CHAPTER ONE

Landing

I woke with a start, and tried to figure out where I was. Weird yellow lighting, the body odor of too many people who'd been in close quarters for too long, and the fact that I couldn't move my arms clued me in. It could only be an airplane.

The flight attendants, with their shellacked bobs and Pepsodent smiles, wove up and down the aisles, offering us warm washcloths. I suppose a cup of coffee would have been redolent of the decadent 1980s. I took the terry cloth square, placed it over my nose and mouth and tried to breathe normally. If I'd flown direct from Oakland, I would have at least rated a packet of Lorna Doones, but you can't fly direct from Oakland to Richmond, Virginia. Instead I had shuffled off a plane in Atlanta at ten pm, expecting to be in Richmond by midnight. But after four hours on the tarmac with scant information, we blearily trooped off one plane and onto another, where we proceeded to wait two more hours for the guys to show up to transfer our luggage. I considered offering to go do it myself, but I'd been a union member my whole adult life. I was not going to launch my retirement by becoming a scab. So I ate the paltry snacks I'd brought for the trip—a hard-boiled egg, some trail mix and a few stale organic cheese puffs—and then tried to doze.

Instead of sleep, what came were a steady barrage of images from the bad movie I'd been living in for most of a week: me dragging my heavy wheeled suitcase into the house, stumbling over the cat, half-eaten French toast on the breakfast nook table, Jen emerging from the bathroom dripping on my prized Turkish rug, her mouth opening slowly like a flower as she stared at me, Sidney yanking the sheet up to cover one breast, as if that might make me unsee the classic scene of betrayal.

I'd called my first girlfriend, Nell. She could solve any problem, and she solved mine.

"Your timing is perfect," she said, as if being dumped while I was out of the country was a career choice. "We're starting a new project, and you're just the person we need."

She'd made all the arrangements. All I had to do was get on the plane. A Josie Miyamoto would meet me at the airport.

I hoped Josie was waiting at baggage claim with a sign reading "Mollie O'Shay." I didn't have her phone number and didn't fancy going up to every Asian woman waiting for relatives and asking if they were Josie. Though, come to think of it, the flight had gotten a lot less Asian since arriving in Atlanta.

I needn't have worried. Richmond International Airport could pass for an ice rink in San Francisco. It wouldn't have taken me long to go up to every person in the building, but I didn't need to, because the six-foot tall Asian chick with a modified shag buried in a copy of Jane Austen's *Emma* was unmissable.

And yes, she had a sign.

She didn't look up from her book until I stood in front of her with a rollaway in each hand, my combination laptop bag and granny purse pressed to my right side.

"Emma?" I said.

"No, Josie," she said, looking up. I pointed to the book.

"I'm Mollie," I said. "How do you like Emma?"

"I like it," she said. "It's not my favorite. Northanger Abbey is. But it's better than Pride."

She was already striding out the door. I huffed to keep up. "Are you in a Jane Austen book club?" I asked.

She hadn't even offered to carry one of my bags. Whatever she was getting out of her Jane Austen fixation, it wasn't etiquette lessons.

"I'm writing a dissertation," she said.

"Women's Studies?" I could have left off the question mark.

"Gender Studies," she said, stretching out the *gen*. "Austen's subversion of the binary through the introspection of subaltern consciousness."

I didn't understand a word she said. She was definitely going to get honors on her degree.

After I'd crammed my bags into the trunk of Josie's red Ford Focus, we hit the highway. I tried to soak in my first sights in the Old South, but she was going at least 80. The road was as deserted as the airport had been. I started to wonder if it was the apocalypse that had delayed my plane.

"Can we stop somewhere for breakfast?" I asked. "I need a hefty dose of protein, followed by a hot shower and a long nap."

"Sorry," she said. "You'll have to make do with a Starbucks latte and scone. You're late and the first two patients are already at the clinic. Two more are coming this afternoon."

"You scheduled them for today?" I groused. "I thought I'd have a day to settle in."

"The clock's ticking," Josie said.

That yanked me out of my self-pity party. After twenty-eight years as a nurse-midwife, I knew what a ticking clock meant. Since the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, the southern states had been toppling like sand castles in an earthquake. Six weeks ago, Virginia's newly Republican legislature had voted to make abortion a crime, except in a few rare circumstances. The expected court ruling staying the implementation had not come; or rather it had, but had been overturned by the court of appeals. The two existing clinics in Richmond that

performed abortions had shut their doors abruptly. The patients waiting for me probably had appointments scheduled for weeks. I was their last hope for a chance to go back and make the same mistakes again.

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"I had an IUD," Vanessa kept repeating, over and over.

"It isn't your fault," I said, as if it was a call and response prayer. "Contraception fails."

The exam table she lay on looked like a reclining chair. The head could be tilted up or made to lie flat, and there was a clever drop-panel that enabled me to position myself between her legs without having to use stirrups. Josie told me it cost a lot more than a normal exam table, but the group felt it would make the clients more at ease.

The kind gesture was lost on Vanessa. She was so tense, I was afraid I wouldn't get the speculum in without damaging her vaginal wall.

"I'm going to need you to relax a little," I said. "Let's take a few deep breaths. Iiiinnnn," I modeled a good, deep belly breath. She half-heartedly sucked some air through her nose, her chest barely rising.

"I want Danny," she said, half-wail, half-sulk.

"I know but he can't come here. It's for his own protection, and yours." Out of the corner of my eye I saw, or sensed, Josie nodding. That's what she had told me to say. I was not sure it was the best approach, but we'd discuss it later. Josie and the rest of her group were taking most of the risk. They had rented the office, bought the equipment, posted the ads on social media, fliers in church basements and stickers in school bathrooms, even made the medical waste connection. I owed it to them to follow their rules.

Though, of course, I was the one with my hands inside a young woman's vagina.

I cocked my head toward the iPad on the desk, and Josie fiddled with it until some vaguely New Agey music filtered out.

Vanessa's muscles softened slightly. I held out my hand and Josie passed me the slim forceps called tenaculum. Vanessa only cringed a little as I brought her cervix forward and injected the anesthetic. I gave her a couple minutes to get numb, before threading the dilators into her os. I heard rustling as Josie unwrapped the cannula. When the cervix was open enough, I inserted it and nodded to Josie, who switched on the aspirator. I had questioned the decision to go with an electric aspirator; a handheld pump would have been cheaper and quieter, but Josie said the group had agreed we needed the speed and accuracy of the electric vacuum.

I removed the cannula and cleaned Vanessa's vagina with an alcohol wipe. That simple, I thought, just like wiping my face on the airplane. That had only been a couple hours ago. It felt like much more. Vanessa's cervix was contracting properly, cutting off the blood supply. She would be right as rain before lunch time.

"We're nearly done. I'll be back in one minute," I told her.

Josie had already removed the cup containing the waste. We moved to a corner of the room to examine it.

"Have you done this before?" I asked.

She shook her head, which was a little too small for her body. Leaning forward, she resembled a question mark. Keeping my voice low, I showed her how to count tiny body parts to make sure the pregnancy had been completely removed. By the time we were satisfied that it had, Vanessa was already trying to sit up.

"Is it over?" she asked.

"Yes, it is." A mere "yes" would have sufficed, but seemed too curt. Extra words needed to mark the moment of an event her body would not remember in twenty-four hours. An event dozens of women experience every hour, the lucky and the unlucky indiscriminately. Too bad we couldn't bank unwanted miscarriages, transfer them seamlessly to women like Vanessa. I escorted her into the recovery room, festooned with a Georgia O'Keefe print and a red and yellow wedding ring quilt draped over the reclining chair. I settled Vanessa in the chair, covering

her feet with the quilt (she didn't want it on her torso, said she was warm). I checked her temperature – 98.2, and asked if she wanted tea or orange juice. She chose the juice.

I brought the juice and handed her the instructions for aftercare, a small bottle of Tylenol and another with fourteen doxycycline pills and a small package of sanitary pads. I warned her not to have sex or use a tampon for two weeks.

"How long are you and Danny together?" I asked.

"Six months," she said. "Really, five and a half."

"Do you love him?"

"I don't know. I think so." Her dark blue eyes were wet.

"Are you in college?" I didn't know if I should be asking such questions. Maybe I should have as little information about our clients as possible. But I wanted Vanessa to remember who she was, why she had chosen to end her pregnancy.

"High school," she said. "I'm going to Reynolds next year." I didn't know what she meant. The Richmond FAQs I'd found online had told me that the Reynolds tin foil company was headquartered in town, but I doubted that was what she was referring to. I'd have to read up on local schools.

"What do you want to be?" I asked.

"I'm not sure – maybe a librarian?" A tear made its way out of the corner of her eye and down an alabaster cheek. Another followed rapidly, threatening a rainstorm. I squelched my panic reaction to people crying, recognizing it as nothing more than pent-up anxiety mixed with relief.

"You didn't do anything wrong," I said once more. She probably didn't remember hearing that, even though it had only been about ten minutes ago. This was Bible country. I doubted anyone in her family would agree with my assessment. Good that Vanessa liked books.

I pointed to the top of the instruction sheet, where "Dr. Mary" was written in next to a phone number. The last tenant in this office was a psychologist named Mary Jenkins. There was also an orthopedist

named Mary Jenkins in town, so the group decided all its practitioners would function under that name. It was suitably nondescript and a cursory internet search, should anyone have reason to initiate one, would not raise red flags. I worried that representing myself as a doctor would add to the risk, but Josie insisted that Richmond's women wouldn't trust someone who wasn't a doctor to remove the contents of their wombs.

I said goodbye to Vanessa, after reminding her to call if she ran a fever or had excessive bleeding. How would she know what was excessive? I wondered. If women started calling us every time they spotted, I would refine my spiel. I ducked back into the makeshift operating room where Tanisha was already positioned with her legs up. I hadn't even seen who had brought her. Vanessa would be escorted out the back door, which exited into the parking lot. The direct door to the lot was a major reason the group had chosen this office. Josie had mentioned they bought a used Lexis with tinted windows so that clients would not need to be blindfolded. They didn't want to add to their tension, or risk someone witnessing what looked like a kidnapping.

Another big plus of this building was the apartment upstairs where I had only had time to drop my bags and check out the bathroom. I thought longingly of the queen-size bed which, if my spatial memory was accurate, stood directly above where I was now washing my hands with antiseptic soap.

I performed eight abortions that day, in just under six hours, with a half hour for a pesto, cheese and olive sandwich and a cup of the Mexican dark roast I'd brought back from Chiapas. By the time Josie and I popped the last set of instruments into the autoclave, I felt like someone had put me through one of those old fashioned washing machines with a wringer.

"Hurry," Josie said, as we stripped the bed for the last time. "It's time to go meet the others."

"Others?" I put the linens in the hamper.

"The organizing group," she said. "They're waiting upstairs." I clamped my teeth shut and counted to ten.

"No rest for the wicked," I said.

Josie packed all the instruments into a big toolbox she stashed in the supply closet, which locked with a code punched into a metal keypad. Thankfully I came up with an easy mnemonic for the code. She picked up the two Sharps containers full of biological waste and headed for the back door. I awkwardly got my arms around the hamper and followed. I made a mental note to invest in one of those rollaway kinds.

Josie looked around carefully before placing the two Sharps in the trunk of her VW.

"Wouldn't it be easier to use paper sheets?" I asked, huffing up the steep wooden staircase with my load of laundry.

"We decided it would be cheaper and greener to use real ones," she said. Cheaper sure, because no doubt I'd be expected to do the laundry in the apartment size washer-dryer upstairs.

"This would be the same 'we' that thought it was a good idea to have a meeting after my first day of surgery?" I couldn't resist saying. "After flying all night?"

"Well you were supposed to get in last night," Josie said. I thought she sounded more accusatory than apologetic, but maybe that was just my nerves.

CHAPTER TWO

The OWLS Hoot at Night

Ten women sat in a circle in my living room: two on a faded brown couch, one in a faux leather recliner facing the thirty-inch TV on the wall (be still my heart), the rest on assorted wooden and folding chairs crammed among the book cases. I felt all twenty eyes evaluating my movements as I entered with my arms full of laundry. I concentrated hard on not dropping anything. After I ditched my burden in the kitchen, the Black woman standing under the television set pointed to an empty chair beside her. She apparently planned to stand for the entire meeting.

Josie perched on one wide arm of the couch, next to Nell, who wore her clerical collar with a black button-down shirt. I met her eyes and mimed falling asleep. “You’ll be so busy, you won’t have time to mourn,” she’d assured me on the phone. She had undersold it. Next to Nell was Rabbit, whom Josie had introduced as her partner. Rabbit was either trans or genderqueer, but used ‘they’ so it didn’t matter. Their delicate features made them look very young, but I guessed they were a few years older than Josie, early thirties.

The leader cleared her throat. She had intricate braids coiled into an elongated knot on top of her head. I couldn’t tell if they were natural or a weave. She wore a knee-length yellow dress and black patent leather heels.

"Let's get started," she said. "I'm Evelyn Grandis, local president of the National Organization for Women, and one of the founders of Options for Women Life Situations, which we call OWLS."

Two women young enough to have grown up reading Harry Potter laughed. The dyke with the graying crew cut and snake tattoo looked at them in baffled annoyance. Obviously she had not contributed to the lesbian baby boom.

Evelyn had a commanding presence. I nicknamed her Evelyn Grandiose right away. She explained – probably for my benefit, since everyone else must already know how OWLS had formed – that the idea had been hatched at an emergency meeting after the legislature passed HB7, making abortion illegal in the state. She and several others from NOW – she pointed to them as she said their names – Yvette, Maureen and Shawn – had gotten together with Sandy, director of the women's health center at Virginia Commonwealth University. Sandy sat to Evelyn's left. She looked like a softer version of a Fox News anchor. Yvette was the only other African American woman in the room. I suspected she was the butch to Evelyn's femme, but I couldn't be sure. Yvette wore black jeans and a starched short-sleeved blue plaid shirt, tucked in. Her hair was cut very short, with a flat top. She sat directly opposite Evelyn, maybe so they could maintain eye contact. I hadn't picked Richmond as the place that would have a Black lesbian running their local NOW chapter, but what did I really know about the New South?

Maureen and Shawn were white women in their sixties. I'd bet anything they were ex-nuns. Both wore slacks, not jeans, and sensible dark shoes. I doubted I would be able to remember who was who. I'd be lucky if I remembered anyone's names at all.

Josie was the only Asian present. I'd done enough cursory research online to know that Richmond had a small Latino community, but I hadn't heard any Spanish when I came in, and no one in the room was identifiably Latinx. Nell had volunteered at a migrant worker center in

Alabama for a while, but that probably wasn't enough to bridge the Catholic-Protestant divide on abortion.

"Officially, all we do is counseling," said Evelyn. "We help women understand the law and their options. All of that will take place over at the safe house."

I noted that she didn't say anything to suggest where that was. Either everyone else knew, or she didn't trust everyone in this room.

"Our plan is to change abortion providers every six months," Evelyn continued. "That will hopefully make it harder for the right wing to target them and build a criminal case against them."

I noted her strategic use of the word "hopefully". I had thought about the risks, of course, but they hadn't been at the top of my worries in the flurry of getting ready to leave home just days after returning from Mexico. I'd had more immediate concerns, like avoiding my lying, cheating girlfriend in the house we'd owned together for fifteen years. I'd jumped at the chance to get three thousand miles away from her and all the so-called friends I imagined snickering behind my back. It would serve them all right if I ended up rotting in a Southern prison.

"Mollie here," Evelyn acknowledged me with a sweeping gesture worthy of her name, "stepped in on very short notice as the first. I'm going to ask her to say a few words now."

No one had told me I would have to make a speech. Public speaking is not my favorite thing, and I usually rely heavily on index cards and PowerPoint slides. If I'd known about this meeting, I would have spent time on the plane writing my remarks and practicing under my breath. But now all these rapt eyes were pasted to my face, so I would just have to muddle through. I sucked in air.

"About ten years ago, it became legal in California for nurse practitioners, nurse midwives and physicians' assistants to do first-trimester abortions. I'm certified as both a nurse midwife and women's health nurse practitioner. My practice specialized in home births, so we didn't generally get abortion requests, but I recognized that fewer and fewer doctors were willing to do abortions, and it seemed like a good idea to

gain the skills. So I volunteered at a grassroots women's clinic in San Francisco. The only procedure I was allowed to do by myself was what's known as a vacuum aspiration abortion."

I had no idea if this was the type of information they wanted. I was just babbling. But I didn't see anyone checking their phones, so I figured I wasn't boring them yet.

"But I also assisted doctors – which means doing everything while they watched – in what's known as dilation and extraction, or D&E. In a D&E, you basically scrape the fetal tissue out of the uterus."

The Harry Potter aficionados were looking like they had eaten vomit-flavored jelly beans. But really, what did they think they were doing here?

"Sorry to be so graphic," I said. "The point is, women need these procedures and I am very well trained in doing them. These are very safe procedures. Many women don't even know they are pregnant until they are past the time when aspiration abortion is possible, which is about thirteen weeks from the start of the last menstrual period. Our clients will have to arrange time off of work and childcare and transportation. We don't want to tell them we can't help them."

Good, a hand was up. That meant I could stop talking and catch my breath.

"Why here?" The questioner was blonde and femme, in skinny jeans and a hot-pink blouse stretched tight over ample – possibly artificial – tits. "Why not help women go to Maryland, where abortion is still legal?"

"Still" was the operative word. There were bills pending in seven states replicating the one that Virginia had passed, and Maryland was one. But the Maryland House was still Democratic controlled, so for the moment, abortion remained legal there.

"The clinics in Maryland already have more clients than they can handle," Josie said. "Setting up a legal clinic takes a lot of time and money, and we don't have either. But there's more to it than that. If you're trying to do everything legally, you can be stopped easily. If you

start out illegal, you set up your systems to prevent people from finding out who you are and it's harder for them to stop you. It's not to say it's safe, but it's eyes open. That's the mistake that the early abortion rights activists made after *Roe v. Wade*. They dismantled the grassroots, underground networks that had worked really well for so many women for so many years. You can't blame them. Who would want to keep running an underground clinic when you could be aboveground and get paid for it and advertise openly? It seemed like a great plan. But that gave the right wing a target and it added layers and layers of expense and political pressure that, honestly, got us to where we are. The Planned Parenthoods and the Women's Options organizations, they forgot how to fight."

The two women opposite me were knitting, their needles clicking in syncopation like nineteenth century suffragettes – if the suffragettes had had silver buzz cuts and tattoos. The clicking rose to a furious tempo. These knitters had probably helped build those First Gen women's clinics.

"Look, I'm not attacking anybody," Josie said. I thought some of the assembled would disagree, but gave her A for Amelioration. "But what we're doing here is a different approach altogether. We are going back to the old self-help model, the Jane model." Several women nodded. The Jane collective operated in Chicago from the mid-sixties until abortion became legal in 1972. Lay health workers provided safe abortions to tens of thousands of women. It had been the subject of a few recent books and movies, so the reference did not leave the younger women completely in the dark.

Maybe I'd start knitting again too. It had helped get me through those boring nursing school classes on The Role of the Nurse, which meant following doctors' orders without question. Nursing school back then didn't have a Social Justice track like the ones my young colleagues had gone through at Cal State East Bay.

"This is an all-volunteer project," Josie went on. "None of us is getting paid to run it. Mollie isn't getting a salary. We're paying her

expenses, but she's donating her time. That's our plan – to recruit retired nurses, maybe even doctors, to come spend half a year here. We –" she swirled her head around the room, trying to catch each person's eye and bring them into her orbit, "will provide the administrative support, security, counsel the clients and assist the practitioners. We'll raise money to cover the rent and the transportation for women who can't afford to get here on their own."

I listened for Bunny, tucked away in the bedroom. I'd insisted on bringing her, even though Sidney protested that cats hated change. "She'll adapt," I said. "And anyway, female cats aren't as territorial as males."

I didn't hear any mewing or rustling. I assumed that meant Bunny was curled up, sleeping, on top of the new quilt Josie said her grandmother had made special for me. I'd have to make sure it wasn't totally shredded before the next practitioner arrived.

I pulled my mind back to the meeting. Evelyn was talking about working groups. Fundraising was the most important, she said. They needed two thousand dollars a month for the rent, equipment, medical waste disposal, transportation stipends and insurance.

"Insurance?" I burst out without thinking. "How can an underground clinic get insurance?"

"We bought renter's insurance," Nell explained, "in case of a fire or something."

A fire or something. My home and workplace could be the target of arson, *or something*.

Volunteers was another big need. Josie was heading up that group. We needed to recruit people for medical assisting, publicity, and security.

Security. My lone experience on a security team had been on May 4, 1970, at Kent State University, where I was a freshman. With twenty other kids, I had put on a red armband. We had somehow thought that made us capable of protecting the people who came to protest the bombing of Cambodia. The National Guard had not paid any attention to our

armbands when they aimed their rifles at the students chanting "Pigs Off Campus."

A harsh sound interrupted my journey into the past. The landline was ringing. Josie had shown me the phone when we put my luggage away. She said it was more secure than cell phones. *Secure*, that word again.

I automatically ran to the kitchen to answer the phone, even though as far as I knew, no one had the number yet.

"Hello?"

"Renata Kellam?"

"Who is this?"

"Is this Renata Kellam?" It was a man's voice, raspy and low. I didn't recognize it.

"No, you've got the wrong number." I hung up, but not before I heard him say, "I know where you are."