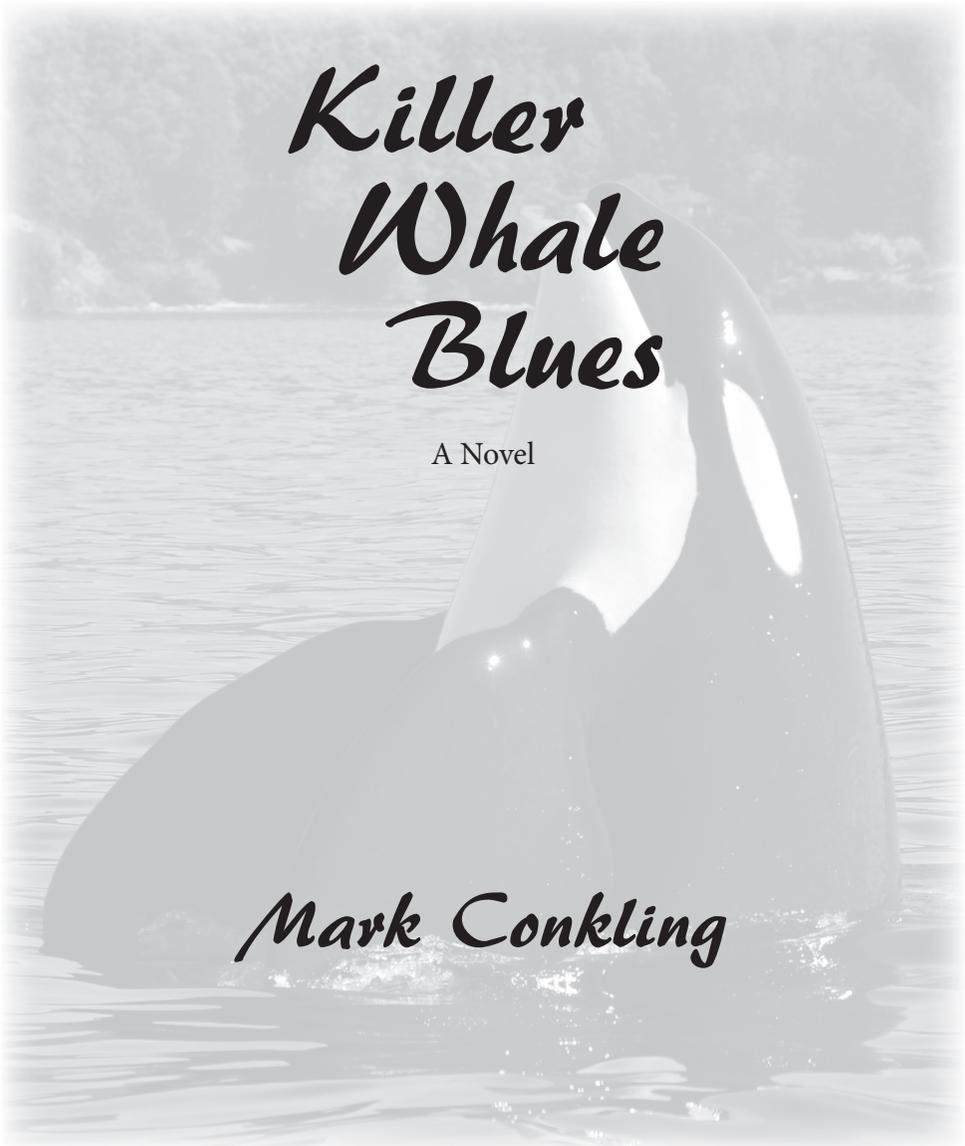


*Killer  
Whale  
Blues*





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Whale  
Blues*

A Novel

*Mark Conkling*



SANTA FE

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*Killer Whale Blues*

is dedicated to my sons

Bryan and Daniel

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**A**nd so we came forth,  
and once again beheld the stars.

—William Styron



# 1

Every so often unexpected things happen, sudden changes from which you can't come back, even if you want to, because once you get started, the path rolls up behind you, snapping at your heels, driving you forward with sharp little nips at the back of your soul. Some say it was fate that made strange things happen to Ida May Corley—a troubled woman of 36, an intensive care nurse with soft curves, dusty blond hair, puffy lips, and an empty heart—while others say she brought these strange things on herself as she tried to claw her way out of her misery.

Ida lived in Albuquerque with her lover Danny, thought about getting married, feared getting pregnant, couldn't sleep, and for the last month, her best friend at work told her a dozen times she looked like crap—completely burned out. “You drag yourself into the nurses' station, you snap and snarl at everyone, and by midnight you're unbearable. You can't keep this up, Ida—you're coming unglued.”

Ida chewed on a thumbnail. “It's been over a year, Marge, and I still smell her perfume in the house—you can't imagine the burden I have. All of Mother's stuff is still there. My father and brothers won't move anything. They're helpless. I have to work to forget.”

“That's the problem—you're blind to yourself. Medical people can't see their own burnout. They just keep going. Work harder, do more. I swear you're going to have a stroke or something. Look at your hands—they're shaking.”

Ida looked and crossed her arms.

“I've seen you take uppers in the night. Are you taking sleeping pills when you get home?”

Ida frowned and looked to the left at a beeping monitor, raised her hand and began twisting her hair. “I'm just tired. This past year took its toll.

I love Danny, but I'm tired from all the shit he put me through. It was a good cause, but I'm afraid we'll never be the same."

"Come on, Ida. You stood by him, you attended him in the hospital, you supported him—you were in the shit because you chose to be."

Ida paced back and forth, arms crossed. "Sometimes he really pisses me off."

Marge grabbed her wrist and pulled Ida's face close. "What about this long-sleeve jersey under your scrubs? I know you've picked your arms raw. Keep this up and I'll have to haul you off to the loony bin. Are you scheduled for a long weekend over Thanksgiving?"

"No, I'm working."

"You're stubborn as they come. I'm telling you, Ida, you're going to lose it."

Ida pulled loose. "I'm going down to the cafeteria for a break. I need to think." She hurried onto the elevator, went in the cafeteria, grabbed some coffee and chose a table in a dark corner. The coffee tasted like acid in her throat.

Stubborn? Probably. Burned out? *I don't think so.* She had resisted going through her dead mother's things, especially her handmade quilts, and her weird collection of dozens of new, unworn panties. What was that about? Neatly packed away in white tissue paper were regular pink, blue, and white silk panties; red, maroon, and beige hipsters with tiny matching bows on the sides; skinny, high-rise bikinis, pastel wisps of flimsy fabric; and lacy green, mauve, and mocha thongs from Victoria's Secret. Over the years, her mother, Janice Corley, had bought all sizes, from small, for the shapely hips she had as a young woman, to the full-size cotton briefs she wore before she succumbed to diapers and to her soft, flannel hospital dress—a light blue and white death gown, the very one Ida's father brought home from the funeral home and hung in the closet, unwashed, still carrying her smell. During that time, her hospice bed was framed by the window that looked out to Albuquerque's Sandia Mountains, her favorite view. Frail and cancer-ridden, surrounded by vases of fresh flowers, she spent her last days with her family and a hospice nurse. Greeting cards addressed to "Mom" covered her nightstand, the only name most people knew. Mom died peacefully there, on the 15-acre homestead off Eubank,

next to the Corley Prairie Dog Park, the family business. Ida and Mom had never gotten along well, although they had cooked holiday meals together, rather, Ida had helped Mom with cooking, and they shared a sometime hobby of collecting first edition books. Although often annoyed with Mom's choices, Ida enjoyed the outings, the escape from work, and the alluring search through dusty bookstore shelves. Mom was proud of her first editions of Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, Paul Tillich's *The Courage to Be*, and Lee Strobel's *The Case for Christ*; Ida favored her Hemmingway, *The Sun Also Rises*, Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. Over the years, their collections came to occupy separate shelves on opposite sides of the living room—their erstwhile hobby fading along with Mom's illness. That was the extent of any meaningful relationship between them except for what happened on that one special day. It was a sad day, 19 months ago, just after July 4, 2002. Ida's eyes watered as she remembered the conversation that wove them together in a family secret and into a cherished, intimate trust.

Ida had changed Mom's colostomy bag, washed her face, brushed her hair, and helped her slip on a fresh gown.

Mom took a sip of water. "I think I could eat some yogurt."

Ida got a small cup from the refrigerator and helped Mom take a couple of bites.

"Do you need another patch?" Ida asked.

"No, I'm fine. I don't want to sleep so much."

"Sleeping is normal. Your body needs it."

"Do you really like your new boyfriend Danny?"

Ida raised her eyebrows, turning her head. "I've surprised myself. I like him a lot. He doesn't have any money, and he's not flashy, but there's something very genuine about him. He loves animals and has a way with dogs."

"Is he good in bed?"

Ida smiled. "Mother, what kind of question is that?"

"Good sex is important. Most relationships don't last without it. Well, is he?"

"He's gentle and a very good lover."

"That's good. You ought to marry him. You know he's a good sponsor

for Junior. Danny has supported him since he got out of rehab. I think he would be good for you.”

“Remember, Mom? That’s when I met Danny, there in the family visiting room.”

“Oh, I didn’t remember. Those days were such a blur. You should marry him, Ida.”

“Well, he has to ask me, don’t you think?”

“Come on, you know very well how to steer a man—that shouldn’t be too hard. After all, you’re quite a catch.”

“You’ve never talked like this. What in the world has gotten into you?”

“I don’t want you to waste time. Your biological clock will kick in soon. I wish I could live to see your children.”

“I don’t want kids yet. I want to get my master’s degree first—that’s a couple of years.”

Mom reached for Ida’s hand and pulled her close. “I want to tell you something. I think it’s time. I know you can keep a secret.”

Ida leaned closer and Mom whispered in her ear. “When I was seventeen, before I met your father, I had an abortion.”

Ida pulled away, taking a deep breath. “Oh, I didn’t know. Did Grandmother Hawthorn know?”

“Yes, Mother knew. We took a trip to Canada, stayed with her friend, and I had it done in Victoria. After we came home, we never spoke of it again. I sometimes wonder how my life might have turned out if I’d had the baby.”

Ida put her hand on Mom’s shoulder. “I never imagined.”

“I want you to find the right man and get married so you won’t ever have to go through that. It’s too painful. It still haunts me.”

Ida raised Mom’s weak hand up to her face and kissed it. Then Ida put her head down on the pillow next to Mom’s face. “We’ll be okay, we’ll be okay.” Mom’s tears dripped into the space between their hands, as if to create a seal of generational pain, an eternal and trusted secret between mother and daughter, their last private conversation before Mom died.

Sort through her stuff? Clean out her closet? Empty her hope chest?—Jesus, her father wouldn’t shut up about the hope chest. Ida had seen inside

the chest only once, another peculiar time back then after everyone learned that Mom was fatally ill.. She could still picture the morning because it was so weird. After the hospice nurse left, Mom had led Ida to her walk-in closet, opened the large hope chest with a key, and showed her each of the nine handmade quilts, tenderly tracing the stitches and patterns as she recalled stories of when she made them. Then, as if performing a teenage show-and-tell, Mom stood and smiled, held up two pair of new panties, twirled around on one foot, waved them in the air, and then put them away. “They’re so much fun to buy, don’t you think?”

Ida helped Mom sit down as she coughed and caught her breath, kneeling in front of her. Ida tipped her head and raised her eyebrows. “When did you buy all these?”

“Over the years. I watch for sales, you know.”

“You’ve never worn them. Are, ah...were you saving them for something?”

“No, not any more,” she sighed. “They’re nothing but old dreams.”

Ida gazed out the window, crossing her arms. “What should I do with these things?”

“Please give one quilt to each of the women in my prayer group, and keep your favorite one for your bed. Take some of the panties to feel pretty, and give the rest to a thrift store. Please don’t let your father see them.” Mom refolded them carefully. Each pair had a little white label with a date written in black ink.

Later that night, Ida wondered if the panties helped Mom imagine the woman she might have been, perhaps a fantasy parade through her imagination, secret thrills from the past, but why was each pair labeled? Why in the world would she date them by month, day, and year?

Cafeteria dishes clattered as someone dropped a tray. Ida wiped her eyes with a tissue and blew her nose. She jumped up from the cafeteria table, ran to the women’s bathroom, splashed water on her face, looked in the mirror, and turned away from the image of her gray ashen face. Burned out? Unglued? She popped a little white pill in her mouth, drank water from her hand, smoothed her hair, and scooted to the ICU. No burnout here. She had a room full of critical patients waiting.

A year and a half had passed, and on the second Christmas after Mom's death, Roy Corley, who everyone called Pop, helped Ida clear the big table and followed her into the kitchen. They tossed the empty Kentucky Fried Chicken buckets and leftover coleslaw into a large black plastic garbage can inside the back door. Ida shook her head. Dirty oatmeal bowls, dried out hot dog buns, and an open carton of milk littered the countertop, and the stainless steel sink was water stained and full of crusty dishes. Mom was probably rolling over in her grave. She had prepared a full-course dinner every Christmas, and kept a spotless kitchen.

Pop turned and looked at her. "Ida, I've been meaning to ask you something."

She crossed her arms and glared. "I don't want to talk about Mom."

"I know, but whenever I try to work out in the machine shop, your mom's private things make me sad. I hate to keep asking, but could you at least go through that big chest and get rid of the quilts and things?"

Ida's green eyes flashed, and she raised both hands and tightened her blond ponytail. "What about Jeff or Junior? Can't they help? Put the stuff in storage somewhere."

Pop reached in his pocket and handed Ida a small key. "Mom said she wanted you to do it—you'd know what to keep and what to give away. She insisted."

Ida turned her back. "I can't do it today."

"Here, at least take the key. Maybe you can get to it later this week."

Ida grabbed the key and pushed it into the back pocket of her jeans. "Next week I work clear through New Year's Day. Maybe I can come by Friday morning, after you and Junior go to work."

"Thanks. Mom's death is hard for me too." Tentatively, he reached his hand toward her, but she ignored it and dried her hands.

"I'm not promising."

"Okay." His wizened face took on the hint of a smile as he looked down. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Pop, but I've got to go. I told Danny I'd be home so we could have Christmas dinner, too."

Ida drove out past the gate, down Corley Lane, and onto Eubank, Paseo to I-25, and then to the south valley acreage where she and Danny

lived with his dog, a black terrier cross named Jedi, and her little tan Pug named ER. Jedi was a rescue dog. Danny's veterinarian friend had brought Jedi to him soon after his dog named Lucky had been killed by a car. ER was Ida's little full-bred Pug she had rescued from the shelter in Santa Fe soon after Mom had died. Danny and Jedi had recently become a dog-therapy team, and they worked two days a week at Presbyterian Hospital, and one day at the University Hospital. As a self-styled dog whisperer, Danny also taught dog training at the Pet Smart stores on the weekends, and with her work as a certified intensive care nurse, they made a good living.

Last year had been incredibly dramatic and life changing—Danny was hurt in a van fire saving rescue dogs, and she was almost fired through the efforts of a nasty lawyer. It all started when Danny was laid off from his job as a Vet Tech at the animal shelter for what some people called his big mouth, but others called his passionate sense of justice. He had accused the owner of a private no-kill animal rescue center of running a scam, mistreating animals, and diverting charitable donations. The owner had come after Danny with a tough lawyer and outright vengeance, and Ida, through no fault of her own except loving Danny, got embroiled in the whole mess and arose to his defense. Danny's burns were healing well, and Ida was looking forward to a quiet, normal existence, a time where she and Danny could settle in and maybe even get married. She admired his sense of justice and his connection to animals. He believed that he could communicate across species, and he often talked with his dogs with both words and touch. Any dog who approached Danny sniffed once or twice, and then settled, as though Danny and dogs shared the same world. He had given up a year of his life and almost lost his five years of sobriety in the legal battle—a battle that ended with good outcomes for the dogs, but pushed Danny into the winds of misfortune. A major donor for the no-kill shelter moved away, the shady owner gave up the no-kill shelter, and Danny suffered in the horrible fire in an animal rescue van. The fire happened in a shopping center parking lot, and Danny had rushed into the burning van and pulled all the dogs out, saving their lives. The burns on his hands and face put him in the hospital for a month, and during his healing, as if driven by fate, he wandered through a new door in his life. Ida brought Jedi to the hospital, and soon after, Danny and Jedi visited dozens of patients on the

cancer ward, clearly, Danny believed, some kind of calling. Just weeks later, and after some training, they became a therapy-dog team, a source of pain relief and laughter for many hospitalized patients. Danny was a good man, a little wacky now and then, but decent and morally upstanding. Ida could imagine them building a sturdy life together, and she desperately wanted some peace of mind, a mental state that persistently outran her, always a few steps ahead, just out of reach.

The very thought of having to go through her mother's stuff made a dull pain behind her heart. She chewed her bottom lip as she pulled into the driveway. Danny was standing at the door, eyes bright with a smile, hands on his hips, and a white apron down to his knees over his khaki shorts, making him look like he had no pants on. Ida laughed as she got out of the car, walked up to him, her puffy pink lips open and inviting a kiss. Then she relaxed into his arms, her full breasts against his chest, and her face pressed to his ear. "I'm glad to be home with you. I don't like going out to the old house." The dull pain persisted.

Danny took her hands, pushed her back, and caught her eyes with his. "Hey, I know it's tough. I miss Mom, too. Let's go in, it's cold. I made pasta."

"I told Pop I might go through her big trunk—next week."

"Want me to go?"

"I'm not sure I'm going. If I do, it's better if I'm by myself, when everyone's gone."

On Friday morning, the day after April Fool's Day, Ida paused, fascinated by a new purple crocus by the porch, the first sign of spring. She went back in the house, put on her old jeans and a sweatshirt, and tied her soft blond hair in a ponytail with a green ribbon. She kissed Danny quickly, handed him the grocery list, and turned to the door. "You go to the store, okay? I'm going out to the house. I can't put it off any longer. Pop called again. At least I need to go through her hope chest."

Danny ran his hand through his tousled dark hair. "Want any help?"

"No, I have to do this alone."

Ida drove quickly across town, stopping at a Starbucks for a latte, then at a Walgreens for Tylenol. She couldn't shake a persistent dizzy

feeling; there was pressure on her chest, and she was bloated from persistent constipation. Though her thoughts raced, she simply could not gather them into a coherent idea except for one. She was angry. She knew that. Angry at her boss, angry at her ICU patients, angry at her brothers, and sometimes, for no reason she understood, she wanted to slap Danny or whoever was nearby. Three weeks ago, on purpose, she jerked out a man's catheter too quickly. For days, she felt guilty about his screams. She parked behind the house and let herself in the dark machine shop that smelled of oil and sawdust, filled with memories of her father repairing equipment, and sitting on his lap at his old desk. The smell of burnt, perked coffee on the wood stove seemed to linger beside his stack of dusty parts catalogs. When she was little, they had laughed together as he showed her pictures of loaders, bulldozers, backhoes, motor graders, and ditch diggers. Often she sat in his lap as he moved equipment around the yard. Sometimes he let her raise the bucket on the loader and dump dirt into a pile.

She pulled the string on an overhead light, closed the door, wheeled Pop's old office chair over by the chest, and opened Mom's musty hope chest with the key. The folded quilts lay neatly on top and completely covered the piles of panties, still labeled neatly with their dates. A sealed envelope addressed to Ida lay under the first pair.

*Dear Ida,*

*There are many ways to deal with temptation. This was my way, and maybe you will find it useful. Whenever I felt lust for another man, I would buy a pair of panties, label them with the date, and put them away. Then I would pray that the feelings would leave by the end of that day, and they usually did. It helped to know that date was dead and gone. I never did understand why this worked, but I think it was mostly the prayers. Love, Mom.*

Ida gritted her teeth and shook her head. Her mother tempted by lust for other men? There was over *thirty* pair of panties. Jesus, Mom. *What went on in your mind?* Ida stood, tore the letter into little pieces, put them in the stove, and pushed them under the ashes with a poker. She sat back down, took a deep breath, and gently peeled the date labels off each pair,

wrapping them back in their tissue paper. The dates were about one year apart, always in the winter.

Underneath, on the bottom, she found a leather-bound Bible, sat down, and began paging through the worn pages, looking at marked passages on the pages with dog-eared corners. These were words her mother had believed, words she had enshrined on plaques around the house: *do unto others as you would do unto yourself; judge not lest ye be judged; love one another as I have loved you; love the Lord your God with all your heart.*

She put the Bible on her lap, folded her hands, let her head fall back against the chair. Tears flowed as she thought about the last weeks of Mom's life. In those final days, they had held hands, shared intimate moments alone, and Mom had confessed her secret abortion. Now that moment was written on the petals of the pink roses that blossomed over Mom's ashes, the place just outside the window where she was laid to rest. After 20 years of Mom's insistent worry and judgment, Ida's deception and secret life with men, and their inability to ever look into one another's eyes, they finally had achieved peace and harmony between them.

She wiped her tears with the sleeve of her sweatshirt, blew her nose into a tissue, and leafed again through the Bible. Pages in the middle of the *Song of Solomon* were slightly separated. *What's this?* She turned the Bible over and shook it. A slim, yellowed tissue envelope fell out. She opened it carefully, and pulled out a faded letter written in pencil on Big Chief ruled notebook paper with wide lines.

*Dear Janice,*

*I'm glad you are back. A boy. That's great! I'm glad he's safe with good parents. I told people you were at a special summer school in Vancouver. I'm really sorry your mother won't let me see you any more. She told me to stay away, but I will always be near you. I will love you forever. XOXO, Fred.*

Ida took a deep breath, carefully put the letter back in the Bible, tucked the Bible back in the chest under the quilts, dropped to her knees on the floor, put her shaking hands over her face, and began to rock back and forth for a long time. When she noticed her knees hurting, Ida pulled

up her sweatshirt and wiped her face, biting her lip. She unfolded and then folded all the quilts but one, put them in a plastic bag, and marked the bag “For Janice Corley’s Prayer Group” with a black marker. Except for a few hipsters and one pink thong that Danny would like, she put all the panties in another bag and marked it “For the Thrift Store.” She made her way to the car as though her legs were wooden, threw the bags in the back, opened the front door, slipped in, gripped the steering wheel with white fingers and knuckles, and drove fast to the Sandia Tram parking lot. She screeched to a stop in a shady spot, took a breath, and shook her head, hoping to find a way to piece things together. Her armpits dripped sweat as she read the letter again, and then screamed at the windshield until her face was purple.

That magical moment—the frail time of deep trust with Mom on her deathbed—drifted out the open window and floated away like wispy gray smoke disappearing into the blue sky. From the center of Ida’s mind, a strong irritation arose and, without hesitation, began fighting for a place, pushing itself into the tangle of other irritations already living there, all jostling for position like sharp-elbowed women at a Walmart holiday sale. Over the years, Ida had fashioned a walled-in space in her mind where she packed her fear and anger, a wonky, protected space wrapped by the warmth of men, their dependable and unending desires for her body, and her bustling control of her work and those around her. She was often haunted by the fear she could not handle everything, and that her life would one day fly apart in little pieces, like silver glitter in the wind.

Her head hummed inside like a tuning fork. Mom had lied to her about the abortion. She had a baby, and had given her son away to a couple in Canada. Jesus, she just gave him away. Ida gripped the steering wheel, lips quivering, and rocked as she counted. Mom was seventeen the year she went to Canada in 1959 and had her baby. Somewhere, if he was alive, there was a half brother who was 44, eight years older than she was. Her mother was a freaking liar and Ida had a half brother—damn. Mom insisted that she be the one who went through the chest. Mom knew that she’d find the letter, and that she’d shield Pop from knowing Mom had a son by a different man. Ida had been used, jammed up between Mom and Pop to hide the truth. *And who the hell is Fred?*

The next Tuesday, as Ida dropped off her tax return at the post office, her cell phone buzzed. It was her brother Jeff. “Hi, can you do me a favor? I need a ride to work tomorrow.”

“Car problems?”

“No, I’ve got to drop my car off for service. They said it would take all day. It’s the Lexus dealer on San Mateo.”

“I’m working the night shift, so I could come by the dealer about eight.”

“That would be great.”

Jeff was waiting outside when Ida drove up. “Do you have a full day of patients?”

“A couple of crowns and one implant, but my first appointment isn’t until ten. Ida, are you all right? You look stressed.”

Ida pulled a twist of hair between her lips, and drove to Jeff’s office in silence. “Hey, why don’t you come in? I’ll make some coffee.”

They went into Jeff’s office and he poured two cups. “What’s going on? You don’t seem yourself.”

Ida paced, breathing hard. “Do you know much about Mom’s teenage life?”

“She never said much. I remember her saying Grandmother Hawthorn kept her on a short leash, especially after Grandpa Russ died. That was when she was about twelve.”

“That’s what I remember.” Ida stood up, walked into the hall, and stopped at Mom’s smiling photo featured on the wall. She slapped the frame, knocking the picture off the wall. “She’s a bitch.”

Jeff picked up the photo, tapping the shards of glass into a wastebasket. “What the hell’s the matter with you? Those crowns are some of my best work...a twenty-five-thousand-dollar smile.”

Ida turned and raced into the bathroom. She fell onto her knees by the toilet, grabbed the seat with both hands, and vomited until her throat and stomach felt like fire. After washing her face, she found Jeff in his office. He tipped his head sideways. “I’m worried—are you sick?”

“I cleaned out Mom’s hope chest.”

“Pop worries himself sick about her stuff.”

“I found an old letter.”

“A letter?”

“A letter from a guy named Fred, when Mom was about seventeen. Ever heard of Fred?”

“A love letter?”

“More than that. Mom told me on her deathbed that she had an abortion when she was seventeen.”

Jeff raised his eyebrows. “Wow, I never knew.”

“So guess what. She lied to me. The letter said she had a baby boy, born in Canada, about six years before you were born.”

Jeff looked up at the ceiling and took a deep breath. “Grandmother Hawthorn had some dear friends in Canada—I think near Vancouver. Do you think Mom could have...?”

“She had a boyfriend named Fred. Her mother took her to Canada. She had a baby boy.” Ida dug in her jacket pocket and handed the letter to Jeff.

He read it twice. “You can’t say anything about this. It’ll put Pop in an early grave.”

“She lied to me. There was no abortion. We have a half brother!”

“That was forty-some years ago. He may not even be alive.”

“If he is we have a sibling.”

“There’s nothing to be gained by dredging it up. Just let it be.” He handed her the letter.

“Burn this.”

Jeff reached into the bottom drawer of his desk and took out a cigar box. “And while you’re at it, go through this stuff and make sure there’s nothing incriminating.”

“What’s this?”

“Pop gave me this box and said to save whatever I wanted. It was in Mom’s dresser.”

Ida opened the box and began sorting through decals, souvenirs, and a few old photos. There were yellowed decals and matchbooks from Carlsbad Caverns, Disneyland, SeaWorld, and the Grand Canyon. Three old, labeled, crumpled envelopes contained locks of hair—Junior, Ida, and Jeff. There were several old black-and-white photos of Junior, Ida, Jeff, and Mom and Pop. They were labeled with Mom’s handwriting on the back,

“Disneyworld 1972, Carlsbad Caverns, 1974.” There was a picture of Jeff and Junior with Goofy, and one of Ida with Minnie Mouse.

Ida shuffled the photos. “These are when I was four and six.”

“Yeah, I remember that picture with Goofy. Pop took it. He said he would get all three Goofy guys in the same picture.”

Ida picked out a motel key with a green tag that said, “Thunderbird Motel, Route 66, #22.”

“Shit, do you know anything about this?”

“Nope. That motel was down on Central Avenue. It’s gone now.”

“Maybe that was Mom and Fred’s love nest.”

Jeff stood up and put his hands on his hips. “Let it go, Ida—the past is gone. If you say anything to Pop, I’ll call you a liar.”

Ida pushed the key in her pocket. She held up a cork coaster. “What about this?”

Jeff took it. “There’s a drawing of a building—says Empress Hotel, Victoria. This is really old.”

Ida took an envelope from Jeff’s desk. She placed the coaster carefully inside, folded the envelope, and put it in her pocket.

“You should throw everything out. Don’t make a mess, Ida. We’ve had enough problems.”

Ida stood up and walked to the door. “You keep the rest of the stuff. I don’t need the memories.”

Jeff touched her shoulder. “I’m telling you. Let this be. If Pop finds out he’ll have a heart attack. I’ll call Junior. He needs to know.”

“Meet me at Chili’s for dinner? We can talk through it—see if we remember anything else.”

“You’ve got to promise we’ll keep this whole thing quiet.”

After work, Jeff drove to the Corley place and parked by the barn. It was getting dark and both Pop and Junior were fussing and drinking coffee. “Hey, what are you guys working on?” Jeff asked.

Pop switched off a small vibrating sander and looked up. “What brings you here? Did you leave work early?”

“My last patient cancelled—a couple of nice crowns—but at least she rescheduled.”

“You work too much anyway,” Junior said.

Jeff shook his head. "You're right. This solo practice gets to be a drag." Pop poured Jeff a mug of coffee and handed it to him. "Sit down. Take a load off."

"How did things go at the park today?" Jeff asked.

"Sold over two hundred tickets—a good day. Pop got the trails watered. We had two busloads from schools. Those little kids love to chatter at the prairie dogs."

"Who would have ever thought? The Corley family makes a living from a prairie dog park. Mom was sure proud of us. I miss her."

Pop took off his cap, smoothed his hair, and put the cap back on.

Junior stood up and looked out the window. "Sometimes her absence seems bigger than her presence."

"We need to get over it," Pop said.

Jeff motioned to the bench. "What are you making?"

"A cedar chest for Ida. I thought it would be a good wedding present."

The chest was small, about 16" by 24", with a rounded lid, copper hinges, and copper straps on the front, top, and back.

"How long have you been working on this?"

Pop grinned, ear-to-ear. "A long time. I knew Ida would get married one day."

"It looks like a treasure chest," Jeff said. "She'll love it."

Pop opened the lid. Jeff looked inside and smelled the rich odor of cedar. The wood fit together perfectly.

"I can't get over being sad," Junior said, "but it's getting a little easier."

"The wedding's still in August, right?" Pop asked.

Jeff turned toward the door. "Danny said they're shooting for Saturday, August seventh. They're happy about having it here at the house."

"I want it out behind the house," Pop said, "where we buried Mom's ashes. It's a good place."

"Got to go," Jeff said. "I'm meeting our accountant."

Pop touched the top of the cedar chest, his finger tracing one of the copper straps. "Don't say anything about the cedar chest. It's a surprise."

Jeff sat outside Chili's. Junior walked up and Danny was with him. They had just come from a six pm AA meeting. They settled into a large corner booth. Junior turned to Jeff.

“What’s going on? It sounded important.”

Jeff glanced at Danny.

“It’s okay. Danny knows everything. We don’t have any secrets.”

“Ida will be here soon. She found an old letter. It seems we have a half brother. Mom had a baby when she was seventeen. Ida thinks she gave him away to someone in Canada, maybe to some friends of Grandmother Hawthorn.”

Junior shook his head. “Are you sure? Our mother?”

Just then Ida appeared, sat down between Danny and Junior, and took the letter from her jacket pocket. She opened it and flattened the page out on the table. “Read this.” They both read it. Junior put one hand over his mouth. “Jeeze, this is incredible. We’ve got a half brother somewhere.”

Danny raised his eyebrows. “Everything changes when something changes.”

Jeff leaned in. “No, it doesn’t have to. We need to keep this quiet.”

Junior looked at Danny. “You know Pop and his blood pressure. Jeff’s right. This news would do him in.”

Ida folded the letter carefully. “I can’t stand it. I have to know.”

“Mom probably thought it was better this way,” Junior said, touching Ida’s arm. “She loved us all, you know.”

“You don’t understand. Mom and I never connected until just before she died. I finally had some peace around that. But it turned out it was all a lie. Don’t you see? Now it’s worse.” Ida rubbed her face with both hands. “It’s all jumbled up. If she was alive, I feel like I’d kill her.”

Junior nodded. “I was that angry. Danny remembers, right?”

Danny smiled through blue eyes immersed in dark worry and put one hand on Ida’s back. They ordered salads and sandwiches and ate in silence, Ida sniffing, Danny softly rubbing her back. Ida picked at the food, tossed her fork on the table, and put her hand on her chin, facing the wall.

Jeff put his fork down. “Here’s the deal. We swear right now no one will tell Pop. I’m going to forget about it, and, Junior, you should too. Burn the letter, Ida. This didn’t happen. Got it?”

Ida looked up at Jeff and Junior. “I can live with that for now.”

The rest of April and most of May brought a rash of new problems into Ida’s life. Angry images disturbed her sleep, grimacing faces of strange

men, and recurrent dreams of people in hospital gowns pouring out buckets of dirty mop water under her feet. In order to chase them off, she had to slosh through the filthy water, shooing them off with a wet broom. When she awoke, nausea gripped her for hours.

Each night at work, it took more effort to smile at patients and to listen to family members. She couldn't sit still, and for a couple of weeks she had felt bloated and fat. She had missed one period, but was waiting for her next one before she picked up a pregnancy test from the drugstore. Late one night at work, she doubled over with cramps and began bleeding heavily. In the bathroom, she looked carefully at her discharge. Was it a miscarriage?

Two weeks later at work, fighting back a shadowy sense of darkness, an old boyfriend, an anesthetist at the hospital, came up behind Ida. He gently touched her shoulder and smiled. "Let's go for a walk."

"Oh, Doug, how have you been? This is awkward. You know I'm engaged now. Is there something you want to talk about?" Her face flushed. Desire radiated from him, making hot, wavy shadows in the air. He smiled, and she was drawn to his warmth. His breath smelled like cinnamon. "Have you seen the new wing? Let's take a break."

Ida walked along beside him as he led her to the elevator, up two floors, and through a corridor that led to a closed ward. "They're going to open this wing in a couple of days. Check it out."

They walked down the silent hallway lit only by nightlights. He stopped, opened a door, and led Ida into a room with a sparkling new tile floor, walls with fresh light green paint, and two beds with new pillows and sheets—a white curtain drawn partway between them. The air smelled sweet, like orange floor cleaner, and cold, blue, mercury-vapor lights shined in from the parking lot. He put his hands on Ida's shoulders and turned her toward him. "You seem like you need a friend. Are things okay at home? Tell me what's going on."

Ida looked down, thinking about the weekends she used to have with Doug, the times he took her to Las Vegas, the all-nighters at the craps table, the champagne, her smell of early morning sex, his Mickey Mouse tattoo over his naval, and the luxurious sleep until late afternoon. "Everything is fine. I'm just tired. I haven't been sleeping well." She let Doug lift her face

in his hands. He kissed her gently, touching her lips with his tongue, like before. She turned her face, a warm shiver rippling up her back, her knees nearly buckling. “This is not good. We should go back now.”

“Not good? You’ve got to be kidding. We’ve always been great together. Remember?”

Ida smiled at him. “Yes, I remember. And now you’re going to tell me what I need, right?” She loved being desired by good-smelling men—a sumptuous feeling, much like feathers on her skin and floating on soft pillows, a place far away from her confusion and irritation. Someday those men will get you in serious trouble, her mother had warned, and you’ll end up getting an abortion.

“How about what we both need? We’re good together, and you’re still the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known.”

Ida shook her head, put her arms around him as he pulled her close, kissing her neck, and began swaying in a rocking dance step, his Mickey Mouse tattoo rubbing softly under her breasts, until the starched sheets on the bed touched the back of her legs. She leaned forward and pushed her hands against his chest. “This is not going to happen.”

“What’s going on? You love what I do.”

“Not now I don’t.” She pushed past him, rushed out the door, and scurried to the elevator. She flashed a pasty smile over her shoulder as she got off the elevator ahead of him. “Back to work,” she said. “Nice to see you again.” His frown disappeared behind the elevator doors.

Ida spent most nights at work with her stomach clenched and teeth gritted. She had been promoted to charge nurse for the night shift in the ICU, a sterile place she could control, yet each night she lost some of her focus and shuffled through clouds of despair. In mid-May, she made some serious mistakes with injections—one night she gave the wrong medication to one of her patients, and it caused a bad reaction. She came home the next morning with a gray face and dull eyes. “I’ve got to do something about this.”

Danny sat down beside her. “I’m sorry. Can I help?”

“I’m going. I’m going to search for him.”

“I worry about you just taking off, especially by yourself. Maybe he doesn’t want to be found, have you thought about that?”

“I’ll figure that out later. There’s part of my life that’s missing—it haunts me.”

“Where will you go?”

“Well, I found a clue. I have a name and a city.”

“A name?”

“I went through the sign-in book for Mom’s funeral. I recognized most of the people, but there was one strange name. A man signed in as ‘Joel Martin, Victoria, Vancouver Island, Canada, old friend.’ Why would a man from Canada be at Mom’s funeral? A total stranger?”

“It could be one of her old friends from Canada. Do you know anything else?”

“I spent some time on the computer. There’s a man named Joel Martin who graduated from the University of British Columbia with a degree in Marine Biology. He teaches at the University. He’s about the right age.”

“That’s not much. A man named Joel came to pay his respects. That’s all. This is one of those things you might have to turn over.”

“My mother is a liar and I have a half brother. Maybe he’s dead, but it’s *too big* to turn over.”

Ida worked the night shift on Sunday, and Danny left the house early with Jedi for a morning visiting at the hospital. They spent the afternoon at a training center for therapy dogs, and Danny came in the house quietly, expecting Ida to still be asleep. He heated some soup, made a vegetarian omelet, and set the table. He opened the bedroom door to wake Ida for dinner, but the bed was empty. He looked around for a note. Then he dialed her cell phone, but it went directly to voicemail. “Hey, where are you? Dinner’s ready.”

Danny ate alone, fed ER and Jedi, and paced the living room as he tried to focus on a movie. He left several messages. He looked again throughout the house for a note, and that’s when he discovered that two suitcases were missing, a black roller bag and a heavy roller duffel. Had she just up and left? Danny called her work. They said Ida was on vacation. None of her friends had heard anything. Jeff and Junior hadn’t heard from her. There was no sign of Ida. He got on the computer and checked their bank accounts. She had written a check for \$2,000 cash that day.

The night before, she and Danny had made love late into the night. Though their bodies were close, Danny felt agitated and distant. Something was different. Ida's body was cool and she didn't smell the same. Her skin always gave off a jasmine and wood scent, a spicy blend that was warm and earthy. Ida's smell always calmed Danny—he called her aroma the essence of Ida—but tonight it had vanished. She smelled antiseptic, sterile, as though she had rubbed herself down with alcohol. Danny's eyes welled up at the thought of losing her.

He sent texts and left messages late into the night. Finally, he sent a text saying that if she didn't call by tomorrow night, he was going to call the police and report her as a missing person.