

Chapter One: Shattered Security

Ventura, California, 1958

The year Olga Duncan disappeared was the year my mother hired the convict babysitter. Mother worked as a psychiatric social worker at the state mental hospital in Camarillo, California. Over the years she had employed a string of babysitters to help watch my sister Betsey and me, as well as do the laundry, make the beds, and clean newsprint smudges from the doors. The year Olga disappeared, I was ten and Betsey six.

Mother was a little lax about checking the references of the sitters she employed, preferring to rely on her “intuition.” She claimed that she could “read people” after so many years spent working at the mental institution. But the truth came out about our new babysitter when her parole officer called a few weeks into the job to check up on Jolene*.

At first it didn't bother me that Jolene had driven the getaway car in a liquor store heist. She was nineteen, a big, jolly girl with dark brown hair and twinkling eyes who always said cool stuff like, “You're the ginchiest.” She'd painted our toenails with hot pink polish, and she took us on our first city bus ride. But my father, a reporter and columnist for the *Ventura County Star-Free Press*, put his foot down.

“Hell's bells, woman,” he said to my mother, “we can't leave the children with a criminal.”

But before Mother found another sitter, Jolene's boyfriend got released from prison, and she ran off with him to Los Angeles to get married.

“She’s in the wind,” Daddy said. “Good riddance.”

“Jolene eloped,” Mother said. “Isn’t that nice, girls?”

Maybe. But as that year progressed, I found myself gripped more and more by a dogged vigilance against danger. Every day I read newspaper headlines about children dying in school bus accidents, escaped convicts in high-speed shoot-outs, killer teenagers on a weeklong murder rampage in Nebraska. *Eleven innocent victims! Who’s next?* Even before Olga Duncan, the pretty Santa Barbara nurse, vanished from her apartment, I had a lot on my mind.

Then, a month after Jolene disappeared with her criminal boyfriend, my cat Cinderella went missing.

“Don’t worry, she’ll come home when she gets hungry,” Daddy assured me.

But a few days later, he came into the kitchen where we were eating our oatmeal and said, “Well, I’ll be goddamned. That cat’s dead in the backyard by the geraniums.”

“But you said... YOU SAID...”

“These things happen, dear,” Mother said. “At least you still have Pinky Lee.”

Shortly after we buried Cinderella in the backyard, my family held our annual neighborhood Fourth of July celebration. My father set off illegal fireworks in our driveway and I found out that the Russians wanted to kill us.

It happened after all the firecrackers had exploded and the last sparkler had fizzled out. Daddy helped Mother pass out bowls of homemade ice cream that they’d hand-cranked in our old wooden ice cream maker. A group of the fathers hovered nearby, waiting for scoops and talking about the space race.

“You know, Sputnik isn’t our biggest problem,” one of the neighbors said. “That same

rocket that launched the satellite could send a nuclear warhead anywhere in the world.”

Another man nodded gravely. “Serious threat to U.S. national security, all right. We could be looking at a nuclear attack.”

Daddy laughed. “That nincompoop Khrushchev claims that the Sputnik launch proves the Russians can hit a fly on the wall from any distance. That’s ridiculous. A hydrogen bomb weighs too much for that Russian rocket to carry it all the way to the United States.”

The neighbor took a puff on his cigarette. “I don’t know about that, Bob,” he said in a mournful tone. “Those Ruskies want to annihilate us.”

It had been exciting the year before when the Russians launched Sputnik. The neighborhood kids had all bounced on their toes in our driveway after sunset one night and passed around a pair of binoculars, oohing and aahing as we watched the little satellite scoot across the sky.

But now...*Annihilate us?*

I took some ice cream for myself, and spooned in a mouthful while staring hard into the dark sky, remembering how we’d seen the twinkling Sputnik pass over our little neighborhood. Sputnik’s batteries had died a few months later and Grandma said, “It’s a miracle that thing didn’t kill someone when it fell out of the sky.”

Later in the week I asked Daddy, “What about the Russians? And the fluoride stuff Grandma says the commies want to put in our water to poison us?”

Daddy peered at me over his newspaper. “Fluoride prevents tooth decay. It’ll make your teeth stronger.” He used his tongue to push his two false front teeth toward me and then clicked them back into place. He’d lost the originals playing baseball as a boy. “Don’t pay any attention to what your grandmother says.” He folded his newspaper, stood and turned to walk out of the

kitchen.

“Do you think Jolene’s boyfriend still has his gun?” I called after him.

The year Olga Duncan disappeared, my family was living just outside Ventura, a small California coastal town south of Santa Barbara. Main Street was only three blocks from the ocean. The small beach town had been transformed in the 1950s when developers bought up surrounding farmland and built tracts of houses for World War II vets and their baby boomer families.

We lived in Montalvo, an agricultural community a few miles inland from the coast. The subdivision of modest stucco bungalows, with long concrete front porches and big yards, had been built in the middle of an old walnut grove. Most of the houses still had a walnut tree or two growing in the yard and plenty of children to climb the branches. A dozen little girls between the ages of six and twelve lived within a half block of my home on Alameda Avenue. Daddy called us the Alameda Girls.

Montalvo was as safe a neighborhood as you could find in 1958. Still, it began to worry me that real danger lurked even in my own little community. Jolene had run off with an ex-con who carried a gun. Mr. Khrushchev had a nuclear bomb and plans to annihilate us. And my cat Cinderella had died under suspicious circumstances. But my parents remained clueless. Except for a fixation on automobile accidents and an unnatural fear of the house catching fire, they had stumbled through the 1950s in a fog of blind optimism.

Daddy couldn’t get over the fact that we owned so many modern appliances—a Bendix combination automatic washing machine and clothes dryer, a self-defrosting refrigerator, a car with power steering and power brakes. After growing up on a cattle ranch in Montana with an

outhouse and icebox, he was giddy over our good fortune. “Progress, girls, progress,” he crowed as he rubbed his hands together. Daddy was a big believer in progress.

I wanted to scream, “Open your eyes, for crying out loud! There’s plenty to be worried about.” We couldn’t even count on God to protect us. My family wasn’t saved, according to a devout Christian girl who lived up the street, because we didn’t attend church like most of the other families in the neighborhood. And Grandma said Daddy was an atheist. I knew we needed to be careful, but we never even locked the front door. We’d lost the key.

On the evening of November 17, 1958, a foggy belt of cold coastal air settled over our neighborhood. The unseen ocean made its presence felt with a whiff of rotting seaweed tinging the cooling coastal breeze. Olga Duncan would vanish later that night thirty miles to the north, signaling the end of our quiet 1950’s life and shattering the sense of security for people in Santa Barbara and Ventura for years to come. But on that night, my family danced the polka.

Polka Go-Round was Mother’s favorite Monday night show, and sometimes, if Daddy was in a good mood, we could get him to dance with us and the dancers on TV. Carolyn was my favorite singer on the show. She yodeled. And Lou played the accordion while he led the band. The polka was the only dance Daddy said he could do. But, really, he just hopped and skipped to the music. Sometimes he got a little carried away.

“Slow down, Bob, before you hurt yourself,” Mother cried that night, as Daddy galloped around our little living room with my sister and me on each of his arms. When Lou fired up the ‘Beer Barrel Polka’ on his accordion, Mother danced too, and we all got going so fast, laughing and twirling, that Daddy stepped on Pinky Lee’s tail, knocked over a lamp and spilled a vase of roses on the floor.

“That’s enough, Bob,” Mother said. “It looks like a nuclear bomb went off in here.” She shut off the TV after Carolyn yodeled good night to the viewers, and told my sister and me to get ready for bed.

“But I want to watch *The Patti Page Show*,” Betsey cried. “‘How Much Is That Doggie’ is my favorite...”

A little while later, I stood on the bottom rung of the bunk bed ladder, watching Daddy as he struggled to close the three-inch gap between the windowsill and the sash.

“Could you please check the closet?” I asked.

He rolled his eyes. “There’s no monster in the closet, honey.”

I scrunched up my mouth and stared at him.

“Fine.” He gave up on the window, walked over and opened the closet door.

“Look behind the clothes.”

Daddy made a big deal of moving the hangers this way and that. “Happy?”

I shrugged as he closed the closet door. “There’s no such thing as monsters. It’s all in your imagination, you know that, right?”

I nodded uncertainly and took another step up the ladder. “Do you think the Russians might be able to hit a fly on our wall with a nuclear bomb?”

Daddy laughed. “I can’t even hit a fly on our wall with a fly swatter half the time.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean that the Russians can’t... Miss Peterson says we have to study harder or the Russians are going to take us over.”

He made a shooping gesture toward the top bunk. “Come on, come on. Climb up. Jeez, Sputnik isn’t a military threat. Khrushchev’s using it as propaganda to scare us.”

“Propa...?”

“Lies. You don’t need to worry about this, honey.”

“Uh-huh. That’s what you said when Cinderella got lost.”

“Well, maybe I misjudged the gravity of the Cinderella situation, but the Russians didn’t kill her. So, don’t worry about the Russians. Understand?”

“Okay, but that doesn’t mean...”

Daddy put up his stop-sign hand. “No more. Get in bed.” He headed for the door. “Where the hell is your sister?”

I finished climbing the ladder, laid down on the bed, and put my palms together to begin reciting the prayer that Grandma had taught me. I prayed every night and went to Sunday school with my friends. I was trying to save myself from God’s wrath.

Pinky Lee curled up beside me. We both closed our eyes as I silently mouthed the words: “Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake...” *Die? Does Grandma know something she isn’t telling me?* I closed my eyes tighter. “I pray the Lord my soul to take.” And then finished off with my own last line: “Please God, not tonight. I don’t want to be buried under the ground like Cinderella. If you let me live, I’ll be good.”

The continuous hum of cars traveling from Los Angeles to Santa Barbara on Highway 101 at the end of our block drifted through the partly open window. The high whine of truck tires came from far away and then faded in the distance. Pinky Lee purred in my ear, tickling my face with his whiskers. Smiling, I turned over and tried not to think about the Russians.

At that same time, just up the coast in Santa Barbara, a young, pregnant nurse drank coffee and ate hot buns with two friends from work. She showed them the gown she was embroidering for her unborn baby and then said good night, unaware that it would be her last.

Chapter Two: Goodbye

Santa Barbara, California, November 17, 1958

The City of Santa Barbara, sandwiched between the Santa Ynez Mountains and the Pacific Ocean, ninety-five miles north of Los Angeles, is sometimes known as the American Riviera because of its beautiful coastline and almost perfect weather. But on that night as a car moved slowly through the dark empty streets, it was cold by local standards. Forty degrees, with a slight whiff of rotting seaweed in the air.

The car's engine sputtered as it turned right from State Street onto a deserted street lined with Spanish style buildings and slender-stemmed palm trees. The car stopped in the next block, idling under a streetlight across from the Santa Barbara courthouse. The clock tower, its huge Roman numerals shrouded in darkness, loomed overhead.

The driver pulled out a heavy object wrapped in an oil-stained rag from under the seat, examined it, handed it to his passenger, and then strained to get a look at the clock on the courthouse tower. Ten past eleven.

After pumping the gas pedal until the engine ran smoothly again, the driver put the car in gear and pulled away from the curb. The engine sputtered momentarily as the car drove past low-slung, red-tiled buildings and headed through the shadowy darkness toward Garden Street.

Three blocks away, twenty-nine-year-old nurse Olga Duncan called out a last goodbye as

her friends from the hospital clamored down the open stairway, still laughing at Doreen's dead-on imitation of their insufferable head nurse. Doreen turned back toward her friend when she reached the courtyard below. "Now girls," she continued in a high-pitched haughty tone, "hasten, hasten. We mustn't keep Doctor waiting!"

Sylvia clapped her hands twice under her chin. "Go along to bed, my dear. We daren't be tardy for surgery in the morning."

Both young women dissolved into laughter before calling out a new round of goodbyes. Olga giggled and covered her mouth. Glancing around at the dark windows of the neighboring apartments, she put a finger to her lips. "Shhhhh," and then shook her head as she pointed toward the door of Mrs. Barnett, the manager of the Garden Street Apartments who always referred to Olga as 'that sweet lovely girl.' Sylvia blew a kiss to her friend as the young nurses waved one last time, turned and stepped onto the sidewalk.

Olga, a petite, quiet girl with large hazel eyes, brushed a few strands of auburn hair from her face and pulled her robe tight against the cool night. An electric stillness filled the air as she smoothed the quilted pink-and-white robe across her very pregnant belly. More laughter drifted up from the sidewalk as her friends waited for their cab. A car pulled up, doors slammed, and the sound of the taxi faded into the distance.

Olga slipped inside the sliding glass door of her apartment but didn't close it all the way. Instead, she leaned her hand on the glass and pressed her face through the partial opening to inhale the salt-scented air. She turned her face to the palm trees towering over the white stucco two-story building. A small sliver of a moon shone between the long, fan-like fronds whispering as they swayed in the light breeze blowing off the Pacific Ocean.

A wistful smile turned up the corners of Olga's lips when the lonesome wail of the train

whistle cut through the quiet night. She felt a pang of homesickness for the family she'd left behind in Canada, especially her railroad engineer papa. As the train chugged through town, she patted her pregnant belly. *Just six more weeks and your Grandma will be on that train.* Olga moved her fingers to the side of her tummy when she felt the baby kick. That's right. *Grandma is coming here to help us.*

Olga felt a sharp pain from the neuritis in her hand. "Only the baby pressing on some nerves," the doctor had said. She massaged her tingling fingers as her thoughts shifted to her sometimes-husband, Frank. The handsome attorney didn't live at their apartment full-time anymore. He just visited occasionally.

"Frank's a big baby," Doreen had exploded at her one afternoon at the hospital. "Enough is enough."

Olga sighed. Maybe. She had talked to that lawyer Sylvia had insisted on, but still... The baby kicked again. A hard kick this time, right under her ribs.

The train noise dissolved into the night and an eerie silence descended again on the apartment building.

"Maybe your daddy will come see us tomorrow," she whispered to her unborn child. Olga smiled faintly as she remembered the silly grin on Frank's face when he'd tentatively put his fingers on her stomach to feel their baby move.

"Everything will be fine, honey. You'll see," Frank had said as he held her close.

The sound of a rough-running car engine creeping along the road below ended Olga's reverie. Headlights swept past the deserted courtyard as she shut the sliding glass door, pulled the drapes closed and locked the latch. The sputtering engine abruptly died in the street.