

Sins of Innocence

Jean Stone



Loveswept®

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CHAPTER 1

Wednesday, September 8

Jess



Jessica Bates Randall stepped from her dressing room into the bedroom. She adjusted the satin sash of her robe, took a deep breath, and walked toward the bathroom. She knew she had to get this over with, and now seemed as good a time as any.

“Charles?” she called.

On the other side of the closed door Jess heard the jets of the Jacuzzi rumble. Her husband didn’t answer.

She went to her bureau and looked at the collection of framed photographs that covered the top. Jess on her wedding day: peau de soie and pearls, crepe de Chine and calla lilies. The kids’ first-day-of-school pictures: Chuck, Maura, and Travis—tousled hair slicked down, pencil boxes, tentative smiles. The family Christmas photos: Charles in velvet smoking jacket, kids in bright flannel PJs. Then her eyes came to rest on one special picture: Jess holding Chuck—Charles, Jr., their oldest—three days after he was born. She touched the edge of the sterling frame and smiled. The baby’s face was nearly invisible, his body bundled by a new mother’s need to swaddle him in not one but three receiving blankets, edged in spun silk. She hadn’t wanted him to be chilled, never mind that it was July.

Jess picked up the photo and held it to her breast, remembering how she’d felt when the nurse first brought Chuck to her. She had looked

down at the tiny infant with only one thought: *I wonder if he looks like her*. And though she had known this baby was hers—hers and Charles’s—she was plagued by nightmares until she left the hospital—horrid black dreams in which she asked the nurse over and over to let her see the baby, but the nurse kept laughing and saying “No, Missy, this one goes up for adoption too. All your babies gonna go for adoption.” In her dreams the nurse had looked like Mrs. Hines, the crusty old cook at Larchwood Hall.

Jess felt tears running down her cheeks now. She set the silver-framed photo back on the bureau and wiped her eyes. Now it was her daughter who was pregnant. Maura. Her sixteen-year-old daughter. And the most important thing to Jess was that no one was going to put Maura through what Jess had gone through, not even Charles. No. No one was going to take Maura’s baby away.

The jets of the Jacuzzi were silenced. She heard Charles splashing quietly. He was washing his hair now, Jess knew. Twenty years of marriage and no secrets. Well, almost none. Charles had known about her illegitimate child, but he didn’t know everything. Everything that had happened at Larchwood Hall.

She adjusted the sash of her robe again. Now was the best time to tell him about Maura: He was at his least defensive when he was naked. And in the last few months it seemed the only time she saw him that way was when she walked in on him bathing.

She crossed toward the split master bath: To the right was her shower, vanity, makeup area, and toilet; his was to the left, complete with steam shower. Connecting the two rooms was the large Jacuzzi room, resplendent with greens and a built-in CD system, lit for relaxation by the recessed lighting that glowed from the raised ceiling. And, like the entire thirty-acre, prime-location, Greenwich, Connecticut, estate—complete with riding trails, stables, swimming pool, guest/bath house, and eight-thousand-plus-square-foot home—the master suite was compliments of her trust fund. *Her* money had bought all this, Jess reminded herself. Not his. And no matter how hard Charles tried to give the country club illusion that he was a successful investment banker, Jess

knew the truth.

She turned the knob on the door and entered the room. “Charles?”

He was lying back, stretched to his full six-foot length in the enormous tub, his head resting on a vinyl pillow, his blond hair wet and slippery. He looked about twenty-five, not forty-three.

He opened his eyes. “This better be important,” he said. “I was meditating.”

Jess stifled a scream. Sometimes she detested the way he made her feel so trivial. “Yes, Charles,” she said. “I need to talk to you.”

He groaned and shifted to a sitting position, water spilling out of the tub, onto the black marble deck. “What,” he demanded. Charles never asked. He demanded. Had he always done that? Or was it yet another side effect of two decades of sameness?

Jess swallowed. Suddenly she heard Maura’s words: *Please don’t let Daddy hate me, Mom*. Dear God, Jess quickly prayed, let me say this the right way. “It’s about Maura.”

Charles snorted, picked up the bar of soap, and began lathering his arms. “And I thought you came in here to wash my back. I should have known better.”

Jess stared at the bubbles as they grew on his arms.

“So what’s the problem?” he said, snickering. “Her boyfriend meet some other sweet young thing?” He picked up the washcloth and drizzled water over his arms. God, Jess thought, why can’t he just rinse himself like normal people?

“No,” she answered. “Michael hasn’t met someone else.”

“I know. Don’t tell me. He has to work at the gas station Saturday night, and she hasn’t got a date for the prom.”

Jess gritted her teeth. “The prom isn’t until spring, Charles,” she said, then loathed herself for playing his stupid game. She took a deep breath. “Maura has a very serious problem. One that involves all of us.”

Charles squeezed the last drops from the washcloth. “Why do I get the feeling you’re about to tell me something I don’t want to hear?”

Jess twisted her diamond-and-emerald ring. “She’s pregnant,” she said.

His face froze for a moment, as though someone had snapped a shutter and another photograph had sealed off time, ready to take its place atop the cherry bureau. Then his eyes darkened to an odd shade of gray. He pitched the washcloth against the mirror and pulled himself up from the tub, splashing water across the deck, the carpeted step, and all over Jess.

“Just what I fucking need,” he shouted. He bolted from the tub, his body pink from the water, his face flaming with anger. Jess saw his penis shrivel into its skin.

Charles grabbed a bath sheet from the heated rack and stormed off toward the bedroom. Jess took another towel and wiped the water from herself, then reached over, pulled the plug, and began sopping up the mess. *Just what I fucking need.* His words stung her mind. *What about the rest of us?* she wanted to shout. *What about Maura?* She tossed the towel down and followed him into the bedroom.

“Charles,” she said. “We need to talk about this.” He had flopped on the bed, a lighted cigarette in hand. He had quit smoking two years ago, when he began his “over-forty” health kick. Obviously he’d kept a pack hidden.

“What’s to talk about?” he seethed. “She’s sixteen years old. She’ll get an abortion.”

Jess smoothed the down comforter and sat on the edge of the bed. She really must get the matching draperies finished. There was never enough time to do the things *she* wanted, the things that *she* enjoyed. “She won’t have an abortion.”

Charles coughed and stubbed out his cigarette on the Waterford ring holder. “Says who?” he barked. “Says you?”

Jess struggled to take a deep breath. “*Maura* says she won’t have an abortion,” she hissed.

“She’ll do as I say.”

Jess twisted her ring again and looked squarely into her husband’s eyes. “No,” she said.

Charles raised his eyebrows. His eyes grew larger; the black pupils bored into her. “I say she’ll have an abortion.”

Jess stood up and walked to her bureau. She looked once again at the picture of her with her son. Then she thought about *her*. Her baby, now a grown woman of nearly twenty-five. She touched the silver frame. “You can’t force her,” she said.

“I can do whatever I want. I’m her father.”

Jess scanned the photos. Her family. So together, so happy, so *normal*-looking. Pictures, she thought, can lie.

“Speaking of fathers,” Charles said, “I suppose it’s his. That grease monkey’s.”

“Michael is a nice boy, Charles.”

Charles spewed forth a disgusted laugh. “Nice? Jesus H. Christ, Jess, he knocked up our daughter! You call that nice?”

Jess didn’t reply. She knew Charles had never felt Michael was “good enough” for Maura—the same way Father had felt about Richard. Richard, she thought with an ache that had never quite gone away. Her first love.

“This is your fault, you know.”

“Because she didn’t use birth control?”

“No. Because ‘The apple doesn’t fall too far from the tree.’ ”

Jess picked up the wedding photo and heaved it at Charles. It missed him and crashed into the brass bedpost. The sound of the glass cracking startled, then satisfied, her.

“You son of a bitch!” she shouted. “You rotten son of a bitch!”

“What do you expect me to say?” Charles gloated. “*Think* about it.”

She crossed back to the bed, with a kind of courage she didn’t know she had. She pointed a trembling finger close to his face. “I expected you to be upset. *And* I expect you to support *our* daughter. *I* did not tell her to get pregnant, and *I* am not going to tell her she has to have an abortion. And neither are you.”

Charles sat up and tightened the damp towel around his middle.

“So what’s it to be? Do we look up that home for unwed mothers you went to? When was that, anyway—1968?” He rolled onto his side, his back to Jess. Then he laughed. “God knows we won’t need references.”

She wanted to claw out his eyes. She got up and went around to the

other side of the bed, the damp satin robe clinging to her small, quivering body. She stood and looked down at her husband. “Maura will stay here with us.”

The shock on his face calmed her. Suddenly Jess felt in control. Finally. After twenty years of marriage. “Maura will have her baby. And”—Jess paused to be assured of the greatest impact of her next words. She leaned close to him—“she is going to keep the baby.”

Charles was perfectly still. For a moment they glared into one another’s eyes. Then he pushed Jess away and got up off the bed.

“Over my dead body,” he said. He grabbed his robe from the valet stand, threw it on, ripped open the bedroom door, and stormed down the hall in the direction of Maura’s room.

Jess steadied herself, her heart pounding. Then she raced after him, just in time to see him punch open the door to Maura’s room.

“You little whore!” His scream split the air. “How dare you!”

Jess flew toward the room. Charles stood, his hands on his hips, an incongruous masculine intrusion in the cotton-candy colors of Maura’s world. Maura sat in the middle of her bed, cushioned by a fluffy pink comforter, surrounded by her teddy bears.

“Daddy,” she sobbed. “Daddy. I’m sorry.”

Jess stepped inside and grabbed Charles by the arm. “Get out of here,” she commanded. “Get out, and leave her alone.”

He shook off her grasp. “Like hell. This is my house.”

Jess winced. *No, it’s not*, she wanted to shout. *It’s my house*. She put a hand to her chest. Her breath came in short gasps.

“And this is my daughter,” he went on, pointing to Maura as though she were a statue, a possession. “And she will do as I say.”

Maura looked to Jess with huge blue eyes, coated with tears. “Mommy?” she whispered.

“You are having an abortion,” Charles said. “And I don’t want to hear another word about it.”

Jess brushed past his bulk and sat on the bed. She pulled Maura close to her, stroking her daughter’s fine golden hair.

“Mommy, he can’t make me. Don’t let him make me,” she

whimpered.

“Think about it!” Charles raved. “If you think for one minute I’ve worked hard all these years to have my daughter held up for ridicule in front of my friends, you’re wrong.”

Jess felt as though someone had turned up the heat in the room. “Your friends, Charles? Is that what this is all about?”

“They’re your friends, too.”

“They’re not *my* friends. They’re *your* business acquaintances. I really think we should talk about this privately.”

“*Privately?* Why? So your darling daughter doesn’t have to hear what her father thinks about her? How she’s about to destroy his life?”

“She’s *our* daughter, Charles.”

He threw up his hands. “None of this would have happened if you’d let them go to private school. But oh, no. Little Miss Goody Two-shoes Jessica wanted her children to have a ‘normal’ life.”

Jess swallowed hard.

“Maybe this is ‘normal’ for you, honey, but it isn’t the way I was brought up!”

Please, dear God, she prayed. *Don’t let him say anything about my baby.* Jess had never told the children about her. She had never told them about Larchwood Hall. Charles wouldn’t let her.

“Charles ...” She tried to speak, but the words stuck in her throat, like an aspirin taken without water.

He balled his hands into fists. The veins at his temples bulged. “I expect you to make the arrangements tomorrow,” he said icily, so much like Jess’s father. The same coldness. Would Father have been so cold if Mother had been alive to protect Jess? Would things have been different? Jess clung to her daughter.

“I want this taken care of, and I want it taken care of fast. And I don’t want to hear another word about it until it is over. Is that clear?”

He turned on his heels and headed for the door.

“No,” Jess said.

He spun around.

Jess kept stroking Maura’s hair, holding on to her daughter for

strength.

“She’s keeping the baby,” she said. “It’s what Maura wants.”

He stormed out of the room.

Damn you, Jess wanted to shout. Damn you for doing this to our daughter. Damn you for being like Father. She closed her eyes and slowly rocked her daughter. “It will be okay, honey. You’ll see. Everything’s going to be fine.”

“Oh, Mommy,” she sobbed, “Maybe Daddy’s right. His friends ... his business ...”

“Sssh,” Jess whispered. “The last thing we’re going to worry about is what other people think. It’s you who’s important. And your baby.”

“Mommy, I’m so sorry.”

Jess took Maura’s shoulders and held her. “Honey, do you really want this baby? Have you thought about it? Really thought about it?”

“Yes, Mom. I told you. Michael and I want to raise the baby. Together. Then we thought when we’re older, we’ll get married....”

Jess pulled her daughter close. It was just as it had been with Richard. She and Richard were to have run away. They were going to be married. They were going to be a family, with their baby.

But Father had thought differently.

“It’s not like I expect he’ll give us a real wedding at the club or anything....” Maura was saying.

A wedding. Jess remembered the one Father had given her and Charles. The reception hadn’t been at the club; it had been at the Plaza. It was a fairy-tale wedding, and had been given fourteen inches in *The New York Times*. Well, why not? No one had known about the twenty-year-old bride’s scandalous past. No one except Father, who refused, as always, to acknowledge it. No one except Richard, and his parents, who were gone to God only knows where. No one except Charles, who had acquiesced to marry her anyway, as long as he never had to hear about it again.

No one except Miss Taylor. And the girls of Larchwood Hall.

She stroked Maura’s hair once again. No. No one was going to put her daughter through what she had gone through. No one was going to take

her daughter's baby away.

There was a soft knock on the doorway. Chuck and Travis stood in rumpled pajamas. "Mom?" Chuck asked. "What's going on? We heard Dad screaming."

Jess looked at her two sons: Chuck, seventeen; Travis thirteen. Chuck was so like his father, fair and tall and so serious. But it was Travis who kept the family together with his humor, his red curls and freckles, and a smile that lit up any room he entered. But now Travis wasn't smiling. His face was as grim as Chuck's.

"It's okay, boys. Go back to bed. Daddy is angry with Maura, that's all."

"What'd she do?" Travis asked.

"We'll talk about it later," Jess said. "There's nothing to worry about. Now go back to bed."

"But what'd she do?" Travis persisted.

"Shut up," Chuck said, and cuffed the red curls. "You heard Mom. Let's go back to bed."

The boys disappeared, and Jess was overcome with weariness. This had been, she feared, the first of many angry nights to come.

"We might as well tell them," Maura said. "They'll know soon enough."

Jess slowly shook her head. "Not now, honey," she said. "Not when everyone's so upset."

Maura kissed her mother on the cheek. "Thanks, Mom. I love you."

"I love you too, honey. Now why don't you try and get some sleep."

She kissed her daughter back and got up from the bed.

"Mom?"

"What, honey?"

"Are you going to talk to Daddy some more?"

Jess sighed. She hoped Charles had decided not to speak to her. She hated the thought of facing him again tonight.

"I think tomorrow might be better."

"Good night, Mom."

"Good night, honey." She snapped off the light and went into the hall,

then walked with hesitant steps toward the master bedroom.

* * *

He stood in front of the bathroom vanity, blow-drying his hair. He was dressed.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Jess asked.

“To the club.” He snapped off the switch and dropped the dryer onto the counter.

“At eleven-thirty on a Wednesday night?”

“The bar stays open until two.”

He stomped out without looking at her.

“Charles ...”

But he was gone.

Jess stood by the edge of the bed. She listened to the sound of Charles’s BMW as it backed out of the garage, heard him jam it into first gear, then saw the headlights splash onto the flocked-silk wallpaper as he turned the car and squealed down the long circular driveway. In all the years they had been together, Charles had never left her. Not that they hadn’t had their disagreements. But, Jess realized now, Charles had always won. Jess had always let him. It had been easier than arguing.

But this time, she promised herself, he wasn’t going to win. She was going to win, and so was Maura. There would be no father ruining his daughter’s life the way hers once had. She had been forced to give up her baby. Father had forced her. Society had forced her.

She changed out of her damp robe and slipped into a warm fleece lounge that hung thickly on her slight frame.

When had the world changed? When had it become “acceptable” for an unwed girl to raise her baby?

She turned and walked toward the one place Jess always sought refuge—her sewing room. As she stood inside the tiny space, her nerves calmed, her exhaustion diminished. This was her place, her haven. It was comfortable. It was safe.

She looked around, feeling the silence. It was in this room where Jess created one-of-a-kind fashions, slipcovers, and draperies—all from

elegant fabrics that Charles said cost so much, she'd save a lot of money if she bought the items ready-made. "Your little hobby costs us a fortune," he'd said on more than one occasion. But it was not a "little hobby" to Jess: It was a way to express herself, a way to feel productive. But lately, more often than not, she'd found herself coming in here not to sew, but to think. To try to sort out her life, to try to figure out what had happened to her marriage.

She closed the door behind her now. The room smelled faintly of tailor's chalk and elastic. Jess sat in the lounge chair and began to weep. She could not get Maura out of her mind, any more than time had erased the questions of her own baby—her first.

Jess rose from the lounge and walked toward the closet, knowing what she needed to do. She opened the door and slowly began taking things out: carefully folded stacks of fabric—sleek black wool for Maura's riding habit; crinkly green cotton from Travis's junior high school play; peach-colored faille from the cocktail dress she'd made for their trip to Madrid last spring. From beneath the fabrics she pulled out the neatly labeled boxes of threads, zippers, and fancy trims. Jess had a passion for being well organized, so she knew what she was looking for would be there, tucked way in the back, out of sight from snooping eyes.

It was there: a small brown shoe box, its lid sealed. She crouched down and pulled the box toward her. She sat on the floor and placed it on her lap. Then Jess did not move.

The box had not been opened in nearly twenty-five years, yet its contents were things she could never bring herself to discard. Perhaps now the time had come to look at them once again. To throw them out, or ...

She set the box on the floor and got up to get her shears. She held the long silver scissors in her hand a moment, remembering a time when she'd held a pair of shears, when what she'd done with them had changed the lives of so many. And suddenly Jess knew that opening the box would mean more than a quick journey back in time; it would mean reopening wounds, setting the shadows free.

She walked back and sat down, the shears poised over the box. She

started to slit the yellowed packing tape, then stopped. She thought of Charles. He would never forgive her for this. She thought of Maura, and of her sons. Would they hate her? Jess shook her head. For once it was time to think of herself.

Then she thought of *her*. And with a swift twist of her wrist, Jess broke the seal and unlocked the past.

A wave of must rose up from the inside. Jess felt her stomach churn, her head grow tight. She ran her hand across the top of the contents, feeling the memories. Then, slowly, one by one, Jess removed the contents.

A calendar. 1968. With the dates from April to November crossed off with deliberate black Magic Marker strokes. The last date marked was November 27.

A square box of stationery, half-empty. The sheets, Jess remembered, had once been scented.

A pink rhinestone collar, its leather new, uncracked.

A ticket stub. The New York-New Haven Railroad. Round trip. Fairfield to New York City.

A Bible. She touched the rippled cover, then opened it and stared at the tissue-thin flyleaf. “Property of Richard Bryant.” Of all the things she’d had to remind her of Richard—old photos, cards, letters—for some reason she’d not been able to destroy his Bible.

A brittle, browned newspaper clipping. An obituary. Leonard Stevens. Prominent contractor of Boston. Leaves his wife, Esther, and a stepdaughter.

Jess quickly put down the clipping and took out a ball of tissue. She unwrapped the paper and held up a round Styrofoam Christmas ornament: a red satin Santa’s head, with a white marabou beard and a green velvet hat. She studied the ornament, and tears spilled onto her silk robe. She set it down beside her and took out the last remaining item.

A plastic wristband. *Jessica Bates. 11-28-68. Room 203. Maternity.* She held it gently, and outlined each letter with the tip of her finger, remembering the loneliness, remembering the shame. And in her mind

Jess heard the haunting sound of a tiny infant's cry, calling for a mother who could not come.

With a trembling hand she set down the wristband, then looked at the pieces around her. They didn't seem like much, and yet they could change her world. She placed everything back into the box—everything but the red satin ornament. That, she could keep out. No one would suspect where it had come from.

Jess replaced the shoe box in the back of the closet, then returned the fabrics and sewing things. She needed to think about what she was going to do.

With the ornament in hand she went downstairs to the kitchen. The house was dark, but tonight the darkness didn't frighten her. She plunked a tea bag into a mug, then opened the tap of the hot-water dispenser. While the strong pekoe steeped, Jess went to the refrigerator for milk. She reached inside toward the half-gallon carton. Her hand froze in midair. *Have you seen this child?* read the ad on the side of the carton. The ornament fell to the floor. She stared at the blurred photo of a little girl. *No*, Jess thought, *I've never seen that child. Just as I've never seen my first, my little girl, who is today a woman.* Jess stared at the picture, and began wondering once again. Was her daughter tiny like Jess? Did she have Jess's small oval face? Pale blue eyes? Or did she look like Richard? But Jess couldn't even see Richard in her mind. And what of her daughter's life? Was she happy? Was she loved? Did she love?

She thought of Larchwood Hall. She thought of the others: Susan, P.J., Ginny. What had become of them? How had their lives turned out? Did they ever think of their babies?

She focused on the photo of the missing child, and somewhere deep inside her the yearning began—the need to find the baby who, over the years, had had a thousand faces in her mind.

She stayed in bed until she was sure the kids were all out of the house. Thank God, Jess thought, they are back in school. She had heard Charles rumble into the house after three o'clock this morning; she had heard him shower and leave for work at seven. She had pretended she was sleeping both times. Jess needed silence now; she needed time. There

was a new priority on her agenda. She pulled herself out of bed.

After showing, she had a quick cup of coffee and half a glass of juice. She dressed in toffee-colored linen pants and a silk shirt, and slipped on the low snakeskin pumps she'd bought on their trip to Rio. She'd never enjoyed those "business" trips she took with Charles, but she always went: the dutiful wife. She would much rather have stayed home, helping the kids with their school projects or cutting out a new outfit for Maura. Maura. As Jess snapped the clasp on her Movado watch, she wondered if Charles would divorce her over Maura. Over Maura, and, perhaps more realistically, over what Jess was about to do. Would his humiliation be greater than his feelings for his family, or—she paused—the need for her money? She squeezed her eyes shut, then quickly opened them and pulled her wispy blond curls into a topknot. No time to think of that now.

Downstairs in the study Jess scanned the shelves for a phone directory that would include Westwood. Bridgeport. Norwalk. Stamford. Damn. She picked up the phone and dialed Information. A crackly, disinterested voice answered.

"What city please?"

"Westwood. The number for Larchwood Hall." Jess was a little surprised that her words sounded so clear, that her voice wasn't shaky. It was as though she'd asked for the number of an old friend.

"I don't have anything for a Larchwood Hall," the voice replied.

She began to waver. "What?"

"No Larchwood Hall. I have a Larchwood, Arnold. And a Larchwood, George H. But that's in Fairfield."

"No ..." The enthusiasm drained from Jess. Maybe this wasn't going to work, after all.

"Wait. I have a Larchwood Retreat in Westwood. Is that it?"

Larchwood Retreat. Worth a try. "I'll take that number, Operator."

The woman switched Jess over to a digitized voice that read off the number in a bland staccato. Jess jotted down the number, hung up the receiver, and dialed again quickly, before she could change her mind.

“Larchwood.” It was a man’s voice. Jess suddenly realized she hadn’t planned what to say.

“Larchwood,” he repeated. “Anybody there?”

She grasped the coiled cord. “Yes, yes,” she sputtered. “Yes, I’m here.”

The man paused, as though waiting for Jess to continue. When she didn’t, he asked, “Can I help you?”

Jess took a deep breath. “Yes. Could you tell me if I’ve reached what used to be called Larchwood Hall?”

“No idea, lady. Only been working here six months.”

“Oh.” The disappointment burrowed beneath her voice.

“You looking for somebody in particular?”

“Yes,” Jess said. “Someone who used to work there. A long time ago.”

“Maybe Pop can help you. He’s been here a while.”

Pop. Jess couldn’t believe it. “Do you mean Pop Hines?”

“That’s him.”

Jess drew in a breath. “I can’t believe he’s still there.”

“Yeah. Funny old geezer. Hold on, I’ll get him.”

She heard the receiver thunk down—was it on the desk of what had been Miss Taylor’s office? Her heart began to pound. She pictured the room in its 1968 decor—wall-lined bookcases, mahogany, leather, and the tainted aroma of Miss Taylor’s English lavender, as it filtered through the stale smell of nicotine. She thought of Pop Hines, the black caretaker, and of his wife—the woman who could terrify Jess just by looking at her.

“’lo?”

God, it was him. “Pop?” Jess squeaked.

“That’s me.”

She pictured his sparkling teeth, glowing against his copper skin. She pictured his huge overalls, sagging around the cuffs as he bent to tend the gardens. She remembered his warmth. She remembered his kindness.

“Pop,” she repeated, as her heart began to swell, and her head began to lighten. “Pop, I’m sure you don’t remember me. I’m Jessica Bates. I stayed there when it was Larchwood Hall....”

“Miss Jess! Of course I remember you! How are you doing? And what on earth you callin’ here for?”

Jess laughed. “Actually I’m trying to locate Miss Taylor.”

“Why, Miss Jess, she done retired. Moved to Cape Cod with her sister.”

“Cape Cod?”

“Yes’m. Town called Falmouth. I still gets a card from her every Christmas.”

“Pop,” Jess asked, “how is Mrs. Hines?”

The line was silent. “Done lost my missus ten, near eleven, years ago.”

“Oh, Pop, I’m sorry.” And she *was* sorry. For, as cantankerous and harsh as Mrs. Hines had been, there had been no doubt that Pop had adored her.

“Never did know what to do with myself after. So I stayed here. No place else to go. But I tell ya, Miss Jess, it just ain’t the same around here.”

“What is Larchwood now? A retreat?”

“Hrmph. Never had no trouble with you girls.” He paused, then added, “Well, almost none. Not like now. This here’s a halfway house for addicts now.”

She twisted the telephone cord and thought about Maura. “Well,” she answered, “I guess times change.”

“Sure do.”

“Pop, you wouldn’t happen to have a phone number or an address for Miss Taylor, would you?”

“Got her address in my book. If you want to hold on, I’ll go out to the apartment and get it.”

“Take your time, Pop. I’ll wait.” And Jess did wait, for what seemed an interminable length of time. She glanced at her watch: 9:10. How long would it take to drive out to the Cape? Three hours? Four? Could she go and be back before the kids came home from school? Her heart raced with excitement. It had been years since she’d been spontaneous. Years ... years. But maybe this wasn’t spontaneous. Maybe this was

something that had just taken her years to decide.

At last the old man returned. “Got it right here, Miss Jess. Say, you wouldn’t be plannin’ to come visitin’, now would you?”

Jess laughed. “Maybe I’ll do that.”

“I sure would like to see you. Now,” he rasped, then cleared his throat, “got a pencil?”

On the long ride east on I-95 Jess made another decision. It could have been because, after talking with Pop, the memories of Larchwood Hall became as clear and strong as those of the child she’d given up for adoption; it could have been because part of her was just a little too frightened of what she was about to do. But somewhere between New Haven and Fall River, Jess decided not to do this alone. She decided she would get in touch with the others—the girls of Larchwood Hall. Susan, P.J., Ginny. Maybe they, too, had felt the changes in the world; maybe they, too, would want to find the babies they gave away. But first, Miss Taylor was the place to start.

It wasn’t difficult to find: a tiny shingled cottage off Route 28, bordered by a white wicker fence trimmed with end-of-the-season pink crawling beach roses. Jess parked her Jaguar in the narrow driveway and headed up the walk, her Louis Vuitton bag slung over one shoulder, her insides churning as if it were the first day of school. An elderly woman answered the door.

“I’m looking for Frances Taylor,” Jess said, her voice as businesslike as she could manage. The woman looked doubtful. “I’m an old friend,” Jess added.

The woman turned from the doorway. “Mary Frances!” she shouted. “Company!” Then the woman looked back at Jess and scowled through the screen. “Looks like the last of summer,” she grumbled. “Damn glad too.”

Jess didn’t know how to respond, so she smiled.

“Always better around here once the summer people leave,” the woman added.

Jess nodded, aware of footsteps approaching from inside the house.

And then she was there: older, a little stooped in the shoulders, a little thicker around the middle. Her hair was white now, and folds of flesh covered her cheekbones, but a slash of red lipstick still glazed her thinning mouth. Jess thought if she moved closer, she'd be able to smell the English lavender, the nicotine.

"Miss Taylor," Jess said. "I don't know if you remember me. I'm Jessica Bates."

The woman beside Miss Taylor still scowled. Miss Taylor blinked a few times. "Jessica Bates," she said, with a clarity that belied her seventy-odd years. "Jessica Bates," she repeated. "Larchwood Hall."

Jess nodded, and tears filled her eyes. This woman had been so good to her—to all the girls.

Miss Taylor undid a small hook and opened the door. "Come in, Jess, come in." She stood for a moment, then held out her arms. Jess slid into them, and the woman hugged her tightly. It was still there: the scent of familiarity, the scent of what had once been home. Jess began to cry.

"Miss Taylor, it's so good to see you," she said through her tears.

"And, my word, I never thought I'd see you again—any of you," the old woman whimpered, as she gently patted Jess's back, comforting her as she had done so many times, so long ago, filling Jess with caring, filling her with love. Yes, Jess thought. Yes, this is right. The time has come.

She pulled slowly away from the woman's embrace and looked into the faded eyes, now outlined with tears.

"It's me," she said quietly. "It really is. And you look wonderful, Miss Taylor."

"Oh, go on with you," the woman said, and waved a hand away. "But you, my dear," she said, as she scrutinized Jess with a smile. "You have turned into a lovely young woman."

"Young?" Jess laughed. "Miss Taylor, I turned forty-one last month!"

"That's young." She smiled again and touched Jess on the cheek, then turned to her sister. "Loretta, fix us some tea, will you? I have a feeling Miss Bates has come here for a talk."

Miss Taylor led Jess through a small, dark living room that was cluttered

with newspapers and worn, overstuffed furniture and had a slight odor of must and old cigarettes.

“I’m sorry to drop in on you like this....” Jess began, but Miss Taylor waved her hand once again.

“No matter. Of course, you’ll have to excuse the mess.” They stepped out onto a lovely porch, and the woman called back to her sister, “Loretta, we’ll take our tea on the piazza.”

Miss Taylor motioned for Jess to sit on a wood-slatted chair. The woman removed a stack of magazines from a similar chair facing her, and sat down. From the pocket of her housedress she withdrew a partly crumpled pack of nonfilter cigarettes.

“Doctor says it’s time I quit these things. Doctors. What do they know? I’ll be seventy-three next year, and I say the only thing that’ll kill me is if I quit smoking.”

With a shaking hand Miss Taylor struck a match and lit a cigarette.

“So tell me, dear,” she continued, as she exhaled a long stream of blue smoke. “How are you? Are you married? Do you have children? Do you ever hear from the others?”

Jess laughed, then quickly gave Miss Taylor a summary of her life for the past twenty-five years.

“What about your ... was it your father?”

Jess smiled. “He passed away ten years ago.”

The old woman nodded. “You became close again?”

“On his terms.”

She shook her head. “Never seemed fair to me. A young girl loses her mother, then ends up in trouble....”

Jess folded her hands in her lap and twisted her emerald ring. Talking about her mother or her father was not what she wanted. It would only depress her; it would only take away from what she had to do.

“It’s fine, Miss Taylor, really. I have a wonderful family now.” She smiled, but her stomach churned as a thought of Charles flitted quickly through her mind.

Loretta arrived with the tea, which she set on an old wrought-iron

table, next to a faded African violet.

“Thank you,” Miss Taylor said to her sister. “Now”—she winked at Jess—“if you don’t mind, I think we’d like to be alone.”

“I’ll just take me a stroll around the block,” Loretta grumbled and disappeared.

“My sister!” The woman laughed. “She was kind enough to let me move in with her when they closed Larchwood, but—” she clucked her tongue— “believe me, there are days ...”

“It’s a nice cozy place you have here,” Jess said, as she sipped her tea. “Very Cape Cod ...”

Miss Taylor nodded. “But we both know you didn’t come here just to see the kind of place I’m living in. What’s on your mind, dear?”

Jess set her cup down on the rickety table, remembering that Miss Taylor always had a way of getting to the heart of the matter. She took a slow breath. “It’s my baby,” she said. “I’ve decided I want to find my baby.”

The woman nodded again and let Jess continue.

“And the others. I’d like to find the others—Susan, P.J., and Ginny. I want to talk to them about doing this too. I thought maybe together we could have some kind of reunion—meet our children together for the first time.”

Miss Taylor’s eyebrows raised. “All of you? Together?”

Jess smiled. “Miss Taylor, we went through so much together. We were all there for each other—well, at the end anyway. It just seems fitting that we should all be together to help support one another.”

“If the others want this.”

Jess looked out the window. A gull was perched on the lawn, pecking through remnant clam shells. “Yes,” she said. “Of course.” She turned her gaze back to the woman. “Would it be difficult? Legally?”

Miss Taylor snuffed out her cigarette, stirred a teaspoon of sugar into her china cup, then clicked her still-long fingernails against the rim. “There’s been much publicity lately about adoptees and birth parents finding one another,” she said, with distance in her voice.

Jess realized the woman had not answered her question about the

legalities involved. She wondered why, but instead of asking again, said, “It’s not because of the publicity. Although, yes, you’re right. It seems to be ‘the thing to do’ these days.”

Miss Taylor took a slow slip and peered at Jess with a warning look. “Won’t this bring up other matters you’d just as soon let lie?”

Jess set her cup on the table and twisted the ring on her finger again. “Miss Taylor, I’ll see to it that nothing that comes out of this will hurt anyone. And that includes you.”

“But what about your family? Your friends? Does everyone you care about know everything?”

Jess dropped her gaze to the woven mat on the gray-painted floor. “No. No one knows everything. Maybe it’s time. Life is different today.”

The woman sighed. “Different. Oh my, yes. That it is.”

They sat for a moment in silence. Jess thought about Maura. Was it better that the world was different? Perhaps. Perhaps not. But the truth was that it *was* different, and just as 1968 had its own set of what seemed today to be archaic values, society still ruled. Only now society said it was okay for an unwed girl to keep her baby.

“Will you help me?” Jess asked.

“Does it matter that I don’t think this is a good idea?”

“Why not?”

The woman leaned forward. “Jess, you and the others, well, you’ve already been hurt once. I don’t want you to be hurt again.”

“Life is full of hurts, Miss Taylor.” For some reason a picture of her mother came into Jess’s mind: fragile, quiet, gentle.

“So why encourage more? And what about the children? Have you given any thought to how this could upset their lives? They have rights, you know. So do their adoptive parents.”

Jess rubbed the back of her neck, trying to relieve an aching stiffness. “I would give them a choice. They wouldn’t have to come.”

The old woman reached out and patted Jess’s knee. “Please, dear, try to understand, these things don’t usually work out the way you see them on *Oprah*.”

Jess stood up abruptly. “I didn’t come here to be patronized, Miss

Taylor. I came here because I need your help.” She walked to the window. The gull had been joined by others—he must have found good pickings. “I want to find my baby for many, many reasons. Maybe she wants to find her mother too. There is that possibility, you know. And maybe the others want to find their children too.” She turned on her heel and faced the woman. “And don’t talk to me about ‘rights.’ What about *my* rights? And what about Susan’s, P.J.’s, and Ginny’s rights? Did we give them all away when we were forced to sign those papers?”

The woman shook her head. “No one forced you to do anything.”

Jess laughed. “I can’t believe you of all people are saying that. You know none of us had any choice!”

Miss Taylor rubbed her eyes. “I don’t want to see anyone hurt.”

“Neither do I. I want to see some of us happy. Some of us, some of our children.” She walked back to the chair and sat down. “Oh, Miss Taylor, I know this probably won’t have a happily-ever-after ending for all of us, but won’t it be worth it if even just one of us is reunited with her child? If just one of us can finally come to terms with the past?”

“Assuming the others feel the same way.”

Jess stiffened her spine. “I think they will.”

“Even Ginny?”

Jess shrugged. “Maybe we never gave Ginny enough credit for having feelings. I think it’s worth a try. To give everyone the *choice*.” She emphasized the word by closing her eyes, then added, “The choice they never had.”

Miss Taylor clicked her fingernails together. “It seems to me as though you’re taking away their choice once again.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you feel you want to find your child, fine. That’s your decision. But forcing it on the others ...”

“They don’t have to come.”

“What if they don’t want to, but what if their children do? Is that fair?”

Jess stared at the African violet, limp and dying. “I only want to make the option available to everyone. Who knows?” she said with a shrug she

didn't really mean. "Maybe no one will show up. Not the girls, not the babies."

"How do you plan to do this?" Miss Taylor asked.

Jess felt a wave of relief pass through her. Maybe there was hope. Maybe Miss Taylor would go along with her after all. She sat back down in the wood-slatted chair and leaned forward. "I thought I'd start by picking a date. Then I'll contact each of the girls and tell them when."

Miss Taylor nodded. "I can probably help you out with their addresses."

God, Jess thought, she is going to help. She really is. "Then the hard part," she said quickly. "Doing the search for the children. The records, I assume, are sealed."

The woman took another cigarette from her pack. "Nothing I can say will make you change your mind?"

Jess pictured Maura, frightened yet determined. Determined to do the one thing Jess had never been allowed. "No," she answered.

Miss Taylor tucked the cigarette between her old lips, staining the white paper with now-faded red dye. She struck a match and held it to the tip, slowly igniting the end as she sucked in the smoke. She plucked the cigarette between her yellow-stained fingers and sighed. "It seems there's no such thing as 'sealed' records any longer. Besides, that doesn't apply to Larchwood, anyway."

Jess felt her stomach roll again. "What do you mean?"

"We were governed by the state, but the adoptions were considered 'private.' The home was privately owned, and privately run—by me. It was part of what made Larchwood so attractive to our wealthy clientele." She inhaled another drag, then coughed. "I kept the names and addresses of the adoptive parents. I felt it was the least I could do—for my girls."

Jess studied the old woman and thought about how few caring people there were left in the world. She reached over and touched Miss Taylor's hand. "When can we start?"

CHAPTER 2

Wednesday, September 15

Susan



It wasn't on the side of the Atlantic, but Susan's parents' Palm Beach house overlooked the Inter-coastal. Instead of waves and sand, the view was one of million-dollar yachts cruising by: young, tanned bikini-clad ladies stretched across the bow; white-haired, firm-bodied gentlemen poised with crystal glasses on the deck.

"What a life," Freida Levin barked as she pointed toward the water. "Oy, to be that young and do nothing but lie around in the sun."

"You couldn't have sat still that long when you were that age," her husband commented as he pruned a yellow hibiscus.

"Ah," Freida said, tilting the green plastic brim of her sun hat. "But our Susan here ..."

"What is it now, Mother?" Susan turned on the chaise and looked at her mother. Incredible. Seventy-five years old and she was still trying to manipulate Susan's life. You'd think she'd have given up on that years ago.

"Don't be flip with me young lady," Freida warned.

Susan rolled back and closed her eyes to the sun. Thank God she'd be going back to Vermont tomorrow.

"Can I help it if I only want the best for you? That's all I ever wanted, isn't that right, Joseph?"

Susan's father clipped another blossom and grunted in reply.

“And what happened? You left that wonderful man you married....”

“Mother, that was eons ago.”

“Eons, schmeons. You left him for what? Now he’s got a family who appreciates him. And you. What have you got? You’re an underpaid college professor in a no-name town.”

“I like my job, Mother. And I have Mark.”

“Mark! Sixteen years old and even *he* doesn’t understand his mother. And what’s going to become of him? Hidden away in, of all places, Vermont?”

Susan stopped herself from saying, “Vermont is a nice place, Mother.” Sometimes she grew so tired of hearing her mother go on and on. Sometimes? Most times. She shifted her weight again, and adjusted the elastic around the bottom of her bathing suit. It left red puckery grooves in the flesh of her thighs—forty-six-year-old thighs that had, she knew, spread beyond the point where she should be wearing something as revealing as a bathing suit.

“Mark will be okay,” Susan said. She turned from her mother and plucked this week’s copy of *The Palm Beach Review* from the wrought-iron table. The *Review*. Scandal sheet of the rich. Every inch and every pica scrutinized by Freida Levin with a reverence usually reserved for the Torah.

Susan opened the tabloid to a photo of Ted Kennedy and his vibrant young wife. She thought of Jack Kennedy, of Bobby. Would Ted’s tumultuous life have been different if they had survived?

Beside Susan, Freida sighed audibly. “When was the last time you saw Leah Levin?”

Susan knew her mother always tried to bring her grandmother into the conversation when she wanted to attack Susan’s conscience. As usual, it worked.

“I took Mark to see her over the Fourth of July.”

“That’s two months ago.”

“Mother, a boy hardly wants to spend time hanging around a nursing home.”

“*Retirement* home. Not nursing home. Besides, she’s your

grandmother. You could find time to go alone.”

Her mother was right. Her grandmother—“Bubby,” as Susan still called her—deserved more from her granddaughter. “She’s in New York, Mother. I live in Vermont. It’s a five-hour drive.”

“Your only remaining grandparent. It seems the least you could do for an old lady all alone. I’ve tried to get her to come down to live in Florida. Haven’t I tried, Joseph?”

Susan’s father mopped his brow, nodded, and disappeared around the corner of the house with his pruning shears.

Even poor Bubby can’t seem to please Mother, Susan thought. “Her arthritis is bad,” she defended her grandmother. “Plus she hates the heat, you know that. And she has friends in New York.”

“She’d feel like she had family, too, if you’d visit her more often.”

Susan wanted to scream. She looked back at the picture of Kennedy. *Families*, she groaned to herself.

Freida looked at her watch. “It’s almost time for lunch,” she said flatly.

“Did somebody say ‘lunch’?”

“There’s my boy,” Freida said, and patted the side of her chaise. “Come sit by Grandma and tell me what you’ve been doing all morning.”

Susan watched her son bound across the patio. He was already taller than Susan’s five-eleven height. Thankfully he hadn’t inherited his father’s short stature. And as yet, Mark hadn’t shown any proclivity toward the “fat” genes that she and Lawrence both seemed to have.

“Dad called,” Mark said as he plopped next to Freida. “He’s been in Lauderdale on business. He’s going back to New York late tonight for Rosh Hashanah, but he wants to take me out for dinner, okay, Mom?”

Susan started to protest, when Freida jumped in. “Out? Not a chance. If your father is in town, he’ll have dinner with all of us tonight. Here. Tell him we’re having challah and roast chicken and noodle kugel. Our New Year’s feast one day early—seeing as how your mother insists on leaving on the holiday.”

“Mother ...”

Freida turned to her daughter and pointed a finger. “It’s bad enough you refuse to follow your traditions, but in my house, we do as I say. Now, Lawrence Brosky may be your ex-husband, but he is always welcome here. He is my grandson’s father, so we’ll celebrate together the way we should. As a family.”

She turned back to Mark and ruffled his hair. “Go call him back and tell him seven o’clock.”

Mark scurried away. Susan’s father returned to the patio, set down his shears, and wiped his hands. “Lawrence is coming for dinner?”

“Won’t it be nice to see him? We haven’t seen him in a month. Or is it two?”

Susan picked at a sliver that had become embedded beneath a chewed fingernail. She couldn’t remember the last time she, Lawrence, and their son were together in the same room for more than a few “hello-and-good-bye” minutes—was it at Mark’s bar mitzvah? But the sight of Lawrence made Susan sick. He seemed to be getting shorter, fatter, and balder as time passed. She hated the way Mark admired him. She hated the way her mother fluttered over him. And she hated the way her father talked to him about the business in such a respectful, proud way. Face it, Susan said to herself, being around Lawrence makes you miserable. “I would have appreciated it if you’d consulted with me first,” she said.

“You’re the one who divorced Lawrence. Not us. And he’s done a fine job with your father’s business. You think we could have retired down here if it hadn’t been for Lawrence?”

Susan pulled a black MIA/POW T-shirt over her head. The worst thing she had done in her life was marry the man her parents had picked. Lawrence Brosky. Up-and-coming genius of the garment industry. Her father’s protégé. The best thing she’d done was pack up her four-year-old son and leave him. Now Lawrence was settled with a nice Jewish girl who worshiped him, and they had two short, plump, dark-haired, dark-eyed spoiled daughters. But for some reason, Mark worshiped his father.

She returned her attention to the tabloid and pretended to be fascinated by its contents. There had been few men in Susan’s life. Bert

Hayden was a good friend—a good friend who often made overtures at becoming something more. They slept together occasionally, but for Susan the act was nothing more than a safe way of satisfying her hormones. There simply were no sparks. As for Lawrence, the only thing that had excited Susan about him when they met was that her parents adored him. She had succumbed to their dream for her and had actually believed that one day she would love him. Susan stared at the newspaper without seeing the pages. Back then she'd thought she had owed it to her parents to marry Lawrence—owed it to them after David. Her eyes were drawn once again to the photo of Ted Kennedy. Forget about his life, she thought, what about mine? Would my life have been happy if Bobby Kennedy were still alive? Was it possible that a lone assassin's bullet had reshaped even her own life? She lowered her eyes to the ground. Hardly a day passed when Susan did not think of David, of what they had shared, of all she had walked away from. Ted Kennedy had been young then, in 1968. Young, and full of promise. Susan and David had been young as well. Young, and full of hope.

She tossed down the tabloid.

"I'm getting out of the sun," she announced. "I have enough wrinkles."

"We're having nice chopped liver for lunch," Freida said, as she stretched out her paste-colored feet and wiggled her Worth Avenue-pedicured toes. "To help us get into a celebration mood."

"I'm not hungry." Susan heaved herself off the chaise. The thought of seeing Lawrence always made her lose her appetite.

"We couldn't have asked for a better year to have our labor contracts come up for renewal," Lawrence boasted as he dipped an enormous chunk of challah in honey, took a huge bite, then sucked his fingers.

Susan clenched her hand around her wineglass. Just get me through the evening, God, she thought. Just get me through the evening without killing him.

"How come, Dad?" Mark asked.

"Recession. People were scared out of their wits to lose their jobs."

He reached across the table for the platter of chicken. “They’d have agreed to anything.”

Susan’s father had told her that the negotiations, such as they were, had ended last month. When she’d asked how they had turned out, he’d merely said, “Successful.” Lawrence’s bragging suggested they had been better than that. Better for him, anyway.

Susan steadied her eyes on her ex-husband. “Exactly what did they agree to?” she asked.

At the end of the table Joseph cleared his throat. “Details, details,” he said. “There’s no need to talk business tonight!” He tried to sound cheerful.

“I’m interested, Dad,” she said without taking her eyes off Lawrence. “The plant is my son’s future.”

“Yeah, come on, Dad,” Mark urged. “Fill us in.”

Susan saw Lawrence glance at her father. Oh, boy, she thought. This must be good. So good, they both know how I’ll react.

“They settled on a two-percent raise. Every year for the next three years,” Lawrence said.

“How generous,” Susan said.

“And we only laid off fifteen hundred workers. It could have been worse. We could be GM.”

“People don’t need to trade in cars every year. But they need to buy clothes. Warm clothes, in winter.”

“Let’s not turn this into a discussion about the homeless, Susan,” he seethed. “I’m sure it disappoints you enough, just knowing that the recession wasn’t my fault.”

Freida coughed.

Joseph took a big gulp of wine.

Susan quietly tapped her foot on the cool tile floor.

“Look,” Lawrence continued, “we don’t know what’s coming. With your pal Clinton in office, anything can happen.”

“Bill Clinton is not my *pal*. He is our *president*.”

Lawrence snorted.

Susan stared at the contents of the pink Zinfandel. *Why the hell do*

they call this “white”? she wondered. “What about benefits? Benefits to those lucky souls still in your employ.”

“Our people have benefits.”

“Do they have any more?”

“Like what?”

“Like day care, for instance. It’s already a law in some states. Any company employing more than some minimum number of workers has to have day care on-site.”

“New Yorkers don’t need perks,” Lawrence grumbled. “They’re tougher than the rest of the country.”

Susan began to boil. “What about health insurance?”

Lawrence gave a sardonic smile. “Well, yes, that is one area where we had to make some adjustments.”

“To whose advantage?”

“Everyone’s.”

Freida drummed her fingers on the Formica table. “I’m sure it is, Lawrence.”

“In what way, exactly?” Susan pressed on. She wondered what the workers had to give up in order to keep their tedious, demanding jobs.

“They agreed to pick up half the cost.”

Susan wanted to throw her wineglass in his face. “Half? You’re making them pay half their medical coverage?”

Lawrence shrugged. “Costs have become prohibitive. Until this country figures out once and for all what we’re going to do about health care, everyone has to pay their fair share.”

Susan picked up her fork and stabbed an olive. “And how much is their ‘fair share’?”

“The average married worker’s insurance is almost six hundred a month.”

“So they pay three. God, Lawrence, that’s seventy-five dollars a week!”

Lawrence shrugged again and looked at Mark. “Pass the salt, please.”

“I remember when Joseph didn’t bring home that much money in a week,” Freida said.

“What about HMOs?” Susan asked.

“They’ve got the option.”

“At what cost?”

“God, Susan, I don’t remember exactly. Half. Maybe less. But not everyone wants to go to a clinic.”

“HMOs aren’t clinics,” she said.

“Look, don’t blame me. This is America. I never did figure out why you didn’t become a socialist and get it over with.”

Joseph cleared his throat. “Lawrence may be right to keep the reins tight,” he said. “It’s the only way to keep profitability up.”

Susan felt her stomach begin to churn.

“Mom and I went to an AIDS rally,” Mark said.

“Mark ...” Susan warned.

The room grew quiet. Susan felt everyone’s eyes on her. So far, this evening was going along pretty much as Susan had expected.

“It was cool,” Mark added.

“Well, it certainly doesn’t sound like dinner conversation,” Freida said.

Lawrence raised his eyebrows. “Maybe it should be. I’d like to know what escapades my late wife is exposing my son to now.”

His late wife. Why the hell did he always call her that? Susan ignored it and answered, “I’m not exposing your son to anything horrible, Lawrence. We had gone to the Boston Museum for the day. There was a rally on the common. We took part. That’s all.”

“That’s all? My son spent the day surrounded by faggots and dykes, and you say ‘that’s all’?” His face reddened. He shook his head, his jowls swayed back and forth. “Is that what comes next? You try to turn my son into a faggot?”

Susan pushed back her chair and threw her linen napkin on the table. “I’m going to go pack,” she said. “As usual, Lawrence, it was wonderful seeing you again.”

Susan unlocked the back door, and Mark pushed ahead of her into the kitchen, his duffel bag nearly knocking her down.

“Watch what you’re doing,” Susan snapped.

“I’ll be in my room,” he said, and bounded up the stairs of the small cottage.

He’d barely spoken to her on the flight home. He’d said he was tired, but Susan knew better. She knew he was angry with her for being what he thought was cruel to Lawrence last night. It was hard enough to be a kid from a broken home, Susan thought. It must be even tougher when the parents couldn’t get along.

She sighed and dragged her suitcase across the uneven tiled floor. A cup of tea. That was what she needed. She filled the kettle and put it on the old black stove, then went to check her answering machine.

In the darkness of the small living room Susan could see the red light flashing. She opened the drapes, letting in the dusk of the early September evening, while she counted the number of flashes. One, two, three, four. Four messages. Not too hot for having been away two weeks. “Says a lot about your social life,” Susan said aloud.

From overhead she heard the boom of the latest rock CD. She had no idea who the group was; she’d lost track of them. She went to the answering machine.

“Susan, this is Doris Hayward at the library. The Chaucer critique you asked for is in.”

Good, Susan thought. Maybe I’ll start off World Lit with Chaucer this year. Something different.

Beep.

“This is the attendance officer at Clarksbury Regional High School,” a nasal voice declared. “I have a note here saying that Mark Brosky won’t be starting classes until Friday the seventeenth. Is this true?” There was a short shuffle of papers. “He will need to pick up his schedule in the office when he arrives. Otherwise ...”—the voice paused again in confusion—“he won’t know where he’s supposed to go.”

No kidding, Susan thought. Long live the bureaucracy.

Beep.

“Hi, Susan, it’s me.” Bert Hayden. “Hope you had a good time, and that you’re back safe and everything. I was wondering if we’ll be able to

get together before crazy classes start Monday. If you're listening to this when you get in, then I guess it's Thursday night. Call me if it's not too late, okay? Or I'll try you tomorrow." She stretched out her legs. She was too tired to see Bert tonight. It was only seven o'clock, but traveling always exhausted her.

Beep.

"Susan? Is this Susan Levin? Well [long pause], I hope I have the right place. Your mother gave me the phone number. I talked with her today, I guess she lives in Florida? Anyway, Susan, this is Jessica Bates. You may not remember me." Susan didn't. "Jess Bates. From Larchwood Hall." Susan stopped stretching. She stared at the little black machine. It kept talking. "I know, this is a surprise, right? I'm calling because I'd like to talk with you. Your Mom told me where you live, and that you'd be home tonight." Jess Bates. Larchwood Hall. Sweat formed over Susan's lip. The tape kept turning. "I'd like to drive up and see you ..."

The machine clicked off. End of message time. End of messages. In the kitchen the teakettle began to whistle.

Susan couldn't move. She stared at the mute answering machine. Jess Bates? Why in hell was she calling Susan? And what, in God's name, was the rest of her message, cut short by the \$49.95 mail-order, deluxe-model, answer-phone system?

Susan wrapped her arms around her stomach and hugged herself tightly. Jess Bates. Larchwood Hall. Jess had been the quiet one, the rich one. The very rich one. Jess had been the one they could hear crying in the middle of the night....

Why in hell was she calling Susan? That was the past. That was over. It was more than another time, it was another life. Susan felt her breath quicken. It was youth. The time when she believed that such a thing as happiness really existed. The time when it had. With David. Susan closed her eyes and felt the swell of two decades of tears.

David. Nineteen sixty-eight. Vietnam. Sit-ins. Psychedelic and leather and Students for a Democratic Society. A string of images unlocked in her mind, like frames of celluloid, poised, ready to be projected, eager to

return Susan to a time when life was lived for consciousness-raising and peace-making. Dylan. Hashish. Janis Joplin and the draft. The assassination of a second Kennedy. Then the dreams came tumbling down. The tabloid photo of Ted Kennedy crept eerily into her mind. Then it vanished, replaced by only one thought:

David.

She opened her eyes. Why in hell was Jess Bates calling her? Susan pushed back the memories, grabbed the phone, and punched in the numbers for Palm Beach.

“Hello?”

God, why did her mother always sound so synthetic?

“Mother, it’s me.”

“Oh, Susan, well, I’m glad you made it home safely. How was your flight? I really wish you’d let your father pay for first-class tickets....”

“No, Mother. The flight was fine.”

“But your legs are too long for those dreadful coach seats....”

“Mother,” Susan cut her off. “Mother, did someone call for me there today?”

“What? Oh, yes. Wouldn’t you know, it wasn’t a man.”

“Mother, what did she say?”

“Why?”

“Did she tell you her name?”

“Yes. I didn’t write it down, though. A friend of yours from college.” Thank God. Jess had had the sense not to tell the truth. “I gave her your number. Shouldn’t I have?”

“No, no. I mean, yes, that was fine. But,” Susan stumbled, looking for a way to probe deeper without getting her mother off on one of her tangents, “my answering machine cut off the message. Did she leave her number with you? I’d like to call her back.”

“No. She didn’t leave a number, no.”

Susan thought fast. “Did she say where she was calling from?”

“Well, no. Well, I don’t know. I don’t remember. What difference does it make? If it was all that important, she’ll call you back.”

Not if she thinks I got the message, Susan thought. She stared back at

the answering machine, as though it would provide her with a clue. “Yes, I suppose you’re right, Mother. Well, good night. Mark and I had a nice vacation.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something else?”

“Oh. Yes. Tell Daddy I said thanks too.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Susan fidgeted with the phone cord. Now what, she thought.

“What is it, Mother?”

“You forgot to say ‘Happy New Year.’ ”

“Oh. Yes. Happy New Year to you too.” She hung up before her mother could say anything else.

“Mom!”

Susan looked up at Mark, standing at the bottom of the stairs. “Jeez, Mom, didn’t you hear the kettle whistling? I heard it all the way upstairs.”

“I’m surprised you can hear anything over your own racket,” Susan said, and hauled herself off the couch to make her tea.

She hadn’t seen Bert since summer school had ended three weeks ago. She hadn’t felt any burning desire to see him before she and Mark had left for Florida; in fact, she had almost dreaded starting another semester with Bert following close on her heels. But now Susan lumbered across campus in the darkness toward Bert’s apartment with an urgent need to be with him, to be with her friend. And he was her friend, first and foremost. Bert would understand. Bert would help her figure out what to do.

He opened the door for her and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

“Welcome home,” he said.

“Thanks.” Susan noted the smell of marijuana on his breath. “Did you while away the hours of my vacation stoned?”

Bert smiled. It wasn’t a handsome face, but it was warm, comfortable. Bert was a giver both of his time and his feelings.

“I think it had something to do with Gardiner.”

Gardiner was Bert’s history-professor colleague who was competing

with him for the department chair, a position Bert deserved.

“What happened?” Susan asked, trying hard to be interested.

“He won.”

“Oh, Bert. I’m sorry.”

Bert shrugged. “It was probably because of my beard,” he half joked. “You know these conservative New Englanders.”

Susan tugged the short-cropped graying curls around his chin. “I think it’s a lovely beard,” she said.

He motioned for Susan to sit down. She automatically shoved aside stacks of papers that were scattered across the overstuffed couch. To her, Bert’s messy apartment always had a welcoming feel.

“Wine?” he asked.

“Please. Make it a large glass.”

“The bitch of the whole thing,” Bert called back to her from his galley kitchen, “is that now Gardiner’s my boss. Ice?”

“Sure. And bring a joint with you.”

“Don’t have much left.”

She heard the tinkle of ice.

“Don’t need much. Bring it anyway.” Leftover hippie, Lawrence liked to call her. So what? she thought. So what if she and Bert shared an occasional joint? Until she’d met Bert, it had been several years since Susan had smoked pot. After she’d left Lawrence, she suddenly had no need for the chemical mellowness, but before that, she had smoked with gusto. Pot and cigarettes. She’d started in college, with David. In many ways, she thought now, her life had started, and ended, with David.

Bert returned to the living room, handed her a glass, and tossed a thin joint onto the end table. She looked at it. The paper was wrinkled, the ends twisted tight. Exactly the way David had rolled them. She took a long drink of her wine and picked up the joint. Bert leaned over and lit it, then settled onto the floor in front of her.

“So what’s up? I didn’t expect to see you tonight. How’d things go at Joe and Freida’s?”

Susan took a deep drag and laughed, smoke spewing from her lungs. Bert had a way of making her laugh. “Will you stop calling my father

‘Joe’? That sounds so weird. No one ever calls him ‘Joe.’ It’s Joseph.”

“Whatever. How bad was it?”

Susan took another drag. Her mouth shriveled with dryness. Her head spun. “It was ... tolerable. About what I expected.” She listened to the hollow sound of her voice as she held in the sweet smoke, letting the calmness begin to creep in.

“So?”

“So what?” She exhaled.

“So you must have trucked over here tonight for a reason. I’d like to think it was because of your passion to see me, but somehow I think it must be something else.” He smiled again, that warm, generous smile.

“Well, I did miss you,” Susan lied. Or was it a lie? She honestly didn’t know.

Bert took a sip of his drink. “Yeah, yeah. But what else. What’s bothering you?”

“Is that what you think?” Susan asked. Her head spun again, and she could have sworn she felt her heart skip a beat. She handed Bert the joint. She’d had enough. “You think I only want to see you to talk about my problems?”

“There could be worse reasons.”

Susan leaned back and toyed with her glass. It was a thick water glass, the kind the local bank had offered for ninety-nine cents with a twenty-five-dollar deposit, hardly the Waterford she’d been drinking out of last night at her parents’. But it felt more real to her, more honest.

“Okay, you win. There is something. When I got home tonight, there was a message on my answering machine that was pretty upsetting.”

“Don’t tell me. Gardiner called. Now he wants you to go out with him. He’s trying to get at me from every angle.”

Susan laughed. “Gardiner’s married.”

“That wouldn’t stop a man like him.”

“No, I suppose not. But, no”—she shook her head—“it wasn’t Gardiner.”

Bert was quiet, waiting for her to continue.

She reached over and plucked the joint from his fingers. One more hit,

she thought. One more hit will make this easier. “It was an old friend. Not a friend really. Just someone I knew a long time ago.”

“Old flame?”

“No. A woman.” She was aware of Bert’s captain’s clock ticking on the mantel. She took another drag, held in the smoke, then slowly released it. “Someone I knew in the sixties,” she said.

Bert whistled. “Wow. A blast from the past.”

She moved a magazine and put her glass on the end table. “She was someone I never thought I’d hear from again.” The joint burned hot now, nearly at its end. She took a quick last drag, then stubbed it out. She dropped her face into her hands. Why was this so difficult to tell Bert? God, this was the 1990s. “I don’t know about you, but there’s a part of my life I’d rather not remember.”

“And she was there?”

“Yes.”

“Did it have to do with Vietnam? The protests?”

Susan put her hands down. “Good guess. But wrong.”

“We all did some pretty stupid things in the sixties, Susan.”

She nodded and brushed the hair from her face. “I had a baby, Bert. I gave it up for adoption.”

He whistled again, but this time the sound was softer, more like a heavy rush of air. “Well,” he said, “that’s pretty heavy.”

“I was in a home for unwed mothers. The woman who called was one of the girls who was there with me. I thought we’d said good-bye twenty-five years ago.”

“What’d she say?”

Susan laughed. “That’s the weird part. She said she’d like to drive up and see me. That she wanted to talk to me. Then my stupid answering machine cut off the rest of the message. I don’t know if she left a phone number, or said when she’d arrive, or anything. I don’t even know what the hell she wants.”

“Were you friends?”

“No. She’s a few years younger than I am. At the time it seemed we were a generation apart.”

“She gave up a baby too?”

“Yes.”

“Then there’s a bond there.”

“I guess.” She drained her glass.

“Maybe she’s going through some sort of midlife crisis and wants to flesh out her past.”

“But why me, Bert? She hardly knew me.”

“Who knows? What are you going to do?”

“There’s nothing I can do. I have no way of getting in touch with her to tell her not to come.”

He crossed his legs and stared into his glass. “Does Mark know about this baby you had?”

“No. Why?”

“Maybe it would be a good idea if you told him. He’s old enough to understand.”

“Mark and I aren’t exactly getting along these days.”

Bert looked up at her.

“Long story. But, of course, it has to do with Lawrence.” She reached across the couch and tried to straighten Bert’s papers. “No. I don’t think now’s a good time to get into it with him.”

“Now might be your only time, Susan.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it. There’s a chance this woman has some news about your—what was your baby, a boy, girl?”

“Boy.”

“Who is now what, twenty-five?”

“Almost.”

“Maybe this woman knows something about him. It’s possible, isn’t it?”

Susan stared at him. That was, of course, what she’d feared, but she’d pushed that thought from her mind. No. It wasn’t possible. It couldn’t be possible. “Then again,” Susan needed to say, “maybe I’ll never hear from her again.”

He drained his glass. “Maybe not. But I think you need to be

prepared.”

She tried to put it out of her mind. But the next morning, instead of working on the syllabus for World Lit II, Susan found herself doing busy, out-of-character things: cleaning out cabinets, scrubbing the sink, throwing away expired coupons that had been sitting in one of her many junk drawers for the past year. Mark had gone to school, and Susan was glad to have that much less tension in the house.

She was standing at the oak kitchen table, folding clothes, when there was a knock at the back door. Without looking, Susan knew who it would be. She took a deep breath and held it a moment, then calmly finished folding the towel she held. She put it on top of the neat stack and slowly walked to the door.

Jess was there, on the other side of the glass, peeking through the ball-fringed café curtains. Age had only made Jess look more delicate, in an elfinlike way. Susan bet to herself that when she saw the rest of the woman, her body would be even slighter than it had been twenty-five years before.

She opened the door.

“Susan,” Jess said.

“Jess.”

They stood assessing one another, Susan conscious of her size as she loomed over the woman by a good eight inches.

“It’s been a long time,” Jess said. “I’m glad I found you.”

Susan looked past Jess at the silver Jaguar in the driveway, parked behind Susan’s old Volvo. There was no one in the car. Jess had come alone. She brushed the hair back from her face. “What do you want, Jess?”

Jess shifted the leather bag on her shoulder. “Could I come in?”

Susan stepped back from the doorway. “Sure. Of course. Have a seat.”

Jess walked into the kitchen. She stepped around an overflowing wastebasket and sat at the table. “I see I’ve come on laundry day.”

Susan laughed. “Trying to get caught up around here. Classes start Monday.”

“You’re teaching.”

“English. Literature mostly.”

“You always liked books.”

Susan moved the laundry piles to the counter. “I don’t drink coffee. Would you like some herb tea?”

“Tea sounds fine.”

Susan filled the kettle, grateful to have something to do. *What the hell does this woman want with me?* She took out two mugs and a tin of French-vanilla tea. “It will just be a minute,” she said.

“Are you alone?” Jess asked.

Susan stood at the sink, looking out the window. “Alone now? Or ‘alone’ as in life in general?”

“Excuse me?”

Susan sighed. “I have a sixteen-year-old son, Mark. He’s not here right now. He’s in school. I have no husband. We divorced twelve years ago.”

“So there’s no one in the house but you?”

Susan twisted around and looked squarely at Jess. “And you,” she said. The teakettle began to whistle.

Susan turned her back to Jess, poured the hot water into the mugs, and dipped in the bags.

“I’m glad,” Jess said. “There’s something I’d like to talk to you about.”

Susan lifted the bags up and down in the water. *Steep, dammit, she wanted to say out loud. Steep, so I can sit down, let this woman have her say, and get her the hell out of my house.*

“I’ll bet you were surprised to get my message.”

Truly an understatement. “Yes,” Susan answered. She glanced sideways at Jess. The woman was twisting the ring on her finger. God, Susan remembered, she did that when she was—how old?—fifteen, sixteen, something like that. Susan had once felt old enough emotionally to be Jess’s mother. Looking at the nervous woman, she did again. She lifted the bags out of the mugs. Good enough, she thought, looking into the half-brewed liquid. “Sugar?” she asked.

“No, thanks.”

Susan scooped the mugs off the counter and placed them on the table. She sat across the table from Jess. As far away as she could get.

“I’ve decided to find my baby,” Jess said.

Susan picked up a spoon and stirred in a hefty teaspoon of sugar from the bowl. She didn’t usually take sugar either, but she needed to keep her hands busy. Besides, if she tried to drink from the mug now, she’d probably drop it.

“What’s that got to do with me?”

Jess took a sip, then quickly put down the mug. It’s probably still too hot, Susan thought. She probably burned the Estée Lauder right off her lips.

“I ...” the woman stammered, not looking Susan in the eye, “I was wondering if you’ve ever had the same feelings.”

The knot that had found its way into Susan’s stomach increased in size.

“I have a son,” Susan said.

Jess looked into her mug. “So do I. In fact, I have two sons and a daughter. And”—she picked up the mug to try again—“a husband.”

Susan pushed back her hair. *My baby*, she thought. *David’s baby*. She closed her eyes, trying to envision what he would look like today. He’d be a man. Older even than David had been when ...

How could she tell Jess that 1968 had been the biggest regret of her life? How could she tell this woman she no longer knew that she felt the decisions she’d made then had led her in a direction that had no definition, no purpose? Mark was the only reason Susan carried on in whatever type of normalcy she could call this existence. But years ago Susan had accepted one important thing: She couldn’t go back.

“Why do you want to do this?”

Jess looked across the table at Susan. “Because it’s time,” she said.

Susan hesitated before asking the next question. “What do you want from me?”

Jess set down her mug and began twisting the ring again. “Haven’t you ever wondered? About your baby?”

Only a million times. Only every night when I go to bed. Only every day as I've watched Mark grow and blossom. Only every time I see a boy who is the same age.

“What are you suggesting?”

“I’m planning a reunion. With our children. I’ve seen Miss Taylor, and she’s agreed to help. She knows where they all are.”

“All of them?”

“Yours. Mine. P.J.’s and Ginny’s. I’m going to contact everyone, even the kids. Whoever shows up, shows up. Whoever doesn’t, doesn’t. It’s a chance we’ll all be taking, but we’ll be doing it together. *Together*. The way we got through it in the first place.”

The words hit Susan like a rapid fire of a BB gun at a carnival. She stood and walked across the room. She straightened the stack of laundry. “I think you’re out of your mind,” she said.

“We decided on October sixteenth. That’s a Saturday. At Larchwood.”

“Larchwood? God. Is that place still standing?”

“It really was a beautiful old house, Susan. Actually, it’s a halfway house for drug addicts now.”

“Great. And will they be part of your reunion?”

“Of course not. They’ve agreed to make themselves scarce for the afternoon. The plan is, we women will meet at two o’clock. Our children can come at three.”

“If they want to,” Susan said.

“If they want to,” Jess echoed.

Susan moved to the sink. She looked at the window-sill. On it sat a plaster sign Mark had made for her many Mother’s Days ago. I LOVE YOU, MOM, it read, in childlike printing, decorated with out-of-balance pink and yellow flower petals.

“I’m not interested,” Susan said, surprised that her usually deep voice sounded even deeper.

“I’m not asking you to decide now,” Jess said. “Only to think about it. Saturday, October sixteenth. Two o’clock. At Larchwood Hall.”

“You can’t talk me into it.”

“I won’t try to. I only know it’s time I put my own past to rest, and I

thought all of you might feel the same way.”

Susan laughed. “Even Ginny?”

There was silence a moment. “Well,” Jess said, “she should be given the chance too.”

“I think you’re out of your mind,” Susan repeated, but this time it came out sounding softer.

Behind her Susan heard the wood chair scrape the linoleum. She turned as Jess stood up. “Maybe I am,” she said, “but, nonetheless, I’m going through with this. I’d love it if you were a part of it. And unless I’m mistaken, so would your son.”

Susan raised her eyebrows.

“Your *other* son,” Jess concluded. “Your *older* son.”

“I’d like some time to think about this.”

“You have it,” Jess said. “You have a month.”

“And if I don’t show up?”

Jess reached over and touched Susan’s arm. “Listen,” she said, “I’m doing this as much for our children as for us. I think they have a right to know their birth mothers, don’t you?”