

# CHAPTER 1

This isn't my story. It's Patricia and Terry's. But in the summer of 1978, their lives were wound around mine like strands of twine around a spool. Twine. Rope. Barbed wire by August.

I still have the notes I took out of habit that summer, not knowing what else to do. I have Patricia's journal too, which she left at the beach house on Kiawah Island in the aftermath. Even now, five years later, I find it too painful to read.

I have the moist heat of the Carolina coast, even here in New York. I see the rivers and smell the salt marsh, sweet with life and biting sour. I hear the perpetual respiration of the ocean, rolling us toward what I called *date certain*—September 1, 1978, the beginning of the Labor Day weekend.

I have me, interloper turned housemate. A his-and-hers confidante, counselor, friend. Speaking truth to love. Lying to power. A fascinated witness, in the middle of it all, the place I hate most to be.

On the first of June, I took in everything at once and made sense of nothing. Patricia was sitting on the side of the bed. The sheets had been stripped and lay on the floor beside a haphazard pile of her husband's suits. The arms and legs of coats and trousers were at odd angles, as if limbs

inside were broken or dislocated. Dress shirts were in another pile. Pockets monogrammed *JC*. She hadn't answered the door, hadn't responded when I stepped inside and called her name. She'd ignored the click of my heels on the heart pine floor.

"Dear God," I said, "what's wrong?"

Her eyes were downcast, her shoulders round. "Where is my husband, Lynn?" she said, without looking up.

"He's finalizing the presentation. He's changed the ad campaign so many times, the art director may walk." Silence. "He said you were upset when you called. He asked me to come."

He'd asked me, his personal assistant, to assist his wife. He asked often when short on patience or time. Or when baffled, like today. When he couldn't intuit the problem. When, unarmed with strategy and tactics, he was afraid his temper would flare.

I sat down beside her, and she looked at me at last, blue eyes brimming, tears threatening a mudslide from her lashes. "I want to leave Jack," she said. "I want you to help me."

I looked away. The golf wear I'd purchased for her was in a box on her dresser. I'd purchased lessons for her too, at Jack's direction. A shopping bag of books sat at her feet. On the bedside table were more books, a pink compact of birth control pills, and her contact lens case.

"I want to show you something," she said. "Something you may know about." She picked up her contact case. "And I don't mean my lens. I'm *sure* you know about that."

I wasn't supposed to. No one was, but in The Curren Company everyone did. Custom tinted, the lens was Jack's solution to the problem of her mismatched eyes, for making the gray of her left match the cornflower blue of her right. He had no solution for their mismatched ages—her twenty-six years, his forty-nine. None for their mismatched lives.

She twisted the *R* cap open. In the white well, a black pearl button was another eye. Omniscient, unsympathetic, unblinking.

“It isn’t mine, Lynn. I found it.” She patted the mattress. “Here.”

I took in a choppy breath, whitecaps of air. “You can’t possibly think Jack would do that.”

“Be unfaithful? Or be unfaithful in our bed?” She laid the button in her palm, made a fist, and passed her other hand over it. She uncurled her fingers, and like a failed magician, stared at what now looked like the head of a nail hammered into her palm. “Do you know who, Lynn? A client? Someone at the office?”

“That’s a question for Jack,” I said.

“I’ve wondered *who* all week.” Tears rimming, clinging. “And I’ve wondered about this button. Was it on a skirt? A dress? A blouse? What color? Black on black? White, pink, yellow? Was it alone on a sleeve or in a long row of buttons? Front or back? V-neckline or mandarin?” She dropped the button back in the case. “How did this button come to be lost? Was it loose? Were they hurrying? Afraid I’d come home? Was she resisting? Was he rough?” Now the mudslide. “I look at this button and see my husband’s hands.”

She returned the case to the table and said, “I found something else.” She took a black pinstripe coat from the floor, slid her hand into a pocket. “I don’t know what I was looking for. A note. A phone number.” She removed a one-inch square package, which I imagined felt cold to her touch. I sighed, knowing too much about their marriage, knowing she’d never touched a condom before. She removed the wrapper. She pulled the condom over her finger. “A covering,” she said, “like my lens.” She turned to me. “He wants to take care of me. And he does. But by controlling me.” She dropped the condom in her lap. “He is standing in the way of everything I want in my life.”

In one swift motion, she removed the contact lens I had never seen her without. The difference in color was so dramatic that the gray eye appeared much larger than the blue, and almost off-center. I managed not to shudder, but I stared. It was chilling. It was also telling. Two people inside her stared back at me. One docile, one determined. My helpless friend, my boss's new foe.

She laid her head on my shoulder. "I could find the strength to leave him if I were like you, Lynn. But I'm not. And I'm not sure I can."

She went into the bathroom, dropped the condom in the trash, and stared at the mirror. I wanted to go to her but knew if I hugged her she'd sob. I scanned the room until my eyes met Raggedy Ann's.

The goddamn doll, Jack called her. A gift for Patricia's third birthday, handmade by her mother, Raggedy Ann wore the traditional white apron over her dress, but the yarn stitched luxuriantly into her head was yellow instead of red, and her big button eyes were mismatched. Over the years her painted smile had faded, but those eyes shone as if new.

"I disobeyed him this morning," Patricia said, stepping back into the bedroom. She straightened the doll's apron and went on in a sunny half whisper. "I went to Harlem, to the public library, which he told me not to do. I volunteered for a program called Read and Reach for the Stars. I sat on the floor and read to children for hours. I can't remember the last time I was that happy."

"You're exaggerating. Every time you open a novel you're happy, or go to a reading or a concert or a play."

"Don't tell Jack," she said. "About Harlem. Or the button. Especially the button."

I stood to go. "I have to get back. He needs me. He wants the Kiawah account badly."

“Wait, Lynn. I went to the Book Mart today. The Gotham.” She dug through the shopping bag of books, found the one she wanted to show me.

My eyebrows arched at the title. I’d bought the book the day it was published, read it in one rainy Saturday sitting. “This is 1978, Patricia. You’re five years late.”

“No, three. Three years married and three years late in doing something other than what my husband tells me to.” She returned the book to the bag. “Do you think I’ll like it?”

I hesitated. “Yes.”

At The Curren Company, the clucking of typewriters had ceased. The workday had stolen the crisp starch of morning. Jack had rolled his shirtsleeves and loosened his tie.

“She’s fine,” I said, and he nodded, a thank-you in his eyes. “Or she’s better at least.”

I switched off the overhead projector, sure he’d rehearsed the presentation in my absence. I turned off the fluorescents, hoping the soft light of the tall brass lamps on his credenza would persuade him to wrap things up and go home. Instead, he asked about the executives, twelve hours and a handshake away.

“What should I know about them professionally, Lynn?”

I handed him my report on the management team. “The CEO thinks an oceanfront golf resort in South Carolina doesn’t need an advertising agency in New York.”

He looked at me over his reading glasses. The challenge in his eyes was as bright as the lights of the city, framed by the floor-to-ceiling windows of his corner office, thirty-fourth floor. The squeaking of his leather chair as he rocked and skimmed my work became the only sound in the room.

He leaned forward, forearms on his desk. “What should I know about them personally?”

“Golf. The director of sales is a member of Pine Valley. The CEO, of Augusta.”

“That’s good,” he said, “though I haven’t played golf in a year.”

“The director of marketing and his wife play tennis,” I said.

“Tennis.”

“Careful, Jack. Your scorn is showing.”

“I don’t know one damn thing—”

“The current rivalry is Connors-Borg—the American bad boy versus the stoic European. The ‘Ice Borg’ or ‘Ice Man,’ whose mere presence on court causes women to ‘Borgasm.’”

He laughed for the first time all day. “*All* women? You?”

I went on. “The new wunderkind is John McEnroe. He’s nineteen, just turned pro. Wimbledon begins on the twenty-sixth. You might suggest Mr. and Mrs. Director of Marketing fly up for the U.S. Open in August. You might offer them The Curren Company box.”

“Since when does my company have a box?”

“I have one reserved,” I said, and he smiled. “I need to let them know. Do you want—”

“Go with it. And thank you, Lynn. I hope my sincerity is showing.”

With his chair tilted back to the maximum angle, he took a moment to relax. When he rocked forward again, he lit a cigarette and studied me. “What is it?”

Smoke curled between us. “Patricia.”

“You said she was fine.”

I tried to decide whether husband or wife deserved my loyalty. “Jack.”

He clamped the Viceroy between his lips and began scribbling tactics on a yellow legal pad, leaving me to wonder if he’d heard and ignored me or tuned me—and Patricia—out completely. On this night, at least, I chose Patricia. I told him only, “She bought *Fear of Flying*.” I had to say it twice before his eyes met mine.

“Patricia has never been afraid to fly,” he said.

“It’s a novel, Jack. It’s a feminist novel. I wouldn’t call it militant feminism—”

“Is there another brand?”

His smile was a familiar invitation to banter, but I was tired. I stayed on task. “It’s not self-help. It’s fiction, but not what she usually reads. I think she’s trying—” I braked as he raised his hand.

“You can’t fix my wife, Lynn. Please.” He let out a smoky sigh. “I can’t get her beyond *when I was seven*. She can’t finish the sentence even for me. If I can’t help her—” He crushed out the thought with the cigarette. “Children are orphaned,” he said. “Children are broken and they recover. For whatever reason, Patricia did not.”

He swiveled his chair, and we looked at her photograph together. I saw an inmate in a sterling frame.

He cleared his throat. “Mail the May P&Ls when you get them. To Kiawah. To the beach house.”

He gave me a meeting-is-over nod. He picked up a portfolio with one hand and his briefcase with the other. Scuffed with twenty-two years of accomplishment, leather cracking around the handles, it was the only thing he was sentimental about. Patricia had given him a new one for Christmas. He’d had me return it the following day.

We crossed the room and paused ceremoniously at the large framed collection of ads on the wall beside the door—newspaper and magazine ads, some color, some black and white. They comprised the award-winning print campaign that had taken an Iowa dairy farm, its failing product, and The Curren Company from regional obscurity to national renown—a print campaign built around seven-year-old Patricia. Her hysteria at the initial photo shoot was the

only reason Jack had impulsively changed the shot, headline, and strategy. Without knowing it, he had also changed his life.

He set his briefcase on the floor and I watched the ritual. He touched the frame as he did at the beginning and end of each day, as if dipping his fingers into a font of holy success or brushing them against a corporate mezuzah.

He said for the first time, “Thank God she was broken.”

In the elevator, I thought of the rules I’d learned from coworkers on my first day at the office.

*Never say*, the agency wouldn’t be where it is today without that campaign.

*Or*, the little girl made the man, made him a success.

*Never in any context say*, trophy wife.

*Never say*, Jack is superstitious.

*Or*, he married Patricia sixteen years after the ad campaign, when he needed another bit of luck.

As for the last one, I knew better. Beautiful, virginal, helpless, she was an intriguing challenge he couldn’t resist. I tried again. “About Patricia.”

“You’re my assistant. She’s my dependent, and I don’t mean on a tax return.”

“You say that like you’re proud.”

“Don’t analyze. Just assist.” He gave me the disarming smile he used with tough clients.

“That doesn’t work with me,” I said, and when he chuckled, I persisted. “It’s not only the novel. It’s something I can’t quite grasp, but it’s there. Something is stirring. It’s atypical.”

“Is it problematic?”



I met his gaze head-on. "I don't know, Jack. I really don't."

"Noted," he said. But it wasn't. I could tell.

Often that summer I wondered if I should have given him a stronger warning that night. I might have, if I'd known what Patricia would do. I imagined her taking a job, a trip, too many sleeping pills, even divorcing him. I imagined many things. I knew only one: if the self-worth she sought led her to the fault line of infidelity, if it fractured inescapably or she chose to cross it, I would not tell her husband. I owed her that much.

The black pearl button was mine.