, hired one, and sent her over.’

‘It didn’t work, did it?’ she shrieked, stomping her feet. ‘I told you it wouldn’t. I told you! Grandma thought she was an

ancient tribesman she met on an island during her final trip around the world as Amelia Earhart.'

'Why did Grandma think the caregiver was a tribesman?' Janie asked. She tapped the tips of her fingers together. 'There were no feather hats, no tribal war paint...'

'How the hell should I know?' Cecilia said, doughnut sugar spewing out of her mouth. 'She's got dementia. Henry didn't like the caregiver because he said she resembled a gecko. He ran away and hid in the shed under a trash can and the police had to come. Momma said the woman smelt like mothballs and death.'

'She didn't smell,' I protested. 'She was a nice lady. She was from Maine.'

'Maine Schmaine. They hated her. Momma told her she reminded her of Jack the Ripper, only with boobs. The caregiver asked me if Momma was insane, too.' Cecilia flung her head back, stared at the ceiling, and threw her arms up as if asking for deliverance.

Momma wasn't crazy. She was, however, a nutcase.

'Jack the Ripper?' Janie moaned. 'There is no correlation, none. Jack the Ripper was a killer in England who tore out—'

'We know who Jack the Ripper was,' Cecilia fumed. She picked up another doughnut. 'Let me lay it on the line, you two. I'm exhausted. I've had it. I'm not sleeping at night.' Tears filled her blueberry eyes, then started soaking her red face. 'I go from teaching kindergarteners, to the girls – they both have problems I haven't told you about – I help *her* out, handle Henry and Grandma...'

She put her hands over her face and started making these choking, gasping, snorting sounds as great gobs of tears rolled down. It about ripped my heart in two. 'I can't take

it anymore. The lawyers are fighting, and Parker and that... that...*slut*...'

Janie started crying, too. She always cries when one of us cries. Gentle, innocent heart. Killer on the keyboard, but she hates to see anyone in pain. I got up and put an arm around Cecilia.

'I can't take her anymore.' She sniffled and coughed and snorted again and I pulled her in close for a hug. 'And I can't... I can't...'

'You can't what?' we asked.

'I can't...'

She waved the doughnut. 'I can't stop eating.' She mumbled. 'I hate myself for it. I'm getting so fat, I can hardly walk. I can't tie my shoes. My blood pressure is as high as Venus and my cholesterol reading shows I have butter in my veins. The other day I was in my car and a boy oinked at me.'

I wanted to tie the boy up by his heels, attach him to a boom on a crane, and swing him around until his intestines slid out.

'Oh, oh! Bommarito hug!' Janie weeped out.

We did a three-way hug, our foreheads together. Cecilia smelt like doughnut. Janie smelt like fear. I smelt like a person who had too many regrets.

'OK,' I whispered, feeling myself spiralling into a deep chasm of doom. 'OK. I'll come.'

Janie leant against me and whimpered, 'Me too, Cecilia.'

Cecilia abruptly snapped her head up, away from our forehead powwow; wiped the tears from her face; and left our warm, snuggly, sisterly hug. Her face entirely composed, she grabbed her purse on her way out, waddling quite quickly.

'Good. Glad to hear it. See you two at the house,' she

ordered, no sign of the tears or unhappiness in her voice at all. She grabbed another doughnut. 'I'll let her know you're coming. She'll be frickin' delighted.'

The door slammed behind her.

I sank to the ground. So did Janie. She put her head on my stomach.

'She duped us again, didn't she?' I asked. '*Duped us.*'

'She manipulated our vulnerability. Our compassion and our womanhood. And we rehearsed this, Isabelle,' Janie whimpered. 'Our answer was no.'

'No, no, no – that was our answer.'

'I need my embroidery,' Janie whined. 'I need my embroidery.'

Shit. *Double shit.*

On the way home I got stuck in a traffic jam. Since I was on my motorcycle, I was happy it had stopped raining. When we were near the accident, we came to a complete halt to let the oncoming traffic go by. There were a couple of police cars, a fire truck, and an ambulance. An old blue truck had smashed into a light post and the beat-up camper trailer the driver was hauling was on its side. The light post now resembled the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

'What happened?' I asked a police officer who wandered over to chat about what a great motorcycle I had.

'The driver was high. Probably meth. He's going to court next week for distributing the stuff. His truck flew through the air with the greatest of ease. Like a bird. Like a torpedo. Like an idiot.' He shook his head. 'What an idiot.'

The driver was not strapped in, so he went through his windshield. Because he was high as a kite and relaxed, he

would live, which was somewhat unfortunate considering the long criminal record he had. He was the oldest son of an old, snobby family in the city.

‘Spoilt brat,’ the police officer muttered. ‘Grow kids up rich and they never turn out. Make ’em work, and you’ll teach ’em how to live and respect other people.’

As the tow trucks came, I stared at that trailer and shuddered.

It was a carbon copy of the one we’d lived in years ago.

The darkness pulled at me again, inch by inch, the hole waiting nearby. I had to stare at the trees on the side of the road and breathe.

She had been beyond desperate. But it was the trailer that had caused all the screaming. And the blood. All that blood.

Blood everywhere.

Once I got past the accident, I rode so fast on my bike I got a ticket.

‘Nice bike,’ the red-haired officer told me who pulled me over. ‘Who you running from so fast?’

Myself, I wanted to say.

I’m running from myself.

But I’m not quick enough to get rid of me.

## CHAPTER THREE

Momma lives in the Queen Anne Victorian home she grew up in before she rebelled and left right after high school but not before smashing my grandma Stella's mother's crystal punch bowl. She lives there with Grandma Stella, and our younger brother, Henry. Cecilia lives up the road on several acres about five minutes away.

The Queen Anne is situated a little outside the town of Trillium River, which nestles along the Columbia River on the Oregon side.

Trillium River changes each time I'm there. When we arrived in high school, traumatised and exhausted, it was small and dumpy. Now there are art galleries, cafés, coffee shops, bookstores, a gourmet ice-cream shop, and a classy tattoo parlour named The Painted Vein. There's also world-class windsurfing, skiing on Mt Hood, and nature fanatics can get high on nature.

Surrounding the town are orchards and farmland. My grandma's Queen Anne home, sitting on five acres, amidst a vast expanse of perfectly green lawn, can best be described as

cakelike. Why? Because it reminds me of a blue cake.

Built in 1899, it's four thousand square feet and light blue with white trim and white shutters, lacy lattice, a gabled roof, a huge wraparound covered porch on the main floor with an attached gazebo, a tower that Grandma visits often to 'hide her secrets,' and a sunroom filled with wicker furniture and walls of windows.

Inside there are nooks and crannies, two bay windows with window seats, built-in bookshelves and built-in china cabinets. The rooms are large and airy, with stained-glass windows in the living room and perfectly preserved antiques.

Two clematis, one with pink flowers and one with white, wind their way up and around the porch like no one's business.

I drove up on my motorcycle, with Janie behind me driving her silver Porsche. We would return to Portland soon and get my black Porsche. I had to have my motorcycle for mental escape.

Grandma's Queen Anne is the most charming home I've ever seen. Inside it smells like fresh-baked bread, vanilla, cinnamon, and history.

Our family's history.

I wanted to turn my bike and peel on out of there, one wheel up in the air.

Janie and I stood in front of the house together like soldiers before a battle, though we did not have any grenades or assault rifles with us.

The wind swirled around, like it was welcoming us home, fun and frolicking...mysterious.

I have never forgotten the wind here.

To me, the wind has always seemed like a person, with

all the mood swings and rampaging, out-of-control emotions that we have. Sometimes it's angry and whips around corners, sometimes it ruffles the river as it hurries towards the ocean, sometimes it puffs on by, gentle, caressing.

'The wind never stops,' Janie said, in wonder. 'Never.'

She grabbed my hand, pulsing it with her fingers. She does this when she gets nervous. She'll squeeze my hand four times, then pause, squeeze it four times, pause again. She gasped a little. Coughed. Breathed in. Breathed out.

'I feel faint,' I said. 'I may need a one-night stand.' Sometimes I try to humour myself when things are particularly bleak.

'I need to tap and count,' she replied. 'In fact, I think I'll pause for a sec and count the roof tiles.'

At that second, the door flew open and a man came sprinting out, legs pumping, arms waving. He was wearing a straw hat over brown curls, blue shorts, and a T-shirt that said ABC. His white shoes had Velcro straps. He had a tummy, he wasn't as tall as me, his eyes tilted, and his smile beamed, as usual.

He put his arms out wide as he hurtled towards us, screaming and laughing.

'They here! They here!' he shouted. His hat flipped off into that wind.

We knew what would happen.

'Now, Henry, no tackling us!' Janie said, so kind, because she loves Henry, but she backed away, hands up.

'Be gentle, Henry,' I said. 'Give us a nice, gentle hug. Gentle!' I love Henry, but I backed up, too, sticking close to Janie.

Henry was not to be stopped.

Within two seconds, Janie and I were splat on the grass, tackled by our happy, mentally disabled brother who was on top of us, laughing.

‘You home!’ he announced, giving us both a kiss. ‘You home for Henry! Yeah, yeah. H-E-N-R-Y-H-E-N-R-Y!’

I gave Henry a kiss on the forehead and said, ‘I love you, my brother, Henry.’

Henry giggled. ‘I love you, my sister, Is.’

Janie kissed both of his cheeks. We hugged him as my love for Henry walloped me hard.

I heard Janie counting out loud. Soon we would be with our momma, a tricky sorceress; our grandma, who thought she was Amelia Earhart; and our sister, Cecilia, who has a hurricane for a personality.

Honest to God, Henry is the only normal person in our family.

The only one.

A long wooden farm table slouched in the middle of the stunning, country-style kitchen Janie had paid to have remodelled so she could assuage the guilt she felt for not living here in the nuthouse with the viper.

A vase of flowers, purples and pinks, in a clear, curving glass vase sat on the table. On the windowsill was a collection of old, colourful glass bottles, the sunlight shimmering right through them. A set of french doors let in that ever-present, meandering wind.

Cecilia hugged both of us, bear-hug tight, then stood to my right, a sister-soldier in the battle against Momma/The Viper.

Momma did not bother to stand from where she was sitting at the table cracking walnuts when Janie and I entered.

She said, almost melodically, ‘Henry, darling, would you please go and pick me a bouquet of flowers? You’re the only one who can do it right.’

‘Yeah! OK dokay, Momma!’ Henry grabbed some scissors, blew us a kiss, then jump jump jumped out the door. ‘I bring the sisters in, now I get the flowers. I be right back!’

To get a full picture of Momma, blend together an older, blonde Scarlett O’Hara and the steely coldness of the Queen of England. Except Scarlett and the Queen were not conceived on the banks of the Columbia River, which is how Momma got her name.

River Bommarito has ash-blond hair that curves into a stylish bell to her shoulders. When we were younger, it was either elegantly brushed or wedged onto her head. The wedging happened if she was spending days or weeks in bed, her depression getting the best of her, as she screamed at us to *get the hell out*.

One day, for some mysterious reason, after she’d moulted, decayed, and sunk deeper into her own emotional pit, she’d get up, shower, apply her make-up, slip on a dress and heels, and it was like her depression never happened.

She’d get another job, usually a soul-shredding one, or her old boss would take her back because she made him so much money, and that was that. No explanation, no apology, no thanks to the three young daughters in the house for keeping things together while she dissolved into an almost-catatonic state.

No family meeting to discuss the trauma we’d recently lived through. The traumas became family secrets, never discussed or let out of the locked box.

Fortunately, after we sisters moved away, and Momma

got older and the very same Grandma Momma she had once called, to her face, ‘a wrinkled, mean hag-monster,’ slipped and slid into dementia, she rarely took to her bed.

Maybe Momma was hoping to enjoy as many sane days as she could before Grandma’s dementia caught up with her through the gene pool. Or maybe, because she was no longer in dire emotional and financial straits, she didn’t get depressed.

Or maybe she took drugs. She’d told us she didn’t take medication, but I wasn’t sure about that. Not sure at all.

Next to me Janie started counting, her fingertips meeting as she muttered each number. ‘One...two...three...four...’

I stuck my chin up a fraction of an inch.

Cecilia whispered, ‘Speak, witch.’

Momma glared at us, like we were larvae, then stood, carefully placing the walnut cracker on the table and swishing her hands together to get rid of any nut residue, her intense gaze never leaving ours.

‘So, the impossible girls have finally returned to help. Guilt has finally got the best of you after years of neglecting this family, hasn’t it?’ River is tiny like a ballerina and has the same eyes as Janie, bright green, but River’s eyes are a murky sea with a light on all the time behind the irises. ‘I’ve changed my mind. Throw out those pink letters I sent you. I’ve decided that we don’t need your help.’

Ah. So it would be this way. We grew up with her demands, her retractions, the guilt trips, righteous self-anger. I know what she is, and isn’t, but when I’m with her I can get things all screwed up, as if my head is in a blender and the blender is turned on to ‘grind’. ‘Momma, you’re going in for open-heart surgery. We got your letters, we came, we want to help you.’

‘I can handle it myself. Your presence here is no longer needed.’ Her green eyes shot tiny emerald-tipped daggers at us. We were bad larvae, she told us without saying a word. Bad larvae.

‘One...two...three...four...’ Janie whimpered.

‘You can’t do it all, Momma. You can’t take care of Grandma and Henry and the bakery and yourself.’

‘Cecilia can do it. Cecilia can help with Henry. She can move into this house and watch him and she can keep an eye on Grandma.’ She adjusted the starched white collar of her shirt. She wore a light pink sweater over it, pearl earrings, and beige slacks. Understated elegance. Prim and proper. ‘Cecilia has always been here for me.’

I glanced at Cecilia and felt my chest get all tight and emotional, if a chest can get emotional. The emotional toll for being ‘there’ for Momma had about puréed poor Cecilia.

‘Cecilia works as a kindergarten teacher, Momma. She has two kids. She has other problems, you know that.’ For example, she has to figure out a way to fillet Parker.

‘Cecilia is always the daughter who has come through for me and she will again. She can do anything. Anything.’

I felt my throat tighten, like it was shrinking. *Cecilia is always the daughter who has come through for me.* I told myself to buck up. Tears never helped a situation. Never. What were they worth? Nothing.

‘I’ve taught her everything she knows about the bakery and she’ll carry on. It won’t be the River Way, but Cecilia will do her best.’

I closed my eyes to smother my temper. Momma always did this, played one daughter against the other. You probably think that I hate Cecilia for this favouritism. That would be

entirely wrong. I feel sorry for Cecilia. Momma might declare that Cecilia is her favourite, but it's kind of like being the favourite of the devil's assistant.

'You are a separate person. You can control how you react to her,' muttered Janie. 'Breathe deeply.'

I heard her breathe deeply, then make a humming sound as she exhaled. 'Set a boundary. *Believe* in the boundary.'

'You and Janie came to help?' Momma arched a perfectly plucked brow. 'Perhaps Janie will teach all of us to count?'

'Momma, stop it, that is not nice,' Cecilia interrupted. 'Janie is here, isn't she?'

I could tell she was petrified at the thought of me and Janie bolting out the door. She knew she couldn't handle teaching and her kids and Grandma and Henry and the bakery. Who could?

No one.

'Janie's here, yes,' Momma mused, cupping the bottom of her perfect hair. 'But I don't understand how someone who can write bestselling novels from a houseboat in Portland can't make time for her momma.'

Janie took a gaspy breath. 'I do make time for you, Momma.'

'No, you don't, young lady. *You. Do. Not.* Too busy being famous for your momma.'

I heard Janie mutter to herself, 'Janie, you can't change her, you can only change your reaction to her.'

'Must you mutter to yourself?' Momma snapped. 'I told you not to do that aeons ago. Stand up straight, and what on earth are you wearing? Do you want to be frumpy and old? Why are you wearing flat brown shoes? And where did you get that dress? From a farmer's wife? Why do you have grey in your hair? I'm your *mother* and I don't let any grey show in my hair.'

She crossed her hands in front of her. ‘Grey is for old women. It’s for women who don’t care about their appearance anymore. You girls are only in your thirties, but...you’re getting old, Janie, I can tell. You should be working to retain your youth, not diving into middle age.’

‘Momma!’ Cecilia and I protested.

Janie muttered beside me, her voice teary. ‘She’s a hurt, deranged woman. You need to be strong. Rise above her pettiness.’

‘Stop that muttering this instant!’ Momma lashed out.

‘OK, Momma, OK,’ I said, putting my hand out towards her and stepping in front of Janie.

Janie whimpered and said to herself, ‘You are separate from her. She cannot hurt you if you don’t let her. Breathhhheee...’

How many times had I done this? How many times had Cecilia? Physically stepped in front of Janie to shield her from Momma? We were all her personal dartboards, but Momma’s remarks always aimed especially sharp at Janie. Probably because Janie wouldn’t fight back. I would. Sometimes Cecilia did. But not Janie. She crumpled.

‘Humph.’ Momma’s attention, diverted from Janie, turned on me. ‘I see you’re still wearing your hair in hundreds of little braids, Isabelle. Why is that? You’re not a black person, are you?’

Cecilia murmured, ‘And the witch speaks...’

‘I don’t believe I’m an African-American, Momma, unless there’s something you want to tell me?’

‘Black people braid their hair. Are you black? No, you’re not. It is unbecoming on you. It is tacky. It is classless.’

‘Actually, my braids are cool.’ I met her gaze, shoulders back. In my work, I had faced down murderous warlords,

scary men with mirrored glasses and guns; escaped from rioting, delirious mobs; and hidden behind tanks to avoid grenades. I could handle my momma.

Probably.

‘Cool?’ She rapped her perfectly polished red nails on the table. ‘Cool? You remind me of a hippie who might have camped out at Woodstock in the 1960s. Do you never wear a bra?’

‘Not today. I needed to feel loose today, like I wasn’t suffocating.’

‘Loose? A lady never should feel *loose*. Breasts should be in bras, close to the body, with no jiggle. So what is your excuse for flopping about in such a completely unladylike fashion?’

I resisted the urge to laugh at the hypocrisy behind that statement. ‘Well, I burnt a couple of bras this past week on my balcony and didn’t feel like putting another one on. Plus, I knew, Momma, that I would have the pleasure of your company.’

She simmered. ‘Pray tell, what does that have to do with bras?’

‘I needed to feel a bit freer, not constricted, because I know you’ll make me feel like I should commit myself and beg for a straitjacket.’

She drew in a deep breath, stuck her bosom out. ‘You will not speak to me like that. I’ll not have it! It’s disrespectful.’

‘And you will not bully Janie, Momma.’ I put my hands on my hips, but my whole body hurt. Why couldn’t she love us like a normal mother? Why couldn’t she hug us and hold us and thank us for coming?

‘I sacrificed for the three of you for years—’

‘Don’t start in, Momma. Don’t start.’

‘I gave you everything I had when you were children—’

‘Yes, you did. You also were often as mean as a cornered rattlesnake and went to bed for weeks on end,’ I said.

‘How dare you. How dare you!’ She hit the table with her palms.

‘I dare because I’m not going to allow you to whitewash what happened to us when we were kids to guilt us into staying here.’

‘Whitewash? I worked, I did things I never thought I’d do, I provided, I protected you. By myself. All by myself.’

‘I know that, Momma. I do. But we worked, too. We baked gingersnaps and lemon twist cookies and banana bread until I hated the sight of sugar with a passion, and I don’t want you twisting our history into your own victimhood.’

She said nothing, but her face reddened. ‘You may leave now.’ She tilted her head at me in dismissal and picked up her nutcracker. The symbolism was not lost on me. ‘I have decided that your presence is unnecessary.’

Cecilia leant against the wall, the colour of coffee foam, shaking her head back and forth, her blue eyes beseeching me. ‘Don’t leave me with the witch,’ she hissed.

‘You may leave, I said,’ Momma sang out. Her eyes were bright. Perhaps there was a tear?

Nah. Nada. Not our momma.

Silly me.

Behind me, Janie started to chant. ‘I will make my own boundaries and hold myself to them. I will make my own boundaries and hold myself to them...’

Cecilia put her hands together in prayer, pointing the tips of her fingers at us, mouthing, ‘She’s wicked. You must stay.’

‘We’re all fine without you. More than fine.’ Momma’s perfectly manicured hands did not still.

Cecilia had taken the brunt of Momma for years. She could have left, like me and Janie. But she hadn’t. I tried to smash my guilt down.

‘You two have lived your own selfish lives without us. Cecilia has been the only daughter who has valued family.’

Cecilia closed her eyes tight, her breathing laboured. ‘Please, please, please,’ she mouthed at me. ‘Help me!’

It was like living inside a horror flick and the resident she-devil was directing what happened.

‘I can make my own decisions. I do not have to choose to stay,’ Janie muttered. ‘I am strong. I am mighty. I am not a doormat for others’ abuse. I can say no. No. No.’

‘Janie,’ I told her. ‘Grab your suitcases. We’re moving in.’

Janie sounded like she was choking on a rock. Cecilia squeaked with relief.

Momma cracked a nut, a slight smile tipping the corners of her mouth.

I wanted to heave that bowlful of nuts through one of the stained-glass windows, followed by my momma.

Like I said, if you happened upon Momma, she would remind you of a southern belle. A model for petite, older women’s clothes. A serene lady.

You would never guess, I thought, as I stomped out to my motorcycle, my stomach churning, my anger switch flipped on high, that our elegant, proper momma had been a stripper when we were growing up.

That’s right.

A stripper. Pole, G-string, and glitter.

Va va voom.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Cecilia, Janie, and I trooped towards Janie's Porsche parked outside Grandma's house.

Henry bopped along beside us. 'Sisters home! Sisters home! Who want to play the hide-and-seek! That game! Hide-and-seek!'

'We'll play with you, Henry,' Cecilia said. 'We have to get Isabelle and Janie settled first.' Then she muttered, 'They're moving into the witch's house.'

'OK dokay!'

I hugged Henry. He's the nicest person I know. My poor brother had survived one wrecking-ball blow after another in his life and he miraculously still found eight hundred things to smile about. 'Let me unpack. How's your stamp collection?'

He laughed. 'I have fifty-six stamps, Isabelle! Fifty-six! I have a stamp from North Dakota! Do you know where that is? I don't!' He clapped twice. 'Do you know where Michigan is? I don't!' Clapped twice. 'Do you know where Florida is?' He loved this game. 'I do! They have swamps and alligators and an ocean and Disney World!' Henry loves Florida. Never

been there, but he loves it. He started singing, ‘Mickey Mouse! Donald Duck! For ever ever ever...’

I noticed that Janie was not with us anymore. I stopped and turned around. Janie was crouched on all fours in the middle of the grass, her skinny body jerking as she went through a series of dry heaves.

‘You think this is hard, you counting hermit?’ Cecilia snapped, her usual compassionate self. ‘Try living with it day in, day out, for years. Know how many times I’ve been told I’m the size of a pregnant hippo? How she never thought she’d have a fat daughter? Get up, Tapping Queen, and suck it up.’ She flounced past me, grabbed two suitcases, and marched back to the house. ‘Get in the house, hermit.’

‘I’ll get your stuff, Janie,’ I told her. She nodded weakly, went back to dry heaving.

Janie had brought five suitcases, a laptop, a sack of self-help books and her classics, a giant picture of her houseboat (‘so I can visualise a peaceful place’), East Indian music, her embroidery basket, teas, a Yo-Yo Ma CD, a yoga mat, a picture of her therapist, and nine new journals to ‘write in when I feel like Momma will overwhelm or diminish me. My journals will recentre me, help me to find the goodness and strength within myself, and the courage to stand up tall as a person who deserves respect.’

I left Henry patting pale Janie, slung my favourite camera around my neck, and dragged my suitcases into the house, up the wood stairs, down the yellow-painted hallway, and into my old bedroom.

My bedroom was painted a light sage colour and had a window seat overlooking the front porch. I used to climb out this window at night to meet one boy or the other for

attention and copulation purposes. My bed was a twin, with a flowered bedspread on it. Two white nightstands and a white dresser and desk completed the room.

Janie's room was pink with white curtains. Her room was smaller than mine but had a funky, pitched ceiling and two dormer windows. I knew she would soon be cowering in her closet, chanting to herself, rocking, embroidering flowers, trying not to let Momma undo years of therapy.

I already felt like the walls were sucking me in, stripping away my fragile, tenuous hold on sanity. The blackness in my head foamed a bit, bubbled, swirled. I had been an adult for so long, but a few minutes in this house and I was regressing.

I flicked my braids back and took a shuddery breath.

I was home.

*Welcome back to your nightmare*, I told myself. *Welcome back.*

I heard the van pull up in front of the house about an hour later. I leant out the window of my bedroom, that busy wind blowing my braids and beads.

There she was. I couldn't help chuckling. Within minutes I heard her marching up the steps, then a brisk knock on my door.

I smiled at my grandma, a tiny woman with white, curly hair, standing in the doorway wearing old-fashioned, air force flight gear, including an antique flight helmet and goggles. It was hard to believe that until a few years ago, when dementia caught up to her, Grandma was a firebrand who'd nitpicked Momma until she could barely see straight through her fury.

'Amelia!' I exclaimed. 'Amelia Earhart!'

‘Good to see you, young lady.’ She narrowed her eyes at me, saluted, clicking her black army boots together two times. ‘You’re familiar to me. I believe we met during my speaking tour in 1929. That tour exhausted me!’ She flipped a hand to her forehead. ‘It was my sinuses. Clogged. Burning. Running.’

‘How are your sinuses today, Mrs Earhart?’

‘Better.’ She tipped her head up, touched her nose. ‘Probably because of my latest operation. The doctors had no idea what they were doing, none. Men are stupid. I’m surprised my nose is still on my face.’

‘I’m glad it’s still there, Amelia.’

I hugged her. She seemed surprised at first but then hugged back.

‘My fans love me!’ she declared, then stepped up close to me, flicking one of my braids back. She smelt like roses and mountain air. ‘I love to fly at night.’

‘Well, Amelia, your night flying skills are excellent—’

‘Some people question my flying abilities.’ She adjusted her goggles over her face. ‘Again, they’re men. Stupid, know-nothing men. Eight brain cells. Maybe. I’ve written a poem about them, shall I pronounce it to you?’ She straightened her flight jacket and clicked her boots together. ‘“Men. Slimy and rude, loud and uncouth. Never inclined to give up their booth.” That about sums them up.’

‘Sure does, Amelia.’

‘I’m a nurse, you know. I aided the soldiers in World War I and I know what I’m doing. If your arm is amputated while you’re here, I can sew it back on. If your head has a bullet in it, I can get it out with a spoon. Care to fly with me soon?’

‘It is my dearest wish,’ I told her. ‘It will be my pleasure.’

‘Women power!’ she shouted, fist up and swinging.  
‘Women power!’

I raised my fist. ‘Women power!’

By the time we moved in with Grandma, my first year of high school, all of us were covered in so much fear we were quaking. It practically dripped off of us. Momma was holding on by her fingernails and most of the fingernails were split in half.

Henry had regressed at least two years and was babbling, his speech lost, bladder control iffy because of what he’d been through. Janie was anxious to the point of cracking. Cecilia was furious and inhaling food. I had retired into my head and my blackness.

But Grandma’s gracious home was an oasis in the midst of an ocean of night terrors come alive. We had clothes that fitted. We had food on a regular basis that she cooked from scratch. We had heat.

When Momma hit blackness and crawled to bed, we were not alone. Grandma was not a saint – she had a flaming temper and did not bother to mince words – but she hugged us warm and tight, unlike Momma, who avoided all displays of affection with her daughters as one might avoid malaria, and she *cared*. Grandma cared about us.

By any account, you could say that Grandma saved our family. She was smart, strong, and ran a tight ship. As captain of that ship she hounded Momma to get counselling, to get a date, to gain weight, to button her shirt up, to go back to school so she could be ‘someone,’ to stop hiding in her bed, and her hair! A mop! Grandma reminded Momma that she’d warned her this would happen! She knew it! She’d told her! It was endless.

As I grew older I realised that Momma's relationship with Grandma was a carbon copy of our relationship with Momma: difficult, competitive, critical, demanding. Never good *enough*.

It's genetics, and we were screwed in that department.

When they fought, we hid in our closets.

Amelia and Momma, however, never fought.

Grandma/Amelia rose onto her toes. Clicked her boots. 'I must be off to the tower. I have to hide my secrets again so the natives won't steal them.'

I nodded sagely.

'Will you be residing here for a while with my co-pilot and what did you say your name was and do you fly?' She stuck her arms straight out, made the sound of a plane engine deep in her throat, and left the room.

I wandered into Janie's bedroom.

'Get out of the closet, Janie,' I said.

'No. I'm in self-analysis contemplation.'

'Come on. Out you go.'

I opened the door to the closet. It was filled with stuffed animals. Janie's face was buried in an alligator. She was sitting on her yoga mat.

'I'm regressing back to childhood, Isabelle,' she whimpered. 'I can feel it. Feel the backward passage of time flowing.'

I got down on my knees. 'Take it on the chin.'

'I can't.'

'You better. She's gonna eat you alive, regurgitate you back up, and start picking at your bones if you don't.'

'You sound gruesome. It makes me uncomfortable.'

I rolled my eyes. She writes graphic crime novels and *I'm*

gruesome? ‘Sorry, but it’s true. Find a backbone and stick it in your spine.’

Cecilia came into the room. ‘OK, ladies... Oh, man. What the hell? Get out of there, Janie. Right now. Stop being such a wimp.’ She shifted her weight to a rocking chair. The chair made cracking sounds. She wiped the sweat from her brow. She was wearing a dress that resembled a green tarp, her long blonde hair in a messy ball on her head.

‘I have the list from Momma.’ Cecilia whipped out the list. It was written on pink paper. I collapsed on the bed. Janie shut the closet door.

‘Damn!’ Cecilia threw the list down, yanked open the closet door, grabbed Janie by her ankles, and dragged her to the middle of the rug. Janie struggled like a dolphin would if caught in the jaws of a killer whale and tried to crawl back into the closet, but Cecilia hauled her back out.

‘We’re too old for this...’ I drawled.

‘Oh, shut up, Isabelle!’ Janie said. ‘You tackled me outside of my own houseboat!’

Cecilia grunted and flipped Janie over. Cecilia is fat but she’s about as strong as Popeye. ‘Listen to me, Janie!’ she screeched. ‘You’re not going back in the goddamn closet!’

‘Yes, I am, and then I’m going home,’ Janie wailed. ‘Home to my houseboat – let go of me, I was in my restorative mood, claiming my own gentleness in my journal—’

Cecilia got down on all fours and put her face two inches from Janie’s. ‘You listen to me, you skinny, obsessive crime writer, you are gonna get yourself together and help me. I can’t, I won’t, do this all by myself when you hide in your houseboat, tapping this, tapping that, counting this, counting that, indulging yourself in your problems while you write

about ripping people's throats apart with barbed wire and a machete. That's sick, Janie. No wonder you can't sleep at night...'

'I turn off my light at precisely 10:14 at night, fluff the pillows four times' – she dissolved into tears – 'tap the tables on both sides of my bed four times, drink water, touch the closets, check the front door to make sure it's locked, check the stove, check the door and stove again, touch the lock of the door, touch each knob on the stove, retouch the closet doors, get in bed, fluff the pillows, tap the tables.' She put her hands on her face in complete despair. 'After that I sleep.'

Cecilia was speechless.

I crossed my legs, examined my nails. 'Think that's exhausting? Ask her about her morning routine.'

Cecilia turned her head towards me, her blonde hair flipping over her shoulders. She has amazing hair. 'You've got to be kidding.'

'Nope. No joke. Now let's see that list you have.'

Janie clapped her hands four times.

The list Momma had compiled of things we needed to do while she was in the hospital was extensive and detailed. I will not share each glorious detail here because if I did, you would probably want to check your own self into a nice, quiet, mental ward and a nice, quiet straitjacket.

Beyond obsessive detail on how to keep the house cleaned in her absence (corners, girls!) and admonishes to not eat too much or we'd get fatter (Cecilia), or too little and appear corpse-like (Janie), and not to sleep with the gardener (me), Momma detailed Henry's schedule.

Henry helped at the bakery at least twice a week. He also

had to be at the church on Sunday from 8:00 to 1:45. Henry was in charge of bringing the boxes of doughnuts in from Mrs McQueeney's car. A description of Mrs McQueeney followed: 'Her facial features are a cross between a nutria and a carrot. She has large nostrils.'

Henry got the coffeepots out and ready, then sat in the front row for both masses to help Father Mike, if necessary. ('For God's sakes, Isabelle, don't confess to Father Mike. It will humiliate me as a mother. *Humiliate me.*')

On Wednesdays Henry helped at the church for the high school youth group. On Thursdays he went to the senior centre, served lunch, cleaned the tables, and set things up for Bunco. On Mondays and Friday mornings he went to the animal shelter and petted cats and dogs. ('If Janie is going to obsessively count the cats, keep her away!')

When Henry helps in Cecilia's classroom, 'remind Henry to make Cecilia go out for recess with the kids. She needs the exercise!' On Saturdays he joined other special people for a day trip.

As for Grandma, aka Amelia Earhart, she had her activities, too. Grandma was picked up by one of those short senior buses and taken on day trips with other seniors. Not all of them had lost their marbles yet. They let Grandma come because when Grandma had her marbles still in her head, she'd made a large donation. ('Do not let Grandma bring the whiskey with her on these trips. Fred Kawa always drinks too much and ends up doing stripteases.')

'Velvet will come in and help you with Grandma. She is a much better caregiver than the mothball you sent me last time and dear Henry likes her, bless him. She has already been informed to never, ever serve Henry orange juice. *You know why.*'

Yes, we knew why. All too well, we knew why.

Grandma had been known to give Velvet the slip, though, so I should be prepared, wrote Momma, to leave the bakery ‘on the spin of a nickel’ and help Velvet find Grandma. ‘Come immediately. You have a lazy bone, Isabelle, you are riddled with lazy bones, and I know, Janie, that you will have to do odd things before leaving the bakery. I don’t know where you got such strange habits, certainly not from me.’

Grandma could get dressed in her flight outfits herself, although she sometimes forgot underwear. ‘You must check Grandma’s bottom each day to make sure it’s appropriately covered.’ I was to comb her hair, description given. She forgot to brush her teeth and would often give speeches in front of her mirror. If the speech grew too long and she was going to miss her day trip, I was to go into her bedroom, the same one she’d been sleeping in for sixty-four years, and say, ‘Mrs Earhart, are you ready for takeoff? Your plane is on the runway.’

Grandma would then stop giving her speech, salute, and go downstairs to the bus.

Grandma had to have bran in the morning. ‘She has bowel problems. Without the bran, she’ll be stuffed to her ears. Make sure she eats it. She has haemorrhoids, which she calls her “bottom bullet wounds,” and you will have to address that. Cream is on the dresser.

‘Don’t push Grandma to do anything she doesn’t want to. I know you girls are control freaks, but control yourself. Control is important for any lady to have and you three need it.’ I rolled my eyes at that one.

I already knew I was to address her as Amelia, or Mrs Earhart. I was not to discuss her husband, Momma’s daddy,

with her, because Mrs Earhart would start swearing and expounding upon ‘killing the cheating bastard’ or ‘He is not a man. He is a eunuch. No balls. Fucker.’

My grandpa Colin was a man, as legend has it, with an ego the size of Arkansas. He was a doctor, hence the house, and died when he was having a night-time picnic with his receptionist up on a cliff. He drank too much and toppled off.

Momma was fourteen. She told me that Grandma’s response at the time was, ‘Wonderful. I was going to have to divorce him. Now I’ll take the life insurance and dance on his grave.’ Apparently she did that, too. Danced on his grave every Friday night for five years while drinking his whiskey. She would scream at him, ‘Hey, pond scum. See who’s still dancing? See who’s decaying?’

So no Colin reminders.

The list reminded me that I was not to call her Grandma or ‘chatter on’ about anything we did as kids. Ever. That confused her.

We also received directions on Bommarito’s Bakery, which we had all worked and cooked in, for hours each day, all through high school, despite Grandma’s protests that Momma was working us ‘hard enough to rip the skin off their bones.’

Momma took orders, and we baked cookies, cakes, breads, you name it, using our dad’s cookbooks. *Ad nauseum.*

‘The bakery is a thriving business. Thriving. Don’t ruin things for me,’ she wrote. ‘I have loyal, dear customers. I hope to the high heavens I still have them when I return.’

I rolled my eyes. She then detailed her recipes (many), what time I was to get to the bakery with Janie (5:00 A.M.), what goods should be made first, and other inane details like

frosting colour. Again, I won't list it. Think: straitjacket.

'Isabelle, don't get into men's beds. That was humiliating last time. Do you have to wear your hair in braids? Black people wear braids. Not you. Are you black? I raised you better than that, and you know it. Janie, *please*. No muttering or chanting. Ladies never mutter or chant.

'Get this right, girls.

'Momma.

'PS Keep Cecilia from eating any more than she already does. She is too fat already. I have done what I could for her.'

There was a silence when we all finished reading *The List*. Cecilia's chin was quivering.

I slung an arm around her shoulders.

'I can love myself even if I don't feel loved by Momma. I can love myself even if I don't feel loved by Momma,' Janie chanted.

I went to hug Janie.

Cecilia made a move for the closet; Janie crawled in behind her. They shut the door.

I crumpled up the pink letter that smelt like nauseating flowers and opened the door to the closet. 'Scoot over.'

Later that night Henry, Janie, and I lined up his shells on the floor and studied them. Same with his collection of rocks.

When he went to bed, we sang songs, and I brushed his curls back. 'I love yous,' he murmured, when his almond eyes began to shut. 'Yeah, yeah. I love yous. I so happy you home.'

No one in my life has ever been as excited to see me as Henry always is. No one has ever loved me as much as he does, either. Darn near made me tear up, thinking of that.

We snuck out when he was asleep. Janie went straight to her room and started murdering people. 'I have a deadline and

I still haven't set out my doilies or peace candles, nor have I arranged a serenity corner or a positive breathing space.'

I hugged her goodnight, then I headed out to the porch swing. Momma was already in bed. She had not liked the dinner we cooked. The sauce was too spicy, the bread hard 'like a suitcase,' the salad filled with salmonella.

You might think that Momma had lost it, like her Momma has, based on what she says. That would be incorrect. Momma has been like this since before our dad slung a bag over his shoulder and walked down our driveway, away from our home and swing set and into the soft lights of dawn. This is how River Bommarito *is*.

I pushed River out of my twirling mind and thought about Henry as I swung.

You would have thought that we sisters would have hated Henry for being Momma's clear favourite.

Never happened.

From an early age, he was sick, helpless, loveable, pitiful, lost, cheerful, loving, and sweet.

It was an unbeatable combination.

He was completely unprepared for the shittiness of our childhood, for what had happened specifically to him, but unlike his sisters, he had learnt to trust again. To hope. To reach out to others with innocence.

He was a blipping miracle.

I swung more, the country quiet, the wind a gentle rustle, calm, the land undulating like the soft swells of a green ocean, trees rustling overhead. It was incomparably beautiful in Trillium River.

I felt like I'd entered hell.

\* \* \*

Cecilia took a day off work from her kindergarteners to help us get Momma to the hospital the next morning. She swung by in her van and Janie and I got Momma settled in the front seat.

The sun was peeping up, the sky golden and pink, the wind sauntering by, relaxed, as if it had all the time in the world today to see Momma off. All was still, sleepy, and content.

Except for the three of us sisters, who were twisting in the middle of an emotional battlefield filled with booby traps and land mines.

Momma was not in a good mood. The breakfast I made her was ‘flat’. Janie was making her nervous. I hadn’t snuck a man up to my room last night, had I? The kitchen was messy, she *never* had a messy kitchen. Cecilia was late. She’s always late. ‘Not an organised woman. She’s a mess. A mess.’

‘Stop spinning around me,’ Momma snapped, attaching a pearl earring. ‘Do not tell me to relax, Isabelle! Cease mumbling to yourself, Janie. Or are you speaking to an imaginary friend? Cecilia, for God’s sakes, you have enlarged. You’re bigger than you were yesterday! You have got to stop eating. One of the biggest days of my life, if not the biggest day of all because I am getting open-heart surgery, if you girls care to remember, and here you are, making me late!’

‘We’re not late, Momma,’ Janie said, tentative. ‘Don’t you worry—’

‘I am worried, Janie. I’m worried that I have a daughter who has written nine books and all she does is murder people in bizarre, twisted ways.’

‘I don’t murder people, Momma—’

‘You do! What is going on in that head of yours? This is not the lady I raised you to be!’ She wriggled in her perfectly

pressed blue suit and recrossed her blue heels. ‘When are you getting married and having children? You’re going to get too old—’

‘Momma,’ I interjected, as soon as Cecilia pulled out of the drive. ‘Don’t miss the sunrise. It’s beautiful.’ *Momma, don’t you want to stay in the hospital five months instead of five days? Don’t you want the doctors to sew your mouth shut for the rest of your life?*

With both hands, I pressed my braids tight to my head. I could feel that blackness again, right on the periphery. I fought so hard against that blackness. It had plagued me since childhood. Sometimes it won, sometimes I won. I was definitely sliding into second place today.

‘Please, Isabelle! I know what you’re trying to do,’ Momma argued. ‘You’re trying to change the subject and it won’t work. Drive by my bakery, Cecilia, immediately. I want to see the building one more time before you girls get in it and burn the whole thing down.’ She shook her head, tsk-tsked her tongue. ‘I’ll be out of business before a week is up.’

‘You won’t be out of business, Momma,’ Cecilia said, turning towards town. She always tried to appease Momma, as she’d tried to appease Parker for years. Cecilia had simpered and catered and smothered her own personality around him to meet his endless and unreasonable needs and wants. With Parker, she had recreated the same relationship she had with Momma. In turn, he had decimated her soul.

There was no one else on the planet she did that for, as she is a tornado with feet.

‘Janie and Isabelle are going to take good care of the bakery, and when summer starts I’ll be there, too, while you recover.’

Momma humphed in the front seat. ‘Humph! And what will Henry do without me?’

‘Henry will be fine,’ we all three said.

‘And what about Grandma?’ She patted her perfectly brushed hair. Twisted her pearl necklace.

‘Grandma will be fine,’ we all three said.

‘The house will be declared a waste site when I return,’ she muttered.

‘The house will be fine,’ we said.

‘What are you, parrot triplets? Stop. You’re hurting my ears.’ She massaged her ears.

I groaned.

Janie gurgled.

Cecilia sighed.

It would be a long drive.

You might find me callous for not wringing my hands and diving into semi-hysteria about Momma’s open-heart surgery. After all, this is what they do in open-heart surgery, if I’ve got it correct: they cut your chest open with a knife as if you are a fish to be filleted. A human does this. Then, they yank open your rib cage, like it’s a closed clam, using something referred to as a ‘spreader’.

Even thinking about this bothers me. If God had wanted our rib cage opened up, I’m sure he would have inserted a zipper in the middle of it. I see no zipper.

Then they stop your heart.

Boom. Beatless.

You’re hooked up to a heart-lung machine, which does what you could imagine it should do. It beats and breathes for you, like it’s a person only it has an off-on button.

Then they (often) cut open your leg and borrow a blood vessel or two without asking the permission of your leg. They use the blood vessel to bypass a clog in your artery. The vessel that is clogged may well be clogged because in your lifetime you have eaten the equivalent of nine cows, four pigs, and a multitude of yummy stuff like wagons full of fried chicken. This cholesterol clings like plaque to your arteries.

If you don't get your arteries hosed out or fixed, well, you're a goner.

So, you might think I would be worried that Momma would soon be a goner.

That is not going to happen. Why?

Because I know it.

Momma will live to be one hundred. Maybe older. I can see her living to be one hundred and twenty-one to taunt me and Cecilia and Janie. By then we'll be in our late nineties and I hope I will have lost my hearing so I can't hear her anymore and I will have lost my sight so I can't see her anymore and I will have lost my mind and will believe that I am someone else.

Like Amelia Earhart. Or Cleopatra. Or Joan of Arc.

I vote for Cleopatra.

On our way into Portland I saw a windsurfer. He had a red and purple sail. He was whipping right along on the waves of the river. Away from struggles. Away from people. Away from life. Free.

He was free.

I wondered if he'd take a shift for me with Momma.