

A NOVEL BY

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CHAPTER ONE

"I just want you to be you baby, I know you can do it."

Julius's arms were enveloping her, his beautiful voice singing to her. The way he was he cradling her in his arms, made her feel relaxed and at peace.

"Do what Julius?" Already she was afraid.

"Baby just one more time...one more time and we'll be rich and fly to Hawaii and eat lobster and drink champagne."

The tone of his voice changed even though what he was saying sounded so pleasant.

"I can't anymore Julius" she said.

"I'm so tired, so exhausted."

He said nothing but when he spoke again, she knew.

"You don't need the cage do you honey? I don't want to do that to you anymore. You've graduated, you're a star."

His embrace had tightened and there was no mistaking his intent.

It was then that the walls around her started closing in. Walls upon walls cracking and swaying ultimately, they all came crashing down on her as she screamed and screamed.

Those screams that eventually woke her in her flimsy little room, the one she grew up in in Paisley Falls. They didn't wake anyone else up. Her mother was out on too much

booze and as she shook herself out of bed she gasped in horror at the open door and empty room of her little sister. It was 2am and Bethy was gone.

CHAPTER TWO

Back in Paisley Falls after more than two years of pure chaos, Suzanne marvels at her survival. Oddly, she feels stronger after being brutalized by the monster Julius. She keeps reminding herself over and over that he is dead and that there is no piece of him that belongs in her. She thought she'd never come back to the tiny Northern California town after so much had happened but here she was. She walks the lonely streets of Paisley by herself, population 26,000, elevation 1,778, a little Sierra slope town tucked in the foothills above the Northeast Sacramento Valley. Sometimes she walks in the rain, when it does rain, to feel that she is more solidly connected to the ground. She runs into no one. Covid had sent many people indoors. The town itself had pulled up its rugs and retreated. She couldn't believe how many businesses were closed forever. The Mall stood out like a wrecked battleship blasted out by an economy that couldn't support it. Its hull remains like a symbol of worn-out greed. Every place she walks holds a memory, the church graveyard where she and her high school friend Sandy had wandered late at night staring at old tombstones that marked the passage of others long gone, the high school she'd never graduated from. How was Miss Eirheart doing she wonders? She wished she could find her old English teacher and tell her about the stories and poetry she wrote that were real. Her words and only hers. There would never be another chance to explain.

She knows that she needs this time to get to know herself again. Or at least settle down with what she had become. People had come, gone, and changed! Bethy, her younger sister who had made such a stand in begging her to come back home and be with her was nowhere to be found. Once Suzanne had agreed to return home Bethy had been satisfied that the family was whole again and taken off, disappearing easily into the framework. Suzanne was left with her mother drunk, usually on the floor, and her father dying in a rest home. Sandy had stayed in LA with her newfound love. They talked by phone, but it wasn't the same. Relationships never were the same when one found a partner.

Suzanne had slowly been keeping up with the gossip and what had happened since she left. Dr. Wilson, a nefarious black sheep, had been leading a double life. Dedicated doctor by day, total pervert by night, he had met a premature death because of all the pain and suffering he had caused. Suzanne hadn't known Nadine Hines personally but in her previous profession she knew the type very well. Lost girl, no self-esteem, willing to give-up her soul for a penny. Wilson's wife had left him anyway. All the stuff at the Loosey Goosey Saloon, she had never entered that place as a girl but now she found her way in one day.

"I'd like a chardonnay please," she sits down with all her newly acquired fake assurance. The bartender looked at her with veiled interest, and after a calculated moment nodded and placed the drink on a napkin before her.

"I guess you earned it miss."

The grimy place made her feel at home. Bars were places that had become a kind of landing ground where she had met johns. She wished she could erase all that she knew. Useless information should be ejected out of your mind just purged from your soul she

thinks. But here she was, what could she learn? What did she need to know? She'd thought more than once that she had been sent back to Paisley Falls for a purpose. As far as she was concerned everything in her life now was on a calculated timeline. Finish the task of life and move on. The townies at the Loosey-Goosey looked at her with anticipation. So, tell us they said.

And she said, lets us all talk together.

It was after midnight when she got home. The place feels so empty without Dad, she thinks, wandering down the hall to the family room where her mother sits unresponsively in her recliner.

"Where you been?"

Rhonda sits up attempting a sober look.

"Nowhere special mom, why don't you get yourself up to bed."

Suzanne reaches over to the butt filled ashtray and stubs out the smoldering cigarette.

"It's too lonely in there." Rhonda says.

"Do you have any idea what it's like to be so alone? No of course not. It was you who put my husband in a rest home. You're killing him as much as if you put a knife in him."

Suzanne has heard this all before.

"So great to be back home Ma. Good night!"

Suzanne walks past her sister's bedroom and peers inside the half-open door. Bethy's room is sparsely furnished, simple decorations of paper mache are stuck on the walls creating a textured look, a leftover from art class. A poster of Billy Eilish is pinned above her bed, as though Bethy thought if she dreamed of Billy while she slept, she'd wake up looking like her. A badly made twin bed and a rickety dresser were the only furniture.

Bethy did her homework on the kitchen table. Suzanne thinks that when she leaves for good, her younger sister should move into her room. My room's bigger and she'll have more privacy when I'm gone, she mutters as she comes to the place she had locked herself into so many times. Her room had stayed untouched. Everything was how she had left it more than two years ago. "How funny" she reminisces as her fingers touch the nightstand that holds the water pitcher and basin she'd been careful to fill each night before bed. "I was pretending to be Jane Eyre and living in a fantasy world. Fantasies turn into nightmares and burn your eyes out." Panicked for a moment she gasps and turns away from her bed. Nothing in this room meant anything to her anymore. Coming back here had been a mistake. She felt an overpowering sense of dread. Shaking her hair loose she tries to erase the fear coming over her. She was completely alone now. Her father was dying, her mother was comatose and her sister...it was after midnight and her little sister was missing!

CHAPTER THREE

As soon as she thought those words, she heard the slight sound of a key turning in the front door and saw sleepy looking Bethy sauntering down the hallway. The clingy smell of pot emanated from her body.

"Have you been smoking dope?"

"Well, I guess if it smells like it, I have." She giggles.

Don't tell me you're gonna start preaching to me now."

Bethy stumbles and leans into the doorway of her bedroom.

"I mean who are you to talk?"

“Bethy, I”

“Hey, don’t call me Bethy anymore. It’s Beth. I’m a brave girl now, like you.” She chuckles walking down the hall.

“I know there’s no point in... of course...good night.”

Suzanne knows better than to try and tell her younger sister how she should live her life.

“Good night, Suzanne, I’m glad you’re back, really I am.”

“I wonder what it is I’m supposed to do here now.” Suzanne thinks as she closes the door to her own lonely bedroom.

As soon as Scuzanne is alone in her room a new sense of dread overtakes her. Earlier in the day she had gotten a mysterious text from someone she didn’t know. At first, she thought it was a joke. She checks her cell again to read the message. “It’s time to visit your dad. Open his nightstand and read the letter.”

She had been to visit her father and it hadn’t been a good meeting. He looked so frail. He had to have aged twenty years in the time that she had been gone. The room he was in was nicer than she expected. How were they affording this she wondered? But the weirdest thing about him was the medallion he held up for her. His shaking hand had held it up to her in the light. The shiny medal object hanging from a necklace chain had no meaning to her but to him it was most important that she look and understand it.

“This,” he said. “This is for you.”

“What is it?”

“For you Suzanne, just for you.”

He continued mumbling incoherently for a little while longer before he fell into a troubled sleep, mumbling under his breath about an organization for the good of all. She

had no clue about what he was talking about. But the urgency with which he told her gave her the chills.

Now with her sister obviously learning to live her own life she thinks this is a warning that she should not forget the tremendous turn her own life has taken. She closes the door to her room and turns the latch as she had instinctively done all the years that she had lived here and vowed that tomorrow she would visit her father again and read the mysterious letter, if there was one, in the nightstand.