Betty stood awkwardly on the lawn by the tent set up for the fiftieth reunion of the class of 1963 at Hargrave College. Clutching the glass of white wine her husband Chip had fetched before joining a huddle of his frat brothers, she scanned the crowd for a familiar face. Not that she expected to find one. Hargrave had been Chip’s college. Her parents couldn’t afford the tuition at this small private institution with Ivy League aspirations and a bucolic setting in upstate New York. She’d attended the SUNY campus in Potsdam, the hometown she shared with Chip.

Chip had dutifully invited her to big events like homecoming—she was his girl, after all. Yet there was plenty she didn’t know about his Hargrave years. He’d say things like “The brothers and I did the craziest thing,” but when she asked what it was, he invariably replied, “Trust me, you don’t want to know.”

This was the first reunion they’d attended. In the intervening years, Chip had lost contact with most of his classmates except for the small group of brothers he was hanging out with now. She knew those men by name only; their annual get-together at a camp in the Adirondacks was a stag affair. Aside from Chip, the only person she’d spoken to this Friday evening was the caterer who kept asking if she wanted another mini quiche.

Betty had just accepted her fourth—or was it her fifth?—serving of the fattening little tidbits when a female voice at her elbow said, “We’ve met before, haven’t we?”

Betty peered down at a petite woman with a cap of silver hair and bright, inquisitive blue eyes. “Maybe, I’m Betty Blackburn.”

“Of course! I’ve heard so much about you from Chip.”

“Oh?” Betty stared at her.

“Ah, so what did Chip . . .?”

Trudy didn’t answer. Her eyes had shifted to the throng under the tent: the men wearing khaki pants and blue blazers, the women, cocktail dresses and heels. Betty spotted a few trophy wives in the crowd, but most of the couples looked to be in their seventies.

“I can’t believe how we’ve all aged,” Trudy said wistfully. “But with age comes accomplishment. There are more than a few movers and shakers here. Recognize him?” Trudy indicated a tall, distinguished-looking man with a full head of wavy gray hair.

Betty had no idea who he was, but she didn’t want to admit this. “Oh, it’s . . . Sorry, I can’t remember his name right now. Must be having a senior moment.”

“George Fredericks, a frequent commentator on PBS.”

No wonder Betty didn’t recognize him. She only watched the local news channel.

“He’s the emcee for the memorial event we’re having tomorrow for our deceased classmates,” Trudy said.

“In the chapel?”

“No, George wanted an informal sharing of memories rather than a religious service. We’re holding it in a meeting room at the campus center. I hope you’ll come, though you may not have known many of the people we’ll be talking about.”

“I’ll try.”

Betty’s gaze shifted to a couple who didn’t fit the almost cookie-cutter mold of the rest. The man was slight of build, without the paunch so many of the men, including Chip, sported. His face was unlined, his hair dyed a reddish brown. He wore a striped jacket with wide lapels
and striped pants. With him was a sultry blonde in a mini-skirt who looked young enough to be
his daughter, and probably was, given the strong facial resemblance between them.

“Who’s he?” Betty tilted her head in their direction.

“Park Avenue plastic surgeon.”

“And the young woman with him—his daughter?”

“Not by a long shot, though he’s done her face to look like his.”

“She was . . . a patient of his?” Betty was stunned.

“Patient turned fiancée. Did the same thing to his three other wives.”

“Really? That’s kinda—”

“Ghoulish, if you ask me,” Trudy declared in a loud voice.

The plastic surgeon turned to glare at Trudy; his fiancée looked upset. Putting his arm
around her, he guided her away.

Trudy went on to provide the low-down on others in the crowd, some of it nice, some
not-so-nice. At least she was more discreet about the not-so-nice stuff than she’d been with the
surgeon. Otherwise, Betty would have felt really uncomfortable. She already felt ungainly
standing beside Trudy. Six-feet-tall in heels, she towered over the other woman, and she was
full-figured, unlike Trudy, who looked like she could easily fit into minus sizes. Big Betty and
Tiny Trudy. Still, she was grateful to Trudy for befriending her.

“Which table are you sitting at?” Trudy asked when dinner was announced.

“We don’t have one,” Betty confessed. “We’d barely arrived when Chip went off with his
frat brothers.”

“Sit with us then.” To Betty’s amazement, Trudy marched over to where Chip remained
in a tight circle with his friends and said, “Break it up, boys, it’s time for the buffet. And Chip,
after you’ve filled your plate, bring it to that table over there, where your wife and I will be waiting.”

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After dinner, they were invited into the college president’s house for a sing-a-long with the president accompanying them on the piano. He led them in a rousing rendition of the college fight song, followed by a number of old favorites. When he stopped for a break, the plastic surgeon’s fiancée took over. She played a classical piece Betty didn’t recognize with dramatic flair. Whether drawn by her playing or her youth and beauty—Betty suspected the latter—an admiring group of men, including Trudy’s husband, gathered around her. The surgeon lounged in a nearby chair, a proprietary smile on his face.

“You’re lucky your husband has the sense to keep his distance,” Trudy said at Betty’s elbow. She gestured toward a far corner of the room where Chip was convulsed with laughter at something a brother was saying.

Betty was lucky, indeed. But it hadn’t always been that way. In high school, Chip had barely noticed her. He’d been attracted to girls like the blonde at the piano and probably would have married one of them, if it hadn’t been for his mother. Mrs. Charles Blackburn II had “discovered” Betty at an athletic awards ceremony, where Betty and Chip were both receiving trophies—she as the star of the girls’ basketball team and he as most valuable football player. The discovery led to a rather clumsy dinner invitation from Chip, along the lines of “my parents would like to meet you.” After dinner, Chip’s mother told Betty how much she and her husband had enjoyed Betty’s company. With a pointed glance at Chip, she added, “And I hope we’ll be seeing lots more of you.” From then on, Mrs. Blackburn did her best to foster a romance between them, through what combination of gentle persuasion, bribery—Chip sported a new Porsche
soon after they began dating—or outright arm-twisting Betty didn’t know. Nor did she care; she was simply happy to have her prince.

“Just look at them,” Trudy proclaimed in a voice shrill enough to be heard over the music, “a bunch of old farts making fools of themselves over that little tramp.”

The surgeon’s smile faded. His fiancee’s fingers crashed down on the keys. She left the room in tears, the surgeon hurrying after her. The men who’d been hanging around the piano, stared at Trudy with a mixture of surprise and annoyance.

Trudy shrugged. Seizing her husband by the arm, she dragged him toward the door, declaring in the same strident voice, “All that excitement isn’t good for your heart. We need to find a less stressful form of entertainment. Want me to round up your hubby, too?” she asked Betty.

Betty shook her head. She didn’t need Trudy or anyone else to ride herd on Chip. Not now nor during nearly fifty years of marriage. The only time he’d ever given her cause to worry was during that awful period right after graduation when he suddenly announced he was taking a year off to travel around the world. This had come as a bitter disappointment for Betty, since it had been more or less understood that as soon as Chip finished college, they’d get married and he’d go to work at his father’s insurance company.

“He just needs to satisfy his wanderlust,” Chip’s mother reassured her. “Then he’ll settle down, and you two can start raising a family.” Betty, however, was afraid Chip would fall under the spell of some beautiful but dangerous woman in an exotic locale who would lure him away from her.

To keep herself busy as well as make money, she took a job at a local dress shop. In her spare time she did a lot of knitting. She also wrote Chip long letters and mailed them care of the
American Express offices in the various cities on his itinerary. She never knew if he actually received her letters, because his infrequent postcards contained such generic messages as “Having a ball” or “Wish you were here.” Still, she saved them all in a scrapbook she labeled “Chip’s Wanderlust Year.”

Betty liked to think her devotion had been rewarded on a beautiful summer day when Chip’s mother called with exciting news. Chip had telegraphed his parents he was arriving on a Pan Am flight to John F. Kennedy Airport the following evening. Just like that. Out of the blue, he was coming home. “Did he give any reason why, all of a sudden, he’s returning?” Betty asked.

“No, but I suspect it finally hit him how homesick he is, and how much he misses us, you especially, Betty,” Mrs. Blackburn said. “Charlie and I are driving to JFK to meet him. Why don’t you come with us?”

Betty hadn’t needed any persuading to accompany Chip’s parents on the long drive from Potsdam to Queens. When they arrived at the gate, his mother nudged Betty forward so she was the first person Chip saw when he walked off the plane.

“Betty? Omigod!” He ran toward her and collapsed into her arms, shaking and sobbing, almost as if he’d come from the killing fields of Vietnam, as he might have if a heart murmur hadn’t enabled him to avoid the draft. Chip’s emotional outburst surprised Betty; he’d never acted this way before. When she asked if he was okay, he said he’d simply missed her and was glad to be back.

Betty teared up at the memory.

“What’s the matter, Honey?” Chip slipped an arm around her from behind. “I hope you’re not upset I’ve spent so much time with the boys. I haven’t seen them in awhile, and—”
“No, it’s fine,” Betty assured him.

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The next day brought a whirlwind of activities. Before Betty knew it, it was five p.m. and time for the memorial gathering. The room had begun to fill when Betty and Chip arrived, but she found seats near the front in the row just behind Trudy, who turned to smile at Betty. While they waited for the program to begin, Betty studied the flyer she’d been given. The cover read: “Gone But Not Forgotten, Hargrave College, Class of 1963.” Inside, arranged alphabetically, were small black-and-white photos of the deceased classmates that had been taken from the yearbook, beside their names and dates. Scanning the entries, Betty focused on the death dates. As she’d expected, most were fairly recent, but she found several from years ago. The men were probably casualties of Vietnam, but what about the woman who’d died in June of 1964, only a year after graduation? She stared at the accompanying photo. Sheila Logan had been an attractive girl with a blonde flip and a big smile. Betty turned to Chip. “Honey—” Chip put a finger to his mouth and pointed at George Fredericks, the PBS commentator.

“We’re gathered here to remember our classmates who couldn’t join us because death intervened,” Fredericks said. “We’ll start with those who’ve told me you’d like to share memories of a particular classmate.”

Some of the stories, especially those involving college hi-jinks, were amusing; others, poignant. When Fredericks finished with the people on his list, he said, “I’m going to read through the names of classmates nobody has spoken about yet, in the hopes someone can share a memory.”

When Fredericks reached Sheila Logan, there was silence. Betty could tell Fredericks was ready to move on when a man seated several rows behind her rose and said, “I didn’t really
know Sheila, but I couldn’t help noticing her—she was so lovely and full of life. This may sound strange, but I’ve often thought of her in the years since.” He paused to clear his throat. “I’ve thought of all the things she missed by dying so young: marriage, children, grandchildren, involvement in her community, maybe building a career, getting together with old friends, making new ones, and taking part in this reunion. That’s all.”

“Thank you, Paul,” Fredericks said, as the man sat down.

Betty found herself moved almost to tears by Paul’s words. As Fredericks spoke the name of another classmate, Chip made a choking sound, clamped his hand over his mouth, and charged from the room. Betty rushed after him, catching up when he was about to enter the men’s room. “Are you all right?”

“No,” he groaned, “something I ate at lunch, or too much . . .” She couldn’t make out the last word. The door shut behind him and she could hear him retching. She was tempted to go in, but knew he wouldn’t like it. She waited until the retching stopped and she heard a toilet flush. A minute later, Chip staggered from the restroom, wan but composed. “Think I got rid of the bad thing in my system, but I’m going back to the motel to lie down. If I’m feeling better, I’ll join you at dinner.”

He’d barely left when Trudy burst from the meeting room. “What’s wrong with Chip?” Betty repeated what Chip had told her.

“Really? I thought maybe it had to do with something else.”

“Like what?” Betty asked.

“Well, he did become ill right after Paul spoke about Sheila.”

“So?”
“You know what happened to her, don’t you?” Trudy’s bright, inquisitive eyes bore into Betty.

_No, but I bet you’re going to tell me._

Applause issued from the meeting room, then the noise of scraping chairs. The gathering was breaking up.

“Sheila was murdered,” Trudy stage-whispered. “In Bombay. Wasn’t Chip—”

Before Trudy could finish the sentence, Betty broke away, stumbling into the crowd leaving the meeting room. “Sorry!” she mumbled to someone she bumped into.

“Are you all right?” It was Paul, the man who’d spoken about Sheila.

“Yes—no. I just—”

“Why don’t you sit down?” Paul steered Betty to a nearby seat and sat next to her. His brown eyes behind horn-rimmed glasses were filled with concern.

“I don’t know what came over me,” Betty murmured.

“Occasions like this can stir up a lot of emotions,” Paul said.

“I liked what you said about Sheila Logan,” Betty blurted. “It was very moving.”

“Thanks.”

They were silent a few moments, while Betty tried to decide whether to ask Paul for more information about Sheila—information she might have gotten from Trudy, except she didn’t trust Trudy not to gossip about their conversation. Paul, however, seemed like a sensitive, caring person.

“I heard she was murdered,” Betty ventured.

“Yes,” Paul said with a sigh.

“What happened?”
“Another stewardess found her strangled in her hotel room in Bombay.”

“That’s awful. She became . . . a stewardess?”

“Sheila had an adventurous spirit and wanted to see the world. After graduation she went to work for Pan Am.”

“Was her murder . . . ever . . . solved?” Betty had trouble getting the words out.

Paul shook his head sadly. “As far as I know, it wasn’t.”

“Too bad.”

“Yes.” Paul’s tone was somber. Another silence fell between them. Finally Paul took her hand. “Ready to face the world?”

“Uh-huh.” She’d face it all right—just not Trudy. At the cocktail party, Betty surrounded herself with other people, moving to a different group whenever Trudy approached. When Chip joined her for dinner, Betty made sure they sat at a table as far from Trudy as possible. She managed a few pleasantries with her table mates before the questions roiling in her brain took over.

Had Chip been involved with Sheila Logan and taken his wanderlust year so they could meet in various places around the globe? Then they’d had a falling-out and he’d . . . ? Betty wouldn’t allow herself to even think the word. Unbidden, an image swam into view. It was the last page of her “Chip’s Wanderlust Year” scrapbook, where she’d pasted the telegram from Bombay, telling his parents he was coming home the next day. Betty could see it as clearly as if she held the book in her hands. And there was the date: June 19, 1964, the same day Sheila died.

Oh dear God! Blood roared in Betty’s brain, so loud she was sure others could hear it. She glanced furtively around the room to see if anyone had noticed her distress. Her eyes met Trudy’s. Betty looked quickly away. She needed to calm down. She didn’t want to betray
herself, as Chip had earlier—at least as far as Trudy was concerned. Betty took several deep
breaths and let them out slowly. She looked at Chip and saw the man she’d always loved. Could
something that had happened years ago erase everything that had come after? All the truly good
years of their marriage when Chip had shown himself to be a devoted husband and father. Betty
knew Chip hadn’t loved her at first, but she believed he’d grown to love her and had worked
hard to make their marriage a success. That was what mattered, wasn’t it?

Betty stole another glance at Trudy, now having an animated conversation with a woman
seated next to her. Trudy’s eyes darted back and forth between this woman and Betty and Chip’s
table. At one point, she even stabbed a finger at Chip. The other woman’s mouth popped open
with surprise.

Betty’s gorge rose. Trudy was spreading ugly rumors about Chip just as she had about the
plastic surgeon. She wasn’t simply a gossip, but a scandalmonger, who didn’t care whose lives
she destroyed with a flick of her malicious tongue. She could’ve begun to connect the dots
between Chip and Sheila before the reunion. Then she’d befriended Betty in the hopes Betty
would provide the missing links. Trudy was like a dog, digging and digging, throwing more and
more dirt into the air until it blocked the light. She had to be stopped.

Betty scrawled a message on the back of a napkin. Excusing herself, she dropped the
napkin by Trudy’s feet as she walked past.

The lights were turned down in the room where the memorial gathering had been held.
Betty made her way through the dimness to the far side. Moments later, the door cracked open,
and Trudy’s sylph-like figure slipped inside. “Betty?” she whispered in a conspiratorial tone.

“Oh over here.”

“This is about Sheila?” Trudy asked, scurrying toward her.
“Yes.”

When Trudy was inches away, Betty drew herself up to her full height, taking advantage of the difference in their sizes.

“Chip was in Bombay when Sheila was killed, wasn’t he?” Trudy’s eyes glittered and her voice vibrated with excitement.

“No,” Betty said firmly, looming over Trudy. “Chip never even went to India. What makes you think he did?”

“Someone told me, I don’t remember who.” Trudy’s voice quavered.

“Whoever it was, was wrong.”

“But—” The word came out a squeak, but it was a protest nonetheless.

Betty clamped her hands on Trudy’s shoulders, holding her in place. “It’s nice that Sheila was remembered today. But she’s been dead for nearly fifty years now. She’s gone, Trudy. Gone and best forgotten.”

“But . . .” Fainter this time.

Betty’s fingers closed around Trudy’s neck, gripping tightly.

Trudy gurgled.

Betty applied more pressure. “Got that?” Trudy’s chin jerked down in a desperate gag of agreement.

“Good,” Betty said. “Now, go back and enjoy the rest of the evening.”

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“I hope this weekend was fun for you,” Chip said later that night, as they relaxed on folding chairs watching a brilliant display of fireworks light up the sky over the quad.

“Yes,” Betty replied. “Interesting, too.”
“Oh?” He turned toward her. “What was so interesting?”

“Trust me.” She smiled. “You don’t want to know.”