

Sisters

1981

Fully erect, he lay back on his examination table, pulled aside the hospital gown and closed his eyes. He stroked his penis imagined brushing his finger against her clitoris as he gently slipped the lubricated syringe into her vagina. Marvin moved the vial to his penis, stroked faster and faster, then gasped as he ejaculated. He was glad his nurse and receptionist had left. He'd been louder than usual.

2019

Claire Spencer Blake drove south on Route 7 in her red Miata, Vermont license plate number 6. The foliage on both sides of Lake Champlain was in peak color. Her niece Katie played music through her Blue Tooth. They'd have time for the short hike up Mount Philo before Katie's soccer practice. Claire still had two homicides to review. Since she'd been attorney general, her afternoons with Katie had been too infrequent. Today Claire needed the distraction. She was more nervous than she'd been since her bar exam, as nervous as when she'd been lieutenant governor and had to cast that tie-breaking vote on the gun law.

Yesterday her Ancestry.com DNA results arrived. She and her younger sister Anne, Katie's mom, had sent theirs in at the same time. Their mother, who'd done hers a year ago, got them DNA kits for their birthdays. Some of the results were no surprise: mother of Deborah Spencer; sister Anne Spencer Blake; niece Katie Blake McNally. But the surprise—or error—was that both their DNA results showed Marvin Coolidge Strong as their father. Both Claire and Anne did some quick sleuthing, which Claire the lawyer, and Anne, a Vermont College of Fine Arts professor, were good at it. They knew of Marvin Coolidge Strong, M.D. He's been their mother's ob-gyn and was still practicing at Central Vermont Medical Center, someone they'd met at a couple of Montpelier parties years ago. He had no documented misconduct or warnings.

There were a couple of other ancestral connections to the Vermont Coolidges of presidential fame, and to Isaac Strong, who'd been Vermont attorney general a century before Claire. These might have been things to talk about, if it hadn't been for the surprise—their father. Also listed on both their DNA results were 24 “likely half” siblings, 13 brothers and 11 sisters.

Their parents had never kept their births a secret. To conceive, their mother had artificial insemination. Their father Collin had been infertile after testicular cancer, though he survived healthy and fully functional. Many AI children sought information about their fathers, and their mother was oaky with that.

While Katie jogged ahead up the trail, Claire called their mother.

“Mama, can Annie and I stop by late afternoon?”

“You sound upset. Is everything okay—a case—your campaign?”

Nothing at the AG's except murder as usual. Too early to campaign. It's something else.”

Claire dropped Katie at soccer practice, and ten minutes later picked up Anne. They could talk on the way to their mother's in Montpelier.

“Annie, have you looked at the results?”

Anne had her laptop balanced on her lap as Claire raced down I-89.

“Just ‘cause you’re the attorney general doesn’t mean you won’t get a speeding ticket.”

Claire slowed down to 70.

“What the fuck is this Claire? 24 brothers and sisters?”

“Halves.”

“Whatever.”

“So was Mama having an affair?”

“I can’t imagine Mama having an affair, especially fucking Dr. Strong.”

“Could you get one of your investigators on it?”

“Bad idea.”

“Huge conflict of interest.”

“For sure Annie.”

“You have a hunch for these things.”

“I feel like it’s something to do with the artificial insemination.”

“So how do we make sense of our lives now?”

“Let’s talk to Mama.”

Their mother, Deborah Spencer, had married Collin Blake while they were grad students at University of Vermont, both 23. She’d stood by him through his cancer treatment. They were 30 when they’d made the decision to have children.

Deborah’s hands trembled as she looked over first Anne’s, then Claire’s DNA results on her laptop.

“Annie, Claire, this is hard to believe, but DNA doesn’t lie. Ancestry.com’s 99% accurate.

“Remind us how you did it.”

“You were \$5,000 in 1983; Claire was \$4,000 in 1981 for tested donor, similar to father, guaranteed background check. I have the contracts in your birth files.”

“I know what I think.”

“Claire?”

“Dr. Strong impregnated women with his own sperm.”

“And kept the money”

“Exactly. 24 likely siblings? Wait—
my God, these two are his—Dr. Strong’s kids with Angie.”

“His wife? That makes his kids our sibs?”

“Why would he be stupid enough to do Ancestry.com if we could find out?”

“Makes no sense, but if he was brazen enough to do this for years, anything goes.”

“There were times he made me uncomfortable.”

“How?”

“I don’t know—the way he touched me. I thought I’d imagined it.”

“Did you tell Daddy?”

“No. Then we had two kids, both teaching, you know.”

“What now Mama?”

“You’re the lawyer Claire. You two think about this. I need to talk to your dad tonight.”

“Should we wait?” Anne asked

“I want to talk to your dad first, if you don’t mind.” Their mother was weeping. I’ll always love you both like I always have. So will Dad.”

“There could be more than 24 plus us,” Claire reminded them.

“It occurred to me dear.”

They hugged their mother longer than usual.

1983

Dr. Marvin Coolidge Strong gently brushed her clitoris as he eased the warm, lubricated syringe into her vagina.

“I hope that’s comfortable, Deborah, well as comfortable as it can be.”

Underneath his light blue medical coat he was fully erect.

2019

Anne and Claire had lives that would surely be disrupted if this became public. Anne had her students, who she loved being with in creative writing seminars. Reading from her new book of poetry in bookstores and on campuses, she was happier than anywhere, except of course with Katie. At 36 she was full professor.

Claire was the first female attorney general of Vermont. At 38, she was considered a rising political star, progressive and pragmatic, a possible governor. She’d been senator at 26, lieutenant governor at 30 and attorney general at 34. Niece Katie thought her aunt had taken a step down from the number 2 job and license plate to Vermont plate number 6. Claire gave Katie a number 2 plate for her bedroom. The girl admired her mother and aunt. Who knew what this would do. Claire liked the action of the attorney general’s job, and was good at it. There was more action than as lieutenant governor and she was using her law degree.

But this, political instinct told her, would go viral. She liked the right publicity, but like Anne was a private person. If they sued Strong, or he was prosecuted, this would go viral. She could imagine the tabloid headlines and tweets: *Doc secret dad of state AG and poetry prof*

2020

Things had moved faster than Anne and Claire expected. First was the criminal case. Claire couldn’t touch it of course. Vermont’s had passed an extended statute of limitations for abuse cases in the midst of the Catholic Church scandals. A case from 2000 looked good for prosecution and bad for the doctor. Most of the state’s attorneys knew Claire, and wouldn’t touch it. But a crusty Republican D.A. from Guildhall called her. Ordinarily he’d be a political foe of Claire.

“I’ll take this bastard (sorry Claire) this prick S.O.B. to hell and back. Legally you and I should not talk about this case again.”

“Thanks Richard, I know.”

He charged Strong with sexual assault. The penalty was three years to life.

Meanwhile the lawsuit against the medical center and Marvin Coolidge Strong, M.D. was moving quickly. The suit had 34 plaintiffs, including Claire, Anne, their parents and 30 others. They’d met many of their half siblings, ages 17 to 42, from Vermont, California, five other states, Canada, France and even one from the Republic of San Marino. Several others were considering separate lawsuits. The medical center wanted to make it go away, but that wasn’t about to happen for a while.

“It’s not about money; it’s about justice and ethics,” Anne told *The Washington Post*.”

“This is hurting Daddy, but he’s totally on board, Claire.” Anne was crying into her phone.

“I know Annie. How’s Katie?”

“Okay.” Kind of fascinated. Worried about us. She still wants to campaign with you. Can you still come to my students’ reading?

“For sure sister.”

Neither a Vermont College of Fine Arts student reading nor a Rotary Club lunch to hear the AG’s campaign spiel would usually get much news coverage. When Claire pulled up to the college for the “Autumn MFA Poetry and Fiction Celebration,” CNN, WCAX and Fox 44 pounced. All she could say was:

“Maybe this will give my sister’s students some ideas to write about.”

Indeed one of them sold an article to a news site in Germany, and later another published a short story. Anne tried to take it all calmly, but she was sweating during the reading.

Two days later Katie got out of school to campaign with her aunt. Claire drove her less conspicuous black Honda, but reporters immediately spotted her. Six news trucks waited for her outside the Bennington Rotary Club.

“Attorney General Blake! Deborah! Attorney General Blake!”

“No comment now.”

Claire ducked inside and found their seats at the head table. It was hard to focus on lunch chatter and keep questions to the job she was running for. This was polite compared to what was on Twitter: *Semen Scandal! Come on Doc! Jack Off Doc?*

Katie had seen this stuff on her smartphone. Claire had a knot in her stomach as she ate her salmon salad, but Katie was calmly chatting with the woman to her right, who owned a fitness spa.

2021

While Vermont had a liberal reputation nationally, in reality the place was more complex, a mix of conservative and progressive. The bad news for Strong was that both sides of the political spectrum agreed on rape. Prosecutors and juries had not been kind to sexual assault

defendants. His attorney warned him that ten years was likely. Pending the outcome, his medical license had been suspended, hospital privileges revoked and savings frozen.

In the civil lawsuit both sides agreed on an out of court settlement. The publicity had hurt the hospital, particularly its obstetrics and gynecology. Strong and the hospital settled on admission of liability and \$15 million, most of which would come from insurance. Anticipating the outcomes in both cases, Strong plea bargained his criminal case and his attorney asked for three years, two to serve.

Marvin Coolidge Strong waited in the holding cell. Five years and a \$25,000 fine. He'd be out on parole in two, with mandatory sex offender counseling, but wouldn't have to sell his Vermont and Florida homes. He pulled out the vial he'd smuggled in, swallowed the fentanyl—just enough to relax. He pulled the blanket up, closed his eyes, saw women on the examining table. He stroked himself as he drifted.

“I loved them all,” he whispered.

Claire's reelection successfully behind, she settled back into her job. Anne was on a year's sabbatical. Their parents left for Florida and a needed break after what they called “the winter of madness.” Their marriage was still good, but the scars would never heal. Anne, Katie and Claire had flown down for ten days.

Katie stayed with her grandparents on the patio, sensing her mother and aunt needed some time. They walked Delray Beach watching surfers and pelicans. Claire found a lettered olive shell and handed it to Anne.

“Annie, to not know who we are. How do we make sense of our lives now?”

“Claire, you'll always be my sister. “And Mama and Daddy.”

“Always.”

“Yes, always, always.”

Annie held the seashell to her lips, and with her other hand held Claire's.

“Sisters.”