

One

I was no bigger than a bug in my mother's womb when the two of us drove away from Sleepy Eye, Minnesota, toward our lives as a duet.

Mom had no destination in mind. The Kaskaskia River wound through the trees like a silver ribbon. The scene reminded her of a photograph that had hung over her parents' bed, so she parked the Pontiac and slept for the first time in three days. Months later I was born at St. Margaret's Hospital within a stone's throw of that parking space. The sisters cooed over my young, recently-widowed mother, a Madonna-like vision with her newborn daughter. Mom named me in the Portuguese tradition with two surnames, my father's name listed before my mother's. That was how I came to be *María Amelia Casimiro Monteiro*. *Amy*, for short. This was the goodnight story Mom loved to tell.

At my first awareness, sometime around the age of four, I remember hearing the fairy-tale beginning of my life, born to the Queen of Sleepy Eye as I was. Unjustly dethroned after only



twenty-three days as the 1958 Queen of Sleepy Eye, Mom refused to return the tiara and the sash. Her larceny seemed justified since her only crime had been a secret marriage to my father. Whenever one of Mom's girlfriends visited the house, Mom brought out the velvet box. With her fingers poised to lift the lid, her eyes lucent, and her smile shamelessly demure, she paused until her audience gushed, "Oh, Francie, for goodness' sake, open the box."

By age ten, I yawned and stretched as she ceremoniously set the box on the coffee table. By the time I turned thirteen, half the rhinestones had fallen from the tiara's settings. Never mind that I'd buried the ratty thing under coffee grounds and potato skins in the kitchen trash more than once, only to retrieve the tiara before my mother discovered it missing. The story was a droning fly I batted away, but it always came back. My apathy went unnoticed. Mom told her story to anyone willing to listen. She worked conversations like a fisherman angling a fighting bass—reel, slack, feed the line—until she hooked the opportunity to tell of her stolen royalty. Grocery lines. Intimate apparel sales. Parent-teacher conferences. The world was ripe for a hard-luck queen story.

Today, Mom rarely speaks of her summer in Sleepy Eye. That was fifty years ago. As far as I know, the tiara and sash lie buried in a landfill with petrified hot dogs and Twinkies. She and my stepfather have retired to travel.

Three years ago, Mom called from New Zealand, and the line between today and yesterday grew decidedly fuzzy. "Amy, honey," Mom yelled as she did when she called from more than ten miles away. "You have to help me find the Pontiac."

I'd spent my early years loathing that car. Mom demanded it be kept in showroom-floor condition. That meant weekly washings, vacuuming, and massaging a special cleaner on the dashboard to

keep it from cracking, as if Mom ever parked the car in the sun. Scuffed door panels were scrubbed immediately. The ashtray went unused. If I wore shoes with buckles, off they came before I was allowed to sit on the seat.

Once a month, Mom polished the leather seats while I waxed the car from stem to stern. For that car I missed birthday parties, grand openings of the A&P and the Dairy Queen, and the very first showing of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* at the Egyptian Theater. Honestly, a little brother would have been a more tolerable evil, especially since Mom only drove the car when the mood struck her. All of this for the 1958 Pontiac Bonneville Sport Coupe Jubilee Edition, a car that without equivocation, outranked every other car in pure gaudiness. Chrome accentuated every line and arched like drowsy eyelids over twin headlights and taillights. The grill was a chrome waffle. But most unsettling of all was the green-on-green paint that soured my stomach.

Still, the Pontiac was the only artifact of my father I'd known.

"The Pontiac?" I asked her. "You sold that—what, thirty years ago? What's this about?"

"This phone call is costing me a fortune." Mom blew her nose. "*Fofa*, honey, I'm desperate. You're so good at finding things. How hard could it be to find a few thousand pounds of metal with four wheels?" The line went quiet for a long time—on my end, because I was wondering why the Pontiac had reemerged as an object of Mom's devotion. From countless other conversations, I'd learned silence on her end meant she was sifting her memories for leverage. Her effort proved unnecessary. Graham, our youngest, had thrown up grape juice on Mom's white sofa last Thanksgiving. I owed her.

"Do you even remember the name of the man who bought the car?"

"You're such a good daughter, my honey, *meu fofa*."



While Mom and Chuck took culinary tours of Tuscany and visited the Northern Baltic countries, the search consumed me for three years. I followed hunches and faded memories to heaps of rusted car bodies in tired cities and townships. That's how Mom and I have come to be in Barstow, California, standing in the dust and scanning the ground for rattlesnakes.

"THIS HAS TO be the car, Mom. Look at it."

"I just want to be sure that this is *our* car." Mom reads the vehicle identification number from the car's firewall while I scan the numbers written in the family Bible, something I'd already done over the phone with the car's restorer. Mom sighs and a flush of relief washes over me—and something else unexpected and harder to name. Foreboding? Suspicion? Nausea? I look to Mom to confirm or dismiss my tumbling gut, but she is digging in her purse for her checkbook.

The restorer of the Pontiac waves a hornet away from his sandwich with a greasy rag, but a half dozen more marauders hover around the man's head. From the slump of the man's shoulders, I don't presume him to be ambitious, but his asking price could retire the national debt.

"Ladies, you have to understand, this car is in primo condition. The original owner ordered all the available technology of that time. The sliding Plexiglas sun visor. The Wonderbar AM radio with an automatic power antenna. Power windows. Memo-Matic power memory seats. And they don't make reproduction parts for this baby. Oh no, I hunted down *new* old parts from vendors all over the country. Make that the world. I got an authentic GM resonator from a parts guy in Ireland."

"We're going to the Bay area. Will the car get us there?" I ask.

“This car is better than the day she came off the assembly line. The twos of you could drive her to China and back,” he says, backhanding mustard off his chin.

“I better take the car for a test drive, just to be sure,” Mom says.

The man eyes me up and down. “You leavin’ your daughter as collateral?”

“I’ll be accompanying Mom.” I open my wallet to the man. “Take a credit card. Take two or three.” My feet itch to get off the snake-infested ground, also a true haven for scorpions and tarantulas and speed-of-light lizards. I hate the desert.

The man fingers the American Express Card, stops, pulls out the MasterCard. “I forget. I don’t take American Express.”

Mom starts the car, and the rumble of the engine thrums against a raw place in my heart. I blink away the tears.

“Let’s go,” she says and slides the transmission into drive. Her chin trembles. We turn onto a road that curves through a subdivision of tightly packed stucco houses with postage-stamp lawns. The green is startling through the shimmer of heat off the pavement.

I ask, “Are you okay?”

“I will be.”

“Is it the money?”

“Memories, mostly.”

She slows for a dip, and the Pontiac rolls like a boat riding a swell. The car is heavy, substantial, nothing like the Prius—a bantamweight by comparison—I drive between our home in Carpenteria and Westmont College in Santa Barbara.

“You were conceived in this car,” she says.

I glance toward the backseat and shiver. “So, how’s she handling? I remember the steering being a little loose.”



“Amy, honey, we have to talk.” Her hand covers her mouth to staunch a flow of emotion. I watch her, not breathing. Her chest rises and falls. “I know you’re expecting a weekend of pampering at Bodega Hot Springs. That’s what I promised, and more than anyone I know, you deserve to be treated like a queen. You persevered, Amy. You found the car. But, Amy, *fófa*, we aren’t going to the spa.” She kneads the steering wheel. “That was a lie.”

“Mom? What? You’re scaring me. You’re not sick, are you?”

Her eyes glisten with tears. “The time has come to set some things right from my past.” She glances at me before fixing her gaze out the windshield. “I’m not proud of this, but I stole this car from your father years ago. He left me no choice. I’ve lived in a state of terror all of these years. Every time the phone rang, I feared the police had found me. A knock on the door? Who else? A detective and his partner. You know, like *Dragnet*? I lived in dread of opening the newspaper to find a picture of the Pontiac and me with a caption, ‘Have you seen this car or the car thief named María Francisca Montiero Santos?’”

No one is more melodramatic than Mom.

“You’re not making sense. You were married. As his widow, the car became yours.”

“The truth is . . . we were never actually married.”

“Never?”

Her knuckles pale as she grips the steering wheel. “And he isn’t exactly dead either. He’s retired and living in Sleepy Eye.”

My high school American history teacher, Mrs. Lund, had once told a story about a World War II paratrooper who had been hidden away in occupied Holland by a seemingly benevolent Dutchman. The paratrooper lived behind painted windows, knowing only what his host chose to reveal. Maybe it had been an episode of *The Twilight Zone*, the one with a very young Robert Redford.

All the paratrooper knew to be true about the world had been the fabrication of his host. Finally released, the paratrooper walked a narrow, cobbled street filled with housewives carrying bundles and merchants arranging produce. Children chased each other, laughing and taunting. This wasn't the war-savaged scene his benefactor had described. Bewildered, the paratrooper stumbled along trying to reconstruct his reality.

I know how he felt.

"You should pull over," I say.

She continues driving down the middle of the street. "Maybe I should have told you sooner."

Now I'm angry, which makes me cry. "*Maybe?* I thought my father was dead. I cried for him. I prayed for him. When other little girls asked for ponies, I pleaded with Santa Claus to bring my daddy back. And you think *maybe* you should have told me?" Tears flow down Mom's cheek too. Wounding her deflates my anger. "Please park the car."

The front wheel jumps the curb, and the car lurches to a stop. Mom lets the car idle in front of a fire hydrant as she flexes her hands on the steering wheel. "I wanted to tell you, and I will tell you everything, but I'm sure that greasy man—"

"I think his name is Bob."

"Bob *schmob*." Mom sighs.

My penchant for detail drives her crazy. Too bad. "Mom, please . . ."

"Okay, okay. Chuck and I were snorkeling in this amazing place—"

"I know this part. Tell me about my father and why you're buying this car."

"I was getting to that."



From the crease between her eyes, I know I will hear the story she wants to tell, not necessarily the one I want to hear. Hasn't it always been this way?

"Anyway, we were snorkeling in this amazing spot on the Coromandel Peninsula on New Zealand's north island called Gemstone Bay. Oh, Amy, the kelp swayed with the surge of the water. I startled a manta ray, followed a red moki as he swam through the amber forest. A whole new world—"

"Stop! Tell me about my father."

"*Querida*, please don't cry." She reaches for me, and I lean into her shoulder.

Good heavens, I'm fifty years old! I sit up. "Mom, tell your story."

She hands me a wad of tissues from her purse. "There I was, thousands of miles from home. I hadn't thought about the Pontiac since . . . I just haven't thought of the car in a long time. And there I was, immersed in amazing beauty, and God spoke to me. He said, 'It's time to right a wrong, Francisca. Take the car back to Carl.'"

"Carl? Who's Carl?"

"Carl Swenson is your father." Mom shifts into drive and heads back the way we came. "We have a long journey before us. We'll have lots of time to talk."

"Then who's Fabio Casimiro?"

She winced and expelled a long breath. "I was scared. The sisters asked for the father's name. You don't know what being pregnant and unmarried was like back then. A widow was respected, treated with great tenderness. A single mother was a slut, a whore. I'd made up a name for your father. I used the name to curse him every time my heart dared to long for him. The name isn't so nice."

"But nice enough to give to your daughter?"

“I had no choice.” Mom pats my knee. “It’s not that bad. *Fabio* means bean and *Casimiro* means great destroyer. Carl, he . . . he . . .”

“He what?”

She shrugs. “Carl farted a lot. I swear he could fart on command. Once he asked me to pull his finger, and when I laughed, he asked me to go for a drive.”

All I knew about my father was what Mom had told me, that he was handsome, sweet, and very, very smart. She convinced me he couldn’t wait to be a papa. My throat tightens around this new truth. My real father wooed Mom, age sixteen, with a coarse joke. The muscle that connects my left eyebrow to the back of my head cramps. Although doing so won’t stop the migraine, I knead my aching eyebrow anyway. “I was really looking forward to Bodega Hot Springs.”

“Maybe next year for your birthday, *querida*.”

“This long trip you’re talking about. Tell me we’re not going to Sleepy Eye.”

Mom sighs.

What makes her think I would want to meet a man known for passing gas, a man who falls a billion miles short of the father I dreamed about, a man whose lasting contribution was DNA for a large nose and unruly hair?

I don’t think so.

“Mom, I’m sorry, but I don’t have time for a road trip down memory lane. Remember, I’m the faculty rep for new-student orientation this year. I have to be in Santa Barbara by Tuesday. Sam expects me back Sunday afternoon. Micole hasn’t registered for classes. And Rocket—”

“We’ll be back in plenty of time for student orientation. We fly out of Minneapolis on Sunday. I called Sam. He’s quite capable of helping Micole with her classes. And the dog? Really, Amy, would you put your dog’s well-being above your own flesh and blood?”



“You called Sam? He knows about this? Does this Carl Swenson person know we’re coming?”

“Not exactly.”

By all rights, I should demand Mom return me to the airport where we rendezvoused only hours earlier. But I’m curious. More than that, seeing my father is a clarion call I must answer. Is this the same irresistible urge that pulls a female salmon from the Gulf of Alaska to hightail it back to her birthplace, a stream too shallow to cover her hump? Ravenous bears. Fishermen. Mutilating leaps up rocky waterfalls. She’s doomed. At the end, her flayed flesh dances in the current as she gulps her last breaths of life. Who can explain such a drive toward self-annihilation?

Not me.

Back at Bob’s Classic Cars & More, Mom charms Bob down two thousand dollars because of a crack in the slide-down Plexiglas sun visor. “You best write that check before I change my mind,” he says. “This baby was headed for Hot August Nights in Reno. Collectors pay top dollar for workmanship there.”

Mom uses the Pontiac’s hood to write the check while I return to Bob’s air-conditioned office to retrieve our suitcases. I’m tempted to call Sam to come get me. The telephone hangs on the wall behind a glass counter filled with trophies, all topped with facsimiles of classic cars. I work to untwist the telephone cord. The receiver spins wildly.

What good would come of calling Sam?

My husband is Mom’s coconspirator, convinced, no doubt, the trip into my past will be good for me, a kind of slap to the face to break the cycle of hysteria Mom ignites in me. I hang the handset up hard, and the mouthpiece breaks free of the receiver to dangle by two slender wires. Out on the lot, Bob eyes Mom up and down while leaning against the Pontiac. I repair the broken receiver with two

Band-aids from my purse. I write a hasty note of apology on a gum wrapper and prop it on the telephone.

The glare from the Pontiac, resplendent with its chrome and garish exterior, makes me wince behind my sunglasses, and the muscle over my left eye cramps again. My migraine medication lies deep inside a suitcase. I don't remember which one. Mom helps me lift the suitcases into the trunk. Bob chews his lip, looking too much like a man rethinking a decision.

Mom loads her matching leopard-print valise and garment bag on top of my tattered suitcases. "Come on, Amy. We're burning daylight."

"I need to use the restroom."

She slides behind the wheel. "For goodness' sake, we'll stop at the McDonald's."

I hesitate.

Mom starts the car and revs the engine.

I talk to Bob over the roof of the car. "You did a great job on the car. Thank you. I'm sure your craftsmanship will mean a great deal to the original owner." But I'm not sure, not one bit. My heart races at the thought of meeting my father, then deflates at the thought of his possible indifference. This is going to be a long trip.

The McDonald's in Barstow is three railroad cars side by side like sardines in a can, a bit of architectural whimsy meant to coax people out of their air-conditioned vehicles and into the 107-degree heat. The restaurant is disappointingly warm. There's a line into the bathroom. With my bladder complaining, I take my place in line. Mom waits for me in the cool car. This is my last chance to bolt, but I wait my turn.

MOM PRESSES THE accelerator to merge with traffic traveling to Las Vegas and beyond. I wince when a semitruck and a black BMW



speed past us. Mom eases the Pontiac to 60 mph. Cars, delivery vans, and semitrucks pass us like we are parked on the shoulder.

“Can this car go any faster?”

“People drive like idiots along here. How can they be in such a hurry to lose their money? Who do they think pays for all those bright lights and fake volcanoes?”

“It’s safer to go with the flow of traffic, Mom.”

A sun-scorched Toyota full of boys wearing their caps backward pulls alongside us, and a passenger shakes his fist when the driver accelerates to pass.

“What did I tell you? They have to be going ninety.”

We pass the *Zzyzx* Road exit. Who or what would live in a place that is gray and beige and riddled with glass shards? My question goes unanswered because the road dips and disappears around a mound of rock.

I hate the desert.

Mom looks over her sunglasses at me. “You’ll never guess how you’re supposed to say that road name.”

And I hate Mom’s guessing games. “How?”

“You have to guess.”

I sigh like she has given me a difficult task to ponder, but I’m making plans to call my husband from the next gas stop. Sam will rescue me. He’s had tons of practice, but this is the craziest thing I’ve ever let Mom drag me into.

My desire to meet my biological father is waning. What’s the point? I like my life. It’s full. I have a family. My husband thinks I’m the sun, the moon, and the stars. He brings me coffee in bed every morning. I’m truly blessed. My second daughter, Micole, has emerged from the black tunnel where she cocooned during her teenage years. She’s nice. She calls me from work to hear my voice and brings me

dainty pastries when she thinks I need a boost. I could die happy, only I wouldn't see my granddaughter—the most brilliant and beautiful child on earth—grow up to be a woman. Her mother, my oldest daughter Steph, expands my heart like a balloon. She made me the woman I am today—in a good way. And then there's Graham, our youngest, born an old man and way too much like me. One of us must loosen up, or the tension will truly break us. When I talk about him like this, most assume he's a Goth with enough metal in his head to recreate the Eiffel Tower. Far from it. He's earnest and analytical, a people pleaser. But I can crush him with a single word or a sideways glance, although that has never been my intention. As the baby, he is the child whose milky breath I can still feel on my neck. I'm crazy about him. And as alike as we are, he dresses like his father, thank goodness. A good life with good people, that's what I'm living.

Who needs to add a complication to their life? Not me.

Whatever vignette Mom has imagined about meeting Carl Swenson won't come close to reality. I don't need a father. I have one. In fact, I have two—a stepfather who demonstrated amazing tenderness during my greatest disappointment; and all those times I thought I was raising my mother, the Father of the fatherless, God, watched over me. You might think I'm arrogant or mentally challenged to say so, but I believe he moved heaven and earth to my advantage. Sometimes I appreciated his involvement, and sometimes I resented him bitterly. I know this sort of yin and yang between daughter and father is normal because I've watched Sam with Micole.

Until she turned thirteen, Micole was Sam's shadow. High school introduced angry and distrustful friends. Despite our warnings, Micole was determined to help them until, not surprisingly, she became one of them. When she disappeared for over a week, Sam slept in fits and spurts. He finally found her in a downtown hotel with her



much older, devil-in-a-blue-shirt boyfriend, Cody. Sam still won't tell me what he found her doing, but decay wafted from Sam's clothes.

The Pontiac grumbles up a long grade that crests only to draw us farther into the institutional beige of the desert valley. On the far horizon, gray mountains dance in the heat. Two stripes of black asphalt score the desert with nothing resembling a destination in sight. This is Nebraska, only someone has forgotten to turn the sprinklers on. I dig a pad of paper and a pen out of my purse to write the word *Zzyzx*.

"I think you'd pronounce it *Zay-ziks*."