

*Saturday*

*.I.*

*Jes*

Jes tossed the contents of the glove compartment onto the passenger seat—flashlight, two ossified sticks of gum, an old breathalyzer, the pre-digital model. Somewhere was dry shampoo, the most significant advance in personal hygiene since the invention of soap.

She'd planned to be at her desk by now, mowing through a stack of case reports before her boss rolled in with his 7-11 donuts and sports bar hangover.

Finally, buried between the folds of a crumpled map of New York State. Psssst, and her hair was... better.

She wriggled out of last night's jeans and into the uniform pants she kept stashed under the seat. Earlier that morning, on her way out of the unfamiliar house, she'd glanced longingly into the master bath—parade of grooming products, plush towels on the racks.

But if she turned on the shower, she'd have woken him. And then she would have been late. Very late.

What was his name?

She had absolutely no idea.

Her mouth felt like sand. She extracted her toothbrush from the clutter on the seat, stuck it in her uniform pocket. One good thing you could say for police issue clothing, pockets.

Another must-do before she headed in: a new ring tone for her mother.

Braying ass?

~

*Beatrice*

Shuffling down the hall of her house, her yipping beagle dancing at her feet, Beatrice hummed in time to the slap of her slippers against the carpet runner. After a few measures, the meandering notes marshaled themselves into a tune, the idyllic harmonies of the seduction aria, “La ci darem la mano,” from Don Giovanni. Ah, the genius of Mozart.

At the threshold to the kitchen, she bent down to scratch Geneva’s ears. Blinking in the brightness—she loved the generous windows above the sink—Beatrice inhaled deeply, anticipating the rich aroma of the French roast that would be waiting in the pot of her coffee maker, courtesy of the infallible timer.

Instead, her nostrils filled with the sour tang of overripe tomatoes.

The coffee pot was cold to the touch—she’d forgotten to set the infallible timer. The source of the acrid smell was beside the dish drainer; tomatoes in meaty red chunks glistened

beneath a busy cloud of fruit flies. Peeled, cored, and diced into cubes, intended for gazpacho. Extra ripe, soft in places; in her hands they'd felt like heavy red balloons of juice. She hadn't finished the soup because her daughter had called to cancel their dinner plans. Vague, weedy complications had sprung up in Jes's life—again—at the last minute. Beatrice frowned. The August morning unsettled itself, hazy and leisurely sliding into too-humid and wrong.

She mopped the tomatoes into the disposal, her mind replaying the argument—despite her best efforts—while she prepared the coffee. Jes telling Beatrice she was being ridiculous—no one made plans days in advance anymore. Jes finally disclosing, at Beatrice's increasingly heated insistence, the reason for the cancellation.

“I have a date.”

In the background, Beatrice had heard glasses and bottles clinking, loud conversations, bursts of laughter. Jes was in a bar. “And you didn't know about this...date when we made our plans?”

“Okay, not a date. A Thing That Came Up.”

“More like a hook-up,” Beatrice had slammed her knife down on the tomatoes, cell phone crunched uncomfortably between ear and shoulder. “Don't think I don't know what those things are called. And don't think word doesn't get around in this town about who's...hooking up.” The guidance counselor at the high school where she taught English literature delighted in informing Beatrice where her daughter had last been spotted, and with whom.

“Oh, please.” Beatrice knew that voice from her daughter's adolescence—Jes had been a quietly difficult teenager, only her father had been able to manage her.

Beatrice sipped her coffee at the front window, holding the mug under her nose—the aroma drowned the smell of rotten tomatoes. She pushed away the memory of her own shrill voice, “You’re throwing your life away, that’s what!” There’d been a short silence, followed by her daughter’s icy enunciation: “God forbid I have a life like yours.”

The bank president—the latest name dropped by the guidance counselor—was old enough to be Jes’s father. Literally—he was the same age Charles would be (four years Beatrice’s junior) if he were still alive. Beatrice had shouted that, too, just before Jes hung up.

On good days, Jes was like garlic, strangely beautiful to behold and, when treated with proper care, inimitably sweet and nutty. On bad days, she was more like horseradish—fragile white flowers and abundant green leaves attached to a root so pungent the faintest whiff would make your eyes water.

Jes was throwing her life away, squandering her youth and attractiveness—these things had a certain shelf-life. Heading straight toward a dead end, and she’d be there sooner than she thought. Beatrice sighed and tried to focus her attention on her well-tended flower beds.

Hollyhocks, hydrangeas—lovely ruffled globes of pale blue. Dragon’s blood, nestled in the shade of the old oak, surrounded by rows of fussy cyclamen. Jes considered gardening a waste of time. But then Jes had no time for beautiful things that lacked a practical purpose.

Parking her empty mug on the sill, Beatrice began the daily search for Geneva’s leash. She found it in the study draped around the neck of a dressmaker’s mannequin, the ends lost in the folds of an elaborate gown. The costume she used for the Duchess of Malfi, title character of John Webster’s seventeenth-century tragedy (Beatrice’s favorite among her rotation of student

productions—A *Midnight Summer's Dream* was so predictable as to be almost dreary). Beatrice had been mending the lace at the neckline, torn during the death scene in the previous performance—it was hard to die convincingly without doing damage to the costume.

She'd also had to let the bodice out; this year's Duchess, Amber Inglin, was a round, ripe peach of a girl. Previously Beatrice had tended toward the Japanese eggplant variety—understated curves, dark and brooding, appropriate for the somber Mr. Webster—and Amber was a bright, sunny change.

Except for the tattoo. An enormous peacock, its tail feathers fanned across the back of the girl's hand, enveloping her wrist like a colorful silk glove, glowing iridescent under the stage lights. Fortunately they'd worn sleeves long in the seventeenth century—a woman's bare hands were considered an erotic sight. It could have been worse, snakes, or fairies, or one like Jes's, which Jes herself, regrettably, described as a 'tramp stamp'. A peacock was in reasonably good taste. Charles, her late husband, had been partial to peacocks.

Rehearsals started in two weeks, with the production slated for the week before Thanksgiving—fall was, without question, Beatrice's favorite season. Her mood lightened with the thought of the auditorium full of slightly scandalized parents. No production of Webster's Jacobean masterpiece was a success to Beatrice unless at least one mother called the principal's office the next morning to complain.

Snapping the leash onto Geneva's collar, Beatrice ignored the portrait in the entry hall. It was a seventeenth-century original, and bore a distinct resemblance to her daughter.

Given the lack of signature or attribution, the bespectacled owner of the antiquarian shop had let her have it for a song. The young woman was dressed in a red satin gown and an over-garment of gold brocade lined with fur, her honey-colored hair pulled back smooth from the pale, sober oval of her face. Beatrice had fashioned the Duchess's costume after the gown in the portrait, imagining how the colors would bring out her daughter's peculiar beauty when she was old enough for the part.

Years (and several Duchesses) later, when Jes had finally tried the costume on, the likeness had been uncanny. And still was, or would be, if Jes ever wore anything besides jeans.

Following Geneva down the driveway, Beatrice passed under the bird house Jes and her father had hung years ago in the birch tree. They'd spent hours at the window in the study, whispering so as not to startle the birds, making notes, passing binoculars stealthily from hand to hand.

At the bus stop on the corner Beatrice turned left onto Willet Drive, a winding road bordered by two- and three-story lakefront homes. Geneva's tags jingling, they passed well-kept Victorian mansions, a modernistic Bauhaus-type structure that looked as though it would be more comfortable in Holland. A shadowy stretch of woods where daubs of gold were just beginning to appear among the deep green leaves. Then the angular, wood-trimmed stucco of the Walshes' Prairie Style mansion, curving into view around an elongated bend.

Liam Walsh, a handsome, burly man with a smile worthy of a toothpaste commercial, who'd made a name for himself in the courts and the school system as a tireless advocate for

children unfortunate enough to land in the custody of Child Services. His altruism, in Beatrice's opinion, was rendered considerably less self-sacrificing by the fact that his wife was loaded.

Beatrice stepped over the shallow ditch into tall, tangled grass. Geneva was advancing at a trot now. Sweat soaked through the back of Beatrice's shirt in big, irregular patches; she could feel it making circles around her armpits. Her shins swished with difficulty through a dense patch of weeds ready to burst with seed; the Walshes should really mow all the way out to the street.

Jes was over thirty. Jes could make her own decisions. The guidance counselor was a bored, small-minded busybody. Jes had just been chatting with the bank president. In a bar, yes, so what of it?

And Jes did have a point: what daughter wanted her life to resemble her mother's? But a surge of indignation jostled aside the reasonable thought—there was nothing wrong with Beatrice's life. Beatrice realized she was muttering to herself. She stopped. These imaginary conversations were becoming a habit.

Then Geneva began to bark, lunging forward and straining at her leash. Beatrice's arm straightened with a painful jerk as she broke into an awkward run.

Near the fence at the back corner of the field, Geneva came to a sudden stop, tripping her mistress who nearly fell. The dog's nose was working furiously among the weeds and Beatrice bent over to catch her breath.

It was then that she saw the curl. A lovely, shiny curl of hair the color of coral tea roses that wrapped itself around twigs and weeds, and then disappeared beneath an overgrown forsythia. So very Pre-Raphaelite!

Beatrice reached to touch the curl, brushing the weeds aside.

Nothing could have prepared her for the image of the peacock. Suddenly, there it was: tail-feathers fully unfurled, luminous blues and greens shimmering between blades of grass.

And then red, marbled with pink, around two imperfect circles of bone-white with dark centers. A space where there shouldn't be one—ground visible, covered with grass, and some clover. Red again—an image of the tomatoes on the kitchen counter flashed across Beatrice's mind—surrounding two more bone-white circles.

The hand bearing the peacock was severed, that was why Beatrice could see a sliver of ground where basic biology dictated there should be skin. There was a clean cut five inches or so above the wrist, just missing the edge of the peacock's tail, the muscles and tendons—the bones—neatly sliced through like a Swiss round steak prepared by an expert butcher.

Beatrice's mind had been taken over by a calm, rational scientist voice, now explaining to her in a precisely measured way that the hand must have been severed by some terribly sharp instrument in order to produce such a clean cut. Beatrice thought again of the tomatoes, chopping them into cubes. She started backward, bile rising in her throat. Dimly, as though from very far away, she heard Geneva's frantic barks.

Having seen the tattoo, Beatrice would have required no further confirmation of the body's identity. But the beautiful face was there, too, pale skin dusted with freckles, blond brows, partially veiled by the forsythia branches. The eyes were open, the skin around them smudged with the remnants of a heavy makeup job. Amber Inglin's mouth formed a flattened "o", as though death had surprised her in the midst of a conversation.

She was naked. As is often the case with Titian-haired women, Amber's skin was startlingly white, nestled in the deep green of the grass. Before Beatrice looked away, the scientist in her brain—certainly male—registered that Amber's breasts were full, and that the triangle of hair covering her pubis was the same color as the curl. Peach.

Later, she would remember not having noticed any blood.

Beatrice staggered backward, away from the bushes, wrapping Geneva's leash around her wrist. Geneva tried to lunge forward again, toward the body, her anxious yip sputtering into a guttural whine when the leash brought her up short. Nausea churned through the two cups of coffee in Beatrice's stomach. She gave up control, vomiting a surprising quantity of bitter liquid into a gap between the branches of a creeping juniper. She straightened and wiped the back of her hand across her mouth.

She had to call Jes. She pulled her cell phone from her pocket. She hadn't wanted a cell phone—people looked so silly walking down the street talking into their hands, or swiping a little screen with their grubby forefingers—but Jes had made her get one. Beatrice's hand shook as she dialed her daughter's number. She mixed up the prefix twice, and then remembered speed dial.

When Jes answered, Beatrice opened her mouth but her vocal cords were unwilling to cooperate. Her throat felt full of stones.

“Mom?” Jes sounded distracted at first, maybe sleepy—it was early, wasn’t today her day off?—and then Beatrice heard the icy voice from last night. “Mom? *Hello?* Are you there?”

Cell phones showed the caller’s number. Beatrice always forgot that.

“I...,” Beatrice began. “It’s terrible...it’s... you have to get here!” Beatrice choked on a sob. She raised a hand to her mouth and realized that her cheeks were wet. She hadn’t been aware she was crying. She tried to swallow and choked again. Those were sobs, hundreds of them, not stones.

“Mom? Where are you? What’s going on?” Impatience and concern in equal parts.

Beatrice took a breath. She’d intended for it to be deep, but it caught and her voice came out on a sob. “There’s a body, under some bushes. It’s... oh, I can’t bear to say it. It’s one of my students. My Duchess, for the fall production, Amber Inglin. She’s *dead!*”

“Where, Mom? Where are you?”

She spoke but a riding lawnmower rounded the corner of the Walshes’ grand house at the other end of the field, trailing some sort of contraption behind it and drowning out Beatrice’s reply. She tried again. “At the edge of the Walshes’ field. Beside some bushes. Forsythias.”

Beatrice had no idea why she’d added the detail about the forsythias—Jes wouldn’t recognize a tulip, let alone a spring-flowering bush in the middle of August. Her head seemed to float, far above her feet in their clogs. She was conscious, in a terrible way, of the presence of Amber Inglin’s body, to her left, not far away at all, but she kept her eyes on her shoes. Clogs.

Impractical for walking across fields. She didn't want to faint. Blades of cut grass stuck to the scuffed tips.

“Mom, what are you...”

The lawn mower was back and Beatrice missed her daughter's next words.

Once the mower disappeared behind the house again, Jes's voice returned, the syllables short and icy. “What are you doing in Liam Walsh's field?”

“Walking the dog.”

A crackling silence and then, “You're walking the dog in Liam Walsh's field?”

“It's where I've always walked her. What does it *matter*? My *student*...” Beatrice swallowed with difficulty. “My *student*—my *Duchess*—has been *murdered*. Get here, please.” Beatrice choked, had to stop to cough. She was glad to stop speaking.

“I'm on my way.” Jes's voice was businesslike now, competent. Beatrice could hear clattering in the background.

Geneva was determined to dive back into the bushes. Beatrice had a task—keep the dog under control. She must not faint or the dog could slip away, return to that terrible...

“Wait for me there. Don't touch the body. And don't call the station. I'll call them once I get there. I'll be there as soon as I can.”

“Hurry.” Beatrice felt the need to lean against something. The air was heavy and humid, oppressive. She made her way to a shady patch, away from the forsythias but not too far—she felt she shouldn't leave the girl alone—and leaned against the fence.