This is Your Song, Lola Rose

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Extract

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Prologue

Madison Square Garden, New York City, 1986. A hot, sweaty night, bright lights strobing across the darkness, illuminating the expectant faces of the fans. Excitement throbbed across the huge arena like a giant heartbeat. Everything went black, until out of the darkness came the thunder of drums, joined a moment later by the wail of a guitar that sent a roar of appreciation up from the crowd.

Suddenly, a shard of light pierced the darkness and there he was, centre stage, filling the vast auditorium with his trademark throat-tearing vocals.

He snatched up the mike stand and strutted with it across the stage, full of arrogance, his mane of curls already sticking to the gleaming sweat on his face. He looked like a god, bathed in the golden glow from the stage lights. Every woman in that place wanted him.

The whole time he was on that stage he was scanning the sea of faces, choosing the one he wanted. He could take his pick, and he knew it. It was written all over that arrogant face as his gaze swept over the crowd. The girls would be screaming for him, trying to catch his attention. All of them begging for their moment with the Wild Man.

Afterwards they'd wait at the stage door with the others, holding their breath, dizzy with anticipation. If they were lucky, the roadies would invite them backstage to 'meet the band'. Being whisked past the other clamouring, disappointed fans was like winning the golden ticket to paradise.

Except it wasn't really paradise backstage. But who noticed the grubby dressing rooms when they got to hang out and party with Poleaxe? The air would be thick with sweat and sex and cigarette smoke. There would be plenty of booze, and drugs, too. Uppers, downers, you only had to ask.

But who needed drugs when you had the rush of being with the great Rick Wild? Sitting on his knee or squashed up on the sofa beside him, feeling his arm around you, fingers idly caressing your neck. Hearing him whisper in that oh-so-sexy voice of his asking whether you wanted to go somewhere more private ...

As if anyone would refuse the Wild Man.

But it was over as soon as it was over. There would be no second chance, no long goodbye. If she insisted on giving him her number he'd throw it away, or maybe pass it on to one of the crew guys just in case they were ever in town again. She'd be left with memories; he'd forget her as soon as she walked out of the door.

Too many girls. Too many shattered dreams and broken hearts. And Rick Wild would go back to his wife and never feel a shred of guilt about what he'd done.

The Devoted Fan picked up the remote control and froze the DVD picture. Rick Wild filled the screen, golden curls rippling, bare chest gleaming with sweat under the lights, brandishing the microphone, arrogant, sexy, king of all he surveyed.

Bastard. He didn't care who he hurt. He didn't care that he played with people's lives. He just picked them up and then dropped them without a care.

Well, he'd learn to care.

Filled with a sudden surge of hatred, the Devoted Fan picked up the pen and began to write.

Chapter One

'And so, we gather together today to give thanks for the life of Edward Derek Lambert. Loving husband, devoted father, loyal friend . . .'

Lola Rose Lambert glanced around the crematorium. Her father would have been proud of the turn-out, she thought. The rows were filled with his workmates from the factory and his friends from the White Lion, looking uncomfortable in their best suits and too-tight collars. They'd all come to pay their respects to their old mate Eddie Lambert, firm but fair factory inspector, stalwart of the pub darts team, and all-round good bloke.

Lola had come to say goodbye to the man who had made her life hell.

As the vicar droned on, she fixed her gaze on the coffin sitting on its polished wood dais, surrounded by purple Dralon curtains. Soon those curtains would close and he'd be gone.

She'd never imagined it would happen. He seemed so strong and powerful, she thought he would be a looming presence in her life for ever. It had shocked her and everyone else when he was felled by a heart attack at the age of just fifty-one.

In the front row, her father's two sisters were snuffling into hankies and comforting each other. Lola stayed defiantly dry-eyed. She wasn't allowed to cry when her mother died, so why should she waste her tears now?

They knelt to pray. The vicar talked, in his well-practised monotone, about heaven and the afterlife, and their hopes for an eternal future in a better place. Lola closed her eyes and prayed, too. She prayed that wherever Eddie Lambert ended up, it wouldn't be the same place as Mum. She deserved some peace after everything she'd had to put up with in life.

The prayers ended. The mourners rose to their feet, as piped music began to play 'Nearer My God To Thee'.

Her best friend Sam gently touched her arm. 'You don't have to stay,' she whispered.

'I want to.' She'd been running away from him for too long. She had to know he was gone.

Sam nodded understandingly. She knew better than anyone what was going through Lola's mind. They'd known each other since they were eleven, and it was to Sam's family that Lola had fled at the age of sixteen after her mother died.

As the music played, the curtains glided silently around the coffin.

Goodbye, Dad. Lola watched unflinchingly as it disappeared from sight, her fingers curled tightly around her hymn book. All she felt was relief.

When they came out of the crematorium, the rain of that April morning had given way to watery sunshine. Lola squinted up at the pale rays forcing their way through cracks in the cloud. How symbolic is that? she thought.

The other mourners came out, dabbing their eyes, and filed slowly past the bank of flowers that had been arranged outside.

'Look at them,' Sam said with disgust. 'They wouldn't be so upset if they knew what he was really like.'

'He was their friend.' Lola didn't blame them. She knew only too well that the face Eddie Lambert presented to the rest of the world was very different from the one she knew.

'Home?' Sam said, as they crunched down the gravel path towards the car park.

Lola shook her head. 'I'm going back to the house. There are some photos and things I want to pick up.' She'd hidden a box in a corner of the attic years ago. She only hoped it was still there.

Sam frowned. 'Do you want me to come with you?'

'I'll be fine. I will,' she insisted, as Sam looked uncertain. 'I'll just collect the box and come straight back to the flat.'

'Brendan's supposed to be taking me out tonight,' Sam said. 'But I can cancel if you'd rather I stayed in with you?'

'Definitely not,' Lola said. Knowing how besotted Sam was with her new boyfriend, she'd probably be devastated. She'd also spend the whole night texting him anyway.

Almir Close was a row of 1960s semis just off the Armley Road,

south-west of Leeds city centre. The houses, with their double-glazed porches and neat front gardens, had pretensions to middle class but were let down by their scruffy neighbours: the Creighton estate on one side and the local secondary school on the other.

It was the end of the day at Pickley Park Comp, and Lola had to slow her car to avoid the teenagers surging out of the gates and into the road ahead of her, laughing, shouting and fighting.

She reached number 14 and felt a jolt when she saw her father's old Vauxhall Astra parked in the drive. For a moment she sat paralysed, her hands clammy on the steering wheel.

Then she gave herself a mental shake. 'Pull yourself together,' she muttered. 'He's gone.'

But it still took all her courage to make herself get out of the car, walk up the front path and put her key in the door.

As soon as she stepped inside, it all came flooding back. It smelt so frighteningly familiar; furniture polish mingled with stale cooking and her father's Benson and Hedges. Everything was just the same as it had always been: the red swirly hall carpet; the striped wallpaper; the ornate gold mirror where Eddie Lambert always stood to knot his tie and smooth down his hair in the morning before he set off for work. Fastidious about his appearance, he never liked to leave the house without his shoes shone to perfection and his suit brushed.

There was the clothes brush on the hallstand where he always kept it. Once, when her mother had forgotten to pick up his favourite jacket from the dry cleaners, he'd used it to smash her knuckles so hard that she couldn't move her fingers for a week.

Lola rocked back on her heels as a wave of nausea swept over her.

This is ridiculous, she thought then as she sat down on the stairs, feeling shaky. You're nearly thirty years old. You're a police officer. You've chased burglars and faced down drunken thugs outside night-clubs in the early hours of the morning. So why was she still so afraid of a dead man?

Eddie Lambert might be gone, but some habits took longer to die. Lola hadn't lived with him since she was sixteen, but even now the sound of a key turning in a lock could make her heart race with panic.

She was just six years old when she first saw her father hit her mother. Before that, for as long as she could remember, she'd been

aware that her parents weren't like other mummies and daddies. There was no laughter, no fun or affection. Only tense, anxious silences.

She found out why when she came downstairs to the kitchen for a drink of water late one night and found her mother curled up in a whimpering ball by the fridge while her father aimed a savage kick in her ribs.

As she stared in confusion, trying to take in what she was seeing, her father had calmly pushed past her and walked out of the room. Even more bizarrely, her mother had stayed on the floor, her arms wrapped around her body, and smiled up at Lola.

'Be a good girl and go back to bed, sweetheart,' was all she'd said. As if it were the most natural thing in the world to be cowering in the corner, nursing a cracked rib.

Nothing was ever said about that night.

Her mother might have been able to stay silent, but Lola couldn't. Fearful as she was of her father, she had a feisty streak that just wouldn't allow her to put up with his bullying.

He'd only hit her once, when she was thirteen. It was during yet another strained mealtime. As usual, Lola tried to stay quiet while her father picked fault with everything. But in the end, as she watched her mother shrinking under his onslaught of criticism, she couldn't stand it any more.

'Why don't you leave her alone?' she'd said. The next thing she knew, her father had lashed out with a sudden blow to her head that caught her off-guard and knocked her sideways.

She was more shocked than hurt. But what shocked her more was her mother's reaction. She'd snatched up her knife and brandished it at her husband's face.

'Touch her again and so help me, I'll murder you,' she threatened in a low voice that Lola barely recognised.

It must have taken Eddie Lambert by surprise, too. It was a full ten seconds before he managed to get any words out. 'You wouldn't dare,' he'd said. But Lola caught the uncertain look in his eyes as he stared at the blade hovering inches from his face.

'Try me.'

Amazingly, he'd backed down, and, for a brief moment, Lola thought the tables had turned. But then, when she got up the following morning, her mother had more black bruises on her arms, and Lola knew nothing had changed.

At the age of thirty-eight, her mother finally lost the fight for good. The doctors reckoned she must have lived with the brain aneurysm for years, like a ticking time bomb inside her head. One day it finally exploded, and she was gone.

From that moment on, it was as if she'd never existed. Her father cleared all trace of her from the house. He sold her beloved piano, gave her clothes to charity and threw all her other possessions on a skip, apart from a box of photos that Lola had managed to save and hide away in the attic.

But her belongings weren't the only thing he'd thrown out. Three months after her mother died, Lola had come home from school to find two suitcases lined up in the hall.

'Who do they belong to?' she'd asked.

'They're yours. I want you out of this house. Your mother's dead and you're not my problem any more.'

She didn't beg to stay. She knew there would be no point, and anyway, she hated being in the house with him now her mother was no longer there. Instead she'd dragged her bags round the corner to Sam's house. They'd taken her in and become her surrogate family. Three years later, she and Sam had found a flat and moved in together, and they'd been sharing ever since.

She went upstairs now, found a torch in the airing cupboard, opened up the loft hatch and pulled down the ladder tucked inside. Holding the torch in one hand, she carefully climbed the steps up into the attic.

The air was cool and musty. As she swung her torch around, the beam picked out random shapes of old furniture and boxes stacked around the sloping walls.

Good thing I'm not scared of the dark, she thought as she climbed up through the hatch. Perhaps her father had been; from the thick layer of dust on everything, it was clear he hadn't ventured up there for a very long time. Which meant he wouldn't have found the box she'd stashed all those years ago.

It didn't take her long to find it, tucked away under the eaves, covered by an old picnic blanket. As she pulled the blanket off, a disgruntled spider scuttled into the shadows. Lola watched it run, then her eye caught something else tucked in the corner.

Her mother's old violin.

She blew the dust away and examined it in the dim torchlight. She was amazed it had escaped her father's purge.

Lola had never heard her play it. Sometimes she'd play the piano, if Lola's father wasn't around. But he hated her music, and banned it from the house.

'I can't stand that classical crap,' he always complained.

Claire Lambert was a gifted musician. She'd studied at the Royal College of Music, and had a promising career ahead of her. Then, for reasons Lola could never get her to explain, she'd given it all up and moved back to Leeds to marry Eddie.

'Sometimes life just doesn't turn out the way you'd expect,' was all she'd say.

Lola could never work out how they'd ended up together. They couldn't be more different. Her mother was gentle, artistic, well-educated. Eddie was what people kindly called 'rough and ready'. He was from working-class Creighton, had left school at sixteen and drifted into all kinds of trouble before buckling down to an apprenticeship at the ball-bearing factory. He'd gradually worked his way up to supervisor, but he hadn't lost any of his rough edges.

Lola was backing down the ladder from the attic, carefully balancing the box of photos on one arm, when she heard the key in the front door.

She froze, panic surging through her. Even though her head told her she had nothing to fear, somehow the message didn't get through to her pounding heart. Somehow she got to the bottom, carefully pushed the ladder back into place and replaced the loft hatch. Then she made her way downstairs, clutching the box.

She could hear them in the kitchen. Two women, bickering over the contents of the fridge.

'It doesn't seem right to me,' one was saying. 'Maybe we should just chuck it all out.'

'Are you mad? Some of that stuff hasn't reached its sell-by. Besides, Eddie wouldn't have wanted to see good food going to waste. Stick it in the carrier bag; that ham'll do for the kids' tea.'

Lola let out the breath she'd been holding all the way down the stairs. Her father's sisters, Auntie Wendy and Auntie Lorraine. Lola had been named after Lorraine, until she started shortening it. No prizes for guessing why they were here. Half an hour after their beloved brother's funeral, they'd come to pick over his belongings like

a pair of vultures. She thought about sneaking out and leaving them to it. But as she made a move, the floorboard creaked. Auntie Wendy swung round.

'Oh, it's you.' Her face fell. 'What are you doing here?'

'I just came to pick up a few things. Same as you.'

'We've got a right to be here,' Auntie Wendy snapped defensively. 'This is all ours now.'

'Eddie left us this house,' Auntie Lorraine chimed in. 'We've been to see the solicitor and it's all official.'

Why doesn't that surprise me? Lola thought. Her father had probably barely hit the ground from his heart attack before they were hammering on the lawyer's door, laying claim to what was rightfully theirs.

'I'm so pleased for you,' she said.

Auntie Lorraine's eyes narrowed, sensing sarcasm. 'He didn't want to leave it to you. He told us you weren't to get a penny.'

'He said he'd given you enough during his life,' Auntie Wendy added.

And what would that be? Lola wondered. The nightmares? The dark memories? The need to keep every man she met at arm's length?

'He was generous to a fault, all right,' she said.

The irony was lost on her aunts. While Auntie Lorraine went back to scooping the contents of the fridge into Asda bags, Auntie Wendy spied the box Lola was holding. 'What have you got there?' she demanded.

'Just old photo albums. I wanted some pictures of Mum.'

'Let's have a look. You could be sneaking anything out of here.'

'Believe me, there's nothing else I want.'

Lola winced as Auntie Wendy pawed through the box, carelessly tossing aside handfuls of photos. She would have asked her to be careful, but she guessed that would only make her tear a few out of spite. Wendy was Eddie Lambert's sister, after all.

Finally, she said, 'I don't know if we should let you take these. They're part of our brother's estate.'

There was a vindictive gleam in her eye. Lola could feel her hackles rising, and fought for control.

'Fine,' she said. 'If you won't give them to me I'll just have to consult my own solicitor about getting them. And while I'm at it, I

might ask about getting my share of the rest of the estate, too,' she added sweetly.

Her aunts exchanged looks. 'Just take the bloody things,' Auntie Lorraine grunted, checking the date on a ready meal.

But Auntie Wendy wasn't one to give up without a fight. She was as tenacious as a bull terrier. She looked a bit like one, too.

'You wouldn't be entitled to anything anyway,' she stated firmly.

'Are you sure about that? I think I could claim something, as his only child.'

'That's just it. You're not.'

Her mouth snapped shut like a trap, but it was too late. The words were already out there. The silence that followed them was like a vacuum, sucking everything in. Even Auntie Lorraine stopped rustling her carrier bags.

'What did you say?' Lola said.

Her aunts looked at each other again. Then Lorraine said in a low voice, 'Wendy, we promised.'

'We promised we wouldn't say anything while he was alive. But what difference does it make now he's dead? Anyway, it's about time she knew the truth. She's been looking down her nose at us for too long, acting like she's so bloody superior. Just like that mother of hers. As if *she* had anything to be uppity about!'

Lola looked from one to the other. Surprised at her own calmness, she said, 'What are you talking about?'

'Haven't you worked it out yet?' Auntie Wendy turned on her. 'You're not our brother's kid. Your oh-so-perfect mother went and got herself pregnant by another man. But of course, he didn't want to know her once he'd had his fun, so poor Eddie took her on and married her.'

Blood sang in Lola's ears. 'You're lying.'

'Suit yourself. It doesn't bother me if you believe it or not. But it's the truth.'

She went back to packing her carrier bags. Lola watched her, dumbstruck. She had to be lying. There was no way her father would have kept something like that a secret. Not if it meant missing out on the chance to be spiteful and vindictive.

Auntie Wendy seemed to guess her thoughts. 'He had his pride,' she said. 'Which is more than anyone can say about your mother.'

'Leave my mother out of this!'

She laughed scornfully. 'You think she was so wonderful, don't you, with her posh voice and her fiddle-playing. But let me tell you something. She was no better than those whores up on Canning Road. I'll tell you something else, too. If it hadn't been for my brother you would have both ended up on the streets. And if you ask me, that's where you belonged!'

Chapter Two

Sam was in her bedroom posing in front of the wardrobe mirror in a purple bra and white jeans when Lola got back to the flat. Her bed was hidden under a pile of discarded clothes, a sure sign she was having another pre-date fashion crisis.

'Can I get away with these, do you think? Or do they make me look fat?' She pinched a roll of flab above her waistband. 'Bloody low-rise jeans would give Kate Moss love handles. I don't know why I even bought them.'

'Because you're a complete fashion victim?' Lola suggested.

'I think it was because they were a size twelve and I was so thrilled to get into them I had to have them.' Sam turned sideways and pulled a face at her reflection. 'Be honest, they make my thighs look huge, don't they?'

'Well ...'

'I knew it. Maybe I'd better wear a skirt instead. Brendan prefers skirts.'

'Yes, but do they suit him?' Lola carried the box of photos into the sitting room and set it down on the coffee table.

Sam followed her, pulling on a T-shirt. 'Did you get everything you wanted from your dad's place?'

'I got more than I expected, that's for sure. My aunts were there.'

'Oh, God, not the Ugly Sisters? What did they want?'

'Just about everything, I think. Dad left the house to them.'

'No!' Sam's mouth fell open. 'That's not fair.'

'It was his house. Anyway, I didn't really expect him to leave me anything. We weren't exactly close.'

'Only because he was so vile to you and your mum.' Sam's face was the picture of outrage. 'You deserve something for what you had to put up with.'

Lola went into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of wine from the fridge. She was still dazed with shock.

Sam eyed her with concern when she came back to the sitting room. 'This has really upset you, hasn't it?'

'Not the house. It's just something my aunts said to me.'

'Oh, take no notice of them,' Sam was dismissive. 'They were probably just trying to get at you. What did they say?'

'That I wasn't really their brother's daughter.'

'*What*?'

As she explained what she'd been told, Sam's eyes went round with shock, then she laughed. 'If that was true, don't you think you would have found out before now? You know what your dad was like. He would have thrown that back in your face a long time ago.'

'That's what I thought.'

But if it *was* true, it explained a lot. Like why he hated her so much.

'If I were you I'd just forget all about it,' Sam advised. 'They were probably just saying that to make sure you didn't try to take the house from them.'

The doorbell rang. 'That's Brendan.' Sam shot off to answer it.

Lola heard Brendan's voice and steeled herself. She tried hard to like him for Sam's sake, but there was something about him that set her teeth on edge.

He was a car salesman, and he'd chatted Sam up while offering her easy terms on a Renault Clio six months ago. But his gift of the gab didn't work on Lola.

He didn't seem to like her much, either. Sam had finally admitted Lola made him nervous because he thought she was a lesbian.

'It's because you don't have a boyfriend and you wear flat shoes for work,' she'd told her.

'I'm a police officer. I can't chase criminals in high heels, can I?'

'That's another thing. Brendan says all policewomen are lesbians. That's why they want to do a man's job.'

Lola heard them whispering in the hall now and guessed they were talking about her when she heard the words 'funeral' and 'try to be nice to her, please'.

'Can't I come and watch you getting changed instead?' Brendan asked. A second later he was catapulted into the sitting room and the door closed behind him.

He shifted from one foot to the other, hands thrust into the pockets of his chinos.

'All right?' he asked finally.

'Yes, thanks. You?'

'So-so. You know.'

And that was it. Their full conversational repertoire exhausted. Lola didn't know why Sam was so determined to make them like each other. It was never going to happen.

Brendan sat down on the sofa, crossed his legs and examined an imaginary scuff on his loafers. He wasn't bad-looking in a shifty-eyed, over-confident, too-much-hair-gel kind of way.

His eyebrows were going up and down, a sure sign he was working up to another conversational show-stopper.

'So ... um ... your dad's dead?'

'Yep.'

'Bummer.'

'It is for him.'

He regarded her warily. That was another thing about her that confused him, according to Sam. Men made jokes; women just laughed.

But at least he'd made an effort. Now it was her turn. 'Sold any good cars lately?' she ventured.

'It's funny you should ask that ...' He launched into a complicated story about splitting the commission on a top-of-the-range Merc. Lola was still struggling to concentrate when Sam came back.

'I'm ready.' She did a little twirl for Brendan's approval. She was wearing a denim mini-skirt, pink vest top and perilously high strappy sandals.

'You look amazing.' He gave her thigh an appreciative stroke. Sam giggled.

Blimey, Lola thought, looking down at her jeans and trainers. No wonder he thinks I'm a lesbian.

'Now, are you sure you'll be all right on your own?' Sam asked anxiously as they headed for the door.

'I'll be fine.'

'You could always come with us, if you like? We're only going out for a drink.'

'No,' Lola and Brendan said together.

As the door closed, she heard him hissing, 'What did you say that for?'

On her own in the flat, Lola had a bath, blitzed herself a ready meal, poured another glass of wine and set about sorting through the box she'd brought home.

It wasn't much to show for someone's life. A battered box of old photographs, the years all jumbled together, baby pictures mixed up with school portraits and holiday snapshots.

Lola gulped her wine and flicked through them a handful at a time. It was painful to look at them. Not just because she missed her mum so badly, although seeing her face again brought back an ache of loneliness. It was because they made her think of how bad those days had been. Those tense Christmases when her father lost his temper and left her mother in tears in the kitchen. Those miserable holidays when they'd shivered on Bridlington beach and tried to pretend they were having a good time. That school photo of the little girl with her hair in plaits, smiling for the camera and dreading the time when she had to go home.

But there was one that made her smile. A strip of black-and-white prints of her and her mum in a passport photo booth. She was about eight years old. The photos weren't exactly flattering – their faces were squashed together, distorted by the fish-eye lens – but they were laughing, really laughing, not just the stiff smiles they put on for her father's camera.

It reminded Lola of the times when they were alone, just her and her mum. Then they'd fool around, her mother would sing and teach her to play little duets on the piano, and they'd eat biscuits and watch *Blue Peter* without being scared of getting crumbs on the carpet.

And then they'd hear her father's key in the door.

Lola had never understood their relationship, or why her mother stayed with him. As she got older, she would beg her to leave.

'I can't,' her mother would say. 'If you knew the full story you'd understand.' But she would never tell her. 'Maybe when you're older,' she promised.

But by the time Lola was old enough to hear it, her mother was gone.

She finished her wine and was just about to pack the photos away

again when she spotted two more, right at the bottom of the box, wedged under the flap.

She barely recognised her mother in the first photo. She was scarcely more than a teenager and looked like a hippie in her flowing cheesecloth dress and embroidered shawl, her straight fair hair pinned on top of her head. She was sitting on a sofa, arm in arm with a dark-haired girl. They were both clutching their violins and grinning at the camera. Sprawled on the far end of the sofa was a young man with rippling golden hair, kohl-rimmed eyes and a moody expression.

Lola turned it over and looked at the back. 'Me, Sarah and Rick' was scrawled in pencil.

She looked at the photo again. Of course. Auntie Sarah, her mother's friend from music college. She often used to come up from London to visit. Lola enjoyed seeing her. She was exotic and arty-looking, and she made her mother laugh. But Eddie Lambert didn't like her and made her visits so awkward that, in the end, she stopped coming. The last time Lola saw her was at her mother's funeral.

She picked up the last photo. It must have been taken at the same time. This time it was a close-up, just her mum and the young man. He had a cigarette in one hand and the other draped languidly around her shoulders. On the back she read 'Me and Rick, 1977'.

The year before she was born.

Suddenly she heard her Auntie Wendy's voice, crowing in her ear.

'Your oh-so-perfect mother went and got herself pregnant by another man . . .'

She looked again at the photo, and felt a sudden, awful jolt of recognition.

That tawny hair, those green eyes, that full, turned-down mouth. It was the same face she saw when she looked in the mirror.