

RUBIN---1
THICKER THAN BLOOD

CHAPTER ONE

SUNDAY, JULY 1, 2023

The woman walked.

She carried a small carry-on bag and a purse. Inside the bag was a magazine and a notebook about the size of a paperback novel. The notebook's binding was on the right side; she was left-handed.

While the plane was in the air and during the hours that had nothing in which to fill them she would make notes about her thoughts, anything at all. If that became too much of a burden the magazine would suffice. It was Life Magazine, always interesting, always pertinent.

The woman walked.

RUBIN---2
THICKER THAN BLOOD

On her way to the departure gate in Philadelphia International Airport, her shoes clicked on the soft grey carpet of Concourse C. The sound died in the carpet, a dull thud as it was absorbed.

She stopped at a counter and pushed a series of buttons.

She pushed her thumb on an oblique colored gel pad to pay, remembered a time when the purchase of airline tickets took days. Now it was the simplest transaction.

Ah, the advantages of age, sixty eight next month. She could hardly believe it and certainly didn't feel so old. Until she added up the years behind her, knew there were more than she had before her.

The man behind the counter smiled and said, "Aren't you the lucky one goin' on a trip?"

She noticed that they were about the same age, but that he looked older.

"Lucky. Yes, quite," she said.

He handed her a scanner, her ticket.

"Lydia Colemar. Your number will be 38762B. Gate number twelve, ahead to the dead end and make a left. Hope it's a good one."

"Thanks."

She collected her belongings and walked away from the

RUBIN---3
THICKER THAN BLOOD

counter.

Lydia Colemar walked with her back straight and her chin held high. Her blond hair was neatly brushed straight and to her chin, parted on the left. Though she only wore glasses for reading they remained on a golden chain about her neck. Her hands were adorned with a diamond bracelet and an outdated but solid gold watch. Something about the new gel power packs that just didn't measure up to the time-honored batteries. She resisted the gel packs with a determination that bordered on stubborn principle. It was very much in keeping for her, to resist on the basis of stubborn principle.

The diamond ring still accompanied the gold band on her third finger although the last marriage, her fourth, ended well over ten years earlier.

Her features were a measure of ivory, not stone. Her small nose never needed surgery. Her sensual lips were polished with a sheer shade of persimmon, just enough to shade.

Her adhesive cosmetics would not require reapplication for another two weeks, a sufficient amount of time to last the trip. She only intended to stay three days. If not she could have her cosmetics reapplied in California.

She considered herself lucky that age reduction had not been necessary yet, lucky if it lasted a few more years. At least now it was done by laser and not by, God Forbid, a scalpel and the

RUBIN---4
THICKER THAN BLOOD

whim of a human hand.

Lydia Colemar was five feet eight inches tall with clear blue eyes and a wide face with high cheekbones. Her chin didn't sag.

She stopped for a snack. The woman behind the register scowled at her.

Lydia was used to it, didn't let it bother her.

The woman behind the register missed Lydia's hand and dropped her change. A man stooped to pick it up for her.

"Here," he said. He looked at Lydia for a moment longer than necessary.

Lydia took the coins.

"Thank you." She turned to leave, walked out without regard to the cashier.

"That was nice. What was that, revenge?", the man asked the cashier.

Lydia was gone before she heard any further comment if there was one.

Her suit was obviously a Buccilli, the shoes Ferragamo, the bag Coach.

Lydia would say she remembered a time when she couldn't afford such luxuries.

That would be a blatant lie. She would say it with a perfectly straight face anyway. Even if the person to whom she

RUBIN---5
THICKER THAN BLOOD

swore it knew differently, Lydia would fully expect to be believed. She would even say that she earned every penny she ever got even if it wasn't easy keeping it along the way. There was a price for her comfort and it was not small by any means. She was well versed in difficulties, had heard her grandparents speak of such things when she was a child.

Kiosks made a mess of traffic in the concourse. People went around the lines for mid morning coffee and cakes. There was brisk walking in every direction and the sounds of announcements, shuffling, walking, talking, busy activity that made her traverse a maze.

Lydia Colemar walked on to the gate. She nibbled on her snack.

Through tinted steel windows she saw massive jets but didn't hear them. She saw the greyness of the sky but not the birds that perched on the tower. She saw the past but not the future, had no thought for what the next seventy two hours might bring.

She only knew what the last forty years had brought. Reason enough to get on that jet.

California.

The thought conjured so many images, so many labels.

California, still in one piece even though its demise had been predicted for years. Still there to taunt her, waiting for the day when she finally got on a plane to go.

RUBIN---6
THICKER THAN BLOOD

Today was that day.

Lydia walked.

People passed by her, some going the same way, some leaving the terminal.

No one lingered in an airport. She looked at them, felt invisible although she was not. She didn't notice side glances toward her, didn't notice those that turned back to watch her walk.

Each face that she saw had a determination, an assignment or reason to be at that spot at that moment. All had a destination, a purpose.

Lydia wondered if her own expression revealed the same sense of purpose. But it would be so easy to reverse direction and forget the years, the pain, the wondering.

But no. It had to be today. Today or never.

She raised her chin.

Lydia walked on.

She shifted her bags.

The que to check at the gate abated. People milled aimlessly as they waited. Others sat, read or dozed. A few prepared goodbyes.

Loud speaker announcements warned with a garbled but practiced lilt of arrivals and departures.

Windows shook as engines revved.

RUBIN---7
THICKER THAN BLOOD

All around were suitcases, briefcases, newspapers, magazines, shopping bags filled to overflowing. Wrappers and coffee cups, sugar packets and straws were strewn there and about Philadelphia International Airport on this busy Sunday morning.

She saw the sign that read Los Angeles. She did a mental count; four children, forty-five others, give or take a few. She looked out the window and saw the pilots in the nose of the jet. They checked their systems, reached for switches.

Lydia found a seat and got herself comfortable. She pressed her thumb onto her ticket until the gel beneath the surface changed from an oblique grey to an astounding shade of blue, lapis blue. She looked to the woman behind the dias who said into a communicator, "Number 38762B."

Lydia nodded her assent to the woman when their eyes caught sight of each other.

The woman nodded. "Confirmed. Flight number 9745 to Los Angeles will now board. Those with a blue scanner may enter the plane at this time. Those with orange scanners may board second, followed by those with scanners as follows; yellow, green, and then red. Those with white scanners, please be prepared to wait another ten minutes or so. Your cooperation is appreciated. Skyway Airlines would like to take this opportunity to welcome you aboard this morning. Our flight time is estimated at six hours due to strong headwinds. Any passengers who might prefer to

RUBIN---8
THICKER THAN BLOOD

arrive in Los Angeles in two hours may make arrangements for the Star Shuttle at the ticket counter at this time. Your payment from flight 9745 will be applied to the cost of the ticket and departure time is in thirty-five minutes. There are still six available seats."

Lydia saw two men agree to change flights as she entered the tube attached to the jet. She entered the plane and was directed to her seat by the attendant who then arranged her bags.

Inside the plane the expansive terminal collapsed to its inner opposite. A tight insulated vacuum muffled by engine rotation made Lydia's ears close. Tight seats and the stale fresh air of travel mingled with aromas of brewing coffee and too-sweet cologne.

It was all fresh, perfect, comfortable, safe.

Blue seats, blue sky. Blue curtains, soothing.

Perky Muzak.

The movement of adjustment was all around her as passengers embarked. There was luggage everywhere. Coats, books, tablets, purses.

Blankets; chilly air in the air, she heard someone say.

The voice was distant, years away, maybe left behind from the last flight, the words just hung around until now? She chuckled at herself.

Seat belts, ever safe, ever soothingly familiar, clicked.

RUBIN---9
THICKER THAN BLOOD

The sounds of machinery welled all around. Wheel wells opened, flaps dropped. Bells ding-dinged, service was requested.

Let the flight begin already, the flight into the future. Her past is back there.

She clasped the harness that went from shoulder to hip although no air mishaps had occurred in over twelve years.

The occupants hushed, the plane reversed from its berth.

The plane accelerated toward a point of no return.

Lydia pulled, yanked at her chain, pulled and pulled until the whole length was released from under her sweater. Finally free, she held it, touched it, felt its cool metal. She prayed as if the chain itself could safely lift the plane and propel it into the clouds.

That the plane pulled and tore through cloud and air, raced toward the sun at full tilt became the accomplishment, not of pilot nor engine, but of a chain held fast between the fingers of a sweaty palm.

The nose lifted, breaths were held for long moments while the wind, white in foamy cumulus, rushed by the windows.

The plane ascended.

Angst mounted in her as altitude climbed, as pressure built. In her mind she saw the seconds since lift off tick, tick, tick on some instrument panel clock.

Cruising altitude, thirty five-thousand feet, finally

RUBIN---10
THICKER THAN BLOOD

approached. The plane leveled, a suspended moment when nothing happened.

All at once life was switched back on.

Lydia's inner gyroscope adjusted and leveled also.

Collective sighs of relief and the business of flying began. Carts filled with drinks and snacks clanked down the aisle.

Seat belts disengaged.

Window shades were drawn or lifted, books cracked, conversations begun or resumed.

Marvelous, frightening and fascinating.

She dropped the chain, its job done, its place again regained under the sweater and near her heart that beat too rapidly.

The plane settled down for the long haul.

She rubbed her sweaty palms onto the rough fabric under her. It was a tight cotton weave, neutral blue, not navy, not pale, exactly Wedgewood, soft and warm.

She removed snapshots from her purse and laid them out on the tray, looked closely at images of herself so long ago.

Clips of words drifted to her ears.

" . . . Next week's agenda "

Snatches of syllables echoed.

" . . . and anyway, I told her "

" . . . Next time we go to California "

RUBIN---11
THICKER THAN BLOOD

" . . . I'd like a Chardonnay and "

" . . . I don't know why our travel agent couldn't book us
on the first class flight . . . more civilized"

" . . . Excuse me but your purse"

She listened.

Lunch was served, drinks offered, and entertainment
provided.

The jet was full.

Entertainment compartments allowed for more space. The first
one was a gift shop, the second a music alcove, the third a
coffee bar and the fourth a video game arcade.

Lydia was introspective as she looked out the window at the
clouds below, the sun above. She could have taken the shuttle but
time was needed above all else in order to get her mind into the
proper place for this. She ignored the presence of those around
her and let her mind wander from photo to photo.

An Agency associate offered a glass of wine and collected
her ticket. Lydia accepted the wine.

She sipped the drink and looked down to her notebook.
Written on the top line in a fine script was the simple phrase,
"How it began."

"What went wrong?" she wrote under that. Lydia placed the
glass down next to her booklet and looked out of the window
again. She wrote, "Why now?" under the previous line.

RUBIN---12
THICKER THAN BLOOD

As her past came back photo by photo, year by year, she let each age embrace her to that time and place, like a picture book or memory scanner.

How it began. She searched for the answers in those six pictures.

It wasn't high school. It was before then. By then we were already best friends for three or four years, yes, at least that long. It had to be junior high. Perhaps even as early as seventh grade.

She left her memory scanner at home.

Some things just weren't right, shouldn't interfere with the sheer pleasure and pain of memory. Images would cheapen it, put proof to the frailties of the human spirit. No, not here. This was not a time for progress. This was a time for reflection, a time to let old stone walls maintain some measure of mildew. For in that moss was the stuff of life, the length and breadth of a lifetime with another human being, albeit one lost to betrayal and greed, a betrayal too clutching to enumerate. No, machinery was not welcome too near the heart and mind. Not at this time. This had to be done with flesh and bone, with blood, with sweat and tears. Betrayal and greed, certainly.

But whose betrayal and greed? My own? Hm. It could be time to let that sink in a bit. Roll it around and say it.

My fault?

RUBIN---13
THICKER THAN BLOOD

Lydia looked out the window and thought of her. She pictured Claire as she'd last seen her forty years ago. No word, no picture, no call, no visit. Claire had returned since, many times. She'd never called in all that time, never asked for me.

Lydia was reminded of a time when she and Claire had taken an oath that so many best girl friends took as children. Mere children! How young, how . . . young! What were they? Fourteen? Perhaps not even. The oath. Lydia said it to herself.

One for all and always for fun, together forever our friendship will run.

A tear slid from her eye. It trickled down her cheek, splattered onto her hand. Her hand shook slightly and she noticed the wine in the glass as it trembled with her nerves.

Turbulence? Goodness, they probably weren't even over Ohio yet. She listened to the dull hum of the engines and the fan and the movie and the music and the conversations that drifted like a breeze.

Oh why, with all the useless inventions, couldn't someone come up with one of those clear data screens for each window to label the states? Now that would be useful.

She sighed and when she did it was staggered and wracked with self recriminations and ruminations that hurt, way deep down inside there. That was where her life with Claire still lived, still pinched after all these years. It was the uneven, stilted

RUBIN---14
THICKER THAN BLOOD

sigh that was her own testimonial to their failures and transgressions. It was what led to this time and place.

She dreaded and welcomed it all at the same time.

But she couldn't go empty handed. She had to know the source, the cause, the reasons.

Oh Claire, how did we let this happen? How for God=s sakes did this ever happen to us?

The man next to her spoke.

"I notice your pictures are of you and a friend. Will you visit with her?"

She looked at him, jumped from the surprise of his voice.

"Yes."

"I don't mean to intrude," the man said. "It's just that you're sad. Is your friend ill?"

She looked at him, took a moment to deliberate, to talk?, not to talk.

He was in his late seventies, frail but healthy by the look of him. He had deep-set pale eyes the color of a marble, grey with flecks of blue and green, eyes that danced with humor when he smiled. And smiling made his bushy white eyebrows do a gig on his forehead. His lashes were purest white and his hands were freckled and knotted. She thought that they were hands that had been gently placed on many a shoulder in his years, hands that guided or perhaps only comforted.

RUBIN---15
THICKER THAN BLOOD

She sensed that about him.

His face was freckled like his hands and she could tell that he was once a redhead although most of the color was gone from his wavy hair. He was also very tall and thin, his knees touched the back of the seat in front of him.

"Yes, no, I mean, oh, I really can't say. I haven't seen her in forty years," Lydia said.

"My! Forty years. Why you hardly look old enough."

She chuckled and nodded.

"Yes. A long time. Forty years."

"My, but isn't it? You were beautiful. The pictures, I mean," he said as he pointed to the pile. "I'm sorry. They are right there after all, aren't they?"

"So they are."

"You were lovely. Is she your sister?"

"One would think so. She did turn herself into a carbon copy. But no, not my sister."

"Goodness, but only those of our generation could know what that means. The age of Aquarius."

She chuckled again.

"True, true. I did date myself didn't I?"

"I'm in the same decade give or take, you know."

"Thank you."

"For what?"

RUBIN---16
THICKER THAN BLOOD

"The compliment. I was a hot little number back then. Boy and didn't I think so?"

She looked at one of the pictures, touched the image of a young girl.

"That was me. My name is Lydia."

He nodded and they shook hands.

"Trent Keeper. And your photo mate?"

"Ah. Claire. We were the best of friends. Like sisters really. In fact I do believe we had a blood sister ceremony at some point. We must have been twelve maybe. Pinky, pin, blood, and all."

"Aren't you the lucky ones then, to still have time to be together?"

She gazed at herself and Claire at the age of fourteen, standing side by side in the picture. They wore bellbottoms. Their hair was long and straight. Their smiles were young and brash, bordered on laughter. Their arms were around each other and Lydia remembered that the picture was taken at one of their parties, the one when they first tried to smoke pot.

"Lucky? Oh, I don't know. We parted badly."

"I am sorry. But on an optimistic side it's never too late, is it?"

"I wish I could be so sure. The only thing I can be sure of is that after these next few days my future will be clear, if not

RUBIN---17
THICKER THAN BLOOD

my past."

"I do wish you and your friend a happy reunion."

"Thank you. I'll call it a success even if all we do is only acknowledge our mistakes."

"Is there no room for forgiveness?"

She looked at him.

"Forgiveness? Probably not in this case. Forgiveness is a contradiction when placed in context with Claire. Forgiveness? A lot to ask."

His bushy brows shot up to his hairline like a scared caterpillar.

"Then why go? Why do this to yourself?"

"You know? You know so much about me already. I'm afraid I've been rude. I apologize."

He smiled and his brow did that thing it did again. She wanted to giggle from the animation in his expressions but in a nice, adorable sort of way.

"You've nothing to apologize for," he said, "I've directed the conversation. I'm always curious about people. You see I'm a professor of sociology and priest of a small Unitarian Church in Malibu. I find my laboratory to be the human condition. So why go?"

He folded his arms and shifted his long legs.

"I have to reclaim what was taken from me. It's time. Forty

RUBIN---18
THICKER THAN BLOOD

years is too long to wait. And time is not something I have an abundance of."

"Ah yes. Better late than never."

"And about time, too." Her nod flashed that bit of stubborn principle again.

"I wish you the best."

She smiled at him.

Lydia looked out the window and saw the ghost of her youth come to meet her face to face. It sat down beside her to refresh her memory, to mock her and rock her.

Outside the aircraft, feathery, milky clouds drifted by at a steady pace.