

# *Crescendo*

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LAURA KALPAKIAN



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CRESCENDO

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A NOVEL



Laura Kalpakian



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*Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done . . . ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness . . . O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . behold, your house is left unto you desolate.*

—Matthew 23:23, 27, 37, 38

*And as he went out of the temple, one of his disciples saith unto him, Master, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here! And Jesus answering said unto him, Seest thou these great buildings? there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.*

—Mark 13:1, 2

*And when he was come near, he beheld the city and wept over it, Saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes.*

—Luke 19:41, 42



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# PART I



# TIME ZONES





## CHAPTER ONE

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May 2, 1985

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11:45 A.M.



he woman at the open window looked like any other of her class and vintage, clad to meet a conclave of like-minded, well-heeled matrons. Her taut, perfect posture reflected the cadet's rigid reflex rather than the dancer's native grace, but her makeup was modest, her blouse starched and her skirt a cool Monet blue. While her attire suggested attendance at a society luncheon, Claire Stone, in fact, had dressed for an appointment with disaster. She had a better than nodding acquaintance with disaster but preferred to meet it on her own terms, insisting on appearances, outward perfection, belying the woman crumbling within. She stood at her bedroom window and surveyed the familiar city, tiered below her like the full flounces of a crinoline, pinned with spires, threaded with wires and laced with the dull gleam of a thousand polished windows. Beyond the city lay the Pacific, obscured by gauzy banners of fog, as if someone had tried to erase the horizon and succeeded only in smudging it. Screeching gulls distantly counterpointed the finches chattering in the backyard elms as Claire rehearsed for her visit to the Emergency ward, practicing on the elms, the finches, the Pacific, the speech she intended to use on her housekeeper. "May I borrow your car, Louise?" That would not do. "Do you mind . . ." No.

She cleared her throat and quit whispering. "I need to use your car, Louise. That phone call was the hospital. Lucky's had an accident." She squared her narrow shoulders and corrected herself. "Lucky's sud-



denly been taken very ill." Less than the altogether truth, this was nearer the point. "Lucky's been hospitalized for an obstruction of the gut." Yes, that's what she'd say. She need not add that the obstruction was a .22 caliber bullet and that he had got it there by virtue of having aimed at his heart and missed. Naturally, he missed.

"Matthew Mark Luke and John." Claire murmured her old childhood incantation, hopelessly inadequate to a situation that offered no sanctuary and no certainties. She glanced from the elms to the half-rumpled bed. Lucky had not come home last night. But he had shot himself only this morning. The police said so. He was not dead. Not yet. *Let him live, Lord, let him live.* Inwardly, Claire blessed her husband's incompetence, wondering if he had been drinking all night long and if the alcohol unsteadied his aim or if the alcohol itself had given him the courage for suicide. She guessed both.

She left the window and returned to the dressing table mirror, gave her loose bob one last unnecessary brush and surveyed the finished woman whose ash blond hair had considerably more ash than it used to. Still, Claire's features suggested youth retained rather than preserved. She straightened her collar; save for her jewelry, she was as ready as she would ever be. She must go now and confront Louise. *And then the catastrophe.* No, then the hospital. And after the hospital? *Let him live, Lord.* Her hand trembled as she carefully reapplied her lipstick. That her husband of nearly twenty-one years had shot himself was unthinkable, but that Claire should rush in, slatternly, unrehearsed, visibly disarrayed, was out of the question, and in that, she reflected grimly, she was still the prisoner of her mother's careful tutelage: Decency, Decorum and Dignity. The Three D's, her mother called them. These, along with good taste, good grooming, good manners, were the characteristics of nice girls. At forty-one, Claire was hardly a girl.

She went into the bathroom adjoining her bedroom and withdrew the bag of jewelry from the toilet tank. She put a pair of opal studs in her ears and then decided against them, selecting finally the sapphire solitaires to match the ring Lucky had given her in better days. That was the way they had lived: when there was money, there were sapphire solitaires and vacations in Europe and private schools for their sons. When there was money, they rented houses like this one, with manicured lawns and swimming pools, homes in newly affluent neighborhoods, living around newly affluent doctors and lawyers and computer wizards with whom they had nothing in common because when their money dried up and life changed, their boys went to public

school, they took their vacations at the family beach home in San Angelo and they had been known to report burglaries that never happened so that they might collect the insurance on the expendable jewelry. When there was no money, they rented homes in housing tracts where their neighbors were good-natured wage slaves with whom they also had nothing in common. Claire had learned not to make friends in either instance. She wondered where they would move now, because none of their reversals of fortune heretofore had involved the possibility of criminal proceedings or the IRS.

She scraped the jewelry back into the silk bag and stuffed the bag into a rubberized ice pack, twisting the coat hanger more firmly around the neck of the ice pack, and hung it back inside the toilet tank, replacing the lid. She did not need to flush the toilet to make sure the ice pack was above the water line. She'd done that yesterday as Treasury agents were combing her house, methodically seizing assets. Lucky had reacted stoically, sitting at the bar downstairs, staring at himself in the mirror and sipping one whiskey straight after another. Claire had responded to the emergency with the native guile of a born peasant. She fled to her bedroom, weeping loudly. She grabbed the silk bag of her jewels and retreated to the bathroom. She continued to sniffle audibly as she rifled the bathroom cabinets looking for something suitable, came upon the ice pack, shoved the bag in, ripped a robe out of the closet, twisted the neck of the hanger to fit around the top of the ice pack. She had just hung it in the toilet tank when she heard the Treasury agents coming upstairs and approaching the bedroom. As her wails rose in pitch and velocity, she took a glass from the sink and filled it with water from the tap. When she had actually heard the agents enter the bedroom, she held the glass over the toilet and retched noisily, tossing the water into the bowl in glops. She flushed the toilet, noting that the water in the tank just grazed the bottom of the ice bag. No one disturbed her.

Earrings in place, she now checked her makeup quickly and assured herself that she was ready. She picked up her purse and was about to leave the bedroom when the phone rang again. "Matthew Mark Luke and John," she whispered, lowering herself carefully to the bed. *Don't let it be the hospital. Please let Lucky live.* "Hello," she said in a hoarse voice.

"Mrs. Stone, this is Hoolihan. You might not remember me. I saw you last at Lucy Rose Cotton's wedding and that must be twenty years ago, and before that, at—"

*Stop him, stop him before he* "Hoolihan, of course," Claire mum-

bled, her breath short and painful. "I remember." The past cracked open like an egg and dripped, gooey and gelatinous, into her lap. In an automatic gesture, she brushed her skirt and collected herself. "No one in my family is likely to forget you, to be that fortunate."

"No doubt your Aunt Althea sees to that."

"My aunt thinks you are a legal pimp for that whore Lucille Swallow," said Claire stiffly.

"Ungenerous, madam, but understandable. I read in the papers about your husband's bankruptcy and collision with the IRS. I am calling only to offer my services, free of charge, when he requires an attorney, as he surely will."

"Did Lucille put you up to this?"

"Your quarrel, if you have one, is with her, not with me. And in any event, Lucille has nothing to do with this. I select my own clients. I'd venture to say that if any attorney in this city could get your husband off, I can."

"Why? What is Lucky to you?"

"Nothing, madam. Your husband is nothing to me, but you were formerly Claire Swallow, were you not, the daughter of Judge Anson Swallow?"

Claire felt herself suddenly docketed in the witness stand; she mumbled in the affirmative.

"I admired your father above all men, Mrs. Stone. I offer my services as a gesture of respect to his memory—not," he added hastily, "in return for any favor or in payment for any debt. Just a gesture. You needn't decide now. I won't say call if you need me. From what I read in the papers, you need me, but you can call if you want me."

The phone went dead, and Claire dropped it like a corpse. She doubled over, momentarily undone by remembered pain, all the more brutal for its having been not simply once forgotten, but sliced from experience altogether. On the day she had married Lucky Stone, Claire resolved to inflict upon herself a selective lobotomy, and with time as her only anesthetic, she surgically, carefully, removed from memory the preceding two years of her life. She believed she could be healed by this desperate measure, and never retreated from her decision, and over the years, as necessity evolved into habit, she managed to quell memory, though she remained perpetually vulnerable to the trivial odor of oranges, the fleeting smell of woodsmoke, to wisps of music.

She rose unsteadily to her feet, reminding herself that she had quite enough pain to contend with at the present. She must, she would, put Hoolihan from her mind and concentrate first on Louise, then the

hospital. And after the hospital . . . She left her bedroom and went slowly down the stairs, bracing herself with the brass rail. Gradually, she relied less on the rail and more on her mother's dictums: *stand up straight, Claire; you're never going to be a tall woman, so you might as well stand up straight and remember that Decency, Decorum and Dignity are your most precious*— "Oh shut up," she said, hugging her dignity to her like the poor rag it was and making her way toward the kitchen.

The house already had the air of a museum; dispossessed possessions stood mute as unearthed artifacts. She wandered through the living room like a lost tourist, noting the glass and chrome coffee table, the silver-framed paintings of poppies, the same pale peach shade as the rug, the floral-patterned chairs, the stereo and video equipment that Lucky's success had bought for them and that now his incompetence, or perhaps his drinking, his predilection for gambling—maybe his downright crookedness—or perhaps his simple ill luck had lost for them as well. She shrugged on her way through the living room; property was little better than illusion: she'd been nothing but a curator all along.

Claire paused regretfully only at the Steinway grand piano; she opened the keyboard and soundlessly stretched her fingers across the keys. Claire Stone was middle-aged, which is to say she had reached the time of life when nothing could happen to her only once; every face and feeling, every dream and desire, every scent and season reverberated into the past, clanged together like windchimes. In middle age any one moment can—not only coexist with the past—but co-transpire, and what is known occurs concurrently with what is being discovered and what is remains to be seen. In spreading her hand across that keyboard, she touched all the pianos she had ever played: the grand piano in her father's home, the upright at San Angelo, the practice rooms during her single year at the university, the first spinet Lucky had bought, when the children were little. She pressed the keys, and hollowly the Steinway eked out the first few bars of the Minuet in G, and Claire could all but see herself sitting on the bench beside each of her three sons, teaching them to play, stroking their silky hair, coaxing music from the unwilling little hands. Her own hands remembered what Claire had managed to forget; she sat down and played the triumphant chords of the *allegro* from Beethoven's eleventh sonata, the same sonata she had played on that other piano, the upright in the church in Chagrin, but the Steinway only echoed with defeat. She slammed the lid down over the keys. Nothing can happen once; if it

happened once, it would go on happening because the past and present ran parallel to one another, like ledgers left in the rain, and the ink bloated with time, brushed and entangled.

She rose and blew away the pollen that had fallen from a vase full of calla lilies and turned her back on the piano, making her way resolutely toward the kitchen. She tottered slightly because she'd chosen the tallest pair of high-heeled sandals she could find, knowing she would need the added inches when she confronted Louise, who towered over her and outweighed her by a hundred pounds.

Pale light wafted through the kitchen window and gleamed on the polished chrome. Louise sat at the butcher block kitchen island, reading the newspaper. "It's here," said Louise, pointing to the inside page. "'Treasury Agents Seize Assets of Stone Imports, Inc.' " Says here Mr. Stone hasn't paid his taxes in years and can't account for import duties or the withholding taxes of his employees. Says here his books are being audited and they've seen such gross—"

"Don't believe everything you read."

"Oh? I guess that was the seven dwarfs come through here yesterday."

"I need to borrow your car, Louise. That phone call was the hospital. Lucky's been taken very ill. He's in Emergency."

"That call just now?"

"No, the one before."

"That one half an hour ago?"

"It wasn't half an hour ago, and I'm losing precious time. Lucky's had a sudden obstruction of the gut, and I need your car to go to him."

"What's wrong with the Lincoln or the Cadillac?"

"You know very well they've been—they're gone."

"You could call a cab."

"I'd rather not."

Louise's eyes narrowed into slits, and a smile hovered near her fleshy lips. "You could take the bus."

"Either hand over the keys or don't, but spare me your comments and observations. You're not paid to comment and observe."

"I haven't been paid at all in six weeks," Louise grumbled, shuffling to her feet and ambling toward the pantry, where she habitually hung her purse. She made an elaborate show of digging for her keys. "You want me to tell Dan and Jason their dad's in the hospital when they come home from school?"

"Tell them nothing."

"Good thing they wasn't home yesterday when the Feds came through. Poor little lambs."

"They're adolescent boys, not little lambs."

"Good thing Scott's at Stanford and couldn't see them Feds pawing through his house. And poor Mr. Stone. Such a nice man. All too much for him, wasn't it? I never met a kinder man. A real gentleman, that's what he is, and when I saw him sitting at the bar yesterday when the Feds came through, drinking and staring at the mirror, I said to myself, Louise, that man's heart is breaking."

"Will you hurry?"

"It's his heart that broke, I know it."

No, Claire thought: he missed his heart. It's his gut that broke. "Give me the keys and be quick about it."

Louise dangled the keys. "You might have to put some gas in it, and it don't start too good. I need to get it fixed, but you don't pay me—"

"Yes, yes, how can you expect me to discuss your car when my husband might be lying at death's door? Just hand me the keys." True to form, Claire refused to reach; she preferred not to do things she couldn't do gracefully and this preference had, over the years, hardened into a rule. It kept her from playing bridge or backgammon; it kept her off the ski slopes and out of aerobics classes; it kept her active in fundraising for the Pacific Conservatory and away from the PTA; it kept her in the garden and out of the kitchen, and in this instance it kept her from reaching for the keys. It kept her intact.

Louise was right—her car didn't start too good. A twelve-year-old cocoa-colored Toyota, it choked and sputtered and spewed forth a grainy exhaust Claire could almost taste. It smelled, too, of Louise, of cleaning fluid and Camels. Claire pulled the seat forward so she could reach the pedals and gripped the wheel, pressing her forehead against it, grinding her teeth and the gears in unison. Now the hospital. *Now*. Slowly, she backed out of the driveway and started down the hilly street. All the houses in Claire's suburb had cathedral ceilings and tinted windows, Congoleum paved kitchens and fake Japanese lanterns in the front yards, which were full of colored rock instead of grass. The houses regarded the street impassively, not a porch amongst them, expensive shelters rather than expansive homes.

She got on the freeway and passed the city where she'd been born toward the end of the Second World War, the city she both knew and could no longer recognize, like a friend whose familiar visage has been altered by plastic surgery. A few of the old hotels retained their vaulted grace and rounded cornices, but everything new shot into the sky,

lacquered and hard and sharp, the glass reflecting only more glass and girders. She passed by the old, imposing county courthouse where her father had spent his professional life: that building she knew, though not the grim glass and steel additions uneasily wedded to the old stone.

Once out of the city proper, she stopped at a gas station where she could use a credit card and found enough cash for a pack of cigarettes. Claire smoked only under duress, an understatement in these circumstances.

"Don't you want the U-pump aisle?" the attendant drawled, scrutinizing the Toyota.

"If I did, I wouldn't be waiting here," Claire retorted. She had no intention of sullying perfume that cost \$65 an ounce with the smell of gas that cost \$1.25 a gallon. "Fill it up," she added. She had some distance to go. Besides not mentioning the .22 caliber bullet, Claire had neglected to tell Louise that Lucky had shot himself in the parking lot of a Foodway Supermart in a grim industrial suburb some distance from their home.

Back on the freeway, she passed through grubby towns with names that reeked of wishful thinking, Pleasant Valley and Apple Cove, suburbs connected by treeless concrete ribbons. Looking for the hospital, Claire crossed and recrossed unfamiliar streets, caught in an eddy of blinking lights and twinkling asphalt. She was utterly lost, but refused to stop and inquire. Claire Stone prided herself on her sense of direction, never mind it had failed her at every crucial turn of her life. She prayed and drove and drove and prayed to the God she had only half believed in and seldom called on in the years since she had weeded gratitude and remorse from her repertoire of acceptable emotions. *Let Lucky live. Matthew Mark Luke and John, let Lucky live.* Desperate for deliverance, she lamented and incanted, prayed and promised to be extra good, to merit the salvation of Lucky Stone, while she cursed Hoolihan for opening the fissures of the past which, like the exhaust fumes billowing up through the floorboards, threatened to overtake her. She prayed for Lucky's survival with the same breath that she cursed his gambling and then, lest it seem that he might have brought this disaster on himself, she qualified that and cursed only his drinking. The gambling had never gone badly till he began to drink. She cursed the drink and his civilized charm that so effectively masked his drinking, damned his pleasant evasions and gilded assurances that she ought not to worry about money. Well, there wasn't any money to worry about anymore, was there? *But let him live, Lord. I'll be a model wife if only you'll let him live.* What did a model wife do? She thought briefly of the model planes suspended from the ceiling in her youngest

son's bedroom: glued together, held in place, perfect in every way but flightless nonetheless. Claire Stone was a model wife, but she would never soar. She was tethered to the assumptions that kept her glued together and to the marriage that held her in place.

In their nearly twenty-one years together, Claire's affection for her husband had grown and she had returned his love, even if she could not return his adoration—which was probably ill-founded anyway, the result of Lucky's blind passion for her. Claire had squandered her passion elsewhere. Her passion, her principles, had all been irretrievably lost by the time she stood in the prim Episcopal church of her youth and murmured wedding vows with Lucky Stone. She wore her mother's utterly outdated wedding gown, but not for sentimental reasons (because by June of 1964 Claire Swallow had foresworn sentiment); she wore the hastily altered gown because her widowed mother had recently lost every nickel of the family's investments, and besides, the wedding itself was hastily assembled. Claire was pregnant.

Claire's father once told her that lies are like money, useful as long as people believed in them. It would be useful if Lucky Stone believed he was the father of her child and married her. Quickly. She knew he loved her and had for as long as she could remember, so she seduced him without compunction and with only that conviction. She had known him since high school, but with the heartlessness of a born belle, she had scorned his admiration because she came by it so easily. After all, girls were supposed to flirt, to collect boys' admiration but to remain lovely and inviolate. At nineteen, Claire found herself pregnant and unwed (rather than lovely and inviolate) and marriage was not only the obvious solution to her dilemma, but perhaps the only desirable option as well. At nineteen, Claire perceived none of the perils of marriage, only the haven it offered. Safety was all Claire wanted. Just safety. She wanted to enter the institution of marriage and have its doors clang shut behind her, picket her prospects, fence promise, envelop her in the expectable. She could only enter that institution with a husband, and so she would marry Lucky Stone. Claire assumed she would be good at marriage because her mother was good at it and no doubt one could inherit a talent for marriage like dark eyes or dimples. That she did not love Lucky Stone seemed irrelevant because by June of 1964, Claire Swallow did not love anything except the tiny two centimeters of baby gathering mortal flesh inside her. By the summer of 1964, Claire Swallow was ready to be comforted by apples or anything else; she was sick of love and she was sick every morning, too.

She had assumed that Lucky loved her, but she was surprised none-



theless at his passion and gratitude the night she led him deftly upstairs to her room in the house her family was about to lose. She had finally decided she would have to bring him home for the seduction because he respected her too much to park the car in a darkened street and neck.

She closed the door to her room, stepped out of her shoes and unhooked her stockings so that (in what she imagined would be his haste and eagerness) Lucky would not run them. But he made no move toward her. No rough pawing. No glinty eyes and hungry lips. He stood there while his cultivated charm and diffident manner deserted him and disbelief swept the angular planes of his face. He glanced around her bedroom as if it were a shrine; the peony-flowered carpet, the white curtains at the windowseat, the chintz-covered chair, the mahogany bed and dresser all seemed to be objects of the utmost sanctity. He repeated her name as if it had texture, substance and ineffable sweetness.

"Are you sure, Claire?"

"I'm sure, I'm sure," she repeated as if this speech were rehearsed. "I'm sure."

"I've always loved you, Claire, but I didn't think, I never dreamed—I'd always hoped, but—I mean, I want you to love me, Claire, not just go to bed with me. I've been to bed with girls I didn't love, even girls I hardly knew, but I couldn't do that with you. I love you and I never dreamed I'd be so lucky that—"

"Lucky is your name."

"My real name is John," he said regretfully.

"I couldn't think of you as John. You're Lucky."

"Yes, but this is a miracle."

Claire turned on the lamp by her bed and paused before taking off her dress. She had reckoned only on a straightforward seduction. It would be difficult to seduce a man who wanted to put her on a pedestal and then look up her dress. She unclipped the barette from her hair and unzipped her pink and green summer dress.

"I've always loved you, Claire, but I wouldn't want to—to do this if you couldn't love me. I'd feel like I'd wronged you."

Her nipples tightened with a familiar delicious anticipatory tingle. "I love you," she said simply, and the lie was useful: as long as she believed it, it heightened and intensified her simple sexual urgency. She took her dress off over her head and let the shoulder straps of her slip fall and it slid into a pool of vanilla at her feet. She stepped out of it and unhooked her garter belt while Lucky gazed at her with mute,