



PROLOGUE

The journal cover felt smooth, pleasing to Louise Vandenberg's wrinkled fingers as she placed it on the shelf. It was the last of dozens filled during her undertaking, and though the answers saddened her, they brought a small amount of peace—a peace two decades in coming. For years after that horrifying night, immobilized by shock and despair, she barely moved. Seconds, minutes, hours, laden with grief, gathered one atop another, but even their suffocating weight was not enough to answer her prayers and end the ordeal. Those days without light did little to dull the image of her husband's bloodied body, or dim the memory of her missing daughter's smile. Her dear friend, Anna, helped her endure from one hour to the next, offering kind and comforting words or simply quiet companionship. In time, Louise understood that until she knew what happened to Jack and Kimberly, nothing would console her.

After years of numbed anguish, she bought the first journal and began her search. She questioned everyone in Raccoon Grove, filling pages and then books with rumors and fading memories. Many she interviewed considered her search futile, a journey destined to add to her pain. They helped out of pity, but they helped. In the end, despite their shaky support and strenuous

efforts by the ex-sheriff to thwart her investigation, the answers emerged. When the truth became clear, Anna and she agreed that even though it would bring more pain, her findings belonged in the hands of the authorities. Only days after that conversation, Anna acquiesced to her frail heart and died peacefully in her sleep. Louise believed her supportive friend had struck a deal with the almighty to postpone departure until they knew the truth. An angel on earth would have no difficulty with such negotiations.

Anna's funeral drew a large crowd, including the man responsible. Louise made the decision to face him before surrendering the diaries. When the service ended, she took him aside and revealed her discoveries. He denied everything, of course, but she saw his discomfort and heard the panic as he fumbled for answers.

As she replaced the final diary and sat on her bed, Louise wondered if the confrontation been a mistake. What else could she have done? In a few weeks, it would be the twentieth anniversary of that day. By then, the police would know the truth. A noise interrupted her thoughts and she turned toward the door as someone entered.

"Hello, Louise."

"Hello."

"You knew I'd come."

"Yes. I suppose I knew you had to."



CHAPTER 1

Spectators in Raccoon Grove High School's auditorium made good use of the programs found on their seats. After admiring familiar faces of daughters, sisters, friends, and neighbors, visitors used the booklets to fan muggy, unmoving air. They packed the sweltering hall to watch young women from the 1965 senior class compete in a beauty contest.

A number of the youthful participants signed up knowing it was their once-in-a-lifetime chance to enter such a competition. Others, preened and prompted by Hollywood-dazed parents, agreed to the embarrassing display as a final concession to waning parental control.

One contestant, Kathleen Chandler, stood out from the rest. Viewers could not know as they watched the young beauty cross the stage with practiced, deceptively confident strides, she longed for nothing more than to fade into the darkness beyond the footlights. Nor did they guess that beneath a healthy radiant glow her stomach churned. Determination, which she could only attribute to confusion, helped quiet her uneasy stomach and propel her forward in the line of smiling women.

Stunned at winning the high school pageant, but convinced it was a fluke, she entered another competition. Defeat would

force her to abandon the pointless exercise and she could return to a normal life, whatever that was. To her shock, she won the next contest, and then the next. In the years that followed, Kathleen regularly found herself on a stage, head tilted to receive the crown and arms open to embrace a bouquet. A ready smile cut through the veil that seemed to separate her from the rest of humanity. She was grateful for the shroud. No one ever looked deeper. Nothing told her what she searched for, or why she believed it existed on a stage or runway. Eventually she stopped questioning her motives. When she tried to imagine herself working a job, or attending a university, the answer was clear.

For six years, she applied suffocating makeup and poured her body into garments that pushed and pulled in unimaginable ways. At the age of twenty-four, an agent suggested she enter the Miss Illinois contest, assuring her she would win and go on to compete for Miss America. At the same time, Kate received another proposal. Dirk Harrison wanted her to become his wife. Most pageants barred married contestants and Dirk's offer gave her an opportunity to end the pointless journey. She heard, and effectively ignored an inner voice that predicted continued uncertainty and despair.

Satin opera gloves gave way to heavy-duty latex, and flowing gowns to aprons. The veil followed her from stages and runways to the bedroom where Dirk, like pageant audiences, failed to notice her lack of interest. He expected only two things from his wife, to maintain his house and her beauty.

To some, housekeeping was drudgery. To Kathleen, it was a way to keep busy. She could focus on the waxy shine of her furniture and ignore the dull ache in her heart. Her looks required little effort and while they remained youthful and fresh, pleased Dirk. He savored opportunities to plump his

feathers when friends and co-workers complimented him on the gorgeous figure attached to his arm.

To play the role, she simply recalled the runways, never considering the effect those performances had on her spirit. Nor did it occur to her that life offered anything more. She assumed all of humanity lived with a gaping hole inside, and when change occurred, it moved you laterally from one empty reality to another. She had traded what she perceived as the normal unhappy life of a teenager for the tedium of diets and exercise to strut down joyless runways. She exchanged that to raise two children and make a home for her husband. Twenty years later, she rarely heard from her son and daughter who attended college in nearby Chicago and found excuses every weekend to avoid coming home. Her husband, still infatuated by young beauty queens, checked out the runways again when Kate took a rare stand and refused to color her hair or surgically enhance anything. Dirk considered the action a breach of their marriage contract.

When he moved in with his next contestant, Kate was forty-four and terrified to be without a role to play. Just as the emptiness threatened to consume her, she recalled a long forgotten pleasure—a love of flowers. She had worked in her mom’s garden when she lived at home and knew the delight of a single new blossom, a pleasure nearly lost in shadow.

At first, she planted only a small number of flowers in the backyard of their three-acre lot. The more time she spent with them, the further her spirits lifted and the garden grew. Soon, aroma and color filled the empty spaces in her yard and her soul. At sixty-four, forty-six years after strolling down her first runway, Kate understood that what she wanted did not come from a Pauline Trigere evening gown, or Helena Rubenstein lip gloss. It came from rich black soil that nudged forth a fragrant

rainbow and revealed a beauty in her heart that she'd nearly forgotten existed.

"Kate, are you home?" Tracy Kendall's familiar voice carried through the kitchen to the garden.

"Out back. Grab something to drink on your way."

"The gardens look great. I like the spring blossoms best." The local journalist and Kate's best friend pointed her water bottle toward the flowers before raising it to her lips.

"You say that about the summer and fall flowers, and I believe I've heard you swear your undying devotion to the greenhouse collection. What brings you out this way, a breaking news story or a hot bit of gossip?"

"Neither. I had to get out of the house and couldn't think of a prettier place to park it. Any new customers?" The women lowered themselves into two cedar Adirondack chairs overlooking the yard.

"Funeral parlors are still my best clients. I try not to dwell on the fact that my business depends on people dying. What about you, anything exciting at the paper?"

"Since dying is news, my business depends on it, too, but a weekly newspaper in a town of five thousand isn't exactly a hotbed of excitement and intrigue."

"I know. That's why I read it."

"I did get two interesting letters in response to last week's column. They don't seem related, I mean as far as who sent them, but both involve a Vandenberg. One was about Jack, and the other, Kimberly."

Kate kept her ears tuned to Tracy, but her eyes scanned the gardens while she listened. When a wilted marigold came into her line of vision, she rose and deadheaded the blossom, laying it on the flat wooden arm when she returned to her chair. "What did they say?"

“Did you read last week’s column? It was the twentieth anniversary of Kimberly Vandenberg’s disappearance.”

“Yes, and I remember quite well what happened in Raccoon Grove twenty years ago. I had more than a passing interest.”

“Right. Well, I didn’t mention your involvement. The article simply told how Louise found Jack dead and Kimberly gone.”

“Thank you for keeping my name out of it. Who sent the letters?”

“I have no idea. They were both anonymous. One said he or she knew who killed Jack Vandenberg.”

“Everyone in town had an opinion about who killed Jack. The sheriff thought I did it. Where is that water bottle?” Kate had been waving her hand erratically under the chair to locate her drink with no success. She leaned down for a better view and frowned as she recovered the empty bottle.

“If I remember correctly, it wasn’t only the sheriff.” Tracy intended the comment as a joke, but at Kate’s frown, amended her response. “I knew you weren’t involved.”

“Thank you. What did the second letter say?”

“That Kimberly Vandenberg is alive and living in Chicago. There was a phone number, but when I called, it wasn’t in service. I found that rather strange. Unless it’s a tacky practical joke, what’s the point of sending a number to contact if it isn’t connected?”

Any words that followed ‘living in Chicago’ dissolved before they reached Kate’s ears. She sat forward, eyes wide, and uttered a few brief and disconnected sentences. “What? How? Kimberly is alive? Why didn’t she come home? Her mom only passed away a few weeks ago. Peter told me they haven’t even settled the estate. Isn’t he Louise’s attorney?”

“We don’t know if the letter is true, but you’re right, until the estate is settled, even though she’s dead, Peter is Louise’s

attorney. He ran an ad in major papers hoping to contact relatives, but he doesn't think there's any family left. The person that sent the letter didn't say they were Kimberly, they said someone they knew might be her. She was only five when she disappeared. If someone kidnapped her, she could have been brainwashed, or kept locked in a basement. Maybe she forgot everything about her childhood.”

“Keep a happy thought. I need water. What about you?” When Tracy lifted the half-full bottle and shook her head, Kate went to the kitchen where she held the refrigerator door open to stare blankly at its contents. Her mind was too full of images from long ago to focus on the shelves or the size of her carbon footprint.

Twenty years earlier, when Dirk told her he wanted out of the marriage, she took the advice of a few other women in town and hired Jack Vandenberg as her divorce attorney. She liked him immediately. At first, they met in his office where he advised her on what to discuss with Dirk and what papers to file. Later, they went to quiet, out-of-town restaurants. Their meetings were not clandestine, but they were, for Kate, a pleasant diversion from the house and Raccoon Grove. Conversation was easy with Jack, and their time together gave her more of a sense of being alive than she'd felt for a long while. It was no more than a friendship, but that friendship came at a time when she needed it desperately. It ended abruptly.



1991

The Raccoon Grove Gazette, a twenty-four page weekly that covered predominantly local news and events, came to town in 1984. It offered little competition to the bulkier papers from nearby cities, especially since two major dailies represented

the largest city in the Midwest. You could purchase either Chicago paper, or Kankakee's daily at a number of outlets around town. If, however, you wanted to catch up on local gossip, or sales at nearby stores, you bought the Gazette. Every Friday, subscribers found the paper on or near their front porch. For those who didn't subscribe, a few coins bought the latest edition at shops and boxes throughout the community.

Tracy Kendall wrote two columns. 'Tracy's Tidbits', the gossip column that bore her name, provided an important service to the community. Small towns thrive on gossip and the loved and hated columnist dished out dirt with the best of them. Over the years, several larger papers offered her syndication, but she declined. She liked the control that went with being owner of her column and the Gazette. A title she shared with her husband and publisher, Dave Kendall.

Her news column ran under the pen name, Maureen Fitzpatrick. Maureen was her mother's name and Fitzpatrick her maiden name. Although everyone in town knew she wrote the column, Tracy enjoyed what she considered her secret identity. In her eyes, she was a journalist first, and a gossip columnist out of necessity, although you'd have a hard time convincing her fans. Tracy's followers considered her as brassy and brutal as any gossip queen. She lived up to that praise, but she also made it a rule to confirm any item before it made the paper. If she received a tip that someone appeared in company other than his or her spouse, Tracy liked to hear both sides of the story. Those ethics led her to request an interview with Kathleen Harrison, retired beauty queen.

A number of reports had reached her desk alleging that Dirk Harrison, Kathleen's husband, was involved with a young woman from a neighboring town who actively competed in beauty pageants as Kathleen herself had twenty years earlier. Tracy

planned to telephone Mr. Harrison for a firsthand account of his escapades. That plan changed when other sources reported seeing Harrison's wife dining with her new divorce attorney. Tracy decided a face-to-face interview with Kathleen would be best, but before she had the chance, Jack Vandenberg, turned up dead.

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Flowers for Her Grave is a work of fiction. Characters, places and events exist only in the author's imagination or are improvised for the story. Resemblances to real occurrences, locations or people, living or dead, are unintended.

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To Mom and Dad



*Flowers leave fragrance in the
hand that bestows them*

Chinese Proverb