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SARAH MORGAN

One
Summer
in
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a novel



Grace

Grace Porter woke on Valentine's Day, happily married and blissfully unaware that was about to change.

Downstairs in the kitchen she added slices of cheese to the bread she'd baked fresh the day before, put fruit and raw vegetables into lunch boxes and then checked her list.

Number four on today's list: *remind Sophie about dinner.*

She glanced up. "Don't forget Dad and I are out tonight. Your dinner is in the fridge."

Her daughter, Sophie, was messaging a friend. "Mmm..."
"Sophie!"

"I know! *No phones at the table*—but this is urgent. Amy and I are writing a letter to the paper about that development they're going to build on the edge of town. Dad promised he'd publish it. Can you believe they want to close the dog shelter? Those dogs are going to *die* if someone doesn't do something, and that someone is me. There. *Done.*" Sophie finally looked up. "Mom, I can make my own lunch."

"Would you include fresh fruit and veg?"

"No. Which is why I'd rather make my own." Sophie gave a smile that didn't just light her up, it lit Grace up, too. "And you're starting to sound like Monica, which is a little scary."

Her daughter was like sunshine. She made the world a brighter place. For years Grace had been braced for her to rebel, take drugs, or roll in drunk after an illicit party with friends, but it hadn't happened. It seemed that Sophie's genetic makeup favored David's side of the family, which was a relief. If Sophie had an addiction it was causes. She hated injustice, inequality and anything she deemed unfair—particularly when it related to animals. She was the champion of all dogs, especially the underdog.

Grace was quick to defend her friend. "Monica is a wonderful mother."

"Maybe, but I can tell you that the first thing Chrissie is going to do when we get to Europe this summer is feast on a ton of fries to make up for all the years her mom wouldn't let her touch them." Sophie finished her oatmeal. "Did you say something about dinner?"

"Have you forgotten what day it is?" Grace closed the lunch boxes and put one next to Sophie. The other she slid into her own bag.

"Valentine's Day." Sophie slid off her chair and picked up her empty bowl. "The day it becomes public knowledge that nobody loves me."

"Dad and I love you."

"No offense, but you're not young, cool and athletic."

Grace took a mouthful of coffee. How much should she say? "It's still Sam?"

Sophie's smile faded as if someone had hit the dimmer switch. "He's seeing Callie. They walk around together holding hands. She keeps giving me these smug smiles. I've known Callie since I was three, so I don't understand why she's doing this. I mean, date him, sure. That sucks, but it's life. But it's like she's *trying* to hurt me."

Grace felt a burning in her chest. Not heartburn, but parenthood. As a mother, her role was to support from the sidelines.

It was like being forced to watch a really bad play without the consolation of knowing you could leave in the interval.

“I’m sorry, honey.”

“Don’t be.” Sophie put her bowl in the dishwasher and then added the one her father had left on the side. “It would never have worked out. Sophie and Sam sounds pretty lame, don’t you think?”

Her hurt slid into Grace and settled deep in her gut.

“You’re going to college soon. After a month in California you won’t even remember Sam exists. You have your whole life ahead of you, and all the time in the world to meet someone special.”

“I’m going to study, graduate top of my class and go to law school where I can learn how to sue people who are assho—”

“Sophie!”

“Er...not very nice people.” Sophie grinned, slung her backpack over one shoulder and stroked her long ponytail over the other. “Don’t worry, Mom. Boys drive me insane. I don’t want a relationship.”

That will change, Grace thought.

“Have a great day, Mom, and happy anniversary. Twenty-five years of not yelling at Dad when he leaves his socks on the floor and his dirty plate on top of the dishwasher. Major achievement. Are you seeing Mimi today?”

“This afternoon.” Grace slid her laptop into her bag. “I made macarons, like the ones she used to buy in Paris. You know what a sweet tooth your great-grandmother has.”

“Because she lived in Paris during the war and she had no food. Sometimes she was too weak to dance. Can you even imagine that?”

“That’s probably why she talks to you about it. She doesn’t want you to take things for granted.” She opened the box she’d carefully packed that morning, revealing pastel macarons lined up in neat rows of rainbow perfection.

Sophie made a sound that was almost a purr. “Wow. I don’t suppose I could...?”

“No.” Grace closed the box. “But I might have packed a couple for your lunch.” She tried not to think about the sugar, or how Monica would react to the inclusion of empty calories in a lunch box.

“You’re the best, Mom.” Sophie kissed her cheek and Grace felt warmth flood through her.

“Do you need a favor or something?”

“Don’t be cynical.” Sophie grabbed her coat. “Not many people would teach French at an assisted-living center, that’s all. I think you’re amazing.”

Grace felt like a fraud. She didn’t do it out of any sense of charity, but because she liked the people. They were always so pleased to see her. They made her feel valued.

It was embarrassing to think she could still be needy at her age.

“Their French Club is the best part of my week. Today being Valentine’s Day, I’ve allowed myself to be creative.” She picked up the stack of menus she’d designed. “The staff are laying the tables in the restaurant with red-and-white tablecloths. We’re eating French food, I’m playing music... Knowing your great-grandmother, there will be dancing. What do you think?”

“*Ooh là là*, I think it sounds great.” Sophie grinned. “Just remember that the average age of Mimi’s friends is ninety. Don’t give them all heart attacks.”

“I’m pretty sure Robert has his eye on Mimi.”

“Mimi is a minx. I hope I’m like her when I’m ninety. She has this wicked twinkle in her eye... It must have been fun having her living with you when you were growing up.”

It had been lifesaving. And that, of course, was why Mimi had moved in.

It was a time she’d never discussed with her daughter. “She’s one in a million. You’ll be okay tonight?” She checked the

kitchen was tidy. “There’s casserole in the fridge. All you need to do is heat it up.”

“I’m eighteen, Mom. You don’t have to worry about me.” Sophie glanced out the window as a car pulled up outside. “Karen is here. I need to run. Bye.”

Telling Grace not to worry was like asking a fish not to swim.

Two minutes after Sophie had left, she slid on her coat, picked up her keys and walked to the car.

Turning the heat up, she focused on the drive.

Four mornings a week, Grace taught French and Spanish at the local middle school. She also tutored children who were struggling and occasionally gave lessons to adults keen to improve their language skills.

She took the same route she always took, seeing the same houses, the same trees, the same stores. Her view only changed when the seasons changed. Grace didn’t mind. She savored routine and predictability. She found comfort and security in knowing what was going to happen next.

Today the snow lay deep on the ground, coating roofs and gardens in thick slabs of white. In this little corner of Connecticut the snow was likely to linger for many weeks. Some people embraced it. Grace wasn’t one of them. By March, winter felt like a guest who had overstayed her welcome. She longed for sunshine and summer dresses, bare legs and iced drinks.

She was still dreaming of summer when the phone rang.

It was David.

“Hi, Gracie.” That voice of his still made her insides melt. Deep and gravelly, but smooth enough to soothe life’s hurts.

“Hi, handsome. You had an early start today.” *And you left your breakfast plate on top of the dishwasher.*

“Things are busy at work.”

David was editor of the local newspaper, the *Woodbrook Post*, and had been kept busy lately thanks to the astonishing success of the girls’ tennis team, the formation of a county children’s

choir and a robbery at the local gas station during which the only things stolen were a box of doughnuts and a bottle of rum. By the time the local police had located the man responsible, the evidence had been consumed.

Whenever Grace read the paper it reminded her of all the reasons she lived in this quaint town with a population of only 2,498.

Unlike other journalists, whose sights might have been set on bigger targets, David had never shown a desire to work anywhere but this small town they'd both fallen in love with.

The way he saw it, he was the voice of the community. He was obsessed with the news, but he also believed that it was what happened right here in their hometown that mattered to people. He often joked that all he needed to fill the entire newspaper was to spend an afternoon at a backyard barbecue listening to the gossip. He was friends with the police chief and the fire chief, which ensured that he was given all the major scoops.

Of course in Woodbrook, a place most people had never heard of, there were more scoops in the ice cream parlor than there were in the local community, and that suited Grace.

"Happy Valentine's and happy anniversary." She slowed as she approached an intersection. "I'm already looking forward to dinner tonight."

"Shall I book somewhere?"

Only a man would think it possible to get a table on Valentine's Day without forward planning. "Already done, honey."

"Right. I should be home early. I'll fix something for Sophie to eat so you don't have to bother."

"I've handled that. The fridge is full of food. You can relax."

There was a pause. "You're superwoman, Grace."

She glowed. "I love you."

Her family was the most important thing in the world to her.

"I'll drop by the store and pick out something for Stephen's

birthday on my way home. He says he doesn't want a fuss, but I feel we should buy him something, don't you?"

"I do—which is why I bought him a gift when I was shopping last week." Grace waited for a gap in the traffic and turned into the school. "You'll find it under the bed in the spare room."

"You've already bought something?"

"I didn't want you having to think about it. Remember that great photo of Stephen with Beth and the kids?"

"The one I took at the Summer Fair?"

She pulled into a space and undid her seat belt. "I had a print made and bought a frame. It looks great."

"That's...thoughtful..."

"I've wrapped it. All you have to do is sign your name." She reached across and gathered her coat and bag. "I'm at school, so I'll call you later. You sound tired. *Are you tired?*"

"A little."

She paused with one leg out of the car. "You've been working long hours lately. You need to slow down. There's nothing for you to do at home, so maybe you should lie down and rest before we go out."

"I'm not geriatric, Grace."

There was a sharpness to his tone that was unusual.

"I was trying to spoil you, that's all."

"Sorry." The sharpness vanished. "Didn't mean to snap. There's been a lot going on lately. I'll call a cab for tonight, so we can have a drink without worrying about driving."

"Cab is already booked for seven."

"Do you ever forget anything?"

"It's all down to lists—you know that. If I lose my lists, my life is over."

It occurred to her that if she died someone would be able to pick up her "To Do" lists and carry on with her life as if she'd never inhabited it.

What did that say about her? A life should be individual,

surely? Would someone looking at the lists be able to learn anything about *her*? Would they know that she loved the smell of roses and indulged her love of French movies when no one was home? Would they know she listened to Mozart piano concertos while she cooked?

“Is there *anything* you need me for?”

Grace gave a smile that her daughter would have said was very like Mimi’s minxy look. “I can think of a few things... I plan on showing you later.”

David ended the call and she walked into school, waving at a couple of parents who were delivering their precious cargo.

Twenty-five years. She’d been married for twenty-five years. She felt a glow of pride.

Take that, universe.

She and David were a perfect team. They’d had their ups and downs like any couple, but they’d handled everything together. Grace had become the person she wanted to be, and if a tiny voice occasionally reminded her that underneath she was someone quite different, she ignored it. She had the marriage she wanted. The life she wanted.

The day deserved a special celebration, and she’d made a reservation for dinner at Bistro Claude, the upmarket French restaurant in the next town. Claude himself was from Texas, but he’d seen a gap in the market, cultivated an accent and modeled his restaurant on something he’d once seen in a French movie.

Even Grace, a purist and Francophile, had to admit the place was charming. She would have loved to take Mimi there, but her grandmother no longer enjoyed eating out.

Bistro Claude was the perfect setting for tonight, because Grace had planned a big surprise. Organizing it had been a major undertaking, but she’d been careful to leave no clues or hints.

Fortunately David had worked long hours over the past couple of months, or it would have been impossible to keep her research a secret.

She pushed open the doors and headed into school.

The children in her class were at that age where anything to do with sex or romance was treated as either hilarious or awkward, so she was fairly sure Valentine's Day would evoke plenty of giggles.

She wasn't wrong.

"We've written you a poem, miss, to celebrate your anniversary."

"A poem? Lucky me." Grace hoped they'd give her the PG version. "Who's going to read it?"

Darren clambered onto his chair and cleared his throat. "Twenty-five years, that's a very long time. More than you get for a life of crime."

Grace wasn't sure whether to laugh or put her head in her hands.

By the time she headed back to the parking lot at lunchtime she felt exhausted, and relieved she only worked mornings. Fortunately the drive to the assisted-living center where her grandmother lived would give her time to decompress.

It was a scenic route that wound through woodland and sleepy villages. In the fall the road was clogged with tourists admiring the sunset colors of the foliage, but now the trees and the rolling hills were coated in snow. The road followed the curve of the river, which had a tendency to flood as the snow melted.

Grace drove past the wildlife sanctuary, turned right into the road that led to Rushing River Senior Living and parked the car.

When Mimi had first announced her decision to move here Grace had been horrified.

As well as having a love of dance and all things hedonistic, her grandmother was a celebrated photographer. She'd traveled the world with her camera at a time when it had been rare for a single woman to do such a thing. She was famous for her photographs of postwar Paris, and Grace had always marveled at how her grandmother could capture people's personal struggles

in a single frame. Mimi's vivid, exuberant personality was at odds with her dark, atmospheric photos of streets drenched by rain, or couples clinging together in a desperate embrace. The photographs told a story that her grandmother rarely shared in words. Of hunger and deprivation. Of fear and loss.

The last thing Grace had anticipated was that her well-traveled, worldly grandmother would choose to move somewhere like Rushing River. She'd tried to persuade her otherwise. If Mimi had reached the age when she could no longer manage alone, then she should live with Grace and David.

Mimi had insisted that she enjoyed her independence far too much to live with other people—even her beloved granddaughter. She'd gone ahead and paid the money without giving Grace any say in it.

That had been five years ago, but it had taken only a couple of visits for Grace to understand why her grandmother had chosen the place.

It was a haven. On busy days, Grace fantasized about living there, too. There was a fitness center, including a pool, a spa and salon facilities, which Mimi loved. But the best thing was the people. They were interesting, friendly and, thanks to excellent management, the place felt like a community.

Her grandmother lived in a two-bedroom garden cottage, with views across the lawns down to the river. In the summer, with the doors and windows open, you could hear the sound of the water. Mimi had turned one of the bedrooms into a dark-room, where she still developed her own photographs. The other room, her bedroom, looked like a dancer's dressing room, complete with a mirrored wall and a barre that her grandmother used for stretches.

The front door opened before Grace had lifted her hand to the buzzer.

“What do you think? *Je suis magnifique, non?*” Her grand-

mother did a twirl and then immediately reached out to steady herself. “Oops!”

“Careful!” Grace grabbed her hand. “Maybe it’s time to stop dancing. You might lose your balance.”

“If I’m going to fall, I’d rather do it while I’m dancing. Unless I fall out of bed having sex. That would also be acceptable—although unlikely, unless the men around here get their act together.”

Grace laughed and put her bags down. She loved the mischievous look in her grandmother’s eyes. “Don’t ever change.”

“I’m too old to change—and why would I want to? Being yourself is the one thing every person should excel at.” Mimi smoothed her dress. “So, what do you think?”

“Is that the dress you wore when you were in the ballet in Paris?”

She’d seen photos of that time. Her grandmother, impossibly delicate, standing *en pointe* with her hair swept up. According to Mimi half of Paris had been in love with her, and Grace had no trouble believing it.

“I didn’t know you still had it.”

“I don’t. This is a copy. Mirabelle made it for me. She has such a talent. Of course I was younger then and my legs weren’t as scrawny as they are now, so she made it longer.”

“I think you look incredible.” Grace leaned down and kissed her grandmother’s cheek. “I have everything ready for French Club. I need to go and help the staff set up, but I wanted to give you this first.” She handed over the macaron box, which she’d tied with a beautiful bow. “I made them.”

“A gift you make yourself is the best gift of all.” Mimi slid her fingers over the silk ribbon. “I had a pair of ballet shoes with ribbon exactly this color.” She opened the box with an enthusiasm that ninety years on the planet hadn’t dimmed. “They look exactly like the ones I used to buy in Paris. They were there in the shop window like jewels. I remember a man once sneaking

out of my apartment early in the morning to buy me a box for breakfast—we ate them in bed.”

Grace loved hearing about her grandmother’s colorful past. “What was his name?”

Could Mimi be talking about the man who had made her pregnant?

Grace had tried on numerous occasions to persuade her grandmother to talk about the mysterious man who was her grandfather, but she never would. *It was a fling*, was all she would say.

As usual, her grandmother was vague. “I don’t remember his name. I only remember the macarons.”

“You’re a wicked woman, Mimi.” Grace took the box from her and closed it. It felt odd to not know anything about her grandfather. Was he even still alive?

“Since when has it been wicked to enjoy oneself? And why are you closing the box? I was about to eat one.”

“You’ll have plenty to eat in French Club. There are more where these came from.”

“I like to enjoy the moment.” Mimi opened the box again and helped herself. She took a delicate bite and closed her eyes. “If you focus on living well in the moment, you will never have regrets about yesterday.”

Grace wondered if she was thinking of Paris, or of the man who had brought her macarons in bed. She knew her grandmother had stories she hadn’t shared, and that there were times she didn’t like to think about. Grace understood that. There were times she didn’t like to think about, either.

“Good?”

“Excellent.” Mimi opened her eyes and reached for her coat and a silk scarf. Today’s choice was peacock blue. “How is Sophie?”

“Enraged about the plans to close the animal shelter. She’s writing letters and calling anyone who will pick up the phone.”

“I admire a person who is prepared to stand up and fight for

a cause they believe in. Even more so when that person is my great-granddaughter. You should be proud, Grace.”

“I am proud—although I’m not sure the way she is has much to do with me. She has David’s genes.”

Mimi read her mind. “Relax. She has nothing of your mother in her.” She tucked her arm into Grace’s as they stepped out of the apartment onto the covered walkway that led to the main house. “When is Sophie coming to see me?”

“On the weekend.”

“And David?” Mimi’s expression softened. “He popped in yesterday and fixed the broken handle on my door. That man is perfect. He has time for everyone. And did I mention that he gets more handsome by the day? That *smile*.”

“I know.” She’d fallen in love with David’s smile. “I’m lucky.”

Mimi stopped walking. “No, honey. *He’s* the one who is lucky. You went through so much and yet you have a family like this—well, I’m proud of you. You’re the glue, Grace. And you’re an excellent mother.”

Her grandmother was her biggest supporter. Grace hugged her in full view of anyone who happened to be watching. It was only when she held her grandmother that she was aware of her frailty. It scared her. She couldn’t imagine a life without Mimi.

“I love you.”

“Of course you do. I’m the buttercream frosting on the stale cake that is life.”

Grace let her go. “Twenty-five years today. Had you forgotten?”

“I have creaking bones and varicose veins, but my memory is fine. I know what day it is. Your anniversary! I am happy for you. Every woman should love deeply at least once in her lifetime.”

“*You* didn’t. Were you never tempted to get married? Not even when you discovered you were pregnant?”

Mimi flipped the scarf around her neck and slid her arm

through Grace's. "I wasn't the marrying kind. You, however, always were. I hope you're wearing your sexiest underwear to celebrate."

"I refuse to discuss my underwear with you, but I *can* tell you that I've booked dinner. And that's when I'm giving him his gift."

"I'm envious. A whole month in Paris. Sunlight on cobbled streets, and the gardens... Paris has a special atmosphere—do you remember that? It slides under your skin and permeates the air you breathe..."

Mimi seemed to be talking to herself and Grace smiled.

"I remember—but I have only been once, and just for a short visit. You were born there. You lived there."

"I did. And I really did *live*." Mimi was never so animated as when she talked about Paris. "I remember one night we stripped off our clothes and—"

"Mimi!" Grace paused at the door to the dining room. "You're about to appear in public. Don't scandalize everyone. We don't want to shock them with your sinful stories."

"Boredom is a sin. You're never too old for a little excitement. I'm doing them a favor." Mimi snapped her fingers in the air. "Pierre! That's it." She looked at Grace, triumphant.

"Pierre?"

"The man who bought me the macarons. We'd made love all night."

Grace was intrigued. "Where did you meet him? What did he do for a living?"

"I met him when he came to watch me dance. I have no idea what he did for a living. We didn't talk. I wasn't interested in his prospects—just his stamina."

Grace shook her head and adjusted her grandmother's scarf. "You should go back."

"To Paris? I'm too old. Everything would be different. The people I loved—gone."

Her grandmother stared into the distance and then gave a shake of her head.

“Time to dance.” She opened the door and sailed into the room like a prima ballerina making her entrance onstage.

They were greeted by a chorus of cheery voices, and Grace unloaded her bag onto the table. She’d stopped to pick up baguettes from the bakery on Main Street. They weren’t as crisp and perfect as the ones she’d eaten in France, but they were the closest thing she could find in rural Connecticut.

While the staff helped prepare the tables Grace selected the music.

“Edith Piaf!” Mimi glided gracefully to the center of the room and beckoned to Albert.

Several other people joined them and soon the room was filled with people swaying.

When they sat down to eat, they bombarded Grace with questions.

Did she have everything in place for David’s surprise? How exactly was she going to tell him about the trip she had planned?

She’d shared her plans with them, knowing how much they enjoyed being part of a conspiracy.

It had been David’s idea not to buy each other gifts for their anniversaries, but instead to treat themselves to experiences. He’d called it their “Happy Memory Project.” He’d wanted to fill her memory bank with nice things to cancel out all the bad experiences of her childhood.

It was the most romantic thing anyone had ever said to her.

The previous year she’d booked a weekend at Niagara Falls. They’d had a good time, but Grace had been determined to go bigger and better this year.

The afternoon passed quickly, and she was clearing up when her friend Monica arrived to teach a yoga class.

Grace and Monica had met when pregnant. No one understood the anxieties of parenting like another mother, and it was

good to talk to Monica, even though her friend often made her feel inferior.

Monica was obsessed with living a healthy lifestyle. She blamed red meat for at least half the wrongs in the world. She juiced, grew her own vegetables and taught yoga. She insisted the whole family were vegetarian, although David swore he'd once seen Monica's husband devouring a sixteen-ounce bone-in rib eye at a steak house in the neighboring town. They'd only socialized once as a couple—a dinner consisting almost entirely of lentils, after which David hadn't been able to leave the bathroom for twenty-four hours.

Never again, he'd yelled through the bathroom door. *She's your friend*.

Grace, whose own stomach was listing like the deck of a ship in a storm, had agreed.

From that point onward the friendship had been confined to the two women.

They met for coffee, or lunch, or the occasional spa day.

Despite David's reservations, Grace loved Monica. She had a good heart and teaching yoga here at Rushing River was an example of that.

Grace helped Monica set out her equipment in the exercise studio. "How is Chrissie?"

"Anxious. Not sure what she'll do if she doesn't get her first choice of college. The waiting is driving us insane. I've been practicing meditation techniques, but they don't seem to be working."

"Sophie is stressed, too. They're not going to hear until next month."

Both girls were hoping for places at Ivy League colleges, and Grace and Monica knew there would be major disappointment if they didn't get in.

"Chrissie wants Brown because she loves their program, but I want it because it's close." Monica removed her sweatshirt, re-

vealing perfectly toned arms. “I want to be able to visit sometimes.” She sent Grace a guilty glance. “Sorry. That was tactless.”

Grace would have loved her daughter to go to college on the east coast, too, but Sophie was desperate for Stanford and excited about going to California. Grace wouldn’t have wanted to stop her, or try to persuade her to pick a college closer to home. She was pleased that Sophie had the confidence to fly far from the nest.

“Do you think about it a lot? What life will be like when she leaves?” Monica dug out the microphone she used to teach her class. “Chrissie seems so young still. Todd is dreading her leaving, although at least we don’t have to worry about her suddenly going off the rails. She’s such a steady, sensible girl. How’s David taking it?”

“He seems relaxed. We don’t really talk about it.” Grace didn’t want to spoil the last few months of having Sophie at home by constantly focusing on her departure. She’d hidden her feelings of anxiety in case she somehow transmitted them to her daughter. She and David were *not* Sophie’s responsibility.

She’d stuck to that resolution—even with friends. “It will be a change, of course, but we’re both looking forward to having some time together.”

Long summer days stretched ahead, just her and David... No Sophie bouncing into the kitchen and raiding the fridge. No clothes strewn around the house and open books on the furniture. No letters of outrage spread across the kitchen counter ready to be mailed.

When Sophie left there would be a big gaping hole in her life. There were moments when it scared her to think about it, but she knew it was up to her and David to fill it.

“You’re both so well-adjusted.” Monica clipped the microphone to her top. “When Chrissie first raised the possibility of going to Europe with Sophie this summer I thought Todd was going to explode. I keep telling him she’s not a child anymore

and that she wants to be with her friends. But I'm worrying a little, too. Do you think we should have encouraged them to do something less adventurous?"

"I was the same age when I first went to Paris. It was an unforgettable experience."

Memories flashed through her head. Rain-soaked Paris streets, sunshine filtering through the trees in the Jardin des Tuileries, her first proper kiss in the moonlight with the river Seine sparkling behind her. The glimpse of a life so far removed from hers, it made her dizzy. The excitement of knowing there was a whole world out there waiting for her.

Philippe.

First love.

And then the phone call that had changed everything.

It all seemed so long ago.

"But they're doing Rome and Florence, too." Monica wasn't reassured. "I've heard bad things about Florence. Donna's daughter had her purse stolen, and she said they didn't dare go out unless there were two of them—even in the day. They were groped all the time. And what if someone spikes their drinks? I don't want Chrissie introducing poisons to her system. She's never even had antibiotics."

Grace dragged herself out of the past. She was pretty sure that Chrissie would be poisoning her system plenty when she got to college. "They're sensible. If they do get into trouble—which they won't—they can call us. David and I will be in Paris for a month."

It sounded exotic, and suddenly it felt as if a door had opened just a crack. Part of her would always ache for those days when her daughter had been safely nestled in the protective cocoon of the family, but there were plenty of things to be excited about in the future.

Possibilities stretched before her.

David's parents had passed away early in their marriage and

he had no other family. He'd often said that Grace and Sophie were his whole world, and Grace was happy with that because she felt the same way. And she had Mimi, too. She smiled. *Her buttercream frosting.*

The idea of a month in Europe, when every day would be completely their own, left her feeling almost light-headed. They'd lounge in bed, enjoy long breakfasts on the balcony of the hotel, do some sightseeing. They'd have the time and energy for sex, and wouldn't have to worry that Sophie might disturb them.

She'd miss Sophie, but the more she thought about it the more excited she was about spending more time with David.

She raised the subject later, when she and David were at dinner.

"I've been thinking of all the things we can do when Sophie has left for college."

The restaurant was full. They were surrounded by the low hum of conversation, the clink of glasses, the occasional sound of laughter. Candles flickered on tables and silverware gleamed.

"We don't know where she's going yet." He tucked into his *boeuf bourguignon*. The scent of herbs and red wine drifted across the table. "She might not get in."

"She will. She's smart. And she works hard. Our baby is grown-up."

From behind them there was a burst of applause. Grace turned her head. A man was on one knee behind them, holding out a ring to a weeping woman. Grace clapped, too, and then glanced back at David. She'd expected him to wink at her, or maybe roll his eyes at the clichéd public display, but David wasn't smiling. He was staring at the couple with an expression Grace couldn't quite interpret.

"It's going to be just the two of us," he said. He watched as the man slid a ring onto the woman's finger. "Do you ever think about that?"

Grace shifted in her seat so that her back was to the couple. She'd ordered the duck confit, and it was delicious. "Of course. I've also been thinking of all the things we can do. I'm looking forward to it, aren't you?"

She was so caught up in her own burst of positivity that it took a moment for her to realize he hadn't answered her. He was still staring past her to the couple.

"David?"

He put his fork down. "I feel old, Grace. As if the best days of my life are behind me."

"What? David, that's *insane*. You're in your prime! If it helps, Mimi thinks you're sexier than you've ever been."

She thought so, too. When you grew up alongside someone you didn't always see them the way a stranger did, but lately she'd found herself looking at the width of David's shoulders or the shadow on his jaw and thinking *nice*. Age had given him a gravitas that she found irresistible.

At the mention of Mimi, the tension left his features. His eyes crinkled at the corners—a precursor of the smile she loved so much. "You've been discussing my sex appeal with your grandmother?"

"You know what she's like. I swear if I weren't already married to you, *she'd* marry you. No, actually..." She frowned. "Marriage is too establishment for Mimi. She wouldn't want to be tied down. She'd sleep with you, and then discard you and not even remember your name. Paris is paved with the fragments of all the hearts Mimi broke there."

And soon they'd be going there. Maybe this was a good time to tell him.

He fiddled with his knife. "I still remember the day Sophie was born. I can't believe she's leaving home."

"It's natural to feel that way, but we should be proud. We've raised a smart, kind, independent adult. That was our job as

parents. She thinks for herself, and now she's going to live by herself. It's the way things are supposed to be."

The fact that it hadn't been that way for her had made her all the more determined to make it happen for her daughter.

David put his knife down. "A milestone like this really makes you take a good look at your life. I've been thinking about us, Grace."

She nodded, pleased. "I've been thinking about us, too. We should celebrate our fresh start. And our summer *won't* be empty, because I have the perfect way to fill it. Happy anniversary, David."

She handed over the parcel she'd kept hidden under her chair. The paper was covered in tiny pictures of Paris landmarks. The Eiffel Tower. The Arc de Triomphe. The Louvre. It had taken two hours of searching to find it on the internet.

"What's this?"

"It's my anniversary surprise. We always take a trip and make a new memory. This is a special one. And maybe you'll feel inspired to work on your novel." He'd been working on a book for as long as she'd known him, but had never finished it.

"A trip?" He removed the paper slowly, as if he wasn't sure he wanted to know what was underneath.

The couple at the next table glanced at them, intrigued. She knew them vaguely—in the way everyone knew everyone in a small town like this one. Faces were always familiar. Someone's cousin. Someone's aunt. Someone's husband.

David pulled out the street map of Paris she'd also ordered on the internet. "We're going to Paris?"

"Yes!" She was ridiculously pleased with herself. "It's all booked. We're going for a month, right through July. You're going to *love* it, David."

"A *month*?"

"If you're worried about taking the time off work, don't be. I

already spoke to Stephen, and he thinks it's a great idea. You've been working hard, and July is a quiet month, and—"

"Wait. You spoke to my *boss*?" He rubbed his jaw, as if he'd suffered a physical blow. Streaks of color appeared on his cheekbones, and she couldn't work out if it was anger or embarrassment.

"I needed to know you could take the time off." Perhaps she shouldn't have done that—although Stephen had been charming about it.

"Grace, you don't have to handle every detail of my life."

"I thought you'd be thrilled." Wasn't he going to look at the other items in the box? There was a ticket for the Métro, the Paris subway, a postcard of the Eiffel Tower and a glossy brochure for the hotel she'd booked. "This trip is for *us*. We'll have a month together in the summer, exploring the city. We can eat dinner outside in pavement cafés, watch the world go by and decide what we want our future to look like. Just the two of us."

She was determined to view this new phase of life as an adventure and a celebration, not as a time for regrets and nostalgia.

Would it feel weird being in Paris with David? No, of course it wouldn't. Her last visit had been decades ago. It was part of a past she didn't let herself think about.

"You should have talked to me about this, Grace."

"I wanted it to be a surprise."

He looked sick. She started to feel sick, too. The evening wasn't going the way she'd imagined it.

He closed the box. "You've booked everything already? Yes, of course you have. You're *you*."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Was she supposed to apologize for something that was one of her best qualities? Being organized was a *good* thing. She'd grown up with the opposite and she knew how bad that was.

"You do everything—even though I'm capable of doing

things for myself. You don't have to buy my boss's gift, Grace. I can handle it."

"I know you can handle it, but I'm happy to do it so that you don't have to."

"You organize every single small detail of our lives."

"So nothing gets forgotten."

"I understand why that is important to you. Really, I do."

There was gentleness in his tone and the sympathy in his eyes made her squirm a little. It was like walking into a crowded room and discovering you'd forgotten to button your shirt.

"We don't need to talk about bad stuff on a night like tonight."

"Maybe we do. Maybe we should have talked about it a lot more than we have."

"It's our anniversary. This is a celebration. You're worried I'm doing too much? It's fine, David. I *like* to do it. It's not a problem."

She reached across the table but he moved his hand away.

"It's a problem for *me*, Grace."

"Why? You're busy, and I love spoiling you."

"You make me feel..." He rubbed his jaw. "Incapable. Sometimes I wonder if you even need me."

Her insides swooped. She felt as if she'd stepped off a cliff. "How can you say that? You know it's not true."

"Do I? You plan every detail of our lives. You are the most independent woman I know. What exactly do *I* contribute to this marriage?"

At any other time she would have said *great sex*, and they both would have collapsed with laughter, but tonight David wasn't laughing, and she didn't feel like laughing, either.

The people at the table closest to them were staring.

Grace didn't care.

"You contribute plenty! David—"

“We have to talk, Grace.” He pushed his plate to one side, his meal only half-eaten. “I wasn’t going to say this tonight, but—”

“But what? What do you want to talk about?” Unease mushroomed inside her. He didn’t sound like himself. David was always sure, confident and dependable. She almost always knew what he was thinking. “Why do you keep rubbing your jaw?”

“Because it aches.”

“You should see the dentist. Maybe you have an abscess or something. I’ll make you an appointment in the morning—” She stopped in midsentence. “Or you can make it yourself if you prefer.”

“I want a divorce, Grace.”

There was a strange ringing in her ears. The background music and the clatter from the kitchen had distorted his words. He couldn’t possibly have just said what she’d thought he’d said.

“Excuse me?”

“A divorce.” He tugged at the collar of his shirt as if it was strangling him. “Saying those words makes me feel sick. I never wanted to hurt you, Gracie.”

She hadn’t misheard him.

“Is this because I bought Stephen a gift?”

“No.” He muttered something and tugged at his collar again. “I shouldn’t be doing this now. I didn’t plan to. I should have—”

“Is it because of Sophie leaving? I know it’s unsettling...”

Panic gripped her heart. Squeezed. Squeezed some more. Her lungs. She couldn’t breathe. She was going to pass out in her duck confit. She imagined the story appearing in the following day’s edition of the *Woodbrook Post*.

A local woman was asphyxiated when she fell face-first into her meal.

“It’s not because of Sophie. It’s us. Things haven’t been right for a while.”

There was something in David’s eyes she’d never seen before.

Pity. Yes, there was sadness, and also guilt, but it was the pity that tore her to shreds.

This was David. *Her* David—who had cried on their wedding day because he loved her so much, who had held her while their daughter fought her way into the world and been there for Grace through thick and thin. David, her best friend and the only person who truly knew her.

He would never want to see her hurt, let alone hurt her himself. Knowing that, she felt her panic turn to fear. He didn't want to hurt her but he was doing it anyway—which meant this was serious. He'd decided he'd rather hurt her than stay with her.

"I don't understand." Surely if something hadn't been right, she'd have known? She and David had been a team for as long as she could remember. Without him she would have fallen apart all those years ago. "What hasn't been right, David?"

"Our lives have become... I don't know. Boring." His forehead glistened with sweat. "Predictable. I go to work in the same place, see the same people and I come home every day to—"

"To me." It was all too easy to finish his sentence. "So what you're really saying is that *I'm* predictable. *I'm* boring." Her hands were shaking and she clasped them in her lap.

"It's not you, Grace. It's me."

The fact that he was shouldering the blame didn't help. "How can it be all you? I'm the one you're married to and you're unhappy—which means I'm doing something wrong." And the problem was that she *loved* the fact that their life was predictable. "I grew up with unpredictability, David. Believe me, it's overrated."

"I know what you grew up with."

Of course he did.

Was she boring? God, was it true?

It was true that she was a little obsessed about them being good parents to Sophie, but that was important to David, too.

He undid another button on his shirt and gestured to the waiter to bring more water. "Why is it so hot in here? I don't feel too good... I can't remember what I was saying..."

She didn't feel too good, either. "You were telling me you want a divorce."

She hadn't believed that word would ever come up in a conversation between her and David, and she wished it hadn't come up now, in a public place. At least two of the people in the bistro had children in her class—which was unfortunate, given the nature of this conversation.

Mommy says you're getting divorced, Mrs. Porter, is that right?

"Grace—"

David took a sip of water, and she noticed there was a tremor in his hand. He was looking pale and ill.

She was pretty sure that if she looked in the mirror she'd think the same about herself.

What about Sophie? She'd be devastated. What if she was too upset to go away for the summer? It was terrible, awful timing.

Monica would probably blame red meat. *Too much testosterone.*

"We can talk to someone, if you think that would help. Whatever it is that needs working on, we'll work on it."

"Fixing our marriage isn't something you can add to your 'To Do' list, Grace."

She felt color flood into her cheeks, because mentally she'd been doing exactly that. "We've been married for twenty-five years. There is nothing—*nothing*—we can't fix."

"I'm having an affair."

The words were like a solid punch to her gut.

"No!" Her voice cracked. And that was how she felt. Cracked. Broken. As if she were a piece of fine china he'd flung against the cabinet. "Tell me that isn't true."

She was going to be sick. Right here in a pretty little French bistro, in front of an audience of around fifty people, she was going to be sick.

She could imagine how the kids in her class would react to *that*.

Did you barf, miss?

Yes, Connor. I barfed, but it had nothing to do with the duck.

David looked worse than she felt. “I didn’t plan it, Grace.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

She had a thousand questions.

Who is this woman? Do I know her? How long has it been going on?

In the end she asked only one. “Do you love her?”

David rubbed his fingers over his forehead. “I— Yes. I think so, yes.”

She almost doubled over. Not just sex, then, but feelings. Strong feelings.

It was the ultimate betrayal.

She stood, although her legs didn’t seem to agree with the decision. They felt like water. But she didn’t want the local community to witness any more of this conversation—not for his sake but for hers and Sophie’s. How much had people heard already? Was she going to be stopped in the supermarket?

I hear David doesn’t love you? That must be tough.

“Let’s go.”

“Grace, wait!” David fumbled for some bills and dropped them on the table without counting them.

Grace was already halfway to the door, the box filled with her Paris plans tucked under her arm. She had no idea why it seemed so important to take it with her. Maybe she didn’t want to leave her dreams lying around. The happy summer she’d spent months planning wasn’t going to happen. Instead, they’d spend the time dividing up property and belongings and consulting lawyers.

The reality of it swamped her.

David was the love of her life. He was the solid foundation upon which she’d constructed her wonderfully safe, predictable world. Without him the whole thing would crumble.

She felt as if she was having an out-of-body experience. Her mind was elsewhere but her body was still here in this bistro,

going through the motions. Smiling, leaving—*thank you, yes, the meal was delicious*—as if her life hadn't just been torn apart.

David pressed his hand to his chest again and shook his head when the waiter offered him his coat. "Grace, I'm not feeling too good—"

Seriously?

"Oddly enough, I'm not feeling too good, either."

Did he expect sympathy?

"I feel as if—I can't—"

David staggered and then collapsed, sending a trolley and a coat stand flying. The weight of him hit the floor with a sickening thud.

Grace couldn't move.

Was this what shock did to you? Did it freeze you into a useless object?

Silence had fallen across the restaurant. She was vaguely aware that a few diners were standing up, the better to see what was going on. Waiters had turned to look at her, panic and expectation in their eyes.

David was on the floor, sweat covering his brow and his eyes bulging.

He clawed at the collar of his shirt and pressed his hand to his chest.

His eyes met hers and she saw the terror there.

Help me...help me.

"Call the emergency services." She was fascinated by how normal she sounded.

She was trained in first aid, but her body and mind were paralyzed by the knowledge that her husband of twenty-five years didn't love her anymore.

He'd been unfaithful to her. He'd had sex with another woman. Probably multiple times. How long had it been going on? Where? In their bed or somewhere else?

David's throat made a rattling sound and Grace examined her

response with a mixture of awe and curiosity. Was she seriously considering not resuscitating him?

My name is Grace Porter and I murdered my husband.

No, not murder. Murder was premeditated. This was more... opportunistic.

If he died she wouldn't even know who to call to break the news. She'd have to look around her at the funeral and try to identify the one woman who was crying as hard as she was.

Dimly registering the clattering and panic around her, Grace stared down at him for what felt like minutes but was in fact no more than a few seconds.

This was the man she loved. They'd had a child together. She'd assumed they'd grow old together.

If he was bored with his life, why hadn't he said something?

The injustice of it almost strangled her sense of duty. He hadn't even given her a chance to fix things. He'd made the decision for both of them. How could he *do* that?

As sirens sounded in the distance, David made a choking sound and then his eyes closed.

Grace woke from her inertia.

She couldn't let another person die even though it felt as if that person had stabbed her through the heart.

She knelt down beside him, felt for a pulse, checked his breathing and then put her hands on his chest and started compressions.

One, two, three— Damn you, David...damn you, David...

She counted as she pumped and then pinched his nose and breathed air into his mouth, trying not to think about those lips kissing another woman.

The first thing she was going to do when she got back home was change the sheets.

The sound of sirens grew louder. She willed them to hurry. She didn't *want* him to die. That would be the easy way out for him, and Grace didn't want to give him the easy way out.

She wanted answers.

Audrey

Thousands of miles away in London, Audrey was in the middle of studying for a chemistry exam when her bedroom door burst open.

“Which dress? Green or pink?” There was a note of wild panic in her mother’s voice. “The green shows more of my cleavage.”

Audrey didn’t turn her head from the screen. *Why didn’t her mother ever knock?* “I’m working.” And every word was a struggle. Whoever had put her brain together had done a crap job.

There were days when she totally hated her life and this was one of them.

“It’s Valentine’s Day. You should be out on a date. At your age I was already a party animal.”

Audrey knew just how much of a party animal her mother was. “My exams start in May.”

“You mean July.”

“I’m done by the middle of June.” Why did it bother her that her mother didn’t know that? She should be used to it by now. “These exams are a big deal.”

Audrey felt sick about them. She was terrible at exams. It didn’t help that the teachers kept saying that the results would

affect their whole future. If that was really the case then her life was already over.

Everyone else in her class had parents nagging them.

Are you doing enough work?

Should you be going out on a school night?

No, you don't need fizzy drinks and pizza.

Audrey longed for someone to show her that much care and attention. *Any* care and attention. She longed for her mother to stroke her hair, bring her a cup of tea and say a few encouraging words, but her mother did none of those things and she'd given up hoping for it.

She'd been six years old when she'd realized her mother was different from other mothers.

While her friends' parents hovered outside the school gate, Audrey stood alone, waiting for a mother who frequently didn't show up.

She hated being different, so she began making her own way home. The school had strict rules about only releasing a child into the care of a known adult, but Audrey found a way around that. If she smiled and waved a hand in the vague direction of a group of mothers, they'd assume hers was among them. She'd slip through the crowd and once she was out of sight she'd make her way home. It wasn't far and she'd memorized the route. Turn at the red post box. Turn again at the big tree.

Day after day Audrey let herself into the empty house, unzipped her schoolbag and struggled with her homework. Every time she pulled her book out of her bag, she had a sick feeling in her stomach. Her handwriting looked as if a demented spider had hurled itself across the paper and she could never quite organize her thoughts in a way that made sense written down. Teachers despaired. She'd despaired. She tried hard, achieved nothing, stopped trying. What was the point?

When she'd tried telling her mother she found reading difficult, the suggestion had been that she watch TV instead.

Finally, after years of handing in messy work and missing deadlines, a teacher who was new to the school had insisted Audrey was tested.

Those tests showed her to be severely dyslexic. In a way the diagnosis was a relief. It meant she wasn't stupid. On the other hand, she still *felt* stupid and now she also had a label.

They gave her extra time in exams, but everything was still a struggle. She needed help, but when her mother came home from work she usually fell asleep on the sofa.

For years Audrey had believed her mother was just more tired than other mothers. As she'd grown older and more observant she'd noticed that other people's parents didn't drink a bottle of wine or two every evening. Sometimes her mother was late arriving home, and then Audrey would know she'd started her drinking early. She had no idea how her mother managed to hold down her job as an office manager, but was thankful that she did.

Functional alcoholic. She'd done an internet search once and found the perfect description of her mother.

Audrey told no one. It was too embarrassing.

The happiest days were when a school friend invited Audrey for tea or a sleepover. Audrey would watch other mothers, and occasionally fathers, fussing over home-cooked meals and homework and wonder why her mother didn't know that was the way it was supposed to be done. She tried not to think about their empty fridge, or the empty bottles stacked outside the back door. More embarrassing were the men her mother brought home from her after-work drinking sessions. Fortunately, since meeting Ron, that had stopped. Audrey was pinning all her hopes on Ron.

"Your exams are done by June?" Her mother leaned on the edge of the desk, creasing a stack of papers. "I had no idea. You should have told me."

You should have known. Audrey tugged at the papers and moved them out of harm's way. "I didn't think you'd be interested."

"What's that supposed to mean? Of course I'm interested. I'm your mother."

Audrey was careful not to react. "Right. Well—"

"You know I've been busy planning the wedding. If you're done by the middle of June, then that means you'll be around all summer."

Not if she had anything to do with it. "I won't be here in the summer. I'm going traveling."

It had been a spur of the moment decision, driven by a deep-seated horror of being at home.

She'd saved some money from her Saturday job at the hair salon and hidden it inside the soft toy she'd had since childhood. She didn't trust her mother not to use the money to buy drink, and that money was her hope for the future. Every time she felt herself sinking into darkness, she looked at the bear that she placed in the middle of her bed every day. He had a missing eye and discolored fur, but he felt like a friend to her. A co-conspirator in her escape plan. She'd worked out that it should be enough to get her a ticket somewhere. Once she was there she'd find a job. Anything was better than being trapped here in the repetitive, exhausting cycle that was living with her mother.

"That's good. It's just that with Ron and I newly married, well—you know—" She nudged Audrey, woman to woman.

Audrey did know. The walls in their house were thin. She probably knew far too much for a person her age.

She noticed that her mother didn't ask where she was traveling, or with whom. All she cared about was that Audrey wouldn't be around to intrude on her romantic interlude.

It hurt even though it shouldn't, but Audrey was used to handling conflicting emotions. And to be honest she was relieved that her mother and Ron were getting married. Ron treated

her mother well, and if the wedding went ahead, then Audrey would no longer feel responsible for her.

A whole new life was within reach.

“I’m spending the summer in Paris.” The idea had come to her in a flash the week before. Paris was meant to be beautiful in the summer. The men were hot, the accent was sexy and if they talked crap, as most boys did in her experience, it wouldn’t matter because she wouldn’t understand them anyway. Best of all, she could get away from home.

The first thing she was going to do when she had her own place was put a lock on the door.

Her mother sank onto Audrey’s bed, ignoring the piles of clothes that needed sorting. “Do you speak French?”

“No, which is why I want to live in France.” In fact, it wasn’t, but it was as plausible a reason as any and her mother wasn’t a woman given to examining anything in greater depth. “I need a language.”

“It will be good for you. You need to live a little! At your age—”

“Yeah, I know, you were having the time of your life.”

“No need to use that tone. You’re only young once, Audie.”

Most days she felt about a hundred. “I need to work now. I have a test tomorrow.”

Her mother stood up and wrapped her arms around Audrey. “I love you. I’m proud of you. I probably don’t tell you that enough.”

Audrey sat so stiffly she wondered if a spine could snap. The fumes from her mother’s perfume almost choked her.

Part of her wanted to sink into her mother’s arms and let her take the worry for once, but she knew better than to lower her guard. Within minutes her mother could be screaming at her, throwing things and saying mean words.

Audrey had never understood why mean words sounded louder than kind ones.

“You’re very tense.” Her mother released her. “Would a drink help relax you?”

“No thanks.” She knew her mother wouldn’t be offering a cup of tea.

“I opened a bottle of wine. I could spare you a glass.”

Wine explained the glittering eyes and the brittle mood. It also explained the perfume. “Have you eaten?”

“What? No.” Linda smoothed the dress over her hips. “I don’t want to get fat. What are you studying?”

Audrey blinked.

Her mother had never shown the slightest interest in what Audrey did with her life. At the open evening at school when they’d been invited in to discuss subject choices and university, Audrey had been the only student attending alone. As usual, she’d lied and said her mother was working. It sounded so much better than admitting that her mother couldn’t be bothered and that the only time her father had been present in her life had been during her conception. She lied so much about her life that sometimes she forgot the truth herself.

She cleared her throat. “Organic chemistry.” And she was going to fail. She’d picked sciences so that she could avoid essays and reading, but there was still a ton of reading and writing. After this she was never studying anything ever again.

“I think this fad for everything organic is nonsense.” Her mother checked her reflection in the mirror on Audrey’s desk. “It’s just an excuse for the supermarkets to charge more.”

Audrey sat with slumped shoulders, swamped in misery as she stared at her laptop screen. *Go away. Just go away!* She sometimes found it hard to believe she and her mother were related. Most days she felt as if she’d been dropped by a stork into the wrong house.

“Mum—”

“You’ve always been a slow learner, Audrey. You just have to accept that. But look on the bright side—you’re pretty, and

you have big—” her mother thrust her hands under her breasts to make her point “—get yourself a male boss and they’ll never notice that you can’t spell.”

Audrey imagined the interview.

What do you consider to be your best qualities?

They’re both attached to the front of my chest.

Not in her lifetime.

If a work colleague ever touched her boobs Audrey would break his arm.

“Mum—”

“I’m not saying that college isn’t *fun*, but everyone gets a degree these days. It’s nothing special. You pay a fortune for something that in the end means nothing. Life experience, that’s what matters.”

Audrey took a breath. “Wear the green dress.”

She was exhausted. She wasn’t sleeping. Her schoolwork was suffering.

Her friend Meena had helped her make a spreadsheet with all her exams on it. Then they’d set alerts on Audrey’s phone, because she was terrified of misreading the spreadsheet and getting her timing wrong. They’d printed out an enlarged version and stuck it on her wall because every since the day her mother had drunk a bottle of whiskey and decided it would be a good idea to throw the computer in the trash, Audrey no longer dared risk storing things on her laptop.

You teenagers spend too long on screens.

On the calendar above her desk were crosses where Audrey marked the end of each day. Each cross took her closer to the day when she could leave school and home.

Her mother was still hovering. “You don’t think Ron would prefer the pink? It shows a little hint of lingerie, and that’s always good.”

“It isn’t good! It looks like you forgot to get dressed! It’s called underwear for a reason. It’s supposed to be worn *under* clothes.”

Bursting with exasperation, Audrey finally glanced away from the screen. Her mother's hair was wild from pulling dresses on and off. "Wear the dress *you* prefer. You can't live your life constantly trying to please another person." She couldn't for a moment imagine asking a man what she should wear. She wore what she liked. Her friends wore what they liked. It was a roundabout of trying to fit in and trying to be different.

Linda's lip trembled. "I want him to think I'm pretty."

Audrey wanted Ron to think her mother was pretty, too. Audrey wanted Ron to take care of her mother, so she didn't have to.

"Green," she said. "Definitely green."

None of the men her mother had dated had stuck around as long as Ron.

Audrey liked Ron. His favorite response to everything was *As long as no one is dead, it will be fine*. Audrey wished she could believe it. "Stop drinking. Sober is sexy. Drunk isn't."

"What are you talking about? I've had a drink, yes, but I'm *not* drunk."

Audrey paused, her heart pounding. "You drink a lot, Mum. Too much." And her biggest dread was that Ron would grow tired of it. "Maybe you should talk to the doctor, or—"

"Why would I talk to a doctor?"

"Because you have a problem."

"You're the one with the problem, but I can't reason with you when you're in this mood." Her mother flounced out of the room, slamming the door.

Audrey stared at the door, feeling sick. This was why she rarely brought the subject up. How could her mother think she didn't have a problem? Someone in this house was crazy and Audrey was starting to think it must be her.

And now her mother was upset. What if she went off the deep end and she drank everything in the house? From time to time

Audrey went through the place, room by room, hunting down hidden bottles. She hadn't done it in a while.

Stressed, she grabbed a chocolate bar from the stash she kept hidden behind her textbooks.

She tried to get back to work but she couldn't concentrate. Giving up, she left her room and stood listening.

She heard sounds of her mother crying noisily in the bathroom.

Crap. She knocked on the door. "Mum?"

The crying grew louder. Anxiety balled in Audrey's stomach. It felt as if she'd swallowed a stone. "Mum?"

She tried the handle and the door opened. Her mother was sitting on the floor leaning against the bath, a bottle of wine in her hand.

"I'm a bad mother. A terrible mother."

"Oh, Mum." Audrey's insides churned. She felt exasperated, anxious and a little desperate. Most of all she felt helpless and scared. She didn't know how to deal with this. Once, in a state of desperation, she'd called a help line for children of alcoholic parents but she'd lost her nerve and hung up without speaking to anyone. She didn't want to talk about it. She *couldn't* talk about it. It would be disloyal. Despite everything, she loved her mum.

She wasn't alone, but she felt alone.

Her mother looked at her, mascara smudged under her eyes. "I do love you, Audrey. Do you love me?"

"Of course." Despite her dry mouth, she managed to say the words. It was a routine that happened often. Her mother drank, told Audrey she loved her, sobered up and forgot all about it.

Audrey had given up hoping that one day her mother might say those words when she was sober.

"Give me the bottle, Mum." She eased it out of her mother's hand.

"What are you doing with that?"

Audrey poured it down the sink before she could change her mind, bracing her shoulders against her mother's distressed wail.

"I can't believe you did that! I was having one drink, that's all, to give me confidence for tonight. What did I do to deserve a daughter like you?" She started sobbing again, apparently forgetting that a moment before she'd loved Audrey. "You don't understand. I don't want to lose Ron. I'm no good on my own."

"Of course you are." Audrey put the empty bottle down on the floor. "You have a good job." Which she was afraid her mother might lose if she didn't sober up.

What would happen then? Did Ron know her mother was an alcoholic? Would he walk out once he found out?

She clung to the idea that he wouldn't. Hope, she'd discovered, was the light that guided you through dark places. You had to believe there was something better ahead.

Audrey grabbed a packet of wipes and gently erased the streaked mascara. "You have pretty eyes."

Her mother gave a tremulous smile, her earlier nastiness no longer in evidence. "You think so?"

The vulnerability made Audrey queasy. Most of the time she was the adult, and the responsibility terrified her. She didn't feel qualified for the role. "Definitely. People wear contact lenses to get this shade of green."

Linda touched Audrey's hair. "I hated having red hair when I was your age. I was teased all the time. I wanted to be blonde. You don't get teased?"

"Sometimes." Audrey reapplied her mother's makeup, her approach subtler than Linda's.

"How do you handle it?"

"I can take care of myself." Audrey styled her mother's hair and stood back and admired her handiwork. "There. You look good."

"You're so much stronger than I was."

“You’re strong, too. You’ve just forgotten it.” *And if you stopped drinking it would help.*

She didn’t say it again. Her mother was calm now, and Audrey didn’t want to do or say anything that might change that. They lived on a knife edge. One slip, and they’d all be cut.

Her mother studied herself in the mirror, touching her cheekbones with the tips of her fingers. “You’d better get back to studying. Thanks for your help.”

It was as if the emotional explosion had never happened.

Audrey returned to her bedroom and closed the door.

She wanted to cry, but she knew that if she cried she’d get a headache and then she’d fail her test. If she failed her test, she might fail her exams and she hadn’t come this far to fall at the last fence. A few more months and she’d never have to study again.

Half an hour later a deep rumble of laughter announced that Ron had returned home.

Audrey covered her ears with her headphones, turned up the volume on pounding rock music and drowned out whatever was going on in the room above her.

Only when she glanced out of the window and saw her mother and Ron heading out of the house together, hand in hand, did she finally relax.

Don’t blow it, Mum.

When she was sure the coast was clear and that her mother wasn’t about to return for a bag, a coat or any other number of things, she ventured downstairs.

She could hear a dog barking in the street outside, and one of her neighbors shouting at another. She didn’t know them. It wasn’t that kind of street. In this particular London suburb, people came and went and never spoke to their neighbors. You could die, and no one would know. It was one of the cheaper areas of the city, which basically meant you paid twice what you would anywhere else in the country and got half as much for your money.

Rain was sheeting down, obscuring the view from the window.

Hardy, their rescue dog, was curled up in the warmth of the kitchen but when he saw Audrey he greeted her like a long-lost friend.

Audrey dropped to her knees and hugged him. “You are the only thing about this place I’m going to miss. You’re my best friend, and I wish I could take you with me when I go.” She giggled as he licked her face. “I hope she gets out of bed long enough to feed you when I’m gone. If not, scratch at the door. Or bite Ron on the ankles.” She stood up. “Food?”

Hardy wagged his tail.

She put food into his bowl, freshened his water and was wondering what to eat herself when her phone buzzed. It was Meena, asking if she could come over so they could study together.

Audrey and Meena had both moved to the school two years earlier, at an age when everyone else was already in groups and cliques.

Their friendship was one of the best things about the place for Audrey.

Given that she was likely to have the house to herself for hours, Audrey messaged back a yes. She would never, ever have contemplated having a friend around when her mother was home, but she occasionally invited Meena, provided the house was empty. Her parents were both doctors and Meena had the kind of stable home life Audrey could only dream of. She had uncles, aunts and cousins and Audrey wanted to implant herself in her family.

She checked the fridge.

It was empty apart from two bottles of wine.

She’d asked her mother to buy milk and cheese, but instead she’d eaten the few things Audrey had stocked up on the day before.

Tired, Audrey grabbed the open bottle of wine and tipped it

down the sink. It was like trying to bail out a sinking ship with an eggcup, but still she couldn't help trying to fix the situation.

There was no time for her to shop, so she headed for the freezer. Fortunately the frozen pizzas she'd bought the day before were still there. She threw them in the oven and retrieved a packet of chocolate biscuits she'd hidden for emergencies.

The moment she answered the door to her friend, she knew something was wrong. "What?"

"Nothing." Meena pushed past her into the house. "Close the door fast."

"Why?" Audrey peered out into the street and saw two girls leaning against a wall. She recognized them immediately. They were in her year at school. "What do those hyenas want?"

"My carcass. For dinner. Close the door, Aud!"

"They followed you again?" Audrey felt something hot and uncontrollable burn inside her. "What did they say?"

"The usual." Despite the cold, Meena's face was sweaty. Her eyes looked huge behind her glasses. "It doesn't matter. It's just words. *Please* don't say anything."

"It matters." Audrey was out of the door and across the street before Meena could stop her, carrying all the extra emotion leftover from her encounter with her mother. "What is your problem?" She directed her question at the taller of the two girls because she knew she was the ringleader. Her name was Rhonda and she and Audrey clashed regularly.

Rhonda folded her arms. "I'm not the one with the problem. But you should stop hanging out with that dumb bitch. You need to rethink your friends."

"Yeah." The smaller girl standing by her side sounded like an echo. "You need to rethink your friends."

Audrey glared at her. She couldn't even summon up the girl's name. She was a mouse who hid in Rhonda's shadow. "When you have an original opinion you can voice it, but until then shut up." She shifted her gaze back to Rhonda. "I don't need to

rethink anything. And seeing as Meena gets top grades in everything, the only dumb bitch I see is standing right in front of me.”

Rhonda lifted her jaw. “She should go back to wherever it is she came from.”

“She comes from here, you brainless baboon. She was born half a mile down the road from you but you’re too stupid to even know that, and who the hell cares anyway?”

“Why are you defending her? This isn’t your business, Audrey.”

“My friends aren’t my business? Is that a joke?” Audrey felt the last threads of control unravel. She took a step forward and had the satisfaction of seeing the other girl take a step back.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

“It’s you who shouldn’t be here. This is my street. My wall. I don’t need a bunch of mean girls leaning against it.” Audrey stabbed Rhonda in the chest with her finger. “Get out of here, and if you come near Meena again I swear I’ll hurt you.”

“You and whose army?”

“I don’t need an army. I’m my own army. Now fuck off back to wherever *you* came from, which is probably the sewer.” With a threatening scowl that she’d spent hours perfecting in front of the mirror, she stalked away from them. They called something after her and she lifted her finger and kept walking.

She found Meena shaking like a baby fawn, her phone in her hand.

“I thought they were going to kill you.”

“You have so little faith in me.” Audrey glanced at the phone. “Why are you calling emergency services?”

“I thought you needed backup.”

“We’re not in an action film, Meena. Put the phone away. And stop shaking. You look like a kitten someone dropped in a puddle.”

Meena rubbed her arms. “I wish I could be like you. You’re funny and everyone likes you.”

“Yeah? Well, I wish I was like you. You have a brain and a place at Oxford.”

“I’d rather be popular and fit in. Pathetic, I know. Those girls say I just got the place to fill their diversity quota.”

“Yeah, well, those girls are mean as snakes and dumb as shit. They’ve got to say something to make themselves feel better because their lives are crap. But *you*—” Audrey grabbed Meena and swung her around. “You’re going to rule the world. And because you have me to do your hair, you’re going to look good while you do it. Be proud! You’re, like, *insanely* smart. I can’t even spell engineering, let alone study it. I boast about you to everyone. *My friend Meena is going to Oxford.*”

“You don’t hate me for it?”

“*What?* Don’t be crazy. I’m proud of you. Why would I hate you?”

Meena looked sweetly anxious. “Because studying is so hard for you.”

“Life is hard for you, too. I don’t have to put up with the crap that’s thrown in your direction on a daily basis.” Audrey shrugged, trying not to think of her own life. “Everyone has something to deal with, right? I’ve got your back and you’ve got my back.”

“No one will have my back at Oxford.” Meena wiped the rain from her glasses. “I wish you were going, too.”

“No, you don’t. You’ll be hanging out with smart people, saying smart things and doing smart things. Now stop letting them get to you. Be mad, not scared. And if you can’t actually *be* mad, then act mad. You need to be meaner than they are. You need to be meaner—Meena.” She collapsed, laughing, and Meena giggled, too.

“Meaner—Meena. I like that.”

“Good. Because right now you’re far-too-nice—Meena. Let’s eat.”

Meena followed her into the kitchen and sniffed. “Is that pizza?”

“Mushroom and olive.”

“Bliss. Well, apart from the olives, but I can pick those off.” Meena dumped her bags on the kitchen floor and stripped off her coat. Her long black hair was damp. She wore jeans and a black sweater that belonged to her sister. Audrey would have loved to have a sister to share clothes with, but mostly she would have loved to share the load of her mother.

She watched as Meena sent a text.

“Who are you texting?”

Meena flushed. “My mum. She made me promise to let her know I arrived safely.”

“You live, like, two streets away.”

“I know. It’s embarrassing, but it’s either that or she drives me here and that’s more embarrassing.”

Audrey felt a stab of envy. “It’s great that she cares so much. You have the best family.”

“Aud—”

“What?”

“I smell burning.”

“Shit.” Audrey sprinted across the kitchen and opened the oven. “It’s fine. A little burned maybe, but not totally charred. Can you grab plates?”

Meena opened a cupboard. “Are you nervous about leaving home and living alone?”

“No.” Audrey dumped the pizza on a board. She virtually lived alone now. No one cared what she did. She didn’t have a curfew or rules. She’d reached the point where she’d decided that genuinely living alone would be an improvement. “Are you?”

“A bit, but it will be nice to have some independence. Mum is determined to make sure I eat healthily while I’m revising so every hour she brings me a healthy snack.”

The mere thought of someone thinking to bring her a snack, let alone a healthy one, almost made Audrey bleed with envy.

“And she’s on my case the whole time.” Meena unloaded her books and piled them on the table next to the plates. “We should get started. My uncle is coming at nine thirty to pick me up.”

“I could walk home with you if you like.”

“Then you’d have to walk back alone.”

“So?” She walked everywhere alone. “What do you want to drink?”

“Anything.” Meena walked to the fridge and opened it before Audrey could stop her. “What happened here? Why is your fridge empty?”

“My mother was defrosting it. It was so full, it needed clearing out.” The lie came easily, as lies always did to Audrey.

Yes, Miss Foster, everything is fine at home.

My mother couldn’t make parents’ evening because she’s working.

She could control the story she told. Less easy to control was the shame. It clung to her like sweat and she turned away, terrified it might be visible. “This pizza is getting cold. We should eat.”

“You’re lucky. Your mum gives you so much freedom.”

Audrey switched on her habitual smile. “Yeah, it’s great.”

Why didn’t she just tell Meena and her other friends the truth? It was partly because having started this story it was hard to untangle it, but mostly because it was embarrassing to admit that your own mother thought a bottle of wine was more important than you were. What did that say about her? At the very least, that she was unlovable.

“Have you decided what you’re going to do this summer?”

“I’m going to Paris.” Audrey snapped the top off a can of soda. They had no food in the house, but they always had mixers. “I’m going to find a job and somewhere to live.”

“That’s going to make Hayley sick with envy. You need to post photos that are cooler than hers. Have you seen her Instagram? *Spending a month by the pool in Saint-Tropez this sum-*

mer. *#lovemylife*.” Meena crunched her way through the overcooked pizza and licked her fingers.

“Yeah. I’ve got my own hashtags. *#yousmugbitch* or maybe *#hopethepoolturnsyourhairgreen* or *#hateyourguts*. Trouble is, I can’t spell any of them.”

“I’ll spell them for you if you promise you’ll post at least one smug photo of you in Paris. How are you going to communicate? You don’t speak French.”

Audrey nibbled her pizza. “I can say I’m hungry, and I know the words for *hot guy*. The rest is going to have to be body language. That’s universal.”

“Do you think you’ll have sex?” Meena pulled at another slice of pizza, catching the cheese that trailed in strands. “You’ve done it, right?”

Audrey shrugged, not wanting to admit what a total letdown sex had been. She had no idea why so many books were written about love and passion. There was obviously something wrong with her. “It’s like going to the gym. You can get physical without having to engage the brain. Not that I exactly have a brain to engage.”

“Stop it! You know that’s not true. So you’re saying sex is like being on the treadmill? What happened to romance? What about Romeo and Juliet?”

“They died. Not romantic.” Audrey nibbled her pizza. “Also, that Juliet had no street smarts whatsoever.”

“She was only thirteen.”

“Well, I can tell you that even if she hadn’t drunk that poison, she never would have made it to old age.”

Meena giggled. “You should write that in your exam. So do you want to revise?”

“You don’t mind? It’s not like you exactly need to.”

“I do need to. And I love being here with you. You always make me laugh. What do you want to start with? Physics? I know that’s really hard for you because of all the symbols. It’s

hard for me, too, and I don't have dyslexia. Whenever I open my book I'm just one atom away from a brain explosion."

Audrey knew that wasn't true, but she was touched by her friend's attempts to make her feel better. "I think I'm getting there, but ask me some questions and we'll find out. Shall we have some music?" She finished her pizza and reached for her phone. "I revise better to music."

"I love coming to your house. Everything is so relaxed here. Where's your mum tonight?"

"Out."

"With Ron?" Meena watched as Audrey chose a track and pressed Play. "Now *that's* romantic. All those years widowed, missing your dad, and now she's in love again. It's like a movie."

"Widowed" sounded so much better than "divorced three times."

Losing a husband in tragic circumstances attracted sympathy and understanding. Being divorced three times attracted suspicion and incredulity.

Audrey figured that with the way her life was, she was allowed a little poetic license. And since she and her mother had moved to this part of London only two years before, no one was likely to find out the truth.

"I love this song. Revision can wait." She slid off her chair. "Let's dance. Come on, meaner-Meena, show me what you're made of."

She turned up the volume and danced around the kitchen. She swayed and bumped to the music, her hair flying around her face. Meena joined her, and soon they were whooping and laughing.

For ten glorious minutes Audrey was a teenager without a care in the world. It didn't matter that she was going to fail her exams and that the rest of her life would be ruined. It didn't matter that her mum preferred to drink than spend time with her daughter. All that mattered was the pump and flow of the music.

If only the rest of her life could be like this.

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Prologue

Levi Tucker
Oregon State Penitentiary
2605 State St., Salem, OR 97310

Dear Ms. Grayson,
Due to certain circumstances, my prison sentence is coming to its end sooner than originally scheduled. I've been following your career and I'd like to hire you to design the house I intend to have built.

Sincerely,
Levi Tucker

Dear Mr. Tucker,
How nice that you're soon to be released from prison. I imagine that's a great relief. As you

can imagine, my work is in very high demand and I doubt I'll be able to take on a project with such short notice.

Regretfully,
Faith Grayson

Dear Ms. Grayson,
Whatever your usual fee is, I can double it.
Sincerely,
Levi Tucker

Dear Mr. Tucker,
To be perfectly frank, I looked you up on Google. My brothers would take a dim view of me agreeing to take this job.
Respectfully,
Faith Grayson

Dear Ms. Grayson,
Search again. You'll find I am in the process of being exonerated. Also, what your brothers don't know won't hurt anything. I'll triple your fee.
Sincerely,
Levi Tucker

Dear Mr. Tucker,
If you need to contact me, be sure to use my personal number, listed at the bottom of this page.

I trust we'll be in contact upon your release.
Faith

One

Levi Tucker wasn't a murderer.

It was a fact that was now officially recognized by the law.

He didn't know what he had expected upon his release from prison. Relief, maybe. He imagined that was what most men might feel. Instead, the moment the doors to the penitentiary had closed behind him, Levi had felt something else.

A terrible, pure anger that burned through his veins with a kind of white-hot clarity that would have stunned him if it hadn't felt so inevitable.

The fact of the matter was, Levi Tucker had always known he wasn't a murderer.

And all the state of Oregon had ever had was a hint of suspicion. Hell, they hadn't even had a body.

Mostly because Alicia wasn't dead.

In many ways, that added insult to injury, because he still had to divorce the woman who had set out to make it look as though he had killed her. They were still married. Of course, the moment he'd been able to, he'd filed, and he knew everything was in the process of being sorted out.

He doubted she would contest.

But then, how could he really know?

He had thought he'd known the woman. Hell, he'd married her. And while he'd been well aware that everything hadn't been perfect, he had not expected his wife to disappear one hot summer night, leaving behind implications of foul play.

Even if the result hadn't been intentional, she could have resurfaced at any point after she'd disappeared.

When he was being questioned. When he had been arrested.

She hadn't.

Leaving him to assume that his arrest, disgrace and abject humiliation had been her goal.

It made him wonder now if their relationship had been a long-tail game all the time.

The girl who'd loved him in spite of his family's reputation in Copper Ridge. The one who'd vowed to stick with him through everything. No matter whether he made his fortune or not. He had, and he'd vowed to Alicia he'd build her a house on top of a hill in Copper Ridge so they could look down on all the people who'd once looked down on them.

But until then he'd enjoyed his time at work, away

from the town he'd grown up in. Alicia had gotten more involved in the glamorous side of their new lifestyle, while Levi just wanted things to be simple. His own ranch. His own horses.

Alicia had wanted more.

And apparently, in the end, she had figured she could have it all without him.

Fortunately, it was the money that had ultimately been her undoing. For years prior to her leaving she'd been siphoning it into her own account without him realizing it, but when her funds had run dry she'd gone after the money still in his accounts. And that was when she'd gotten caught.

She'd been living off of his hard-earned money for years.

Five years.

Five hellish years he'd spent locked up as the murderer of a woman. Of his wife.

Not a great situation, all in all.

But he'd survived it. Like he'd survived every damn thing that had come before it.

Money was supposed to protect you.

In the end, he supposed it had, in many ways.

Hell, he might not have been able to walk out of that jail cell and collect his Stetson on his way back to his life if it wasn't for the fact that he had a good team of lawyers who had gotten his case retried as quickly as possible. Something you would've thought would be pretty easy considering his wife had been found alive.

The boy he'd been...

He had no confidence that boy would have been able to get justice.

But the man he was...

The man he was now stood on a vacant plot of land that he owned, near enough to the house he was renting, and waited for the architect to arrive. The one who would design the house he deserved after spending five years behind bars.

There would be no bars in this house. The house that Alicia had wanted so badly. To show everyone in their hometown that he and Alicia were more, were better, than what they'd been born into.

Only, she wasn't.

Without him, she was nothing. And he would prove that to her.

No, his house would have no bars. Nothing but windows.

Windows with a view of the mountains that overlooked Copper Ridge, Oregon, the town where he had grown up. He'd been bad news back then; his whole family had been.

The kind of guy that fathers warned their daughters about.

A bad seed dropped from a rotten tree.

And he had a feeling that public opinion would not have changed in the years since.

His reputation certainly hadn't helped his case when he'd been tried and convicted five years ago.

Repeating patterns. That had been brought up many times. An abusive father was likely to have

raised an abusive son, who had gone on to be a murderer.

That was the natural progression, wasn't it?

The natural progression of men like him.

Alicia had known that. Of course she had. She knew him better than any other person on earth.

Yet he hadn't known her at all.

Well, he had ended up in prison, as she'd most likely intended. But he'd clawed his way out. And now he was going to stand up on the mountain in his fancy-ass house and look down on everyone who'd thought prison would be the end of him.

The best house in the most prime location in town. That was his aim.

Now all that was left to do was wait for Faith Grayson to arrive. By all accounts she was the premier architect at the moment, the hottest commodity in custom home design.

Her houses were more than simple buildings, they were works of art. And he was bound and determined to own a piece of that art for himself.

He was a man possessed. A man on a mission to make the most of everything he'd lost. To live as well as possible while his wife had to deal with the slow-rolling realization that she would be left with nothing.

As it was, it was impossible to prove that she had committed a crime. She hadn't called the police, after all. An argument could be made that she might *not* have intended for him to be arrested. And there was

plausible deniability over the fact that she might not have realized he'd gone to prison.

She claimed she had simply walked away from her life and not looked back. The fact that she had been accessing money was a necessity, so she said. And proof that she had not actually been attempting to hide.

He didn't believe that. He didn't believe *her*, and she had been left with nothing. No access to his money at all. She had been forced to go crawling back to her parents to get an allowance. And he was glad of that.

They said the best revenge was living well.

Levi Tucker intended to do just that.

Faith Grayson knew that meeting an ex-convict at the top of an isolated mountain could easily be filed directly into the Looney Tunes Bin.

Except, Levi Tucker was only an ex-convict because he had been wrongfully convicted in the first place. At least, that was the official statement from the Oregon State District Attorney's office.

Well, plus it was obvious because his wife wasn't dead.

He had been convicted of the murder of someone who was alive. And while there was a whole lot of speculation centered around the fact that the woman never would have run from him in the first place if he hadn't been dangerous and terrifying, the fact remained that he *wasn't* a killer.

So, there was that.

She knew exactly what two of her brothers, Isaiah and Joshua, would say about this meeting. And it would be colorful. Not at all supportive.

But Faith was fascinated by the man who was willing to pay so much to get one of her designs. And maybe her ego was a little bit turbocharged by the whole thing. She couldn't deny that.

She was only human, after all.

A human who had been working really, really hard to keep on top of her status as a rising star in the architecture world.

She had designed buildings that had changed skylines, and she'd done homes for the rich and the famous.

Levi Tucker was something *else*. He was infamous.

The self-made millionaire whose whole world had come crashing down when his wife had disappeared more than five years ago. The man who had been tried and convicted of her murder even when there wasn't a body.

Who had spent the past five years in prison, and who was now digging his way back out...

He wanted her. And yeah, it interested her.

She was getting bored.

Which seemed...ungrateful. Her skill for design had made her famous at a ridiculously young age, but, of course, it was her older brothers and their business acumen that had helped her find success so quickly.

Joshua was a public-relations wizard, Isaiah a ge-

nious with finance. Faith, for her part, was the one with the imagination.

The one who saw buildings growing out of the ground like trees and worked to find ways to twist them into new shapes, to draw new lines into the man-made landscape to blend it all together with nature.

She had always been an artist, but her fascination with buildings had come from a trip her family had taken when she was a child. They had driven from Copper Ridge into Portland, Oregon, and she had been struck by the beauty that surrounded the city.

But in the part of the city where they'd stayed, everything was blocky and made of concrete. Of course, there were parts of the city that were lovely, with architecture that was ornate and classic, but there were parts where the buildings had been stacked in light gray rectangles, and it had nearly wounded her to see the mountains obscured by such unimaginative, dull shapes.

When she had gotten back to their hotel room, she had begun to draw, trying to find a way to blend function and form with the natural beauty that already existed.

It had become an obsession.

It was tough to be an obsessed person. Someone who lived in their own head, in their dreams and fantasies.

It made it difficult to relate to people.

Fortunately, she had found a good friend, Mia,

who had been completely understanding of Faith and her particular idiosyncrasies.

Now Mia was her sister-in-law, because she had married Faith's oldest brother, something Faith really hadn't seen coming.

Devlin was just...so much older. There was more than ten years between him and Faith, and she'd had no idea her friend felt that way about him.

She was happy for both of them, of course.

But their bond sometimes made her feel isolated. The fact that her friend now had this *thing* that Faith herself never had. And that this *thing* was with Faith's brother. Of all people.

Even Joshua and Isaiah had fallen in love and gotten married.

Joshua had wed a woman he had met while trying to get revenge on their father for attempting to force him into marriage, while Isaiah married his personal assistant.

Maybe it was her family that had driven Faith to the top of the mountain today.

Maybe her dissatisfaction with her own personal life was why it felt so interesting and new to do something with Levi Tucker.

Everything she had accomplished, she had done with the permission and help of other people.

If she was going to be a visionary, she wanted—just this once—for it to be on her terms.

To not be seen as a child prodigy—which was ridiculous, because she was twenty-five, not a child at all—but to be seen as someone who was really great

at what she did. To leave her age out of it, to leave her older brothers—who often felt more like babysitters—out of it.

She let out a long, slow breath as she rounded the final curve on the mountain driveway, the vacant lot coming into view. But it wasn't the lot, or the scenery surrounding it, that stood out in her vision first and foremost. No, it was the man standing there, his hands shoved into the pockets of his battered jeans, worn cowboy boots on his feet. He had on a black T-shirt, in spite of the morning chill, and a black cowboy hat was pressed firmly onto his head.

Both of his arms were completely filled with ink, the dark lines of the tattoos painting pictures on his skin she couldn't quite see from where she was.

But in a strange way, they reminded her of architecture. The tattoos seemed to enhance the muscle there, to draw focus to the skin beneath the lines, even while they covered it.

She parked the car and sat for a moment, completely struck dumb by the sight of him.

She had researched him, obviously. She knew what he looked like, but she supposed she hadn't had a sense of...the scale of him.

Strange, because she was usually pretty good at picking up on those kinds of things in photographs. She had a mathematical eye, one that blended with her artistic sensibility in a way that felt natural to her.

And yet, she had not been able to accurately form a picture of the man in her mind. And when she got

out of the car, she was struck by the way he seemed to fill this vast empty space.

That also didn't make any sense.

He was big. Over six feet and with broad shoulders, but he didn't fill this space. Not literally.

But she could feel his presence like a touch as soon as the cold air wrapped itself around her body upon exiting the car.

And when his ice-blue eyes connected with hers, she drew in a breath. She was certain he filled her lungs, too.

Because that air no longer felt cold. It felt hot. Impossibly so.

Because those blue eyes burned with something. Rage. Anger.

Not at her—in fact, his expression seemed almost friendly.

But there was something simmering beneath the surface, and it had touched her already.

Wouldn't let go of her.

"Ms. Grayson," he said, his voice rolling over her with that same kind of heat. "Good to meet you."

He stuck out his hand and she hurriedly closed the distance between them, flinching before their skin touched, because she knew it was going to burn.

It did.

"Mr. Tucker," she responded, careful to keep her voice neutral, careful when she released her hold on him, not to flex her fingers or wipe her palm against the side of her skirt like she wanted to.

“This is the site,” he said. “I hope you think it’s workable.”

“I do,” she said, blinking. She needed to look around them. At the view. At the way the house would be situated. This lot was more than usable. It was inspirational. “What do you have in mind? I find it best to begin with customer expectations,” she said, quick to turn the topic where it needed to go. Because what she didn’t want to do was ponder the man any longer.

The man didn’t matter.

The house mattered.

“I want it to be everything prison isn’t,” he said, his tone hard and decisive.

She couldn’t imagine this man, as vast and wild as the deep green trees and ridged blue mountains around them, contained in a cell. Isolated. Cut off.

In darkness.

And suddenly she felt compelled to be the answer to that darkness. To make sure that the walls she built for him didn’t feel like walls at all.

“Windows,” she said. That was the easiest and most obvious thing. A sense of openness and freedom. She began to plot the ways in which she could construct a house so that it didn’t have doors. So that things were concealed by angles and curves. “No doors?”

“I live alone,” he said simply. “There’s no reason for doors.”

“And you don’t plan on living with someone anytime soon?”

“Never,” he responded. “It may surprise you to learn that I have cooled on the idea of marriage.”

“Windows. Lighting.” She turned to the east. “The sun should be up here early, and we can try to capture the light there in the morning when you wake up, and then...” She turned the opposite way. “Make sure that we’re set up for you to see the light as it goes down here. Kitchen. Living room. Office?”

Her fingers twitched and she pulled her sketch pad out of her large leather bag, jotting notes and rough lines as quickly as possible. She felt the skin prickle on her face and she paused, looking up.

He was watching her.

She cleared her throat. “Can I ask you...what was it that inspired you to get in touch with me? Which building of mine?”

“All of them,” he said. “I had nothing but time while I was in jail, and while I did what I could to manage some of my assets from behind bars, there was a lot of time to read. An article about your achievements came to my attention and I was fascinated by your work. I won’t lie to you—even more than that, I am looking forward to owning a piece of you.”

Something about those words hit her square in the solar plexus and radiated outward. She was sweating now. She was not wearing her coat. She should not be sweating.

“Of me?”

“Your brand,” he said. “Having a place designed by you is an exceedingly coveted prize, I believe.”

She felt her cheeks warm, and she couldn't quite figure out why. She didn't suffer from false modesty. The last few years of her life had been nothing short of extraordinary. She embraced her success and she didn't apologize for it. Didn't duck her head, like she was doing now, or tuck her hair behind her ear and look up bashfully. Which she had just done.

"I suppose so."

"You know it's true," he said.

"Yes," she said, clearing her throat and rallying. "I do."

"Whatever the media might say, whatever law enforcement believes now, my wife tried to destroy my life. And I will not allow her to claim that victory. I'm not a phoenix rising from the ashes. I'm just a very angry man ready to set some shit on fire, and stand there watching it burn. I'm going to show her, and the world, that I can't be destroyed. I'm not slinking into the shadows. I'm going to rebuild it all. Until everything that I have done matters more than what she did to me. I will not allow her name, what she did, to be the thing I am remembered for. I'm sure you can understand that."

She could. Oddly, she really could.

She wasn't angry at anyone, nor did she have any right to be, but she knew what it was like to want to break out and have your own achievements. Wasn't that what she had just been thinking of while coming here?

Of course, he already had so many achievements.

She imagined having all her work blotted out the way that he had. It was unacceptable.

“Look,” she said, stashing her notebook, “I meant what I said, about my brothers being unhappy with me for taking this job.”

“What do your brothers have to do with you taking a job?”

“If you read anything about me then you know that I work with them. You know that we’ve merged with the construction company that handles a great deal of our building.”

“Yes, I know. Though, doesn’t the construction arm mostly produce reproductions of your designs, rather than handling your custom projects?”

“It depends,” she responded. “I just mean... My brothers run a significant portion of our business.”

“But you could go off and run it without them. They can’t run it without you.”

He had said the words she had thought more than once while listening to Joshua and Isaiah make proclamations about various things. Joshua was charming, and often managed to make his proclamations seem not quite so prescriptive. Isaiah never bothered. About the only person he was soft with at all was his wife, Poppy, who owned his heart—a heart that a great many of them had doubted he had.

“Well, I just meant... We need to keep this project a secret. Until we’re at least most of the way through. Jonathan Bear will be the one to handle the building. He’s the best. And since you’re right here in Copper Ridge, it would make sense to have him do it.”

“I know Jonathan Bear,” Levi said.

That surprised her. “Do you?”

“I’m a couple years older than him, but we both grew up on the same side of the tracks here in town. You know, the wrong side.”

“Oh,” she said. “I didn’t realize.”

Dimly, she had been aware, on some level, that Levi was from here, but he had left so long ago, and he was so far outside of her own peer group that she would never have known him.

If he was older than Jonathan Bear, then he was possibly a good thirteen years her senior.

That made her feel small and silly for that instant response she’d had to him earlier.

She was basically a child to him.

But then, she was basically a child to most of the men in her life, so why should this be any different?

And she didn’t even know why it was bothering her.

She often designed buildings for old men. And in the beginning, it had been difficult getting them to take her seriously, but the more pieces that had been written about her, the more those men had marveled at the talent she had for her age, and the more she was able to walk into a room with all of those accolades clearly visible behind her as she went.

She was still a little bit bothered that her age was such a big deal, but if it helped...then she would take it. Because she couldn’t do anything about the fact that she looked like she might still be in college.

She tried—*tried*—to affect a sophisticated ap-

pearance, but half the time she felt like she was playing dress-up in a much fancier woman's clothes.

"Clandestine architecture project?" he asked, the corner of his lips working up into a smile. And until that moment, she realized she had not been fully convinced his mouth could do that.

"Something like that."

"Let me ask you this," he said. "Why do you want to take the job?"

"Well, it's like you said. I—I feel like I'm an important piece of the business. And believe me, I wouldn't be where I am without Isaiah and Joshua. They're brilliant. But I want to be able to make my own choices. Maybe I want to take on this project. Especially now that you've said...everything about needing it to be the opposite of a prison cell. I'm inspired to do it. I love this location. I want to build this house without Isaiah hovering over me."

Levi chuckled, low and gravelly. "So he wouldn't approve of me?"

"Not at all."

"I am innocent," he said. His mouth worked upward again. "Or I should say, I'm not guilty. Whether or not I'm an entirely innocent person is another story. But I didn't do anything to my wife."

"Your ex-wife?"

"Nearly. Everything should be finalized in the next couple of days. She's not contesting anything. Mostly because she doesn't want to end up in prison. I have impressed upon her how unpleasant that experience was. She has no desire to see for herself."

“Oh, of course you’re still married to her. Because everybody thought—”

“That she was dead. You don’t have to divorce a dead person.”

“Let me ask you something,” she said, doing her best to meet his gaze, ignoring the quivering sensation she felt in her belly. “Do I have reason to be afraid of you?”

The grin that spread over his face was slow, calculated. “Well, I would say that depends.”

Two

He shouldn't toy with her. It wasn't nice. But then, he wasn't nice. He hadn't been, not even before his stint in prison. But the time there had taken anything soft inside of him and hardened it. Until his insides were a minefield of sharpened obsidian. Black, stone-cold, honed into a razor.

The man he'd been before might not have done anything to provoke the pretty little woman in front of him. But he could barely remember that man. That man had been an idiot. That man had married Alicia, had convinced himself he could have a happy life, when he had never seen any kind of happiness come from marriage, not all through his childhood. So why had he thought he could have more? Could have something else?

"Depends on what?" she asked, looking up at him,

those wide brown eyes striking him square in the chest...and lower, when they made contact with his.

She was so very pretty.

So very young, too.

Her pale, heart-shaped face, those soft-looking pink lips and her riot of brown curls—it all appealed to him in an instant, visceral way.

No real mystery, he supposed. He hadn't touched a woman in more than five years.

This one was contraband. She had a use, but it wouldn't be *that* one.

Hell, no.

He was a hard bastard, no mistake. But he wasn't a criminal.

He didn't belong with the rapists and murderers he'd been locked away with for all those years, and sometimes the only thing that had kept him going in those subhuman conditions—where he'd been called every name in the book, subjected to threats that would make most men weep with fear in their beds—was the knowledge that he didn't belong there.

That he wasn't one of them.

Hell, that was about the only thing that had kept him from hunting down Alicia when he'd been released.

He wasn't a murderer. He wasn't a monster.

He wouldn't let Alicia make him one.

"Depends on what scares you," he said.

She firmed those full lips into a thin, ungenerous line, and perhaps that reaction should have turned his thoughts in a different direction.

Instead he thought about what it might take to coax those lips back to softness. To fullness. And just how much riper they might become if he was to kiss them. To take the lower one between his teeth and bite.

He really wasn't fit for company. At least not delicate, female company.

Sadly, it was delicate female company that seemed appealing.

He needed to go to a bar and find a woman more like him. Harder. Closer to his age.

Someone who could stand five years of pent-up sexual energy pounded into her body.

The sweet little architect he had hired was not that woman.

If her brothers had any idea she was meeting with him they would get out their pitchforks. If they had any idea what he was thinking now, they would get out their shotguns.

And he couldn't blame them.

"Spiders. Do you have spiders up your sleeves?"

"No spiders," he said.

"The dark?"

"Well, honey, I can tell you for a fact that I have a little bit of that I carry around with me."

"I guess as long as we stay in the light it should be okay."

He was tempted to toy with her. He didn't know if she was being intentionally flirtatious. But there was something so open, so innocent, about her expression that he doubted it.

“I’m going to go sketch,” she said. “Now that I’ve seen the place, and you’ve sent over all the meaningful information, I should be able to come up with an initial draft. And then I can send it over to you.”

“Sounds good,” he said. “Then what?”

“Then we’ll arrange another meeting.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he said, extending his hand.

He shouldn’t touch her again. When her soft fingers had closed around his he had felt that around his cock.

But he wanted to touch her again.

Pink colored her cheeks. A blush.

Dammit all, the woman had blushed.

Women who blushed were not for men like him.

That he had a sense of that at all was a reminder. A reminder that he wasn’t an animal. Wasn’t a monster.

Or at least that he still had enough man in him to control himself.

“I’ll see you then.”

Three

Faith was not hugely conversant in the whole girls'-night-out thing. Mia, her best friend from school, was not big on going out, and never had been, and usually, that had suited Faith just fine.

Faith had been a scholarship student at a boarding school that would have been entirely out of her family's reach if the school hadn't been interested in her artistic talents. And she'd been so invested in making the most of those talents, and then making the most of her scholarships in college, that she'd never really made time to go out.

And Mia had always been much the same, so there had been no one to encourage the other one to go out.

After school it had been work. Work and more work, and riding the massive wave Faith had some-

how managed to catch that had buoyed her career to nearly absurd levels as soon as she'd graduated.

But since coming to Copper Ridge, things had somehow managed to pick up and slow down at the same time. There was something about living in a small town, with its slower pace, clean streets and wide-open spaces all around, that seemed to create more time.

Not having to commute through Seattle traffic helped, and it might actually be the sum total of where she had found all that extra time, if she was honest.

She had also begun to make friends with Hayley Bear, formerly Thompson, now wife of Jonathan. When Faith and her brothers had moved their headquarters to Copper Ridge, closer to their parents, Joshua had decided it would be a good idea to find a local builder to partner with, and that was how they'd met Jonathan and merged their businesses.

And tonight, Faith and Hayley were out for drinks.

Of course, Hayley didn't really drink, and Faith was a lightweight at best, but that didn't mean they couldn't have fun.

They were also in Hayley's brother's bar.

They couldn't have been supervised any better if they'd tried. Though, the protectiveness was going to be directed more at Hayley than Faith.

Faith stuck her straw down deep into her rum and Coke and fished out a cherry, lifting it up and chewing it thoughtfully as she surveyed the room.

The revelers were out in force, whole groups of cheering friends standing by Ferdinand, the mechanical bull, and watching as people stepped up to the plate—both drunk and sober—to get thrown off his back and onto the mats below.

It looked entirely objectionable to Faith. She couldn't imagine submitting herself to something like that. A ride you couldn't control, couldn't anticipate. Where the only way off was to weather the bucking or get thrown to the mats below.

No, thanks.

"You seem quiet," Hayley pointed out.

"Do I?" Faith mused.

"Yes," Hayley said. "You seem like you have something on your mind."

Faith gnawed the inside of her cheek. "I'm starting a new design project. And it's really important that I get everything right. I mean, I'm going to be collaborating with the guy, so I'm sure he'll have his own input, and all of that, but..." She didn't know how to explain it without giving herself away, then she gave up. "If I told you something...could you keep it a secret?"

Hayley blinked her wide brown eyes. "Yes. Though... I don't keep anything from Jonathan. Ever. He's my husband and..."

"Can Jonathan keep a secret?"

"Jonathan doesn't really do...*friends*. So, I'm not sure who he would tell. I think I might be the only person he talks to."

“He works with my brothers,” Faith pointed out.

“To the same degree he works with you.”

“Not really. A lot more of the stuff filters through Joshua and Isaiah than it does me. I’m just kind of around. That’s our agreement. They handle all of the...business stuff. And I do the drawing. The designing. I’m an expert at buildings and building materials, aesthetics and design. Not so much anything else.”

“Point taken. But, yes, if I asked Jonathan not to say something, he wouldn’t. He’s totally loyal to me.” Hayley looked a little bit smug about that.

It was hard to have friends who were so happily... *relationshipped*, when Faith knew so little about how that worked.

Though at least Hayley wasn’t with Faith’s *brother*.

Yes, that made Faith and Mia family, which was nice in its way, but it really limited their ability to talk about boys. They had always promised to share personal things, like first times. While Faith had been happy for her friend, and for her brother, she also had wanted details about as much as she wanted to be stripped naked, have a string tied around her toe and be dragged through the small town’s main street by her brother Devlin’s Harley.

As in: not at all.

“I took a job that Joshua and Isaiah are going to be really mad about...”

Just then, the door to the bar opened, and Faith’s

mouth dropped open. Because there he was. Speaking of.

Hayley looked over her shoulder, not bothering to be subtle. “Who’s that?” she hissed.

“The devil,” Faith said softly.

Hayley blinked. “You had better start at the beginning.”

“I was about to,” Faith said.

The two of them watched as Levi went up to the counter, leaned over and placed an order with Ace, the bartender and owner of the bar, and Hayley’s older brother.

“That’s Levi Tucker,” Faith said.

Hayley narrowed her eyes. “Why do I know that name?”

“Because he’s kind of famous. Like, a famous murderer.”

“Oh, my gosh,” Hayley said, slapping the table with her open palm, “he’s that guy. That guy accused of murdering his wife! But she wasn’t really dead.”

“Yes,” Faith confirmed.

“You’re working with him?”

“I’m designing a house for him. But he’s not a murderer. Yes, he was in prison for a while, but he didn’t actually do anything. His wife disappeared. That’s not exactly his fault.”

Hayley looked at Faith skeptically. “If I ran away from my husband it would have to be for a pretty extreme reason.”

“Well, no one’s ever proven that he did anything.

And, anyway, I'm just working with him in a professional capacity. I'm not scared of him."

"Should you be?"

Faith took in the long, hard lines of his body, the dark tattoos on his arms, that dark cowboy hat pulled low over his eyes and his sculpted jaw, which she imagined a woman could cut her hand on if she caressed it...

"No," she said quickly. "Why would I need to be scared of him? I'm designing a house for the guy. Nothing else."

He began to scan the room, and she felt the sudden urge to hide from that piercing blue gaze. Her heart was thundering like she had just run a marathon. Like she just might actually be...

Afraid.

No. That was silly. Impossible. There really wasn't anything to be afraid of.

He was just a man. A hard, scarred man with ink all over his skin, but that didn't mean he was bad. Or scary.

Devlin had tattoos over every visible inch of his body from the neck down.

She didn't want to know if they were anywhere else. There were just some things you shouldn't know about your brother.

But yeah, tattoos didn't make a man scary. Or dangerous. She knew that.

So she couldn't figure out why her heart was still racing.

And then he saw them.

She felt a rush of heat move over her body as he raised his hand and gripped the brim of his cowboy hat, tipping his head down slowly in a brief acknowledgment.

She swallowed hard, her throat sticky and dry, then reached for her soda, feeling panicky. She took a long sip, forgetting there was rum in it, the burn making her cough.

“This is concerning,” Hayley said softly, her expression overly sharp.

“What is?” Faith asked, jerking her gaze away from Levi.

“You’re *not* acting normal.”

“I’m not used to subterfuge.” Faith sounded defensive. Because she felt a little defensive.

“The look on your face has nothing to do with the fact that he’s incredibly attractive?”

“Is he?” Faith asked, her tone disingenuous, but sweet. “I hadn’t noticed.”

Actually, until Hayley had said that, she hadn’t noticed. Well, she had, but she hadn’t connected that disquiet in her stomach with finding him...*attractive*.

He was out of her league in every way. Too old for her. Too hard for her.

Levi was the deep end of the pool, and she didn’t know how to swim. That much, she knew.

And she wouldn’t... He was a client. Even if she was a champion lap swimmer, there was no way.

He was no longer acknowledging her or Hayley, anyway, as his focus turned back to the bar.

“What’s going on with you?” Faith asked, very clumsily changing the subject and forcing herself to look at Hayley.

She and Hayley began to chat about other things, and she did her best to forget that Levi Tucker was in the bar at all.

He had obviously forgotten she was there, anyway.

Then, for some reason, some movement caught her attention, and she turned.

Levi was talking to a blonde, his head bent low, a smile on his face that made Faith feel like she’d just heard him say a dirty word. The blonde was looking back at him with the exact same expression. She was wearing a top that exposed her midriff, which was tight and tan, with a little sparkling piercing on her stomach.

She was exactly the kind of woman Faith could never hope to be, or compete with. And she shouldn’t want to, anyway.

Obviously, Levi Tucker was at the bar looking for a good time. And Faith wasn’t going to be the one to give it to him, so Blondie McBellyRing might as well be the one to do it.

It was no skin off Faith’s nose.

Right then, Levi looked up, and his ice-blue gaze collided with hers with the force of an iceberg hitting the *Titanic*.

And damn if she didn’t feel like she was sinking.

He put his hand on the blonde's hip, leaning in and saying something to her, patting her gently before moving away...and walking straight in Faith's direction.

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#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ROBYN CARR

The View from Alameda Island

A NOVEL



CHAPTER ONE

Today was Lauren Delaney's twenty-fourth wedding anniversary and there wouldn't be a twenty-fifth. To many it appeared Lauren had a perfect life but the truth was something she kept to herself. She had just been to see her lawyer and now she needed a little time to think. She headed for one of her favorite places. She needed the solace of a beautiful garden.

Divine Redeemer Catholic Church was an old church that had survived all of the earthquakes since the big one—the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. Lauren had only been inside the building a couple of times, but never for mass. Her mother had been Catholic, but she hadn't been active. The church had a beautiful garden where parishioners often walked and there were several benches where you could sit and pray or

meditate. Lauren was on her way home to Mill Valley from her job at Merriweather Foods and she stopped there, something she did frequently. There were no brochures explaining the genesis of the garden or even the fact that the church sat on such a generous plot of land for Northern California, but she'd happened upon an old priest once and he'd told her one of the priests in the early 1900s was a fanatic about growing things. Even though he'd been dead for decades, the church kept the garden going. They even preserved a large garden behind the beautiful flowers for fruits and vegetables, which they donated to food banks or used to feed hungry people in poorer parishes.

Divine Redeemer's parish just outside of Mill Valley, California, didn't have many hungry people. It was an upper-class area. It was where she lived.

She was very well off. Richer than she'd ever imagined by her family's standards, yet her husband ranted about his low pay. He was a prosperous surgeon raking in over a million a year but he didn't have a yacht or a plane, which irked him. He spent a great deal of time managing and complaining about his finances.

She would be leaving him as soon as she could finalize the details. She had spent an hour with her attorney, Erica Slade, today. Erica had asked, "So, is this going to be it, Lauren?"

"The marriage was over many years ago," Lauren said. "All that's left is for me to tell him I'm leaving. I'm getting my ducks in a row."

They would be spending the evening at a charity auction and dinner. For that she was so grateful. There would be no staring at each other over a starched white tablecloth searching for things to say, no watching Brad check his phone and text all through the meal. As he was fond of reminding her, he was an important man. He was in demand. She was nothing.

THE VIEW FROM ALAMEDA ISLAND

If she ever received a call or text, it was from one of her daughters or her sister. But if they knew she was out, they wouldn't expect a response. Except maybe her eldest daughter, Lacey. She had inherited her father's lack of boundaries and sense of entitlement—it was all about her. Her younger daughter, Cassie, had, perhaps unfortunately, inherited Lauren's cautious and reticent nature. Lauren and Cassie didn't like conflict, didn't step on toes.

“When are you going to stand up for yourself, Lauren?” Brad had been known to say to her. “You're so spineless.” Of course, he meant she should stand up to anyone but him.

Oh, wouldn't Brad be surprised when she finally did. And he'd be angry. She knew people would inevitably ask, *Why now? After twenty-four years?* Because it had been twenty-four *hard* years. It had been hard since the beginning. Not every minute of it, of course. But overall, her marriage to Brad had never been a good situation. She spent the first several years thinking she could somehow make it better, the next several years thinking she probably didn't have it so bad since he was *only* emotionally and verbally abusive, and the last ten years thinking she couldn't wait to escape once her daughters were safely raised. Because, the truth was he was only going to get more cantankerous and abusive with age.

The first time she'd seriously considered leaving him, the girls were small. “I'll get custody,” he said. “I'll fight for it. I'll prove you're unfit. I have the money to do it, you don't.” She'd almost done it when the girls were in junior high. He'd been unfaithful and she was sure it hadn't been the first time he'd strayed, just the first time he'd been caught. She'd taken the girls to her sister's cramped little house where the three of them shared a bedroom and the girls begged to go home. She returned and demanded marriage counseling. He admitted to a meaningless fling or two because his wife, he said, was

not at all enthusiastic about sex anymore. And the counselor cautioned her about throwing away the father of her children, explained that the repercussions could be very long-term. She found another counselor and it happened again—the counselor sympathized with Brad. Only Lauren could see that Brad was a manipulator who could turn on the charm when it suited him.

Rather than trying yet another counselor, Brad took the family on a luxurious vacation to Europe. He pampered the girls and ultimately Lauren gave the marriage yet another chance. Then a couple of years later he gave her chlamydia and blamed her. “Don’t be ridiculous, Lauren. You picked it up somewhere and gave it to me! Don’t even bother to deny it.”

She’d told him she wanted a divorce and he had said, “Fine. You’ll pay the price. I’m not going to make it easy for you.”

Knowing what was at stake, she moved into the guest room instead.

Days became weeks, weeks became months. They went back to marriage counseling. In no time at all Lauren suspected their marriage counselor had an agenda and favored Brad. She helped him make excuses, covered for him, pushed Lauren to admit to her manipulative nature. Lauren suspected him of sleeping with the counselor. He told her she’d become sick with paranoia.

By the time Lacey was in college and Cassie was applying to colleges, Brad was worse than ever. Controlling, domineering, secretive, verbally abusive, argumentative. God, why didn’t he want her to just leave? Clearly, he hated her.

But he told her if she left him he wouldn’t pay college tuition. “No judge can make me. I can be stuck with some alimony but not support payments. And not tuition. When they’re over eighteen they’re on their own. So go then,” he’d said. “You’ll be responsible for cutting them off.”

The last few years had been so lonely. She had spent a lot of time worrying that by staying with a man like Brad she had taught her daughters a dreadful lesson. She'd done her best with them but she couldn't make them un-see how their own mother had lived her life.

She'd taken a few hours from work to meet with the lawyer, laying out plans, creating her list and checking things off. The lawyer had said, "He's had you running scared for years. We have laws in this state. He can't cut you off and freeze you out. I'm not saying it will be easy or painless, but you will not starve and your share of the marital assets will be delivered."

It was time. She was finally ready to go.

Lauren inhaled the smell of spring flowers. This was one of the best times of year in Northern California, the Bay Area and inland, when everything was coming to life. The vineyards were greening up and the fruit trees were blossoming. She loved flowers; her grandmother had been a ferocious gardener, turning her entire yard into a garden. Flowers soothed her. She needed a garden right now.

Lauren heard the squeaking of wheels and looked up to see a man pushing a wheelbarrow along the path. He stopped not too far from her. He had a trowel, shovel and six plants in the wheelbarrow. He gave her a nod, and went about the business of replacing a couple of plants. Then he sat back on his heels, looked at her and smiled. "Better?" he asked.

"Beautiful," she said with a smile.

"Is this your first time in this garden?" he asked.

"No, I've been here a number of times," Lauren said. "Are you the gardener?"

"No," he said with a laugh. "Well, yes, I guess I am if I garden. But I'm just helping out today. I noticed a few things needed to be done..."

“Oh, is this your church?”

“Not this one, a smaller church south of here. I’m afraid I’ve fallen away...”

“And yet you still help out the parish? You’re dedicated.”

“I admire this garden,” he said. He rotated and sat, drawing up his knees. “Why do you come here?”

“I love gardens,” she said. “Flowers in general make me happy.”

“You live in the right part of the country, then. Do you keep a garden?”

“No,” she said, laughing uncomfortably. “My husband has very specific ideas about how the landscaping should look.”

“So he does it?”

Get dirt under his nails? Hah! “Not at all. He hires the people who do it and gives them very firm orders. I don’t find our garden nearly as beautiful as this.”

“I guess you have nothing to say about it, then,” he said.

“Not if it’s going to create conflict,” Lauren said. “But it’s kind of a secret hobby of mine to find and visit gardens. Beautiful gardens. My grandmother was a master gardener—both her front and backyard were filled with flowers, fruits and vegetables. She even grew artichokes and asparagus. It was incredible. There was no real design—it was like a glorious jungle.”

“When you were young?”

“And when I was older, too. My children loved it.”

“Did your mother garden?” he asked.

“Very little—she was a hardworking woman. But after my grandparents passed away, she lived in their house and inherited the garden. I’m afraid she let it go.”

“It’s a hereditary thing, don’t you think?” he asked. “Growing up, our whole family worked in the garden. Big garden, too. Necessary garden. My mother canned and we had veg-

etables all winter. Now she freezes more than cans and her kids rob her blind. I think she does it as much for all of us as herself.”

“I would love that so much,” Lauren said. Then she wondered how the residents of Mill Valley would react to seeing her out in the yard in her overalls, hoeing and spreading fresh, stinky fertilizer. It made her laugh to herself.

“Funny?” he asked.

“I work for a food processor. Merriweather. And they don’t let me near the gardens, which are primarily research gardens.”

“So, what do you do?” he asked.

“I cook,” she said. “Product development. Testing and recipes. We test the products regularly and have excellent consumer outreach. We want to show people how to use our products.”

“Are you a nutritionist?” he asked.

“No, but I think I’m becoming one. I studied chemistry. But what I do is not chemistry. In fact, it’s been so long...”

He frowned. “Processed foods. A lot of additives,” he said. “Preservatives.”

“We stand by their safety and it’s a demanding, fast-paced world. People don’t have time to grow their food, store it, make it, serve it.” His cell phone rang and he pulled it from his pocket. “See what I mean?” she said, his phone evidence of the pace of modern life.

But he didn’t even look at it. He switched it off. “What, besides flowers, makes you happy?” he asked.

“I like my job. Most of the time. Really, ninety percent of the time. I work with good people. I love to cook.”

“All these domestic pursuits. You must have a very happy husband.”

She almost said nothing makes Brad happy, but instead she

said, “He cooks, too—and thinks he’s better at it than I am. He’s not, by the way.”

“So if you weren’t a chemist cooking for a food company, what would you be? A caterer?”

“No, I don’t think so,” she said. “I think trying to please a client who can afford catering seems too challenging to me. I once thought I wanted to teach home economics but there is no more home ec.”

“Sure there is,” he said, frowning. “Really?”

She shook her head. “A nine or twelve-week course, and it’s not what it once was. We used to learn to sew and bake. Now there’s clothing design as an elective. Some schools offer cooking for students who’d like to be chefs. It’s not the same thing.”

“I guess if you want homemaking tips, there’s the internet,” he said.

“That’s some of what I do,” she said. “Video cooking demonstrations.”

“Is it fun?”

She nodded after thinking about it for a moment.

“Maybe I should do video gardening demos.”

“What makes you happy?” she surprised herself by asking.

“Just about anything,” he said with a laugh. “Digging in the ground. Shooting hoops with my boys when they’re around. Fishing. I love to fish. Quiet. I love quiet. I love art and design. There’s this book—it’s been a long time since I read it—it’s about the psychology of happiness. It’s the results of a study. The premise that initiated the study was what makes one person able to be happy while another person just can’t be happy no matter what. Take two men—one is a survivor of the Holocaust and goes on to live a happy, productive life while the other goes through a divorce and he can hardly get off the couch or drag himself to work for over a decade.

What's the difference between them? How can one person generate happiness for himself while the other can't?"

"Depression?" she asked.

"Not always," he said. "The study pointed out a lot of factors, some we have no control over and some are learned behaviors. Interesting. It's not just a choice but I'm a happy guy." He grinned at her.

She noticed, suddenly, how good-looking this man was. He looked like he was in his forties, a tiny amount of gray threading his dark brown hair at his temples. His eyes were dark blue. His hands were large and clean for a gardener. "Now what makes a volunteer gardener decide to read psychology?" she asked.

He chuckled. "Well, I read a lot. I like to read. I think I got that from my father. I can zone out everything except what's happening in my head. Apparently I go deaf. Or so I've been told. By my wife."

"Hyper focus," she said. "Plus, men don't listen to their wives."

"That's what I hear," he said. "I'm married to an unhappy woman so I found this book that was supposed to explain why some schmucks like me are so easy to make happy and some people just have the hardest damn time."

"How'd you find the book?"

"I like to hang out in bookstores..."

"So do we," she said. "It's one of the few things we both enjoy. Other than that, I don't think my husband and I have much in common."

"That's not a requirement," he said. "I have these friends, Jude and Germain, they are different as night and day." He got to his feet and brushed off the seat of his pants. "They have nothing in common. But they have such a good time

together. They laugh all the time. They have four kids so it's compromise all the time and they make it look so easy."

She frowned. "Which one's the girl? Oh! Maybe they're same sex...?"

"Germain is a woman and Jude's a man," he said, laughing. "I have another set of friends, both men, married to each other. We call them the Bickersons. They argue continuously."

"Thus, answering the question about gender..."

"I have to go," he said. "But... My name is Beau."

"Lauren," she said.

"It was fun talking to you, Lauren. So, when do you think you might need to spend time with the flowers next?"

"Tuesday?" she said, posing it as a question.

He smiled. "Tuesday is good. I hope you enjoy the rest of your week."

"Thanks. Same to you." She walked down the path toward her car in the parking lot. He steered his wheelbarrow down the path toward the garden shed.

Lauren made a U-turn, heading back toward him. "Beau!" she called. He turned to face her. "Um... Let me rethink that. I don't know when I'll be back here but it's not a good idea, you know. We're both married."

"It's just conversation, Lauren," he said.

He's probably a psychopath, she thought, because he looks so innocent, so decent. "Yeah, not a good idea," she said, shaking her head. "But I enjoyed talking to you."

"Okay," he said. "I'm sorry, but I understand. Have a great week."

"You, too," she said.

She walked purposefully to her car and she even looked around. He was in the garden shed on the other side of the gardens. She could hear him putting things away. He wasn't

looking to see what she was driving or what her license plate number was. He was a perfectly nice, friendly guy who probably picked up lonely women on a regular basis. Then murdered them and chopped them in little pieces and used them for fertilizer.

She sighed. Sometimes she felt so ridiculous. But she was going to go to the bookstore to look for that book.

Lauren was in a much better mood than usual that evening. In fact, when Brad came home in a state—something about the hospital screwing up his surgery schedule and flipping a couple of his patients without consulting him—she found herself strangely unaffected.

“Are you listening, Lauren?” Brad asked.

“Huh? Oh yes, sorry. Did you get it straightened out?”

“No! I’ll be on the phone tonight. Why do you think I’m so *irritated*? Do you have any idea what my time is worth?”

“Now that you mention it, I don’t...”

“Isn’t it lucky for you that you have a husband who is willing to take care of details like that...”

“Oh,” she said. “Lovely.”

“It might be nice if you said something intelligent for a change.”

“It’s the odd night when you’re not taking calls,” she said.

“Were you hoping for a night off?”

“Obviously! Why do you imagine I brought it up? I’ve told them a thousand times not to get involved with my schedule. They’re going to cause patients unnecessary anxiety, not to mention what they do to me! But they think I’m at their beck and call, that I serve at their pleasure, when I’m the money-making commodity. Even when I very carefully explain exactly how they should manage the schedule, can they figure it out? I’m paying a PA, a very overqualified PA to schedule

for me, my clinics and my surgeries, and the hospital brings in this high school graduate who took a six-week course and gives her authority over *my* schedule...”

Lauren listened absently and fixed him a bourbon, watered, because they had to go to that fund-raiser tonight. She poured herself a glass of burgundy. This was her job, to listen and let him rant, to nod and occasionally say, *That must make you so angry*. While she did that, he paced or sat at the breakfast bar and she unwrapped some cheese and crackers and grapes for him to snack on.

But while all this was going on she was thinking about the man with the easy smile, the tiny bit of gray, the dark blue eyes. And she fantasized how nice it would be to have someone come home and not be a complete asshole.

“We might think about getting ready for the dinner,” she said. “I’d like to look at the auction items.”

“I know, I know,” he said. “I bought a table. We shouldn’t be too late.”

Of course people would expect him to be late, to rush in at the last minute. “I’m ready. Do you need a shower?”

“I’ll be down in five minutes,” he said, leaving and taking his bourbon with him.

“Happy anniversary,” she said to his departing back.

“Hmph,” he said, giving a dismissive wave of his hand. “Nice anniversary,” he grumbled. “My schedule is all fucked up.”

The charity event was for the local Andrew Emerson Foundation supporting underprivileged children. They came to be known as Andy’s kids. Tonight’s event would raise money to provide scholarships for the children of fallen heroes. Professional athletes, businesses, the Chamber of Commerce, hospitals, veterans’ groups and unions from San Francisco and

Oakland supported the charity with fund-raising events such as this dinner and auction. Andy Emerson was a billionaire software developer in San Francisco; he was politically influential and admired by people like Brad. Brad never missed an event and claimed Andy as a friend. Brad was a fixture at the golf tournaments and donated generously. The children of military men and women and first responders disabled or killed in the line of duty could apply for the scholarships generated tonight. To be fair, Lauren had a great deal of respect for the foundation and all that it provided. She also happened to like Andy and Sylvie Emerson, though she was not so presumptuous as to claim them as friends. This event was a very popular, well-organized dinner that would raise tens of thousands of dollars.

Brad and Lauren attended this and many other similar events; Brad's office and clinic staff were invited and he usually paid for a table. This was one of the few times during the year that Lauren visited with Brad's colleagues. And while Brad might be primarily fond of Andy's assets, Lauren thought the seventy-five-year-old Emerson and his wife of almost fifty years, Sylvie, were very nice people. It's not as though Brad and Lauren were invited over to dinner or out for a spin on the yacht—the Emersons were very busy, involved people. However, it was not unusual for Brad to get a call from some member of the Emerson family or a family friend with questions about an upcoming medical procedure or maybe looking for a recommendation of a good doctor.

Just as she was thinking about them, Sylvie Emerson broke away from the men she was chatting with and moved over to Lauren. She gave her one of those cheek presses. "I'm so happy to see you," Sylvie said. "I think it's been a year."

"I saw you at Christmastime in the city," Lauren reminded

her. “You’re looking wonderful, Sylvie. I don’t know how you do it.”

“Thank you. It took a lot of paste and paint. But you’re aglow. How are the girls?”

“Thriving. Lacey is doing her post-grad study at Stanford so we see her fairly often. Cassidy graduates in about six weeks.”

“UC Berkeley, isn’t it?” Sylvie asked. “What’s her field?”

Lauren chuckled. “Pre-law. She’s scored beautifully on the LSAT and is bound for Harvard.”

“Oh my God. Are you thrilled for her?”

“I don’t know yet,” Lauren said. “Don’t you have to be a real tiger to take on law? Cassie seems so gentle-natured to me.”

Sylvie patted her arm. “There is a special place within the legal system for someone like her. I don’t know where, but she’ll find it. And no one chose medicine?”

Lauren shook her head. “I’m a little surprised about that, since I have a science major as well. Though it’s been so long ago now that—”

She was distracted by a man who had been pressing his way through the crowd with two drinks and suddenly stopped. “Lauren?” he said. Then he smiled and those dark blue eyes twinkled. “I’ll be damned.”

“Beau?” she asked. “What in the world are you doing here?”

“Same as you, I suppose,” he said. Then he looked at Sylvie and said, “Hi, I’m Beau Magellan. I just recently ran into Lauren at church.”

Lauren laughed at that. “Not exactly, but close enough. Beau, this is Sylvie Emerson, your hostess tonight.”

“Oh!” he said, sloshing the drinks. “Oh jeez,” he mumbled. Finally, laughing, Lauren took his drinks so he could shake

Sylvie's hand...after wiping his hands on his trousers. "It's a pleasure, Mrs. Emerson. I'm personally indebted to you!"

"How so, Mr. Magellan?"

"My sons have a friend whose dad was killed on the job, Oakland police, and she received a scholarship. Now I'm a big supporter of the cause."

"Magellan," Sylvie said. "Why does that sound familiar?"

"I have no idea," he said, chuckling. "I'm sure our paths wouldn't have crossed. Magellan Design is my company. It's not a big company..."

She snapped her fingers. "You designed a rooftop garden for my friend, Lois Brumfield in Sausalito!"

He beamed. "I did. I'm very proud of that, too—it's incredible."

Sylvie looked at Lauren. "The Brumfields are getting up there... Aren't we all... And they have a single-story home in Sausalito. They didn't have any interest in a two-story anything, their knees are giving out. So they put the garden on the roof! And they have a lift! They sit up there any evening the weather will allow. It's gorgeous! They have gardeners tend their roof!" Sylvie laughed. "They have a patio on the ground floor as well, nice pool and all that. But that rooftop garden is like their secret space. And the house is angled just right so it's private. From there they have an amazing view."

"There's a hot tub," Beau said. "And a few potted trees in just the right places."

"Really, if the Brumfields had more friends, you'd be famous!"

"They have you," Beau said.

"Oh, I've known Lois since I was in college. She's outlasted most of my family!" Then she looked at Lauren. "Church?"

Lauren laughed. She put Beau's drinks on the table she stood beside. "I stopped to see the gardens at Divine Re-

deemer Catholic Church—they're beautiful. And they're right on my way home. Beau was replacing a few plants. I thought he was the groundskeeper." She made a face at him.

"I love the grounds and I've known the priest there for a long time," Beau said. "I gave them an updated design and got them a discount on plants."

"Do you have a card, Mr. Magellan?" Sylvie asked.

"I do," he said. He pulled one out of his inside jacket pocket. "And please, call me Beau."

"Thank you," she said, sliding it into her slender purse. "And of course, I'm Sylvie. Lauren, the weather is getting nice. If I give you a call, will you come to my house, have lunch in my garden? Just you and me?"

"I would love that," she said. "Please do call! I'll bring you a plant!"

"I'll call. Very nice meeting you, Beau. Excuse me please. I have to try to say hello to people."

And that fast she was gone.

Lauren looked at Beau. "What am I going to do with you? Met me at church, did you?"

"In a manner of speaking," he said. "Seeing you here is even more startling."

"We're big supporters," she said. "See that bald guy over there? With Andy? My husband."

"Hm," he said. "He's friends with the host? Andy Emerson?"

"He believes so," she said. "Like I said, big supporter. Do you play golf?"

"I know how," Beau said. "I don't know that you could say I play, in all honesty."

"That's right," she said, laughing. "You read psychology. And fish. And garden." She glanced at the drinks. "Should you get those drinks back to your table?"

“They weren’t dehydrated last time I looked. They’re signing up for auction items.”

“It’s possible we have friends in common,” she said. “My brother-in-law is an Oakland cop. I remember a fatality a couple of years ago.”

“Roger Stanton,” Beau said. “Did you know him?”

She shook her head. “Did you know him?”

“No, but the boys know the kids. You’ll have to ask your brother-in-law...”

“Oh, Chip knew him. Even though it’s a big department, they’re all friends. It was heartbreaking. I’m so glad his daughter is a recipient.” She nodded toward the drinks. “You should probably get those drinks back to your wife...”

He shook his head. “She’s not here tonight. I brought my boys, my brother and sister-in-law and a friend.”

“But not your wife?” she asked.

“Pamela finds this sort of thing boring and the friend I brought is a guy. But I don’t find things like this boring. So tell me, what are you doing Tuesday?”

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m going to check on the plants, maybe hoe around a little bit. H-O-E,” he specified, making her laugh. “I’m going to put some bunny deterrent around. See how things are doing. I like the plants to get a strong hold before summer. Do you think you’ll want to be uplifted by flowers?”

“You’re coming on to a married woman,” she said.

“I apologize! I don’t want to make you uncomfortable. I’ll get out of your space,” he said, picking up the drinks.

“I might check out the plants,” she said. “Now that I’m pretty sure you’re not a stalker or serial killer.”

“Oh Jesus, do I give off that vibe?” he asked, sloshing the drinks over his hands again. “I’m going to have to work on my delivery!”

“You sure don’t give off the waiter vibe,” she said, lifting a napkin from the table to assist him.

Just then, Brad was at her side. “We’re down in front, Lauren. Don’t make me come looking for you.”

“I know. Brad, this is Beau Magellan, a landscape designer. A friend of Sylvie’s.”

Brad’s black eyebrows shot up. “Oh? Maybe we’ll have you take a look at ours.” He put out a hand to shake, once he heard there was an Emerson connection, but Beau’s hands were full of drinks. They were wet besides.

“Oh. Sorry,” Beau said, lifting his handfuls clumsily.

“Okay,” Brad said with a laugh. “Another time. I’ll save you a seat,” he said to Lauren.

“Sure. Be right there.” She looked back at Beau, a mischievous smile playing at her lips.

“You’re a liar, Lauren,” Beau said.

“I’m sorry.” She laughed. “It was irresistible. I hope we run into each other again, Beau. Now if there’s anything left in those glasses, get them to your table.”

CHAPTER TWO

Lauren knew she'd be going to the church gardens on Tuesday after work even though she thought it could be foolhardy. Becoming attracted to a man was not a part of her plan. In fact, it could be a major inconvenience. But she liked him. She liked that he read a lot and wanted to talk about what he'd read. She enjoyed how flustered he was meeting Sylvie. She adored the way he sloshed the drinks he carried. And it moved her that he was there to support a scholarship recipient who'd lost her father.

Of course he was there. She saw his back moving through the plants and shrubs. He was pulling off dead leaves and dried flowers. And putting them in his pocket!

She noticed there were some things on the bench—the one she had occupied the last time. A bag containing something

and two Starbucks cups. It made her smile. He shouldn't have known that Starbucks would make her happy.

She cleared her throat. He turned toward her with a smile, shoving a handful of dead leaves and buds in his pocket.

"Hi," he said. "I brought you a mocha with whipped cream."

Perfect! Of course. "That's very thoughtful," she said, just standing there, feeling awkward.

"And something else," he said, lifting the bag.

"Oh, why did you do that? You shouldn't be giving me things. You should sit and relax and enjoy the flowers. And you were tidying up."

"I'm always grooming plants. Maybe it's a nervous habit." He pulled a handful of dried leaves and small sticks from his pocket, dumping them in the trash can. He handed her the bag. Inside was a book. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*.

"This is great!" she said. "I actually went looking for this book! But I didn't ask for it, just looked in the psychology section."

"I had to find it at the used bookstore..."

"Did it change your life?"

"No, but it was enlightening."

She sat down on the bench, looking through the book. He handed her a coffee and stood at the other end of the bench. "I guess it didn't make your wife any happier," she said.

"No," he answered with a laugh. "She has always wanted something more. Something else. Listen, full disclosure, my wife and I are separated. We've been living apart for six months. We're getting divorced."

"Ah," Lauren said. "And you're getting back in the game."

He looked stricken. "No! I mean, that has nothing to do with you! I'm not looking for anything. You're a complete

surprise. I might've done this even if—" He shook his head, looking embarrassed. "You just seem like a very nice person, that's all. And you complimented my flowers. This divorce—it's long overdue. It's not our first separation. And no, I haven't been known to mess around on the side. I have a couple of sons. Stepsons, actually. I wanted to keep their lives stable for as long as possible. They're seventeen and twenty. I think they understand we should be divorced and that I'll always have a home for them. If they don't know they can count on me by now, they never will. I'm not going anywhere."

"And their mother?" she asked.

"She loves them, of course," he said. "Maybe because they're boys, they're closer to me. Or maybe it's because their mother is hard to please."

"Oh God," she said. "It is not a good thing that we have this in common."

"You're separated?"

"Not yet," she said, hesitantly. "I have a difficult situation. I'm not ready to talk about it. But can you tell me about yours? Unless it's too..." She shrugged.

He settled in, sitting on the bench with his coffee. "Okay, I'll give you the short version. I've been married twelve years. We lived together first. The boys were four and seven when we met. They have two different fathers. Disinterested fathers. Pamela wasn't married to either of them. They hardly came around and when they did, they took only their son, not his brother. That just didn't make any sense to me. They're adults. Don't they realize little boys would be upset by that? Feel left out? Have self-confidence issues? So if I knew one or the other was coming to get his son I tried to have something planned for the one left behind. It didn't take much—just a little extra time to throw the ball around or play a video game. Just attention, that's all."

“That’s so...*nice*,” she said.

“No it’s not,” he said, almost irritably. “It’s what an adult should do. It just makes sense. Doesn’t it?”

“What did their mother say? About one son being left behind?”

“She was in conflict with their fathers over lots of things, so it was one more thing. But that didn’t matter to me. Mike and Drew were little kids. They had enough trouble, you know? The school was saying Drew had learning disabilities and they tried to pin ADHD on Mike because he was restless. He was restless because he was a boy with a lot of energy who was kind of bored with school. Pamela would get mad, which didn’t seem to resolve anything so I started going to some of these meetings at the school with her and we worked out programs for them. Pretty soon I was going to the meetings alone.” He stopped and ran a hand around the back of his neck. “On our good days, she was very grateful I was willing to take them on. On our bad days she accused me of thinking I was their father and she reminded me I had no authority.”

“I’m sorry,” Lauren said.

“Drew graduates with honors in a few weeks,” he said with a smile. “So much for his learning disability. Mike’s in college with a nice GPA. He’s got a great girlfriend, plays baseball, has lots of friends. Wants to be an architect,” he added with a proud but shy smile.

“When did you know?” she asked. He gave her a perplexed look. “When did you know the marriage wouldn’t last?”

“Almost right away,” he said. “Within a couple of years. But I wasn’t giving up. The guys... They might have two different fathers but they were going to have one stepfather. We did fine. We managed. I might still be managing but Pamela wanted to leave and I didn’t put up a fight. At all.”

He laughed uncomfortably. “Then she wanted to come back and I said, no.”

“I guess you’re done,” Lauren said.

“My mother says I’m a peacekeeper. She didn’t consider it a compliment.”

“Shame on her,” Lauren said. “We could use a little more compromise and cooperation in this world!”

“Spoken like a true peacekeeper,” he said. “As military ordinance, a Peacekeeper is a land-based ICBM. A nuclear missile. Maybe all those people who take us for granted should look out.”

“Indeed,” she said, smiling in spite of herself.

Then they both burst into laughter.

“How long have you been friends with Sylvie Emerson?” Beau asked.

“I’m not so sure we’re really friends,” she said. “We know each other because of our husbands. I’m sure we like each other. We run into each other at fund-raisers and social events. We’re friendly, that’s all. My husband served on the foundation board of directors for a few years and got cozy with a lot of Andy’s friends. It’s not that he’s passionate about the cause. He’s passionate about being connected and about Andy’s billions and influence, though what he hopes to do with either is beyond me. That’s why I run into Sylvie a lot—Brad hangs close. He would deny that, by the way. I’ll be surprised if she calls me for that lunch date—she’s very busy. But let me tell you something. What I know of the Emersons is they’re both sincerely good, generous people. Sylvie has mentioned that of all the work their foundation is able to do, she’s partial to the scholarship fund. She and her husband might not have identical priorities, I’m not well acquainted with Andy, but Sylvie has told me more than once—we have to feed and

educate the next generation, that's the only way we leave the world better than we found it."

"I wonder if they even realize how great a gift that is—giving an education. I don't know about you, but my family wasn't exactly fixed to send me to college."

"Nor was mine," she said. "I grew up poor."

"What's poor?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I have a younger sister, Beth. Three years younger. When she was a baby our father went out for the proverbial pack of cigarettes and never came home. My mom worked two jobs the whole time we were growing up. My grandparents were alive and lived nearby, thank God. They helped. They watched us so she could work and probably chipped in when rent was late or the car broke down."

He smiled. "I have a large extended family. The six of us—my mom, dad, brother, two sisters and I lived in an old garage my parents converted into a small house. My mom still lives in that house, but I don't know how long that's going to last—she's getting a little feeble. My dad was a janitor, my mom served lunch at the junior high and cleaned houses. We got jobs as soon as we were old enough. But my folks, under-educated themselves, pushed us to get decent grades even though they couldn't help us with homework. We did our best. We might've been competing with the cousins a little bit."

"Nothing like a little healthy competition," she said. "Did you know you were poor?"

"Sure, to some extent. But we had a big family on that land. A couple of aunts and uncles, grandparents, cousins. Sometimes it got crowded. But if the heat went out in winter there were plenty of people to keep warm with. Heat in summer—no relief." He drank a little of his coffee. "We didn't have any extras, but it wasn't a bad way to grow up."

Thing about it was we might've been poor but we were never poor alone."

"Can I ask you a personal question?"

"You can always ask, Lauren..."

"How do you think your life's going to change, getting divorced? Does this begin a whole new adventure of some kind?"

"Adventure?" he asked. "God no. My life doesn't have to change. I love my life today. I have work that makes people happy, good friends, amazing family. I have enough predictability every day so that it's not very often that something throws me off balance. I sleep well. My blood pressure is good. I don't know if I could have a better life. I just don't want it to change *back*."

She was quiet for a long moment. Finally she said, "Life must have been difficult... Before..."

"That's a hard question," he said. "Difficult? There were days I thought it was hard. Unbearable, really. But those days passed. What didn't pass was irritation. Unbalance. Never knowing what would be coming at you today. But ask anyone—you're not allowed to bail out because your wife has mood swings. Or because she yelled and now and then threw a glass at me. Hey, she missed, and cleaned up the shattered glass. But she wasn't a drunk, she never came at me with a knife, didn't sleep around...not counting those separations, when the excuse was that we were separated. According to the rule book, if you're able to work it out..." He shrugged. "So I stopped asking myself if I could live like this because I *could*, but that was the problem. I started asking myself if I *wanted* to live my life like that. And the answer was no. Fortunately for me, Pamela needed a little time to think again, to determine what she wanted from life. She needed another separation.

Our fourth in a thirteen-year relationship. It was the perfect time for me to say, me, too.” He chuckled. “Her separation was very short after hearing that. Mine was not. I decided I was happier on my own. I think I could be a happy old bachelor.” He grinned. “I wouldn’t have a boring or lonely day in my life. I think the boys might look in on me sometimes, make sure I haven’t broken a hip.”

“How old are you?” she asked.

“Forty-five,” he said.

She snorted. “I don’t think you have to worry about that broken hip for a while yet.”

“I’m just saying, my life right now is fine. More fine than it was wondering which Pamela was coming home to dinner. But being sick of living with a volatile, angry, unpredictable person is not moral grounds for divorce. For better or worse, right?”

Lauren identified with so much of what he said but her first thought was, it’s so much easier for men. They’re not expected to have to put up with moody, angry women but women are supposed to put up with difficult men. She really wanted to let loose and complain about what it was like to live with a controlling, angry man. A man who could keep an argument going for *days*. A man who cut the line of people waiting to purchase movie tickets, loudly accused maître d’s of losing the reservation he never made, shortchanged maintenance workers on their bills because he assumed they wouldn’t dare come after him because they were undocumented or spoke poor English. Once while they were vacationing in Turks and Caicos he found some lounge chairs by the pool that were desirable, but they had towels on them—someone had already claimed them. There were a couple of pool toys as well, indicating they belonged to children. He threw the towels and toys on the ground beside the chairs, claimed the chairs for

himself and his family and when a young man with two small children appeared five minutes later, he briskly told him, “You can’t save chairs with towels. You have to be using them.”

Brad was a bully who thought he was better than everyone else.

But Lauren didn’t say anything to Beau. Unless people really knew Brad, they would never understand. So she changed the subject and asked Beau to tell her about rooftop gardens.

“My specialty,” he said happily.

After an hour of pleasant conversation she decided she’d better leave. He asked if he’d be seeing her the following Tuesday and she said, “Very doubtful. This isn’t a good idea.”

He chuckled softly. “Oh. I wouldn’t want to put you in an uncomfortable position,” he said. “You didn’t say it but I already know. You’re in the same spot as me. Maybe not identical, but close enough. I sympathize. And if you want someone to talk to you know how to find me.”

She nodded sadly. Of course he didn’t know how to find her. And she didn’t tell him.

Beth Shaughnessy was spending her Sunday cleaning up the remnants of the party she and her husband Chip had thrown the night before. Chip had a new smoker and had treated many of their friends to a barbecue. While she had made good progress in the kitchen and great room, the patio and grill were still a disaster. Chip, whose given name was Michael, pleaded a slight hangover and promised to get out there with the boys to clean up after they watched a little of the US Open on the big screen in his den. The last time she looked in on them, Chip was flipping between basketball and golf and women’s beach volleyball.

When Beth’s sister, Lauren, had called earlier and asked if she could get away for lunch, Beth had said she had chores.

Lauren said she'd go to the gym for a while then head over to Beth's. She needed to talk.

When Lauren most needed Beth and the phone wasn't good enough, Beth suspected marital angst. When you were married to Brad Delaney, *angst* was the kindest word one could apply. It took several deep breaths for Beth to remind herself to be careful what she said. The only serious and alienating fight the sisters had ever had was over Beth's low opinion of Brad and her sister's marriage. Well, sort of. It was more Beth's strong opinion that Lauren should get out, no matter what it took. Yet Lauren had stayed on. And on. And on.

Beth had been only twenty when Lauren and Brad were engaged to be married. At first she thought Brad handsome and sexy, but soon her impression of him changed. She heard and saw things that just weren't right. More than once, she'd heard Brad call Lauren an idiot. She saw him squeeze her hand so tightly it caused Lauren to wince and pull away. She wasn't sure exactly what was wrong but she knew it wasn't right. Even at her tender, inexperienced age Beth had said, "Lauren, what are you doing?"

"I'm marrying a handsome and successful doctor!" Lauren had said, beaming with joy. Lauren was seeing all those things they'd never had growing up—financial security, a beautiful and spacious home, cars that didn't break down, dining out, vacations... But behind the brightness of her eyes, something else lurked. And of course they hadn't even gotten through the wedding without tears of anguish and serious doubts. As anyone close to the couple could see, Brad, ten years older than Lauren, was temperamental, self-centered, grumpy and an egomaniac. He had a widowed mother, Adele, who was just an older version of her son. Adele was a controlling and temperamental sourpuss who had very firm ideas about what exactly was good enough for her entitled only child. Ex-

cept Adele didn't know how to be charming. While Lauren and Beth had grown up in relative poverty with their single mother, Honey Verona, Brad had grown up well-to-do.

Right before the wedding Honey said, "Lauren, don't do it. You must see he won't even try to make you happy."

"But everything is planned and his mother paid for it all!" Lauren protested.

"It doesn't matter," Honey said. "You can walk away. Let them sue us."

Lauren almost didn't marry him. It was a last-minute melodramatic moment when she said, "I can't. I'm just not sure." Beth almost threw a party. But then she and the other bridesmaids were banished from the room while Brad's mother took over, having a heart-to-heart with Lauren. Dame Delaney was a force to be reckoned with...

And the wedding proceeded.

Beth and Lauren were nothing alike and yet they were vital to each other. Beth was a professional photographer. She did a lot of weddings, anniversaries, parties, even funerals. She also shot bridges, fields, wildlife, flowers, children, elderly people, beaches, sunsets... Beth was an artist. But she photographed a lot of people and she had learned to recognize who they were in their eyes, their expressions, their body language, their smiles or frowns. She could read people.

She had read Brad right. He was an asshole.

Lauren was more scientific. More pragmatic. A plotter and planner.

Beth had been married to Chip for sixteen years. They weren't able to produce children on their own so they had adopted a couple. Ravon was thirteen; they'd had him since he was four. Stefano was nine; they'd had him since he was two. Both came through the foster care system. Chip was a cop and big-time sports enthusiast, particularly golf. He

taught the boys to play and the three of them were doing something that involved a ball every free second. Beth lived in a kind of rough-and-tumble house with a husband in a high-risk profession; she was always fighting that testosterone poisoning that created messes wherever it passed.

But Beth was not wired to take the kind of shit Lauren put up with. She rode the men in her family hard, insisting they pitch in and help, demanding courteous behavior. And she was just a little thing. A little thing who could haul forty pounds of camera equipment everywhere she went. Ravon was already taller than her, but that hadn't made her meek at all. She could bring all three men in her house to their knees with one killer stare.

Lauren showed up looking sleek and rich in her workout clothes, her thick chestnut hair pulled back in a ponytail. Lauren didn't ever seem to sweat, either. She sat at Beth's breakfast bar with a bottle of water while Beth dried the last of the serving platters. "How was your party?" Lauren asked.

"Loud," Beth said. "Bunch of cops and their spouses and kids. All the usual suspects. They stayed too late and disturbed the neighbors. It was great, in other words."

"We went to a cocktail party for a retiring doctor. I overheard Brad tell a couple of men he had to take the management of the finances away from me before I ran us into the poorhouse. Now he lets me keep track of my little paycheck while he manages the rest." She sighed. "I don't recall ever being in charge of the finances."

"I was just about to ask when you were in charge of the money..." Beth wasn't surprised by this mean little dig from her brother-in-law. "If he poked at me like that, he'd pull back a bloody stump," Beth said.

"He doesn't realize this, but he doesn't have much longer as my jailer. I just don't want to stress Cassie. I've put up with

him for twenty-four years, I can put up with him a few more weeks. Get Cassie out of college.”

The sound from the den erupted in a roar—someone made a basket, goal, or hole in one and Beth’s men yelled. “I wouldn’t have been married to him long enough to get my babies out of nappies, much less college,” Beth said.

“They can’t hear us, can they?” Lauren asked.

“They couldn’t hear us if we were talking right into their dense male faces,” Beth said.

“I put a deposit on a rental property that will be available July 1. I’m going to talk to the girls and move out. I’ve scheduled my vacation for after Cassie graduates and the first week of July. I suppose it will be sweltering.”

Beth’s mouth hung open for a moment. “This isn’t the first time you’ve said this,” Beth said.

“It’s the first time I’ve rented something,” Lauren said. “I’ve been to the lawyer, planned this out carefully. Listen, I’m sorry you’ve had to put up with me and my rotten marriage, my vacillating, my lack of courage and my mean husband. I’m a load and I know it. And now I need a favor.”

“You know you’re welcome here,” Beth said.

“That’s not what I need. I’m going to pack up some boxes and suitcases. I also have to buy a few things—new linens, some new kitchenware, that sort of thing. I need a place to store it. Someplace no one will notice.”

“The guest room,” Beth said. “We’ll close the door. Can I say one small thing? Can I say, please God, please really do it this time! There’s still time for you to have a life.”

“I’m going to do it,” Lauren said.

Beth gave a heavy sigh. In spite of all the bad things, Brad and Lauren had also been generous. He’d loaned them twenty-five thousand dollars to try in-vitro fertilization; he’d loaned them another twenty-five grand to build onto their

house to make room for the boys. He and Lauren stepped up when Beth and Chip needed an expensive tutor for Stefano because he had a learning disability. Of course, Beth had long suspected Brad liked giving people loans they would take a long time to repay because it gave him power over them.

“Honey would be ecstatic,” Lauren said. And immediately her eyes filled with tears.

They’d lost their mother two years ago. She’d been killed in a car accident; a truck driver had a medical episode, lost control of his huge truck and struck three vehicles, killing three people. Honey had never known what hit her—her death was instant, thank God.

“I miss her so much,” Beth said. “It’s just the two of us. I’m there for you. You’re there for me—let’s remember that. You’ve been to this lawyer how many times?” Beth asked.

“Leaving a man like Brad takes very careful planning,” Lauren said.

“Are you afraid of him?”

“Of course. Not afraid he’ll physically hurt me. He never does that...”

“A pinch here, a squeeze there...” Beth said, inexplicably rewashing a perfectly clean serving tray.

“He calls it affection gone a bit rambunctious,” Lauren said.

“Because he’s a liar. An experienced gaslighter.”

Lauren sucked in her breath.

“All right, all right,” Beth said. “I’ll try to say nothing and just hope for the best.”

“Once Cassie has graduated, there’s really nothing more to hold me back.”

Beth looked into her sister’s beautiful lavender eyes. Lauren looked like pure perfection. She was elegant, smart, nurturing, compassionate, talented in so many ways, yet somehow held captive by an arrogant asshole. But she wouldn’t call him

that. Putting Lauren on the defensive might prevent her from freeing herself. Why her brilliant, loving, educated sister had chosen Brad eluded her. Why she stayed with him had confused her even more.

She had been young. She'd had stars and Wolf appliances in her eyes.

"Okay, tell me what you rented," Beth said.

"It's small and quaint, a Victorian, on a street that almost looks like the Seven Sisters in San Francisco," she said, keeping her voice down. "Three bedrooms and a loft, a long porch and deep yard on a lovely old street in Alameda. The owner lived a long and happy life there, building a lovely garden. There are big, healthy trees. Her son is keeping the house as a rental so it's being remodeled—new flooring, patching, texturing and painting the walls, new kitchen and bathroom cabinets, new appliances. I'm signing a one-year lease with an option to have first right of refusal if he decides to sell. He let me have some input on the materials... Or, let's say, I told him I did videos for Merriweather and he assumed I was a great homemaker..."

"You are," Beth confirmed.

As Lauren described the house, she became animated and Beth had hope for the first time in a long time. Only her rich sister would call a Victorian on the island of Alameda "quaint." It was probably a million-dollar property.

They talked about the house, the fact that Lauren could get back and forth to work more easily, that she'd have a say in how the yard looked, that it would be homey and all hers. She would have room for the girls when they visited. She hoped they would but it wouldn't surprise her to find they preferred their rooms at her current house. "The most important thing is that they know both their mother and father love them," Lauren said. And then she shuddered.

“It’s not going to be easy,” Beth said.

“I know,” Lauren said in a shaky breath. “I plan to have a big celebration for Cassie’s graduation. Once we’ve all come down from that, I’m going to help Cassie move to Boston. Then I’ll talk to the girls. One at a time. Then I’m going to tell Brad. I would tell Brad first but once I do, I have to leave. If things don’t fall into place like I plan—if one of the girls tells him before I can, or something—I might have to impose on you. I can’t really stay there after I make my intentions clear. Because...”

“Because he will be horrible,” Beth said, finishing for her.

They had done this before. But, in the end, Lauren had always stayed. Beth knew about everything—the suspected affairs, the STD, the separate bedrooms. No matter how bad things got, Lauren always tried to make the best of it for the sake of her daughters.

“I’ll help you in any way you ask,” Beth said. “What makes you think you’ll really go through with it this time?”

“If I don’t, I might as well resign myself to living out my life with a mean, cantankerous old man who thinks he’s smarter than God.”

“Pretty soon, that will be the only option,” Beth said.

Lauren ignored her or at least pretended to. “So, we’ll celebrate Cassie’s graduation and when my rental is available I’ll tell them. Cassie will be in Boston for the next three years at least. Lacey has her apartment in Menlo Park. Once I’ve dealt with them, I’ll face Brad.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t do that alone...”

“I’ve worked this out with the lawyer,” Lauren said. “She has an investigator who is willing to stand by.” Then Lauren shuddered again.

Beth hoped her sister would finally do it. Beth was terrified her sister would finally do it. This could get ugly.

Another loud cheer erupted from the den.

Beth and Lauren talked for a while longer. Every once in a while Beth would glance through the glass patio doors to the chaos outside—wet towels on the ground, various men's shoes, the greasy grill, plastic glasses, trash cans that were used for refuse, not all of which hit the mark. Lauren's surroundings would never be in such disarray. Brad would have a fit.

Beth's marriage wasn't perfect. There is stress in the lives of a cop's family; there is challenge in all relationships. She and Chip had money issues, kid problems—both of her sons were multiracial and hitting that puberty stage. Sometimes it seemed like a constant struggle. But they were happy.

But Lauren was married to an impossible jerk. Sad to say, but that trumped everything. How do you resolve yourself to life with a guy like that? No, he didn't beat her but he did twist an arm here, squeeze too hard there. No, he didn't get drunk every week. He'd had at least a couple of flings, but he was so repentant he even bought jewelry and took the whole family on trips so amazing the girls hoped he'd have another one. He treated people badly, told lies, believed he deserved slightly more consideration and a slightly bigger cut than anyone else, bullied his wife, put her down. And...he thought he was always right, no matter what. How do you explain that to your children?

When Lauren left Beth wandered into the den. Oh God, she should never have allowed them to put furniture in here. Chip was stretched out on the couch, Ravon's legs were hanging off the end of the loveseat. Stefano was lying on the floor with his feet up on the coffee table. It looked like a frat house. Morty, their old chocolate Lab, had his head resting on Stefano's belly. She was going to have to spray the room down with Febreze.

Something happened on the TV and all of a sudden everyone moved and cheered.

“Hey,” she said. “Why does this den smell like the inside of a tennis shoe?”

“This is not a den,” Chip said indignantly. “This is a man cave!”

“I beg your pardon,” Beth said. “It’s pretty gamey in here. Isn’t it a little early in the year for the Open? Isn’t that a June event?”

“This is an old one,” Chip said. “Ten years old. It’s a replay.”

She was completely stunned for a second. “You have *got* to be kidding me! My backyard looks like a war zone and you’re in here smelling up the place and watching a ten-year-old sporting event? Come on—get out there and clean up from last night before the sun starts to go down! I mean it!”

The boys dragged themselves to their feet, moaning and groaning, their lazy Sunday afternoon ruined. Chip got up, stretched and dropped an arm around her shoulders. “Thanks, babe. I needed a little nap.”

“Hmph,” she said.

“I heard Lauren’s voice.”

“Yeah, she was here.”

“She having problems?” he asked. “With Brad?”

“Why would you ask that?” Beth asked.

“Because you’re all prickly.”

“Do we have a perfect marriage?” she asked, looking up at him. Beth was five foot three and Chip was a towering six foot three.

He grinned. “I doubt it. But close. Because your wish is my command.”

“Yeah, right. After four hours in front of a ten-year-old golf tournament.”

THE VIEW FROM ALAMEDA ISLAND

“But see how much nicer I am now?” he asked. He kissed her forehead. “You can’t do anything about Lauren and Brad.”

“Promise not to say a word. She’s focused on Cassie’s graduation for right now.”

“Beth, she’s never going to do anything, you know that.”

But Beth was thinking, this time she might. And although it made her feel sad and guilty, she desperately hoped her sister would really leave Brad.

CHAPTER THREE

Beau carried a forty-pound bag of fertilizer on each shoulder as he walked along the trail of patio stones that led to the vegetable garden. There he found Tim working on building a nice large pile of weeds. “I thought I might find you here,” Beau said. “I brought you a present.” He dropped one bag on the ground and lowered the other. “What are you up to?”

“Just hoeing around,” the priest said.

“You’re hilarious.”

“I know. I haven’t seen you in a couple of weeks,” Tim said. Then he stepped over his plants and gave Beau a firm handshake that brought them shoulder to shoulder. “How’s life?”

“Manageable, but busy,” Beau said, returning the man hug. Tim and Beau had known each other since they were

about ten. To say they took different paths in life would be an understatement.

“But is life any good?” Tim pushed.

“Lots of it is,” Beau said. “Work is excellent. I’m almost too busy. Things are quiet at home. I watch sports all night.”

“I guess the divorce is proceeding,” Tim said.

He shrugged. “It’s a little stalled. Pamela wanted to try counseling. I thought it was a waste of time that also cost money. But then Michael asked me why I wouldn’t give it a shot.” He looked down, shaking his head. “I don’t know why Michael gets himself into this—he’s twenty, a sophomore, has a steady relationship...”

“He’s trying to put his life together—the life he wants to have. He doesn’t want the one you and Pamela have. He wants to know how that works.” Tim sank to one knee and stabbed the bag of fertilizer, ripping it open, releasing the rank smell.

“You almost sound like you know anything at all about marriage, *Father*,” Beau said.

“I’m well trained,” Tim shot back.

“Michael just needs to pay attention to the women he lets into his life, make sure there aren’t any red flags. Maybe he should be in counseling. Just for his future.”

“Not a bad idea,” the priest agreed. “Have you told him the truth, Beau? That you stayed for them?”

“I might’ve suggested that,” Beau said, sticking a shovel in the fertilizer and scooping out a big load, sprinkling it down the rows. “I told the counselor I’m there in body only. I don’t want to fix it. I want to end it. Our mission in counseling should be to help Pamela let go. So she sobbed for an hour, babbling excuses and trying to explain her change of heart. And there was begging. My head hurt for two days. It’s torture.”

“Stop going,” Tim said. He sat back on his heels. “Seri-

ously, stop going. You are the worst victim sometimes. You can't do this for her. It was her choice, you gave her many last chances. She needs counseling but not marriage counseling."

"Well damn," Beau said. "What about the sanctity of marriage and all that?"

"Everything has an expiration date, my brother," Tim replied. "Really, I'm in the wrong order. I should be with the Jesuits. I'm living in this century. I can't tell perfectly miserable people trapped in abusive and unholy relationships to stick it out just because the church prefers it that way and we promised to turn the other cheek and all that. I wouldn't have lasted a year with Pamela."

Beau grinned. "If the diocese ever finds out about you, you're history."

"Eh," he grunted. He stood and started spreading the fertilizer with his hoe. "How about Drew?"

"Drew's good. Graduating in a couple of weeks. I'm having a party for him—mostly his friends and my family. Will you come?"

"Of course, as long as no one dies or gets married."

"Pamela is trying to get involved, combining families, throw in an ex who may or may not show up. I'm expecting Drew will get a card with some money in it from his dad—anywhere from twenty to a hundred, depending on his guilt. It's so awkward, my family and I'm sure her family know the circumstances but we have to make nice, act like we're at least getting along, look as if we're not getting divorced. I talked to Drew about all the subterfuge and he said, 'No biggie. Let her do it. Then we're done until I get married, which I promise you will be many years from now. Between now and then, I'm probably not going to make her unhappy.' You gotta love that kid. Everything rolls off his back."

“Or it seems to,” Tim said. “Keep an eye on that. Still waters...”

“We spend a lot of time together,” Beau said. “Just me and Drew these days. I think Drew has forgotten we have Michael’s graduation in a year...”

“Things will be better by then. What did you tell the counselor?”

“I told her we’ve been separated four times, Pamela has had other relationships during the separations and when we’re together she’s almost always unhappy and we argue too much. She pokes at me until I poke back, so sometimes I leave the house or go in the garage or detail the truck. I told her I don’t want to do that anymore. And of course she asked if we fixed our relationship so it wasn’t like that, was I in? And I said, I’m sorry, not anymore.” He dug out a shovelful of fertilizer. “I’d like to move on so my friends and family aren’t constantly forced to ask me where we are now.”

Tim stopped moving his hoe. “I’m sorry, Beau,” he said.

“Aw, not you, Tim. I don’t see enough of you for you to get on my nerves. That’s a problem, by the way. I’d like to see enough of you for you to get on my nerves.”

Tim grinned. “Basketball game Thursday night.”

“Can I bring a ringer?”

“Absolutely. I haven’t seen Drew in months.”

“I’m in pretty good shape,” Beau said. “You should pray.”

“I’ll think about it, Beauregard,” he said.

When Beau was a kid, a relatively poor kid, Tim’s well-off family moved into town. Tim’s dad was a lawyer. Beau never went to school hungry but there were lots of times he wanted more to eat than there was and he was impressed by the bounty of Tim’s table. Beau had two sisters and a brother, Tim had two brothers and a sister. Tim lived in a five-bedroom house on a big lot with a brick circular drive-

way. Tim's mom played a lot of tennis at their club and had a cleaning lady. But, despite the differences, the boys became friends and stayed friends all the way through school.

Beau's parents were amazed and impressed that he got himself through college in five years with no help from them. Tim, on the other hand, went to Notre Dame. He'd never admitted it to anyone but he'd always aspired to the priesthood. He was spiritual and wanted to help people. Notre Dame honed that aspiration into reality.

Tim's parents were appalled. Tim, being so damn smart, would have made a good lawyer in his father's firm, but that didn't interest him. He studied theology and counseling. And his mother lamented that he wouldn't be a father. "But yes, I will," he answered with a smile.

As it was, Beau became a landscape architect, marrying his love of design with his love of growing things. And Tim, after being away for many years, had finally come home to a parish in California not so far from where he grew up. And he was reunited with his closest friends.

When Tim came back it was to find his best friend struggling with a failing marriage. And while Beau was so happy to have Tim close by, he found the good father at odds with his assignment in his new parish. Tim wanted to help the needy, the hungry, the disenfranchised of the world and here in Mill Valley he was tending the wounds of people with plenty of money and access to everything they might ever need by way of health care, private education and luxuries. True, the well-to-do were not without problems, but Beau knew Tim longed for grittier work. He felt he wasn't as useful as he could be.

They talked for a while about the vegetable garden and fruit trees, laughed a little bit about how Tim's boss, the bishop, just wanted him to get people back into church. "He

wants the confessional bubbling 24/7 and while there are plenty of Catholics in the parish, they're more like you," Tim said. "Not too worried about having a priest guide them and intercede with Christ for them. And most gave up on church doctrine a long time ago."

"Your ego must be bruised," Beau said with a laugh.

"I'm bored," Tim admitted. "There isn't enough challenge."

"It's a rich parish. Surely you can find something to do with the money!"

"This isn't my dream job, Beau. In fact, sometimes I question my calling. Or better to say, sometimes I ask myself if I've done all I can do in this—"

Someone was walking through the garden and the men turned to see a lovely woman standing not far from them.

"I'll be damned," Beau said. "Lauren!" And he smiled, thrilled to see her.

Lauren left work a little early. It was a beautiful spring day and she wanted to stop at Divine Redeemer and see how far along the gardens had come. It wasn't Tuesday, she told herself. There was no harm in it. But inside she knew she wanted to see him. Just to hear him talk about the gardens. Or his boys. She wondered how his life was going. Maybe he would talk a little about his divorce. If she felt comfortable and even a little secure, she'd ask him how they broke it to the kids. Cassie's graduation was a mere week away. After that event and the celebration, when things had calmed, Lauren was going to stir it all up by telling her daughters her plans.

She was terrified.

The garden was looking so beautiful. In this part of the world, the humid spring brought everything to life in such a

rainbow of colors. She sighed deeply. It made her feel calmer just looking at it.

Then she heard the laughter of men. She rounded the corner and there stood Beau and another man. Dear God, they were both hunks. Tall, broad-shouldered, lean. Beau had thick brown hair and the other man, straw-colored. Both had strong, tan arms; both held gardening tools—a hoe and a shovel. She just filled her eyes with them. Must be Beau's assistant or one of the church maintenance men.

"Lauren!" Beau said, and there was no mistaking the delight in his voice. Her heart soared and she smiled back.

"I never expected to run into you here," she said. "I wanted to check out the garden. I haven't been back here in weeks."

"Lauren, this is my friend, Father Tim. Tim, this is Lauren. We met here one afternoon. I was replacing a few plants and she was enjoying the garden. Then we ran into each other again at a fund-raiser."

"Nice to meet you," the priest said. Oh, he was much too handsome to be a priest. She immediately decided a bunch of women probably sought his counsel. Regularly.

"Nice to meet you, too. It's all looking beautiful. You must have dozens if not hundreds of people spending time here."

He shrugged. "When there are daytime functions at the church. Sundays, lots of people wander through. A few people come just to see the gardens. Surprisingly few, considering how beautiful it is." He gazed around thoughtfully, leaning on his hoe. "We need a fountain. Maybe I'll suggest it to the board. That'll give them something to discuss for a year and a half." He chuckled.

"I guess you like to get personally involved," she said.

"On a day like today, when I have no appointments, it's a good excuse. You must live around here."

"Mill Valley. I work in Oakland so this is on my way

home. I discovered this garden a long time ago. My grandmother was a master gardener. She's gone now and so is the garden, I'm afraid."

"How have you been?" Beau asked.

"Well. And you?"

"Great. I have a kid about to graduate high school. My youngest."

She loved the way he talked about his stepsons as if they were his very own. "And I have one graduating college in two weeks. My baby."

"You must have been seven," Father Tim said with a laugh.

"Very nearly," she said. "I was quite young when I married and had children. And here they are—grown. My nest has been empty for a while now but with Cassie's graduation coming up I don't see them coming home except for visits." She took a breath. "It's bittersweet."

"I'm finding it only bitter," Beau said with a laugh. "Drew has no interest in leaving me anytime soon. He's going to UC Berkeley and it's close. Close enough to commute."

"He'll change his mind in short order," Tim said. "Once he sees all the good times on the campus, he'll get interested in leaving home."

Beau thought about this for a moment. "I'm not sure I take comfort in that idea. Trading one set of problems for another."

"You wanted to be alone, remember." Tim laughed.

"Show me what you've got going on here," Lauren asked of the men.

They gave her a nice little tour, introducing her to the lettuces, cabbages, root vegetables, tomatoes and potatoes. Melon and squash vines were growing, flowers appearing where there would be fruit. Cucumber, beans and zucchini vines were snaking all over. Beau had a pumpkin patch started

and Tim showed her the ancient apple trees that surrounded the church.

“Impressive,” she said. “The bounty. You guys do good work.”

“I’m only part-time,” Tim said.

“So am I. I didn’t plant the vegetables,” Beau said. “I tried to give them a design that would maximize their space.”

“You have quite a kale farm going there,” she said.

“You know what I heard about kale? That if you chop it and add coconut milk it’s much easier to scrape into the trash.”

She laughed but then she said, “I have some good recipes for kale. Kale and quinoa.”

“Mm. Sounds delicious,” Beau said, making a face.

The three of them talked about vegetables and flowers for about fifteen minutes while Tim and Beau spread fertilizer. Lauren, wearing a skirt and low pumps, couldn’t get into the dirt, though she wished she could join them. She did bend over and pull a weed here and there.

She looked at her watch. “I’d better head home. I was going to stop at the store and I always get sidetracked...”

“I’ll walk you to your car,” Beau said.

“It was nice meeting you, Father,” she said.

“I hope to see you again, Lauren.”

Beau kicked the dirt off his shoes before starting down the walk. At first he had his hands in his pockets but within only a few steps, his right hand rested at the small of her back. It felt so protective somehow, as though keeping a light hand on her to be ready if she stumbled or tripped or was suddenly in the path of a speeding train. Brad always gripped her elbow. A bit too tightly. Not escorting her but steering her.

“I’m glad I happened to be here when you stopped by, though I know it was probably the last thing you expected,” he said.

“It was, but I’m glad, too. I know it’s meaningless but just knowing you’re going through something similar... Really, I planned to wait for a time when I felt secure and comfortable to ask you...”

He stopped walking and looked into her eyes. His were dark, smoky blue and heavily lashed. She smiled. She had extra lashes applied so she wouldn’t need too much mascara but this guy who liked to dig in the dirt had all the lashes in the world.

“I hope I don’t make you feel insecure or uncomfortable. What are you going through that’s similar? You can ask me anything. I’m pretty much an open book.”

She took a deep breath. “How did you tell your boys you were getting a divorce?”

He put a comforting hand on her upper arm. “Our situations are probably different. Pamela told them she was moving out. She needed a breather, she said. She might be filing for divorce, she said, but she hoped a little separation would help. Then I had to tell them I wasn’t willing to try again. But I also told them I wasn’t going anywhere, that they were my boys and I loved them.”

“And that was enough?”

“I thought so at the time. We’ll see.”

“I have to tell my daughters,” Lauren said. “They love their father. They tiptoe around him, but I know they care about him.”

“Good that they care,” he said. “That’s a good thing. I’m sure he’s a great father.”

“No... I don’t know,” she said, shaking her head. “But that’s all too complicated. I just want to know how to tell them.”

“Lauren, they probably already know. They live with you. Once you know how you feel and what you want, you have to be clear and honest. Don’t expect them to be supportive.

Aw hell, what do I know? I'm no expert. Our attempts at marriage counseling have been pretty dismal."

"Ours, too!" she said. "Brad walks in the door with a mission to win over the counselor! Within ten minutes she's thinking...it's almost always a woman...she's thinking the poor man has a nagging, half-crazy gold digger trying to bleed him dry of all his hard-earned money!"

All Beau could say was, "Gold digger?"

"Brad's older than I am," she explained. "He was a surgeon when we married. He's very successful. His family was rich. As I mentioned, mine was not."

"But you're a chemist. A working chemist," he said. "You're obviously not laying on the daybed watching your soaps and having your nails done."

She hid her hands. He smiled and pulled them out. They were lovely, manicured nails, soft hands, but not because she was self-indulgent. She took care of herself. "I do my own most of the time. I get an occasional manicure but I just can't sit still for it."

"It's not a crime to be able to afford something like this. Pamela gets completely redone every six weeks. Maybe we have more in common than I thought," he said. "Is your husband a little overpowering?"

She nodded.

He chuckled. "If you knew Pamela..."

"Overpowering?"

"She makes the rules," he said. "Every couple of years she gets restless. Has he left you?"

"Never," she said. "Not physically. He's a very difficult, high-strung man. He knows everything. He has a bit of a temper."

Beau's face darkened with a low crimson brewing under his tan. "He hits you?"

She shook her head, shame preventing her from talking about what he did. What he did was so subtle. He hurt her in small ways that no one would ever notice. He had to have control. He was in total control all the time and if anyone got in his way or argued with him, he would fight back until he exhausted his opponent and they gave up or gave in. He belittled her. He loved reminding her she came from nothing. "I really should go," she said a little nervously. She wasn't afraid of being caught talking to a gardener in broad daylight at a church. She was nervous about exposing herself too much. If people knew how much she'd put up with, how could they respect her? She no longer respected herself.

"Wait," he said. "Lauren, who do you have to talk to?"

"I have family. My sister. I have friends. They're not all close but there are a couple I can confide in," she said. "There's Ruby. She was my supervisor at work but she's fifteen years older than I am and she's retired now and yet we've been close for a long time. It's just that..." Ruby's husband had been ill.

"I know marriage counseling hasn't worked out. Mine hasn't, either. Maybe she's like your husband, put the two of us in a room and Pamela has to win. She'll do anything to win. But maybe you should think about your own counselor. Just for you. Someone to help you get through the rough patches."

She had done that once, on the sly, a secret counselor. Maybe she should revisit that idea. "Do you have your own counselor?" she asked.

"I don't," he said. "It's been suggested and I might go that way yet. Right now, things are manageable. Not fun but manageable."

"I'll keep that in mind," she said.

"Listen..." He paused and glanced away. "I'd like to see you again. Is that possible?"

“Probably not. A complication right now...”

“I’m not suggesting anything illicit, but if you want someone to talk to... I know I wouldn’t mind having someone to talk to.”

“I can’t depend on a man right now, not even for talking.”

“I wouldn’t want that, either,” he said. He pulled out a card. “That’s my cell number. If you want a cup of coffee. Or if you’re sitting on a park bench worrying about things...”

“Thank you,” she said. “It’s doubtful I’ll call.”

“I understand,” he said. “It’s an offer.”

“But you’re a busy guy and I’m a virtual stranger.”

“Doesn’t really feel that way,” he said. “Here we are, two people going through divorces with grown kids to deal with and... You know. It just happened that way. Neither one of us ran an ad or signed up for online dating.”

“I appreciate the offer,” she said, smiling.

“We’ll run into each other again,” he said. “Meanwhile, hang in there.”

Father Tim was leaning on his hoe, waiting for Beau in a stance that looked like the old farmer stance, except that Tim was anything but an old farmer. Plus he was grinning mischievously, ready to give Beau the business. “Your friend Lauren is very attractive.”

“Stop looking. You’re supposed to be a priest,” Beau said, lifting his shovel.

“A priest, not a corpse,” he said with a laugh. “Did you notice her eyes are violet?”

“Must be contacts,” Beau said. “No one actually comes with eyes that color.”

“If they’re born from a god and a high priestess.”

“Spread the manure on the ground, Father.”

He had noticed everything about her. He loved the sound

of her voice, her easy laughter, her rich and soft brown hair that fell to her shoulders. It was the color of mahogany. He loved her sass when he ran into her at the fund-raiser and noticed that when the subject turned to her husband, her marriage, it sucked the confidence right out of her. She had that lean and strong look, like a thoroughbred. She was tall and she had kind of big feet, but tall women had to have a sturdy base or they'd blow over in the wind. And that thought made him smile secretly.

"You're seeing her?"

"No. She's going through a divorce. Or will be soon. No, I haven't been seeing her. It's like she said, we met accidentally a couple of times, that's all."

"How do you know about the divorce?"

Beau leaned on his shovel. "I told her I was separated. The next time we met she said she'd be in the same spot before long. So here we are, strangers with grown kids, getting divorced..."

"What are her issues?" Tim asked.

"I have no idea, Tim. We're not close friends."

"But you want to be," Tim said, then wisely shut his mouth and turned back to spreading fertilizer.

It was true. He wanted to be. "That was the last thing I was looking for," Beau said. "Pamela kind of cures you of women. She doesn't look like the kind of woman who'd make you want to jump off a very tall building, does she? But she's—"

"Pamela needs help, Beau. She'll never get it, but she's so temperamental and narcissistic, she's not going to function well in a relationship. Medication and counseling could help her but she's probably not open to that idea."

"I don't know if it's even been suggested," Beau said. "The mood swings almost killed me. And trying to make herself happy with things—outrageously expensive shoes or purses.

And a better man. She always says she'd left the relationship before the man but I don't think so... Then when the grass isn't really greener, she comes home."

Of course Beau had told Tim all this before. Tim had been back four years now, came home to find his closest friend mired in a mess of a marriage with a selfish and manipulative woman.

"But I'll be forever grateful to Pamela for giving me a chance with those boys," Beau said. "They're good boys. When it's the three of us, when we go camping or fishing or hiking, we have a good time. One who thinks too much and one who lets everything go."

"Don't get yourself in a complicated situation with a beautiful woman who's trying to leave her husband," Tim said.

"Don't sin?" Beau asked.

"That's probably asking a bit much," Tim said with a laugh. "It's just that there's an intensity about Lauren..."

"Well, what would you expect? She's obviously pretty worried about what's coming. She asked me how I told the boys. She has to tell her daughters."

"I know you want to help her," Tim said. "I'd just like you to remember, Pamela needed support when you met her. She'd just come out of a bad relationship and found you to help her pick up the pieces."

"Hey, I don't know this woman, okay? But she doesn't seem like a Pamela! Manure on the plants, Father."

"All right. Don't get testy."

"I'm not," Beau said, digging a shovelful of fertilizer out of the split bag.

But he was. He was annoyed because Tim could be absolutely right. When he met beautiful, sexy Pamela, he didn't see a selfish, impatient, hard-to-please woman with a short attention span. Oh no—he saw a vulnerable and sweet

young woman saddled with two hard-to-manage little boys, a woman so grateful to have a good, steady man in her life, a man interested in the parent-teacher conferences. It was a couple of years before he met the other Pamela. Oh, he'd seen hints of her here and there, but they were so fleeting he convinced himself that everyone has their bad days.

Lauren, at first glance, seemed like a good woman with a strong moral compass. She couldn't meet him even just to have someone to talk to if it could become a distraction, a complication. She wanted to be sure her daughters were informed in the best way of what was coming. She didn't trash the husband she was leaving, yet it was clear in her eyes and what little she said, she was in a bad situation. When he asked if he hit her, she rubbed her upper arms and said, "No." She was beautiful. Sweet and sensitive.

And in two years they could be at each other's throats. She could be railing at him about how dull he was, how uninteresting, how inattentive. He didn't dance. He had quiet friends. He didn't want to party. She could be explaining how her life had become unfulfilling, how her needs were not being met...

...how her sex life needed to be recharged.

"There were red flags with Pamela," Tim said. "You told me all about them, how obvious they were, how you convinced yourself you were overreacting because most of the time things were good. And besides, no one's perfect. You admit you have failings. In fact, you're a little too eager to admit your—"

Beau stopped shoveling and stared at his friend. "Stop reading my mind."

"Sorry," Tim said. "I wasn't sure I was."

"You do it all the time and it pisses me off."

"I said I was sorry. So, we can count on you for basketball Thursday night?"

“Yeah. Sure.”

“Father?” a female voice said from the walk. “I’m sorry to interrupt you. I was just wondering...”

“Angela! How wonderful to see you! What brings you to my neighborhood?”

“A fool’s errand, I think. It’s still so early in the spring, but my shelves are bare of the fresh stuff and my clientele could use some greens. It was just a gamble, that you might have some lettuce that came in early.”

“Beau, meet my friend Angela,” Tim said. “She operates a food bank in Oakland. It’s where a lot of our fresh stuff from the garden ends up.”

“It’s a pleasure,” Beau said. He couldn’t help but notice how Tim’s eyes lit up. He also noticed how beautiful the Latina woman was, black hair in a single braid down her back. Beau guessed she was about thirty. Her eyes danced as she was focused more on Tim than Beau. She wore tight jeans with rips in the knees, hoodie tied around her waist. She was lovely. And Tim’s entire mood changed.

“We don’t have anything yet but I’m friendly with the produce manager at the big Safeway. One of my parishioners. Let’s go see if he’s clearing out produce. I bet we’ll get something, no matter what his stock looks like. Let’s go in your car, then you can drop me back here.”

“I knew you’d help if you could,” she said, smiling so beautifully.

“Let’s go then,” he said. He took her elbow to guide her, walked her away from the garden. He leaned down to talk with her and they laughed together.

Tim never looked back at Beau.

“Interesting,” Beau said. Then he proceeded to spread fertilizer.

Want to know what happens next?
Order [*The View from Alameda Island* by Robyn Carr](#),
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A woman with blonde hair is seen from behind, sitting in a white hammock on a porch. The porch has a white railing and a teal deck. The background shows a sunset over the ocean with tall grass in the foreground. The sky is a mix of blue, orange, and yellow.

“The Summer Cottage is that absolutely irresistible and necessary novel.”

—NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR DOROTHEA BENTON FRANK

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE CHARM BRACELET*

VIOLA SHIPMAN

the summer cottage

A NOVEL

July 2006

“There it is!” I said, rolling down the car window and sticking my head out.

Even though I was a grown woman—a married mom now in her thirties—there was nothing like seeing my family’s summer cottage again. I smiled as Cozy Cottage came into view. It looked as though it had been lifted from a storybook: an old, shingled cottage sitting on a bluff overlooking Lake Michigan, an American flag flapping in the breeze. The cool wind coming off the lake whistled, the grass on the dunes swayed, the leaves rustled in the aspen trees and the needles of the tall pines surrounding the cottage quivered.

My heart raced, and all the years fell away. I instantly felt as excited as the little girl who knew she’d be spending her entire summer here. I waved at my parents.

“We’re here!” I called. “We’re here!”

I could hear them whooping and hollering from the screened porch. Their happy voices echoed back, enveloping the car.

“Welcome, campers, to Cozy Cottage!”

Our SUV pulled to a stop at the end of the long, gravel drive leading to the summer cottage. My seven-year-old son, Evan, bounded out of the SUV before it had even come to a complete stop.

“Grandma! Grampa!” he squealed, leaving his car door open and sprinting up the labyrinth of warped, wooden steps to the porch. My mom and dad were rocking on a barn-red glider, but they leaped off it, faces beaming, waving little American flags, “Yankee Doodle” blaring from a vintage stereo. They pulled Evan into their arms and rained his head with kisses.

I laughed and turned to my husband, Nate, who was rolling his eyes.

“Please,” I said softly. “Don’t.”

“We’re not campers,” he admonished in the professorial tone he used to intimidate college freshmen. “It’s so juvenile, Adeleine.”

“You know they’ve done it forever,” I said, reaching over to pat his arm. “Let’s just have fun. It’s summer. It’s July Fourth vacation. It’s our only time away from all the stress of life.”

Nate didn’t agree or nod, but instead walked around to the trunk to retrieve suitcases.

I hated when he didn’t respond to my comments—which had been more frequent of late—but now wasn’t the time to tell him this. We hadn’t seen my folks since Christmas, and I just wanted our visit to be pleasant.

“Adie Lou,” my mom and dad cooed at the same time as I headed toward them. They pulled me into their arms and hugged me tightly. “Our Yankee Doodle Dandy is home!”

“I love you, too,” I said. And I meant it. My parents were more than a little corny, but I loved them more than anything.

Nate caught up, lugging a big suitcase and an oversize cooler up the steps.

“Jonathan,” Nate said formally to my father, extending his hand, before turning to my mother. “Josephine.”

Everything Nate did was formal. It was one of the first things that attracted me to him in college. He opened doors, and wore sweaters with leather patches on the elbows. He took me to the theater and read books to me. He told me I could be and do anything, and treated me as an equal. He was unlike any beer-guzzling fraternity boy my sorority sisters typically dated. And his seriousness and manners gave him an air of authority that made me feel safe, things that now just felt distant and cold.

“Nathaniel,” my dad said just as seriously, before busting into a laugh. “Smile, Nate! This is Cozy Cottage. Not Cranky Cottage.”

“Yeah, Dad!” Evan added, before turning to his grandparents and jumping excitedly. “Are we ready?”

Nate smiled, but it came across as more of a smirk.

“Ready for what?” my dad teased, deciding to ignore Nate’s response and focus on Evan instead.

“Ready to recite the rules!” Evan said, his eyes as blue and wide as the expanse of Lake Michigan behind him.

“It’s the only time I’ve seen you pay attention to rules,” I teased him.

My dad tucked his flag into his shirt pocket, reached into the woven Nantucket basket hanging from the front door and then turned as if he were a magician, his hands behind his back.

Evan giggled.

“Ta-da!” my dad said, producing five sparklers. He handed

one to each of us, forcing the last one into Nate's hand. He then pulled a long fireplace lighter from the basket and lit them. Evan giggled even harder at the shimmering sparks.

"Remember, we have to recite all the rules before our sparklers go out," my dad said, his voice warbling with excitement. "Go!"

"First rule of the summer cottage?" my mom asked quickly as she held her sparkler high, looking a bit like the Statue of Liberty.

"Leave your troubles at the door!" Evan and I yelled together.

"The second rule of the summer cottage?" my dad asked.

"Soak up the sun!" we said, big smiles on our faces.

"Rule number three?" my mom chimed in.

"Nap often!"

"Four?"

"Wake up smiling!"

"Five?"

"Build a bonfire!"

We recited every rule as quickly as we could—go rock hunting, dinner is a family activity, ice cream is required, be grateful for each day, go jump in the lake, build a sandcastle, boat rides are a shore thing, everyone must be present for sunset—until we got to the last one.

"And what's the final rule, Nate?" my dad said pointedly, turning to my rigid husband, who'd yet to say a word.

"I don't remember," he said. "I want to get this stuff in the fridge before it spoils."

He opened the door, dragging the cooler and suitcase inside with a loud grunt and then shut the door. Evan's face drooped as his sparkler sputtered.

"We didn't do it in time," he said, his voice sagging.

"*We* did," my mom said, emphasizing the first word for effect. "Great job, Evan. Want to go for a swim?"

“Yeah!” he yelled, his mood changing. He grabbed his grandma’s hand and pulled her through the front door.

Sorry, I mouthed to my dad.

He winked. “Some people don’t get the beauty of a summer cottage,” he said softly, putting his arm around my shoulder. “But the magical campers do, don’t they, Adie Lou?” He gave me a kiss on the cheek. “I’ll go grab some stuff from your car,” he said, heading down the steps.

For a moment I was alone on the front porch. Lake Michigan was as flat as glass, and the blue water was indistinguishable from the horizon. It all just ran together, and the beauty of it made me catch my breath.

Sailboats dotted the water, boats and Jet Skis zipped by in the distance, and the golden shoreline arced gently as if it were yawning and stretching its sandy back.

Such a contrast from the traffic of Chicago, I thought. *Saugatuck, Michigan, is magical.*

I’d been coming here my whole life, just as my parents and my dad’s parents had. There wasn’t a moment in my life where Saugatuck and Cozy Cottage hadn’t been a part of it.

How old are you? I wondered, looking at the cottage.

Its shingles were weathered and gray, and those on the roof were a tad mossy in spots. The windowpanes were wavy, and the paint on the trim was peeling. My dad always talked about how much “sweat equity” he put into the cottage, but Nate always said at some point it would cost a small fortune to fix it.

I looked up. A turret topped the house with a window I always believed kept a lookout on the lake like a magical eye. A narrow staircase—so tight you had to crawl up at the top—led to the turret, where there was a 360-degree view of the lake. I spent summers at our cottage reading, dreaming, believing that I could be anything I wanted.

I called the cottage “quaint” and “charming,” but Nate referred to it as “old” and “decrepit.”

The cottage creaked, and I smiled.

I loved the sounds our summer cottage made. It creaked in the winds that roared off the lake at night. The attic groaned in the heat, the wood floors moaned as we walked, the screens on the porch exhaled in the breeze. Hummingbirds whirred near the feeders my mom placed in the trees, moths thumped in the outdoor lights at night, bees buzzed in the towering gardens and overflowing window boxes, wild turkeys called to the thunder that boomed over the lake. The cottage actually seemed to sigh when it was filled with people.

I walked inside, and its distinctive smell—woody, watery, a bit moldy—greeted me. I took a step into the foyer.

Creak!

The cottage was a mix of shiplap, angled, beamed ceilings featuring endless coats of white paint, wide windows, paintings of the lake and gardens, vintage finds that were part shabby chic and part old cabin. Framed photos of my family going back generations lined coffee tables, walls and bookshelves. High-back chairs, a worn leather sofa draped with old camp blankets and a mammoth moose head hanging from a soaring lake-stone fireplace greeted visitors. My grampa—a Chicago grocer who used nearly all of his savings to buy the cottage so my grandma could get away from the store they never left—always called the moose that jutted from the fireplace Darryl, because he said its eyes looked as glassy as his best friend’s after a few manhattans. When I was little, my grampa would tell me that the cottage was built around Darryl, and that his tail still popped out the back of the house. I spent hours searching for Darryl’s tail end.

But the biggest focal point of the cottage was a hole in the wall with a frame around it. Visitors always wondered at first

if my family was simply lazy housekeepers or terrible renovators who took pride in our mistakes until they got close enough to read the little plaque under the frame:

BULLET HOLE FROM AL CAPONE
AFTER DRUNKEN SHOOTOUT

Rumor had it Cozy Cottage had once been Al Capone's hideaway, a place where he ran liquor during Prohibition in collaboration with Detroit's Purple Gang. The noisy cottage—far away from Chicago and Detroit and difficult for police or other mobsters to sneak up on—was supposedly beloved by Capone.

I never knew if this was true or just another of my grampa's tall tales.

Creak!

Evan ran down the stairs dressed in his swimsuit, a towel draped around his neck like Superman's cape, screaming, "Wheeee!"

My mom followed, yelling, "Wait for me, camper!"

"Rule number ten!" I could hear Evan yell as he raced toward the lake, his voice echoing into the cottage. "Go jump in the lake!"

My mother slowed for just a second when she saw my face. "What's the first rule, Adie Lou?"

"Leave your troubles at the door," I said.

She nodded, winked and quickened her pace.

I smiled and the door slammed behind my mom.

July 2018

The slamming of a door jars me back to the present.

"The appraiser is finished," Nate calls into the cottage. "Inspection is complete, too."

I am standing in the living room of Cozy Cottage staring at Darryl, his eyes fixed on mine like I'm a traitor.

Nate strides past me, saying, "Boat guy just stopped by and thinks he might have a buyer for the *Adie Lou*, too. It's a good day."

Good day? I think.

He spins in the living room, follows my eyes and says, "That moose always unnerved me. Say your goodbyes. I'll leave you alone for a few minutes."

I can't move, or speak.

"Adeleine," he says, using the same, sly tone I suspect he used to make his grad student, Fuschia—I mean *what kind of name is that? It's even a terrible color!*—fall under his spell.

A car honks.

"She's not very patient, is she?" I ask. "You haven't trained her very well."

"Adeleine," he repeats. "Fuschia's doing us a favor."

"Us?" I ask, my eyes wide.

Against my better judgment, and even though the inspection was today, I agreed to let Nate come to the cottage to pick up some of his belongings as well as his beloved vintage Porsche convertible that my dad let him store in the garage. I guess I just wanted to rip the Band-Aid off in one fell swoop. I didn't expect Lolita to tag along.

I peek out the window.

"What time does prom start?" I ask.

"Just follow the course," Nate continues in his formal detached way. "Play by the rules, just like our attorneys have outlined, and we'll both get the new start we want. You'll get a fortune from this place, and we'll see a nice windfall from the sale of our home in Lake Forest. You're sitting on a gold mine *if* you sell now. This place has seen better days. It needs a new roof, new plumbing, new life..." He stops for empha-

sis. “*New owners.*” Nate smiles and continues. “The Realtor will find some sucker who falls for its—what do you always call it?—‘charm’ before it falls apart.”

I look at him, my mouth open.

Though my parents left Cozy Cottage to me, and Nate is entitled to none of its proceeds, I agreed to sell it because he convinced me that the rules were stacked against me.

On your salary, you will go broke maintaining the cottage and paying its taxes, Nate told me over and over. And how often will you use it anymore? How often will Evan use it?

“I need to smudge this place,” I suddenly say out loud, as much to myself as him. “Get some better energy in here.”

Nate laughs dismissively. “You and your sage, and crystals, and beads and essential oils. And what did you ever do with that yoga certification, which took so much time and cost so much money?” he asks. “The only thing that new age BS will do is make the cottage smell bad for potential buyers.” He turns and looks at me, as if seeing me for the first time. “You’re not the person I married, Adeleine.”

Nate walks away, the floor creaking. The door slams behind him, and the cottage seems to exhale relief with his exit.

Play by the rules, I think. But I’ve played by the rules the last thirty years, and where did that get me? I’m not the one who changed. You tried to change me. I’m the same woman you married.

I turn, and that’s when I notice that the Cottage Rules sign my parents had hand-painted on old barn wood so long ago is hanging askew, just like my life.

Who knew that so much could change in just over a decade?

My son is now in college, my parents are gone, and my husband and I are divorcing. Even my job—an ad executive creating cute slogans for corporations who poison the earth—is killing me. Everything my parents taught me seems to be

fading away, just like the sparklers they used to hand out when we'd arrive.

I begin to walk out, but stop on the woven rug my grandmother made long ago, the colorful, circular one that has been in this same spot by the door for decades, collecting sand. I am unable to leave the sign askew.

I straighten the sign, running my hand over the letters.

Rules.

This summer cottage was a place whose only rules were to be happy.

I stop on the last rule of the cottage, the one Nate refused to recite so many years ago. My heart races as I read it, tears springing to my eyes, blurring the words.

SHAKE THE SAND FROM YOUR FEET,
BUT NEVER SHAKE THE MEMORIES
OF OUR SUMMER COTTAGE.
IT IS FAMILY.

PART ONE

Rule #1:

Leave Your Troubles at the Door

ONE

February 2019

“I can’t do it.”
“Yes, you can.”

My attorney Trish, who not only happens to be one of the finest divorce lawyers in Chicago but also my best friend from college, stares at me, unblinking in disbelief.

“I can’t.”

“Sign. The papers. Adie. Lou.”

She says this slowly, in a tone like the one my dad used when he caught me trying to sneak in the cottage past curfew.

“I can’t,” I repeat. They are the only words I can muster.

“You can,” she says.

She continues to stare, her brown eyes that match the frames of her expensive tortoiseshell reading glasses still unblinking. Trish graduated top of our undergrad class and her law class at

Northwestern. Her gaze had broken some of the most ruthless divorce attorneys and husbands in Chicago.

She doesn't just stare, I finally realize. She punctures your soul.

"You're freaking me out," I finally say, after an uncomfortable pause. "You haven't blinked in a minute. You look like a snake."

"I am," Trish says. "That's why I'm a great lawyer." She stops. "Actually, *you're* freaking *me* out. What's going on, Adie Lou?"

She sits back in the banquette at RL, the posh Ralph Lauren restaurant on Michigan Avenue across from the flagship Polo store, folds her napkin in her lap and then folds her arms over her tailored jacket. The room is beautiful and bustling, and yet still hushed in that way that moneyed places always are. I look around the room. This is where Chicago's elite gathered. The preppy place where the ladies who lunch lunched (and had a glass or two of champagne), the place where businessmen threw back a whiskey to celebrate a deal, the place where tourists gathered to gawk at those ladies and businessmen...

I stop.

The place where attorneys bring clients to sign divorce papers, I add, so they can't make a scene.

I set the pen down and push the papers back into the middle of the table, clattering bread plates and utensils together.

"I can see we're going to need a drink," Trish says. "Now rather than later."

"It's noon."

"Then we're going to need a double." Trish motions at our waiter, who arrives without a sound, like a well-mannered ghost. "Two manhattans."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'll be drunk by one," I say.

"Good," Trish laughs. "Then maybe you'll sign the pa-

pers.” She stops. “What’s going on? Square with me, Adie Lou. What’s going on in that head of yours?”

Although the weather is brutally cold—typical for February in Chicago—it is a bright, sunny day. I watch shoppers scurry past the frost-etched windows of the restaurant. Their cheeks are red, their eyes bright, they look happy, alive, excited to be part of the world.

I can feel my lips quiver and my eyes start to tear.

“Oh, honey,” Trish says, reaching out to grab my hand.

“I’m sorry,” I say, as the waiter drops off our drinks. He thinks I’m talking to him and gives me a sad smile.

“Here,” Trish says, handing me my drink. She lifts hers into the air, and a huge smile comes over her face. She removes her glasses and begins to sing our old sorority drinking song.

“We drink our beers in mugs of blue and gray

“We drink to Zetas who are far away

“And seven days a week we have a blast

“And when the beer runs out we go to class

“And when our college days are never more

“We’ll be alums and then we’ll drink some more

“We are the girls who like to set ’em up and drink ’em up

“For Z-T-A!

“Hey! Hey!

“Z-T-A

“Alpha to Omega say

“oohm-darah, oohm-daray

“Eta Kappa Z-T-A!”

“Cheers!” she says to me, as everyone in RL stares. Trish turns to the patrons and lifts her glass. “Cheers!”

I laugh and take a sip of my manhattan. It feels good to do both.

“That’s what I’m missing in my life,” I say. “Remember those Zeta girls? The ones who thought they could conquer the world, do anything, be anything they wanted?”

Trish nods.

“You did,” I say. “I didn’t.”

“Oh, Adie Lou,” Trish says. “Listen. I hear you. I really do. But I have to be honest. I think it’s the divorce talking. I’ve handled hundreds of divorces, and what you’re feeling is natural. There’s a sense of overwhelming loss, sadness and failure. More than that, many women often feel rudderless and bitter because they sacrificed their lives for their families, and then when the family is grown, their husbands have a midlife crisis and run off with someone half their age. Men used to just buy a damn convertible.”

“He did that, too,” I say.

Trish stifles a laugh. She stops, smiles and sighs. “But you have the greatest accomplishment I’ll never have. A child. Evan is a gift to you and this world.”

I match her sigh. “I know, I know,” I say. “You’re right.”

“And let me be totally clear, Adie Lou,” Trish continues. “You have the chance to start over.”

I take a healthy sip of my manhattan. “That’s what I want to do,” I say. “And that’s why I can’t sign the papers.”

Trish’s raises her eyebrows about to speak, but I stop her. “Hear me out.”

She leans back in the banquette holding her drink. “Okay.”

I grab my bag off my chair and pull out a sheaf of papers. “I want you to look at something,” I say. “I have a plan.”

Trish’s eyes widen, and she lifts her drink to her mouth. “Oh, God,” she says. “A plan. With actual papers. Let me brace myself.”

“What if,” I ask, my voice rising in excitement, “I kept the summer cottage and turned it into a B and B?”

Trish chokes on her drink. “What?” she asks too loudly, people again turning to stare. “Have you lost it, Adie Lou? Or are you already drunk?”

“Neither,” I say, squaring my shoulders.

“You have a great job making great money in a great city with great friends,” Trish says. “And you have a great offer on the cottage.”

“I hate my job,” I say. “I always have. You know that.” I hesitate. “I don’t want to be miserable any longer.”

Trish cocks her head and softens. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I didn’t realize you were this unhappy.”

“Just hear me out a little while longer,” I say. “And try to blink.”

Trish laughs. “Go on.”

I spread the papers I’ve been holding on to for the right moment across the table. “What if I don’t sell the cottage and turn it into a B and B,” I start over. “I’ve been doing a lot of research.”

“I hate to interrupt already,” Trish says, “but there are a ton of B and Bs in Saugatuck. Isn’t it called the B and B Capital of the Midwest?”

“Yes,” I say. “But there are only two inns on the entire lakeshore. One is an older motel, and the other is tiny and for sale. Cozy Cottage has the potential to be eight bedrooms if I convert the attic and turn the old fish house out back into a honeymoon suite.” I stop and shut my eyes. “And that turret... Wouldn’t it be the most romantic place to serve wine at sunset?”

I look at Trish. “I’ve already talked to a contractor, too,” I say, before adding, “Blink.”

She does. Once. Very dramatically.

“And what if I kept the wooden boat?” I continue. “And use it for sunset cruises? I would be able to offer something the other inns don’t have, something that would make me unique.”

“The roses,” Trish says, still staring at me. “You forgot about the roses.”

“That’s not fair,” I reply, instantly remembering the first time Trish and I met.

We were eighteen, and we’d just finished sorority rush. It was late, and everyone was either passed out or still at the bars. I couldn’t sleep from all the adrenaline, wondering if and from whom I might get a bid, and wandered into the common room to find Trish watching *Ice Castles*, one of my favorite movies of all time. Not only could we both recite nearly every line—including the big scene where everyone realizes figure skater Lexie is actually blind when she trips over the roses adoring fans had thrown onto the ice—but also immediately knew we’d be best friends forever.

From then on, Trish and I used that line when one of us was about to make a big mistake.

“I admire your enthusiasm, Adie Lou,” Trish says, “but now hear me out.”

She grabs the divorce papers I had pushed aside earlier and begins to shuffle through them. “Do you remember how many issues the inspection revealed in the cottage?” Trish asks, her voice immediately serious and in full attorney mode. “The roof needs to be replaced, the plumbing is ancient, you still have knob-and-tube wiring in some areas of the cottage, the stairs down to the beach are in need of repair, not to mention erosion that needs to be addressed, the windows are old, the house needs new insulation and shingles... Need I go on?” she asks. “Okay, I will.”

Trish continues to rifle through the papers. “Your gas and electrical bills are astronomical even with no one living there, and need I remind you of the property taxes? Nearly \$15,000 a year.”

“But I’ll be homesteading,” I say, my voice still hopeful. “That should knock taxes down by a third.”

“Oh, wow,” Trish says sarcastically. “You’re rich.”

She continues, her voice a bit softer. “I’m not counting the upkeep on an old, wooden boat, much less the fact that—oh, yeah—you won’t have steady income. How much does it cost to run a B and B? How long to make a profit? What about insurance and health codes and...”

“But Nate said he’d provide monthly support for me until Evan graduates from college,” I say.

“If you agreed to sell the cottage and the boat,” Trish interrupts.

“I know I might not be able to do the boat immediately,” I say, my voice beginning to rise. “I know I can’t afford everything all at once.”

“That’s an understatement,” Trish says.

“Trish,” I say, tempering my voice. “For the past twenty years I’ve raised a child in an emotionless marriage, I’ve endured a husband who regards me as critically as one of his philosophy books, I’ve excelled in a job I’ve despised, I’ve lost both my parents, I’m about to lose my family cottage...” I hesitate, trying to rein in my emotions. “I can’t lose anything else.”

“You realize what’s at risk here, don’t you?” Trish warns. “You’re my friend, but right now I must advise you as your attorney first and foremost.”

I nod. I know she cares about me and is just looking out for my well-being.

“You have a great offer—all cash, need I remind you—for the cottage. If you don’t sell, you’ll be losing a sizable chunk of change that would set you up for life. In addition, you’ll be incurring a load of debt, you’ll be leaving a city you love to start over in a resort town, you’ll be starting a business that

you have no experience in..." Trish stops. "You could lose it all, Adie Lou. Everything. Even the cottage in the end."

"I feel like I don't have anything to lose," I say. "And what if I don't? What if this is what I was meant to do? My grampa sacrificed everything to buy that cottage. My parents loved that cottage more than anything in this world. So did Evan and I. What does it mean if I just walk away from all of that so life is a little easier on me? My mom told me the worst thing to live with is regret." I stop. "That cottage is my history." I stop again. "I think it might be my future, too."

Trish nods and then smiles. "Okay, then should I remind you that you don't particularly like random strangers, and I haven't seen you make anything except reservations since I've known you."

"Hey!" I protest. "I cooked when Evan was young, but then Nate said he hated the 'smell of food' in our house. And he only really wanted to hang out with people he liked, intellectual elites who didn't understand the joy of eating a pint of Ben and Jerry's and watching *Sex and the City* reruns on a rainy afternoon." I stop to catch my breath, my anger rushing forth like the waves of Lake Michigan during a storm. "And I just don't like the people I work with or for..." I stop again and look at my friend.

"My God, Trish," I continue. "Look at me. I mean it! Look at me! Who am I anymore? I've gained twenty pounds. I wear sweater sets now. A man at an account meeting who's older than me called me 'ma'am' last month. I'm an online click away from purchasing a rose-colored sweatshirt with cardinals perched just-so on a snowy branch with matching sweatpants and giving up." I stop, and my lip quivers. "I need a new beginning. I've lost who I am. I'm trying to find that girl again. Help me."

Trish's face softens.

“And it’s *my* summer cottage, not his. Nate always hated it. I don’t know why I listened to him in the first place about selling it.”

Trish looks at me for a long time, not blinking, and takes another healthy sip of her manhattan. “Give me a few minutes,” she says. “Let me call his attorney.” She stops. “He does owe you, and I’ll make sure they know that.”

As she walks away, I take a sip of my drink, and my head grows light. The world seems to fall away in sections right in front of my eyes—the walls of the restaurant first, followed by the tables, then the waiters and the diners, before the buildings outside slip into the ground, leaving me alone with only the sound of my heartbeat in my ears.

What am I doing? Trish is right. I could be making the biggest mistake of my life.

“Well,” Trish says, walking back to the table startling me, “Nate doesn’t want you making a big deal to the university, especially with his tenure review coming up and since Evan is a student there.” Trish winks. “I might have made it seem as if you were going to storm into the chancellor’s office or call the student newspaper if you didn’t get your way.” She continues. “And Illinois is a dual classification state. As I told you before, it separates marital property from separate property. Your parents left you the cottage. It’s yours legally. It’s separate property. It’s not Nate’s. So he has no rights to it.”

She continues. “But the mortgage on your Chicago home *is* in both names. It’s marital property. Illinois is an equitable distribution state, but equitable does not mean equal, or even half, but rather what the circuit court considers fair. The court divides the marital estate without regard to marital misconduct.”

“Where are you going with this?” I ask nervously.

She smiles. “You have a deal. Nate will continue to give

you two-plus years of support, only until Evan graduates. But he now wants two-thirds of the cash from the sale of the Lake Forest house.”

I begin to protest, but Trish holds up a hand. “Hear me out. I can contest that, and chances are you’d likely get a fifty-fifty split of the home, if not more, but then they could contest the level of Nate’s support, and I know how much that means to you moving forward. It extends your runway, gives you a little more time to get the plane off the ground.” She continues. “And Evan goes to school free because Nate works there, so they have that in their back pocket to argue against the level of support.”

I take a deep breath as Trish takes a seat.

Trish raises her glass. “Cheers!” she says. “I still think you’re crazy, but I’m so proud of you, Adie Lou.”

“Thank you,” I say, the gravity of what just occurred hitting me with full force. “Cheers back,” I add, taking too big of a drink.

“And I’m sorry,” Trish says. When I look up, her eyes are filled with love. “For not asking how you were really feeling more often. For not being there for you. For not seeing that your marriage wasn’t fine. For...” She hesitates. “Well, everything. You’re taking a risk, and that is admirable. I envy and adore you, Adie Lou.”

I reach across the table and take my friend’s hand in mine, and give it a big squeeze.

“Thank you,” I say.

“To no regrets,” Trish says, before adding, “Promise me one thing?”

“Okay.”

“Just watch out for the roses,” she replies.

TWO

“Hi, Mom.”

I am always taken aback when I hear my son’s voice. I still expect him to sound like he did when he was a boy—high-pitched, singsongy, begging for me to hold him or help him—instead of the baritone that booms forth from his six-foot-two-inch, nineteen-year-old body.

“Lose my number?” I tease. I’m on my cell phone, sitting in my Volvo, which is packed with boxes from my office. *It’s amazing how a career that can consume every minute of your life becomes insanely irrelevant the very moment you leave to follow your passion*, I think. “It’s been a while.”

“I’m sorry,” he replies.

I move on cautiously because I don’t want to worry Evan. “I have some news.”

“I heard already,” he says, cutting me off at the pass. “Dad told me.”

Of course he did, I think, annoyed.

“Oh,” I say, bracing myself. “What did he tell you?”

“You want the sanitized version?” he asks.

I laugh so Evan thinks his father’s actions don’t bother me, but it sounds hollow.

“Dad said you’d sort of, well, lost it, and that you were quitting your job, moving to Saugatuck and turning the cottage into a B and B.”

“That’s the sanitized version?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he laughs. “Believe me.”

“Well, I actually quit my job today,” I say. “I’m sitting in my car trying not to freak out.”

Evan laughs. There is a pause that worries me, but then he says quietly, “I’m proud of you, Mom.”

This time, his words stop me cold, hit me so hard I feel as if I just might break down and cry. “Thank you,” I say, my voice wobbly.

“I didn’t want to lose Cozy Cottage either,” he says. “It’s part of our lives. It’s who we are. I can’t imagine my life without it. Dad never liked it, I know, but us...” Evan stops, and his deep voice cracks. I instantly remember watching a rerun of *The Brady Bunch* as a kid, an episode in which Peter Brady’s voice cracks when he sings a solo. Evan continues. “Thank you for saving it,” he says with emotion. “Some people don’t get the beauty of a summer cottage, but the magical campers do, don’t they, Mom?”

My heart leaps into my throat. Evan is repeating the words my dad always said to me when Nate refused to recite the rules.

“Oh, Evan,” I say. “You remember.”

“How could I forget?” he says, before suddenly asking, “But why, Mom? What prompted all this?”

How can I sum up a lifetime of wonder, love, loss, mistakes, heart-aches, precious moments and wasted time to a nineteen-year-old? I think. How can I explain what happens to adults when they do what is expected, take the path of least resistance, playact through life?

“You know, Evan,” I begin, “I feel like I need a new start. In my previous life, I would have fretted about quitting my job, and Nate would have grabbed a calculator to figure out lost income and what this would do to our retirement. But I’ve thought too long about health care plans and 401(k)s, and doing what everyone else wants and expects, and squeezing into a way of life that doesn’t really fit who I want to be.”

I stop and take a deep breath. “To be honest, I only have about four hundred months in my life’s checking account if I live into my eighties, and that, for once, seems more important than what’s in my retirement account. I want to do something meaningful and courageous, something that makes me deeply and achingly happy. For once, I want to hold my breath, close my eyes and jump.”

For a long moment, Evan doesn’t speak, and I think I have lost my reception or he’s hung up, but then he says in a voice that sounds as if he is that little boy I used to hold in my arms, “Then jump, Mom. And I’ll be there to catch you if you fall.”

“Oh, Evan,” I say, before covering the phone to muffle my sniffles.

“The fall can’t hurt any worse than the one you just had, can it?” he asks. “You know, Mom, I get it. I really do. It’s not easy to be on a campus where everyone knows Dean Clarke is your father, and that his new girlfriend isn’t much older than his son.” He stops. “I know I get free tuition, and that’s huge, but sometimes I feel like I need a new start, too.”

In the midst of my pain, I realize I’ve trivialized my son’s, and forgotten that he is still more boy than adult. I believed he was sheltered at college, but he really is living at ground zero.

“Then jump,” I say. “And I’ll be there, too.”

“Thanks, Mom,” he says. “So, when are you headed up to the cottage? I’m assuming you want to get all the permits in hand and have all the renovations done before Memorial Day, so you can take advantage of high tourist season, right?”

My heart stops. Suddenly, it hits me that I’ve just quit my job and need to start a business and renovate the cottage in three months.

“You’re insane,” I think I’m saying to myself.

“You said it, Mom,” Evan laughs, “not me.” He hesitates. “A bunch of the guys were planning on driving to Florida for spring break next month, but now I think I should drive to Saugatuck and help you.”

“Evan, no,” I say. “You need a break from college and from all this stress we’ve put on you. I couldn’t ask you to do that.”

“You didn’t ask, Mom,” he says. “I want to.”

I cover my cell again with a trembling hand. “Thank you,” I say. “It will be a lot of work, and...”

Suddenly, music blares so loudly that my eardrum aches. A song I know—REM’s “It’s the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)”—is playing.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“We have to start getting ready for our annual Around the World Party,” he says. “Every room in the fraternity house is decorated as a different city or country, and a theme drink is served.”

“Sounds fun,” I reply. “Like margaritas in Mexico, or wine in Paris?”

“Well, maybe the first,” he says. “Wine in Paris is a little fancy for fraternity guys. Josh and I are turning our dorm room into New York City and serving Long Island Iced Teas.”

“Be careful,” I say. “Those are strong.”

“I *know*, Mom,” he says. “That’s the point.”

“Well, I like the old-school music.”

Evan laughs. “It’s tradition,” he says. “I love tradition.”

My heart nearly explodes when Evan says this.

“The old-timers started the party in the ’80s,” he continues, “and that was the song that kicked it off. Can’t change it.”

“You know I’m an old-timer, right?” I ask. “I know that song. I danced to that song. Made out to that song while dancing...”

“La la la la la,” Evan sings loudly, as he always does when he doesn’t want to hear something I have to say.

“Well, I better let you go,” I say over his singing. “Have fun.”

“You, too, Mom,” he says. “You deserve it.”

“Remember to call me, okay?”

“Okay,” Evan says. “I’ll talk to you soon about coming up for spring break.”

“Bye. I love you.”

“Me, too,” he replies, suddenly yelling, “Mom?” in the phone before I hang up.

“Yeah?”

“What’s the first rule of the summer cottage?”

“Leave your troubles at the door,” I say, smiling.

“Let’s both remember that,” he says. “Oh, and, Mom? Don’t sit in the car and cry like you did when I started kindergarten, and grade school, and middle school and high school and college?” He is laughing.

“How did you know that?”

“Mom,” he sighs, “the whole school knew.”

“I get emotional sometimes. It’s nothing to apologize for,” I say. “And I promise. I won’t. I’m getting stronger every day.”

“I know you are,” he says. “Bye, Mom.”

“Bye, honey,” I say.

I hit end on my cell, think of how proud I am of my son, glance in the mirror at my former life in the trunk of my car, and then lower my head onto the wheel of my Volvo and weep just like I did on Evan’s first day of kindergarten.

THREE

As soon as I round the bend from Chicago to Michigan, I see a wall of clouds over Lake Michigan. Half of the sky is bright blue, the other half is steel gray, as if Mother Nature has hung a banner announcing, Nightmare Ahead!

Lake-effect snow. My hands immediately tighten around the wheel.

I see a Pure Michigan billboard, touting the beauty and landmarks of the state, and laugh.

Lake-effect snow is Pure Michigan, I think, my former ad exec coming out, *but I don't see any billboards touting that.*

Without warning, the world goes from clear skies to total blizzard. I slow the car, tighten my grip even more and turn on my headlights. Lake-effect snow is not just snow, it's as if the winter skies have opened up and are weeping centuries of frozen tears upon the earth. Within moments, the highway is

covered and slick, and trucks and cars are moving at a snail's pace. My heart is thumping like a jackhammer, and I immediately lament my life change.

How could I have forgotten that winter lasts longer than summer, fall and spring in Michigan? Combined! What have I done? My earnings season will be shorter than the one my parents had to grow tomatoes on the back deck.

I crank up the defroster and crack a window, realizing my near hyperventilation is fogging up the entire car. And then, from the depths of nowhere, I laugh, crazily, like a madwoman.

How long has it been since I've been this nervous, excited, uncertain? I wonder. It's a shock to the system. And it feels good.

I find REM's "It's the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)" on Pandora and play it on repeat—singing at the top of my lungs, the lyrics taking on new meaning between the snow and my new adventure—and I don't realize I've made it to Saugatuck until I see the painter's palette, the sign that has marked the entrance to town forever as a welcome beacon, lighting the sky, the name of the town and each paint color twinkling.

Saugatuck is renown as an artist lover's haven—known as the Art Coast of Michigan—filled with galleries galore. I used to paint with my mom on the bluff overlooking the lake.

"Don't paint what you see," she used to tell me. "Paint what you feel."

"That's what I'm trying to do with my life now, Mom," I say to the sign.

As I ease my SUV down the snow-covered lane leading to town, gallery storefronts light the way, giant oils, pastels and watercolors of summer in Saugatuck—Lake Michigan at sunset, the grandeur of the dunes, gardens of purple foxglove, ice-blue hydrangeas and red rhododendrons as big as trees—offering the promise of what's to come.

What if I offered painting classes at my new inn? I think. Or painting weekends in the fall? City people eat that up.

I pass a historical marker on the way through town. Its history is embedded in my mind, as I used to work summers cranking the chain ferry, one of Saugatuck's biggest tour attractions. I speak as if I'm back on the chain ferry, reciting memorized lines in a robotic tone to tourists: *Saugatuck's setting has drawn urbanites from Chicago and as far away as St. Louis since the early 1900s. A resort, tourist and cottage culture emerged in the 1880s and exploded in 1910 when a group of artists from the Art Institute of Chicago established the Summer School of Painting on the Ox-Bow Lagoon and when a huge dance hall, called the Big Pavilion, was built on the waterfront. The resulting influx of well-known artists and big-name Chicago architects resulted in a wave of buildings in the Arts and Crafts and Colonial Revival manner. Now, the galleries, the golden beaches and towering dunes, the wineries and U-Picks, and the unsalted majesty of Lake Michigan beckon tourists.*

I laugh. How can I remember old song lyrics and things like this from my youth, but can't remember to take out the trash?

Today, I smile at the quirky resort town, even more beautiful in the snow. Pine boughs are draped in white, and the old-fashioned streetlights make it feel as if Charles Dickens might pop his head out one of the storefronts. I find a parking space directly in front of my favorite coffee shop and hop out. The place is empty, save for a few locals and retirees who are sitting at tables sipping lattes or mugs of hot chocolate.

I order my favorite latte, a Caramel Silk—white chocolate and caramel blended with the shop's own roasted coffee—and as I wait, I see the owner wiping down tables.

"Dale?" I ask. "Adie Lou—" I stop and have to force out my married name as if I'm choking on it. "Clarke. Remember me? My parents owned Cozy Cottage?"

"Oh, yeah," he says, tossing the dish towel over his shoul-

der and extending his hand. “Good to see you. I was sorry to hear about your parents. Everyone loved them around here. What brings you up this way on a winter’s day? Heard your place was for sale...or already sold?”

“Well,” I start, “it was. And it almost did. But now I’m starting a business here. Turning the cottage into a B and B.”

“Need another one of those like a hole in the head,” cracks an old man in a stocking cap reading the newspaper.

“Don’t mind Phil,” Dale jokes. “Hasn’t seen his shadow since the seventies. That’s why he’s so grumpy.” Dale stares at me. He looks older than I remember, his hair now silver, his forehead lined, like a president you notice has aged significantly by the end of a first term. “That place needs a lot of work, doesn’t it?”

I nod.

He grins, as if he knows a secret I don’t. “Well, good luck,” he says. “Coffee’s on the house today.”

“Thank you,” I say. “But I already paid.”

“Now, that’s how you run a successful business,” Phil laughs in the background. “He always offers when it’s too late.”

“Shut up, Phil,” Dale laughs. He turns. “But he’s right,” he adds with a wink. “Seriously, next one on me.”

“Liar,” Phil says under his breath, before adding in an even more sarcastic tone, “Good luck with that B and B, Bob Newhart.”

I look at Dale, and he nods, giving me the okay. “Shut up, Phil,” I say as Dale laughs again and continues wiping down tables.

“Caramel Silk! Adie Lou!” a barista yells. I pick up my coffee, head back out into the snow and aim my car toward the cottage. As I turn onto Lakeshore Drive, the wind buffets my car, and the snow is no longer falling but flying horizontally. I feel as if the Wicked Witch from *The Wizard of Oz* might bike over my head at any minute.

Every summer cottage on the lane is dark. Not just dark, but empty. Hurricane shutters have been pulled over the windows, screened porches enveloped in plastic, and trees staked. There isn't a light on for miles.

I pull into the driveway of Cozy Cottage, my SUV struggling for traction to get up the drive. I open my door and instead of my parents' voices, I imagine I hear the cottage groan in agony. I step out of the car, slip on the snow and have to grasp the car door to stop myself from falling. I grab my bag but leave my luggage in the car for now and move, one baby step at a time, up the steep stairs, my body at a severe angle like the snow to keep myself from being blown over.

I reach the front porch, my breath coming out in big puffs like steam from a locomotive. I look out at the lake. It is roaring and angry, so loud I can barely hear myself think.

I rarely came to Saugatuck in the winter, and never on days like this. Cozy Cottage was a summer retreat.

This, I think, is like The Shining. But way, way worse.

I turn to face the cottage, little tornadoes of snow lifting off the ground and hurtling into my face. I squint. The cottage's wood shingles are loose, and a few are now missing on the front. The paint is peeling, there is a crack in the stone foundation, and most of the shutters have come loose and are now banging against the house.

I manage to find the keys in my purse and unlock the front door. A mouse looks up at me as if I'm a stranger who has burst into its home. I scream. It screams. And then it scurries across the rug in front of me. I scream again, and the mouse stops, shocked, and stands on its hind legs scared out of its wits, before zipping toward the stairs.

I suddenly remember what Evan told me, and I retreat back out the door.

I open the Nantucket basket—still on the front door but now worn, the weave loose and unraveled—and I look inside.

No sparklers, I think, immediately sad remembering my parents. And then it hits me: I reach into my bag and pull out a big smudge wand of sage that I brought to cleanse the cottage and give it a new start. I move my hand around until I find a lighter. I turn my back to the wind, holding the sage close to my body and lighting it.

“Ready to recite the rules?” I ask myself over the roar of the wind and groans of the cottage. “What’s the first rule of the summer cottage?”

I raise the sage over my head and yell to the cottage, “Leave your troubles at the door!” The house creaks as if in agreement. I repeat the rule, this time to myself. “Leave your troubles at the door, Adie Lou.”

I yell again, this time into the winter wind. “To a new start! To a new life for me and you, Cozy Cottage! No regrets!”

I begin to open the door, but the wind gusts, nearly knocking me off my feet, and the burning sage goes dark. A shutter on the front of the cottage flaps wildly in the gale, making a sound similar to a hundred ducks taking flight from a pond.

And then, just like that, the shutter is airborne and flying directly toward my head. I move just in time, and it smashes into the ground, clacking down the dune and into the lake.

Before I run inside, now fearful for my safety, I see the sprawling, wooden trellis in the yard, the one on which my mom and grandma’s knockout pink and red roses climbed for decades. The trellis is bare, trembling in the wind, shaking just as hard as I am, and I swear I can hear Trish say to me very clearly, “The roses, Adie Lou. The roses.”

Want to know what happens next?
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