

Chapter 1

Victoria was on the checkout line at Safeway for the mid-week groceries when the cell had vibrated in the pocket of her slacks. It was there mostly for useful family communications and emergency situations.

On the line was Mr. Tatum, headmaster of Michael's school, which had her cell number on file. Her heart jumped to her throat. He was quick to reassure her.

"Michael is fine. Don't be alarmed," he said.

Then why this call, she wanted to ask, but held off.

"It's the business about the candy," Mr. Tatum explained. She sucked in a deep breath and expelled it with a sense of relief. Then disgust set in.

"That again," Victoria sighed. "So it's reached the emergency level, has it?" she said with a touch of sarcasm. As she spoke, she watched the heavysset uniformed female clerk punch in the numbers. "They're three for two twenty," Victoria barked. "Check your ad."

"Damn," the clerk blushed, embarrassed, rereading the list of promotional prices.

"Not you, Mr. Tatum," she said into the phone. "I'm at the Safeway."

"I don't want to complicate your life, Mrs. Rose," Mr. Tatum said unctuously. "But we need you here as soon as possible."

"You can't be serious. Why?"

"We would like Mr. Rose here as well."

"That's impossible. You know he works in Manhattan. You know that, Mr. Tatum. Why the urgency?"

"It's happened again," Mr. Tatum explained.

For a brief moment, a wave of panic washed over her. Was something terrible being hidden? Surely, this could not be about candy bars.

"Madeline's parents are not satisfied with Michael's previous denials, Mrs. Rose."

"Are you saying that the girl is making yet another accusation?"

"I'm afraid so."

"And the Crespos are buying it?"

"Completely, Mrs. Rose. We're, sort of, at an impasse."

"It's no impasse as far as my husband and I are concerned," Victoria said, feeling the heat rise in her body. Frustrated, she watched the clerk scowl at the register as if it were to blame for the error. "I've already explained this. We do not lie in our family."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Rose," Mr. Tatum told her officiously. She sensed that Michael's accusers were witnessing his call. "We need to get to the bottom of this."

"Can't it wait until tomorrow, Mr. Tatum?"

"I wish it could."

"The Crespos," Victoria hissed, weighing her comment with sarcasm. "They're there, aren't they, Mr. Tatum?"

"Yes, they are here," Mr. Tatum replied.

"And Michael?" Victoria asked. "Under no circumstanc-

es do I want him disrupted.”

“At this point we hope we can resolve this without any additional trauma to the children, Mrs. Rose,” Mr. Tatum said.

“Good. I do not want him present as if he were a defendant in a courtroom drama, Mr. Tatum.”

“It has similarities, I’m afraid,” the headmaster sighed. It was obvious he detested the confrontation.

“Give me an hour,” Victoria said. “I have to carpool my daughter and her friends to ballet class.”

“We’ll wait,” Mr. Tatum said, his voice indicating a struggle for neutrality.

Victoria ended the call and watched the clerk furiously punch in the last numbers. Her attention had strayed. Later, she would analyze the final tape against her purchases. Vendors were always making mistakes, some in her favor, some not. Either way, it opened up opportunities to exercise her moral superiority and mathematical acumen. She had minored in accounting at NYU, rejecting going for CPA and opting for law instead. Now she was majoring in Mommy with obsessive and awesome determination.

She paid her bill by Visa, wheeled the food basket to the rear of the Ford Explorer, loaded the groceries, then headed for Emily’s school, cursing the conduct of the headmaster for allowing the situation to reach this level of absurdity.

She knew the Crespos from the various meetings and events involving the school—Pendleton Hall, tuition twenty-eight thousand a year, plus another five for incidentals. That, plus another twenty-five thousand for Emily at Epis-

copal. A rip-off, Victoria had concluded, making you pay over and above taxation because they let the public school system turn to *merde*. To Victoria, being suckered was a capital sin.

She quickly shrugged off the irritation. Parents preparing their children for success in the complex take-no-prisoners world ahead had no other alternative. Private schools in general, and this one in particular, provided the competitive edge. Improving the odds of attainment, in Victoria's estimation, was an essential component of good parenting.

The prospect of again confronting Helen Crespo and her big boobs and husband John with his bushy moustache and little round wire glasses made her ache with despair. He taught English at a local junior college, and she was an heiress from some pasta machine invention who did ceramics and talked a blue streak, never pausing to edit or absorb anyone else's commentary or response.

The families had also interacted at church, St. John's Episcopal, which they had joined when Michael was four, providing the obligatory spiritual component that both she and Josh had rarely been exposed to in their childhood.

Victoria had thought their initial confrontation had resolved the issue. They had met in an empty classroom after the school day with Mr. Tatum sitting behind the teacher's desk. Apparently the headmaster did not want to expose the children to the threatening environment of his office.

Michael, with all of his eleven-year-old indignation, had denied the accusation in the presence of both Crespos and their nerdy little Madeline who lisped, ogling them through

goggles far too big for her pinched little face. Mr. Tatum had watched the proceedings with an expression of tolerant understanding. He was a tall, handsome man in his fifties with the tweedy, comforting look of a wise teacher. He was the respected King Solomon figure of Pendleton Hall, and he had laid down rigid standards of conduct and academic achievement. Parents and students deferred to him. His word was law.

“Did you see him take the Milky Way?” Victoria had asked the little girl, adopting her version of a sweet, non-threatening tone. The three parents who were present had been provided with adult chairs while the children sat at their regular child-size desks.

“Thee him?” Madeline replied, raising her voice, averting her goggled face from that of her interrogator. “How could I? He wath too thneaky.” She looked reassuringly toward her parents.

“Then how do you know he took it?” Victoria asked, with lawyerly innocence, noting that the child’s lisp reacted negatively to excitement.

Madeline raised her little face and scrunched up her nose in an unpleasant gesture as if there was a foul odor in the room.

“He thaw me eating it in the wunch room and he thaid sharing food ith an act of wuvv and friendthip.”

Aunt Evie’s puffed and rosy face had jumped into Victoria’s mind. *Food is love* was her sister-in-law’s mantra, and her bloated face and body was its logo. Madeline’s assertion made her heart sink. Could it be true then? No way,

she decided. In their household, telling lies was worse than the ten plagues visited upon the Egyptians in the Old Testament.

"That doesn't make him the thief, dear," Victoria said still sweetly.

"I altho thaw him eating it."

"A Milky Way? Michael?"

"Yeth. Twyth."

"Twyth," Victoria said. It was inadvertent. She had not meant to blatantly mock the child's lisp.

"Victoria!" Helen Crespo rebuked.

"That was insensitive," John Crespo sneered.

"I'm sorry. Really, I hadn't meant...." She was getting off the track. She offered the child a painful smile. "How did you know it was your Milky Way, Madeline dear?" Victoria asked.

"Becauth it wooked wike mine."

"All Milky Ways look alike," Victoria said, rediscovering her old prosecutorial skills.

"It wath mine."

"But it could have been given to him by someone else who might have gotten it out of a vending machine," Victoria countered.

"We do not have candy vending machines in the building," Mr. Tatum interjected.

"I never stole her Milky Way," Michael had protested, blue eyes blazing, lips pursed, his little body ramrod straight, adding his own clinching comment. "My mom doesn't even let us eat candy in our house."

Echoes of Aunt Evie again, but in a more positive mode. Her sister-in-law's gluttony and its obvious physical results had prompted an increase of her rejection of fatty foods and all other edibles containing high amounts of sugar and sodium. Before any food entered her kitchen, Victoria fanatically pored over nutritional tables, rejecting any foods that did not meet her strict dietary standards.

"How does Madeline get this candy?" Victoria asked, making no attempt to mask her disapproval.

"It's a treat," Helen Crespo said defensively. "We put it in her backpack."

Victoria shook her head with obvious disgust. A glance of disapproval from Mr. Tatum gave her pause.

"My son does not lie," Victoria reiterated.

"Neither does my daughter," John Crespo said.

"Perhaps," Mr. Tatum said, making a cathedral with his fingers and peeking through the steeple, "we should allow this incident to pass without resolution. These things have a tendency to escalate. As you know, the standard at Pendleton is truth and tolerance. It could very well be that each child is looking at the incident from different perspectives, both of which are correct in their own minds. Call it the Rashomon effect. Let us hope that a similar incident does not reoccur."

Which meant it was a standoff. That evening she had gone over the circumstances with Josh, who with fatherly solemnity had confronted Michael yet again.

"She's lying, Dad," Michael said, offering not a hint of guilt in expression or gesture. "I did not steal her candy. Be-

sides, I know candy isn't good for you." He looked toward his mother. "Right, Mom?"

Victoria nodded and smiled.

"I don't mean to belabor the point, son, but this means a great deal to all of us."

"I know that, Dad."

"Truth no matter what the consequences," Josh had intoned.

"Don't you believe me, Dad?" Michael said, his eyes begging, swallowing hard, his upper lip beginning to tremble. "Mom does." He looked toward Victoria, who opened her arms and embraced him, rubbing his back.

"You know I do, darling," Victoria said.

"Mikey wouldn't lie," Emily suddenly squealed. She had been watching the proceedings from the foot of the stairs and was visibly upset by any questions concerning her brother's fidelity. "Nobody lies in our family."

At nine, Emily lived in a world of complete belief in the goodness of all people. She particularly adored, doted upon, believed in, and supported her brother in all things. Happily for their parents, it was a two-way street. Both Victoria and Josh had nurtured this idea of sibling solidarity in their children and were delighted that their wish had become a reality.

Born, according to plan, one year apart, Victoria, an only child, had yearned for such an alliance. Josh, having experienced the strength and comfort of the sibling bond, had eagerly supported the idea. There was an irony in that, Victoria knew, since she was not exactly keen on the zealous solidarity of Josh's relationship with his sister Evie, al-

though she understood why they had clung together so tenaciously over the years. Considering what had happened to their parents, the Roses, she had tried valiantly but unsuccessfully to temper her judgment.

"We didn't mean to upset you, darling," Victoria said, turning to Emily, throwing her a kiss. Then she turned to her husband. "This is overkill, Josh."

"You realize, Michael, that there's nothing to be afraid of," Josh pressed, obviously ignoring her comment.

"I know that, Dad," Michael said. His eyes had grown moist and the tip of his nose reddened. Victoria and Josh exchanged knowing glances and the interrogation abruptly came to end.

"I do believe you, son," Josh said, adding, "One for all and all for one." He reached out to tousle the boy's blonde hair. Victoria put her hand over Josh's and motioned to Emily who bounded to join the embrace.

"Trust is everything in this family," Victoria said.

"I know that, Mom."

Michael looked from one parent to the other, then crossed his heart.

"I never doubted you for a minute," Josh said, kissing Michael's cheek. Then he kissed Emily on the head and Victoria on the lips.

"That ends it," Josh said. "We will not have our children harassed."

As she drove, panic had turned to indignation. The old law-

yerly aggression had surfaced. Abuse that child and I'll sue your ass, she heard herself say in her mind.

Memories of earlier legal tangles surfaced, dramatic confrontations with smug lawyers from the greedy insurance companies defending their suspect turf from the equally suspect plaintiffs whose cases she had manipulated and manufactured, mostly from trumped up medical evidence and fictional scripting.

In those career days, as a single practitioner in the seedy negligence law business, she was living testimony to the case for tort reform. Once she had enjoyed the hurly-burly challenge of walking the thin wavy line between the micro margins of corruption and alleged legality. Love and marriage had demanded a higher level of moral turpitude and parenting had sealed her fate, motivating aggressive psychic reconstruction.

Hadn't Michael assured them of his innocence? The Rose family built their lives on a rigid standard of absolute honesty. It was the bedrock of their behavior. The Crespo girl was imagining things.

As she approached St. John's, the Episcopal school that went only to the second grade, she had worked up a good head of exasperation. Emily was waiting for her with her two friends at the school entrance.

"Hi Mommy," Emily said excitedly as she jumped into the back seat of the car with her two little friends. The girls chirped together like hyperactive sparrows.

"Seat belts, everyone?"

"All except Bobbie," Emily giggled.

"I hate seat belts," Bobbie said, reluctantly fastening hers. "Tattle tale."

"I'm not a tattle tale," Emily said. "Am I, Mommy?"

"No way, darling. Seat belts save lives," Victoria said, offering the homily from her ever-growing collection. She headed the car in the direction of the ballet class.

"See," Emily said.

"You have to be very careful in this world, girls," Victoria said. "Safety first."

More homilies burst from her by rote. "Never take anything for granted. Always be prepared for every eventual-ity. Accidents occur when you least expect them." She rattled them off without thinking, her thoughts fixed on what would soon occur at Pendleton Hall.

"I have to stop by Mikey's school," Victoria said.

"Is Michael alright, Mommy?" Emily asked, ever sensitive to her brother's fate.

"Michael's fine, sweetheart," Victoria said, skirting the issue.

"Daddy says everything is good now, isn't it Mommy?"

"Daddy is right," Victoria said, wishing her daughter would drop the subject.

"My Daddy knows everything," Emily opined, bragging slightly.

Through the rearview mirror, Victoria glanced at Bobbie's face. It was pale and unsmiling. Bobbie was the child of a nasty divorce, and the father was, according to the mother, a deadbeat dad. Victoria's heart went out to the little girl. She knew the drill and had warned Emily to desist

from making too many effusive complimentary references to her own dad.

"Remember what we talked about, Emily?" Victoria reminded her, with a quick look at her daughter through the rearview mirror.

"What, Mommy?" Emily asked with a look of genuine puzzlement.

"You know."

"No I don't."

Victoria felt a growing sense of frustration.

"Never mind," she said.

"Oh," Emily said, suddenly remembering. "You mean about Daddy."

"Exactly."

"I'm sorry, Bobbie," Emily said. "I forgot."

Again, Victoria glanced at Bobbie's face through the rearview mirror. The girl's eyes were glazed and her lips tightly pursed. She felt the old hollowness in the pit of her stomach, the familiar sensation that she had grown up with. There was no cure for it.

"Now if I'm a little late, girls," Victoria said, deliberately changing the subject and, hopefully, the mood, "just wait inside the door and listen for my honk. I'll honk three times like this."

She honked the horn three times, much to the consternation of the driver in front of her who raised a middle finger salute. She mimed a gesture of apology and the girls started to giggle.

The Crespos were waiting in the anteroom of Mr. Tatum's office, both rising in tandem when Victoria crossed the threshold. It was a gesture of impatience, not respect. They wore dour, unsmiling expressions. Helen Crespo faintly nodded acknowledgement. She wore a gray sweated dress cinched tightly at the waist to emphasize her imposing breast work. Her husband eyed Victoria coldly through his little round glasses, reminding her weirdly of old photos of European intellectuals. He turned to Mr. Tatum's nervous gray-haired secretary.

"You can tell Mr. Tatum that Mrs. Rose has arrived," Mr. Crespo said.

Mr. Tatum ushered them to a conversational grouping consisting of two facing upholstered sofas and a large winged leather chair obviously to be occupied by him. This was, unquestionably, his domain, and he ran the school with tight-fisted authority. Although there was a board that tended to administrative and financial matters, Mr. Tatum was the sole voice of academic authority. It was he who decided what students entered the school and what infractions constituted expulsion, a not-uncommon action in a school with a waiting list that went on into infinity.

"I know this is short notice, Mrs. Rose," Mr. Tatum began apologetically. He wore a gray herringbone jacket, charcoal gray flannel pants, a striped tie over a crisp, white shirt, and tasseled loafers. He had the look, feel, and image of someone who commanded respect. His expression struck her as kindly, but neutral.

"To put it mildly," Victoria said, eyeing the opposition.

Staring them down had been a powerful weapon in her legal arsenal.

"It happened again yesterday, Victoria," Helen Crespo said. "Madeline came home hysterical. We demanded this meeting and Mr. Tatum has obliged."

"Haven't we been through this? Once again I ask: did she see him do this?"

Both Crespo's exchanged glances.

"She saw him eating it?" Helen Crespo said.

"Must we go through this yet again?" Victoria sighed. "This is worse than circumstantial. It proves nothing."

"The child became hysterical in class," Mr. Tatum said. "Which raises the stakes of this issue considerably. I was immediately summoned. I called Mrs. Crespo, who was at home."

"I was at my studio, as usual in the midst of making a single stem vase, very intricate work. Mr. Tatum's call was completely unnerving. Needless to say, the work was spoiled. You see..."

"Helen called me and we took Madeline home," John Crespo interjected. "We were up all night with her. So you see this is no small matter, as far as we're concerned."

"This time we did not confront Michael," Mr. Tatum said, exchanging glances with the Crespos. "We thought it best to discuss this situation with you first. I'm sorry Mr. Rose is not present."

Two against one, Victoria thought. She looked pointedly at Mr. Crespo.

"Both my husband and I are satisfied that Michael is tell-

ing the truth. His word is good enough for us.”

“Do you know what it means for a child not to be believed?” Mr. Tatum said with mild admonishment. “Not by her teachers or her fellow students. Really, Mrs. Rose, it is beginning to affect her psychologically. The child is....”

“It has to be resolved,” John Crespo said pedantically, taking off his little glasses and pinching the bridge of his nose. “The child feels alienated, isolated, surrounded by hostility. Somehow we have to clear the air, Victoria.”

“Michael is not a thief or a liar, John. It is the primal axiom in our household.” Her gaze drifted pointedly from one Crespo to the other. “To us, a lie is original sin. It has been drummed into our children since birth. Madeline is fantasizing.”

“Once, I acknowledge, she could be fantasizing,” John Crespo said, carefully refitting his glasses. “Twice could be fantasizing. This has been a repeated offense. She is certain that Michael is the thief.”

“I’d be very careful with your choice of words, John,” Victoria snapped, her eyes boring into those of her antagonist.

“How else would you characterize it, Victoria?”

“It is an accusation without merit, based on the hysterical comments of a child. In a court of law, John, a child’s testimony is often rejected on those grounds.”

She felt herself growing lawyerly now, deliberately intimidating and aggressive.

“This is not a court of law, Mrs. Rose,” Mr. Tatum said, his implication clear. *I am the law* here was his unmistakable message. “We are simply looking for a solution to a di-

lemma. We are in a kind of a double bind here. Although it might seem minor in terms of the objects at issue, it has, in fact, become a major circumstance. Both children are good students. Michael's a natural-born leader, a role model, a kind of hero to his peers. And Madeline is a lovely girl." Victoria looked toward the Crespos. "She has become even more withdrawn than before these...." Mr. Tatum coughed politely into his fist. "These allegations."

"Allegations?" Victoria snapped. "These are a couple of kids, dammit. And the issue is candy, for crying out loud. Just candy. What is going on here?"

"What's going on here, Victoria," John Crespo snapped, "could be a matter of some consequence to Pendleton Hall. We do not intend to remain silent."

"We intend to be quite vocal, Victoria," Helen Crespo chimed in.

"That would be your style, Helen... being vocal... interminably," Victoria said, regretting it instantly. Helen shot her husband a challenging stare, which he ignored.

"We're talking full-court press," Mr. Crespo said, lips pursed in anger. "Media exposure, perhaps lawsuits."

Victoria looked swiftly toward Mr. Tatum, noting a quick shrug and an eyes-to-the-ceiling gesture of frustration. Above all, Mr. Tatum feared anything that might reflect badly on the school.

"On what grounds?" Victoria asked.

"Whatever fits."

"You'll be dragging the school through the mud," Victoria shot back, noting Mr. Tatum's brief nod.

“So be it. What we want is justice for our child.”

“We’re talking Milky Ways here, not nuclear proliferation,” Victoria said, shaking her head in outrage, fighting for control. She wished she had postponed this confrontation until Josh could be present. She felt beleaguered, blind-sided, unprepared. In her legal battles, she had always been overprepared. She had calculated every possible angle. Displays of emotion were performed on cue.

“The Rose boy lied,” John Crespo said, “and it has deeply affected my daughter. We demand satisfaction, Mr. Tatum.”

John Crespo turned his attention to the headmaster.

“As you can see, Mrs. Rose, they feel rather strongly,” Mr. Tatum shrugged. “Hence my urgency.”

“What the fuck would satisfy you?” Victoria exploded. “Stand Michael in front of a firing squad before the student body? On the testimony of some pampered little maladjusted brat? I think you’re both a couple of shits.”

“No need to get smutty, Victoria,” Helen Crespo cried in shock, sitting up stiffly, pushing out her big boobs. It was obviously her ultimate gesture of indignation.

“And don’t point those missiles at me, Helen,” Victoria said. From the corner of her eye she noted that the blood had drained from Mr. Tatum’s face. She paused for a moment, sucking in a deep breath.

“I have a solution,” she said, forcing a smile that made her mouth ache.

“Perhaps we’re getting somewhere,” Mr. Tatum said hopefully.

“Remove the cause,” Victoria said. She could see by the

glances of confusion between the Crespos that she had been too subtle. She shook her head and sucked in a deep breath. "Stop giving her those fucking Milky Ways."

"Can you believe this?" John Crespo said.

Mr. Tatum remained silent, exchanging what Victoria interpreted as a private glance of camaraderie. Helen Crespo by then had fully returned to her rocket-poised posture of indignation.

"Don't dismiss the logic out of hand, John," Victoria said, finding her old prosecutorial voice. "Good nutrition notwithstanding, candy is a temptation to any child. Someone with a sweet tooth could find the temptation irresistible."

"Someone did," John Crespo said. "Your son."

"Thank you, Captain Queeg," Victoria sighed, wondering if they would get the *Caine Mutiny* reference. "Where are your comfort balls?"

"You have a filthy mouth, Victoria," Helen Crespo sneered.

"Not those balls, Helen," Victoria replied.

"I'll show you balls, Victoria," John Crespo said, raising his voice for the first time. Obviously, the reference had touched a hot button. "You asked what would satisfy us. I'll tell you what. Expulsion, that's what. Nothing short of that."

Unable to remain seated, Victoria stood up.

"Do you people really want a settlement of this issue?" In her mind, she was back in her office now across from City Hall in Manhattan in full ball-busting mode. "That's not a settlement. That's a demand. You want court. I'll give you

court up the gazoo. I am a lawyer admitted to the bar in the state of New York. For my child, I will fight to the death.”

Victoria could see by the sodden expressions on the face of the Crespos that her strident attitude of intimidation had found its mark. It surprised her to discover how easily her old aggressive posture had erupted after so long in hibernation.

“We’re not used to this kind of treatment, Victoria, we....” Helen Crespo began. Victoria could tell the woman was winding up for a stream-of-consciousness assault. She looked at her watch.

“I’m sorry. I have to leave, please forgive me.”

With that, she nodded her good-byes, then turned on her heels and walked swiftly out of the office, a ploy often used in her practice to humiliate potential litigants and give them time to reflect.

Back in her car, heading back to the ballet school, she felt energized to the point of explosion. She needed to vent and dialed Josh’s cell phone. She couldn’t get through. For some reason lately he had either neglected to charge the battery or had forgotten to turn it on. Frustrated, she opted against leaving a message through his office voice mail. She was too hyper at the moment for the nightmare of press one, press two, and press three routines. Instead, with a mixture of hope, dread, and anxiety, she called her mother in Ft. Lauderdale.

“As long as you truly believe he’s telling the truth,” her

mother said after Victoria had reiterated the events. Her mother's voice held its usual combination of cynicism and arrogance. Time and her own life's experiences had, Victoria wanted to believe, eroded her mother's influence on her. Knowing her mother's advice was tainted with bitterness over her own failed marriage, she was, as always, wary but combative.

It had been a lifelong struggle for Victoria to find the right balance between tolerance, guilt, and understanding. It was hard not to respect her mother's strength and independence and the awesome sacrifices she had made on her behalf. Victoria considered their relationship terribly complicated, even maddening, but miraculously enduring.

Victoria was often critical of her mother's vocal outbursts on the subject of the male gender. Their clashes were heated, angry, and often abrasive, but they never reached the point of total separation. Their relationship, Victoria had concluded, had been forged on the pitted anvil of single parenting and the resultant condition of fierce and often obsessive mutual need. Who else was there to turn to in crisis and trauma? Who else could listen with such profound concern?

"Of course he's telling the truth. A mother knows."

"Who can argue with that?"

"You seem to be questioning it, Mother."

"He's still a *he*, Victoria."

"Not that old drumbeat, Mom. Not now, please. This is about your grandson."

"Was Josh with you?"

“No. He was working.”

“Never there when you need them, are they?”

“Mother, please. Not today.”

Victoria’s mother had been a nurse and moved with her daughter to numerous cities working for various hospitals, always leaving because of some altercation with the hospital administrator or a doctor who had somehow treated her unfairly. The result was that Victoria had never known any permanence at all, chasing around the country from apartment to apartment and school to school.

When Victoria was two, her father had left their house. Her mother insisted it was desertion, which seemed logical since he had literally disappeared. Eventually, she was granted a divorce on those grounds. In further protest, she had taken back her maiden name, Stewart, and had applied it to Victoria as well.

Aside from removing her husband’s name, she had taken steps to eliminate any lingering reminder of his presence. There were no photographs of him, no possessions, no memorabilia, except her own words and gestures of derision and contempt.

As Victoria grew older and more knowledgeable about sexual relationships between men and women, her mother embellished the story with additional revelations. Apparently Victoria’s mother had caught her husband *in flagrante delicto* with a neighbor, the big bang of betrayal that had triggered in her a blind antagonism for the male sex. In her mother’s view, all men were satyrs, adulterers, predators and marauders, disloyal liars and incorrigible villains.

At some point, her mother had also turned the idea of fathering into a biology lesson. The male has a single function in the chain of life, she had preached. Take the elephant, her prime example. He performs his function then is banished from the herd. We females take care of our own. This explained why she had more stuffed elephants than other children, more elephant books, more Dumbo stories.

From overhearing telephone conversations as a child, Victoria had learned that her father had run away from Belfast as a teenager, escaping some sort of trouble, the implication being, as she learned later, that he was never loyal to anyone, not even his birthright.

While in her teens, her aroused curiosity motivated her to surreptitiously apply to the King County Bureau of records, where she learned that her father's name was Thomas Edward Holmes. In an effort to discover even more about him, she would rummage through her mother's drawers looking for clues. For some reason, Mrs. Stewart had kept her marriage license or had forgotten to destroy it. Victoria found it hidden away in a bottom drawer. Her father had signed his name merely as T.E. Holmes.

Victoria's remarkable memory for numbers caught the discrepancy immediately. She had the date of her birth and her mother's marriage date, which was merely four months before. This meant her mother was five months pregnant when they had married. As the years passed, the fact grew in importance, offering yet another clue to her mother's obsessive anger.

She had also absorbed the notion that somehow she was

at least partially to blame for her father's desertion, as if her conception and arrival had raised the stakes of responsibility that he had not the character to tolerate.

Yet who could fault a working mother who had struggled and sacrificed to raise a fatherless daughter? It was bad enough to have an absent father. Her mother had escalated the condition to a disease of gender. It was the foundation of her martyrdom.

When Victoria was twenty and an undergraduate senior at NYU, she received a postcard from a man identifying himself as her father. *I am Thomas Edward Holmes, your natural father*, the postcard began. It was sent through the college administration office.

He wrote that he was terminally ill and wanted to see her, giving an address in Boston. Without telling her mother, who would have exploded in anger and forbidden her to do so, she went up to visit him. It was the address of a boarding house in a seedy part of South Boston. The landlord told her that he had been taken to Boston Holy Mercy hospital. She found him in a ward smelling of decay and filled with sick and indigent men in various states of disintegration.

"You came," he croaked, his first words when he saw her. "I took a chance. It wasn't easy finding you."

His eyes were sunken and glazed, although she imagined they had lit up slightly when he saw her. Studying his wasted and gaunt face, she was startled to see the familiar shape of her own mouth and the equally familiar almond contours of her eyes. The obvious genetic kinship shocked

her. There's him in me, she realized, noting, for the first time in her life, that her mother's demonization of her father had carried with it a curse upon her.

"You said you wanted to see me," Victoria told him, pulling a chair beside the bed. It was obvious that the end was near.

"Victoria. It was me that named you for Gramma Holmes, my father's mother. Loved the royals, she did. We were Orangemen, you see." Victoria caught the faintest hint of memory, the old brogue speech rhythms. She hadn't heard his voice since she was two years old.

"Drove me away, your mother did. You were the light of my life." He swallowed hard and grimaced in pain. "Look at you. So beautiful." He coughed weakly and stared at her for a long time without speaking.

"She said you deserted us," Victoria said, feeling a compulsion to further plumb the truth of her mother's rage.

"She gave me no choice. Swept me away like yesterday's rubbish," he shrugged. "I did love her once. Too much, perhaps."

"Did you really?" Victoria asked, perhaps seizing the opportunity to hurt him. "I saw your marriage license. I was a bit of an early bird."

"She never loved me, you see. Never wanted to marry. But there was no choice for her in those days."

Hearing this sad, wasted man talk of love appalled her. She didn't believe a word of it, but she couldn't bring herself to dispute him.

"She became a hard, bitter woman. I was no match for her."

She wanted to nod agreement, but desisted. Too much had intervened to make him an ally now.

“She said you broke the marriage bond.”

“Some people can make hell happen on this earth. Couldn’t be worse on the other side.” With difficulty, he sucked in a deep breath and expelled it. “It was from her I ran, daughter. Not from you.”

Unsaid rebuttals crowded into her mind. But you could have stayed close. You could have visited me. You could have made yourself available. Hugged me. Comforted me. You ran from that as well. You made us struggle and suffer. You could have provided a presence, been a dad. Why didn’t you challenge her total possession of me? Defend yourself?

Such questions had long been planted in her mind, like tendrils and shoots growing at random, twisting and turning in the fertile soil, nourished by fatherly deprivation and motherly rage and denial.

Instead she rebuked him silently: I am your daughter. You are my long-absent father. How dare you summon me out of the blue to give you solace on your deathbed. Where were you when I cried out for your touch in the night? No, I will not forgive you. Never.

He seemed to be studying her face, perhaps reading her thoughts.

“I’m sorry, daughter. Truly sorry.”

He began to cough and turned his head away. She waited until he recovered from his coughing fit. Taking a tissue from a box beside the bed, he blew his nose and wiped his eyes.

"Looks like your mom did a damned fine job without me," he said when he had recovered, forcing a thin smile.

"She tried...." Victoria had struggled to emit the word that hung unsaid in the air. Amazingly, it came out right. "Dad."

"Dad," he repeated, his sound a wispy gargle. Tears again streamed down his whiskered and wasted cheeks. Finally, he was able to speak again.

"I had a lousy life, Victoria. No good came of me. But you were never out of my thoughts. From the looks of you, I did what was best. You were a good girl to come see your old dad." He paused again and studied her. "Your mother know you've come?"

She shook her head. It was a secret to be kept forever. Her mother would never have forgiven her for consorting with the enemy, and she couldn't bear the thought of that maternal bond broken. However weird, it was the only parental bond she had, and she clung to it tenaciously.

She saw her father's Adam's apple rise and fall as he struggled to speak again. Then he looked at her, squinting, searching her face, reading her mind.

"You're right, Victoria. I don't deserve it."

It was a moment, she would remember later, when even the most oblique mutter of forgiveness, however insincere, was called for. Yet, despite the ease with which it could have been given, she could not bring herself to offer it. She had come hoping this visit might represent some kind of closure. It didn't. This last painful snapshot of her father rose periodically in her mind, especially when she interact-

ed with her mother.

Like now.

"I'm hanging up, Mother," Victoria sighed. "I'm getting too old for elephant stories."

"You can't deny the natural order."

"I'm not an elephant, Mother."

There was the long expected pause.

"Keep me posted, Victoria. I hope everything works out the way you want it to. But remember...."

"Please, Mother."

"You can't outwit destiny."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Never mind. No matter what, I love you."

"Sure you do."

Victoria flipped the cell phone shut, furious that she had reached out for succor in what was, as always, the wrong direction.

Once again, she tried Josh's cell number. Once again it failed to connect. This time she called his office directly.

"We are terribly sorry, but all lines are busy," a voice said. "But stay on the line. Your call means a great deal to us."

"Fuck you," she cried, breaking the connection as she arrived at the ballet school.

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