

Chapter One

Joyce

Yesterday, I kissed my husband for the last time. Of course, he does not know this. Not yet. In fact, I have a hard time believing it myself. But when I woke up this morning, I knew that it was true.

I am standing on the terrace, trying to discern my future. Right now, it seems to consist entirely of the morning air. Cool and still, but with the promise of heat.

This is as far as my future can be told.

For the next five minutes, I shall stand out here and drink my coffee and admire the colors of the garden in the first light of the day.

Oh, how many colors there are. The May-green lawn. The patio's salmon tiles. The white wall that surrounds the house. The crimson geraniums in their terracotta pot. The sky, hazy at the fringes, as my head is fogged with fatigue. The pool's blue is so deep and vivid I want to fall in and go under, and dissolve like aspirin.

I wish to paint this moment. To fix it on paper before

it slips away. But I gave away my materials long ago. Instead, I clasp my hands around the coffee mug and imprint the scene on my memory. A morning like this will never come again.

The geraniums need water. But they will have to be patient. Ruby won't arrive until the afternoon, and I am on the last day of my period. Frank does not like it when I water the flowers during menstruation. The female miasma will make them wilt, he says. Best let the help do it.

I agree with him, of course. I never point out that he also says Negroes have no talent for raising anything, which is why they don't have window boxes and their babies often die.

These are dark thoughts. They engulf the universe of my brain and swallow up the light. A Mellaril would snuff them out, but I don't think I'll need it. Not yet. There is hope in the morning hours, just as there is desperation in the afternoon, which stretches like gum and yet contracts into nothing, once it is filled with laundry and dusting and dinner and the children running around, always at risk of falling into the pool.

Where will I be tomorrow morning?

My heart begins to pound in my ears. For the first time in my life, I do not know. And for the first time in many years, I long for the afternoon.

I want to paint. I could pick up some supplies at the mall today, after I see the doctor. It would give me something

to do while the children are down for their nap. Something to bridge the gummy hours, when the minutes crawl past like slugs. Afternoon, when the heat wilts the geraniums and my mind crumbles into dust.

My stomach thrums with half-remembered pains. The menstruation, of course. But something else as well. Dark thoughts. Galaxies of blood.

How far does my female miasma reach? I imagine it as a halo, framing me like a saint. But my halo is dark red, not light, and I am not a saint, but a sinner.

Gently, I set my coffee down on one of the pool chairs and pick up the watering can. The touch of the metal makes my palms tingle. My first revolution of the day. There is a little water left at the bottom. I sneak up to the flowers, one arm extended. But then a bawl from inside the house catches me out, followed by lazy, half-interested crying.

Lily is awake.

I freeze. I should head up and see to my daughter. My whole body yearns to stifle her wailing with a hug. But Frank showed me a clipping from the paper, where a Professor Summers said that instant response may spoil the child.

And something in me heartily agrees. I want a moment longer with the pool. I want to care for the geraniums before I care for my child. Does that make me a bad mother? Does it make me worse than I already am?

I ignore the crying, pour a sad trickle of water onto the

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flowers and pick up my coffee. I shall finish it out here,
alone with the pool and the sky mirroring its perfect color.
Blue, so blue. False and True.
Me and You.

Chapter Two

Ruby

The bus jerks into motion, crawls ten yards along Southern Boulevard and grinds to a halt. Ruby stifles a sigh. It's hot. It was hot yesterday and it will be hot tomorrow, so what gives? That's what Momma would have said. *What gives, girl? It's hot, you deal with it. The Lord ain't changing the weather for your sorry ass.*

Speaking of which, her butt is so sweaty it sticks to the plastic seat. She arches her spine and pulls her skirt down. Too late. The cotton fabric is already crumpled. Mrs Ingram will have a fit.

Damn this job.

Today is a day for shorts, sandals and loose hair. Instead, her head is burning up under her little cap, and her feet are marinating in her sneakers. She almost longs for the clumsy white slippers the wives of Sunnyslakes insist on, so they can trace every single molecule of dirt on the carpet back to the perpetrator.

A lost-looking white lady is sitting near the front, as far

away from Ruby as possible, with a big hat and a bag clutched tightly to her chest. She's not turning around, so it'll be OK to slip the sneakers off for a minute.

The sweet relief is accompanied by a whiff of cheese.

She checks her watch, a gift from Joseph. It's past noon. Oh, Lord, she's already been on this bus for more than an hour and she's meant to be at Mrs Ingram's at 1 p.m. and Mrs Haney's at five.

Finally, the bus crests the smog line and descends into Sunnyslakes. The trees here are still small and do nothing to shield the road from the heat. The houses fly past her, one identical to the other, each surrounded by a pretty lawn and a pretty fence, the walls adorned with fake stone fronts. Pa says that stone fronts cost more, so all the men in Sunnyslakes ordered them when they built these houses with their hard-earned dollars. Make mine stone, sir. Make it look like a fortress to protect my property against the Commies and the Japs and the Negroes.

Ruby chuckles. *Well, too late for that. I'm already in your house, mister.*

She disembarks at the corner of Pine Tree Avenue and Roseview Drive, and walks up Mrs Ingram's driveway, past the plastic parakeet Mrs Ingram has stuck into her lawn by way of sophisticated home decoration. At the pink front door, she digs the key out from under a flower-pot and sticks it into the lock. Every time she does this, her innards start to curl. The key is too easy to find. One of these days someone's gonna break in here and clear

the place out. And then Mrs Ingram will know who to blame.

Inside, the house looks as if it's already been ransacked. Mrs Ingram works – a rare thing for a white woman – and doesn't have time to tidy, as she loves to proclaim.

Ruby puts on the slippers, and wipes and cleans and mops. The street is quiet. Just once a car drives past and she tenses for the inevitable arrival of Mrs Ingram. But it's not until just after 4 p.m. that the front door clicks open and the mistress of the house returns. Mrs Ingram passes by the toilet, where Ruby is elbow-deep down the U-bend, and makes a face like she's spotted a pile of dog poop on her carpet.

'Still in the bathroom? You're slow today.'

You're running late yourself. Ruby keeps her eyes on the sponge dunking in and out of the water. 'Good afternoon, Mrs Ingram. Sorry, my bus was stuck in traffic.'

'The bus goes along the highway. It's never stuck.'

Ruby bites her lip. 'Yes, ma'am.'

'Don't let it happen again.'

'No, ma'am.'

Mrs Ingram sniffs the air. 'And what is this? I smell an odor. Haven't you got a shower at home?'

No, ma'am, I wash at a fire hydrant in the street, 'coz I'm from South Central, and this is how we play.

'Sorry, ma'am.'

*

Normally, white folk try to forget as best as they can that the help is in their house. But today, once she's changed and freshened up, Mrs Ingram is after Ruby like she's expecting a photographer from *Better Homes and Gardens*. Bad day at the office, Ruby guesses, or perhaps she's just bored. Mrs Ingram runs fingers along surfaces, picks at invisible dust bunnies and tests the wetness of the cloth with which Ruby is rubbing down the sinks.

The best thing is to make a game of it by playing double meaning. Mrs Ingram is particularly good for that. She's got no husband and wears lots of bright-red lipstick and tight sweaters that bring out her cone-shaped breasts.

'Am I rubbing it OK, Mrs Ingram?' Ruby asks. 'Want me to make it wetter, Mrs Ingram? Would you like me to plunge faster?'

The women of Sunnyslakes never wise up. Most of them are so uptight it's hard to imagine anyone here having sex. Mrs Ingram gives a thin smile, paces her crisp, clean house, powders her crisp, clean face and snorts and hisses and complains.

The next time Ruby checks her watch, it's almost 5 p.m. Fortunately, Joyce Haney never counts the minutes. She's always chasing after the kids, so she's got no time to go chasing after the help. Sometimes, she cracks open a soda and shows Ruby her sewing. They talk about patterns and family and the kids. Joyce pays for that time as if it were work.

At quarter past five, she tidies away the cleaning things

and pulls the front door shut. As soon as she is on the driveway, she catches the curtain twitch. Mrs Ingram is watching.

The afternoon light slides golden blades between the trees. Ruby stretches her knees and swings her arms. The worst is over now. Only two more hours, and she'll be on her way home with three dollars in her pocket.

The roar of an engine cuts the stillness of the street. A fancy car thunders out of the Haney driveway, turns the corner and speeds away toward President Avenue. It's a Crestliner, silver and black, with a green rear fender. Mrs Haney must have had visitors.

The Haney house sits a little back from the main road, because the property slopes down to the lake. The trees here are older and darker, and Ruby never likes to walk between them in the winter, when the night lurks between the branches. Behind the house, the trees have been cut away to clear the view toward the lake. But Mr Haney has built a big wooden fence, so there is no lake to see from the house, only tidy white boards that he paints once a year in spring.

Ruby stops. Joyce's car is parked up in the driveway. The front door is closed, the flowers planted on either side wilting in the sun.

Something feels wrong. Her stomach tingles with it.

She listens. The windows are open to let in the breeze, but nothing is moving behind the curtains. No pots clatter,

no children scream, no radio babbles from the living room window.

A movement catches the corner of her eye. Ruby spins around and spots a flicker of color dancing among the trees. The breeze catches her skirt and sends a shiver up her spine. She balls her fists and wills her breath to stay calm.

‘Hello? Who’s there?’

A child’s head pokes around a tree trunk. Blonde hair bristles over eyes that are large and blue and very wet. Joyce’s daughter. Barbara.

Ruby kneels down. The pine needles are soft under her legs. She stretches out her arms. ‘Barbara, come here. What are you doing out?’

‘I’m waiting.’

‘Waiting for who, baby?’

‘Joanie’s mom.’

It takes Ruby a moment to remember. Joanie’s mom is Mrs Kettering, the family one house over. Barbara and Joanie are best friends.

‘Come here,’ Ruby says. ‘Time to go inside.’

‘I promised to wait.’

‘Well, Joanie’s mom didn’t come, so you should go in.’

‘I don’t want to.’

‘But it’s nearly dinnertime.’

‘No.’

Something about the girl’s eyes makes Ruby’s hands tremble. Barbara peers toward the house as if it contains a bogeyman or a dragon.

‘Barbara, where is your mommy?’

‘She told me to wait.’

‘Shall we go see her?’

Barbara lowers her eyes. ‘They made a mess, Whoobie.’

‘Well, I’m here to clean it up. Now, come on, baby.’

Barbara detaches herself from the tree and takes Ruby’s hand. Together they walk toward the house. Barbara’s hand is hot. Her little nails dig into Ruby’s palm.

Ruby rings the doorbell. No answer. But inside the house, Lily begins to cry.

‘Mrs Haney?’ Ruby shouts. ‘Joyce.’

She rings again. The tingle in her stomach crawls into her chest. The way that baby’s crying. Hoarse and hopeless, as if she thinks no one’s ever going to come.

She gropes for the spare key under the porcelain eagle by the door and opens the lock. The hallway is tidy and there are fresh flowers on the sideboard. The Haney’s house has a mezzanine, a term she had to look up after her first day. It means the bedrooms are halfway up some stairs, as is the big bathroom.

From the nursery comes the sound of Lily’s crying.

The lavender carpet swallows Ruby’s footsteps. She takes the stairs two at a time and bounds toward the nursery door. She flings it open. Lily is sitting in her bed, her eyes streaked with tears, her face red and tired. The room stinks. The girl’s diaper is soggy. Something has run out of it and stained her playsuits.

Ruby lifts Lily up and unbuttons her clothes, but she

screams even louder and starts kicking. The diaper comes off in a wave of stink. Ruby flings it to the side and wipes Lily down with a cloth. She is just fastening a fresh diaper when Barbara enters and sits down on the floor. Her lips are trembling, and her eyes are full of tears.

‘Barbara-baby, what’s up?’ Ruby tries to prop the screaming Lily up on her feet, but Lily punches her in the chest. ‘Where’s your mommy?’

‘They’re not here,’ Barbara says. ‘They made a mess.’

Ruby frowns and tries to think. Maybe Joyce had an emergency. Maybe a friend called her away. Maybe she forgot the pork chops for dinner. But her car is still in the driveway, so where—

She’d better leave. Something’s wrong, but it ain’t her problem. Plus, if Mr Haney comes back and finds his kids alone with the help, he’s gonna have a coronary.

‘Listen, Barbara,’ she says. ‘I’m going to call Mrs Kettering and ask her to come over. She can take care of you until Mommy’s back, OK?’

Barbara does not answer.

‘You’re going to come downstairs with me, baby?’

Barbara shakes her head.

‘OK, then.’

Ruby hoists Lily onto her hip. It feels weird being in the house alone, and now she’s sure she *is* alone. In the hall, she picks up the phone and flips through the little address book with the golden corners until she reaches K.

Later, she can’t remember Barbara slipping past her. But

all of a sudden, the girl appears in the kitchen door, her chin bobbing, terror in her eyes. She stretches out a soiled hand.

‘Whoobie,’ she says. ‘I can’t clean it up.’

‘Don’t worry, baby.’ Ruby shifts Lily from one hip to the other and receives a kick in the guts for her troubles. ‘I’ll deal with it.’

Then she sees Barbara’s hands and the floor tips over, sending her into free fall. The child’s palms are caked in red.

Blood.

She yanks Barbara out of the way and throws open the kitchen door.

There is blood on the floor. Blood and paper towels and a crumpled cloth soaked in crimson. The sun beams through the curtains and paints the ghosts of daisies on the tiles. Blood on them, too, smeared and sticky, dreadful as the devil’s tongue.

Ruby clenches Lily to her chest and screams as loud as she can.

Chapter Three

Mick

Mick mops beads of sweat from his brow with his sleeve. *Serves you right, Detective Blanke, fresh from the Big Apple, so excited about getting the corner office.* The southwest corner office. The chief must think it's a big tickle to give the hottest room to the new guy. When he received the keys and carried them proudly to his door, some of the boys had been snickering. That should have set his alarm bells ringing.

At ten in the morning, the place is already stifling. He sticks a finger into his collar to loosen it; it comes out wet. With heatstroke looming, he opens both windows and the door. But open doors let in strays, and soon enough Chief Murphy pops his head around the frame.

'Already at work, Blanke? It's only ten past ten. What about your beauty sleep?'

'Aw, Murphy. You need it more than me.' Mick grins. 'I work late, sir. I'm putting in the small hours.'

'Small as in few, right? Well, today's your unlucky day. Case for you down in the 'burbs. Missing woman, possible

home invasion. Blood trail and all that jazz. Here are the files. Get your ass down there to check it out. Sergeant Hodge is waiting for you. G'day.'

Mick takes what Murphy calls the 'files', three flimsy sheets of typewriting, with a couple of notes scribbled in the margins. He puts his feet up on the desk, one of these modern ones made from wood laminate. Its legs are splayed like those of an East Tremont hooker. Swanky, better than his beat-up office in Brooklyn, which he misses more than he cares to admit. With his back to the window to escape the sun, he begins to read.

Police called to 47 Roseview Drive at 5.30 p.m. by a neighbor. First patrol car arrived to find the neighbor, the help and two children waiting at the scene. The help said that the children were alone in the house when she arrived. She discovered blood smears in the kitchen. The wife was missing, and still is. The husband is away at a conference in Palmdale. The children were placed with the neighbor and the help arrested.

Arrested?

He reads the woman's statement. She arrived at 5.15 p.m., went upstairs to find the younger girl and change her diaper, then came back down and found blood in the kitchen. She alerted the neighbor and waited until two officers arrived. The officers promptly arrested her.

Why?

He looks at her information. Ruby Wright, aged twenty-two, of 1467 Trebeck Row, South Central. Negro.

Ab. That's why.

'Chief.' He shuts the door behind him and strides down the hallway. 'Chief. The boys made an arrest on this?'

'Just as a precaution. Until we've checked out her story.'

'She's a witness. Not a suspect.'

'Yeah. But she might be involved. First on the scene, always suspicious.'

'I want to speak to her.'

'Don't you need to get down to the crime scene first?' Murphy pulls a fold of belly fat from his pants. 'Come on, Blanke, move it. Do some detecting, Mr Detective.'

'All right, Murphy. Don't flip your wig.'

Mick knows when he's lost a battle. The chief doesn't like him, and for good reason, too. He is a favor placement. The boss in Brooklyn pulled a few strings, and all of a sudden Santa Monica Police Department needed its own detective. Now he is stationed in California's most boring town. Where the sunshine makes him woozy every time he steps outside, and the worst crime committed until now was when someone stole little Timmy's brand-new Schwinn.

He gets lost twice in Sunnyslakes. Curse the names of these streets. Hillview Crescent, Berrywood Road, Grand Park Street, Meadow Hills. The main joint is called, kid-you-not, President Avenue. Maybe Mr Eisenhower opened the damned place personally. It looks like something from an election poster. The tidy houses, the flags, the mailboxes

glinting in the sun. The streets are so neat you could eat your dinner off them, but of course nobody would, because everyone here has a dining table and china plates mail-ordered from Wards.

On Roseview Drive, there is not a rose in sight. Number 47 is at the end, flanked by a pink house close by and a bigger, two-story home just about visible through the trees. Cars are parked up along the road, and people are milling about by the larger house in the distance. Must be the first search party.

Mick pulls up in front of the driveway beside a red Chevrolet Bel Air. When he gets out, the curtains move in the pink house. He's being watched. Which is interesting. In this quiet place, there is no way a stranger could drive up to a house and steal away its occupant without the neighbors noticing.

The door to number 47 has been taped off, but the tape is ripped. A loose end is hanging across the front steps. Mick looks around, feeling slightly furtive, and steps into the house.

It's . . . modern. The linoleum in the hallway has a purple square pattern and the lamps are made from chrome. He finds a family photograph displayed prominently on the sideboard. Joyce Haney, with the children on her lap. The little one is a baby still, the older has her hair in pigtails and smiles like she's in a Sunbeam Bread ad. Frank Haney, loving husband and proud father, stands behind them, his arms wrapped around his family in a way that is both

protective and possessive. He has blond hair, blue eyes and a square jaw that screams former high school football quarterback. A face like a fire alarm, Mick thinks – you just want to smash it in.

Joyce's beauty is as much the result of careful pruning as it is natural. Brown, perfectly set hair, thin lips brightened with lipstick, brownish eyes, not very large, with the dreamy look of a movie star. It doesn't suit her, he thinks, that put-on look and the tender, tired smile. Somehow, she strikes him as a woman who cracks a good joke.

The kitchen is the only thing in this house that's out of whack. Brutally so. Mick stands in the doorway and takes his time memorizing the scene. There is blood on the floor. It runs from the sink toward the door in one long spatter. A half-unraveled roll of paper towels is lying in a corner, and in the middle of the blood puddle is a blue piece of cloth. The blood has congealed into a dirty brown. There are pieces of crumpled tissue where someone tried to wipe up the mess near the door.

He checks the bloodstain. During his former life in Brooklyn, he encountered the results of gang stabbings and Italian revenge torture and the crazy Japanese grandpa who plunged a knife into his abdomen and then disemboweled himself. Compared to that, there isn't a lot of blood here. But its presence in this suburban kitchen, with flowers on the windowsill and a child's drawing taped to the refrigerator, with tins for sugar,

coffee and oatmeal lined up on the counter – now, that’s eerie.

Upstairs there isn’t much to see. A tidy master bedroom, the king-sized bed perfectly made and covered with a frilly spread. A lavender vanity sits in one corner, arrayed with cosmetics. A quick rifle through the drawers produces lots of underwear, all neat, nothing kinky. The husband lords over a harem of dress shirts folded away in the closet. His suits are ironed with pleats. Nothing’s disturbed, and it doesn’t look like anyone’s packed anything, either.

The children’s room is messier. The older girl’s bed is made but the bedding in the crib is piled up at one end. There’s a brown stain on the changing table and a soiled diaper lies on the floor, sulking in its stench. The bathroom and guest room are unremarkable.

On the terrace, Sergeant Hodge is sitting in a striped lawn chair overlooking a pool and the most meticulously manicured lawn Mick has ever seen. Hodge is holding a bottle of soda and looking like a man at one with his world.

Mick sneaks up to him. He slaps the sergeant on the shoulder, so hard he nearly spills his drink. ‘Hope you brought your own Coke, Hodge.’

‘Course, Detective.’ Hodge scrambles from the chair. ‘Wouldn’t help myself from the refrigerator. Just putting my feet up. Damn hot to be standing around.’

Mick resists the temptation to sit down himself. The sun flares from the tiles marching around the pool. Not

a single weed dares to rear its head through the cracks. A pot of geraniums on the terrace is the only nod to exuberance.

‘Apparently the husband likes to garden,’ Hodge volunteers.

Mick scoffs. ‘Husband is neurotic, most likely.’

‘Beg your pardon, sir?’

‘Nothing.’

‘So, what’s your theory, Detective?’

Mick grins. ‘Don’t got none, yet.’

‘But aren’t you . . . ?’

‘Keeping an open mind. It’s too early to jump to conclusions.’

‘All right.’ Hodge nods as if he’s understood, which he very clearly hasn’t.

‘So, what’s the situation?’ Mick asks. ‘I mean, I got the files this morning, but I want to hear it from you.’

‘First officer on the scene was Murray. He saw the blood and called headquarters. They’re just a misdemeanor division in Sunnyslakes. You know, drunk driving, domestics, and all that.’

‘This wasn’t a domestic?’

‘Well, the husband wasn’t home. He left on Sunday night for Palmdale. The wife was seen by witnesses throughout the morning. She went to the mall around 9 a.m. and left the older girl with the neighbor, Mrs Nancy Ingram. She came back at 11 a.m. and picked up her daughter, all in good spirits. Mrs Ingram had a chat with her before she

went to work, they talked about lunch. Nothing unusual. Then . . . who knows?’

‘The older girl was discovered outside?’

‘By the help, yes. She was meant to be here at 5 p.m., but was running late. She’s a Negro, you see? She found the girl, took her inside and changed the younger kid. When she came into the kitchen, she saw the blood.’

‘So, you arrested her.’

Hodge shrugs. ‘Sounded like a fishy story to me.’

‘In what way?’

‘She went to change the baby without checking if her boss was home.’

‘Maybe it was normal for Mrs Haney to leave the kids with the help. Did you question her?’

‘She was . . . agitated.’

‘Did you try to calm her down?’ Mick can taste something sour in his mouth. He can just imagine the scene. The blood, the screaming children, Sergeant Hodge yelling. *Agitated*. Hell, he’d be rattling his cage like a rabid monkey.

Hodge shrugs. ‘You should have been here, sir. The baby was wearing only a diaper. She was kicking the help and screaming. Tells you something, doesn’t it?’

Mick raises one eyebrow. ‘It does?’

‘The help was yelling at the older girl to stop touching the mess in the kitchen. You see, the little dear was trying to clean up her mommy’s blood. Then the neighbor, that Ingram lady, came over and slapped her, and—’

‘The neighbor hit the little girl?’

'No, the help. Just slapped her. We—'

'Didn't you close off the house?' Mick groans. 'Didn't you remove the witnesses from the scene? Who else was here? How many people have been stomping through this place?'

'Well, not many.' Sergeant Hodge holds up his fingers to count. 'There was me and officers Murray, Stanwitz and Anderson, and the help and the kids and Mrs Ingram. That's about it, really. Oh, and the milkman.'

'The milkman?'

'Showed up just before 6 p.m., sir. Said he'd forgotten the butter.'

'Christ in a cardigan.'

'But then we put some tape up. No one got in today. And them folks outside, they're planning to search the neighborhood. They're not here to gawp.'

Mick rubs the bridge of his nose and waits until he's calmed down enough to level his voice. There's no point in lecturing. It's too late.

'Evidence recovery and the photographer are coming this afternoon,' Hodge offers. 'We searched the surrounding properties and the lakeshore. No body. The car's still here, so she hasn't left in that.'

'Have you heard from the husband?'

'We had a little difficulty getting hold of him. He didn't return to his hotel until late last night. He's on his way back and should be here this afternoon to pick up the kids from Nancy Ingram.'

'Is there no other family? Grandparents, uncles and such?'

'The husband's folks live in Philadelphia. And the wife's . . . well, we're waiting for him to confirm who they are.'

'So, you've got no leads.'

'Not really.' Sergeant Hodge looks like a puppy when the treat bag's empty. 'We'll have more when we find the body.'

'We don't know she's dead, Sergeant.'

'Sure. But think about it: she's a mother. No mother in her right mind would abandon her kids.'

Mick decides he's going to leave it there. He follows Hodge's gaze toward the fence, and they stare at it for a moment, as if there's a chance that Joyce Haney will peep over it any moment now and wave a dainty, gloved hand. *Hello, boys, I'm back.*

Hodge pulls his shoulders up toward his ears, then lets them fall. 'Imagine putting up a fence like that. It's like they didn't want to look out.'

'Or perhaps they didn't want anyone to look in.'

'Sir?'

'Keep an open mind, Hodge.' Mick lifts his hat. 'Never good to make assumptions.'

Back in the kitchen, he opens a couple of cupboards, but finds nothing out of the ordinary. There is a shopping list taped to the refrigerator, written in practiced, slender handwriting: *eggs, mayonnaise, corn flakes, rice, cocoa, Spry*. The refrigerator is nearly empty.

He steps carefully over the blood, and his eyes catch on the blue cloth. A patch of white fabric is stitched onto one end. It has little rodeo cowboys on it, jumping over fences and falling off their horses. He pulls and the cloth, stuck to the floor with blood, comes away reluctantly. He lets go; no need to further mess up the scene.

It's not a cloth, it's a baby's sleepsuit. Soft blue fabric, tiny white feet, a bright collar and stomach patch with more cowboys, now stained brown. Mick tries to remember Sandy and Prissie when they were that size, but his memory is a haze filled with milk smell and sleeplessness and fingers so tiny he was scared to crush them in his hand.

He peels open the label. Yep, this sleepsuit is for a newborn.

Chapter Four

Mick

Nancy Ingram has been expecting a visit from the police. You can always tell with women. The hasty attempt to tidy the lounge, the lipstick, troweled on like insulation paste . . .

Now Detective Michael Blanke is sitting in a brand-new easy chair. Drinking a soda from a yellow-tinged glass with ice cubes clinking at the rim. Staring into Mrs Ingram's blue-green eyes, framed by lashes in which tiny mascara drops have curdled into chunks.

She bends her upper body across the coffee table, a move that makes her yellow sweater stretch across her breasts. Mick instinctively leans back and swirls his soda as if it were a whiskey, which he really damn well wishes it was.

'I'm sorry, I had no time to make things more presentable,' Mrs Ingram says with a darling flourish of her hand. 'But I've been looking after the kids. Barbara had three nightmares last night. And I've just rushed over to speak

to Laura Kettering across the road while the girls were watching TV. No one has heard from Joyce. Did you see all these people? They want to start a search and . . . ? She swallows. 'I might take the children out later. Or perhaps not. It might scare them. Oh, God, I don't know what to do.'

Mick takes the chance to get a word in edgeways. 'Have you been in contact with Frank Haney?'

'He's driving down from Palmdale right now. The poor man is beside himself. Have you found out anything? Has she called?'

'I assure you, our team is on the case. Meanwhile, can I ask you a few questions?'

'It's horrendous,' says Mrs Ingram by way of an answer. 'I don't know what to think. That kitchen . . . ?'

She looks tired underneath the makeup, and she hasn't yet asked for any salacious details or impressed her theory on him. She is worried for her friend, deeply worried, while trying to keep up the pretense for the girls. One of them is sitting outside on the terrace, forcing her doll to mop up an imaginary kitchen floor.

'Did you notice anything unusual when you last saw Mrs Haney?'

'No, not at all. She was dressed for town and had just returned from the mall. She left Barbara with me for a couple of hours.'

'Was that a normal thing for her to do?'

'Oh, yes. I adore her children.' A little tremble quivers

on her lip. She's got none of her own. 'I didn't mind at all. I don't start work until just before noon. And it's much easier for Joyce to do the shopping with just one.'

'Did anything strike you as odd about Mrs Haney's behavior when she returned?'

'She was a little rushed off her feet. She had a big bag of shopping with her and Lily clinging to her hand. We didn't talk long. She asked if Barbara had been good, and I said yes, and she said she had to make lunch so I let her go . . .' Mrs Ingram looks at her soda as if it were a crystal ball. 'Oh, God. I don't even want to think of what might have happened . . . All that blood.'

'It must have given you a fright.'

'I had just come back from work and was fixing my face. I heard Lily screaming. She would not stop, so after a while I went outside. The door was open, Ruby was on the lawn, screeching like a harpy, and I just . . .' She hesitates. 'I knew right away something had happened to Joyce. Call it a woman's intuition.'

Tears are peeping through Mrs Ingram's mascara. Mick feels compelled to quell them. 'Blood always looks worse than it is. It's hard to take a guess, but it looks like Mrs Haney was injured, hopefully not killed.'

'Could she have been abducted?'

'That's one option. She could have hurt herself and gone to get help. We have an officer phoning around the hospitals right at this moment.'

'She should have called me. Or Laura.'

‘Laura Kettering? Is she a good friend of Joyce’s?’

Mrs Ingram pouts a little. ‘She is a great neighbor, but . . . very involved with her household. Her husband is a movie executive and works like a mule. She has three small kids – there’s not much time for socializing. Her and Joyce are close, but not as close as Joyce and me.’

Mick shifts his butt and the easy chair emits a squeak. ‘Why did you slap Ruby Wright?’

A hint of disgust flits across Mrs Ingram’s carefully powdered face. ‘Because she was hysterical. And she couldn’t control those kids. Barbara was putting her fingers in the blood. And Lily . . . my God, dirty and naked like a street child. I just had to take control of the situation.’

‘Miss Wright cleans for you?’

‘Ruby has been my help for about two years.’

‘How often does she come in?’

‘Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 1 p.m. to 4.30 p.m.’

Mick can’t help but look around the bungalow. What’s there to clean for more than ten hours a week? ‘After she’s finished here, she goes to the Haneys’ place?’

‘When Joyce and Frank moved here, they asked me if I knew someone to help around the house and I recommended Ruby. Joyce is very house-proud, and with the two kids . . .’ Mrs Ingram smiles politely. ‘I am, unfortunately, not able to stay at home entirely, otherwise the household wouldn’t be a problem. But since my husband died . . . I work at the Sunnyslakes estate office when they need someone to do viewings.’

Mick takes another sip. The dark yellow glass makes the soda look like a particularly well-fermented urine sample. 'Can you tell me about the Haney marriage?'

'Oh, Frank is a wonderful man. Very caring and devoted to his wife. They are a happy couple. I . . .' She blinks a few times, fast. 'I don't even want to imagine . . .'

Mick puts down the soda and rises. There isn't more to glean here. 'Thanks,' he says. 'Please call us if you remember anything else of importance.'

Outside, a big, black Pontiac has boxed him in. He curses and shimmies his car back and forth until he manages to wiggle free. Through the trees he can see an array of dresses and hats. Joyce Haney's friends, searching for the lost lamb of Sunnyslakes.

This gives him an idea. He leaves the car half-in, half-out and saunters over to what he assumes is the Kettering house. Halfway there, a woman emerges from the trees and cuts in front of him. She is stuffing a folded-up piece of paper into her bag. When she sees him, she freezes.

'Who are you?'

He lifts his hat. 'Detective Michael Blanke, Santa Monica PD. And you?'

'Don't see what business that is of yours.'

Oh, you bet there's plenty of business here. He scans her messy hair, the well-worn flats, the turquoise jacket engaged in a lethal clash with her purple skirt. She is youngish, but misery is scrawled all over her face.

‘Have you just come from the house?’ he asks.

‘I’m here to help with the search.’

‘You’re a neighbor?’

She flinches. ‘No.’

‘A friend of the family then? What was the paper you were just putting away?’

‘Flyers. To find her.’

‘May I—’

‘Deena, there you are.’

He spins around. One of the women has detached herself from the herd. She is wearing a bright green dress, white gloves and a grave expression.

‘We’ve been waiting for you,’ she says to the woman named Deena. ‘The first search party has already left. You could catch up or wait with Laura. She’ll stay here, just in case.’

‘Laura Kettering?’ Mick asks.

It is only then she graces him with a look. ‘Yes, sir. Are you from the police?’

‘Detective Michael Blanke, ma’am. And you are?’

‘How wonderful.’ Her smile is sad. ‘Please, come on over. We are ever so worried. I am Genevieve Crane and this,’ she gestures at the sullen woman, who looks away, ‘is Deena Klintz.’

‘A friend of Joyce’s?’

‘We all are,’ she says. ‘I run the Sunnyslakes Women’s Improvement Committee. You must be here to speak to Laura. I’ll introduce you.’