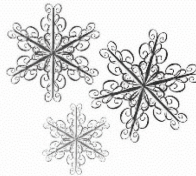


**EIGHTEENTH
AND
WESTERN**

A NOVEL

Laura JenSKI



Snowbound Stories, LLC
Boise, Idaho

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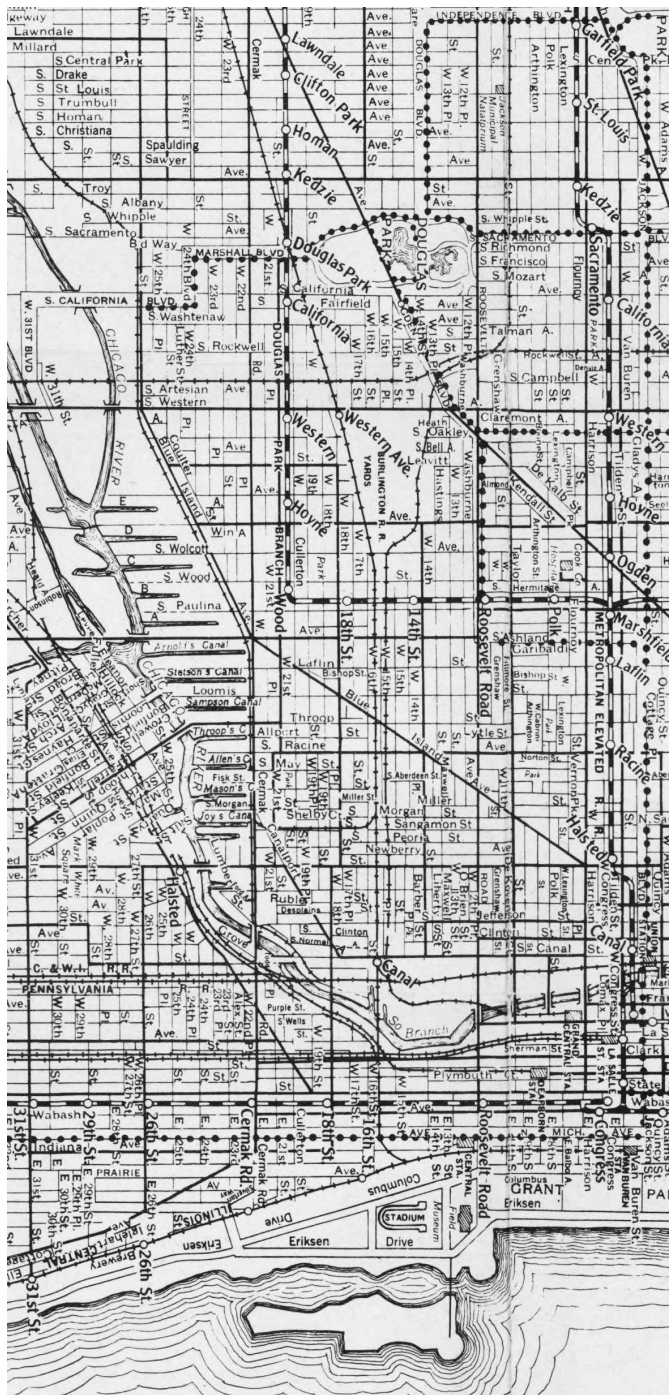
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For my friend, Nancy K.

EIGHTEENTH AND WESTERN



Chapter 1

**Dani
2023**

I knew about the voices. The ones in Grandma Jean's head telling her to do things. Mom believed Gram was certifiable, but I knew the voices weren't real. Just Gram being Gram. So, I didn't worry—that is, until the voices told her to buy real estate.

The parcel in question was a corner lot at Eighteenth and Western on Chicago's Lower West Side. Grandma Jean cashed in her few stocks and took out a small mortgage to purchase the property. She dreamed of creating a civil rights center for working-class women, the riskiest financial project imaginable for a seventy-something single woman—except maybe cryptocurrency.

To be honest, I hadn't taken Gram's dream seriously. I loved my grandmother more than anything. She'd been my safe place when others made me feel weird. But I couldn't understand why she'd spend money on

strangers—money she needed for herself. If Mom learned how Gram blew her savings, she'd have her committed.

"Danielle Mae?" My mom's voice on the phone sounded breathless. She was probably on her exercise bike. "Did you lose your lease?"

I shared a run-down apartment in Houston with another woman and her boyfriend, the latest in a string of roommates I hated living with but couldn't afford to live without. I might have been a Martian for how well I fit in. I did have one friend in Houston: my cousin Rachel. She barely passed college algebra, but as the lead in *Giselle*, she was a miracle in pointe shoes. Rachel had a clear focus—ballet—whereas I wondered what the hell I was doing with my life, a detail my parents pointed out often.

"Yes, Mom. The lease is up in a few days."

"Your father and I think you should move in with your grandmother to make sure she's making healthy decisions."

"Spy on her, you mean."

Mom's breathing quieted. Her online spin class must have ended. "Do you have a reason to stay in Houston? A job, perhaps? Related to either of your *two* college degrees?"

I had majored in molecular neuroscience at Rice University because Mom said handsome boys wouldn't date nerdy science girls. And when Dad droned on about social workers being bleeding heart liberals, I added sociology as a second major. Within twelve months of graduation, I turned down both jobs my father lined up at his company and, as a result, barely eked by as a part-time barista and bartender. Obviously, I aimed my choices to antagonize my parents. I wasn't proud of my decisions, but I kept making them.

"No job."

"Your grandmother needs you. I'll phone her to say you're on your way." Mom disconnected the call.

I was broke and out of options, so I packed my meager belongings into my beat-up Honda Civic and drove to Chicago. Gram's house in the Morgan Park neighborhood was a modest, yellow-brick ranch built in the

middle of the twentieth century and not remodeled for at least fifty years. My best memories flowed from the lazy summers spent reading books in the shade of her tiny back yard or, on rainy days, assembling jigsaw puzzles on the Formica-topped kitchen table. I could always talk freely with Grandma Jean—no need to be perky when I felt down or wear the frilly dresses Mom picked out. No reason to accept an identity that didn't fit me.

And, of course, there were the plants. Stout and aromatic, with characteristically serrated green leaflets, sitting in pots by Gram's back fence behind a thick bed of daylilies. I'd never smoked the plants, but I could always tell when my grandmother harvested a crop. Those were the times we put the psychedelic-rock records on the turntable and baked brownies all afternoon.

I wanted to talk to Gram before Mom called and precipitated an apocalypse. I'd finished unloading suitcases at her curb when Grandma Jean rushed out the front door.

"Dani, what a wonderful surprise. I wasn't expecting you. Your mother's been calling me for two days, but I haven't answered."

On cue, Gram's cell phone rang. I had installed its custom ringtone: "I Will Survive" by Gloria Gaynor. Number one on the Billboard charts in 1979. My mother, also a Gloria, was eight years old that year and believed herself the artist's namesake because Gram played the record over and over. Mom was named after Gloria Steinem, but Grandma Jean soon realized her daughter had more interest in Gloria Vanderbilt and ladies' fashions than women's rights.

Grandma Jean tapped the speakerphone icon. "Hello?"

"How are you, Mama? I've been worried about you. You didn't answer the phone when I called yesterday."

The levity in my mother's voice didn't deceive me and certainly wouldn't fool Grandma Jean.

"Did you call? My phone didn't ring. You can't trust technology, you know."

My mother heaved one of her dramatic sighs. “There’s nothing wrong with your phone, Mama. You just didn’t answer it.” Another sigh, and then the light tone returned. “What have you been up to? Keeping busy in your garden? You shouldn’t be in the sun too long, you know.”

“You didn’t call just to criticize my gardening. What do you really want?” My grandmother sank onto the front porch steps and dug into the pockets of her baggy blue jeans. No doubt, she looked for the cigarette pack she’d already smoked. It wasn’t even 4:00 p.m.

“Dani needs a place to stay,” my mother said. “Her roommates are moving into a smaller place.”

I sat next to Gram on the porch. “Don’t tell Mom I’m here,” I whispered.

Grandma Jean nodded. “Isn’t she enjoying Texas?”

Another dramatic sigh. “Her father had her set up with great jobs at his company in Atlanta—making almost six figures right out of college. But no, she pours drinks in some dive bar and lives like a hermit.”

“It’s her life. She can do whatever she wants with it. She can live here with me. I have a spare room, as you well know.”

Grandma Jean stopped, her eyes widening. I squirmed. Gram must now realize what Mom was up to.

“That’s a wonderful idea, Mama. Of course, she’ll contribute to the food and utilities, and you’ll have someone to help. You know, to fix your phone if it doesn’t ring. I’ll send her there right away.” Background voices came through the line. “I have to go now, Mama. We’ll talk later.”

My grandma put her phone into her back pocket and sighed.

“I should’ve given you a heads up,” I said. “Before Mom called you.”

“She expects you to spy on me in my own house. Report on my every move. She thinks I’m feeble-minded and wants to send me to a nursing home. But I’m not going to go!”

I patted Gram’s knobby knee. “As you said, we can do what we want. Besides, I’m not a dirty rat, like they say in the old movies. I won’t squeal on you.”

Grandma Jean squeezed my hand. Her fingers were cold. “How was the drive from Houston? It wasn’t too stressful, was it? You should rest before dinner.”

Though Gram’s eyes twinkled above her broad grin, they seemed sunken, rimmed by grayish-purple rings. She hadn’t said anything about being sick.

“I’m fine, Gram. I stopped overnight south of Saint Louis.”

“Let’s get your things indoors. I keep your room ready.”

“You’re the best.” I patted the shoulder of her thin muslin blouse. Not an ounce of muscle or fat seemed to cover her protruding bones.

While I unpacked my things in the familiar sky-blue bedroom, Grandma Jean shooed Gandalf, the gray tabby, off the blanket and laid folded towels at the end of my bed. “I don’t think anyone except you has stayed in the guest room in five years.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Nah. Other people are vastly overrated. You’re an exception, of course.” Grandma Jean closed the paisley curtains and pulled a large plastic storage tub from under the bed. “Help me get this into the front room.”

The Tupperware must have been close to fifty years old but had weathered well. The stuff was as tough as titanium, just like Grandma Jean. I dragged the tub over the shag rug and through the narrow hallway.

“I have my most valuable keepsakes in here,” she said.

I curled up next to the tub on the floor. As a child, I’d looked through it. It contained pictures, flyers, books, and handwritten notes from women Grandma Jean had worked with at a women’s rights organization.

“My years with the South Side Political Alliance for Women—we called ourselves the South PAWs—were the best years of my life. And the worst.” She ran her fingers over the tub’s dusty lid. “I bet you college students marched in a lot of protests when the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*.”

I shook my head. “There were several rallies on campus, on both sides, but I didn’t go to any of them.”

Gram looked up, surprise registering on her face. “You haven’t been protesting the Dobbs decision?”

My ears burned. “I was really busy, Gram. Studying. Working.”

Grandma Jean nodded. “College is hard, I know. But what the politicians have done—the laws restricting women’s rights to their own bodies—it affects your generation most of all.”

I knew Gram had a point. Some girls in my high school and college had abortions—a few after being raped. Still, I kept making excuses. “I have to figure out a career. I’ve applied to a Ph.D. program in Houston. UT Health Sciences is recognized internationally for research in epigenetics.”

“Texas,” Gram mumbled. She shuffled the papers in the Tupperware tub into piles. “Of course, you have to do what you think is best. You’ll be a great scientist, I’m sure. Not like me—a bureaucratic number cruncher in a bloated city government.”

“Oh, Gram. I didn’t mean anything like that.”

Grandma Jean reached over and patted my hand. “Follow your passion. That’s what’s important. Don’t let fear stop you.” She picked up a picture frame. “I want to show you a picture of the storefront at Eighteenth and Western. I found it years ago on a dusty shelf in the back of the South PAWs’ headquarters—the same building.”

“The property you’re buying?”

“Yes. She told me to buy it.”

“She?”

“I’m certain my paternal grandmother is in the photo.”

I tried to hide my frown. The voices again. “And she’s the one who spoke to you?”

Grandma Jean stroked the old picture frame. “Suffragettes,” she said. “1920. Posing by the storefront. I’m certain one is my grandmother. She *has* to be.” She pointed a shaky finger at a young woman in an elaborate white dress standing with other suffragettes. The woman looked like a young version of Gram.

“Why does one of the suffragettes have to be your grandmother?”

“It would explain a lot about my dad’s family.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Something important.” Gram sighed—a wheeze, really. “My Aunt Joanna was nice. She and another aunt lived on the North Side. My mother called them ‘well-to-do.’ It bugged my dad that they had money.”

Before I could ask more, a knock rattled the back door.

“Jean? I know you’re in there. Unlock the door.” I recognized the voice: Grandma’s widowed neighbor, Eddy Hannigan, calling through the back door screen. “I made canapés—Swiss cheese melted on rye crackers with baby gherkins. I’ve got a bottle of wine too. Your favorite—white zinfandel. C’mon, Jean. We can sit outside if you’d like.”

Eddy came by every day, it seemed, plying my grandmother with gifts of greasy food, gooey sweets, and what she appreciated most, wine. He listened as much as he talked and was a genius with every hand and power tool known to man. Gram had him to thank for the repairs that kept her house standing.

Opening the back screen door, Grandma Jean motioned Eddy to one of two plastic chairs on the six-by-six-foot patio. “Bring us three glasses, Dani,” she said. “The plastic ones on the first shelf.”

I placed the wine glasses on an aluminum TV tray and settled on a stool at the patio’s edge. Eddy began to unwrap the plate he’d brought.

“Don’t get too comfortable, Eddy,” Grandma Jean said. “You’re not staying very long. I’m making stir fry for dinner and have to wash and drain the Swiss chard and press the tofu.”

Eddy winked at me. “Do you really like to eat that kind of stuff? I guess kids nowadays are into the whole vegan thing. Me, I’d rather have a nice meatloaf.” When my grandmother frowned, Eddy added, “But for the pleasure of your company at dinner, I’d eat nothing but garbanzo beans for the rest of my life.”

“You’re not invited to dinner. It’s just the two of us. Dani will be living with me for a while. She might go to graduate school.”

Eddy poured wine into the three plastic glasses. “Graduate school, eh? What are you going to study?”

“Human genetics. A subspecialty, actually. Epigenetics.”

Eddy grinned. “Dani sure is smart—and pretty too. Had to be, being your granddaughter.”

Grandma reached over the appetizers and picked up a glass of wine. “Dani can be anything she wants. Scientist. FBI agent. Investigative journalist. She could work for *Sixty Minutes*. They need some new blood in TV.”

“I hope all your wishes come true,” he said, his glass raised toward me. “And yours, too, Jean.”

Grandma Jean swallowed more wine. “This zinfandel doesn’t taste as good as before.”

Eddy shrugged. “It’s what I’ve always bought.”

“My wish will come true sooner rather than later,” Gram said.

Eddy’s eyes narrowed a bit, but the smile remained on his broad face. “You did it, then? You bought the property?”

“The closing’s tomorrow at a bank out in Cicero.”

“That’s more than twenty miles from here. Are you taking I-90 to the Stevenson Expressway? I know you don’t like driving superhighways. Let me drive you there—I don’t have any plans.”

My grandmother hesitated for a brief moment. “No, no. Dani has a car. I’ll pay for her gas.”

“Grandma Jean, you don’t have to pay me for—”

“Dani’s a great girl.” Eddy picked up an appetizer.

With a scoff, Grandma Jean plopped her wine glass onto the TV tray. “She’s a young woman, and don’t you forget it. Men are so arrogant, thinking all females are weak and helpless.”

“Gram, I don’t think he meant—”

“C’mon, Jean, you know I don’t think a woman needs a man to protect her. My wife, God rest her soul, wasn’t weak. She was stronger than me right up to the end.”

Grandma Jean nodded. “Stronger than any of us. I don’t know how I could have raised a daughter without Donna’s help. You were both good neighbors to me. It just feels wrong to have only you left.”

“You paid Donna back with interest after the surgeries when the chemo and radiation knocked the wind out of her. She made me promise to take care of you after she was gone.”

“You’ve told me that already.” Grandma Jean’s voice was curt, gruff.

I remembered Donna. She and Grandma Jean were like sisters but without sibling rivalry. Compared to my grandmother, Donna had always looked fragile, undoubtedly from battling cancer. Now, years later, my grandma was the frail one.

Eddy picked up another appetizer. “I know, I know,” he said. “These aren’t good for me. Too much cholesterol and carbohydrates, and I don’t need more calories. I’ll skimp on dinner, I promise. In fact, you could invite me to have dinner with you and Dani so you’ll know I don’t overeat.” Eddy grinned. “Just holler over the fence when dinner is ready.” I smiled; I’d heard him say that dozens of times.

Grandma Jean looked at her watch. “I’m busy. You should go. I hear that lazy dog of yours whining for its dinner.”

Plate of appetizers in hand, Eddy left the wine bottle on the TV tray. “I did have an ulterior motive for coming over. I thought we might go to Tampier Lake on Friday. Dani should come too. It’ll only take us thirty or forty minutes to drive there, and the weather is supposed to be ten degrees cooler by then. We could take a rowboat out and have some ice cream on the drive back.”

“No. I’ll be too busy. And you shouldn’t be rowing on a lake. Seventy-seven years old, obese—”

When a flicker of hurt crossed Eddy’s face, Gram softened her tone. “Chubby, I meant to say. You’re in a high-risk category for a heart attack

or worse.” She reached for a cigarette from the pack resting on the window sill.

Eddy moved toward the gap in the fence leading to his yard. “I’d like for you to take care of yourself too. We could take care of each other.”

With a dismissive hand wave, Grandma Jean carried the wine bottle inside. I trailed close behind. “Gram, I think Eddy was just trying to be nice.”

My grandmother erupted into a hacking cough. Gandalf scooted from the kitchen into the hallway.

“Your lungs sound worse than before.”

Another flippant hand wave. “You wash the chard while I prepare the tofu.”

Within thirty minutes, we settled at the kitchen table, ready to eat. “This stir fry tastes really good,” I said. The zippy flavor of the tofu, chard, and mushrooms surprised me.

“The secret is the soy sauce. I got it from a place on 111th. It’s their old family recipe, passed down for generations in China.” Grandma Jean looked pensive for a moment. “That reminds me. Have you heard anything about those ancestry tests we took? You’re sure it’s safe, aren’t you? Our genes won’t fall into the wrong hands?”

“The results came by email this morning, and something is interesting. But, to be clear, the company doesn’t sequence all our DNA. They look for single nucleotide polymorphisms—just a few base pair variations.” I paused. My grandma’s eyes had glazed over. “Don’t worry about the technical stuff.”

“This is too bland.” Grandma Jean pushed her dinner plate away, the stir fry half-eaten. “I know a scientist at the University of Chicago who does all that genetics stuff. Mel Arnstein. I haven’t seen her for years. She called herself Mel, not Amelia. People thought she was a man. Remember how people used to think you were a little boy named Danny?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“I see you don’t have a nose ring anymore. Did it get infected?”

I licked my fork. “Nope. And no one made me take it out. I just got tired of it, I guess.”

“Did you get tired of your purple hair too? You looked good in purple—better than the coal-black hair you had a couple of years ago. This auburn color you have now is nice. It goes with your blue eyes.”

I laughed and poured a bit more white zinfandel into our wine glasses. “It’s my natural color.”

My grandmother giggled. “Don’t tell Gloria I said that. She’ll think I can’t recognize my own family.”

“I won’t, Gram.” I squeezed her hand; it was still cool to the touch. “Tell me more about this Chicago landmark you’ll buy tomorrow.”

“The red brick house and adjacent storefront were built in 1888, intended to anchor a gentrified neighborhood for railroad executives. But, by the turn of the century, it was a general store.”

“A general store? Like for selling kerosene lamps and rye flour?”

Gram nodded. “Years ago, a man told me a young Polish couple owned the store. The Polish Women’s Alliance met there each week. Later, it was a brick cutter’s warehouse and a civil rights headquarters when I was there.”

“And now?”

Grandma Jean squirmed. “Well, it has potential despite what it might look like.”

“And what does it look like? A boarded-up eyesore frequented by drug dealers and prostitutes?”

“It looks like a place of redemption.” She poked a fork into a lump of chard on her plate.

“What does that mean, Gram? Redemption for whom? You?” I studied her sunken eyes. Had the voices in her head talked about her needing to atone?

“Maybe. To prove I can do something important. And to make sure I hadn’t . . .” Gram pressed her lips together, and her eyebrows pinched into a frown.

“Make sure you hadn’t what?”

“I meant, um, show all the naysayers they were wrong about me.”

“Why would anyone think badly of you? All the obstacles you faced—yet you succeeded as a single mom and had a good-paying job with the city.”

Grandma Jean’s gaze wandered to the cotton curtains fluttering at the sink window. “Back in 1970, I tried to be a part of something big, to promote equal rights. I failed and had to abandon the dream back then. This is my last chance. I just hope nothing goes wrong.”

I swallowed the last of the stir fry on my plate. It was, indeed, very spicy. Grandma Jean’s taste buds must be losing their sensitivity if she thought it too bland.

“What do you think could go wrong?”

“Your mother. Gloria might find a way to stop my property purchase. She’d convince the bank I’m not of sound mind. She did that with my doctor last year—attempted to, anyway.”

My mother’s meddling in Gram’s affairs didn’t surprise me. “What did Mom say to your doctor?”

“She asked him to send me to a retirement home because she and your dad moved to Georgia. I foiled that coup. The South Side of Chicago has been my home for fifty years, and I intend to die here.”

The last sentence prickled the little hairs on the back of my neck. Sure, seventy-something sounded ancient, but my grandma didn’t seem old. She acted too tough to age.

We carried our dishes to the sink, and Gram took a pack of Marlboros from the top drawer. “Would you mind washing the dishes?” she said. “I’m feeling a bit tired and need to get some sleep so I can get up early.”

“Sure, Gram. I’ll clean up since you cooked.” My grandmother walked unsteadily into the other room. I hated to admit it, but my mother’s concerns might not be completely unfounded. Still, I’d promised to be there for Gram, and she’d be disappointed in me if I didn’t keep my word.

The closing on the property brought no surprises. Grandma Jean had hesitated, just for a moment, when the banker read the dollar amount on the document. Still, she penned her name with determination and beamed when handed the packet of signed papers. Later, on the ride to Eighteenth and Western, she sang some unidentifiable songs from back in the day. Grandma Jean couldn't carry a tune.

We stood on Western Avenue facing the one-story storefront. It had served many purposes but now sat neglected—the red brick exterior worn by the elements and several windows boarded up. Under a thick coat of dirt, the concrete foundation sported a spiderweb of fissures.

"We'll see clients in the front by the windows," Grandma Jean said, keys in hand. "Help the women start a business or organize their community. In the back, we'll have private meeting rooms for victims of domestic violence and those needing, um, confidential advice." She sniffed and wiped her cheek.

I stroked my grandma's back and took the keys from her hands. "Those are great services. A lot of great services. But do you have staff—volunteers—to help?" I unlocked the flimsy padlock on the storefront and pushed the door open. A fetid gush of stale air encircled us.

"It's been vacant for a while," my grandmother said, stepping across the threshold.

"When was the last time you were in here?"

Grandma Jean didn't answer at first. "I was twenty-one," she finally said. "I was angry. Bitter."

"About what, Gram?"

She stared into a corner. "That's where I threw pencils at him. They just bounced off his chest."

"Whose chest?"

"Burgess Mueller. I've tried to forget him, but he's been creeping around my thoughts lately." My grandmother shook her head. "Enough of the past."

I stepped from the sunlit doorway and through the rubble to wander the sickly green, shelf-lined room. “So, Gram—about recruiting volunteers. We could post on social media and set up a GoFundMe page. I’ll put something on Facebook, too, if you want older people.” I stopped next to my grandmother’s silent figure. “Is something wrong, Grandma Jean?”

“Just memories. What did you say about Facebook? Eddy’s housekeeper—you remember her—did something for me with Facebook. She said she’ll be my first client because she wants to start her own company.”

I tapped my cell phone and scrolled. “Her post called your project a much-needed neighborhood shelter. It’s gotten several dozen likes and comments.”

“Let me see.” Grandma Jean stepped over a chunk of mildewed ceiling plaster.

I forced my frown to relax and tucked my phone into the pocket of my cut-off jeans. “We can look at them later.”

“Something you don’t want to show me?”

“All posts get negative comments. One person talked about the South PAWs and how it folded in the early seventies. Really nasty words. And I thought kids were mean.”

My grandmother turned to the doorway as a shadow darkened the sunlight streaming in. “Susan Mueller.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know her full name. Her handle is @MsSusanM.”

“So, Jean, you’ve come back to the scene of the crime,” said the woman in the doorway.