

Angel Park

A Novel

Patricia Kokinos

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Prologue



The urge to begin this story with “Once upon a time” is nearly overwhelming. But then it would be a fairy tale, and this is a story of reality, at least what passes for it in the world we all share. It does begin with violence, exactly like a fairy tale, that is true; yet what occurs later, no fairy tale would ever allow. The story happens in a place that will seem familiar, as all fairy tales do, but this one is part of our modern mythology, a profoundly American place.

Cornwall was the name of the small city, nestled in the bend of a river on the eastern side of the country. People liked it because they felt protected there, separated from the urgency of the rest of the world by their insulation of provincial and personal concerns. It was a place as middle-America as it could be, in all the mundane and complacent delight that the description implied. Uptown, where the larger, more elegant homes were located, was the showplace of the city, the neighborhood that gave everyone a solid reason to call Cornwall an up-and-coming kind of place. It was no wonder that people were appalled by what was discovered there one brilliant blue morning at the end of May.

Two days after Memorial Day, a housekeeper went out the connecting door from the kitchen to the garage and, in an instant, felt her life change. Her name was Mrs. Rojas, a recent immigrant from the wilds

of South America. She was absorbed in the small circle of her own new world as she carried a full basket down the steps toward the laundry room, absently rubbing her nose at an odd smell.

When she picked up the flicker of something strange at the corner of her eye, she turned toward the car and began to scream, not even feeling the laundry basket drop from her arms. She ran to the car and pounded on the side window, coughing and wiping her face with her apron. She cupped her hand to see inside, but stinging tears overflowed her eyes and ran down her dusky cheeks, already raw from the acrid fumes still trapped in the airless garage. She pushed the tears away so she could see the dog; the dog was there, too, right next to her master on the car seat, neither of them moving.

Stumbling through the spilled laundry, Mrs. Rojas kicked away the sheets and towels that tried to twist around her ankles. She ran up the steps into the kitchen and pulled the door shut behind her, breathless and wild-eyed. The phone, she thought, on the end of the counter, the phone would bring help.

Before she could stop shaking, they were there, an ambulance first and firemen, and when they saw what the emergency was, police cars, detectives, the coroner's van, all in a tumult of noise and rushing and loud voices. Mrs. Rojas hadn't thought to raise the garage door so they could get to the car, so the men tramped through the kitchen, leaving black marks on her shiny tile floor. Only it was not going to be her kitchen floor anymore, she thought, because poor Dr. McCarthy...poor Dr. McCarthy and that sweet dog who met her at the door every Wednesday and followed her from room to room as she dusted and polished...that sweet dog and poor Dr. McCarthy were both on the front car seat, silent and still as death.

A man was talking to Mrs. Rojas, a tall man with dark hair, leading her to the living room and asking her to sit on the beautiful silk covering the sofa. She perched on the edge, uncomfortable to be in this room, sitting on this sofa. The white man with no expression on his

face carried over a dining room chair and sat with her, leaning too close, and waited for her to dry her eyes and look up at him.

“Tell me what happened,” he said, a policeman named Detective Chaney, waiting with his pen in the air, ready to mark down what she was going to say. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

“Mrs. Rojas, did you move anything or touch anything?”

“No,” she said, “no, no, no, I touch nothing. I try to see in car, that’s all, but I cough and eyes full of water. Then I run to kitchen and call 911.”

Suicide, they were all mumbling, suicide.

Mrs. Rojas began to cry again, twisting the silver cross on the chain around her neck. She could not understand why an important lady like Dr. McCarthy, a lady who lived in a house like this, would do such a thing. But mostly she thought about the poor, sweet dog.

Television vans pulled up out front, popping open their satellite dishes and positioning tall antennas as cameramen leaped out, running for the garage. The detective yelled for someone to close the garage door. Mrs. Rojas turned to a friendly policewoman, who got her a glass of water and a damp cloth for her face.

Detective Chaney buttoned his sport coat and walked through the marble foyer to the front door. He stood there a moment, preparing to meet the crude thrust of the microphones. He opened the door to flashes and noise, nodding to the patrolman who was keeping them back. He told them only what they needed to know: Dr. Maureen D. McCarthy, assistant superintendent of the Cornwall City School District, had been pronounced dead at 9 a.m., an apparent suicide. The family had been notified. The coroner and police were investigating her death, the detective said, and turned his back on the rest of the questions, shutting the door firmly behind him. He hadn’t mentioned the dog.

When the radio broke the story on the 11 a.m. news, Constance Demetrios and the rest of Maureen’s team locked themselves in their office, right at the beginning of the raucous double lunch shift at Corn-

wall High School. They suspended their packing, books and papers left hanging in mid-air, open boxes strewn haphazardly around their crowded cubicles. Without saying a word, they gathered at the table in their tiny lunchroom, their version of an altar, and sat staring at each other with shocked eyes, unable to comprehend the impossible news. They all had the same questions in their silent glances.

When had school become a matter of life and death?

Where did we miss the clues? What could we have done to help? What in the world had Maureen been thinking?

Connie got up first and closed herself in her nearly empty cubicle, refusing to listen to the high school noises around her. She felt like screaming at Maureen and she felt like crying, but she did neither. She slumped over her desk and held her head in her hands. A dull ache formed behind her eyes. What she wanted to do was go home and lie down, as if she were the casualty of Maureen's death, but she would have felt too alone.

CHAPTER 1



Cornwall was the kind of city that did not like its world to tip out of balance, as though its stable gyroscope were threatening to flip over and dump the occupants into empty space. The people there liked their placid lives and the successful way they had always maintained a traditional degree of decorum. Suicides caused disturbing ambiguities that simply did not fit into the everyday scheme of things.

It was the mid-1990s, a moment in American life when holding onto traditions was no simple matter, so a great deal was at stake. The entire world seemed frenetic then, people racing around wildly, complaining that time was moving ever faster, that their lives were all about speed and intrusion and technology and the millennium. Everyone seemed bent on a mission, as though they all had something to get done before the century turned, as if the past 95 years had not been time enough.

The simplest decision to make in that harried environment was that Dr. Maureen McCarthy had suffered a psychotic break, as the psychologists liked to say. Everyone knew she had been a little crazy anyway, and a loner besides. The death of the second in command for the Cornwall City School District quickly became an open-and-shut case.

Only Constance Demetrios, whose own life was in a period of turmoil and disorder, felt driven to understand the deeper reasons for

Maureen's fatal act. Connie even blamed herself for not realizing that there were other lonely people who would be affected by the unique traumas of that school year. But she had been fresh from a mid-life divorce when she had come home to Cornwall and too intent on saving herself to be aware of the need to reach out to anyone else.

The truth was that Connie could not have prevented what happened, just as she could not have guessed how much Maureen's suicide would alter the trajectory of her own life. She had no need to be so hard on herself simply because she had been blindly going about her business, just like everyone else. They had all started the school year innocently enough the previous September, and by October, things had been chugging along as well as could be expected. The real decline had begun on a mid-October morning remarkable chiefly for an early rainstorm, which turned out to be a rousing preview of the violent winter that would soon obscure the landscape of the great Northeast.

Greedy gulps of water, blown ashore in towering thunderheads that had sucked up moisture from the roiling Atlantic, spilled across the roadways, obliterating the white line and slowing traffic to a hesitant crawl. Connie had been running late that morning, and she was irritated that the enormous storm had to pick that day to assault the windshield of her dark blue sedan and make her big Texas hair curl up even higher on her head.

Her adrenaline spiked ominously when pulsating smears of red washed across the back window, but before she could turn to look, an ambulance flew past, jockeying through the bumper-to-bumper traffic, screaming up the avenue. A shooting, another god-awful kid shooting, she thought, and stopped leaning forward. She no longer willed the traffic to open up, glad that the paramedics were going to get to the high school first.

In the wake of the ambulance, the line of cars inched forward and started to move, tentatively, with the same degree of uncertainty Connie felt about her flight to the East, a pilgrim running away from an empty house in the suburbs of Houston. Coming home was like evol-

ing backward, leaving what was sunny and modern and crawling back into the ancient dark. The roaring storm reminded her that something primitive still lived here.

She could see the high school up ahead, kids standing out in the rain, waiting. The ambulance was parked at a hurried angle with its doors thrown open. As the cars stopped again, a hefty man in a hooded raincoat ushered a black Jaguar into the red space in front of the ambulance. A tall, thin man in a trench coat unfolded from the car and started up the broad walkway, his coat billowing out behind him.

It was Joe Clay, her new boss and the first African-American to be named superintendent of the Cornwall City School District. Three boys on the low brick wall lining the walkway followed Joe's progress as he leaned into the wind. All of them leaned a little, too, probably wondering who that tall black man was, with the expensive shoes and fancy car, looking like he was important. No white kids out in front of the school, Connie noticed. They were somewhere else, on their own turf. It was a tableau that she had seen too many times before.

Why, she always asked herself, despite the best efforts of millions of teachers and parents and administrators and researchers, and billions of dollars, did nothing seem to change? In the waning years of the twentieth century, the world of public education still flowed forward no faster than the glaciers had eons ago. No matter how much the rest of the world progressed, high school remained its own reality, as though it were a museum diorama, encapsulating everything Americans loved and hated about the past.

The effort to create change was a constant battle, and Connie had earned her stripes in twenty years of school wars, stretching from Ohio to Oregon, Kansas to Colorado, Los Angeles to Houston. She had survived two decades of fervent infighting that the public never saw, the kinds of interpersonal combat that made school people laugh out loud when outsiders talked about the rigors of the "real world."

Yet Connie would never have expected to find the agonies of public education emblazoned in stark relief against the backdrop of sleepy

Cornwall, the place she had come to escape all of that. She had returned to her hometown because she wanted a safe place to hide out for a while, a place where she could get a job and a house and be close enough to visit her kids, who were both at college in the Northeast. She thought she might get to know her mother and father again, on a new level. In her more optimistic moments, she even thought she might find the pieces of herself that she had left behind so many years ago.

Suddenly the traffic rushed forward as though a floodgate had opened, pouring her into the parking lot behind the three-story classroom building. Connie docked her car along the edge of the automobile sea. She struggled to open her umbrella and then scooted out under it, swept up by the wind blowing toward the huge brick and glass structure.

By the time she had dodged the biggest puddles and picked her way across the lot, her pumps were ruined and the bright red coat she had brought with her from the Wild West was soaked through from the waist down. Christ, she thought, it's only October and the weather has already got the best of me. It was time to give up the lightweight coat and the silly summer pumps and stop pretending that she was just visiting in Cornwall.

If Connie hadn't been dreading the shooting in the high school hallway, she would have been shopping already, at least in her mind, selecting a smart black coat and tall black boots, perhaps new gold earrings. She was clinging stubbornly to the red coat as proof that she didn't really belong in a provincial place like Cornwall. But even she could see that she stuck out like a beacon in the vast expanse of somber blacks and grays and navy blues that the serious Northeast demanded.

Somehow, she had forgotten that part during all the years she had moved around the country, packing and unpacking her household and managing her children's ever-new lives. Her husband Tony had been the focus of their collective interest, as he had moved them up to larger and larger markets, sculpting his career in radio broadcasting. Now he

was a newscaster for a major station in Miami Beach, doing the Macarena with skinny bimbos, while Connie was in Cornwall, trying to figure out who she was going to be this time.

A gust of saturated wind blew her in the back door and drove her up the stairs to the second floor, which was level with the main entrance. Paramedics were trundling a gurney toward the front hallway, one of them holding an IV drip. A crowd of men and kids shielded the body from view, trailing along the sides of the gurney as if they were clearing a wedge through a crowd. A tall, slim woman with glasses suspended on a flower-studded chain came out of her classroom to watch. Connie hadn't met most of the people who worked in the 3,000-student high school, but she was still carrying with her the casual familiarity of the West, and she had to know.

"A gunshot victim, huh?" Connie said, holding the dripping umbrella to one side and moving up to stand beside the woman in front of the classroom door.

The woman turned to look in the direction of the voice, pointedly noticing Connie's wet coat and sodden shoes. Her eyes widened as they came back up to Connie's face. Connie watched her take in the big, curly blonde hair, full-on makeup, and what could only, by now, be streaks of mascara running from the corners of her eyes.

"Where are you from—Los Angeles?" the woman said. "This is Cornwall. We don't have shootings here, dear." She turned abruptly and went back into her classroom, shutting the door behind her.

Connie stood there for a moment, surprised by the quick retort. Then her shoulders began to relax. The state of emergency in which she had lived most of her working life receded a tiny bit, and she grudgingly allowed herself to find a note of reassurance in the woman's comment. She wasn't prepared to let her guard down completely, but she nodded at the hope that Cornwall was still the comfortably bland place that she remembered. If anything unsavory did happen, it would be quickly covered over and forgotten so people could get on with their lives. Cornwall believed in safety first.

With that rule in mind, Connie was even more curious about what was going on and who was being taken away. She followed the wet trail left by the paramedics and reached the front entrance in time to see them shut the gurney into the ambulance and speed off.

Four men in suits, the housemasters of the north and south wings of the school, began herding students back toward the door. The kids were resistant and noisy, complaining about having to go to class and miss the excitement. Joe Clay had his arm around the shoulders of the vice-principal, Bob Sacco, who kept nodding his head as Joe bent down to whisper in his ear.

A wave of chattering voices washed over Connie as the crowd entered the building. She looked into teenaged faces, eye-to-eye with most of the tall boys, trying to ask what had happened. They walked through her, intent on their own conversations, and then a small woman in a fuzzy brown coat pushed past her, waving her right arm to be seen in the crowd and screaming at Mr. Clay to stop.

The other administrators rushed to block her way, but Joe pivoted on the wet carpet to look back, not happy with the intrusion. In the instant he took to swivel around and begin to move toward the woman, Connie watched him transform his startled, angry glance into solicitous but firm concern.

“Paula, what are you doing here? We’ll talk about the entire situation at the appropriate time,” he said.

“Don’t give me appropriate time, Joe Clay,” she said viciously, making a wet sound with her mouth.

Connie took an involuntary step backward, stunned at the vehemence of the woman’s response. She looked more closely, feeling a prickle of dismay scratch at the back of her mind. So, she thought, the fuzzy brown coat and brown suede flats and mousy brown hair cover the heart of a little animal with fangs. A mole? A ferret?

A mutant mole, she decided, as she got a better look at the woman’s furrowed brow and close-set eyes. A mole crossed with a miniature

badger. Please, Connie implored, let this be an annoyed parent rather than what I am thinking right now.

Joe swept the woman toward the office by cradling her arm in his, as though he were supporting her, and closed the door firmly. The woman's voice leaked out around the edges, shrill and demanding, but no words that Connie could discern—and how much did she want to know, anyway?

She turned around and went back over the glass bridgeway that connected the administration wing to the classroom building, figuring that her officemates would be able to tell her what had happened. Halfway across, a bouncy blonde secretary from the front office tried to race past, hobbled only slightly by her tight skirt and spike heels. Connie reached out and caught her by the arm, watching two sharp vertical lines of alarm stand up on the woman's smooth brow as she whirled around.

"Oh, Ms. Demetrios," she said, relaxing her face and staring back at Connie inquisitively, "what can I do for you? I didn't recognize you. I'm sorry."

"No problem," Connie said. "Could you tell me what's going on? And I am interested in finding out who that woman is, the one in the brown coat?"

The blonde was pulling Connie along, forcing her to walk faster, the two of them squishing in tandem along the soggy carpet.

"Haven't you met her yet?" the secretary said as they came to the junction. "That woman is the president of our Board of Education, Paula Nowinski."

Connie felt herself suck in a quick breath, annoyed that she had been doing this work for so long that her subconscious had made the connection without her.

"Uh-huh," Connie said. "I suspected that. I haven't met any of the board members. Is this one always so...so determined?"

"You have no idea," the secretary said. "I'm sorry, but I can't stay and chat. I need to see the north housemaster right away. The princi-

pal's just been taken away in an ambulance—heart attack, they said—and we are in big trouble, starting right this minute.”

She flipped her pageboy behind her and turned quickly toward the north office, leaving Connie at the wall of glass than ran the entire length of the building.

Connie paused to stare out at the rain for a few moments, watching surprised leaves fall into the courtyard before their time. Her shoulders drooped a little as she balanced there, cold and wet on slowly rotting red pumps, juggling her umbrella, her purse, her briefcase, and her car keys. She didn't have to think hard to imagine the viper's nest the school district would become while everyone engaged in the backbiting and second-guessing that filling the principal's job would require. That's why the board president was already screaming at Joe. She probably had her agenda all lined up.

Having been there and done that before, over any range of issues that might disrupt a school system, Connie nodded to herself philosophically, if a little sadly, and stuffed her car keys in her purse. She was relieved that there had been no shooting, and she would have to leave it at that. As the supervisor of English curriculum for the school district, she had no role in what was to happen. All of them, the eight members of Maureen's curriculum team, were housed at the high school instead of downtown where they belonged because of some unexplainable tradition. As in most large institutions that depended for their existence on the public trust, traditions whose purposes had been lost in time were the glue that held things firmly in place, regardless of their usefulness, irrespective of the confusion they caused in systems that could be redesigned and run efficiently if anyone put a mind to it.

Right now, however, Connie had work to do, appointments to make, wet shoes to climb out of, and a shopping trip to plan. She didn't have time to think about a situation that was somebody else's problem. She only hoped that the principal, Jim McDougall, wouldn't suffer too much and that they would find something less stressful for him to do than run a high school.