

Chapter One

“John Lewis Defies War Labor Board..” “55 Williamsburg Women Honored by Red Cross For Knitting, Sewing and Bandage Rolling,” Brooklyn Eagle, Thursday, June 3, 1943

There was no warning. Rose Martin’s husband would later say that he could not remember a time when his wife seemed unhappy. Perhaps she had been a little quieter recently, but she never really spoke much, that was what he liked about her. She was not a woman who complained or raised her voice, more like a tiny bell, gently tinkling, distant and not disturbing. But on the afternoon of Thursday, June 3, 1943, at three o’clock, Rose Martin walked to the edge of the fire escape of her fifth-floor apartment at 247 Berry Street in Brooklyn and without a sound, stepped off into the hot summer air.

In that Williamsburg neighborhood, bad news always traveled quickly, but Judith Weissman had been cooped up working all day in Irving Gold’s insurance office, unaware of Rose’s leap. By late afternoon, the hours of sitting hunched over tiresome files had settled into her shoulders, and all Judith thought about as she walked home from the subway was the Alice Faye movie at the Academy. A musical comedy like “Hello Frisco,” would be the perfect way to divert her mind from the daily headlines about the war and the numbing work at the office. Singing and dancing in bright, sunny Technicolor. She’d go even if Marvin was too tired. That was the beauty of movies, you could be transported all by yourself, sitting there in the dark theater. Life’s edges became blurry as romance and cinematic happy endings became the reality.

As she crossed the street, her high heels clicking on the sidewalk, a young soldier leaning against a lamp post winked and smiled, reminding her that she was just twenty-five and had the best legs in the neighborhood.

Turning onto Berry Street, she saw Edith O'Malley standing in front of her building across the street, surrounded by three neighbors that Judith once in a fit of pique, had dubbed the Berry Street Yentas. Gert Moskowitz, chief in charge of gossip, rumor and innuendo, had her ample arm around Edith's bony shoulders, while Rosalie Stein, who thought being the wife of the head of the local draft board gave her some superior position, daubed Edith's face with a cloth. The third, Faye Lichter, stood sniffing into a handkerchief. Judith made it a rule to avoid this trio whenever possible, but Edith called out, "Oh, Judith, you knew Rose, didn't you?" as she ran down the steps, her face streaked with tears, bursting to tell Judith her story.

"I was hanging my wash on the line out the window, when I saw Rose standing there on the fire escape. Didn't even notice me," Edith said. "At first she just stood there, then she twisted around, like she wanted to take a last look, and over she went, straight down, with her skirt up around her shoulders." Edith leaned closer and whispered, "I think I saw her smiling."

"Who?" For a moment Judith didn't grasp what Edith had said.

"Rose Martin, she's dead. She jumped from her apartment." Edith's colorless eyes were red, the pale lids puffy.

Gert came down the steps, wiping away her own eyes. "It's crazy. Poor Walter."

The other women shook their heads in agreement, but Judith thought, Rose finally had flown away. They wouldn't have been so surprised if they had ever looked into Rose's sad eyes, two gray reminders of wintry days. She had felt a kinship with Rose, a gentle woman, who walked without casting a shadow. For these other ladies, life was simple, organized, a well-worn recipe of two teaspoons marriage, one tablespoon children, a sifting of religion, a pinch of pain. Stir it up and life comes out a flat bread, dense enough to sustain, but too bland to nourish. Rose pretended acceptance, but no contentment lived inside her. Judith shivered as she imagined Rose climbing over the sill, a tiny sparrow, no longer caged, flying free, seeking the clean fresh air above the clouds.

Edith grabbed Judith's arm, her fingers yellowed from too much laundry in Fels Naptha soap. "Why do you suppose she did it?"

"Maybe she was looking for a better place," Judith said, ignoring the shocked expressions on the women's faces. To them, there was no better place than Brooklyn. Judith had to be as crazy as Rose.

Judith did not join the brigade of women delivering chicken soup and tuna casseroles to Rose's bewildered husband. She sat in her darkened living room, an outsider in the apartment she and Marvin had shared for the last three years. Only small pockets felt as though they belonged to her, her books on a shelf on the far wall, the water-color of the ocean above the couch, seaweed green waves churning high and

stormy, and her precious tea set, thin, translucent cups with scenes of blushing Japanese maidens being wooed by fierce looking Samurai warriors.

All thoughts of movie musicals banished, she didn't move, didn't prepare dinner. After working all day in his father's butcher shop, Marvin would expect a hot meal. His mother loved to remind Judith how hard he worked. "Opening a can is not making dinner," was one of Yetta's favorite sayings. But tonight the roast beef stayed in the icebox, along with thick slices of boiled potatoes and beets marinated in tangy vinegar, while Judith sat in the living room, wondering what had happened today, why Rose had chosen this particular afternoon. Such a tiny woman, no one you would notice in a crowd, or even sitting alone in a room. Rose had been the first person in the building to greet her the day she and Marvin had moved in, after their three-day wedding trip.

"Honeymoons are the best times in a marriage," Rose had whispered to Judith, like a child sharing a secret. When she spoke, her hands fluttered like fans, constantly touching her face, as if to reassure herself that she still existed. But it was the eyes that Judith remembered most. What dreams had been locked away behind those eyes? Surely they didn't include living with Walter Martin, who looked as though he suffered from chronic constipation. Maybe Rose dreamt of writing poetry or living in a cottage on a rocky English coast. Perhaps she longed to walk along the shore collecting seashells that would whisper in her ear. Given a chance maybe that sparrow was a fierce hawk, waiting for a chance to strike, talons out and sharp. They should have talked more.

Judith heard footsteps overhead in Rose's apartment. Now that she was gone, all the neighbors who had never bothered to visit were gathering to help the grieving Walter.

Judith could see him sitting in his living room, looking blankly at the women bustling in the kitchen, filling his icebox with meals for one.

The front door opened and Marvin entered, flushed by the day's heat. She scanned his face, alert to any similarity to Walter. They were both dark, both quiet, but Marvin's wide-set black eyes were gentle, not small and beady like the uncomprehending Walter. How would Marvin react if the neighbors came to him one hot afternoon and told him that she had tumbled from the roof? Would he cry, declare her crazy, or sit numbly accepting tuna casseroles?

"I heard," he said, kneeling by her chair. "She must have been sick to do that." The raw, bloody smells of the butcher shop still clung to his skin and hair. Those smells had always attracted her from the first time they met. He was embarrassed by them and bathed them away as quickly as possible, having no idea that it was these very exotic smells that had fascinated her. They conjured images of fierce warriors in battles over honor and justice, bloody but somehow romantic. He would have been horrified. His Judith, his delicate flower, prone to headaches and crying spells was someone who needed his care. Now he leaned close, looking concerned, his damp black hair stuck to his forehead, his square body blocking the waning light from the window.

"She was a bird that needed to fly," Judith said, seeing Rose, her arms lifting like wings.

His eyes widened. "Judy, she jumped from five stories up." He spoke slowly, emphasizing each word.

Did Rose have a moment of joy before she stepped off? Did she feel her hair loosen as the hairpins fell away? Not crazy, not stupid, but courageous enough to take that final step, standing on the iron rungs, grabbing the dream that had eluded her.

“My mother says Rose was always a little nuts.” Marvin went into the bathroom to wash away the odors of the dead animals he carved all day.

“Your mother couldn’t possibly understand Rose.” Anything Yetta Weissman couldn’t hold between her two chunky hands did not exist. She tried often enough to squeeze the life out of Judith, preferring a daughter-in-law who had no opinions and would follow her lead.

“You’re just upset,” he called out. “Don’t move until I change. We’ll take some sandwiches to the roof, have a little picnic.”

A picnic? He wanted to cheer her up with a picnic on the roof, as if she were a child who needed diversion. The first time she saw him, he stood like the Errol Flynn of butchers. Now he had already begun to shrivel at twenty-eight, as if the meat lockers were chilling his soul and freezing his life. A solid routine marked by the boundaries of Brooklyn was enough for him.

He left the bathroom, his hair slicked down and smelling like damp wool. She sat at the kitchen table while he made roast beef sandwiches with the same finesse he used in dispatching chops and chickens at the store. He poured iced tea into a large pitcher, not splashing a drop, as if his preparing food at home was an everyday occurrence. She got up slowly, putting forks, knives and two mugs into a wicker basket, sleepwalking, while the smiling cat face of the kitchen clock mocked her. She took out a faded blue blanket,

still smelling of hot sandy afternoons at Coney Island, grains of sand caught in the creases.

They climbed upstairs to the roof and Judith removed her shoes, feeling the warm asphalt on her bare feet. At night even Brooklyn seemed transformed, becoming a mysterious, almost magical stranger, the darkness throwing a cape over the oven-hot buildings and small-town thinking.

Marvin spread the blanket and unpacked the food. The evening was warm, and she unbuttoned her blouse, letting the slight breeze stir the sheer material, the air kissing her shoulders and cooling her skin.

“Judith, somebody might see you.” Marvin reached over and pulled her blouse closed, glancing around to see if any of the neighbors were out on adjoining roofs.

“It’s just the two of us,” she said. She lay back and watched a slight flush rise up his neck to his ears. Married three years and Marvin still got embarrassed if she undressed in front of him. Sometimes she caught him watching her through the open bathroom door, pretending to be asleep. Once she saw him sitting on the bed, holding her silk nightdress, gently running his fingers over the material. When he heard the floor creak, he quickly shoved the gown under the pillow and neither of them ever mentioned it. If only he held her, caressed her like the hero of her nightly dreams, but he had to keep his feelings hidden, as if they were a forbidden pleasure he could only examine when he was alone.

Manhattan beckoned just beyond the Williamsburg Bridge. The lights of Broadway would be bright, she could almost smell the flowers along Park Avenue, hear

Tommy Dorsey's band at the Paramount. Tonight she longed to touch it all. Maybe Rose had come up here, also melting into The City lights.

Judith leaned over and took her husband's hand, squeezing it tightly. "Marvin, suppose there was no war. Would you ever just drop everything and run off somewhere, do something crazy like being a cowboy out west or climbing mountains in Tibet?"

He sat there looking at her, his beautiful black eyes filled with confusion. He hated when she questioned him like that. He was happy living in Brooklyn, where he grew up, went to school, became the borough marble champion at age twelve. He still kept his two best marbles, a clear cat's eye and an aggie, in a velvet-lined box, protected behind glass in the living room curio cabinet. But when he was a boy shooting marbles, Judith was already plotting her escape from Brooklyn, even before she fully understood the meaning of the word.

"How amazing that we ever got together."

"Let's go downstairs," he said, taking her hand, his voice thick.

"No." Judith pulled out of his grasp and stood up, swaying in the warm night air. Across the way, Elsie Cohen's teenaged son played "Dancing in the Dark," his clarinet soaring over the roofs, as he imitated his hero, Artie Shaw.

She stood at the corner of the roof thinking again of Rose, how close to the edge she must have been. Bending her head back, Judith swayed slowly in rhythm with the music. "Come dance with me Marvin." She reached out to him, but he didn't move. Suddenly she felt so alone. She wanted to breathe in deeply, fill with air and float away,

an untethered balloon. Maybe that was all Rose meant to do, just drift away. Tears pooled in the corners of her mouth, she couldn't stop crying.

"I'm here, Judy." Marvin took both her hands and steadied her against his chest.

Nothing fazed him. She suspected he was happiest when she was neediest. Her romantic warrior who had metamorphosed into a useful husband.

He led her downstairs, into the bedroom, and switched off the lamp, casting the room into shadows. A thin shaft of light from the street shimmered between them. She shivered, imagined the large cabbage roses on the wallpaper becoming creatures who lay in wait for her. Marvin moved closer, stroking her hand, then reached under her blouse. She felt as if she were across the room, sitting at the vanity watching as he squeezed her breast through the silk slip and eased her down on the bed. He lifted her skirt and pulled off her panties, slowly moving on top of her. A slab of beef being hoisted onto a counter. She shivered again, closing her eyes to blot out the room, instead imagined a large mother-of-pearl moon, a tall, lanky stranger, someone like Gary Cooper, Hemingway's hero in "For Whom The Bell Tolls," an outsider fighting for justice. She heard a guitar strumming in the background, as the stranger's hands traveled slowly over her breasts and hips, in tune to the landscape of her body, the curve of her neck. His touch electrified her as he pressed his mouth against hers, but instead of seeing the chiseled face of Gary Cooper, she saw Bobby Levitt. Why think of him, now, at this time? He had left her life long ago after graduating school.

Judith opened her eyes and it was Marvin's face beside her on the pillow, already half-adrift in sleep, his breath heavy and moist on her cheek. She turned away, heard the sound of weeping, but wasn't sure who cried, she or Rose Martin.

She got up, careful not to wake Marvin. She closed the bathroom door and started the water in the tub. Her skin had a gray cast and her brown eyes were red-rimmed and restless. Talc, Ivory soap and nail polish from earlier in the morning hung in the air, giving the room the heady smell of a women's sauna. Patches of sweat trickled down inside her thighs, chafed from Marvin's love-making. He was in such a hurry, never waited until she was ready. Maybe it was unfair, but she wanted him to understand without words.

She trailed her fingertips across the crease behind her knee, lightly traced around her collarbone and the thin circle of her nipples as Bobby's face, his steel-blue eyes flashed across her brain again. He had nothing to do with her life anymore. Nothing.

She eased into the tub, lying back against its cool smoothness, and opened the faucet, feeling the churning between her legs, her skin tingling. She lifted her hips, her fingers working faster and faster, until she felt the sudden surge of warmth, her body pulsing in time with her pounding heart.

The water rose to the top of the tub. She turned off the faucet, sank down to her chin, the world silent except for her breath rifling the surface. Her favorite seashell was on a shelf above her, she held it to her ear, touching the pink-ribbed interior which still tasted of salt with the tip of her tongue. As a child she believed that all shells floated into Coney Island from magical places like Fiji or Bora Bora. Now there was nothing magical

happening across the ocean, just death and dying. In Europe Jews perished. She was haunted by a photo from the aftermath of the Warsaw Ghetto, just a huge pile of shoes, nothing more, just shoes. Where were the feet that once wore them, danced in them, walked to school, lugged groceries home from the market, ambled with a sweetheart over Warsaw streets? Here in Brooklyn, they could do nothing but sit and wait to hear about Yetta's family who was trapped in Poland, or her Bubba Esther's relatives left behind in Russia. And what was she doing to help? Everyday she rode the subway to Irving Gold's office to type those infernal insurance forms.

Neither she nor Marvin scored very highly on the patriotic front. He had been classified 4F and even she had begun to feel embarrassed by his status. It was unfair and she certainly was glad he wasn't in danger but no one understood that although he looked healthy his heart had this tiny flaw.

When she first saw him in his father's butcher shop, framed by sides of beef hanging from metal hooks, he looked like a silent hunter standing by his kill. The smell of burnt chicken feathers made her woozy, and the room began to blur around her. She would have fallen on the sawdust-covered floor if he hadn't caught her, his hand gripping her elbow. His square face topped by inky black hair and thick brows over black, black eyes, like the opening to a cavernous mountain cave.

Marvin had been so shy in the beginning that he used her friend, Miriam Sussman, as a go-between. "Judith," her mother said, almost dancing with joy, "his father has a good business. Don't spoil this." She dreamed of romance, while her mother,

remembering the Depression, counted coins. But remembering those dark eyes and the strong arm that kept her from falling, she agreed to see him again.

Why not? The boys who came calling were always scared off by her shifting moods. She had sworn against marriage but realized it was her best escape from the family prison. Everyone knew that Marvin's mother was against the match, warning him, "That girl is *mashiginah*." But Marvin, who seemed so predictable, insisted that Judith was the only girl for him. He amazed everyone and shocked his mother into temporary silence. "Imagine," the yentas all whispered, "the son defied Yetta and won."

Judith dried herself with a soft towel, slipped on a cotton shift, and tied back her damp hair. Getting some cold tea from the kitchen, she went into the living room, looking out on empty streets, buildings defended by blackout shades, hearing neighbors cough and grunt in their restless sleep. She pushed the window up as high as it would go and sat on the sill, holding on tightly with both hands. It wouldn't take much to push off, see the ground racing up to meet her as her body fell through the night. Would she feel a breeze gently ruffling her hair, or would fear stiffen her limbs as she plummeted? What had been Rose's last thoughts? She had made no sound, but Edith O'Malley swore she was smiling.

