

Getting Back



CINDY RIZZO

Chapter 1

March 2008

ELIZABETH MORRISON TIGHTENED THE GRIP on her Blackberry as she held it to her ear, feeling her fingers cramp around the curved edges.

“And I assume *I’m* the last one to find this out, aren’t I, Margaret?”

“Ah, the Queen Elizabeth voice, how I’ve missed it.”

“You deserve it. You engineered this whole thing behind my back.”

Elizabeth eased into her leather desk chair, trying to hold on to her anger, but feeling instead as if she was going to fall apart.

“Sweetie,” cooed Margaret, “it’s been thirty years. Could it be that you’re still pining away for Ruth Abramson?”

Elizabeth breathed out audibly. “Certainly not! And that isn’t the point. I just feel... I don’t know, like I’ve been ambushed.”

It was a diversion, chastising her best friend—or the woman she had thought was her best friend—for taking it upon herself to invite Ruth to be the class luncheon speaker at their thirtieth reunion. But in reality, all her emotions were focused on just one thing—the prospect of seeing Ruth for the first time since college.

“Elizabeth, you run one of the most successful publishing companies in the world. You have editors trembling in your wake, agents fawning over you hoping for the slightest nod of your

head. Surely you can deal with this. Maybe it's time to face things head on?"

"Why didn't you come to me when this was just an idea, before she agreed to speak?"

"Because *I'm* chairing the reunion committee and I didn't feel I had to clear all of our plans with you."

"Oh come on, Margaret, I'm not just anybody. I'm a trustee of Fowler. Besides, you know very well that Ruth and I have been studiously avoiding one another all this time. I don't even see why she would agree in the first place. She hasn't set foot back on campus since graduation."

Margaret's voice was quiet, almost a whisper. "Truth is, we begged her. She's a US district court judge, the second most accomplished member of our class, after you of course, Your Majesty."

Elizabeth knew the trajectory of Ruth's career quite well. She'd been following it for years. She closed her eyes and shook her head slowly. A groan escaped. Suddenly weary and unsettled, she was unable to conjure up the anger from just a few minutes ago.

"You know, she didn't want to do it," said Margaret. "We waited weeks for her to confirm."

Elizabeth rolled forward in her chair and rested her head in one hand.

"Why now, I wonder?"

"Maybe she thinks thirty years is long enough."

With the phone still pressed to her ear, Elizabeth sat slumped at her desk. Margaret's news had completely unsettled her. What could Ruth possibly want after all this time?

Elizabeth knew from mutual acquaintances that Ruth had only been dating women since her divorce from Bennett Miller in 1985. She wondered if Ruth had ever come out to her parents while they were still alive, especially her father, who'd always

been her main concern. Main obsession, really. The Great Leon Abramov, national hero and savior of Russian Jewry. Elizabeth had cut his obituary out of the *Times* back in 1998 and placed it in the secret scrapbook along with photos from the funeral, attended, of course, by President Clinton and every important Jewish leader in the country. The paper had included a picture of Ruth flanked by her two children, a son and a daughter. She looked tired and drawn but not, Elizabeth had noticed, grief stricken. As she'd carefully smoothed the newspaper photo onto the sticky page of the scrapbook, Elizabeth had speculated whether Ruth could even be a bit relieved that the man who'd controlled so much of her life was finally gone. Or maybe the relief and the hope it left in its wake had been Elizabeth's?

A loud staccato buzzing propelled her back to the present.

"Ms. Morrison?"

She pressed the hands-free button on her office phone.

"Yes?"

"Reese Stanley is here for your three o'clock."

Elizabeth hesitated for a second. Reese. She'd realize something was wrong in a heartbeat if Elizabeth let her walk in now.

"I need a minute or two," she said, leaning over to the speaker on her desk.

She stood and straightened her posture, shoulders back, head high. Checking her face in a compact mirror, she freshened her lipstick and made sure nothing looked smudged or worn. Satisfied at last, she called up her business voice—the one she knew they all referred to as "Queen Elizabeth"—pressed the button on the phone, and said, "Have Reese come in."

Hours later, as Elizabeth scanned her office to make sure she had everything she needed before heading home, she once again realized that the wonders of technology meant she no longer had

to stuff quarterly sales report binders and marketing data into a briefcase to prepare for a night's work. Now everything was on a file server that her chief tech officer assured her was secure and "hacker proof" as he called it.

"I sure hope so," she whispered with a sigh as she put her arms through the sleeves of her camel hair coat. The days were getting warmer now that it was nearing the end of March and soon she'd be able to switch to her lighter Burberry. April would begin more than two months of the New York spring social season—an unending string of charity benefits and business opening celebrations that someone in her position had to attend. It was exhausting and only worth it if she could pick up a tidbit of information here or there about the industry. What were her competitors up to? Were they ready to partner with Amazon the same way Morrison Publishing had? She thought of these outings as hunter-gatherer expeditions in which it was her job to bring back sustenance from the wild that her company could feed on to stay alive.

Queen Elizabeth the Cavewoman, she thought, slinging her Coach bag over her shoulder. As she reached for the handle on her office door, someone opened it from the other side.

"Ms. Morrison, I'm so sorry. Excuse me."

It was Ana, the woman who cleaned her office. She smiled at the young woman, dressed in jeans and a light blue smock shirt.

"I didn't realize you were still here. I can come back and clean later."

"I was just leaving, and besides, I wanted to ask you if you'd followed through on requesting those tuition benefits we made available when we hired all the cleaning staff away from that dreadful company you used to work for."

Ana pushed a large plastic trashcan on wheels into the room. "Yes, I'm going to start at Queensboro Community College in the fall."

Elizabeth took a step toward the door. “Good. Keep me posted on your progress, all right?”

“Yes, and thank you, Ms. Morrison.”

Her finance chief had thought she’d lost her mind when she announced that they would bring on the cleaning staff as Morrison employees. But Elizabeth couldn’t stand by and do nothing knowing how these people, most of whom had just arrived in the United States, were being treated. No health insurance or paid sick days. It was almost barbaric.

As she pushed through the revolving door of the building, she spotted Max, her driver, in the Lincoln Town Car ahead. The bracing night air hit her face at the same time as the realization as to why she’d become so concerned about the welfare of the cleaning staff.

It was Ruth.

Ruth had always tipped waitresses more than twenty percent. She’d bought cupcakes for the dorm’s janitor and had given the cafeteria workers Christmas tree ornaments before the campus closed down for its winter break. Ruth had taught her to care about people whose jobs placed them on the lower echelons of society. And Elizabeth had held fast to that lesson, even as she rose to become one of the country’s top women executives. She wasn’t sure why it continued to matter so much to her, but it did.

Now she had to contend with the knowledge that she and Ruth would once again be face-to-face back at Fowler, the same place where they’d fallen in love and spent almost three blissful years together. The reunion on campus in western Massachusetts was in early June and Elizabeth had no idea how she was going to get through the next few months.

“Busy day, Ms. Morrison?” asked Max. His usual greeting.

“Yes,” she replied as she leaned back on the soft leather seat. “Among other things.”

Her relationship with sleep was an ambivalent one. Some nights it was a dutiful servant, carrying out its responsibilities of providing her with a needed rest. Other times it was a cruel overlord, summoning disturbing, fitful dreams usually brought on by some stressful event at work. With the advent of online book buying and the growing influence of Amazon.com as an almost monopolistic vendor, the entire publishing industry's business model had been turned on its head. The vendor was now calling the shots and squeezing Morrison Publishing's profit margin to a thin shadow of its former self. Elizabeth spent many nights lying awake, thinking about how the company could navigate its way through these uncharted waters. She was almost wistful for the days when all she'd have to agonize over was a negative review of a promising book or a sudden spike in the number of hardback returns.

When she was most agitated by the state of her industry, the dreams of her young adulthood would return. They'd start with Ruth bent over a desk writing and then would switch suddenly to a view of her sprawled out on their bed, the long dark hair of Ruth's college years falling past her shoulders, her body relaxed and inviting. Elizabeth would approach her and Ruth would smile and sit up. One minute she was in Elizabeth's arms, a split second later she was standing under a chuppah with Bennett Miller at her wedding. Elizabeth would watch them from a distance, unable to speak or move as a rabbi asked whether there was anyone who would object. The scene, so reminiscent of Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*, was almost laughable, except for the fact that in Elizabeth's case, Ruth did not leave her new husband and go running off in her wedding dress to escape with Elizabeth on a city bus. Instead, Ruth stayed right where she was, distant and unreachable, while Elizabeth tried to scream but could not.

The wedding dreams weren't even the worst ones. It was almost a relief to wake up to the knowledge that her stress level

was not yet at the point where the more frightening dream would take hold. But inevitably some issue or event would trigger it. Last time, it had been on the night before she'd left for Seattle to negotiate the original agreement with Amazon. Morrison Publishing had broken ranks with all of the other large publishers and bet its survival on making peace with the devil. Her publishing colleagues wanted to close ranks together and oppose what they viewed as an unfair pricing scheme. But Elizabeth instead decided that Morrison would strike out on its own and negotiate an independent deal with the online behemoth.

As she lay in bed the night before the trip across country, all of her fears and apprehensions about what she was about to do jostled the dormant giant of her nightmare into action. In her sleep she was visited by the imposing figure of Leon Abramov, Ruth's father, who stood over her and pronounced her sentence. She was exiled to Siberia, interned in a prison camp where Pushkin, Pasternak, and Solzhenitsyn turned their backs as guards forced her to stand naked in the cold.

In an effort to make sense of all this, she'd read a self-help book the company had published a while back. Its author asserted with some confidence that an individual who appeared to you in a dream wasn't necessarily that person, but merely a stand-in for various aspects of yourself. But that theory couldn't really apply to her dreams since it was she who always appeared as the ultimate symbol of her suffering.

Fortunately, the worst of these nightmares intruded only on rare occasions when her waking hours were overtaken by events she was not yet able to control. When life proceeded in predictable ways, she could keep the dreams, as well as thoughts of Ruth, at bay.

But on the night following Margaret's call, she was much too anxious to even entertain the possibility of sleep. Instead, she pushed through the work she'd saved for home and then

spent a little time catching up on industry blogs and her top authors' social media posts. She was glad to see the uptick in online visibility by her people, something Morrison Publishing had been encouraging them to do for a while. They'd even created a webinar on self-promotion strategies for their authors. If the company was going to survive past 2008, it would need to nudge its authors, including the most reluctant, to become active participants in the brave, new virtual world.

In spite of her attempts to distract herself, throughout the evening she was regularly preoccupied with thoughts of Ruth. Would she really follow through on Margaret's invitation and attend the reunion? Did any vestige of the sweet, kind young woman Elizabeth remembered remain? Or had Ruth become hard and patronizing like her father? The warm, sensual person of their three years together, the eager student of feminism and all things lesbian, was she still there after thirty years?

It was ridiculous to expect someone to remain the same as they were three decades ago. Elizabeth herself had changed. She was no longer innocent and open, the way she'd been in college. Being the boss suited her. She liked taking charge and always exhibiting confidence, while keeping her worries and doubts confined to nights alone at home. Very few people were permitted to see that side of her. From time to time, she'd open up a bit with Margaret, who as a business owner herself, understood the pressures of making hard choices.

But she thought it prudent to hide her persistent interest in Ruth Abramson from everyone. Her ongoing efforts to keep tabs on Ruth's life, greatly facilitated these last ten years by the advent of the Internet, had taken the form of a bad habit that was impossible to stop. Like sneaking a cigarette on the back porch or buying the *National Enquirer* at a newsstand and hiding it in your desk drawer.

Elizabeth sat in her living room armchair sipping the sherry she'd received as a gift from the head of the company's Spanish subsidiary, hoping it might eventually get her to sleep. But she couldn't even muster a yawn. Instead, she kept picturing Ruth standing at a lectern in the alumni dining room, addressing the members of their class. Ruth and Elizabeth would be back at Fowler yet not together. She couldn't make sense of that thought, even though she knew it was the truth. Maybe it would be best to confront who they'd been back then in order to accept the reality of who each of them had become.

She rose from her chair and went to her desk. At the bottom of her file drawer, under a stack of papers was the scrapbook; her own version of the hidden *National Enquirer*. She sat at her desk with the unopened book before her. Would this little trip down memory lane help her sort things out or just make them worse? What she dreaded most were those first few pages. She normally skipped them when she had something to add, opening the book to the items from the last few years. She'd insert whatever new photo or article she'd found, forcing herself to focus on the present and ignore the past. But with the prospect of finally seeing Ruth, maybe it was worth reviewing the entire history from the beginning and, by facing it boldly, reduce the power it seemed to have over her.

She glared at the closed book as if it was a bothersome underling. *You're not really a scrapbook, you know. You're merely a photo album covered in faux light brown leather and decorated with a faux gold border.* The words of Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz* came back to her.

"You have no power here. Be gone, before somebody drops a house on you!"

She smiled to herself and opened the book to the first off-white page covered in a clear plastic sheet that could be pulled away from its sticky cardboard backing. Taking a deep breath,

she looked down at the blank page, deliberately left that way as a safety buffer so she could avoid being suddenly confronted with the past. The next pages contained all the old college photos. She'd debated about whether to destroy them, but found that she was unable to do so. They reflected back the happiest time in her life. If they were gone, she'd have nothing.

Unable to trust herself not to one day rip them up in a fit of anger after a particularly bad Siberian prison dream, she'd made a full set of duplicates and gave them to Margaret, pretending they were the originals. It was far better for her friends to think she had exiled images of Ruth from her midst instead of knowing the truth: she was incapable of letting them go.

The sherry slid down her throat with a slight burn. Tonight was the time for confronting. She grabbed on to the edge of the blank page and slowly turned it.

And there was Ruth, standing by that oak tree behind the student union, her hand on the trunk, a big smile on her face. Her dark, curly hair was tied back in this picture, even though Elizabeth always encouraged her to wear it out draped over her shoulders, reaching down to her breasts. Her pale skin contrasted with the hair and her dark brown eyes—eyes that had immediately captured Elizabeth and later held her attention as they lay in bed for hours gazing at one another and touching, always touching.

Then there were pictures of the two of them, among friends and on their own. She shifted her attention from Ruth to herself, dressed in baggy, faded jeans and a tight-fitting sweater with pink, green, and white horizontal stripes. *Ugh*, she thought, *how could I have ever worn such a thing?* Luckily her taste in fashion had improved over time. But even with the wretched clothing, she was able to notice with longing her formerly smooth skin and the silky texture of her light brown hair, now dulled by years of coloring and highlighting. Would Ruth even find her attractive now?

She crossed her arms, laid them over the open book, and lowered her head onto them. Ruth had had over twenty years to contact her: twenty years of being on her own and dating women. But she had not come back. Instead, it seemed she had dismissed their intense connection, their love, as a mere college dalliance. Clearly, Ruth had moved on. Why couldn't Elizabeth?

After a week of very little sleep, Elizabeth was no longer able to hide the drawn look on her face and her distracted manner. Even on the nights when she'd managed to drop off for a little while, she was inevitably jolted awake by the worst of the horrible dreams.

The young Ruth resting in her arms is abruptly transformed into the grown-up Ruth who walks away without a word, leaving behind her son and daughter who stand pointing and laughing at Elizabeth. The sudden onset of paralysis leaves her unable to use her phone to call for help as she is carted off to yet another Russian prison.

Her appearance was betraying signs of stress, even with the drops she'd used to clear her bloodshot eyes and the makeup she'd applied to put some color in her cheeks. But she knew from the looks she was getting at the office that people had noticed a change. And that just increased tension all around.

Because she was the CEO of Morrison Publishing, the staff was always watching her for the slightest sign that would belie her mood, assuming that any problem she was having was related to the fortunes of the company. So now, looking so haggard, she imagined that the rumors were flying. She'd have to ask Communications to prepare some kind of positive announcement to calm the waters. *Publishers Weekly* would soon carry reviews of the summer releases and Elizabeth knew there would be a few blockbusters among them. Joe Donovan's new thriller was solid and the political tell-all of Ginny Lewiston, the disgraced

senator's wife, was sure to fly off the shelves. Good news was on the horizon and surely morale would rebound. She wanted to guard against any inclination of her senior staff to update their resumes.

"Reese Stanley is here for your three o'clock."

Well, no point in delaying the inevitable.

"Show her in."

Her executive assistant opened the door. Reese, dressed in her usual skirt and sweater set, the new uniform of the young professional woman, was shown in.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Morrison," she said as she took the seat opposite Elizabeth's desk.

The greeting to "Ms. Morrison" was for the benefit of others in the office. Once the door was closed she became Elizabeth.

She surveyed Reese as she settled in with her usual notepad and blue pen. Under Elizabeth's tutelage, her protégé's career was coming along nicely. Even early on as a student intern from Fowler College, Reese had immediately shown promise, first as an acquisitions assistant and then as a junior editor. Elizabeth had personally mentored her with these weekly meetings and eventually she'd become the company's youngest developmental editor. Now in her thirties with a Pulitzer Prize-winning author in her portfolio, Reese had been promoted to senior editor.

With her head slightly tilted to one side, her mouth turned down, and soft brown eyes staring at Elizabeth, Reese's face belied her worry.

Elizabeth decided to avoid the silent questions that Reese was asking. "Where are you at with Robin Greene's new book?"

That might do it. While still an entry-level acquisitions assistant, Reese had discovered this talented, young writer who'd gone on to be called "the voice of her generation" by the *New York Times* and to write a string of best-selling and well-reviewed novels.

They were both quiet for a moment. Clearly Reese was not going to be diverted from her agenda of concern.

Elizabeth sighed and threw her hands up in defeat. “Out with it, Reese. You might as well say what everyone else around here is thinking.”

Reese crossed her legs. Her voice was quiet. “What’s wrong, Elizabeth? Are you sick or did something happen?”

“I’m not sick, unless you define it to mean exhausted and stressed.”

Reese’s eyes were wide. “So?”

“I’ve received some news and it’s sent me into a bit of a tailspin. It’s about the reunion in June.”

Reese crinkled her nose. “Your thirtieth?”

Elizabeth nodded.

“You know,” said Reese, “I’m going to be there as a member of the alumni council. I volunteered to help out.” She smiled. “Of course it doesn’t hurt that I have a passing interest in this cute professor.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. Reese had a perfectly nice girlfriend who she’d been with since high school: an attorney. But they had what she referred to as a semi-open relationship. Each of them could play around when they were apart for conferences or other trips, but never while they were both at home or in the same city. Upon first hearing this, Elizabeth had quipped, “So what you’re saying, Reese, is that your relationship is not so much open as it is ajar.”

Who knew? Maybe that kind of thing kept a long-term relationship alive. Elizabeth was far from an expert on such matters. All of her attempts at relationships had fallen short, most of them lasting less than a year, except for Gretchen, and of course, Ruth.

“Well, if you’re helping out at the reunion in addition to your, uh,” she deliberately cleared her throat, “extracurricular

activities, then you'll be witness to it all, along with everyone else. Lucky you."

Again, the questioning look. "Witness to all of what?"

"The worst part of my past coming back to haunt me. I've never told you about Ruth Abramson, have I?"

Reese shook her head.

Elizabeth usually reserved their personal discussions for lunches or dinners and kept their weekly meetings focused on what Reese needed to learn about the business aspects of the company—sales, operations, finance. Even though Reese was only sixteen years her junior, Elizabeth had come to regard her as the daughter she'd never had. And so she'd begun to groom Reese as her successor.

"Ruth was my first love. We were together three years at Fowler. I know it sounds like it was just some college romance but you have to believe me that it was much more than that. We were everything to one another. Ruth was the only person with whom I've ever felt I could be with forever. But she decided she had to obey her father and marry the boy he chose for her."

Reese leaned forward in her chair. "Why?" she asked.

Elizabeth picked up a pen and gestured with it. "The easy answer is rooted in her family's story, which I'll tell you one day. They were refugees. The more difficult answer to your question, Reese, is something I've never quite been able to figure out." She sighed and slapped the pen back on the desk. "I haven't seen her for over thirty years and now I've learned she's the class speaker at our reunion."

Reese was wide-eyed. "Elizabeth, I—I don't know what to say. I had no idea something like this had ever happened to you. Is that why you've never settled down with anybody?" Her hand flew to her mouth. "Oh God," she whispered. "I had no right to ask that. I'm sorry."

Elizabeth took a deep breath and let it out. "I honestly have no idea why I've never settled down. It's not like Ruth has been

a constant issue for me. Months have gone by without a thought of her.” She pointedly did not mention the scrapbook. “I do hear things from time to time, but my friends from Fowler usually go out of their way not to talk about her. And she’s never had any interest in being an active alumna. Until now.”

She stood and stretched to her full five-foot-seven-inch height, tired but relieved to be moving her body.

“I wish I knew why she’s suddenly so keen to come back to Fowler. She must know I’ll be there.”

Reese was still seated, apparently not ready to let the conversation end.

“I don’t really care about figuring out Ruth’s motives,” she said. “I’m concerned about you and why this is affecting you so strongly. You’re just not yourself.”

“I’m well aware. I haven’t slept but a few hours a night, and it’s never a restful sleep. There are these dreams.”

“Dreams?”

Elizabeth closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. “Yes,” she said with a slight groan. She gave Reese a quick summary.

“A prison camp in Siberia? Why?”

“I told you her family came here as refugees. They were from Russia. Leon Abramov was her father. Do you know who he is? You may be too young.”

Reese shook her head. “No. Who is he?”

“He was very active in getting Jews out of the Soviet Union where they were being persecuted. When Ruth was a teenager, her family was smuggled out of Russia and her father made it his life’s work to help those unable to escape. He was always in the papers. When he died, the president attended his funeral.”

“Wow. So that’s where the whole Siberia thing comes from?”

“I would imagine that’s the origin of it, yes.”

Reese sat with her eyes closed, hands pressed together in front of her face, her thumbs locked under her chin. It was a

pose Elizabeth had seen many times in meetings with authors when sticky editing situations were being discussed. She stood watching, waiting out Reese's thought process, wondering what she could be mulling over.

Finally, her eyes opened.

"Elizabeth, the reunion is almost three months away. How are you going to cope from now 'til then?"

"I honestly wish I knew. I keep hoping I'm just having a short-term reaction to the fact that not only will I see Ruth again, but it'll be back at Fowler. I want to be able to assimilate this information and go on with my daily life. But I haven't quite figured out how."

"Would you consider therapy?"

"*Psychotherapy?*"

Reese nodded. "Haven't you ever?"

"No, I have not," she knew she was using the Queen Elizabeth voice, but Reese's suggestion had unnerved her.

A chuckle escaped from Reese. Elizabeth admitted to herself that she deserved it.

"I'm just suggesting that you see somebody who can support you through this so you can do things like sleep and work from now until June. It might be helpful so you can be prepared to face whatever happens at the reunion."

"I've thought about not going, but I worry that it would raise too many questions."

"Why don't you discuss that with someone who can get you to look at all the options you have?"

"Oh, Reese, must all lesbians be relegated to therapy at some point?" She kept her tone light so Reese would know she was joking.

"You wouldn't want to lose your dyke card, would you?"

Elizabeth grimaced. "Such a distasteful word. Must you use it?"

“If you decide to see someone, I have a name. Here, I’ll get it and leave it with you.”

Reese stood, reached in her purse for her cell phone, and appeared to be looking up the name. “Here it is,” she said and wrote the information down on the note pad Elizabeth kept on her desk. “Everyone I know who’s seen her has nothing but good things to say. But if she’s not right for you for whatever reason,” she hesitated for a second, “I’m sure she can refer you to someone else who is.”

“The last thing I want to do is go therapist shopping. If I decide to see her and it doesn’t pan out, that’s it.”

“She works with a lot of writers and creative types, by the way.”

“I’m not a creative type, I’m an executive.”

“Not true. I’ve read old copies of the *Fowler Literary Journal*. Elizabeth Morrison wrote some kick-ass short stories.”

Elizabeth reached for the paper.

“That word ‘old’ is the perfect descriptor in this case. I haven’t written a thing since college.” She paused. “Actually, since things ended with Ruth.”

Why did she use that passive construction? Things ended! Ruth left her. She read the name on the paper.

“She’s a doctor?”

“A PhD psychologist. She even teaches part-time at Columbia. She’s smart. You like smart people.”

“And you’ve been to see her?”

Reese shook her head. “No, she’s someone I know socially. Do you think I’d refer you to *my* therapist?”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes and waved her hand at the door. “Get out of here, young lady, before I call the Fowler alumni office and tell them about your plan to seduce a professor.”

But instead of heading toward the door, Reese came over to her.

“I’m unsure of the protocol here, but Elizabeth, can I give you a hug?”

Elizabeth drew her head back automatically, but then relaxed. "I suppose, under the circumstances."

Reese threw her arms around Elizabeth's waist. They felt comforting and sweet but also a little strange. Was Reese merely her employee or was she something more? Could Elizabeth claim her as family?

As they both drew away from one another, neither spoke. Reese collected her things and left.

Once again, Elizabeth gazed at the small white sheet of paper.

"Dr. Tracy Patterson," she said aloud, addressing Reese's loopy script. She couldn't care less about holding on to some horrible thing called a dyke card, but if this woman could help keep the dreams at bay so she could get a good night's sleep, she might be worth a try.

Chapter 2

March 2008

IT WAS A SMALL WAITING room, large enough to fit five chairs plus end tables that held the requisite outdated magazines. Elizabeth glanced down at the covers but couldn't bear to pass the time reading what was likely a very mundane selection. A faint shushing sound filled the air. She traced its origin to a small plastic contraption on the floor in one corner. One of those white noise machines designed to block out sound from the three rooms whose doors lined the walls. Which one was hers? she wondered.

She glanced at her watch as she took a seat in one of the cushioned wooden chairs. Three minutes before the hour. In the next few seconds, would she suddenly be faced with another patient when one of those doors opened? Patient—is that what she was signing up for here? And what about when *she* exited her session with Dr. Patterson? Would some other person waiting in this very chair look up and see her? What if it was one of her authors? Reese had mentioned that Tracy Patterson worked with a lot of creative types.

Oh, this had been a terrible idea. Maybe it was best that she leave now before somebody recognized her.

But there wasn't time. The door opposite her opened and out came a stunning, long-legged blonde. Dressed in black slacks and a periwinkle silk blouse, she looked directly at Elizabeth, a closed-mouth smile on her face.

“Margaret Halperin?”

Elizabeth stared back for a second and then remembered she had given Margaret’s name to the receptionist when she set up the appointment. She didn’t want the fact that she was seeing a therapist to be circulating throughout New York City. Besides, Margaret deserved a little bit of payback for putting her in this position in the first place. “Oh,” she said as she stood. “Dr. Patterson?”

“Yes.” There was a questioning tone in her response and her eyes narrowed in confusion. She glanced down at a yellow legal pad she’d been holding and looked back at Elizabeth. “Please come in.”

The room they entered was larger than the waiting room. A light wood desk was positioned out of the way. There was a trio of small framed photos on the surface with the pictures facing away from her. She wondered if Dr. Patterson had a husband and children.

The rest of the area was furnished in the style of a living room with a small burgundy couch and two upholstered armchairs in more neutral sand-colored tones. A taller wood-framed chair covered in what looked like brown leather was opposite one of the armchairs, a small light wood table next to it. A large area rug with stripes that picked up the burgundy, brown, and sand accents completed the decor.

As Dr. Patterson took her place in the leather chair and crossed her legs, she gestured for Elizabeth to sit in one of the armchairs. Once she was seated, Elizabeth looked past Dr. Patterson and saw a framed print of a beach scene hanging on the wall. Designed to soothe tormented souls, she supposed.

“This is a lovely office,” she said. “So spacious.”

“Thank you. Yes, I run a number of groups here.” Dr. Patterson leaned back in her chair and raised the pen she was holding. “You’re not Margaret Halperin, are you?”

She hadn't expected the direct question right off the bat. But what good would it do to delay? She closed her eyes and shook her head. Then she rose and offered her hand.

"Elizabeth Morrison. My apologies for the bit of subterfuge, but I'm in a position where I need to exercise some discretion in these matters." She smiled weakly.

Dr. Patterson breathed out and touched Elizabeth's hand in greeting. "I thought so."

Elizabeth detected a slight Southern accent.

"Ms. Morrison, do you know who *I* am?" she asked with a tilt of her head, that same puzzled look from before on her face.

"You're a psychotherapist. I'm told you're quite good or else I wouldn't have bothered calling you."

"Well, thank you, but..." She paused and opened her mouth, appearing as if she was trying to figure out how to say something. "I thought you'd know that I'm Robin Greene's partner, and you of course are her publisher."

Elizabeth stared at Dr. Patterson. How could this be?

"Ms. Morrison, I can't see you for therapy. We have a conflict based on my personal life and your professional one."

Surely this wasn't possible. It seemed preposterous that she would have decided to pursue therapy, in spite of all her misgivings, only to be faced with the partner of one of her authors. This was not the sort of thing that normally happened to her in business. She always anticipated these kinds of complications.

She rose from her seat and went over toward the desk, walking around to the other side to peek at the three standing picture frames.

Dr. Patterson followed her. "Ms. Morrison? What are you doing?"

Robin Greene's face stared back at her from a publicity still the company had taken after the Pulitzer announcement. A second picture was of Robin with Dr. Patterson, both of them

younger, gazing at one another. And a third photo showed them with a dark-haired shorter woman, their arms all around each other. The woman looked vaguely familiar.

Elizabeth looked up at Dr. Patterson, her mouth open, an apology forming.

“Reese didn’t mention any of this, I assure you.”

“Reese Stanley referred you? She knows me. She’s had us over to dinner.”

“I don’t know what to say. It’s not like Reese to be so careless.”

“You understand my position, Ms. Morrison, don’t you?”

Elizabeth’s mind went blank and she felt the room move, making her dizzy and queasy. It had taken so much energy just to get here and now, she was thoroughly embarrassed and thwarted. She stood at the side of the desk, balancing on the smooth wooden surface for support. Dr. Patterson approached her.

“Let’s both sit back down,” she said softly. She gently guided Elizabeth over to the armchair.

“Now, I can refer you to some really good therapists, top-notch people, I promise.”

The words sailed right past Elizabeth as if they were inconsequential background noise. She leaned forward in the chair and pressed the tips of her fingers into her closed eyes.

How could Reese do this to her? And why had she herself been so sloppy? Normally she would have looked into Dr. Patterson’s background on her own, verifying where’d she trained and who knew her. But because her mind was dulled by lack of sleep, she had not thought to pursue her usual vetting. Instead, she’d been distracted and unnerved by the incessant ticking of the clock in her head counting down to the day when she’d have to face Ruth.

“I haven’t been myself lately. I should have known this,” she said, her voice shaking. She lowered her hands and looked directly at Dr. Patterson, whose face registered concern. “Have we met before?” she asked.

Dr. Patterson leaned forward in her chair. “Only once and it was a brief introduction at the PEN Literary Gala. I was also at the Pulitzer luncheon with Robin. I don’t recall if you were there.”

“No. I had to be in Seattle for a meeting with executives from Amazon.”

She felt as if she were in one of her dreams where the surroundings seemed familiar, but all of the action was greatly distorted. She gazed down at her lap and shook her head slowly.

“Ms. Morrison, can you look back up at me?”

Dr. Patterson’s request sounded more like a command than a question. Elizabeth raised her head.

“Sit all the way back in the chair, please. Can you do that?”

Elizabeth complied.

“Good, now relax your arms on either side of you and keep looking at me.” The voice was softer now, helping to shift Elizabeth’s dream-like state from one of agitation to comfort.

As she grasped the armrests of the chair and felt the soft brushed cotton under her palms, she noticed that Dr. Patterson’s eyes were a beautiful sea green, the same color as the water off Sanibel Island.

“What was the last vacation you took where you really felt like you’d gotten away, even if it was for only a few days?”

How strange she would ask this question just as the thought of Sanibel Island had come into her head. Three days with friends and a shared commitment that cell phones and computers would remain off from sunup to ten p.m. It had been glorious.

“Late December last year, I was away with friends for a few days at a place on the beach.” Still feeling as if she were in a dream, her voice had a faraway quality to it that even she could detect.

“Did you feel or smell or taste anything that made you happy or relaxed?”

She felt her mouth form a slight smile at the memory. “Yes. I had grouper, grilled with a sweet garnish. Moist and full of flavor.”

Dr. Patterson nodded. “Sounds wonderful. And was the ocean warm at the beach?”

“Yes. I sat at the water’s edge and let the tide come up around me. It was like a soothing bath that ebbed and flowed.”

“Hmmm. Close your eyes now and remember that moment when the water rolled up onto you. How it felt against your skin, how the sounds behind you on the beach faded and you were shielded from everything and everyone for a short while. Can you still feel it?”

“Yes, and it was exactly like that. As if I was cordoned off.”

“Good. Stay right there for another minute. Stay there.”

Elizabeth found that she was able to. The quiet din behind her, the water warming her thighs, the sun on her hair, her fingers smoothing the wet sand.

“Now, slowly open your eyes and look at me again.”

The beach melted from her vision and there was Dr. Patterson.

“Okay, turn your head slightly to each side and notice your surroundings. You’re back in my office now.”

Elizabeth fixed on the burgundy couch first and then the desk with the framed photos. She stared straight ahead and saw hanging on the wall what now felt like a poor substitute for the beach of a few minutes ago.

“How do you feel?”

She looked at Dr. Patterson as she contemplated her answer.

“Better, calmer, like I’m waking from a relaxing nap. No, not a nap, more like a massage.”

“Good. I’m glad it was helpful for you. Remember, you can get back to that place at the beach any time you need to go there.”

She stood up and smiled. “So now let me give you some names of other therapists.”

Elizabeth felt confused.

“I don’t understand. Weren’t you just, I don’t know, being my therapist?”

She shook her head. “No, I was just trying to get you back to yourself after the way you reacted to being surprised. I didn’t think it would be right for me to let you leave my office in that state. I also thought it would be good to give you a strategy that you could use on your own when you felt agitated. But I still can’t see you for therapy.”

This just wouldn’t do. Tracy Patterson had been the first person who’d actually been capable of improving her state of mind. She was as talented as Reese said she was. Elizabeth didn’t have the time to go on an extended hunt for somebody else. There had to be another way, one that could sidestep these bothersome conflict-of-interest rules.

But then she remembered that Reese had said, “If she’s not right for you for whatever reason, I’m sure she can refer you to someone else.” Had she known all along that this might happen?

“Dr. Patterson, I’d like to ask you to reconsider. At my level in the company, I have very little interaction with individual authors. I don’t work with Robin Greene at all.”

“I understand that, Ms. Morrison. But you are the president of a company that has a business relationship with my partner. If that relationship changed, it would become an impediment to the work we could do here.”

“That’s ridiculous. Robin Greene is one of our top authors. We treat her with the utmost respect and generosity.”

“I’m sorry, but I have to abide by the code of ethics of my profession. These rules were put in place to protect clients. I’d be doing you a disservice if I ignored them.”

Elizabeth stood and threw back her shoulders. “It’s not in my nature to take no for an answer.”

Dr. Patterson smiled and gave a quick shrug. “Well, in this case it’ll have to be. But I do hope you’ll contact someone else.”

As Elizabeth was shown out of the office, Dr. Patterson handed her a folded piece of paper with three names and phone

numbers. Waiting for the elevator, she wondered if she'd truly be able to again conjure up the peaceful scene from Sanibel Island after waking from one of her more troubling dreams.

Once outside, she looked up and down the street to see if Max had arrived to pick her up. As she reached for her phone to call him, the realization hit that Elizabeth Morrison, the head of one of the most successful publishing companies in the country and anointed by *Curve* magazine as one of the top ten most eligible lesbians, had been summarily dismissed by a beautiful young woman. Her stomach clenched with the realization that it had only happened one other time, and the woman had been Ruth.

Chapter 3

April 2008

NO MATTER HOW HARD SHE tried, she couldn't get herself back on that beach. It must have been Tracy Patterson's sea-green eyes or her soothing Southern accent that was missing. Unable to make any progress, Elizabeth left her bed on a particularly fretful night and tried sitting in the armchair in her living room with her eyes closed and the memory of moist grouper in her mouth. But that was as far as she could get.

The calm remove of Sanibel Island had been beyond her reach. When she pictured herself sitting on the sand, instead of the quiet roll of small waves rising up to meet her, she heard the laughter of her friends and then felt a hand tap her on the shoulder. "Elizabeth, we need you to settle a dispute. Did we read Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* in American Lit or Intro to Women's Studies?" She turned and saw Margaret and their friend Celeste seated on a beach blanket.

She blinked and was immediately back in her apartment. "Women's Studies," she said aloud to nobody. She shook her head and closed her eyes, but no amount of concentration could help her return to that moment of peace she'd experienced in the therapist's office.

Maybe there was another way. One thing that always helped her think when she felt overwhelmed was cooking. The more complex the recipe, the better. Could she close her eyes and

imagine herself baking something French? While in Paris the year after graduating from college, she'd taken courses at Le Cordon Bleu, toying with the idea of abandoning her plan to work in publishing and instead becoming a chef. She'd quickly learned that a life among books suited her better than a life in a kitchen, but she held on to cooking as a hobby. Now, perhaps, it could also keep her sane.

She sat back, closed her eyes and pictured the steps involved in making a Napoleon. First, preparing the vanilla beans for the pastry cream, then stirring the mixture over medium heat on the stove. Next came the custard. She added in the egg yolks and made sure to stir constantly until the ingredients thickened to the desired consistency. Butter was then included, using a whisk, one teaspoon at a time. Finally came the mixing and rolling thin of the pastry dough, which first needed to be refrigerated before it was time to assemble everything and apply the icing.

She found that this cooking meditation helped a bit. It momentarily took her mind off her problems, but instead of relaxing her so she could sleep, she felt energized and awake. Leaping out of the armchair and practically running to the kitchen, she surveyed the contents of her refrigerator and pantry. There was enough of what she'd need to make a lemon soufflé. By sunrise, she had a lovely dessert to bring to the office and another night where sleep had eluded her.

A week later, still unable to get a good night's rest, she decided to try one of the therapists listed on Dr. Patterson's sheet of paper. She was a woman close to Elizabeth's age who'd written a mediocre book on healing from a broken heart, of all things. Published by an imprint of Penguin Group, the book had all the markings of a rush job thrown into the market for a pre-Valentine's Day release. Elizabeth had leafed through it in a bookstore. It was full of trite, quasi-feminist affirmations ("you will only be able to truly love another once you love yourself,"

“women always undervalue their self-worth,” and so on). She’d go mad if she had to listen to that kind of drivel for fifty minutes each week. But after a few more sleepless nights, when she finally put aside these misgivings and met with this woman, it was clear very quickly that her session was in actuality a pitch for the therapist’s second book.

“Did you happen to check out my recent publication, *Clearing the Love Deck?*”

The full title was *Clearing the Love Deck: How to Move Out, Move On, and Move into You*. Elizabeth had actually shuddered when she’d first seen the dust jacket.

“Yes. I found it, uh, very informative.”

The therapist had beamed back at her with pride as if Elizabeth had told her she’d run into the woman’s son at Harvard. She then proceeded to explain that this was merely the first in a series of “love and self-esteem” books she was planning but that she and her agent had been unhappy with the amount of promotional assistance they had received from the publisher.

Elizabeth did her best not to take the bait and to redirect the conversation to the woman’s psychotherapeutic methods. But at that point there wasn’t much this therapist could say to redeem herself. Elizabeth would have much rather taken her chances with Tracy Patterson’s so-called conflict of interest than with this blatant attempt to secure a book contract from Morrison Publishing. She dealt with that kind of thing on a daily basis. She didn’t need to pay someone for the pleasure of receiving more of it.

There was no point in contacting the other two names she’d received. It was clear to her that she was bound to find something objectionable about both of them. She’d known all along that this idea of Reese’s was not going to work. She should have just dismissed it immediately instead of wasting her time. So with therapy now off the table and her attempts at revisiting the calm

of Sanibel Island a failure, Elizabeth gave in to her last resort—sleeping pills. An Ambien before bedtime seemed to do the trick. She was finally able to get eight hours of rest undisturbed by visions of prison camps and misguided weddings. She could now get through the workday looking and acting more like herself.

With the difficulties of the last month behind her, she leapt into the intensity of the social season with less focus than she could usually muster, but enough to prevent her from embarrassing herself or the company. She was hopeful that she was the only one who could figure out that she was still off her game.

One of the commitments on her calendar was a fundraising dinner that Morrison Publishing had signed on to as a lead sponsor. She'd agreed to this as a favor to Joe Donovan, one of the company's best-selling authors. Joe and his wife, Maureen, were active in a school-based creative writing program called Voices from Our Future. They were co-chairing galas up and down the East Coast, from Boston to Miami. Elizabeth had personally taken charge of the New York event. Held at a hip new hotel near the Flatiron Building, it had sold out a month ago, with six hundred and fifty people paying five hundred dollars each to attend.

Dressed in a champagne-colored sleeveless dress with a beaded top and a plain silk skirt below, her hair up in a French twist, Elizabeth circulated among the crowd at the opening cocktail party. She made sure to check in on VIP guests and flagged down the hotel's event coordinator to make sure that all the logistics were going smoothly. At one point, she noticed Reese standing near a bar talking with Robin Greene and Dr. Patterson. She made her way over.

"Ms. Morrison." Robin's voice betrayed that touch of nervousness she always displayed around Elizabeth. "I'd like you to meet my partner, Tracy."

So Dr. Patterson hadn't said anything about her visit. Elizabeth had wondered about that. She smiled and said a warm hello,

allowing Robin to go through the formality of this unnecessary introduction. Then she turned to Reese.

“Reese, you see that gentleman over there with the camera?” She pointed to a tall, bearded man in a navy-blue suit. “He’s the photographer the company hired for tonight. Can you take Robin over to him, find Joe Donovan and a few of our other high-profile authors, and make sure you get some good pictures? I’d normally ask Phil from Communications, but I can’t find him in this crowd.” She looked at Robin. “Don’t worry, I’ll take good care of Tracy until you’re finished.”

“Ms. Morrison, how are you doing?” asked Tracy when they were finally alone. Once again, Elizabeth was struck by this young woman’s natural beauty. Although elegant in an indigo satin sheath dress with her blonde hair in a chignon, it was clear that she really had to do very little to bolster her good looks. One more thing to admire about her.

“Tracy, why don’t you call me Elizabeth? I see no reason for us to be so formal with one another.”

Tracy looked directly at her with those penetrating yet soothing eyes. Feeling a bit uneasy, Elizabeth decided it was best to take charge.

“Would you kindly follow me to the alcove over there, where it’s a little quieter?”

They walked to a small sitting area that was unoccupied.

“So just where in the South are you from?” Elizabeth asked as they were seated on a cushioned bench.

Tracy gave her that same crinkle-eyed look of confusion that she’d shown in her office when Elizabeth had made the appointment using Margaret’s name. “Durham, North Carolina,” she said after hesitating a few seconds.

“Ah, the Triangle Area, very cosmopolitan.”

Tracy smiled knowingly. “You mean, for the South, don’t you?”

“I meant no such thing, I assure you. I find your accent to be quite delightful.”

“It’s inherited. My parents grew up in Greensboro, a less cosmopolitan city, as you might call it.”

So she was sensitive about what people thought about the South. Elizabeth had to admit that while she did harbor a few prejudices about the region, she had great respect for a culture that could create such an authentic and varied local cuisine. She’d been meaning for some time to take a class in Southern cooking. She wondered if Tracy Patterson knew anything about it.

“Did you inherit any interest in the local cuisine? Family recipes and the like? I ask because I have an interest in regional food, a kind of hobby you might call it. I spent some time in Europe many years ago taking classes, and since then I’ve learned quite a bit about the specialties that are unique to Southern France and Northern Italy. I’ve perfected a wonderful bouillabaisse as well as a mouthwatering panna cotta. But I thought it might be a nice change to focus on the regional cuisine of this country.”

Tracy smiled at her and seemed to relax a bit. She pivoted in her seat so she could face Elizabeth directly. “I do a pretty good job with my mama’s pecan pie. Is that what you’re looking for?”

“Why yes. That would be a perfect place to begin.”

“I can send you the recipe.”

“Oh no, I don’t believe in recipes. I like to watch the process myself. Would you be willing to come to my apartment one evening and make it there? I’ll buy all the ingredients, of course, and you’ll find I have an excellent kitchen as well as a wide selection of quality wines you can sample as you work.”

They were interrupted by a buzzing sound that seemed to originate from Tracy’s small purse. She looked down, unsnapped the catch, and reached in for her cell phone. “I’m sure that’s Robin, wondering where I’ve gotten to.”

All this talk of the South had made her accent even more prominent. Elizabeth thought it was charming and hoped it was a sign that Tracy was becoming more comfortable with her. She

watched as Tracy rose from her seat and tapped out a response to the text she'd received.

Elizabeth stood and faced her. "Would Friday night work for you?"

"This Friday? I think so. Let me check with Robin. Should I bring her? She's actually quite a good cook in her own right. Her chicken soup is heavenly and it cures anything."

"Maybe next time, if that's all right with you. I thought maybe you and I could get to know one another a bit better. Please don't take this the wrong way, but I find that I'm quite intrigued by you."

Tracy, who'd begun walking back toward the cocktail party, stopped abruptly and grasped Elizabeth's arm to stop her as well. "Is this about more than pecan pie, Elizabeth? Because if it is, I'm not interested."

"Tracy, I assure you, I am not propositioning you, if that's what you think. While you're quite beautiful, well, the truth is, you're not my type." She glanced down at the floor. "Oh, forgive me, that sounded so harsh." She looked back up at Tracy and put a hand on her shoulder. "But I'm trying to reassure you that I am merely looking for friendship and a lesson in Southern cooking, of course."

But Tracy's face was still serious. Her eyes hooded, her mouth a straight line. Elizabeth took her hand away from Tracy's shoulder.

"And this isn't about your visit to my office a few weeks ago?"

"No, I have completely given up on the entire idea of psychotherapy. Let's just say your referrals didn't pan out and I have lowered myself to the level of every stressed out Manhattanite. I'm taking Ambien to sleep. It's quite effective, actually. It even blocks out dreams."

Now Tracy looked concerned, similar to the expression back in her office when Elizabeth had peeked at the pictures on the desk. "Yes, I'm familiar with the wonders of Ambien. I'm glad it's

helping you, but don't become too reliant on it. And, as long as Robin is comfortable with the idea, I'd be happy to teach you how to make an incredible pecan pie. But I have to warn you ahead of time, I'm not that intriguing."

She smiled and walked ahead of Elizabeth, making her way to Robin who stood back at that same spot by the bar.

Elizabeth could see that Tracy was impressed as she walked around the kitchen. Well, who wouldn't be? The architect had designed it to her specifications—industrial stainless steel appliances and slate-blue granite countertops with the walls covered in small, rectangular slate-blue subway tiles. The cabinets were mostly glass fronted with a bluish-white wood trim. The glass gave a sense of openness to the room and showed off her top-line dishes and glassware.

"I assume Robin felt comfortable with you coming here unescorted?"

Tracy gave her a small smile in response. "Yes, though a bit perplexed. It was actually kind of funny because after I told her about our conversation at the gala, her first reaction was, 'She let you call her Elizabeth?' That surprised her much more than your interest in Southern cooking."

"Always good to keep the authors on their toes," said Elizabeth as she tore open the bag of pecans. "You do know I'm joking, I hope. You'll get used to my sense of humor soon enough."

"How often do you get to use all this?" asked Tracy as she gestured to the large Viking stove with the double oven.

"Not as often as I'd like, but I try to entertain friends a few times a year when I have the time to roll up my sleeves and refrain from calling a caterer. There's a group of us who went to Fowler together and we've remained good friends even though we're scattered all over now. Where did you attend college?"

"Adams in Massachusetts."

“Oh, of course, I knew that. Joe Donovan teaches there.”

“Yes, he taught Robin.”

“As Joe tells it, it isn’t clear who taught who. He said he learned quite a lot from Robin.”

“Well, I was there and I can tell you that Robin has always idolized him. He’s been a major influence on her development as a writer.”

Elizabeth handed Tracy a white apron and tied her own around her waist.

“So the two of you met at Adams? Was it one of those love-at-first-sight things you read about in romance novels?”

Tracy chuckled as she tied her apron. “Hardly. More like hate at first sight. I knew I was gay but wasn’t out to anyone at the time. I was even trying to make everyone think I liked boys. Robin was the angry lesbian rebel. At first she thought I was an empty-headed Southern belle until she realized I was actually a closet case who spent all my time seducing older women to avoid taking a good look at myself. It was a lot of approach and withdraw until we were both too miserable not to be together.”

Elizabeth breathed out a laugh. “Mine was a bit different than that, though it was also a case of opposites attract.”

“Yours? You were out to yourself when you were in college?”

Elizabeth reached up into a cabinet and pulled down her set of nested ceramic mixing bowls.

“My dear, even back in the Stone Age of the 1970s, some of us knew about ourselves. You may recall that this was the era when both women’s liberation and gay liberation were first hitting college campuses. And I was at an all-women’s college.”

“Like a kid in a candy store, I bet.” Tracy grinned and began to measure out the dry ingredients for the pie dough. Elizabeth stood and looked over her shoulder.

“It wasn’t quite like that, at least not for me. There was only one girl, and in some ways there has always been one girl.”

Tracy turned her head, a look of surprise on her face. “Really? Who was she?”

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