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Family Trust

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Family Trust

VALERIE BUTTLER

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Chapter 1

Sylvia spotted them coming out of the front door. Oh, jeez, give me a minute. Let me get myself together.

She struggled to get her bulky suitcase out of the trunk of her Malibu. Being short, she had to yank it out a bit at a time. She had hoped to reintroduce herself to her family as a woman in control, but with each pull of her heavy luggage, she felt that hope disappear. Her brother, Blake Matthews, stood watching her from the doorway. Their mother, Gertrude, peeked out from behind him.

"Need some help?" Blake asked, walking across the lawn toward Sylvia and her car. He moved slowly, his unbuttoned, navy coat flapping at his calves as he walked.

"No, I'm okay." Sylvia gave the suitcase a final jerk, which knocked her back a few steps. The case thudded to the ground, landing at Blake's feet.

"Hello, kiddo," he said, hugging her and planting a quick kiss on her cheek. He took the suitcase from her and they walked together towards their mother.

"You look good, Blake. I like your coat."

"So do you, kid. Thanks. It's cashmere."

Of course it was. He had money, a tan left over from summer, and thick, wavy hair. No wonder he was grinning.

Sylvia looked up at her mother leaning against the door frame. From a distance she looked to be her usual, vibrant self, dressed in a green sweater, yellow jacket and tight, snakeskin pants. But as she got closer, the wariness became apparent in her mother's face.

"You made it." Gertrude stepped down from the stoop to greet her daughter. "Good for you."

"Nice to see you, Mom." Sylvia hugged her tightly, feeling the thinness of her frame.

"What do you think of the place?"

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Sylvia turned around and surveyed the grounds that surrounded her mother's home. The gardens were lush with greens and remnants of summer color. "Your yard's terrific, as always."

"Thank you. Still do the work myself." Gertrude thumped her right forefinger on her chest for emphasis. "Tell me what you think of those houses across the street." She waved her hand dismissively at the row of three oversized houses sitting on the bank of the Merrimack River.

Sylvia wondered how long her mother thought she'd been away. "The blue one's new. It doesn't fit in any better than the others."

The structures were modern in design and out of proportion with the homes on the rest of River Road. This area was an old neighborhood with centuries of history, as was most of the town of West Newbury, Massachusetts. Gertrude's house, built in 1729, looked like it had for as long as Sylvia could remember; still unpainted clapboard, just a little more weathered and worn.

"The privacy's gone, and the view of the River," Blake said as he motioned the two women to go inside. "We should have fought them on it."

It smelled the same: an old house with a damp cellar and a bad furnace. Sylvia breathed it in.

"Don't mind the mess." Gertrude flung her jacket onto the wooden chair in the hall that already had a pile of coats on it. "Blake has said enough."

"Well, Mother," Blake said. "You're going to trip."

He placed Sylvia's suitcase next to an antique chest that was strewn with flashlights, cat combs and lanyards. She recognized a Burger King cardboard crown that had been sitting there three years ago. Blake looked at her and rolled his eyes. He moved a kitty litter bag out of her way and she stepped over some garden clogs into the kitchen.

This had always been her favorite room. She could still picture her grandmother standing at the black woodstove, turning donuts frying in oil, or before the sink, pumping water. The only thing that

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remained from those days was the low, unfinished, beamed ceiling that Sylvia now reached up and touched.

"Get in here," Gertrude called from another room. "Where are you?"

"Just looking around, where are you?"

"Out here. Come see my checkered room."

Sylvia walked into what had been her grandmother's front room, now the dining area, and saw a wall of light on her left. "Oh, my God, what is this?" She stood in the door frame of a room she had never seen.

"What do you think?" Gertrude asked.

"Give me a minute. This is like, wow." Oversized windows extended around the room, shiny gold stars hanging in each of them. Blake was sitting on one end of a blood red love seat, a grey Himalayan cat lay stretched out beside him. In front of them was a coffee table made up of a white elephant with a blue blanket draped over his back, supporting a metal tray of gold, red and blue embossing. A second grey Himalayan was walking towards her across the floor of large white blocks and navy caulking. Her mother was sitting in the corner to the right, in a blue rocker. Sylvia stepped into the room. "Amazing."

"Watch out," Gertrude warned. A red, spiraling piece of nylon struck Sylvia on the cheek. "You got hit, ha, ha." She kicked her legs out straight in front of her, rocking back and forth, pointing at her daughter.

Sylvia looked up and saw three more long spiraling strips hanging from the cathedral ceiling.

"This is quite some room. When'd you do this?"

"About two years ago. Thought I deserved it."

"This is the only place she sits now," Blake said.

"So? I like it here. I can see my yard." Gertrude pointed towards the windows on her right.

The view was of the side yard down to the trees beyond. No houses, just gardens and lawn.

"And my kitties like it here. Don't you, my babies?"

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A third cat had come from somewhere and was rubbing itself along Sylvia's ankle. She knew Tessa and Puddy, the Himalayans, but not this white and black one. "Who's this?"

"That's my Walter. Hello, baby," her mother said to the cat. "He looks like Uncle Walter, on my mother's side."

"Why don't you sit?" Blake got up from where he was sitting and stood by one of the windows. "How was your ride?"

"Easy. Traffic was good."

"You cut your hair." Gertrude patted her spikes. "Not as short as mine, you a sissy?"

"No, Ma, just not as brave as you." Sylvia smiled at her mother. She'd gotten it cut just before coming and had blow dried it straight this morning, wanting to look neat. She'd worn her naturally curly hair shoulder length for years, her mother always fussing that she should do something with it.

"It shows off your face," Blake said, "looks good."

"Thanks."

"You hungry?" he asked.

"She doesn't want anything yet. She just got here."

"Sylvia?" Blake looked at his sister.

"Actually, Mom, I could eat." She'd been nervous about this trip and had had only a few graham crackers with coffee while driving. She'd spent the time she had to get ready this morning changing her clothes from one outfit to another. She'd finally chosen the beige slacks and chocolate sweater she now had on, thinking they looked smart and put together. But amidst the colors of the checkered room and her mother's slacks and top, she felt drab and dull.

Gertrude served them tuna fish sandwiches with the Cape Cod potato chips Blake had brought.

What were they thinking as they looked at her? Sylvia was pretty sure no one would bring up her three year absence from the family, but there was no way to avoid having to catch up on some things. She figured she might as well go first. "How are Sara and Caroline?"

After a slight pause her brother said, "They're both doing well."

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That was it. He wasn't going to give her any more, as though his lack of words could protect his family. Her mother, on the other hand, reached for a framed picture that sat on a side table by her chair.

"Look at how pretty she is, Sylvia," Gertrude said as she handed the frame to her daughter. "Look at that hair. Have you ever seen anything like it?"

Yeah, on Sara, when she and Blake were first dating.

The photo was of Caroline dressed in a pale pink dance leotard and tutu, her hair long, blonde and wavy.

"That was taken in May," Gertrude said, "at her dance recital. She's ten now."

Yup, it's been years. "She's beautiful, Blake."

Her brother looked at her and smiled. "I'll take these things to the kitchen." He started picking up their plates. "Why don't you put your things upstairs?"

"Good idea. Which room?"

"Lily's room," her mother said. "I put sheets on the bed for you. You don't mind making it, do you? I ran out of time."

"Of course not, it'll just take a minute. Be right down."

The room had been Sylvia's sister Lily's until she moved out about a year ago after their father died. Her bed, dresser and TV remained, but the rest of the large room was crammed with Gertrude's clothes. Four racks of hanging skirts, dresses and blouses were lined up in the left half of the room, surrounded by clear tubs of folded clothes, arranged by color. The dresser against the wall on the right half was covered with costume jewelry, mostly gaudy necklaces and earrings that Sylvia remembered her mother wearing years ago. She decided to leave her clothes in her suitcase as the rest of the drawers were most likely full. Making up the bed with sheets and a quilt, Sylvia pictured the room as it was when she, Blake and Lily had come to visit their grandparents. The family came once a month, on a Saturday, and stayed overnight. Blake would sleep in the bed by the door and Lily and she shared the other. The room had heat now, but back then, there was only the wood burning stove in the kitchen and another in the front room downstairs. In the colder months, the three

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of them would sleep under four or five blankets, on flannel sheets. If they had to pee during the night, they had to use a thunder jug that was stored under the bed. They had some of their best sibling moments in this room. Sylvia almost hated to leave it, but she lifted the black metal latch and opened the door.

Downstairs again, she saw Gertrude rocking back and forth in her chair, looking over her Wall St. Journal. She found Blake in the kitchen at the table with manila envelopes, pens and an address book in front of him. "What's up?"

"We've got a lot to do before Friday," her brother said. "I'm making up envelopes for all of us: one for me, one for you and one for Lillian."

As if she didn't know who all of us meant.

He continued. "On the envelopes will be the numbers of the hospital, Mom's doctors, and friends she wants us to contact after the operation. We'll each have each other's information: contact numbers, cell, home."

"Okay."

"I've made copies of Mom's power of attorney papers and other things that we might need." Blake was writing names and numbers on one of the manila envelopes, copying them off another.

"Mom's got a power of attorney?"

"Yes and a health care proxy. She'll need them in case something happens."

"Are you the power of attorney?"

"Yes, my name is on the health care proxy as well, keeps things consistent."

"Am I anything?" Sylvia picked up one of the manila envelopes and scanned the various names, which she noticed were neatly written.

"You're an important person in all this. You'll be here when none of us can. The two weeks of Mom's recovery. We're all depending on you." Blake finished the envelope he was working on and handed it to her.

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"I'll be here, as soon as they let her out. I told work we'd know more after the operation as to what days I need to get off."

"Good." He smiled at her.

"What are you two doing?" Gertrude appeared in the doorway. "Why aren't you out here with me? Aren't you here to see me?"

"We're going over some necessary things, Mother," Blake said.

"I'll be right in." Sylvia stood up. "Is there anything to drink? Want me to run to the liquor store?"

"Good idea. Let's have a Black Russian, straight up." Gertrude gestured a pointed finger towards the low ceiling, almost hitting it. "Get the vodka and Kahlua, Sylvia. Bring them in the checkered room." She turned to the cupboard in search of glasses while Sylvia reached on the shelf over the table to get the bottles.

"We're not done in here, yet," Blake said, "we need to talk about Friday."

"Oh, Blake," Gertrude said.

Blake stood up. "We need to make sure everyone's ready on time. What time will you be up, Sylvia?"

"I don't know I just got here." She wanted to sit down, have a drink with her mother and talk.

Her brother looked at her and folded the address book shut. "We have to be up early, you know."

"Okay. What time?"

"Nine thirty. Pat will be picking us up, the tenant from Garden Street." Blake walked over to the refrigerator and opened it. "I don't want a Black Russian, I'll have my wine." He pulled a bottle of Pinot Grigio off the bottom shelf.

"Oh, Sylvia," Gertrude said, "Pat has been wonderful. She's been taking me into Boston almost every time. Can you believe it?"

"That's great. Has Lillian taken you in at all?"

"No, she's very busy, you know."

"Is she coming over today?" Sylvia asked.

Her mother was on her way back to the checkered room with the glasses. "If she gets here, we never know."

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Sylvia set the liquor bottles down on the floor by her mother and left the room to put her manila envelope on the stairway to take up later.

What a piece of work. Lily comes when she wants, doesn't bother when it's inconvenient. Must be nice; the rest of us have to work at pleasing Mom.

When she came back into the room, Gertrude was leaning forward in her rocking chair, one arm across her knees, the other gesturing at Blake. "You do not tell me what to do. I know what's ahead. I read the papers from Dr. Bertrand. I'll take care of it."

Blake was standing in the center of the room holding his glass of white wine. "You won't, Mother. Not on your own. The preparations are important. You heard him say that."

"I did. I'm not stupid." Gertrude flung herself back into the rocker and took a swig of her drink.

"I know you're not. It's just..." Blake turned and looked at Sylvia, who was still standing in the doorway. "We want you to get better, don't we?"

What the heck? There was no chance of Mom getting better. Even she must realize that at this point. Why can't we just say that aloud? It's time.

It had been two months since Lily called to tell her that she should make peace with their mother before it was too late, that the squamous cell carcinoma in both her legs was beyond control. Sylvia had swallowed her pride and called. In the conversations she and her mother had since, Gertrude talked about the cancer in her legs as though it was a nuisance she was dealing with temporarily.

What we, the family, need now, Sylvia wanted to say out loud, is to have Mom say what she has to, tell us her wishes and maybe let us in on some family secrets. There must be some of those. It's time to get everything out in the open. But instead, she said to her mother, "What is it you have to do?"

"Tomorrow night I have to bathe with special soap."

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“Not bathe, Mother, shower.” Blake looked at Sylvia and held up his hand in a helpless gesture. “See?”

“I know that,” Gertrude said. “I’m just saying bathe in general. Get wet. Soap up.”

“It has to be a shower. You cannot take a bath.”

Gertrude finished the dark brown liquid in her glass and looked at her son. “Would you like to come in with me and make sure I do it right?”

Sylvia wanted to tell him to give it a rest, but she ignored him and turned to her mother, “So you have to bathe slash shower with special soap and then what?”

Her mother bent way over, her rear end at the edge of the rocker, and pulled the vodka and Kahlua bottles towards her feet. She poured a good shot of both in her glass and said, “Then I just have to put on clean pajamas and that’s it.”

“So what’s the big deal?” Sylvia looked at her brother.

“The big deal,” Blake moved a few steps closer to Gertrude, “is that Mother doesn’t have clean pajamas. She barely has clean *anything*.” Blake stood there, smiling at both of them.

Gertrude was not smiling back. “Don’t be so dramatic. I do laundry. There are plenty of clean clothes. You complain how many clothes I have, that they’re everywhere. Now you say I don’t have any.”

Sylvia said, “I’m sure we can find some.”

Blake turned and looked at her. “Not without cat hair on them. She can’t wash herself clean and then put on hairy pajamas.”

“Oh, pooh,” Gertrude said. “Are my clothes covered in cat hair, Sylvia?”

Sure, put it on me. My clothes are covered and I’ve only been in your house a few hours. You live here. Yes, your clothes are covered, everything is, Mom. But I’m not going to say that. “No, Mom, you’re clothes are fine, but he’s got a point. You don’t want to get anything on your legs.” Gertrude’s face relaxed. Sylvia went on. “I brought a new pair of pajamas with me. They should fit you fine.” And they’ll be alright as long as I don’t take them out of my suitcase until you’re ready to go in to shower. Not bathe.

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"So there," Gertrude said to her son, "it's taken care of. Have a drink, Sylvia. Don't make me drink alone."

"That's another thing," Blake said. "Why are you drinking?"

"I like it." Gertrude held her glass up in a salute towards her daughter and smiled. Sylvia gestured back with her glass.

"Well you can't have any tomorrow. That's on the paper."

"Yes, Father." Gertrude winked at her daughter. She eased back into her chair, laughed and took a swallow of her liquor. "Changing the subject, Sylvia, I know you like to go out to eat when you come here, get your fried clams. But we've been invited up on the hill tonight."

"On the hill?"

"Yes, behind me up the hill. The boys have asked us for dinner, just you and me."

Blake was standing in the doorway. "You've never met them, have you?"

"No."

"They're pretty boys. I'll leave it at that."

Gertrude laughed. "They are pretty, David and Ray. They're very generous, too."

"Yeah, I wonder why." Blake turned and left the room.

"Don't listen to him. He's uncomfortable with them. Who knows what their relationship is, how can you tell? They live together. You've had roommates, doesn't mean anything." Gertrude gestured in the direction Blake had headed. "He just likes to cause trouble, doesn't like me having friends."

Her mother went on to tell her about the boys on the hill. There was David who occasionally helped her around the yard, hauling bags of mulch or bird food, spreading rock salt in the winter. If he saw her as he was driving by on his way out, he'd stop and ask if he could pick anything up for her at Home Depot or Wal-Mart. Ray, the other one, was hardly ever around. His job in pharmaceuticals took him around the country. He made good money, he'd told Gertrude, and enjoyed having fun with it. The two of them had often treated her to dinner or a show. Neither seemed to have family and they never got much company, but they knew how to entertain. Gertrude had been

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their guest before. She and Sylvia were to be up on the hill for dinner at six sharp.

Chapter Two

Ray Greco met them at the door. He was relatively short, around 5'5", in his early thirties, and handsomely dressed in a black v necked sweater and grey dress slacks. His black hair was gelled and combed back, making him appear very Italian. With a smile that stayed on his good looking face all night, he welcomed Gertrude and Sylvia inside.

In the kitchen they met David Hudson, who was a couple of inches taller than his roommate, but about the same age. His chestnut brown hair grazed the collar of his sage colored flannel shirt. He couldn't shake their hands as he was shaping small balls of dough which he placed on a cookie sheet. Ray showed off the kitchen he had recently had remodeled. There was extensive cabinetry: drawers in odd places, funny little cabinets, everything nice and new. Sylvia found herself touching the smooth counters and shiny doors.

The four of them initially sat in the equivalent of Gertrude's checkered room while the rolls baked. Two sides of the room were floor to ceiling windows which provided an unhindered view of the woods. Because it was fall in New England, the view was red, orange, and yellow. Sylvia counted three white birch trees, one of her favorites.

Gertrude was being her usual, aren't I the most wonderful thing, the most unusual person you have ever known, self, but Ray and David seemed used to it. Perhaps they found her entertaining. Sylvia tried every now and then to picture the two men and her mother out somewhere together, like at a concert, but it never became a clear picture. Maybe they just felt sorry for her. Sorry that her children didn't do as much for her as they did.

They moved to a room with subdued lighting and an unlit fireplace over which candles were burning. Dinner, consisting of roasted pork, garlic mashed potatoes and steamed asparagus, was served on a round table set with shiny, grey place mats and silver

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napkin rings David said they picked up in Oldies Marketplace in Newburyport.

When they were done, Ray offered to take the food and dishes to the kitchen, but only if Gertrude would keep him amused. She, of course, agreed to entertain him. Sylvia got up to help, but Ray and David insisted she sit and relax.

Sylvia could not believe what she was hearing. This man had never met her before tonight. He was just a neighbor. How would he know how her mother felt?

David leaned into her and repeated, "You'll never be loved like the others."

"How can you say that?"

"Because I know things you don't. I'll tell you, but it will hurt."

"Then tell me."

"It's not that simple. There are some things you need to read to understand. Give me your address and I'll mail them. You can read them later. You should concentrate on your mother for now."

"That *is* why I'm here." Sylvia hadn't seen her mother in three years. She'd had to bury deep feelings of anger and hurt towards her family to be here today. She had two days before the operation with her mother and who knew how long after that. No, she wasn't going to think about what David had said. Never be loved like the others. No. Things couldn't be ruined again, not now. "I'm not comfortable giving you my address. Besides, I just want things to go well with my Mom and me, okay?"

"At least give me your email before you leave." David slid a pen and small pad of paper across the table towards Sylvia. "You need to know."

She picked up the pen and wrote her email address on the paper. The information was probably nothing at all, and that would be the end of it. What could he possibly know about her family that she didn't?

"Why do you think she never mentioned you to us?" David asked.

"You and Ray didn't know about me?"

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“Not until a few weeks ago when she told us you were coming. We wanted to meet the unmentionable daughter.” He waited but Sylvia didn’t say anything. He repeated his question. “Why do you think she never mentioned you?”

“I don’t know, pride, doesn’t like others to know anything’s wrong. Look how she is with her cancer.” Sylvia fidgeted with the edge of her place mat, rolling and unrolling the corner. “Who knows? Maybe she figured I’d never come back.”

The sound of footsteps getting closer brought an end to their conversation.

“You boys outdid yourselves,” Gertrude said when she and Ray came into the dining room. “Look at this, Sylvia.” She placed a pecan pie and a bowl of what looked like homemade whipped cream on the table. “They made everything I like.”

Ray set a plate of cookies and chocolates next to the pie. He said to Sylvia, “These are from your mother’s favorite bakery. There’s a bag of them in the kitchen for you to take when you leave.”

“You really did make a wonderful meal,” Sylvia said. “It was nice of you to include me.” They must care for her mother. They certainly made tonight a special one for her. Sylvia was happy that her mother had such good neighbors, but their concern nudged at the guilt she felt for having done nothing herself for so long. But that’s in the past. I’m here now, and I will be loved.

Estranged daughter Sylvia gets the chance to mend the damaged relationship she has with her mother when her mother's rights are taken away by Sylvia's brother. When she learns of a secret her mother has kept from her, one that she's not supposed to find out about until it's too late, Sylvia is torn between fighting for her mother and fighting for herself.

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