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Babe in Paradise

No Direction Home

The God of War

Alone with You

Mary Coin

Little Nothing

The Mysteries

AT LAST

a novel

MARISA SILVER

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For Ken, always

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ONE

ARRANGEMENTS

Omaha, Nebraska, 1971

Helene supposed Ruth had been some sort of hippie. Or maybe it all had something to do with women's liberation. She couldn't think of how it might relate to Vietnam, but she was sure that Ruth had found some way to make the connection. Something about imperialism or capitalism. The way she had it, you couldn't buy a pair of shoes without having to acknowledge imperialism, or capitalism, or—what was that other thing she was always going on about?—*advertising*. As if a person had no mind of her own when, in fact, Helene had bought the blue leather pumps with the small gold buckles she was wearing right now because she *liked* navy blue, and because the buckle made things a little more formal, and because, in her opinion, a mature but slightly festive pump was appropriate for the wedding of Ruth, this tall and rashly opinionated girl, to Tom, Helene's otherwise responsible son.

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Whatever the girl's reasoning was, nothing about this wedding was appropriate. For one thing, it was taking place in a public park in the middle of winter. All right, she conceded, it was the end of March, but all it took was one look outside the car window, where sooty patches of snow clung to the grassy verge, to know that the lamb had not replaced the lion in Omaha, Nebraska, a city Helene had never been to before, and from the grim looks of it, one she would never need to visit again. For another, Ruth and Tom were not going to be married by a rabbi but by a judge who was, according to Tom, somebody one of Ruth's sisters had heard about.

She wanted to speak of these things now, to commiserate about the weather, and the judge, and everything else about this unconventional wedding, but she barely knew Ruth's mother, who was driving, tapping her fingers impatiently on the wheel to let Helene know she'd rather be doing anything else than taking her on this errand. Evelyn Turner. Which was certainly not an authentic name, Helene thought. Of course, there had been a time, years ago, when she hadn't liked the idea of being saddled with the name Simonauer for the rest of her life, but it had become something to be proud of, hadn't it? A declaration. Especially after the war. At any rate, she'd met this Evelyn Turner only hours earlier and now she was allowing herself to be driven (a little recklessly, she thought, as the woman turned left into a line of not-distant-enough oncoming traffic) to a florist shop so that Helene could perform her "job" for the wedding.

Which was how Tom and Ruth had put it, back in Cleveland six months ago, when they told her that she would be in charge of the flowers. "You have such good taste," Ruth had said. This might have been a compliment or not. It was hard

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to tell with the girl, who always seemed to be saying one thing and meaning the very opposite. Whenever Tom brought her to the house, she wandered through the rooms, complimenting the decorative bowls on the coffee table or the silver vases on the dining room sideboard, but Helene knew the girl was judging her, one object at a time.

After Tom and Ruth described her meager role—they were not even having a rehearsal dinner for her to host, which seemed to Helene the least they could do on her account—Tom had looked at her with such eagerness. He wanted her approval, not only of this idea that her sole contribution to the wedding should be a few bunches of flowers, but also of his choice of wife. Helene did the best she could. Hadn't she gone out of her way to compliment Ruth's outfit that day? Those bell-bottom slacks? That—what was it called—poncho?

"I thought maybe you could pick out my bouquet, too," Ruth had added, uncharacteristically demure. *Bouquet* was such a genteel word that Helene wondered if irony was involved. Tom, touched by Ruth's sudden shyness, took her hand just the way he'd taken Helene's two years earlier, at his father's funeral. Then, she'd been stunned by the sudden reversals in her life. Her husband dead. Her son acting as her protector. The whole thing had made her feel claustrophobic and she was relieved when the service was over. But, oh—the expression on Tom's face as he waited for her to agree to the wedding plan. He reminded her of nothing so much as himself as a little boy when, after behaving badly, he'd look at her with those dark, wet eyes, desperate for her to reassure him that she loved him despite his naughtiness.

Once Ruth came into the picture, Helene let go of her as-

sumption that her son would wed one of the perfectly reasonable Cleveland girls he'd dated in high school or college. Those girls, sensing Tom's devotion to his mother, courted Helene's favor with deference and a suitable restraint of personality. She'd also let go of the idea that the wedding would take place in the darkly potent sanctuary in University Circle with its domed ceiling, its difficult pews, and the provocatively obscure choir loft that, if it didn't approximate heaven, made a person feel at least proportional. But she had not come to terms with the fact that any normal idea of a wedding, one a mother might reasonably expect, had been jettisoned.

For instance: Ruth had decided that she would not walk down an aisle. In fact, the folding chairs would be arranged in the park so that there would be no aisle at all. *I'm not*, she said, *a sheep to the slaughter!* She also decided that the idea of being given away was, in her word, *gross*. Which seemed, to Helene, a funny way for a young woman about to finish a PhD in Germanic and Slavic languages to express herself. *Gross* was the favorite word of every child Helene tutored at the after-school reading program where she volunteered. *This snack is gross. This homework is gross.* And even, from one particularly distractable eight-year-old boy: *You smell gross.*

Which she most certainly did not, she reminded herself, as Evelyn accelerated through a yellow light. Helene brought a hand to her ear, ostensibly to adjust her large pearl earring, but really so that she could sniff her wrist and assure herself of the fact that her smell was, and had been for nearly thirty years, the unimpeachably floral scent of L'Air du Temps.

Evelyn pressed the cigarette lighter below the dashboard. "Do you mind?" she asked.

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“Not at all,” Helene said, though she did. The car already smelled strongly of residual smoke that would certainly become trapped in the fibers of her good wool coat. She grew increasingly uncomfortable as Evelyn glanced away from the road to fish a cigarette out of her purse, put it between her lips, then reach for the lighter. She guided the glowing coil to the tip, steering with one hand by making small, sharp motions back and forth as if she were driving by feel.

“My husband died in a car accident,” Helene said. She’d taken to using this explanation with strangers. It allowed for a straightforward sympathy without the diminishing effect of the excitement people felt when presented with a truth that beggared belief. A car crash had the added advantage of making Helene a double victim, first of the loss, and then of the car companies, or the gasoline companies, or whoever it was that benefited from a highway speed limit more suited to race car drivers than actual people. In the two years since Emil’s death, she’d become a hesitant driver, heavy-footed with the brakes, as if she believed the story herself.

“Yes,” Evelyn said. “Ruth mentioned it.” She drew deeply on her cigarette before she put her hand back on the wheel.

An accident. *Well*, Evelyn thought, exhaling a stream of smoke, *that was one way to put it*. According to Ruth, the man had been crushed to death by a tree. Sitting in his car. In his own driveway. Not so much an accident as lousy timing. But then, timing was the whole kit and caboodle, wasn’t it? Look at Ruth. Two years ago, she met a young man on the street, and now they were getting married. If either she or Tom had been at

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that same spot five minutes earlier or five minutes later, Evelyn would not be driving around with a woman who clutched her purse on her lap as if she thought Evelyn might steal it.

She drew smoke deep into her lungs. The cigarette was a good choice. It made silence more acceptable. More than that, smoking made her feel farther away from the woman whose ample hips took up the other half of the bench seat and threatened to brush up against her own every time she took a curve. Well, maybe that was an exaggeration, but Tom's mother was solid as a block and she sure knew how to fill a space. Even when she'd arrived at the house that morning, a complete stranger, she behaved as if Evelyn were lucky to take her coat and offer her a cup of coffee.

Evelyn pulled a right turn a little faster than was strictly necessary, and Helene grabbed the handle on her door. The woman wore the sort of hairdo that most people had given up on a decade ago, Evelyn thought. A set. A teased and sprayed bubble that had you sleeping like a mummy for a week between appointments so it would hold its shape. She wasn't as tall as Evelyn had expected given that Tom was well over six feet. He must have gotten his height from the dead father. Although, who knew? Ruth was much taller than either she or Frank, taller than her sisters, who called her "stork" when she was young. This was nasty, but also true, because Ruth had those long, impossibly thin legs that went right up to her hips without flaring. She had a habit of holding her head high with her chin slightly forward. Ever since she was a little girl, she stood this way. As if she wanted to be the first one to see what was coming.

Anyway, the smoking allowed Evelyn not to bother herself with the kind of conversational jawing that would allow this

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woman to report back to whomever she would report back to in Cleveland that *Ruth's mother was a lovely woman*. Evelyn was not a lovely woman. She didn't try to be and never had. Smart—yes. Able to smell when someone was trying to put something over on her—you bet. Especially once Frank died (of very un-accidental heart disease, thank you very much) and it seemed like every other repairman were either flirting with her or trying to charge her double, or both. People thought a woman lost half her brain when her husband died. In fact, Evelyn had never felt quite so sharp.

No doubt, Helene was waiting for Evelyn to say something consoling about the dead husband. She was probably hoping that the two of them could make some sort of friendship based on their shared bad luck. Well, Evelyn wasn't interested in the sisterhood of widows. She hadn't been when Frank died six years earlier, and she wasn't now. All those women inviting her to lunches that ended in teary hugs. Their tedious belief that the world had given them a bum steer. People died. It happened every day of the week. You pulled up your big-girl pants. You got on with it.

She wasn't wild about the idea that Tom's mother would be living in her home for the next two days. It was going to be awkward. They would have to, inevitably, have *conversations* about God-knows-what. Evelyn would need to get dressed before she came out of her bedroom because she'd be damned if the woman was going to see her in her bathrobe without makeup. Wasn't there such a thing as a hotel? The house was full enough as it was. Ruth and Tom had been spending the week leading up to the wedding in Ruth's old room. They'd pushed the twin beds together, which was fine by Evelyn. She

wasn't born yesterday, or the day before that. But apparently Helene was, and now that she was going to be staying over, Tom would sleep on the pullout in the basement. Paula and that husband of hers would be driving in from Lincoln later in the afternoon, so that took care of Paula's old room. Ruth would get her bedroom to herself before the wedding—fair enough. But inconvenient, because it meant that Helene would have to take Naomi's room, and Naomi, home from Kearney State for the week, would have to sleep with Evelyn. Thinking about it made Evelyn shudder. She hadn't shared a bed with another person since Frank, and the idea of sleeping next to her twenty-four-year-old middle daughter, of hearing her breathe, of their bodies accidentally touching in the night—well, she and her girls weren't in the habit of hugs and cuddles, were they? And what was wrong with that? Evelyn hadn't gotten that sort of thing from her mother and she'd turned out just fine.

She glanced at her watch. It was already one-fifteen. She should be home boiling two dozen eggs and peeling beets. She should be dragging the leaves for her dining room table out of the garage, ironing napkins, and cleaning her serving platters, which she hardly used. There came a point in life where you just said to hell with all that pretending and you dished food right out of the pots you made it in. There came another point where you didn't even bother to bring the pots to the table, and you told Ruth, Naomi, and Paula to fill their plates at the stove. And then, you gave up on the whole thing and told your daughters that if they wanted to eat, they could pour a bowl of cereal. This happened when Frank stopped feeling strong enough to come downstairs for meals. Cooking, sitting at the table with her girls, and listening to them talk about their plans for the

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weekend or who stole whose eye shadow made the charade of a family dinner feel like she was holding on for dear life when dear life had already let go.

Stopping at a red light, she suddenly felt exhausted. She'd lain awake half the night before, listening to Ruth and Tom argue. This morning, the two of them were overly considerate as they made breakfast, apologizing when they got into one another's way. *Do you want your eggs runny or firm?* Ruth said. Had Evelyn ever heard her daughter ask such a question? Ruth would decide what kind of eggs she wanted, and that's what everyone else would get. But there she was, fluttering around the kitchen, doing a bad impersonation of Donna Reed. It was a terrible thing to watch. Well, whatever they'd fought about was none of Evelyn's business. Ruth and Tom would work it out or they wouldn't. And even if they worked it out now they'd come up against it again, because the first problem in a relationship is always the last problem. Evelyn had warned her girls about that. She'd sat through enough dull conversations with her friends as they complained about their husbands for the very same reasons they'd whined about them from the start. Sure, you could teach a man to lower the toilet lid after he did his business. But people did not, fundamentally, change. She and Frank hadn't had any marital problems, but his father died of the very same heart disease at the very same age. That bomb had started ticking on day one.

Except whatever was going on with Ruth and Tom *was* her business because Tom was supposed to take his mother to Sonya's shop for the flowers. But then Ruth, still busy making up for the night before, decided that she and Tom had to spend the day before their wedding together, driving around to see her childhood haunts, which left Evelyn with the job of chauffeuring this—

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Was the woman saying something now?

"I'm sorry?" Evelyn said.

"What?" Helene said.

"Did you say something?"

"No."

"I thought I heard—"

"You didn't."

Helene hoped she had not inadvertently spoken her thoughts, which were less than charitable. She'd mentioned her husband's death, and Evelyn Turner offered nothing in return. No kind thoughts or an acknowledgment that Helene's letting go of her only son not two years after Emil's passing or traveling to Omaha and putting her life in the hands of a fast-driving cigarette fiend so that she could make her meager contribution to this patched-together wedding should be counted as acts of heroism. "And I was sorry to hear that Ruth's father has also passed," she said. "Tom told me everything, of course," she added, not wanting to be the only one whose life was discussed in absentia.

"It wasn't a surprise," Evelyn said. "He was sick for a long time."

"But you can never really prepare for these things, can you?"

"Of course you can," Evelyn said, taking the final puff on her cigarette then stubbing it out in the ashtray. Helene watched as Evelyn did something that made it look like a tongue of smoke was licking her nostrils. It was a trick of some kind, Helene thought, and it was meant to be belittling in the way of all tricks.

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“Here we go,” Evelyn murmured, turning in to a shopping center, where small stores flanked a supermarket called Hinky Dinky.

Hinky Dinky, Helene thought as Evelyn parked the car. Tom was marrying a girl who came from a place where people said things like, *I have to run over to Hinky Dinky’s*. This whole thing was impossible.

The temperature had dropped since they left Evelyn’s house, and once she was out of the car, Helene pulled at the lapels of her coat to protect her neck. She should have worn a scarf. She had a good constitution, but she was also fifty-seven years old, and it was foolish for a person to take unnecessary risks. Evelyn looked younger, with her tight skin and her slim figure. Maybe she was one of those dieters Helene read about in magazines at the hair salon. Women who did nothing but eat grapefruit morning, noon, and night. She was wearing a lightweight trench coat and—how had Helene not noticed this before?—the woman’s legs were bare! She was not wearing hose! With a mother like this, it was no wonder Ruth thought that getting married outside in the freezing cold was a fine idea. And it was also no wonder that Evelyn Turner appeared to be unbothered by the fact that *her* assigned task for the wedding was to prepare egg salad sandwiches and her “famous borscht” for the postwedding luncheon at her house. That’s how Tom had put it back in Cleveland when Helene, coming to grips with her assigned task, asked what Ruth’s mother’s job would be. He and Ruth had smiled at one another, sharing some private knowledge about this soup, and Helene realized that Tom had begun to adopt Ruth’s family lore as his own. Could he boast about his mother’s famous anything? Most of what he’d eaten during his

childhood had been prepared by Erna, who was a wonderful cook. Helene chose the recipes, of course. But you didn't brag about your mother's meal plans, did you?

Famous borscht. She wanted to say those words out loud. She could say, *I hear you're making your famous borscht* and let the implication sink in, but she was too busy trying to keep up with Evelyn, who walked quickly across the parking lot toward a florist Helene knew nothing about. She'd spent her entire adulthood developing relationships with the people she did business with. Her florist in Shaker Heights, her hairdresser, her dry cleaner, her mailman. These people knew her customs and tastes. They sent notes to remind her when it was time to think about the Passover flowers or store her coats for the summer. And in return, she always remembered to ask about someone's ailing mother and give their children little holiday gifts. These were gestures. But they were important. They were how things worked. Wasn't that true when, just the other day, Paul—no, it was Jeffrey now—had pulled up in his mail truck just as she was backing out of the driveway, and she'd bothered to stop and ask after his son in the army? And couldn't she be sure that on a day of rain or snowfall, Jeffrey would bring her mail right to the door rather than leave it in the mailbox?

But now she was going to have to buy flowers, probably the most important flowers she'd ever buy in her life, from a perfect stranger. Who, the minute Helene stepped foot in the store, came flying out from behind the counter and threw her arms around her.

"Helene! It's so nice to finally meet! Evvy has told me so much about you!"

Helene's confusion and the shock of being manhandled by

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this stranger put her in a frozen state where all she could do was wait out the embrace. “I’m not sure how much she could have told you,” she said when the woman finally released her. “We’ve only just met.”

“Well, she certainly told me about Ruth and Tom,” the woman said. “Your son,” she added, raising her voice as if she thought Helene might be deaf, or daft, or both.

“I’m aware,” Helene said.

“Don’t mind Sonya,” Evelyn said. “She’s the enthusiastic one.”

And suddenly, Helene understood. Evelyn had not just brought her to any flower shop, but to one owned by her very own sister.

Sonya suddenly clapped her hands to signal a transition. “So, what were you thinking?” she said. “We figured four arrangements for the park to define the space. And then we bring them back to the house. That way you don’t even have to bother with a centerpiece.”

“Kill two birds,” Evelyn said.

“It’s cheaper that way, too,” Sonya said. “Although don’t worry on that score. You’re getting the family rate.”

Did she wink?

“I’m prepared to pay whatever the flowers are worth,” Helene said.

“Well, that’s just it, isn’t it?” Sonya said. “What’s a thing worth? You read the market, consider profit margins and your overhead, then you set a price. But there’s more to it, isn’t there? There’s the emotional piece. A man buying flowers for his wife on Valentine’s Day doesn’t want to look like a penny-pincher, does he? He doesn’t want me to think he’s trying to get away

with something. And the funny thing is, his wife's not going to have any idea how much he paid for those roses. But he walks out of the shop a little puffed up knowing how much he spent."

"Men," Evelyn said.

Helene thought it was distasteful to talk about money this way. When she'd bought the very shoes she was wearing, she and the salesman had talked about all sorts of things: that the shoes would complement the dress she'd wear to the wedding, that Tom had been hired by an investment firm in downtown Cleveland straight out of business school, that the house he and Ruth had picked out was not in Shaker, but it wasn't too far away. By the time she walked out the door with her shopping bag, she couldn't remember money changing hands.

"And then you think about the competition," Sonya continued. "What their prices are set at. You know, here's a funny thing: you have two flower shops side by side—and I've seen this with my own eyes—and one sells the same tulips as the other for a few dollars less. Nine out of ten times a customer will pay the higher price at the other shop. And you know why? Because they think there must be something wrong with the cheaper bunch."

"You can't make a fool think smart," Evelyn said.

Sonya went to the cooler at the back of the shop and took one fully arranged vase of flowers after another from its shelves, then placed them on the counter near the cash register. Helene realized that her contribution to the wedding was more insignificant than she thought. All the decisions had been made. The approving smile on Evelyn's face told her everything. Helene was nothing more than a checkbook.

Sonya described the roses and chrysanthemums that made

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up the arrangements, telling Helene which flowers would let off a scent, which bore some significance to the occasion. “Forget-me-nots,” she said, laying the tip of her finger on a petal. “A nice sentiment for a wedding, don’t you think?”

“I think if they’re worried about forgetting each other they have some things to work out,” Evelyn said. “Which I think they do, by the way, given last night’s performance. I could barely sleep.”

“Those were just the jitters,” Sonya said.

“Maybe,” Evelyn said.

Helene had no idea what they were talking about, but she refused to ask and betray her ignorance. “My son is very loyal,” she said.

“Oh, we all like Tom,” Evelyn said. “Don’t worry about that.”

“I brought him up very well,” Helene said.

“Very,” Evelyn said.

Helene felt that she was being mocked. “I’m afraid to say, none of these arrangements are what I was thinking of.”

“Oh,” Sonya said, disappointed. She looked at the flowers sadly, as if she were worried their feelings were hurt. Then her expression shifted and she became avid and alive to the challenge. “Not a problem,” she said. “The customer is always right. Tell me what you have in mind.”

The truth was that Helene had given no thought to the flowers at all. She felt Sonya and Evelyn waiting for her answer. She looked at the four vases, all of them bulging with stems and buds and greenery.

“Something not quite so . . . busy,” she said. “And less . . . red.”

Evelyn sighed. "I'm going to run over to Hinky's. I need paprika."

"Her egg salad really is delicious," Sonya said after Evelyn was out the door. She had a wry sort of smile on her face, as if she could read Helene's thoughts.

"The borscht," Helene said.

"I know what you're thinking. Stains."

"I didn't want to say."

"Well, at least the bride isn't wearing white," Sonya said in a tone that made Helene sure that she, too, thought the peasantry nightgown-looking dress Ruth had chosen was a mistake. They were quiet for a moment.

"So," Sonya said, gazing at her rejected bouquets, "what should we do?"

For the first time all day, Helene felt that someone was on her side. "Maybe you can show me your more exotic flowers," she said. "Things you don't see all the time."

"Well, to tell you the truth, we don't carry anything that unusual. It's not what people here are generally looking for."

Helene heard a small defeat in the woman's voice. She understood the way in which Sonya's bright gregariousness was only a cover for a more long-standing yearning.

"Most people aren't very imaginative, I'm afraid," Sonya said. "They want to play it safe."

"Roses are safe," Helene said. "Carnations are safe."

"Carnations!" Sonya said. "If I have to do another arrangement of carnations for a funeral, I'll shoot myself!"

"Then we'll know what flowers *not* to have at yours," Helene said.

Sonya laughed. Helene felt pleased with herself. She walked

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over to the cooler and opened the door. "Let's have a look," she said.

"Just don't blame me for the orange daisies and the baby's breath," Sonya said, her ebullience returning.

Helene spent the next ten minutes pulling various stems from buckets and laying them side by side on Sonya's worktable. It was a job to try to make something unique with what the woman stocked, arrangements that people would talk about years from now: *Remember those stunning flowers at Tom and Ruth's wedding? Did you know his mother chose them?* And that was the point, wasn't it, she thought as she circled the worktable, placing one stem at a time into the vases, stepping back, judging, adjusting. A wedding was all about what would be remembered.

The door opened, and Evelyn came back into the shop.

"Got the secret ingredient?" Sonya asked.

Evelyn waggled the small paper bag in her hand then took in the new arrangements. Her impassivity made Helene feel that she needed to account for her choices, to explain that the stalwart willow bark was meant to symbolize, she thought, and Sonya had concurred, the strength of marital commitment. But now she was becoming angry. Why should she have to justify herself to this woman? What had she to prove to someone who thought a wedding lunch of soup and sandwiches was a good idea, a woman who didn't have enough control over her daughter to get her to hold her wedding in a temple, wearing a white dress, and standing in front of a rabbi, for heaven's sake?

"Are we done here?" Evelyn said, looking at her watch. "I've got to get a move on."

"I haven't chosen the bouquet," Helene said.

“What bouquet?” Evelyn asked.

“Ruth’s bouquet.” It wasn’t until this moment that Helene realized that, whether the request had been sincere or not, it was odd that Ruth had asked her to pick out the flowers that she would hold on her wedding day. Wasn’t this something a mother and daughter would want to do together? Clearly, Evelyn was not as lucky as Helene to have a child who still cared about her opinion. She felt sorry for the woman now, and she thought it would be a generous gesture to include Evelyn in the selection. Magnanimous, really! But what was the woman saying now?

“Oh, yes. Ruth and I decided it would be nice for you to pick out the bouquet,” Evelyn said. “Seeing as I’ve got three girls and you have only the one son.”

Was this true? Was this what had made Helene suspicious back in Cleveland when Ruth had asked? Was the girl’s flattery and diffidence only a strategy she and her mother had come up with together?

“Well, let’s see what we’ve got here,” Sonya said, walking back to investigate the cooler. “I’ve got just enough purple nemesia. Which we could mix with the sweet alyssum. Very delicate. I use that for a lot of my brides.”

“Ruth isn’t like a lot of brides,” Helene said.

“And why’s that?” Evelyn asked.

“Well, just look at her plans for the wedding! She wouldn’t want to carry something you see all the time in advertisements. Or something expensive, what with capitalism. Ruth isn’t that kind of girl, is she?”

The women fell silent. Sonya looked down at the floor as if preparing herself for her sister’s anger. She was the cheerful