



The
Triumph
of it all

J a m i e
B e n n e t t

*It's hard to come home again—you
never know what's waiting there
for you...*

Grier Warren won't be waltzing back into Tennessee as the same woman who left it. When she flew to California ten years before, she was a loser, but now? She's the picture of success. She's ready to show everyone she left behind how wrong they were about her. She'll show her former best friend, Shaw, that he made a large mistake by forgetting her and letting go of the amazing relationship that they'd had, the one that had been the most important thing in her life.

He had the chance to make something of himself, too, but apparently he wasted it. Instead of being like Grier, always successful, always a winner, Shaw has let himself turn into a semi-recluse—and that has nothing to do with their past. It's not her fault, it's not the fault of her family, it's not because of the accident, it's not because of the money, and it's not anyone's problem but his own. Right?

It's hard to come home again, when old friendships turn more complicated and old problems threaten to derail all the triumph of your wonderful life. The future for Grier and Shaw will have to be something new, something beyond the what they shared in high school. But what will they do if the past just won't let them go?

Can they hold on to each other?

THE TRIUMPH OF
IT ALL

Jamie Bennett

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CHAPTER 1

It was when the rock hit my windshield that I realized how much I still wasn't welcome here.

“Get the hell off my land!”

The words came from inside the house directly after the rock struck. I'd stopped, turned off the car, and lowered the windows, so I heard them despite the distance. I thought that I recognized the voice—I was almost positive, but it had been so long, six years since I'd been back to this town. It was longer than that since I'd made my way around the rusty gate that guarded the Highsmith property.

I sat stunned for a minute, shaking, my mouth hanging open as I stared at the concave dent in the glass on the passenger side. The original break was as large as a grapefruit and cracks had splintered from it in every direction, so that it resembled a firework going off in the sky. Unfortunately, what had happened to my windshield was a lot less fun to look at than a fourth of July display.

“I said to get out! Turn your car around and leave or I will shoot. Did you hear me?”

The words startled me out of my shock but of course I didn't leave. I wasn't the kind of woman who got scared off by a cracked window and a threat (even if it had sounded sincere, and even if the broken glass had startled the breath out of me). I wouldn't have gotten to where I was in life if I'd backed down or offered the other cheek when confronted with problems or opposition. No, no one had ever said that they'd

shoot me before, but they'd probably wanted to and I had gotten my way in the end. Generally.

I pushed down my fear and other useless emotions because I was here for a reason, and it was too uncomfortable to sit in this car, anyway. The sticky summer heat had quickly dispelled any remnants of the air conditioning I'd run as I drove here and I felt curls of hair start to tickle the back of my neck, rebelling against the straightness I enforced every time I got out of the shower. So I opened the car door and stepped onto the gravel driveway, my legs still shaking, and I held my arms above my head and to show my empty hands. I wouldn't back down, but I wasn't stupid, either.

"Shaw?" I called. "It's me, Grier. It's Grier Warren. Is that you? Shaw? Can you come out?"

No more rocks rained down now but there was silence from inside the house. I stayed next to the car, deciding on my next move. The place looked ghostly and run-down but it had always been that way, ever since I'd first come here as a kid. Obviously, no one had been doing much upkeep in the years since I'd left either. It was exactly what I'd heard in town, that the house was falling apart, that he was living in a hovel, but I hadn't fully believed it. It was just one of the rumors and inuendo that went around from mouth to mouth, stories that had stretched and grown as distance took them farther away from their source.

"Shaw?" I called again, and started walking forward.

He was the source: Shaw Highsmith. Not totally a recluse, because he came out for groceries sometimes. He went to church every now and then and to the hardware store and

people had seen him driving out of town as well, maybe to Chattanooga, maybe to somewhere else. This was a small community and he was definitely a point of interest, so everyone watched carefully and reported what they'd seen to others, and that was how I'd heard. That was why I'd gone to church myself, so that I could discover what was happening with him—but no one knew very much.

No, they didn't know what he was doing behind the rusty gate, but it sure was fun to speculate. Making meth, like in that TV show? Probably not. Despite his dreams of medical school, he'd struggled some in science and anyway, he'd always had such a strict moral code. How about producing pornography? No, definitely not. He would have laughed at that suggestion, I decided. Actually, the guy I'd known ten years before would have laughed at it, but I wasn't sure if anything remained of that person anymore. I certainly wasn't at all the same as when I'd left this town, and I was glad of it.

But whatever he was doing inside the building, Shaw wasn't emerging from it to cut the grass or to weed because I had to pick around a lot of tall, spikey plants to get closer to the house. He hadn't hired a crew to come in take care of things for a fee, either. His family had always been rich in a lot of ways: land, memories, and love, to name a few. But they'd never had a lot of money. At least, they hadn't until the last ten years or so, and not that he had an excuse for avoiding a job and making some for himself. He was only twenty-six now and ten years before he'd been smart, strong, and determined. He had the capability, in other words, and there had been plenty of time to make a success of himself. That was what I had done.

I'd parked the car a way back because huge rocks blocked the driveway, four boulders almost the exact same size placed in a neat, straight row. I remembered Shaw in geometry class in high school and the way he'd carefully sketched out the figures on the graph paper in his notebook, each line precise. I was sure that he had put this obstruction across the route to his house, so that no one would be able to drive up and descend on him. I took another few steps toward them.

"Stop right there," the voice said, and now I was also sure that it was him speaking. Who else could it have been? There was no family left, no wife or girlfriend according to the gossip, no children for certain. Not even any pets, not that I'd heard. I'd been asking around as casually as I could and it didn't take much for people to want to talk about him. Besides his transformation into a mysterious semi-hermit, he had always been so appealing. His looks made him that way, because even at first glance you would have been attracted to how handsome he was. Like you never wanted to stop staring at him, because he just had that kind of face—his looks were irrelevant to the task at hand and I refocused.

"It's me, Grier," I repeated. Of course he remembered me, although he would have preferred to forget. I decided to remind him of the happier part of our past. "We were in so many classes together in ninth grade," I called. "We sat together and did our homework together. We were friends." But while he'd stayed here in this desolate house, I'd left. I'd gone away to boarding school and then to college and then I'd started my career, and I'd only come back a few times during vacations. They'd been darting visits, just a day or two before I was ushered away again, back to an empty dorm, off to a

camp, or enrolled in a summer school. I hadn't seen Shaw or anyone from here apart from people at church on the few Sundays and holidays when my attendance had been required. My parents had liked to make an appearance at times.

I waited for a reaction to my words and I did hear movement inside the house, faint but definitely there. It was too dark behind the windows to see anything of the interior, not with the summer sun shining above me like the light bulb inside an oven. There was no shade where I stood in the driveway, but there was plenty on the house because the big building sat well-camouflaged by tall, old trees. Shaw's great, great-grandfather had cut down only the minimum when he'd constructed his home, preferring to live in a forest. The whole property was wooded like that, but it hadn't been quite so wild before. The gate at the road had always been old but it had been neat, for example. Now it was disguised by broken branches and litter from cars passing by, and it was hardly visible at all. From my current perspective in the driveway, the house looked empty, but I'd heard that voice—

And then the front door opened and there was Shaw Highsmith. It had been a lot of years and he had changed, just as I had. He seemed taller than I remembered and broader through the shoulders and chest, but I hadn't seen him since he was sixteen so that made sense. Of course he'd grown. His dark hair was closely cropped now, when before it had been a mass of...mess. No one had ever bothered to tell him to cut it when he was younger, and he'd never cared about how it had looked.

His eyes seemed different, although the shade of his irises couldn't have altered from the light brown they'd been before.

They were almost an amber color that (in my teenage-melodrama stage of life) had reminded me of a wolf. Anyway, I couldn't see his eyes very well from this distance. He hadn't advanced out of the doorway and I had stopped next to the boulders.

Enough of this. "Can I come up?" I called.

It was very quiet, with just the sound of cicadas and birds. It was very quiet because Shaw didn't answer me. He stood absolutely still, a talent he'd always had, and seemed to watch. He'd done that in our biology class, I remembered, when the teacher lectured from behind the tall desk at the front of the room. Shaw's eyes had moved slightly, flicking left and right, up and down, but everything else about him had been stationary, as if he didn't even breathe. I'd watched him instead of the teacher.

"Stay right there," he ordered. "What was the name of our PE coach in our freshman year?"

Was he testing me? "Mr. Brown," I answered. "He didn't like you because you were so skinny but you could do so many pull-ups. It made him mad that you were stronger than you looked so he had you run laps." Then the teacher had gotten even madder, because Shaw could also run forever. I'd alit with indignation on his behalf for being punished because he was good at something, and then I'd wanted to blow raspberries in Mr. Brown's face when Shaw had gone for lap after lap and never slowed, never tired. I'd overflowed with pride.

"Why did you come here?" he asked from his position in the doorway.

I'd practiced an answer to this in the car, prepping for likely questions and concerns in the same way that I'd done in my career. "We haven't seen each other in so long," I announced with a friendly grin. I let my voice settle back into the Tennessee accent that I'd worked hard to polish out during my first year of boarding school. "How are you, Shaw?" It was important to say someone's name. It helped to establish a friendly rapport, which obviously, we didn't have anymore.

"Why did you come?"

Ok, those strategies hadn't worked, so I went to the next one: showing my humanity and recognizing his. "I was so sorry to hear about your dad. You must have been devastated."

"Were you sorry? I wonder why."

I brushed my fingertips over my temple, wiping away a droplet of sweat that had threatened to run down my cheek. "I was so sorry," I said, and I felt real tears come to my eyes. It wasn't only a strategy because the loss had hit me, too. It would have been good if he'd seen them but he was probably too far away to notice.

"Why are you here?"

Those tactics hadn't worked either, and I cleared my throat. If I could get inside, I could see what was really happening in his life. I could really understand and start to solve this problem.

"Can I come in? It's hot out." I smiled and fanned myself with my hand.

"It's not any cooler inside the house," he told me, but he moved, finally. He walked toward me and stood in the shade

of a pine tree, and when he didn't object to my approach, I joined him there.

He did look different. It wasn't only his increased size, although the skinny sixteen-year-old was definitely gone. Maybe he wasn't leaving this house to hit the gym in town or coming out in the front yard to do a lot of weeding, but he was up to something to make the muscles that I saw outlined under his t-shirt. Besides that, I saw a change in his face that I couldn't put a label on. Maturity? Pain? Anger?

"You look different," he said, echoing my thoughts. He squinted his eyes, and I saw that they were still amber.

"I do my hair differently now." Before, when he'd known me, it had been a blonde tornado, and those days were long over.

"It's not just your hair. You look old."

Furious words sprang to my lips in answer, but I shrugged slightly instead of saying them. "I guess time catches up to all of us."

"You're twenty-three," he pointed out. "You shouldn't be haggard yet."

Again, I bit back my response. "Maybe I'm tired," I suggested instead. I was, because I'd been working very hard since I'd come home. Not that I didn't work hard generally, but this had been physical labor and it had been outside in the night.

Anyone would have looked bad after all that.

"What do you want, Grier?"

I'd always loved when he said my name. Even now, all these years later, it made my heart pick up to hear it. "I'm back

from Los Angeles and I wanted to catch up with old friends.” I smiled at him again. “Like you!”

He didn’t smile in return. “Who else is on your list?”

Well, no one, which he already knew because I hadn’t had any friends here besides him. “How long has it been? I bet that you didn’t go to the five-year reunion either,” I went on. I hadn’t graduated with the rest of them, so I actually hadn’t been invited.

“Cut the shit,” he suggested, and I stopped smiling.

“I thought—you were right,” I said, and the phrases started breaking unevenly like they’d done when I was younger. “I don’t know very many people, besides some through my parents and church, so I thought—a lot of our age group has moved away, or they don’t remember—” Or they did remember me from when I’d lived here and they still couldn’t stand me, for which I couldn’t blame them. I had been almost totally without social, athletic, and verbal skills and I had looked like I had thirty skeins of unraveled yarn on my head.

But I was different now, because I had worked very hard to get that way (and multiple stylists had toiled, too). I was no longer that girl with the bushy hair who couldn’t string a sentence together without turning red and stammering. I reminded myself that I was great, the new and improved version of Grier, and Shaw would be impressed once he recognized it.

“I wanted to say hello and to let you know that I’m here, that I’m home,” I said, and this overture emerged more coherently. He was still silent. “I would have called instead of coming over,” I offered, “but I don’t have your cell.” I had tried the

old number to his house phone, dialing the digits that my finger had automatically reached for when I'd thought of him, but an automated voice had informed me that it was no longer in service. Their phone had hung on the kitchen wall, bright yellow and installed sometime in the middle of the last century. It was what we'd used to talk when we weren't together, whispering softly and laughing.

"I don't have a cell phone," he stated.

"Really? You don't have any communication with the outside world?"

He didn't bother to answer and although I didn't get tongue-tied anymore, although I wasn't the tornado-haired girl always at a loss for words, I couldn't think of anything to say that would come out right. It didn't help that he was staring at me so balefully, as if my deodorant had totally failed and he was downwind. Yes, it probably had failed because it was so hot and sticky, but he was also probably too far away to catch anything foul.

I'd have to try again later—I'd have to—because right now, it just wasn't working. It was important to know when to walk away, although that had always been difficult for me: I tended to want to dig in my heels and argue incessantly for another outcome. But in my short career in real estate, I had learned better. I'd seen that often when you did walk away, the withdrawal of interest and attention would lead your adversary to capitulate. When that happened, you could crush them, you could tie them into a deal so much in your own favor that they would be sorry they'd tried to jerk you around. So I smiled at him again, swiveled, and walked carefully toward my father's

car in front of the boulders as if I were leaving and didn't care at all about him and what he was hiding in that decaying house.

This tactic worked. Shaw did capitulate, even faster than I could have hoped. I'd barely reached my car door and touched the silver handle, already burning with the absorbed heat of the sun, when I heard my name again. "Grier."

Got him. I looked so bad, right? So tired, so old? I'd gotten him anyway, so thank you to the stylists and the thousands of dollars in expensive hair products I'd purchased from them, thank you to the yoga instructors and my personal trainer, and to the hours of makeup work, and to everything else I'd done. Got him.

"Yes?" I asked lightly as I turned. It did feel good to achieve even this small victory.

"I didn't mean to crack your windshield."

I hadn't thought so, but I hadn't known how much he might have changed. Time and trauma could do a lot to a person.

"I was trying to hit the driveway next to your tire," he explained.

"You never could aim," I said, and laughed in relief that we were now talking normally, and because I did remember him trying to throw. He'd liked to watch sports like baseball and football and he'd wanted to be good at them, but he'd never been able to hit the broad side of a barn with any projectile. All these years later, he still hadn't learned. But I, who hadn't known how to throw, run, or walk without wobbling, had gone

to yoga and the personal trainer and...well, now I could walk without falling down but I still couldn't throw either.

The sound of my laughter seemed to startle him, or maybe he got insulted by what I'd said, because he frowned at me. "I'll pay for the damage," he announced, pointing to the glass.

"Oh, it's not necessary at all," I assured him. "I can get it replaced without a problem."

"That's not right. I did it," he told me, and for the first time, he met my eyes. We stared at each other and I remembered why I'd thought he resembled a wolf. It wasn't just the color of his irises. I remembered my teenage-melodramatic ideas of "untamed" and "loner," but that was just from reading too many bad romance novels. He'd been a normal kid and he was a normal adult, too, except super bitter and angry.

"I'll get someone to go by your house and fix it," he went on.

"No, I'm not your responsibility," I said, just like I'd told him ten years before when we'd last spoken, and it all rushed back, swirling like floodwater. Why had I come here?

"Why did you come here, Grier?" he asked, echoing my thoughts. For a moment, I had no idea. All I could think was that I shouldn't have, I wished that I hadn't. It was a mistake.

But I rallied, because I did have a reason, a good one. It wasn't the one he was probably thinking of, that I'd shown up to apologize and make amends. It wasn't the one I'd stated either, that we could renew our friendship after having been apart for so long—because it really had been a friendship, however it had ended and however many years it had been since we'd had contact. No, those weren't actually the reasons

that I was here but they did sound a lot better than the truth, so that was what I said.

“I came to see you because it’s been forever,” I told him. “I’m home but it’s like I don’t even recognize it very much. The whole downtown looks different.”

“They fancied it up.”

I nodded. They sure had and it was better than it used to be—as in, the main street wasn’t full of empty storefronts and scary people selling weed to minors, and the old library looked as good as new. “The high school has changed, too,” I mentioned. “There’s a new football field?”

“They fixed the field and the track around it so that it doesn’t have all the potholes.” He told me more about a new principal, a guy who had started an art club and let the girls use the locker room that had been assigned to them for their afterschool sports. Before, that space had been siphoned off for the JV boys’ football players.

“You kept up with it,” I noted, and that made him realize who he was talking to.

“Why the hell do you care? You left and you never looked back. Stay out of my driveway, stay away from my house. Stay away from me.”

“Shaw—”

The strategy of saying his name didn’t work, again. He walked back toward his door a lot faster than he’d walked from it, and that was when I spotted his limp. It wasn’t as pronounced as the first time I’d seen him after the accident, when he’d hardly been able to put any weight at all on his leg

and each step had looked so painful that I'd turned away, unable to witness it. Since then, I'd been careful to avoid this house. I'd been careful to avoid his entire road because I didn't want to get near the old gate. The times that I'd been allowed home, I had driven in from the airport and gone directly to my parents' house. I'd only emerged to head to church some Sundays or to swim in the pool in the summer, and then I'd been sent away again. After a while, I hadn't come back to this town at all.

The pool outside my house was now full of brown water and little things swimming around that I thought might have been tadpoles. It seemed like years had passed since the service had been out to take care of it; my father had probably never learned to work on it himself, and my mother would never have noticed. Her interests hadn't included anything that wasn't wardrobe- or substance abuse-related.

I watched the door of the Highsmith house close and that was the last that I saw of Shaw, although I waited around my car for a while, pretending to check on the damage to my windshield. Really, I was thinking about what I was going to do next and trying to give myself time so that my hands would stop shaking. This hadn't gone at all like I'd wanted it to, but that was what I got for barreling over here with little to no prep work. I should have stopped and thought about my tactics before I came. I should have, but now it was too late; you couldn't go back and fix things once you'd broken them.

In the meantime, I had to leave. I reversed for a ways until there was a spot to turn around, and I mostly stared at the house instead of watching the driveway behind me as I went. He hadn't walked out with a gun and I was fairly sure that he

didn't have one. It had been an empty threat. He wouldn't ever have carried a firearm back when I'd known him and he never would have shot anywhere near another person.

That was lucky with aim like he had. Part of his problem with sports was a lack of practice, because no one had thought to work with him, but part was his eyesight. I remembered him squinting at the whiteboard at the front of our English class and then glancing over at my page of notes to see what I'd put down there. "You write like you're using the wrong hand," he had whispered to me, which was true because my penmanship —

My car bounced over a rock and I automatically hit the brakes and winced at the scratching noise that came from underneath somewhere. The windshield was a big enough problem no matter what I'd said to Shaw about how it didn't matter, and I knew that I had to be careful with this vehicle. Even so, I drove home pretty much lost in the memories that seeing him had brought to the surface, things I hadn't let myself even briefly consider for the last decade or so.

I thought about meeting him for the first time, seeing the tall, thin guy who was taking classes at least year below where he should have been so that he was already sixteen in ninth grade. I thought about starting high school myself, starting so young and fearful that I'd been sniffing as I walked up to the front door and had tried to hide it from the older girls who'd stared at my roly-poly body and tornado hair as I shuffled my way along. One had been nice and told me that the middle school was in the next building over, but I had been in the right place. I was thirteen and already a freshman, which made me really, really weird. Shaw and I had been at the

opposite ends of the age spectrum but were equally out of place. I realized that I was sniffing again now like a child as I turned into my own driveway.

It was so hot inside my house but I couldn't open the windows that night to cool it, because a big summer storm rolled in. I sat in my living room and watched the sky illuminate with each flash of lightning, and then I counted seconds until the booms of thunder sounded. The storm lasted for a long time and was strong enough that the window glass rattled with vibrations, but even after it was over, I still wasn't able to close my eyes and drift off.

That was why I looked bad—old, as Shaw had pointed out. I wasn't sleeping enough. In the morning, I examined my face carefully in the mirror, checking for lines and wrinkles or brown spots, but all I saw was that I looked sunken and tired. My clothes had started to hang off my body, I'd noticed, which was partially due to the increased physical labor that left my muscles aching in the mornings, but also to the fact that I couldn't seem to eat very much.

I remembered my mother doing that, avoiding food and saying she just couldn't, but I'd never had this problem before. Until now, I'd gone the other way, consuming until I was almost sick—but this morning I noticed that my face had started to look gaunt, as if my eyes were too big for it, and I was pale, too. No wonder Shaw had been underwhelmed by my appearance.

The ladies at church that day also noticed, despite the work I'd put in with makeup and yes, stuffing my already padded bra. I hadn't been home for that long, only two weeks, but one asked

if I was feeling well because I didn't seem as "healthy" as I'd been when I'd arrived, and another suggested that I should come to her house for lunch to get a good meal in. I answered, "Yes, ma'am, I'm feeling great!" with a big smile in response to the first question, and to the lunch invitation, I politely declined by claiming that I needed to work.

"Even on a Sunday? They're driving you too hard," she commented.

"I like keeping busy," I said, and she nodded back as if she knew that was true, but in fact, no one here knew me at all. Possibly they'd heard things from my parents, and I'd shown up a few times over the years. None of those trips had lasted long enough for me to really remember names to go along with the faces. I was trying to memorize them now and I had started a list in my phone, a cheat sheet of who they were, where they worked, and distinguishing characteristics to help me remember them. The one who'd suggested that I looked ill had a nevus on the side of her nose that was large enough to be very distracting when you spoke to her, but it made it easy to recall her name: Miss Debrah *Molyneux*.

The one who'd asked me over to eat with her family? I didn't have a clue, but I'd look her up later because, of course, it was important to use people's names so they felt a rapport with you. I smiled at them and walked to take my seat, placing myself at the end of the pew to facilitate an easy escape at the end of Mass. I had to limit the amount of time that I spoke to people here, because as much as I wanted information from them, I didn't want to give it out about myself.

Just before the priest greeted us, there was a small stir within the congregation. No one spoke but I heard a rustling that denoted heads turning and bodies shifting, and it was so that they could look to the back of the nave. I turned too and saw Shaw Highsmith entering and sliding into the last row. He didn't look at anyone as he did so; his eyes were right on the altar at the front.

I listened with half an ear but the moment that the service was over, I stood up and strode as fast as I could so that I was one of the first through the doors into the narthex. For the past two times I'd attended on Sundays, I'd continued walking quickly out to my car but today, I stopped and looked at a bulletin board with pictures of a youth group working on framing a new house and smiling together. At the same time, I waited for the doors behind me to open again, and they did soon enough.

I turned and glanced over my shoulder...no, it was that lady who wore the big hat and smelled so musty, like both she and the headgear had been kept in an unaired attic for a long time. I smiled hello to her, and as I did, Shaw appeared over her shoulder. He was a foot or so over her shoulder, because he had grown even taller over the last decade. I kept the smile on my face and he didn't give one back to me, but he did walk slowly over to the bulletin board.

"Hello, Grier."

"Hello," I answered. It sounded breathy, kind of like I'd been running. If I'd been doing that, I would have had bruises on my knees because my newfound balance and grace only extended to slower gaits.

“I’ll go with you to your car.”

He did, slowly again. When he moved that way, it was hard to see him limping at all. He must have noticed where my eyes were: on his knee and leg. “It’s better now,” he remarked.

I wasn’t sure how to respond to that. Was I supposed to say, “Glad to hear that the injury I caused didn’t totally ruin your life, only partially?” I just nodded.

“I wanted to talk to you about your windshield.”

Well, it was better than nothing. I hadn’t thought of that like a hook, but I could use it. “I was wondering why you spoke to me again after how things went yesterday,” I noted, but he didn’t respond. “The windshield really isn’t a problem,” I continued. “I’ll get it fixed. I guess I’ll have to soon, because I think I could get a ticket for driving with so much damage to the glass.” I wasn’t sure that was true, and I thought I should read up on applicable code. “I’ll get it done when I can make the time. I’m very busy.”

“I heard that you were doing something with real estate in California.”

He’d heard that? “I was, but I’ve moved on from that position,” I answered. “I decided to come back here for a while after what happened.”

“Your parents,” he said, and yes, that was what had happened. “It was a big story,” he mentioned and I nodded because their car crash had been a noteworthy event, as in, the local TV news had reported on it. I’d watched the segments on my phone as I’d sat at the gate at LAX, not understanding what was happening.

But he didn't say that he felt bad about their demise, only that he was aware of it happening. Well, that was ok. I wasn't sure if I'd been sorry about it myself—definitely shocked, but sad? It was complicated. “It was sudden,” I noted, because it had surprised the heck out of me. “I had to come back to take care of everything.” There was a lot that remained unsettled, a lot I had ahead of me.

“Are you going to live here permanently now?”

Was he worried that I would be around or did he want me to stay? I held my hand to my eyes to block the sun and casually surveyed the parishioners emerging from the church. They were surveying us, too—not at all casually—as we stood by the car. I didn't know if there had been a bigger scandal in the history of our congregation than everything that had happened between the Highsmith and Warren families, and now here were Shaw and I talking in the parking lot. I smiled widely to demonstrate the happy ease of our relationship.

“Why are you grinning like that, so fake? It's almost frightening.”

I felt the corners of my mouth tug down into unhappiness.

“That was rude.”

He didn't seem sorry. “It was the strangest thing seeing you in the driveway yesterday, getting out of your father's old Benz,” he told me. “It took me right back.”

So he had recognized the car, but he'd still thrown the rock.

“It was like history repeating itself,” Shaw went on. “I remember him driving up there and my grandpa threatening to shoot him.”

“I remember that.” My father had wanted to buy the Highsmiths’ land and had been yelling offers through the open window even as he backed up. “Your dad was polite. He told him not to trespass.”

“It’s good advice. I don’t have a gun, but Grandpa did. He would have used it.”

I knew how his grandpa had ignored most systems of authority, like courts and their codified laws, but he wasn’t violent. “I don’t think he would have shot anyone, either,” I said.

Shaw didn’t appear to share that opinion. He shrugged one of his broad shoulders but then added, “He hated your whole family. He thought all y’all would burn in Hell.”

I agreed that my parents were probably already there. “I came to church today to work on avoiding that scenario,” I mentioned, and for the first time in ten years, I saw him smile slightly. It was only a tiny quirk of his lips but it was much better than the frown that he’d been directing at me since he’d opened his front door.

“That sounded like the girl I used to know,” he said and for just a moment, it was like we were back in high school. It was very brief because then he seemed to remember who we were and where we were now, that it was a decade later and we stood in a parking lot with an audience of people pretending to walk very slowly to their cars so that they could stare at us.

“So you’re staying,” he said, the smile gone. “You’re not coming for a weekend and then taking off.” He paused. “That was a chance for you to fill in how long you’ll be around.”

I recognized that this conversation was about more than my windshield. “I don’t know yet. I haven’t decided on the future. I was great in California—I really loved going to school and living there,” I told him, so he wouldn’t get the wrong idea about the direction my life had taken. It had been so wonderful and great, and it would be great when I returned to it. “I loved it, but I did miss being in Tennessee, too,” I admitted. “There’s a lot of business to settle and I might have to be here for a while.”

It was probably not what he wanted to hear. He’d gone for a long time without seeing me and being reminded of the crap that had happened in the past, and my presence would only bring everything back up.

He confirmed this idea. “I thought you’d come and go like you always have. Are you seriously thinking about staying? Why would you do that?”

I was a big girl so it didn’t bother me that someone didn’t like me—that someone hated me—but it did make me angry. Maybe it had hurt my feelings, too, and that was why I said something contrary to my best interests and then I doubled down.

“Everything happened so long ago, nobody even remembers it,” I told him and added, “You could have—why didn’t you leave? You should have! I did, on purpose. Your house is no good anymore and people say you make porn in it, which I don’t believe but you could have gotten a job and had an amazing life, too. You made the mistakes, not me.” No, that was wrong. It wasn’t anything like what I should have said,

because his face closed off and he took a step back from me. “Wait, I didn’t mean,” I began, but Shaw was already talking. “You haven’t changed. All that time I could have spent moving away, you could have spent making yourself a decent person. You’re just the same as you were ten years ago when you left, and I don’t want anything to do with you,” he said, and he walked off. I watched him limp to his car and so did the other congregants. We all saw him drive away, back to that lonely house in the woods.

He was wrong, because I had changed. I had left our hometown as a stupid little girl who got kicked down the road, and I had come back as a successful woman who was going to win now and then keep on winning.

He’d see that because I’d make him. I’d show Shaw and I’d show everyone.

CHAPTER 2

The witchy woman looked at my résumé and nodded.
“I’m very impressed.”

Good. Everything on there was true and yes, it was all very impressive. “Thank you,” I told her.

“I wonder why you’re here.”

“Excuse me? I’m here because you have a job opening and we discussed me coming for an interview,” I said. “Is that not right?” I looked around the bookstore and realized that maybe I had misunderstood her intent. “If that was that more of an existential question, I’m prepared to discuss Kierkegaard, Sartre, and de Beauvoir.”

“No, that’s not necessary,” she said quickly. “I was actually wondering why someone with an MBA would want a part-time job at my bookshop. It’s really not a position that would utilize the skills and experience you’ve listed here.” She looked at the second and then third, fourth, and fifth pages of my CV. “Again, this is all very impressive, but you would be stocking books, helping customers, and, of course, prepping for Lughnasadh.” She delicately blew her nose.

“Bless you,” I said politely.

“I wasn’t sneezing, I was referring to the celebration of Lammas,” she explained, “and I also have seasonal allergies.” Then she proceeded to tell me a lot more about pagan holidays than I’d ever learned before (or wanted to know). I listened for a while as I pretended to drink her rancid flower tea, but I really had to get going. I was used to moving at an LA pace:

everything was fast and you didn't have to bother with niceties of behavior, like chitchat and pretending to care about anyone else. Out there, if you were waiting for an old guy to pull out of a parking spot and he was taking much too long because he was talking on the phone and lighting a cigarette as he maneuvered, then you could lay on your horn and give him the finger. Also, if the older woman who was interviewing you was nattering endlessly about ancient festivals and you were done with it, then you could get up and escape in the middle of one of her sentences without saying goodbye.

Both of those situations had occurred within the last hour and I'd had to remind myself not to respond in the SoCal way. Even if I couldn't rudely bolt, though, I already knew that I shouldn't work at this store. Not one customer had walked in during the entire time I'd been sitting here, and if there weren't any customers, it would just be the two of us. This woman would be up in my business before I could even blink, and there was a lot that I didn't want to discuss with her or with anyone else about my current, temporary lack of success and the situation that my parents had left behind. There were only so many ways to say "mind your own business" before you cursed at someone and got fired.

She also seemed to have the understanding that I would not be suitable for the position of "clerk, assistant, neophyte" that she'd advertised online. "I'll let you know, but I'll say now that I think you'd do a lovely job at any number of places. Any number of places would be happy to have you, besides my bookstore," she told me kindly, as if I needed her kindness. "And here." She held out a smooth, pink rock and I automatically took it.

“What is this?”

“It’s rose quartz,” she explained. “It’s designed to draw positive energy. And love! Good luck to you, Grier.”

“Thank you for your time,” I said politely and I smiled nicely, too, as I dropped the pink stone into my purse. I didn’t need its help in drawing positive energy, because I made my own luck. I was the captain of my ship and anyway, I didn’t believe in mineral power. I walked out of the store and immediately let the smile fall away as the humidity of the fading afternoon enveloped me. My car was a few blocks over since that old guy never had gotten out of the good spot, so I strode off down the baking sidewalk, checking my phone as I went. I’d compiled a list of other places I had considered for jobs, because I needed one fast.

But I couldn’t take just anything. I wanted to work outside of my hometown where I wouldn’t constantly have to explain myself, my parents’ deaths, and my choices in life to my neighbors. Driving into Chattanooga had seemed to be my best bet since there were more options here. I also had to be at a place where no one I knew would ever go even if they did venture away from home, and “Selah’s Magical Books,” where I’d just interviewed, had fit that bill exactly. Selah wasn’t going to hire me, though, so I had to keep up the search. I went down my list, past fast-food restaurants where I would ask to work in the kitchen, giant stores where I could operate in stockrooms, phone- and internet-based jobs where my face wouldn’t show to anyone at all. None were great choices for a variety of reasons, but I was going to have to settle. For the moment, it would be ok.

I looked up and realized that as I'd scrolled, I'd also walked in the wrong direction. Right now I was across from a big hospital, one busy with cars and people. As I watched, an ambulance raced up the street toward it and I stopped when I read the name above the wide front entrance.

This was the place where my parents had been brought after their accident a few months before. I had gotten a call from the police late in the night in Los Angeles, California, which meant very, very late here in Chattanooga, Tennessee. I'd been groggy and tired but even if they had called in the middle of the day, I still would have had trouble grasping what had happened. My mother and father had been driving so far away from their home, so late at night, and together? And she had been the one behind the wheel? And the car—her car—was registered under my name? I remembered trying to understand it all as the officer had talked to me because none of that had made sense. I didn't think that my mother had even renewed her license over the past ten years, so why...

The big doors slid open, gaping wide as someone departed from the huge medical complex. He had a limp, very obvious today as he made his way to the crosswalk and then picked up his pace to reach the opposite sidewalk where I was. I stood staring at him in shock for much too long before I remembered that I had better not let him catch me here, because it would seem exactly like I was spying on him. Why else would both of us have been an hour from home on the exact same street? I turned and walked in the direction that the bright summer sun was slowly sinking so he'd have to squint to see me, and since his eyesight was poor anyway, I was probably in the clear.

"Grier? What in the hell are you doing here?"

Or maybe not. I raised my hand and waved, but I kept on going. He couldn't catch me, not with his leg so mangled—but as soon as that thought crossed my mind, I stopped, freezing exactly where I was so that Shaw soon stood abreast of me.

He was both confused and furious. “Did you follow me?” he asked, reaching for my arm. His fingers hovered like a clamp around my biceps, almost touching my skin.

“You wish!” I shot back. “I certainly wasn't following you.”

“Then what in the hell are you doing here right now?”

I glanced over at the hospital. “I was—I was on a pilgrimage. That's the medical center where my parents died.” Or actually, that was the place where their bodies had been brought, because I'd looked at everything I could find about the accident and there was no way that they could have survived the initial crash, no matter how the officer on that phone call had talked to me about rescue efforts and first responders and whatever else. My mother's old Porsche had been totally wrapped around a tree. Another car had stopped to help, but the witness had told the police that the engine had felt only a little warm to the touch. He hadn't touched the occupants of the vehicle because he'd known that there was no use checking for a pulse. No matter how well the car had been built, they hadn't used airbags in the 1980s and my parents never wore seatbelts. They had been DOA from the impact.

Shaw's face softened slightly when he heard my excuse and his hand dropped away from my arm. “I didn't realize that this was where—” But then he got angry again, furious. “You

just happened to be doing your pilgrimage at this exact moment? Exactly when I was leaving the building?”

I forgot that I was supposed to be making up to him, being nice to get what I wanted. “I had no idea that you would be here,” I snapped. “How did you even see me?”

“I wear contacts now and I can see for miles,” he snapped back. “That was how I spotted you spying.”

“I was not! As far as I knew, you never left your property except to bother me at church.”

“I bothered you at church? I bothered you?”

“You bothered me,” I confirmed. “I’ve minded my own business and left you totally alone since I went to your stupid house.” Not that I hadn’t been plotting, but physically? Yes, I’d left him alone.

“What’s the matter with my house?” Shaw demanded. “You used to like going over there to get away from your crazy parents.”

My blood boiled at his words, because—well, mostly because he was right. “You don’t know! Why don’t you—your house is decrepit, and poverty isn’t romantic. I won’t go there again, not that I’m invited, so don’t worry, because I think it’s depressing,” I announced. Those words weren’t anything like the cogent argument I’d meant to make, and I was panting in anger instead of controlling my errant emotions.

“Poverty is depressing and not romantic. You finally figured that out?” He stepped back and shook his head. “Goodbye, Grier. Stop following me.” He turned and started to walk away and he was limping a whole lot.

I hadn't meant to say any of that, not only because it wouldn't help me at all but because it was just mean. One thing he'd never been, at least until lately, was mean. I suddenly had a vivid memory of walking into my first class in high school, freshman English. I'd sat down at a desk in the front corner of the room so that no one would be able to turn around in the rows ahead to see me crying. He'd sat next to me even though there were a lot of empty chairs and despite what I'd found out later, how he liked to sit in the back so that no one could complain about him being too tall to see around. Without speaking, he'd reached and put a tissue on top of my binder.

And when I'd used it to wipe my eyes and blow away my sniffles, I'd finally looked up at him. I was probably the ugliest girl he'd ever seen, red-nosed and swollen-eyed and all-around unattractive even without those issues, but he'd smiled anyway and I'd seen a dimple in his cheek that was so appealing. "I like your stickers," he'd said, and pointed to the cover of my binder.

All that came back as I watched him for a split second longer and then I ran after him. I only wavered once and I managed to right myself on a bus stop and keep going. It didn't take me that long to catch up, panting and hot. "Shaw, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I said that."

"Screw off."

I'd learned in business that the first offer wasn't what you took as the final, so I didn't screw off. I kept talking. "No, wait. I'm very sorry. I did love your house and I always wanted to be there. It was my favorite place. Don't you remember? I would come and your grandpa would make eggs—"

He stopped his jerking walk. “Do you know why he did that? Do you know why he always made eggs?”

“Because we were hungry?”

“Because we had chickens, so eggs were free. We had a garden, so the vegetables were, too. Yes, we were poor. I always assumed you were oblivious to it, just like you were to everything else.”

“What does that mean?” I asked. I had been as smart back then as I was now, not oblivious in the least.

“Do you remember coming over after Christmas? You were playing with a gold bracelet that you’d gotten as a present, spinning it around your finger like a hula hoop, and it flung off somewhere in the room. You didn’t even try to help find it because you didn’t care. You had no idea of its value and you had no appreciation that you’d been given something so nice.”

I did remember that bracelet. “No, I didn’t care because I knew why I got it. My parents had forgotten to buy me anything for Christmas so my mother went into her jewelry box and picked something that she didn’t ever wear to pass off to me. They had one child, one, and they had forgotten about a present and they only gave it to me in case someone at Mass asked about my gifts.”

I paused, because people were staring at us as we argued on this sidewalk and it wasn’t just the heat and humidity that was making my face feel so darn hot. “I’m sorry,” I said again, very stiffly now. “I shouldn’t have been rude to you now or thrown my bracelet back then, and I’m sorry that I ran into you today. I did not, not in any way, plan to spy on you coming out of the hospital.” No, my plan had been to wait until after

church on Sunday and approach him if he showed up there, which I'd been mentally weighing the odds of.

"Why are you here in Chattanooga, then?" he asked.

"I went to a bookstore." That was true, but I hadn't gone to shop as that response might have implied.

"There's no bookstore on this street." But he shook his head before I could react. "Right, your pilgrimage. Sure." He stood staring at me, and while he hesitated, I pressed to gain an advantage.

"Why were you here?" I asked in return. "Are you sick?"

"No. I came for physical therapy."

"Still?" I asked, looking at where his leg had been so broken and twisted. That had been a decade ago, though. I didn't know you would keep working on an injury for so long.

"I had another surgery last year," he answered. "If you care."

"I do," I said, trying to put honesty and sincerity into those two words. I still needed him, I reminded myself. No, I didn't need Shaw exactly, not as a person, but I needed his knowledge and I needed to get into his house. I needed to figure out what kind of scam he and his family had been pulling all these years. I didn't really care about a problem which he had brought on himself, but my eyes did go to his leg again, and then I remembered the sound of him moaning in pain. I could hear it just like it was happening again, right at this moment on the hot sidewalk instead of the wet, dark driveway ten years before.

"Right, you care so much," he said, "you and your family, too. That was why your parents refused to pay any of my medical

bills—”

“You liar,” I burst out, and I forgot that I was supposed to be friendly and placating and said it loudly and angrily all over again. He was a liar! He pretended to live in poverty, he let his house go to shambles, but I knew. I knew! “I have the records. I’ve seen the proof,” I told him. “I’ve seen everything! I’ve gone through all the information that my father had about your family and I know about the payments.”

He stared at me, and if I didn’t know how he’d changed over the years, that he’d become someone so bitter and angry and manipulative, I could have sworn that he was honestly confused. “What records? What payments?” he asked, sounding bewildered. “What are you talking about?”

We looked at each other. “There’s no reason to discuss it like this, not here.” I forced a smile, because this wasn’t the way to win. I’d been an idiot to show my hand like that and I needed to backtrack and make it up somehow. “Why don’t I come over to your house and we can sit out of the sun and square things away?”

“No. No, I don’t want you at my house again. I’ll come to you.”

He didn’t want me there because he didn’t want me to see the truth, but there was no way that he could come and see the truth about me, either. “You’ll—wait, no,” I tried to say. “No, we—”

“What’s the matter with that idea?” he asked. “You can show me whatever the hell you’re talking about that makes you think you can speak to me like I’m your servant.”

“I’m not doing that! I’m not acting like I’m better than you.”

He looked as if he were about to argue, but then he said, “Fine. I’ll see you at seven.” He walked away slowly and carefully, and maybe his leg pained him after working on it in physical therapy but he didn’t show it now. He kept his gait even and both shoulders level, not stooping to one side or twisting at all when he walked. How did I even know that he’d been to some therapist appointment, anyway? Why would I have believed that he needed more surgery on that leg? There was nothing but his word to go on, and I wasn’t going to do that.

But I figured that I’d better hurry, because I had a lot to do if Shaw was actually coming to my house tonight. I rushed back to my father’s car and drove as quickly as I could, moving my head around to see past the cracks that had spread into my line of vision on the driver’s side. That method worked ok but there were definitely problems, which was the same situation as in my childhood home. Problems. Definitely.

By the time that the hands on the clock in the living room—now in the living room—moved onto the seven and the twelve, I had accomplished almost everything to prep for his visit. I looked around and carefully felt over my straightened hair. The house wasn’t as cool as I would have wanted but there was no way to change that, so I was wearing my sheerest summer dress and had put on a whole lot of powder and foundation in case I started to show the heat on my face.

And then I waited. I sat near the front window, which I had open to try to catch an evening breeze, and thought about icebergs, blizzards, sleet, unheated pools, and other things that would keep my mind off the fact that it had to have been

eighty degrees in here, if not warmer. “Wasn’t as cool as I would have wanted” was definitely a stretch when describing the current conditions inside my house. It felt a lot like I had the heat on, when most people switched to air conditioning during a Middle Tennessee summer.

Shaw was late, and the sun was setting when I finally heard his approach in the distance. Like his own house, you couldn’t see mine from the street; unlike his, my father hadn’t left the property wild. There were large lawns and beds for flowers, shrubs and trees meant to be trimmed and manicured, and a definite landscape rather than the forest that surrounded the Highsmith place. Yes, I had a landscape to maintain, and that really sucked.

I’d been getting ready to call it quits on waiting for him and go change into work clothes when he deigned to make his appearance. As I watched at the front window, the same ancient vehicle that Shaw had owned ten years before chugged its way up the driveway. It bounced over the cracks and dipped significantly when he ran over the big pothole that I knew to avoid. I watched him park and emerge from his old truck to look around, surveying the place. It had been a long time since he’d been here, and he’d only come that one time. I’d asked him over to study with me, which we’d usually done at his house, but I’d thought that it would be fun...

Oh, no. He was currently walking around my father’s car and examining the windshield. I jumped up and rushed to the door, throwing it open. At least that created a little gust of air, although it didn’t balance out the heat I’d accrued with my swift movement or the twist I’d given to my ankle as I did. Ow.

“Shaw!” I called, and walked outside, frenetically waving my hands. “The front door is over here.” And he would have been pretty oblivious not to see it, because there were huge topiaries on either side and a portico that went up a story and a half. It wasn’t a small house. “Come in!” I called, and smiled. He didn’t return that, but he did approach on the path from the driveway and mounted the five steps to join me. I should have hidden the car—I couldn’t have put it in the garage, of course, because all four doors had broken openers and I wasn’t sure how to deal with them, despite the multiple videos I’d watched and articles I’d read on repair websites. Not that it mattered, since I also had the power issue.

“You didn’t get that windshield fixed,” he said briefly and he did enter my house, walking past me and into the foyer. It was a place I wanted to hurry him through due to its emptiness—there were definite light patches on the paint where pictures had hung, and the furniture was gone, too. I slid around his side and went toward the living room, talking as I went.

“It totally slipped my mind,” I said over my shoulder. “Come have a seat. Can I get you something to drink?”

“I’ll take a glass of water.” He looked around more, frowning, as he joined me. “It’s damn hot in here.”

“Is it? I don’t feel it,” I lied with another large smile. I went into the kitchen, got ice out of the cooler, and filled a glass with that and water from the tap. He wasn’t asking for anything fancy, or at least, the Shaw I’d known from the past wouldn’t have wanted that.

He seemed pleased enough with what I gave him and finished it a few long swallows, and then he wiped the sleeve of his t-

shirt over his forehead. “What financial records were you talking about? Show me.”

I had planned on a little small talk, actually, so I sat in the chair that my mother had always occupied when my parents had entertained, the few times they’d done it. I’d spied from the staircase, pressing my face between the spindles so I could see my mother dressed up, a glass in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Actually, she hadn’t often been without those accessories.

“Please, sit,” I offered to Shaw, and he looked warily at the couch before he placed himself onto its plank of a cushion. He wiped his face again and balanced his glass, empty and sweating, on his jean-covered knee. “Is your leg feeling better after the PT?” I asked politely.

“Let’s cut the shit, Grier. What in the hell were you talking about when you implied that your family gave mine money?”

I didn’t recall “implying” anything; by mistake, I’d spit that fact right out of my mouth. “Can I get you more water? How about some pecans?” He’d always liked them and the bag I’d bought to soothe him into liking me as well had been expensive, so I hoped he’d accept my offer.

He only waited, looking at me.

“Ok,” I said, sighing. “Fine. You want to play a game of not-knowing? Great, I’m up for it. Wow, Shaw, isn’t it amazing that your dad never had a job but somehow he was able to pay his property taxes for all those years? Isn’t that funny?”

“What? He got disability benefits and my grandpa had savings. What do you know about my property taxes?”

“That money covered everything? All your expenses? How about this, then—isn’t it weird how you got offered a ‘scholarship’ that you never even applied for to go to college? Isn’t that what y’all called it, so no one would wonder where the money had come from?”

He stared now, his jaw sagging open. “How in the hell did you know—”

“Oh, come on! You cut the crap! You must have been aware of how much my father was paying out to your family over all these years, so where did it go? I expected to see a palace behind your front gate but it’s even worse than it used to be, like pigs might live there instead of humans,” I told him.

“Where’s the money? Because I want it back.”

We stared at each other, me glaring with all the anger I’d accumulated since coming home after my parents’ deaths and finding the mess they’d left behind, and him looking back with...

“Please wipe that ‘I’m so confused’ expression off your face,” I said. “You used to do the same thing when our English teacher asked questions and you weren’t confused at all, you just hadn’t read the assignment.”

“I haven’t read this assignment either—no, I mean that I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t,” he repeated shortly when I rolled my eyes. “What you just said makes no sense to me, none. As far as I know, I did get a college scholarship, but I gave it up because I couldn’t leave my dad. I thought some other kid should have...how do you know about that?”

I took a small pillow and fanned my face, waving away some of the heat. “My father gave a big donation to your dad for

your education,” I said slowly and carefully. “The bank in this stupid town sent actual paper statements, so I have the image of the check, where it says ‘Scholarship for Shaw’ in the memo line and it’s endorsed by Paul Highsmith on the back. Even if you didn’t use it for school, your dad still took that money. Ten thousand dollars. What did you do with it all?”

“Ten thousand dollars,” Shaw repeated.

“Did you spend it? How? Do you have a gambling problem or something? Did you waste it on bad investments? Buy nice cars and wreck them? Do you still have some left? Because if there’s anything, then you better give it over.” No, that had sounded so childish! It sounded like I was trying to squeeze him for lunch money. “I should say, I demand recompense. I don’t want to bring my attorney into this, but I will.”

That had been a dumb tactic, very dumb. Threats had always been the last resort at the real estate firm I’d worked for, and they would only employ them if they could actually back them up. I’d gotten angry again and let my mouth run away with itself. But now, of course, I had to stand my ground.

“I don’t want to call the police,” I continued, and he snorted.

“I dare you.”

“You don’t believe me? You don’t think I’ll do it?”

“I thought you were serious until you said that about the lawyer. You’re full of it,” he answered, and that pushed me into total fury.

Sweat dripped down between my shoulder blades as I stomped into the old library/office. It wasn’t hard to locate the bank

statement I'd just referred to, not since I'd done all the work to organize the mess of my father's paperwork. He'd saved so much but had filed nothing, which had turned into an utter disaster when you considered that he must have been acting that way since at least the time that we'd moved into this house from our former condo in Memphis.

I grabbed the relevant page and helped myself to a few more documents as well, and then I stomped back into the living room. As I did, I glanced at the big window that overlooked the pool and that was still sufficiently disguised, but...the sun was setting faster than I'd anticipated. Actually, I'd anticipated its arc correctly but I hadn't factored in how late my guest was going to arrive. I used the underside of my dress to pat off my face but I didn't have time to fix the makeup I'd deposited on the fabric before I continued to the living room.

Shaw was also looking out at the pool, and despite the plants in containers and blowup toys that I'd used as a screen, he seemed to notice that something was off. He turned to me, frowning. Again, frowning. "Is your pool filter broke—"

"Here," I announced, and slapped the papers against his chest. "You can see for yourself."

He sat down again to examine them. He stared at the entries that I'd highlighted on the bank statements; he squinted at the images of the checks, all written to "Paul Highsmith," his dad. I hadn't brought out everything, all my documentation, but I'd totaled it up. In various forms, my family had paid out more than a hundred thousand dollars to his. And I wanted it returned in full.

I waited for as long as I could, trying not to squirm in my mother's former chair, but then I couldn't hold back my questions. "Well? Where is it? Are you going to be honest with me now?"

"I have..." His voice trailed off into silence. "My dad told me that he'd filled out scholarship forms, that he'd applied for me. He said that I could have the money if I would use it to go out of state. He wanted me to leave and try new things. He said the scholarship was from a fund for poor kids, that they'd wanted to help because of what had happened to me..."

Again, his voice died.

"Your dad was a big liar," I stated. "Did you really believe he was capable of doing that, of applying for aid without help? When I knew you, he didn't even have a phone besides the yellow one in your kitchen, the one with the dial that you spun to get each number. He didn't know how to use a computer. He never went anywhere or did anything! He only sat at your kitchen table drawing in his journal and writing stuff. How would he have known about a scholarship and then gotten it for you?"

"I don't know. I didn't really understand his explanation, but it didn't matter. I knew that I couldn't accept the money because I couldn't leave him, even if he wanted me to go off and start a new life somewhere else." He squinted at an endorsement, the looping signature in the picture of the back of one of the checks. "This is his handwriting. He signed these."

"Obviously." I recognized it too, because I'd sat next to his dad at the table as Shaw and I had studied and Paul Highsmith

drew pictures in his notebooks. “So where is it? Where’s the money? What did you do with it?”

“Grier, I’m telling you that I have no idea! Don’t you think I would have noticed if I had an extra ten K in a drawer somewhere?” He flipped through the pages again and went to the window, where he held them closer to his eyes. “Can you turn on a light?”

“No. No, you should just go,” I said.

“Maybe your father was buying my dad’s silence for what your mother did,” he mused.

“She was cleared of any wrongdoing. Or are you back to claiming that she was drunk, and that the entire police force and everyone who treated her at the hospital are colluding to hide that fact?” It was what he’d said to me the final time we’d spoken to each other when we were teenagers, when I’d called him from the airport in Chattanooga on my way to boarding school. He’d yelled that my drunk mother had almost killed him, my drunk bitch of a mother, and I was as bad as she was.

“I’m willing to admit now that the blood tests they did were accurate,” he said carefully, “but then it makes even less sense to me why my dad would have gotten money from yours.” He stared at the paper and said, “We need to figure this out.”

I’d heard enough. “You don’t want to figure it out, you want to lie. You don’t have only ten K, you have ten of them. I mean, the total from the checks I found was over a hundred thousand dollars and I want it back. All of it.”

“What?” He stared, then shook his head as if to wake himself up. “No, that’s not possible, but even if I did have that money, why would I give it to you? Why would you deserve any of it?”

“Because your dad bled my family dry, that’s why! He took every cent that he could and left us with—none of y’all deserved a penny. What happened wasn’t our fault.”

“No?”

“No, it wasn’t. It was an accident.” I’d repeated that to myself for so many years. “The police report said so and insurance paid for stuff.”

“It didn’t pay for everything. It didn’t pay for me not working, it didn’t cover all the physical therapy, it didn’t—”

“Paul Highsmith was preying on my father’s guilt, which was unjustified but apparently he still felt it,” I declared.

And Shaw did that inappropriate snort thing again. “Your father felt guilty? You’re saying he had feelings?”

“He did!” I said, which I was not sure of, not at all. “He was a human being and he felt terrible about what had happened to you, although you shouldn’t have run out into the road and put yourself in danger in the first place.”

“I was trying to stop your mother from driving away with you in a car that she couldn’t control. I thought she was going to kill the both of you.”

She could have, and she could have killed him, too. I slid down into the chair as that memory came right back. It snuck up on me sometimes, when I was asleep and also when I was awake. I’d been crying—my mother had been crying—

someone, maybe both of us, had been screaming—and then Shaw’s face, bloodless and horrified, had been in the windshield and his head had cracked against the glass just like the rock he’d thrown from the third story window, making a sound so horrible that I couldn’t even—

“Grier. Are you going to faint?”

I must have closed my eyes, because I opened them when I heard my name. I was in the semi-darkness of my parents’ living room, not in the Porsche careening through the night away from the Highsmith house and into Shaw. He was now kneeling in front of me, a position which must have been hard for him to assume with the damage to his leg, and his face wasn’t the dead white it had been as when it had flashed in front of our car. He was flushed with the heat in here, and I was glad to see it.

“I shouldn’t have run into the road,” he told me. “Anyway, you were a kid. You didn’t know what you were doing, even if she did.”

I pulled myself together. “It was an accident but my father kept giving yours all kinds of money and that wasn’t right. It was like...blood money. Ransom. Paul Highsmith shouldn’t have taken it.”

It took a bit for Shaw to work his way to his feet again, and when he got there, I stood too. I put my hand out to grasp the back of my chair because I did feel little dizzy.

“You knew my dad,” he announced. “There’s no way that he was plotting or playing tricks. He didn’t have that in him anymore.”

I had known Paul pretty well, I'd thought, which had made everything seem so much more unreal. "Then explain it. Explain his signature on the back of the checks. Go look at your bank account and explain the big deposits you find. Explain it all away, and I'll believe you." No, I wouldn't, because I had a brain of my own. "Until then, I'm going to have to insist that you pay me, because otherwise..."

"What would you do? Lie to the police? You'd have to tell them that your father was a generous person who gave money to the mentally and physically challenged, but you want it returned."

"How dare you say that!" Shaw and his dad weren't—well, they'd both had challenges, but—

"Yeah, I shouldn't have called your father 'generous.' It's an insult to the people who really are charitably minded." He started to walk toward the front door, but he tripped a little over the step up to the foyer. It was hard to see in the dark and he was limping a lot.

I watched the lights of his car leave my driveway, the engine noise lessening and then disappearing as he went toward the street. It had been a mistake to think that I could somehow fool or bully him into giving the money back; it was probably all gone, anyway. His dad hadn't had the wherewithal to hide it, so he must have spent it or lost it somehow it years ago. It was gone, and reclaiming it had always been a pipe dream. I had other things I needed to do, so using my phone to light the way, I went and took off my dress. I stood for a moment in my old room and told myself not to shed tears over money that I never had a chance at getting.

I knew that wasn't why I was crying, and the missing money also wasn't the reason I'd driven to Shaw Highsmith's house in the first place. I'd wanted to see him because I'd missed him in the years that we'd been separated. I'd missed him, I'd been so sad—

No. No, I was doing great. I was so good without him, and I hadn't been wasting my time pining over someone who hated me. I wiped my thumbs beneath my eyes and asked myself why I kept crying over this. Shaw didn't care and no one else did, either.

I put on jeans and boots and I decided that I was done with this behavior. Successful women like I was didn't moan and wail, they got things done. I set out into my yard to do just that, but my balance was worse in the failing light and soon my knees and palms met the dirt. No matter. I brushed myself off, because no one else would, and I got to work.

CHAPTER 3

I straightened my dress, smoothing my hands over the fabric. It was the same one that I'd had on when Shaw had been here, and I'd chosen it again because it was also the easiest to wash and wear. I'd had no idea, none, what had gone into prepping my clothes when I'd dropped them off at the dry cleaners. Did they actually use one of the hot ironing things on every garment? I'd also never looked very closely at my bill, but now I was looking extremely closely at every bill, so dry cleaning was out and dresses that looked ok after you hung them up on a shower curtain rod were the norm.

But I knew that my appearance today was fine. No, it was great. Great! Luckily, the tools I used for my hair were cordless and could be charged in the car, since I'd done all my styling during my traffic-clogged commute when I lived in Los Angeles. My makeup bag had a suction cup so that it could stick to the dashboard, too. Anyway, I was still able to de-poof my hair and it wasn't too hot inside my house yet, because I'd scheduled this meeting very carefully to be early enough for cooler weather yet light enough for...light.

I opened the front door to Amber McCourt. My first thought was that she reminded me so much of my mother—kind of the same age, kind of the same color blonde hair, and at about the same level of pretty (very). Her eyes, however, reminded me a lot more of my father's, because they were not clouded and bleary but hard and shrewd. I'd looked up her state license and seen that the date on it was very recent, so she hadn't been in the real estate game for long. But one look at her now on

my front porch assured me that her short career as an agent didn't mean that anything would get by her. I sighed inwardly.

"Are you Grier?" she asked. I'd emailed to set up the appointment, so she hadn't heard me pronounce my name. She'd called me "Gri-er," to rhyme with "crier." According to the spelling, yes, they should have rhymed, and the fact that they didn't was one of my pet peeves. "Grier" could have been a pretty name, but of course, my parents had made that difficult.

"Greeeeeer," I told her, drawing out the long vowel sound.

Her eyebrows went up. "All right," she said, and she repeated it the same way. "I'm Amber McCourt. You can call me Miss Amber."

Like heck did I need manners lessons, and like heck was I calling my real estate agent, who worked for me, "miss" anything. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Amber."

She got a big frown as I held the door wider to let her and her tote bag inside. "I noticed that the grounds need some upkeep," she mentioned.

"Do they?" They did; working nights to fix them hadn't been enough. It would have been so much easier if it had all been left as forest, like other people's property. There was no way I was going to be able to fix it myself no matter when I worked, night or day, because not only did I lack the know-how, but I also lacked the proper tools. If we'd ever had them, the garage was certainly empty of them now.

As she stepped into the foyer, she noted the specific problems she'd spotted on her trip up from the street. She wanted to

know the age of the roof, when I'd last had the driveway paved, if the gate was functional, if there had been tree-trimming performed, and many, many other details. I knew most of the answers to her questions, because in the weeks since I'd had the meeting with Shaw, I'd finished cleaning up and organizing the papers in my father's home office. They had shown me that the state of the family residence was as bad as the state of the family finances, and that I wouldn't be able to clear up either of those issues without Miss Amber's help. I meant just Amber, Amber's help. No "miss."

She held her phone to her mouth as we toured the interior.

"Kitchen is dated," she spoke into it. "Tile countertops. Appliances..." She opened the refrigerator and then put her hand inside. "Is this broken?"

"It functions just fine, but I've been having a problem with the circuit breaker to this room," I said. "It's on my list of things to repair. It's a short list." No, it wasn't. It was ever growing on my phone, to the point that I was wondering if I might run out of storage space in the darn thing's memory if I added any more items.

Miss Amber—Amber went immediately to the switch on the wall and flicked it up and down. "No power to the kitchen," she reported to the microphone. She disappeared and I heard her try another switch. "No power in multiple rooms and entrance to the kitchen is through the powder bath. That's very strange."

"Let's go to my father's former office, which also serves as a spacious library. The built-ins are made of white oak," I said

before she tried another light or noticed that you could only get to the pool and back patio from the pantry.

“They’re oak,” she agreed, lightly running a hand along one of the library shelves and then staring with pursed lips at the accumulated dust on her fingertips. I’d meant to clean there but I’d had so many other things to do that I’d missed it. This woman, on the other hand, didn’t miss anything. “These are bookshelves. Where are the books?” she asked.

“Oh, I had to pack up a lot of my parents’ personal belongings,” I explained.

“A house looks better furnished,” she pointed out, as if I didn’t know that. Who didn’t know that? It was why I had moved the extant furniture into the living room, so that one place in the house would look decent and if anyone came over, I could seat them in there. Not Amber, though, because she wanted to see it all.

“I would expect that any competent agent would be able to sell a home of this caliber, furnished or not,” I said, wiping the Tennessee out of my voice and using the flat California accent.

She turned around from her perusal of the window shades and eyed me. “Any competent agent would tell you that this place will be a tough sell, no matter what you think of its caliber. It’s more interior area than people usually want but if you tried to bring in a big family, that would be a problem. There are only two bedrooms in twelve thousand square feet.”

“My father built the house and I was the only child,” I said haughtily. “It worked well for us.”

She shrugged, dismissing that. “There’s also the...I guess you’d call it a theme?”

“It’s the aesthetic,” I corrected.

“The aesthetic is uncomfortable and unattractive. The land’s no good for farming or cattle. It’s mostly hills and rocks, as far as I can tell, and the shape of the parcel doesn’t make any sense. It’s pointy. Like a star with no middle.”

“The acreage is unusually distributed. It’s an irregular pentagram and yes, the interior pentagon is...smallish.”

“Was this house ever inspected by the county during construction?” she asked next. “Because my brother-in-law works for the building department and I’ve noticed several violations, including the lack of railings around the porch in front.”

I searched for a good response. “I wasn’t privy to the inspection schedule, but I’m sure that my parents did everything properly and aboveboard.” That was not in the least true. In my life with them, I’d discovered so many things that were neither proper nor aboveboard. For example, during my junior year of high school in California, I found out that I’d only been admitted there after a series of bribes, direct payments to the headmaster. That guy had kept a lot of paper notes on his private deals with parents in a file underneath all the other ones in his drawer and he hadn’t done a great job of locking that or even his office door. He’d also been having an affair with the chair of the World Languages department, if anyone cared.

“It looks to me like the pool isn’t working, the driveway is a mess, and the roof needs replaced. I also noticed that you

spray-painted the topiaries on the porch,” Amber McCourt continued. “They’re not really green, they’re dead.”

Yes. Yes, all of that was true, but I didn’t know what to do about it. I didn’t know how to solve those problems or fix all the other ones and I felt almost like I might cry, which was, of course, something that you never did in business. Never.

I regrouped instead. “A competent agent should be able to work around those issues,” I informed her.

Her answer was to try the switch on the wall, although there hadn’t been any need for the overhead lights until she’d closed the shades to determine if they were functional. Joke was on her, because these lights wouldn’t come on either and the shades were in fact broken, so they wouldn’t open back up. That left us standing in the dark.

A lack of light didn’t stop Amber McCourt. She marched out of the room to confirm that yes, the pool was a nasty pit of brown murk and on top of that, it needed to be replastered. In addition, the plants I’d put in containers to try disguise the water problems were also spray-painted green and not actually living, and there seemed to be a sinkhole that I’d covered with a pool float but that wasn’t a permanent solution. Neither was painting the roof shingles in a nice charcoal color, although I’d considered it until I thought about how far I would fall when I slipped.

“Your email to me indicated that you were a real estate professional yourself,” Amber noted. She studied the cracks in the patio and then looked at one of the windows. It seemed to have developed thick fog inside it that I hadn’t been able to disperse.

“Yes, I worked in commercial real estate in Los Angeles,” I said, and if I sounded proud of myself? Well, I was. I’d been the youngest vice president ever at their firm.

“What kind of commercial real estate?”

“Multifamily,” I said, less grandly.

“You were an apartment manager or something like that?”

“No! No, I was an executive vice president of a multinational firm,” I told her. They’d had a building in Mexico, which made the “multi” part of that title accurate. “I don’t want to discuss my past employment.”

“You were the one who brought it up. I have no idea why, but you wrote it—”

“Yes, I realize now that I shouldn’t have included that information in my email to you.” I’d been trying to preemptively demonstrate that I wasn’t someone that she could jerk around, and maybe I’d been trying to impress her, too. With the way she was currently wrinkling her nose at me, I was able to determine that she wasn’t very impressed at all. Instead, she looked like she smelled something stinky.

Amber McCourt, real estate agent, held out her hand toward the house, just like it was hers and she was allowing me to enter. No, she was not! I held out my own hand too, and we stood there staring at each other for a moment before she finally preceded me through the pantry and kitchen and back into the living room. I did let her sit first, and she chose my mother’s old chair. I settled on the rock-hard couch, where Shaw had sat when he’d been here. I hadn’t seen a glimpse of

him since, not at church and not when I'd driven by his house, either.

"You're in a pickle," Amber stated. "You sold the furniture. Your utilities have been turned off. The building is falling down around your ears."

"I didn't sell the furniture. It was already gone when I came back here. And not all the utilities are off, because the water is still on," I said, like those things made everything better. I'd managed to pay off some of the bills but the money due for gas and electricity was insurmountable right now.

"Your parents didn't leave you anything when they died? Any other assets besides this place?"

Of course, she had heard about my parents' car accident but like Shaw, she didn't say that she was sorry and she sure didn't sound like she was upset that they were dead. She'd probably known them personally to have that reaction.

"They really only left me a mess," I told her, which was something I hadn't admitted to anyone. Who would I have told, anyway? "Their legacy to me consisted of debts and bills and piles of papers. I don't know what happened to my mother's clothes and jewelry, all her purses and shoes. She even had fur coats but the closets are empty. My father made weird payouts and I tried to get some of the money back, but he wouldn't—I couldn't do it. I don't know what happened to his business."

"I never heard that Huck Warren had a business to speak of," she noted.

“Oh, and you know everything? Have you heard every bit of everybody’s story in this town?”

I had no idea why I was fighting with her, this stranger who was going to work for me, but she didn’t rise to the bait. “I’d say yes, I have,” she mused. “I married into a large family, and I guess that between us all we do know just about everything. Haven’t you met any of the McCourts?”

“I don’t know many people in the area, besides some families from church.”

She wanted to know which church but it wasn’t hers, so she only shrugged and wrinkled her nose again.

“We moved here just as I finished eighth grade and I left after ninth grade,” I continued. “I didn’t come back very often.”

“Where did you move from?”

“Memphis. Well, my mother is from Sand Mountain but she met my father and...” I cleared my throat. I needed to shut up and stop spilling my history to this stranger, my employee.

“Are you interested in this listing? Yes or no?”

Yes, she was interested, but neither of us wanted to give an inch so it took a while to hammer out an agreement. We finally decided on her commission, on the repairs I would somehow have to facilitate, on a sales price, on an open house date, and on all the other issues that she checked off on a list she had pulled out of her tote bag. I impressed upon her that until the home went on the market, she was not to tell anyone about its impending sale. No one. Her eyebrows raised at that stipulation but finally we’d signed everything and exhausted our arguments, and she was ready to go.

She stood and adjusted her bag on her arm. “I think we’ll have a productive relationship, if you listen carefully and do as I say,” she said, and smiled at me. I could feel the snarl on my own face. “That works much better for my daughters.”

“Whatever,” I muttered.

“And you can call me Amber,” she let me know, and I almost stuck out my tongue at her. But actually, it did feel better that I had someone else also working toward the goal I’d set of getting myself out of here. It felt better that I’d told her some of the things that had been going on, too, such as the infestation of frogs in the pool and the sinkhole. Well, she’d found out about that for herself when she’d almost fallen in.

I hadn’t told her everything, like how a lot of my family’s money seemed to have gone missing because grifters had been able to get at it. The rest of my inheritance? I had no idea, but maybe there had never been as much as I and everyone else around here had presumed. I’d searched through my father’s papers again and again and there was nothing in all that junk that indicated how he’d amassed the supposed fortune he’d made in Memphis. Nothing at all—and that was extremely odd, I thought, not only for tax purposes but for human ones. People liked to hoard memories. I myself had a box in the closet of my old room full of stuff that I should have tossed years before.

Anyway, this wasn’t the first time that I’d checked on my father’s activities. I’d been curious about him in the past and searched his name, but there was nothing online either. There were no business licenses, no professional licenses or certifications, nothing in general. I’d found his birth

certificate at the bottom of a pile in his office and it had his mother's name on it, no father listed, so I'd checked on her, too. She'd passed away in 1998 and that was basically all there was of his early life.

The lack of information probably meant that however he'd gotten his money, it hadn't been in the usual, legal ways, like a job or good investments, or an inheritance, or a giant stroke of luck. He had always described himself as an entrepreneur, an amorphous term that made people feel like they should understand what he meant and stop questioning further.

Most likely, his entrepreneurship had been skirting or totally over the bounds of legality. It made sense to me that he would have been a criminal, since he'd always seemed to be a totally amoral person. He'd had no qualms about lying, not ever, not about anything. He'd lied so easily and believably that it was really difficult to tell what the truth was until you saw it for yourself, and even then you'd had to question everything because he always had a new story to cover the old one.

He'd said that we'd moved from Memphis to be near family, but once we were here, I'd never seen evidence that we had one relative anywhere around. They'd died and moved away themselves, he explained. He'd claimed that we'd had a car stolen (and I'd found the documents proving that he had collected compensation from the insurance company). But right now—as of this moment—that very car was at the back of this pentagram-shaped property rusting under a tarp, and it was another problem that I'd have to clean up. He'd lied about little things too, dumb things, like he would leave an empty carton of milk in the refrigerator and then deny that he had done it. There were three people in our family, and my

mother didn't put anything in her mouth that hadn't come from a cigarette pack or a liquor bottle, so who else could have drunk the milk?

Thinking about all that didn't help me very much. Amber was right and there was a lot to do if I wanted to get decent money for this house, and although I usually worked at night when it was cooler and no one might drop by and catch me at it, I didn't have the time for that anymore. I needed to get myself out of Tennessee and out of this bad situation that my parents had created and then dumped off on me by conveniently dying. It was convenient for them, I meant, but it had left nothing behind but trouble.

That was how I tried to think of what had happened, anyway. It was an inconvenience, a mere blip in a life (mine) that was otherwise full of success. I'd done great at boarding school after I'd left here. I'd been the valedictorian and it hadn't mattered to me that my parents weren't in the audience when I'd made my speech and also that hardly anyone in my graduating class had clapped at its conclusion. They were just jealous. I'd done the same thing in college, finishing right at the top and quickly securing a job while getting my MBA at the same time, and also becoming pretty and coordinated. I was a success, undeniably a success.

Per the plan that Amber and I had devised, I would start at the front of the house and get as far as I could in tidying the landscape. I started right at the front door, in fact, with the topiaries that I'd painted green. They needed to go but they were too heavy to move as they were, so I hacked at them to remove their branches. Despite being dead and brittle, they were still hard to cut, and despite the removal of some

“greenery,” they were still remarkably hard to evict from their pots. It was more like they were cemented in, in fact. I switched from clippers to a saw and slashed at them, rage growing with every single rasp of the blade. I sweated from anger and also because the sun was beating down on my back, angling under the high roof and roasting me.

With great difficulty, I started to roll one pot onto its side to tug out the plant that way, but as it tipped, it weighed too much for me to control. It came down on my foot fast and hard and—ow! I yanked free of the heavy, cement container, making the usual noises of shock and pain, but I wasn’t going to let some stupid plant best me.

I stood next to it panting, and then I firmly placed both my injured foot and my good one and I grabbed the pokey trunk. I got as close as I could for a better grip, scratching my face against the sharp edges of the branches I’d previously cut and broken. Then I threw myself backward and tugged, and it gave way. Both the dead topiary and I flew off the porch, me landing hard on my back and the bush landing on top of me.

As I lay stunned, catching my breath for just one moment, it got worse. The heavy pot rolled, and with no railing to stop it, it toppled off the elevated porch and dropped directly onto my legs. The painted plant didn’t provide very much protection against its former pot. I was pinned but the immediate pain of it—I screamed and tried to get it off my body, tried to scabble away, even as I heard the noise of a car engine and then a door closing as someone emerged onto my driveway.

“What in the hell is happening here?”

The pot lifted and I moaned, shoving aside the mangled topiary and sitting up to put my hands around my ankle. It hurt so much, but I'd definitely injured myself before with my clumsiness and it wouldn't be that bad in the end. This probably wasn't anything in comparison to the time I'd fallen off a high curb in Mexico City and landed in front of a bus, which had clipped me a little. No, I was fine. I moaned again. Shaw knelt down next to me, moving faster than I would have thought possible. "What were you doing?"

"Fixing my plants." I'd gasped the words, because it really hurt. A lot.

"Come here," he ordered, and pulled me up onto one foot, swiveling me to sit on the edge of the porch I'd just fallen from. "Damn, you're a bloody mess."

I looked down at my legs, which were scratched and raw, and at my arms in the same condition.

"I meant your face," he told me, and walked around to climb the steps to the front door.

I had the presence of mind to try to stop him. "Wait! Where are you going?"

"To get you some ice," his voice told me faintly, and I shook my head, because he wouldn't be able to do that. I struggled to stand and get myself inside where the water, but not the freezer, was functioning. That meant I could clean off the blood.

Shaw returned before I'd made it any farther than the front door, because walking was difficult on only one functioning

foot. “Your appliances aren’t working and neither are the lights,” he announced.

“There’s an outage.” I managed another step.

“That would explain it, except that the freezer and refrigerator are both empty.”

“So?” I hopped.

“You’re not keeping anything in them like a normal person,” he informed me.

“I remember that your grandpa used to keep a crate of beer in the creek behind your house,” I snapped back. “Maybe I’m storing perishables in my pool.”

“If you are, I’d take them out. A thousand frogs swimming in dysentery water aren’t good for food.” He nodded. “I went out through the pantry and looked under the cover.”

“This is none of your business.” Hop, hop. My mother’s chair wasn’t so far away now, but I realized that I couldn’t sit on the furniture while I was so bloody. I slid to the floor next to it instead. “None of it, not any of your business.”

“What about when I pulled the planter off you? Should I have left it where it was and gone on my way?” he asked.

“What is your way? I mean, why are you here, anyway?” I winced at my legs, because there were some fairly deep scratches on the right one. I knew from experience that I would scar, an angry red at first and that would fade slowly until the next mishap left new ones.

“I would have called but I didn’t have your number.”

“How would you have called? I thought that you didn’t have a phone,” I noted.

He disappeared again and returned with one of the nice guest towels from the powder room, which he started to put against my leg.

“No! Don’t use that,” I admonished, jerking away.

“Why? It looks clean.”

“It’s a good towel and it’s only for display. Go get one from under the sink and wet it,” I requested. It sounded more like an order and I remembered him saying that I treated him like a servant. I added, “Please.”

Shaw glared at me for a moment before returning his gaze to the blood dripping down my appendages, and then he went and got some of the rags from beneath the sink. I used one to try to clean the dirt, debris, and gore from my limbs and then chose another to dab at my face.

“You’re a damn mess,” he told me. “What were you doing?”

“Those plants are dead and I have to get them out of the pots and off the porch,” I answered. “Ow!” I yelped for the second time today, and the day was still young. He’d sat in the chair and had taken another rag to do some dabbing, but he put it down to remove his secret phone from his pocket to look at something.

“I just checked the utility website for outages and there isn’t one in the area,” he announced. “Why is your power off?”

I didn’t respond to that. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to guess the answer and maybe he’d been sixteen when he’d

started high school, but that was because his family had made poor decisions, not because he was dumb.

“You really don’t have the money to pay your bill?” he asked me next. “Seriously? Your parents were always rolling in it. You went off and got all those degrees, that job. I heard things,” he explained when he saw my eyebrows raise.

“It’s not *my* bill. I mean, I didn’t create the debt. It was months in arrears and the gas and the power were already off when I got here. Nobody had paid anything in forever,” I said, feeling too grouchy to be accurate. No, they wouldn’t let you go “forever” but there was a grace period before your utilities were cut off. My parents had run totally out of that grace.

“They were living without lights and heat?”

I shrugged. I couldn’t think of the last time I’d spoken, texted, or emailed with my mother and father, and I’d had no idea of what was happening in their lives. Obviously.

“What are you going to do?” He dabbed at my forehead more gently than he’d done it before, and I sat still and let him rather than jerking away.

“I had a real estate agent over today and I’m going to sell the house as soon as possible.”

“Who would want to buy this place? It looks like a fake castle and the rooms don’t make any sense. You have to pass through a bathroom to get into the kitchen.”

I bristled. Yes, the house did resemble a medieval citadel and yes, some of the layout was odd. Perhaps a lot of the layout was odd. My father had designed the place himself and had it built to his specifications, something I’d overheard him brag

about, but it meant that it wasn't like other houses in which professionals had been involved in the planning and construction.

One thing that was different? The main bedroom had a bathtub in the middle of the floor, so you had to be a little careful when walking in there in the dark. My room, the only other bedroom, was in what you might have called the understory. Some might have called it the basement, even, but it was only because the topography here was so hilly and rocky that the house was built into the landscape at strange angles. Unlike a real basement, there were windows in my room but they were smallish and they were only at the very top of the walls.

"Someone will want to buy it," I told Shaw. "Someone will love it."

"Maybe. So you're pulling out dead plants in order to offload the place?"

"Among other chores." I took the rag from his hand and leaned away from him. I didn't need to warn him against talking about the impending sale, because who would he have told? "Why did you come here?" I asked instead. "Are you interested in putting in a bid on the house?"

"I wouldn't want this place even if you paid me to take it," he said. "It's—"

"No, I don't need to hear any more about how terrible it is. I know real estate and I know this will sell. What I don't know is why you showed up at it." I waited for a heartbeat and then prompted, "Did you have an attack of conscience? Go on."

“Grier, you’re just going to have to trust that I had no idea that your father was syphoning money to my family.”

Sure, I would just “trust” him. You didn’t do that in business and business was the only thing happening here.

“You have to know how much that would have helped us. I had medical expenses, I had my dad to take care of—” He stopped briefly. “When my grandpa died, Dad had a hard time and I couldn’t—”

That time, he didn’t continue. “Go on,” I prompted again.

“I’m saying that it would have been like a gift from God to have money like that. It’s a number I can hardly believe, like I couldn’t conceive of ever having so much just sitting in the bank. Currently, I have twelve hundred and three dollars in there, and I looked back at the account that my dad and grandpa shared. We’ve had a lot less, but there’s never been a lot more. Never.”

“So what did your dad do with it?”

“I can’t believe that he ever had it.”

“I have the proof. I worked more on organizing it since you were here.” Cautiously, I pushed myself up to stand, noticing that my limbs had already stiffened and that the cuts and scrapes pulled. “It’s going to take me a minute.”

“You need to put ice on your ankle.”

“No, I don’t, Dr. Highsmith,” I retorted, and then I was sorry I’d said that. It had been his dream to become a doctor, but like so many things in life, it just hadn’t worked out.

He didn't respond but he did hold out his arm for me to grasp so I could hobble instead of hopping. He'd done the same thing with his dad, I remembered, because Paul Highsmith hadn't been overly steady on his own feet. It had been something that Paul and I had laughed about together, in fact, because we were both so clumsy back then. He and I had gotten along—I'd thought. When I'd seen his signature endorsing those checks from my father, I'd realized that I must have been wrong about him, just as I had been wrong about a lot of stuff.

I put my hand carefully on Shaw's forearm and felt the hard muscle there, the soft hair, the warm skin. I stopped myself from gripping with my fingers and we made it to the office, where my eyes went automatically to the clean streak that the new real estate agent Amber McCourt had made on the shelf. I remembered the books in here, rows and rows of them, all the same size and color. They were sets that my father had bought because this room required them, not because he wanted to read them. Like so many other things, they were only illusions and lies. I pulled my hand away from the arm that supported me.

"This is where we were studying," he remarked, and I nodded. I'd thought about the same thing when I'd started to clean out this room. Back then, the one time that he'd come over when we were in high school, the books had been neat on the shelves, the papers stacked away or at least hidden in the drawers, and regular furniture had filled a lot of the room. It had seemed normal, in other words.

"You sat there, and I sat here," he said, looking at a space on the floor where the desk had been. "We were working on

something for *The Odyssey*. I hated that book and how that idiot stayed away from his family. Why would you have done that, when you had a wife and kid waiting for you? Odysseus just kept galivanting around like an asshole, screwing other women, messing with monsters, and then he got back and was pissed that his wife didn't immediately fall all over him." He stopped. "Dumb book. Other people seem to like it, though."

"It has managed to stay in circulation for a couple thousand years," I answered. "I remember how it made you mad, though."

"You defended him and his 'heroic journey.'"

"He was trying to return to where he'd started, but he kept having issues. Everything was against him and it was a long road, but he did it in the end," I said.

"He could have...I don't know why we're discussing this. I was glad when we finished with it and I never wanted to see that cover again."

"I was thinking about when you came here, too," I told him.

"You said, 'This house is interesting. Is there a moat?'"

"I was afraid of falling in or getting eaten by crocodiles. Those memories all stuck with you," he noted, but I only shrugged.

"I don't actually remember that much. Here." I forced myself to walk instead of hopping and retrieved a file folder full of papers. "I pulled out all the information about the payments to your dad and put them in one place. Those are copies. I have the originals in a different location."

Shaw stared. “What are you hinting at? Do you think I’d run off with your little file?”

I knew from my former job how it was a good idea to have back-ups, that was all. I’d had some issues when dealing with coworkers, other executive vice presidents, and I’d learned that it was better to be safe rather than sorry that you had messed up. “Take a look at the copies,” I offered, and started to hop back to the living room.

He went past me, brushing against my side as he did. “I’ll take them to go,” he announced. “Good luck with your dead plants.”

I watched through the window as he paused on the porch outside the front door. First, he ripped out the other dead topiary, the one I hadn’t yet tackled. He took both of the painted plants and piled them next to the garage. Next, he emptied the dry dirt from the big pots into a flower bed (that had no more flowers in it) and then stacked those pots next to the garage, too. He brushed off his hands on his jeans, picked up the file folder, and left.

I watched his car disappear down the road and thought about Odysseus and his long journey home. He was gone for twenty years and his son grew up and his wife grew old, but everyone still loved him and accepted him when he came back.

Lucky guy.

CHAPTER 4

“My word!” Amber McCourt gasped. “What happened to you? Did you get attacked by a bear?”

“A topiary,” I said, and adjusted my sunglasses and pulled my hair forward around my neck like a scarf. The glasses were large and the hair covered some but obviously, they weren’t sufficient camouflage. “Remember the plants that were on the front porch? They’re gone.”

“Not without a fight,” she answered. “What about the other things on your list?”

She’d set a two-week timeline for me to complete everything, which was why I had come to talk to her today. The woman was a taskmaster. She’d been texting me constantly, asking for status reports on the repairs and beautification projects (which I could have lied about) and pictures of the progress (which I could not fake without significant editing, and I’d tried that but she hadn’t been fooled). I was in her office now because it was much better than her showing up at the house, like she’d been threatening to do, and witnessing my lack of headway in person.

“If you managed to hurt yourself that badly just by removing a plant from a pot, I don’t think that you should climb a ladder to clean mildew off the gutters,” she announced. “Strike that item.”

“About the list,” I said, and removed the glasses.

“Your eye!” she gasped, recoiling at my irritated sclera.

“One of the branches got me there. It’s fine.” The real problem was my ankle, which I still wasn’t able to walk on very well. I would have been better with a cane, but I’d sold all of those before I’d left Los Angeles. I would have been better with someone’s arm to lean on, maybe. “About the list,” I began again.

“No, forget the list. Hold on.” She started typing very quickly on her phone and as she did, I looked at the numerous framed photos adorning her desk here in the realty office. There was Amber smiling in the arms of a handsome man with grey hair, another shot featuring a younger version of herself hugging a different guy, a five by eight of two beautiful blondes bookending a laughing woman with red hair, and at least a hundred pictures of kids. She did have a big family.

“Those are some of my grandchildren, Aric, Gentry, and Trace,” she said when she took a break from her phone, and she smiled at a frame that I’d been looking at. She named the kids in the next picture too, and she went through each and every person in each and every photo. The red-haired woman was Aria, her other two daughters also had A-names, as did an improbably young boy who she claimed was her son. She told me about all of them, extremely proudly and in a lot more detail than I ever might have cared about. If I were back in LA, I could have walked out. Since I was here, I had to sit through it but I did find myself a little interested. It was funny how this woman transformed from haughty and bossy to smiling and warm when she talked about them and their happy lives. Remarkably, they did seem happy.

But finally, she was ready to move on. “I just sent out an SOS,” she told me, and tapped her phone. “I have various

relatives in the construction trades and we'll be able to get these repairs done.”

“No. I won't pay them for work that I can do myself,” I informed her.

“Obviously you can't, if you were maimed by a plant,” she informed me in return, and although that was exactly what I'd come here to tell her, the way she said it made me want to argue.

“I'm perfectly able to get the mildew off, and fill the sinkhole, and—”

She interrupted to tell me the names of the individuals who would be taking care of those tasks instead of me. “Your focus is now getting your power on. And I have a solution to that, as well.” She paused dramatically. “A job.”

Wow. No one ever would have thought of that! “I have a job,” I let her know. “It's in the food service industry.”

“Are you manning the drive-through?”

No, not until my face healed, because they thought I would scare away customers. “No, I am not,” I said. “Not that it's your business.”

“Why haven't you tried to get a job that uses your fancy degrees?”

“I don't want to,” I told her, which sounded very childish. “I mean, I haven't yet found a position that suits me.”

“I would think that a life with electricity would make up for any aspect of a job that didn't perfectly suit you.” She looked

like she smelled the stinky thing again, and it might have been my bad attitude.

“Listen here,” I said angrily. “You work for me. You are my employee, and—”

“I’m happy to tear up our listing agreement right now,” she said. “Is that what you’d like to do?”

No. I scowled. “Don’t talk down to me.”

She didn’t apologize, but she did conciliate. “You remind me of my daughters,” she said. “My husband Jed says that I have a little tendency toward bossiness. He knows that it’s due to my loving heart.”

Sure. “I appreciate what you’re doing for me,” I said, “but I won’t need your relatives to step in. First of all, I don’t want them to know that I’m selling the house.”

“I didn’t tell them that. They think that you’re a friend in need. Most of them have been wanting to see your castle for years and they jumped at the chance to go over there.”

“I can’t pay them,” I said next, and that was harder to admit even though she was already aware of my monetary issues.

“They’re giving me a cut rate and I’ll handle the bills for now. We’ll take it out of the proceeds of the sale later.” She pursed up. “These things have to be done, Grier. We’re not touching the roof or the pool, we’re not paying to stage the place. The very minimum is having the power on and making things look normal and safe. As normal as a house with a heart-shaped bathtub in the bedroom floor could be, and as safe as a building with a leaning turret.”

“No one ever went up there, not even my father. I don’t know why he wanted it.” It wasn’t as if he was watching for approaching armies or anything. I didn’t know why he’d done anything and I would have liked to slap him over a lot of it but he’d gone and died, so I wouldn’t get that opportunity.

I looked up and Amber was watching me closely. “I have an idea for a different job for you,” she told me. “I need an assistant.”

“No way.”

She was stunned but recovered pretty quickly. “May I ask why you think you can turn me down?”

“Well, because we have something called the Bill of Rights in this country,” I said, but stopped myself. “I should have said thank you. Thank you for the offer, but no. I don’t want to work in town.” I looked behind me at the traffic on the main street. I hadn’t even wanted to walk into this office in case someone might have seen me.

“Why?”

Because I was a successful woman, a former executive vice president, not a girl who would be a low-level assistant in a local realty office. I was better than the people here who’d thought that I was dung beneath their shoes—not that I blamed them, since I had been so hopeless and hapless back then, but I wasn’t anymore. I was from the family that lived in the castle, after all, and I wasn’t some kind of person driving around with a broken windshield. Although yes, I was still driving around with a broken windshield, but all they needed to know was that despite what I’d been ten years ago, now I was a success.

Amber studied me and managed to show as much disapproval with her pretty features as at least fifty people saying “ugh, no!” in unison. “I understand that you think you’re better than this,” she said. “I was widowed young and my life changed dramatically, just like yours has. When I had to go back to work full-time to support my girls, I thought I was too good for it, too. I was furious about the hand I’d gotten dealt.”

“You and I are not the same. I’m sorry to hear about your husband, but losing my parents is a totally different situation. I hardly even knew...”

Was I going to become that person now, the one who ran at the mouth and bored other people so that they wanted to escape? I brought myself back under control.

“Thank you for the job offer and for corralling your relatives into doing the chores at my house,” I continued. “I will get the power back on, soon.” If I could sell more plasma, I would be closer to my goal, and I was taking extra shifts in the back room at the restaurant, too. I’d get there, but maybe not as quickly as my real estate agent would have liked.

I returned the sunglasses to my face, pulled my hair forward, and left Amber at her picture-covered desk. I went to my car as quickly as I could on my bum ankle, keeping my eyes averted from the road so that I wouldn’t see anyone who might question why I had missed the last three Sundays at church and also, maybe, anyone I’d gone to school with. I didn’t want them to spot me with these wounds, which I’d disguised with pants and bandages, the sunglasses and my hair. I wanted them to see me only at my best, but I probably didn’t have to worry about them recognizing me anyway. Of course they

wouldn't have associated the sophisticated beauty on the sidewalk with the ugly idiot I'd been back then—

“Grier? Is that your name? Grier something?”

The woman calling to me was also waving from the door of another storefront. “Hey, girl! I think we had math together in high school.” She pointed at her chest. “Raelyn! Raelyn Carter! I'm Raelyn Nguema, now. Remember me?”

Yes, I did remember her. She'd been one of the girls I'd envied a lot, because she'd had a boyfriend who'd waited for her after that class and she'd had a friend in it, too, another girl who had laughed with her and had slid over her test paper once or twice to share answers when our teacher wasn't looking.

“Hello,” I said.

“I recognized you right away because of all your scratches and cuts. Did you fall down a hill again? I remember when you did that during PE, how you rolled right to the bottom when we girls were out for that mile-run. You were so bloody.” She stepped out further and I saw what the door had disguised: a bulge in her stomach that I guessed portended a baby, since the rest of her hadn't expanded much in the ten years since ninth grade.

“I—no,” I said, and gathered myself. Despite the new injuries, I was not the same person I'd been back then, the same idiot who'd rolled down that hill and then had to be hauled up by the teacher and one of the other girls in the class who'd been on the wrestling team and was very strong. “How are you, Raelyn?”

“Pregnant,” she said, smiling. “That sums up how I am. This summer was so hot, I’ve been spending most of my time sitting in a kiddie pool while my husband turns the hose on me.”

“That sounds...scintillating.”

She laughed. “It’s cooler, anyway,” she answered, and waved at me to enter the store. “Come on in! I’m letting out all the air conditioning.”

It was a nail salon, I noticed as I walked toward her and past the name painted on the plate-glass window. I folded my fingers into fists so that my own nails wouldn’t show, because it had been a long, long time since I’d had them done, and there had been a lot of gloveless yard work and home repairs in the intervening months. I noticed that she was also barefoot with the fresh polish on her toes protected by foam separators. My own toes curled in envy but I felt something else, too: excitement, because Raelyn Carter (or whatever her name was now) was talking to me, was interested in me.

No. I squelched that immediately. Now I was the interesting one. I was the woman that drew attention when she walked down the street...not just because of my wounds, but because of the improvements to my hair, the nice clothes I wore, the way I was walking without tripping or veering to one side or the other. Raelyn had called out to me because she was curious about the person who’d gone away to have an exciting life, the person who had come back fit and beautiful, cultured and sophisticated: Grier Warren. I was that woman now, not the scratched-up girl who’d rolled down the hill in PE because

she'd gotten dizzy and stumbled, screaming until she had a mouthful of dirt.

But despite my attempt to cover them, my current abrasions were still more eye-catching than I would have liked. "What happened to you?" Raelyn asked, pointing to a large gash peeking out from under my sleeve. "That looks like it hurts!"

"No, not at all. Um, no, it's...at all," I said, and told myself that I was going to speak in complete sentences, not stumbling over words, not stuttering them out. "How—what, I mean, the baby? You're having a baby?"

"I sure am." She smiled proudly and patted her stomach. They really had done a great job with her nails at this salon. "Xavier and I got married last winter and it happened pretty fast. Do you remember him? Outside linebacker? He was a four-year starter," she said, just as proud of her husband as she was of their child.

I recognized that she was using football terminology, which meant that this Xavier was low-level, high-school famous. "I didn't meet many people," I explained. "I only went for one year."

"You mostly stuck to yourself," she recalled, and I was fairly stunned. She had noticed that? "Except you were with Shaw Highsmith a lot. Are y'all still friends?"

I saw that she wasn't the only person in the nail salon who was interested in my answer. Another woman leaned forward and the receptionist shifted her right ear closer to where I stood.

"We still talk," I ventured.

“I always thought that he was so cute. Kind of wild-looking with all that hair, but friendly, too. You know what I mean,” Raelyn said, and that was very annoying. Not that she was wrong—of course she wasn’t wrong, because I’d always thought that as well. He was undoubtably handsome, so why even bring it up like it was some kind of novel discovery? And on top of that, why hadn’t she told him so back then, when Shaw and I had been the outcasts?

“We went out once or twice,” she continued, and now it was all I could do to keep my jaw from dropping to the floor. “But I could tell that he was never into me. He stopped smiling back but then Xavier started saying hello, so I guess it worked out for the best!” She patted her stomach again and laughed more.

“You and Shaw?” I managed to ask. Raelyn Carter was so pretty—and she’d always been that way. It wasn’t like she’d worked on developing it after she graduated, because I remembered her being much the same ten years before when we’d been in class together. She’d been happy, too, always smiling and laughing in the same way that she was today, and she’d been very social. Like I’d just explained, I hadn’t met many people but I had watched them. I’d seen that the girl whom she’d copied off of hadn’t been Raelyn’s only friend. She’d hadn’t been one of the extremely popular and very mean girls, but I remembered her always eating with a group and never waiting for the bus by herself, as others had.

“I think a lot of us had our eyes on Shaw,” she went on. “A lot of girls talked about him before our soccer practices when we were changing in the bathroom and I know he went out with a few of them. I don’t remember him being serious about

anyone and then he..." Her features took on a sympathetic cast. "It was just so hard for him after he had that accident, wasn't it? He missed so much school over the next years and I think he was trying to do home study stuff, right? He didn't walk at our graduation."

"He did get his diploma," I said, which I was sure of because I'd been checking from afar, from the top bunk in my room at the boarding school. I remembered seeing his name on the list of graduates and tears slipping down my cheeks, which I'd quickly removed before my roommate had come in. The two of us hadn't gotten along very well and in fact, I hadn't had a lot of friends in that whole school. I tried recall a name, because there must have been at least one...

"What has Shaw been up to lately?" a woman in a pedicure chair asked, and I decided that it was time to go. I had an appointment, I told them, and vaguely touched my hair like that was what I was doing. It wouldn't have been a bad idea and I knew that a cut here would have cost a lot less than in Los Angeles, but it was still too much for a woman who had to get the power back on. Never mind, because my hair was straight now and it looked great. The blonde tornado had been banished for good.

"Before you leave, give me your number," Raelyn said, and she told me that they were having a little party this weekend, an end-of-summer thing and she said that her husband was a true genius with his smoker. "Bring Shaw," she suggested, smiling, and I smiled back in a way that I hoped was noncommittal and blasé and answered how nice it was to have run into her.

This time, I went back to my car even faster, but my mind was buzzing with what I'd just heard. Raelyn and Shaw had gone out? He'd gone out with other girls besides her? I hadn't been with him every second of every day, and I hadn't kept tabs on what he was up to when we were apart. Yes, I'd done things like wait in the hallway most mornings to watch for his old truck pulling into the student lot and yes, I'd walked very slowly in front of his Spanish 101 classroom before it started and when it ended, since I had been just down the hallway in Spanish 202. I'd gone to a lot of movies when he'd worked at the theater and I'd also hung out at the car wash because he'd had a job there on weekends, even though I was three years away from a license and had no car to wash.

I'd done some stuff like that and maybe, now that I thought about it, they might have been construed as "keeping tabs" on him. Obviously, I hadn't been watching all the time because I'd had no idea about that aspect of his social life. But he was so cute that any number of the girls in our high school might have been interested and it made sense that he would have dated a lot.

I didn't know why I hadn't seen that before, except that I'd been so focused on our relationship, the friendship we had with each other. I hardly thought there were words to describe how important it had been to me. From that first day when he'd offered me the tissue, my life had improved so dramatically that I remembered laughing to myself as I lay in bed at night, looking out at the stars through the narrow window at the top of my wall and brimming with happiness.

Instead of heading home, I drove in the direction that I sometimes drifted anyway, but today I had a purpose. It had

been a while since I'd passed my evidence folder to Shaw and I figured that I should go pick it up from him. He'd had enough time to digest everything and I was curious about what he thought now. I was curious and I had an invitation to issue, too. Raelyn had said that I should bring him to her party.

I felt a little quiver of excitement at the idea of going to her house with him, as if we were on a date like one of the girls he'd talked to in high school. I would wear my easy dress, since I still hadn't progressed much in figuring out how to do laundry in a tub and make everything come out nicely. Shaw would wear...well, besides the one time at church, I'd only seen him in jeans. They were so old that they looked soft and the t-shirts he'd paired with them had the writing mostly faded off. I wondered if he would shave, like he'd also done for church but not when he'd been at my house and ripped out the stupid topiaries.

I reminded myself that it was doubtful he would go to Raelyn Carter's house and even if he did, we wouldn't arrive together, and that didn't matter to me. It was clear that the only reason that I was thinking about him so much, having dreams and whatever, was my proximity to so many triggers for memories. Since I'd been back home, I'd come across a lot of things that brought up our past relationship—like Raelyn, like the shadowy hole up on a hillside that looked like the entrance to a dwarf cave (I'd really liked Tolkien books and we'd discussed that a lot), and like the clinic on the east side of town where he'd said he might work someday because back then, he'd dreamed of becoming a doctor. Almost everything here reminded me of Shaw.

It was funny how I kept deliberately passing by the high school, a place I'd hated and wasn't really on my way to work at all. It brought back random thoughts about him eating tater tots and his dead truck battery in the parking lot, of laughing with him as we sat in the grass behind the gym and picked little flowers, and of watching him in biology class instead of watching the teacher. It was funny that he was on my mind so often now that I was here. It was strange but understandable.

On the other hand, he'd hardly ever been on my mind when I lived in California. Hardly ever, except when I'd wondered if he'd gone to the senior prom and graduated, if he'd gotten a new truck, if his leg hurt, if he was happy. I'd looked him up a few times—very few, surely, and only to check and see if he was married, had children, a job, or had passed any other milestones in the years since the accident. But I only had wondered and checked a handful of times, tops.

The gate blocking his driveway looked just as rusty as it had the first time I'd come to his house, but I myself felt different. I thought back to that day and how badly everything had gone, how much I'd messed up by bursting in on Shaw and then failing at all the strategies that I'd seen successfully deployed at the real estate company where I'd worked in California. When I'd driven through this gate that afternoon, I'd still been shell-shocked by the immediate physical situation that my parents had left for me: the mess of papers, the lack of electricity, the emptiness of the house because most of the furniture was missing (including my former twin mattress and their king-sized water bed, so that there was nowhere to sleep besides the hard couch).

Then I'd found that the bank accounts had negative balances, there was no life insurance, there were no funeral plans. Bills kept arriving, more and more every day, and I'd discovered that somehow, those bills and even the house itself had been put in my name. All of it was my responsibility, a curse from beyond.

I'd driven to Shaw's house because I'd been grasping at straws to find a solution, but I'd also driven here because I'd just wanted to see him so much—only to make sure that he wasn't still injured, but the urge had been strong enough that I hadn't been able to stop myself.

Today I noticed that his gate actually operated very well for something so rusty and old-looking. It swung easily on its hinges when I tugged it open, and the driveway was a lot smoother than mine, too, all the way up to the line of boulders and weeds. It was funny, odd, that I hadn't noticed those things before, but I'd been in such a rage. That morning, I'd driven down to Georgia to confront a woman in Fort Oglethorpe. I'd found the series of payments that my father had been making to her, too, and when I'd gone to see her to try to claw back some of that money, she'd laughed and said that he owed her a lot more for all the times she'd had to get his old ass off.

Today I stopped and waited at the row of big rocks, but nothing rained down from the house onto my windshield. I got out and it felt cooler, too, but maybe I had been so hot before because I'd also been so angry.

"Grier. You're back." The voice came down from on high like the other time, but the front door opened a lot faster.

“You didn’t throw anything at my car,” I answered.

“It’s Wednesday. I only cast the first stone at the beginning of the week. What are you doing here?” Shaw asked. He wasn’t angry, though. “I still don’t have your money. I won’t ever have it.”

“I’ve been thinking a lot about that,” I said. “Even if you still did, it’s yours. I couldn’t take it from you.”

“Not even with the lawyer you mentioned? I think you also said something about calling the police.”

I shook my head. “They probably have other things to do. I also have other things to do rather than chasing after you.” And I was sure that he didn’t have that money. I’d been telling myself not to believe him, not to trust him, but I did anyway.

“If it’s not to argue more about that, then why did you show up here today?” he asked, still sounding more curious than angry. He stepped forward, out of the shadows of his house.

“I came to get my folder,” I explained.

“I thought all the stuff in there was just copies.”

“Um, yes, but...financial, you know. It’s—account and bank, that’s a privilege.”

Fortunately, he shrugged slightly instead of getting mad, and moved on. “I looked at your copies and again at the records I have here, what there is of them. If my dad ever actually had any money, he didn’t keep it.” He paused. “I’ll get your file. Anything else you need?”

There was a lot, actually. “I want to know where everything went, the furniture and jewelry and all the stuff.”

“I can’t help you with that, either.”

“No one can. No one knows anything, including me. I don’t know why my parents were driving together that night because to my knowledge, they hadn’t talked to each other in about five years. I don’t understand how anything got to this point.” I stopped, because my voice had been fading as I spoke and then it died away.

“You may never get answers to those questions,” he told me.

“Sometimes we have to live without the solutions we want.”

No, that wasn’t how I operated. I’d made my own solutions for my life, and I wanted some here, too.

“Your face is healing,” he noted. He looked at the visible wounds on my arms. “You’re a lot better.”

“I guess.” I pushed the sunglasses up my nose to make sure my eye was disguised.

“I’ll get your file,” he said again, “so you can go back to what you were doing today.”

I nodded. “Ok.” I felt very unsure about why I was in this driveway, here again with no reason. No, I had a reason: the invitation! “Wait! I ran into Raelyn Carter,” I said. “Do you remember her?”

“I think she got married and changed her name, but yeah, I do. Why?”

“She said that you two went out a few times,” I noted and he didn’t have a response to that, so it was probably true. “Um, anyway, she asked if you wanted to come to a party at her house on Friday. A barbecue.” She had already texted me the details.

“Why did Raelyn relay that invitation through you?” he asked.

“She thought we were still friends. She remembered that we had been,” I explained, and we looked at each other for a long moment.

“Come on inside.” He was already walking as he said the words, and I went as quickly as I could on the ankle that wasn’t totally better, even faster than I’d tried to speed to my car after leaving the real estate office.

I hadn’t expected the changes I saw as I walked through the front door. I had spent a lot of time here, a lot of afternoons when Shaw wasn’t working and almost every weekend, hours upon hours. I’d thought about it since—not too much, not too often, but I had dreamed about it, too. The outside was the same, but the interior was very different from the pictures in my memory.

“You straightened things up,” I noted, which was the most obvious change. His dad and grandpa hadn’t been much for cleaning, and although it hadn’t bothered me at the time, that fact had stuck out to me as I’d gotten older. The house had been physically dirty, with sticky counters in the kitchen, dishes piled around the living room, windows streaked enough that there wasn’t much of a view of the world outside them. Now, it was totally clean, neat as a pin and fairly gleaming.

“It took me a while, but I finally realized that it’s more comfortable to live like this than how it was before with all the mess and confusion. If I’m going to be here all the time, I want it neat,” he responded.

There were some new things, too: a few pieces of furniture I didn’t recognize, like a couch that wasn’t covered in years of

dog hair from pets long gone and grime from everyone's boots resting on it. He had also painted everything, both the walls and the ceiling, which I remembered as dark and low. It didn't feel that way anymore. The floors were a different color now too, no longer the murky brown of my memories. It had all changed a lot but not like it was suddenly five-star luxury—in other words, it didn't seem as if someone had spent a hundred thousand dollars to improve it but still, the Highsmith house was much, much better than it had been the last time that I'd visited.

"It was like a cave in here," Shaw was telling me, but I was looking towards the alcove where we'd eaten and done our homework, the little nook off the kitchen where his dad had liked to sit too and draw using the light that trickled through the dirty windows. All the former chairs had been removed and although the same table remained, it was now set up as a desk. "My office," he explained, when he saw the direction of my gaze. "I work from there."

"What do you do?" Because according to the gossipers, he did nothing except hide from their curiosity.

"I'm a programmer," he said. "I'm mostly self-taught but I took college classes, too. Online. I'm close to graduating."

"I didn't know you were doing that," I said, staring at the setup he had. I knew only a little bit about computers, but even I could see that what was there was impressive. Again, not a hundred thousand bucks' worth of equipment, but impressive.

"What do you know about me anymore, Grier?" Shaw asked. "We hadn't spoken in ten years before you showed up in my

driveway a few weeks ago.”

I didn't mention that I'd been looking for information about him during the decade that we'd been apart, because I really hadn't done it that often. Instead, I continued my tour of the house. There were new appliances in the kitchen and new cabinets.

“I installed all this,” he explained. “Do you remember how my grandpa had glued everything together?”

“I remember yanking off a drawer front by mistake and being so horrified, and then he pulled out a big roll of tape and your dad told me not to worry.” I smiled, thinking about it. The rules had been different in my own house where nothing was really meant to be touched or used, and his dad had always been very nice to me. I looked around the rooms that had been so familiar and comforting, missing Paul Highsmith's presence in them.

“They both liked you, up until what happened to me. They were pissed about that, more than pissed.”

Of course. Everyone had been.

“They were disappointed by how you acted afterwards. My dad used to cry.”

I walked to the window instead of responding. What was I supposed to say? They'd hated me and his grandpa had died cursing me, I assumed, because he had passed away in our junior year of high school. I'd read that from my usual spot on my bunk bed in the boarding school dormitory and had wiped away tears with the edge of my pillowcase. He hadn't had the time to understand how much I'd changed since then, how I

wasn't that stupid little girl any longer. I reminded myself of how I was a different person from the idiot who had pulled off the drawer front and later had run away from everyone in this house. I wasn't the same at all.

My thoughts were on Shaw's grandpa, how he'd died thinking that I'd ruined his grandson's life and had left them all to suffer, so it took me a moment to focus on the scene outside of the window in front of me. Then I said, "Look out there. Look at that!" Where there had been a few small, scraggly rows to make a garden and a dirt patch filled with chickens, now there were multiple beds overflowing with leafy plants, vines climbing trellises, and trees heavy with fruit. The chickens were in a separate, fenced yard and had their own house, too, and I saw a few goats and what looked like a cow. He was almost farming back here.

"I grow a lot of my own food," he told me. "Not enough to be totally self-sufficient, but I do ok."

"Can I see?"

He seemed surprised but nodded. "Careful. It's a big step," he said as he opened the back door, and when I glanced over my shoulder, I saw that he held out his hands, as if he might need to catch me.

"I've done a lot of work since you knew me," I told him. "I had a trainer and I've done Pilates, yoga, weights, spin, you name it. I'm so much stronger that I hardly ever get off-balance."

"Good. That's good to know. I thought it was a problem with your inner ears, though, not because you didn't work out."

I stepped off carefully into the back yard. “But I don’t even notice it anymore, because I’m so strong. I’ve transformed my body.” Apparently, he hadn’t noticed anything besides how haggard I’d been looking, like he’d said the last time I was over.

“I was wondering about you in that house at night without lights,” he said, and I looked back again, because he’d remembered that it was harder for me in the dark. I’d tended to lose my balance even more when the light was dim, but not now.

“No, I’m absolutely fine. The thing about me falling off the porch the other day had nothing to do with a balance problem, nothing at all.” It had been a misjudgment about where the edge of the porch was and a lack of attention to building codes that would have meant railings. “What are you growing?”

“The season’s winding down so I’m mostly harvesting,” Shaw said, and he showed me. It was eye-opening; not the part about the plants, although I was impressed by his gardening skills, but all of it.

“Why are you hiding this?”

He put down the red pepper he’d just picked. “I had to build the fence because of deer.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. Why does everyone in town think that you don’t have a job, but you do? Why do you let the front of your house look so cruddy, when the back is so beautiful? I noticed how you’ve kept up the driveway so the gravel is smooth, but you let the gate look like it won’t even open. What’s with the hermit routine?”

“It’s not a routine. I just don’t want to go out and explain myself. It’s a waste of time.”

“Then why do you bother to go to church?” I asked.

“I thought you had the answer to that when we ran into each other there. Didn’t you say it was for Hell-avoidance?” he asked, and I laughed.

Shaw had the same reaction as the other time I’d done that in front of him: he seemed to jump at the sound, and he scowled at me. He gathered up the vegetables he’d picked and started for the kitchen door.

“If you don’t want anything to do with anyone, then I guess you don’t want to go to Raelyn Carter’s house for her barbecue,” I said, and that made him pause.

“Are you going?”

“Maybe,” I answered, and I was definitely going. I wanted to see those people again, all the ones from school who had thought I was an ugly, uncoordinated circus freak. I would have my straight hair, I’d walk without weaving or wobbling, and I’d speak in sentences that would be witty, erudite, and coherent. They would be so impressed that they wouldn’t know what to do with themselves. At the same time, I’d be able to compare how my life had turned out so wonderfully to the unfortunate choices that they’d made—well, maybe my life wasn’t so fabulous at this exact moment, but it would be again soon, and no one besides Amber the real estate agent knew how bad off I was right now.

Shaw knew, too, but I just had a feeling that he wouldn’t spill that information. He was watching me, the still, quiet

watching he did where only his eyes moved. “Do you want me to go?” he asked.

“I don’t care,” I answered. “I just thought you should know that you were included in the invitation.” Then I admitted what I’d been thinking. “Raelyn wanted you to come and she asked me because she thought I could make that happen. So it would be really weird if I went and you didn’t, because they would all be disappointed.”

“I’m such a draw.”

“You are because you’ve made yourself seem so elusive. Like Batman or something. Or the Hunchback of Notre-Dame.”

A smile started small and then spread across his face until he was fully grinning, showing the dimple in his right cheek that I hadn’t seen for more than a decade. It wasn’t very hot any more, in that the weather had cooled and the humidity of the summer was calming, but I felt warmth rising through my body.

“I pick being Batman over Quasimodo,” he said. “Ok. I’ll go.”

I tried to be the cool, collected woman that I now was and didn’t do anything but shrug. Then I thought that I should say something. “Good,” I told him. “I mean, fine, I guess, which is the standard response—I don’t care.”

“Good,” he repeated. “I’ll drive since your windshield is still a traffic hazard.”

“You’ll pick me up?” Like a date?

“Sure,” Shaw said off-handedly. “I’ll pick you up.”

It was a normal thing, nothing out of the ordinary that I was getting picked up by a guy to go to a party. This happened all the time in Los Angeles because I went out a lot there, to loads of parties with tons of different men to see all the friends and colleagues I'd amassed in my busy California life.

“You ok?”

“I'm fine,” I breathed, since I was totally fine and not at all bowled over by the thought of going out with Shaw. “I'll see you Friday.”

I was fine. I was not excited at all, not worked up, not thrown off-balance. I was great, as usual.

CHAPTER 5

I thought I might puke. I looked again at my reflection in the mirror, the one still attached to the wall of my mother's empty closet, and I decided that I looked as good as I could get myself. It wasn't perfect, given all the scratches and wounds still visible from that stupid fall I'd had, but the red zombie eye had faded slightly and I'd spent forever on my makeup and my hair, hours in the car to get everything how it needed to be.

No, that was wrong. To be a success, you had to think like a success, so I changed my mind: I did look perfect. I was perfect except for the abrasions which would get better with time but right now looked terrible, and perfect except for the thirty or so things that I wanted to improve about my face and body but would only be accomplished with plastic surgery and recovery from that. I needed a haircut, too. Unfortunately, I wouldn't be able to get any of those things done before Shaw's arrival. I walked to the front window to watch for him, promising myself that despite the obvious problems, I was perfect. Absolutely perfect.

Unlike the last time he'd come over, he was prompt tonight. I made myself wait inside instead of running right out when I saw his headlights, though, because I remembered watching my mother dressing up (the rare times when she'd permitted me to be there and observe). I remembered the smell of her cigarettes and how she'd sung under her breath as she picked through the long rows of her clothing, searching for the perfect thing. Then my father would start bellowing, but she'd still

had tons of work left to do on herself because she'd always begun her preparations at the exact moment that he had told her that they'd need to leave—like if he said they would go at six, she sat down at her makeup table at six on the dot. It meant he always had to wait, and wait, and wait.

But given how their lives had turned out... maybe they shouldn't have been my role models. I opened the door and hurried through it, just as Shaw was approaching the dangerous porch without railings. He moved slowly, I noticed, so the first thing out of my mouth was the question, "Did you have physical therapy today?"

He stopped next to the bottom step. "Yes. Why?"

"No reason. I thought it might have been on your schedule, that's all." I moved just as slowly to join him on the cracked pavement of the driveway.

"Is your ankle still hurting from your plant injury?" he asked me back.

"It was the pot that was the problem, not the dead topiary. It's ok now but I wouldn't mind walking kind of carefully," I said, and we both went to his truck at a very measured pace, which seemed to be better for him.

He opened the door for me when we got there and nodded back when I said thank you, and my ankle really had felt ok on the walk. But when I got in—that was when I felt the pain. Not physically in my joints this time, but a shock like I'd been hit across the face, because it was exactly the same. Of all the things that had changed in our lives, this truck hadn't. It was just as it had been when I'd ridden in it in high school, with the same smell (part boy, part leather, part outdoors), the same

plaid blanket spread across the seats, the same pink mermaid that seemed to wink as she spun from the rearview mirror. I put my elbow on the armrest, where I had carved two very tiny letters with my fingernail among the many scratches in the old vinyl: a G and a W, my initials. I'd done that to prove to myself that it was real, that I was actually riding with Shaw in his truck, and also so that other girls in the future would know that I had been there first. I wondered how many women had sat in this seat in the years since.

"Could you see that I was having trouble with my leg as I walked up?" he asked me as we headed toward the road, bumping over the driveway that was not going to get repaired before the house went on the market.

"I could tell a little."

"The last surgery was reconstructive on the ligaments that got hurt," he mentioned. "Kind of a tune-up. There's nothing really wrong anymore and I'd rather not talk about it at this party. People always want to bring up my injuries and they will especially when they see the two of us together."

"I don't want to talk about anything, either," I answered quickly. "I know they'll want to ask about my parents, though, so I prepped for that."

"Prepped?" he echoed.

"That was what I did at my old job when I had to talk to my bosses. I would try to think of every possible thing they could ever bring up so that I would have a response all ready. No surprises. It's a good strategy," I told him.

"Did that work? Were you always prepped for everything?"

“I was good at my job. I was an executive vice president at a multinational real estate firm,” I said, but then admitted the whole truth. “No, it didn’t work all the time. I was often surprised and unprepared.” And then I’d stood there blathering out stupid words instead presenting the polished image of the woman who was going to have it all. As I was going to do.

He considered that, and as he did, his bottom lip pushed out a little. It was the same thing he’d done when we were in biology class and he’d thought hard about what the teacher was lecturing on. “You’re kind of young to be an executive vice president,” he told me.

“I was ready for it. They wouldn’t have given me the position otherwise,” I informed him right back.

“Great, good for you,” Shaw answered, but he shook his head a little like he didn’t believe what I’d said, or maybe that he didn’t think it was so great after all.

“It absolutely was great,” I said, but then found myself admitting even more. “It doesn’t matter much because I’m not employed there now.”

“Did you quit when you decided to come home?”

“No. No, it was already over because the company was—the owner, the CEO, he decided to go—he wanted to do something new, so he moved to Mexico and he’s involved in infomercials there. I’d been unemployed for a few days when they called about my parents.” It had been a week full of highlights.

“I had no idea that people still made infomercials.”

“That story may not be true,” I admitted. “The company folded fast and that was one thing I heard, but there were a lot of rumors flying around.” In any case, it was done. We’d all handed in our badges and on my way out, I’d seen liquidators removing the office furniture.

“So you got fired,” he suggested, and that part was definitely true. “You must have made good money, though, as the executive vice president at a multinational firm. Why don’t you have any saved so you can pay your bills?”

“First of all, they aren’t ‘my’ bills. My parents had run them up over several years and I hadn’t visited even once in that time, so I had nothing to do with them. I did have some savings but they went pretty fast toward other things. The back taxes and burial costs, for example.” I hadn’t bothered with funerals since there wasn’t really anyone who would have wanted to pay their respects, except people from church who would have been curious rather than mournful. “But I didn’t have that much saved,” I admitted. “It’s really expensive to live in Los Angeles, and I had student loans.” It felt easy to share that although normally, I kept my business to myself. I remembered telling Shaw all kinds of things when we’d been friends, every detail of my sad, boring life as it was back then.

“What student loans?” he asked. “You mean that your parents didn’t pick up the tab for your education?”

“They did for some of it, but not the last few semesters of undergrad, and nothing for graduate school. Also, I was doing a lot of self-improvement and it cost money.” No need to get into all that right now, no need to discuss the hair, makeup, and exercise projects that had brought me to where I was today.

“I’m only twenty-three and I thought I would have plenty of time to save up for other stuff.”

“Stuff like emergencies? Stuff like supporting yourself in your old age?”

“What are your grand preparations for all that?” I asked him.

“What are you doing that’s so adult?”

Well, a lot. He told me about it on the rest of the drive over to Raelyn’s house, about the ways he saved money and where he parked his investments, the schedule of his truck maintenance, his home repairs, his retirement options, and on, and on. He was careful with what he earned and he made it stretch, and I found myself very impressed. It made me sound worse because I didn’t really have anything to show for my own successes, but I would get back to that soon enough. Amber McCourt would sell my house and I would return to the life I’d had before, to the triumph of it all.

Raelyn was doing a lot of grown-up things herself. She lived in a little house that was nowhere near the size of my family’s castle, but it was very cute, and she and her husband seemed to have done a lot of home and automotive maintenance, too.

They had two clean cars with smooth, uncracked windshields parked in their driveway, trees that were naturally green, and neat flower beds filled with living plants. Probably they didn’t have a sinkhole in the back, either, and it was almost a certainty that they enjoyed all the benefits of electrical service.

Shaw parked at the curb and walked around to the passenger side just as I opened the door for myself. I hit him with it by mistake, and we were arguing a little over whose fault that was when another car pulled up behind us.

“Is that Shaw? Shaw Highsmith?” a woman’s voice called.
“Oh my God! I can’t believe it’s you! Do you remember me?
I’m Stacia Laska, from high school!”

I watched his back stiffen slightly and I wondered why he’d said he would come here. I’d teased him about being a hermit, but he did seem to have a good thing going back in his house in the woods with all the improvements he’d made, and he’d told me that there was no reason for him to leave it. Now he was setting himself up for intrusive questions from annoying, pretty girls like this one. I remembered her very well from high school, her husky voice and her big boobs, both of which I’d envied.

No matter Shaw’s level of discomfort—I’d prepped for all of this, so I was ready to give him an assist. “Hello, there. I remember you but you probably don’t recognize me anymore. I’m Grier Warren,” I said, and swiftly approached the woman emerging from her car. She took the hand I’d offered and shook it, but she seemed slightly thrown by how close I stood to her and by my grip. Good—that was the point. I’d seen this tactic deployed in meetings with tenants in LA and physical immediacy and displays of strength always took them off their game. “After one year of school here, I left to attend a top-ranked boarding school, and after that I graduated summa cum laude from UCLA. I continued with my MBA there as well,” I informed her.

“Uh, great.” She pulled her hand away from mine and maneuvered so that she could close her car door. “See you later.”

I rejoined Shaw, pleased with how that had gone. She had left him alone and on top of that, she was also aware that I wasn't someone to be messed with. Not anymore.

"I couldn't hear what you said to her. Why did she give you that look?" he asked me.

"I introduced myself," I explained, and we went toward the house.

There was a lot of excitement at our arrival, but it wasn't about me and my new hair and confidence. No, they were a hundred-percent focused on Shaw, which made sense. Just to look at him now, so tall, so cute, so...I had to stop looking because it was so overwhelming.

"Shaw?" a guy asked, and stood up from his seat near the smoker. "Hey, man. We worked at the car wash together a lifetime ago. How are you doing?"

"I'm Grier, Grier Warren," I said, stepping in between them. "You may not remember me because I left for boarding school in California. It had exceptionally high academic standards."

He blinked. "Hi, Grier. Uh, good to see you."

There were a lot of people on Raelyn's deck whom I hadn't met before and some I remembered from school. I didn't worry if they remembered me back or not. I went ahead and behaved exactly as I'd taught myself to do at parties, making introductions and small talk. All the time, I kept an eye on Shaw and how the other guests were reacting to his presence. I felt oddly protective of him, even though he was also an adult and both of us should have been totally capable of behaving in social situations.

But I had been out in the real world, dealing with people much more sophisticated than the ones here with their red cups of beer and disposable plates heaped with barbecue—which was delicious, by the way. Maybe I was getting my appetite back, because I had a hard time not taking down ribs like they were going to be outlawed. But I was very, very careful not to get anything on my dress. If at all possible, I wanted to avoid the laundry tub.

I watched Shaw break away from the group of people he'd been speaking to, get a beer, and then approach the corner where I'd found myself a seat. "What are you doing over here?" he asked as he joined me at the table.

"I'm eating," I answered. "Raelyn's husband really is a really good cook."

"Let me have a rib," he said, and devoured it. "That's good," he agreed. "This party isn't bad, either."

"No one's bothering you?" I asked suspiciously.

"No, I'm not bothered. It's different, but not bad." He glanced around. "I wasn't actively avoiding people before."

No? "I'm sure you had plenty of opportunities to go to other barbecues," I said, but he only took another rib and didn't respond to that. I watched people watching him eat. "They were lining up to talk to you," I noted. "They're staring, too."

"I do feel a little bit like an exhibit at the zoo." But he took a casual sip of his beer so maybe that didn't bother him very much. "It has been a long time since I've been out. I should have done it sooner."

“Raelyn mentioned to me that you two had gone out in high school. On a date,” I clarified. “She said that other girls were interested in you back then, too.”

“So?” He took another drag of his drink.

So, I had thought that he and I were in the same boat, rowing through freshman year together on the reject raft. The castaway canoe, the pontoon of pariahs. “I didn’t know,” I said, which didn’t really cover the hurt I somehow felt over it. Why would I have cared that I was the only passenger in that boat? It was years before and I wouldn’t be embarking on another journey in it. “It makes even less sense to me why you self-isolated for all these years if you were secretly popular in high school.”

“I wasn’t secretly popular and I haven’t been isolated. I was busy going to classes, getting a job, working on my house. I went places, too.”

“To Chattanooga, for surgery and doctor appointments,” I said, but he shook his head.

“I’ve traveled some. Not hundred thousand dollar vacations,” he informed me. “I just didn’t hang out a banner about any of it, so I guess that people didn’t know and they got into the idea that I was living in a bat cave.”

“Yes, I did notice that you’re wearing that t-shirt today,” I said and pointing to the faded, black-winged logo on his chest. He grinned and there was the dimple that made my heart skip out of its normal rhythm. “Why didn’t you keep socializing with the girls you knew from high school? Or with the guys,” I added.

He finished the bottle. “They were taking exams, then doing summer jobs and going to the pool, and then they were playing sports, hanging out, and starting their sophomore year. I was lying in my bed in pain, thinking that I’d never be able to run again, thinking that I wasn’t going to be able to support my dad when he needed it. They were moving on and I wasn’t, and then my grandpa got sick, too. Things were bad and I didn’t have time for barbecues.”

I nodded sedately, schooling my features into the calm, disinterested expression that I’d employed during business meetings in LA. All those things had happened years before and obviously, he was fine now. He was eating another rib and wasn’t in pain, wasn’t worried. I found that I was clutching both aluminum arms of my chair, though, so I let them go and casually wiped my fingers on a napkin. Then I also casually dabbed at my face, because I seemed to have broken out in a sweat.

“I didn’t see too many people and that got to be a habit,” Shaw concluded, and used another napkin to thoroughly wipe his hands. “I got used to being alone.”

“Well, they should have tried to do something for you!” I said. They were to blame just as much as anyone for how things had gone. If there was a villain here, it was all the classmates and neighbors who had dropped the ball and forgotten about him and his family. “If they weren’t seeing you, then it would have been kind for them to text and call to ask how you were, to invite you out to stuff. They go to church and talk a big game about generosity, but when someone needed help, where were they?”

“They were there for me,” he answered, which sucked the wind directly from my sails. “People were very nice. They came and dropped off food, even when my grandpa threatened them off and said he’d shoot them. He probably wouldn’t have,” he added. “They started a fund for my medical expenses, too. When my dad got weaker, they came again with the food and with offers of help. He lost a lot of mobility, enough that I was carrying him sometimes.”

Shaw was all right now, though. I could look at him and see that he was fine, so I didn’t need to worry about him and get upset.

He went on. “It wasn’t just his body. He was having a lot more trouble focusing and he even stopped writing in his journals in in the last year or so of his life. We hardly left the house.”

“I’m sorry. I’m really sorry about your dad.”

He watched me. “The first time you said that, I didn’t believe you.”

He was close enough to see the tears this time. I only nodded back.

“Can I ask you something?”

I nodded sedately once more, but I got afraid of what that something might be. Despite my current emotional state, I reminded myself that I was the one in control here. I briefly touched my hair, too, and found minor curl activity but a general lack of funnel cloud appearance. I was great.

“How come you keep bragging to all these people?” Shaw inquired.

“Bragging?” I echoed. That hadn’t been the question that I’d expected. “What do you mean?”

“You keep telling people shit to puff yourself up,” he clarified, and I bristled.

“No, I haven’t been doing that! I’m telling them about myself because I’m leading with information.”

“Care to explain?”

“It’s a negotiating tactic,” I said. “Rather than waiting for someone to ask a question that you don’t want to answer, you give them a fact that you want them to know instead. So if I didn’t want to talk about my parents and why my mother purposefully ran her car into a tree, I might open by stating that my senior thesis for my undergrad econ degree won a prize for being the best out of more than...” I stopped, considering how that remark might have come across.

“Do you think that’s what happened? You think their crash was purposeful?”

I shrugged. I wasn’t stupid and I was fully capable of solving simple equations. Two people driving at night in a strange place minus two seatbelts, plus one big tree, take away any trace of skid marks on the pavement? It totaled zero, which was what my parents had left to me. No, that math was wrong. They had left me with a value less than zero: it was all negative.

“I could see how some of the things I’ve mentioned might sound like bragging, but it’s also a good thing not to sell yourself short,” I said. “You want to go big so that people know whom they’re dealing with.”

“You play yourself up?”

“I don’t have to. I only have to tell the truth and they’ll get intimidated, like how the first time I emailed my real estate agent Amber, I explained to her that I was also in the field... ok, that’s also not a good example.” Amber McCourt hadn’t been intimidated in the least; she’d only gotten huffy. I paused, trying to think of a better way to explain some of the methods I’d learned in my former career. “I’m not getting it across to you right,” I finally said. I looked around the deck, at where I was sitting in comparison to where everyone else besides Shaw had placed themselves. It was like I was at an isolation table instead of at a party, that was how far apart I was. “This isn’t going the way it usually does. I usually have a lot more success with these approaches.”

“Really?” he asked, and he sounded very doubtful, but he’d never witnessed me in action in California. I had been very popular at parties, very magnetic and desirable, but he wouldn’t get the chance to see that if everyone here kept responding so incorrectly to my overtures.

“If you can tell that it’s not working, why do you keep doing it?” he continued. “You’re sitting over here, stuffing ribs into your face all by yourself because the other guests think you’re boasting and acting snotty. It’s just like high school.”

“I’m not alone because of that! They didn’t think—that wasn’t me in high school!” I sputtered. “It was the other way around. They thought they were better than I was.” And they actually had been better then I was back then, because the girls been fun and built just right, and they’d also known how to talk to boys and draw their attention. The boys themselves

had been totally inexplicable to me, all of them except for Shaw. “I wasn’t snotty, and if I kept myself apart, it was because they were mean. They were exclusionary toward me, not the other way around.”

He nodded slightly. “Well, however it was back then, right now you keep talking about your grades, and your big job and your apartment in Los Angeles, and your expensive exercise classes, and how you went to parties with celebrities. Your tactic is working, I guess, because they’re not asking you any questions that you don’t want to answer. They’re ignoring you instead, and that can’t be how you wanted this party to go.”

No, it wasn’t. “I only mentioned one brush with a celebrity,” I defended myself. “I was at a bar with the girl who was the host of the travel show about taking your pets on Caribbean cruises. It was before she got fired for sexual harassment and replaced with the former pro surfer who always has the parakeet on his shoulder. It was just a point of interest, not bragging.”

He nodded again.

“I could see that it might have sounded as if I was trying to show off,” I admitted, “but leading with information is a valid strategy. I did it for you when we got out of the car so that Stacia woman with the push-up bra would leave you alone.” The placement of her boobs in that contraption (chin-level) was totally ridiculous, but I noticed that she was now sitting with a large group of people and wasn’t alone with a pile of rib bones.

Shaw leaned back in his chair and squinted towards the setting sun. “If I wanted people to leave me alone, then I could have

stayed home. I showed up here expecting questions.”

“Why? Why did you show up here now?”

“Seemed like an interesting idea when you mentioned it. I don’t know.”

“You said that you didn’t want to talk about things, and I could tell that you didn’t want to answer that woman’s questions when we were getting out of the car. That was why I tried to deflect for you,” I told him. “I understand how it’s hard to say a bunch of stuff that’s embarrassing. Not in your case, it’s not embarrassing, but it’s...” I searched for the word.

“Personal.”

“Exactly,” I agreed. “I’m sure you don’t want to say personal stuff, just like I don’t want to.”

“Then why did you come?”

I stared at the rib bones. I’d come in order to show them all how I was awesome, except that wasn’t working. I seemed to be giving them another message instead, one about how I was full of myself, but not so full that I couldn’t eat more ribs than the combined total of everyone else here. “I don’t know,” I answered.

He paused a moment before saying, “If you’re worried that I’m going to share personal information about what happened to me, you shouldn’t. I won’t talk about that.”

“I don’t—you can say—it’s up to you since it’s your history.” I waved my hands like a bee was attacking, but I was just trying to dismiss his words. “I don’t care if you talk about it because it wasn’t my fault. It wasn’t my fault at all.”

“I didn’t say it was.”

“No, but your grandpa did, and your dad thought it, too. They blamed—”

“Hi, y’all.” Raelyn slid back the third chair at the table and eased herself into it. “Mind if I join you? I get tired of standing, even in these shoes.” She rested her feet up on the last chair, and I saw some very wide, very ugly athletic slides. I also saw that her toes resembled small, swollen hot dogs with beautifully painted nails. It was gross. If this was pregnancy, I would definitely pass, I decided, but then I brought that line of thinking to a firm stop. Where had it even come from? Of course, I would pass on babies! I was going nowhere near babies, marriage, husbands, partners, or anything long-term like that, anything that would distract me from my ultimate goals.

“Thanks again for inviting us, Raelyn,” Shaw told her, and she smiled hugely at him...and now that I thought about it, I did remember girls smiling at him when we were back in high school together. I remembered them talking to him, edging close and leaning near, even giggling. I hadn’t understood it at the time because I had been, what, incredibly stupid? More obtuse than a cement block? Apparently, yes to both of those things.

“Thank you,” I agreed, and both of them turned to look at me. I realized that I might have said it too loudly.

“I’ve heard a little about what you’ve been doing since you left home, Grier, but I’d love to talk to you more,” she said, smiling. Every time I’d looked in her direction today, she’d had that same expression and I began to wonder if she was

actually happy or if it was a tactic of her own, if she was trying to fool people. I'd never seen that one used before, though. My fellow employees at the real estate company had mostly been frowning and miserable, as had the tenants in the apartment buildings we'd bought and sold. Those people had generally been fighting against losing their housing, so it had made sense for them to be upset.

Maybe Raelyn's happiness made sense, too, because she seemed genuinely pleased with her husband, and I'd seen them hugging and holding hands a lot today. She'd also proudly shown everyone the garden they'd put in and given a tour of the nursery (I hadn't participated, since I didn't care about baby stuff). Those thoughts flew through my mind and as they did, I heard myself tell her, "I haven't been doing all that much. What were you saying about baby names? You might go with Jack to honor your grandfather?"

She was very excited to rehash that topic and very ready to talk about the baby in general, which I supposed made sense. If you had another human brewing in your uterus, it would weigh heavily on your mind. And on your feet, by the look of hers.

After a while, more people wandered over and pretty soon everyone was chatting together and I was in the thick of it. I sat quietly and looked around, kind of entranced. It was exactly like we were teenagers—not my personal experience at that age, but the experience I wished I'd had. Sitting like this reminded me of the cafeteria in the public high school just down the road from Raelyn's house, and also of the dining hall in my private school in California. Both of those big rooms had featured a table, *the* table. Its precise location in the space

had been impermanent but nevertheless, it had been the center of everything, the hub of the social world. The people seated there at lunch had been the prettiest, best-dressed girls and the boys who were deemed suitable as their escorts, generally due to athletic prowess and comparable handsomeness.

And now here I was, Grier Warren, sitting at the good table. Maybe I was still scratched up (a few people had asked me about what had happened), but guess what? I was the one surrounded. I was the one next to the cutest guy here, too, because Raelyn's husband was no slouch but Shaw was...well, he was just Shaw. There wasn't anyone to compare, certainly not in this little town. I hadn't seen anyone close to him in Los Angeles, either, or anywhere else I'd traveled.

When it got late, the party mostly broke up and Shaw and I made our way out, too, after thanking our hosts and saying goodbye to the other guests. I felt almost like I was floating to the truck, drifting along on a zephyr of victory. Maybe things had started weirdly but they had ended better than I ever could have imagined. I'd talked to a lot of people and no one had mentioned my parents besides a few of them saying they were sorry for my loss. As far as I'd overheard, they hadn't bothered Shaw too much, either, except for scattered remarks about not seeing him and wondering where he'd been. He just told them he'd been busy.

I still didn't totally understand why he'd made the leap back into society today at Raelyn's, but I was glad that he had. I guessed my happiness showed on my face, because as he cranked up the old engine and let it sit for a moment before shifting into drive, he mentioned that I'd been smiling a lot.

“For about the last hour, even after you saw that you had sauce from the ribs on your dress,” he told me. “You had fun.”

“It was really fun. I didn’t even know that I liked cornhole and I’ve never been a fan of beer either but it tasted good. And everyone was nicer than I expected.” In fact, I’d talked to more people tonight than I had in the last few months in total.

“Did you go to a lot of parties like that?” I asked him.

“Before, you know, before it happened? I don’t remember that you did, but I don’t remember you going out with Raelyn, either. I guess I hadn’t been aware of that.”

“I didn’t ever go to many parties or out with a lot of girls,” he said, and we eased down the road without any objections from the engine.

“Why? Clearly, you could have been popular.”

“No, I couldn’t have been,” he said. “Remember how I threw that rock? I was never going to make it in sports. Speaking of, there’s a guy who will come to your house—”

“I already have an appointment to get the windshield fixed,” I said. “It’s taken care of, so please don’t send anyone.” I persevered with the previous topic. “You could have been popular, because Raelyn told me about girls liking you. You didn’t have to play football or baseball for that.”

He seemed to consider the idea, but then he shook his head.

“No, I couldn’t have been. None of the people over at Raelyn’s house tonight were in that crowd either, not even her husband and I think he was on the starting line of the football team for all four years. Didn’t you see how nice he was?”

“Yes.” He’d laughed when he saw me disposing of my pile of bones, but it hadn’t been in a malicious way. “Even if you didn’t want to be mean to people, you could have been like Raelyn, you know, with lots of friends but without the nasty drama. Why didn’t you do that?”

“I was weird. Don’t you remember? I was the oldest freshman to ever come through there. I’d also been homeschooled up to that point, so I didn’t know anyone.”

Right, “homeschooled.” What it meant for him was that he’d only learned what he’d taken on himself, and it had been a miracle that he’d made it to high school at any age.

“I went out with some girls because yeah, I was a teenage boy and they made it clear that they were interested, but I wasn’t looking for a lot, not a girlfriend or a ton of people to hang around me. I was happy with what I had. I had a best friend, and I didn’t feel like I needed anybody else,” he finished, and glanced across the cab of the truck.

Me. I had been his friend, his best friend. He’d been mine too, and suddenly my happiness leached away and I felt like I might cry. The red cups of beer that I’d imbibed weren’t helping my emotional state, obviously, but the real problem was that I missed him so much and at the moment it felt like a whirlpool of that emotion had engulfed me.

“Do you think that we could ever have that again?” I heard myself ask. I hadn’t meant to, and yes, maybe it was due to the three or four or five beers that I’d drunk, but that question had been at the top of my mind for about ten years. “Do you think we could be friends again? Could we go back to where we were then?”

“No. No, Grier, there’s no going back.”

To my ears, he hadn’t sounded totally convinced by his own words. He was also shaking his head slightly but not too hard, as if he didn’t fully believe what he’d just said. So I kept going, trying to convince him. I knew that this was the wrong tack to take—my boss had told me so at my last job, to quit digging in my heels and fighting, to shut up and sit down.

But I couldn’t seem to turn off the spigot of my mouth. “We got along really well, didn’t we?” I pressed. “You said it yourself. We used to be best friends.”

“We’re not, not anymore,” he stated.

“But tonight we got along again. We could get along all the time! You could give up on being so angry at me and I would also give up being angry at you—”

“Why in the hell would you be mad? How did your life get shit on, Grier? Weren’t you the one who got to go to the boarding school with exceptionally high academic standards? What’s your problem?”

I ignored that question. “We’re making inroads. You came and sat with me tonight, right? Right? And it was because—”

“Because I felt sorry for you,” he answered angrily, “just like I did when we were in ninth grade. I felt sorry for you when you came to my house to invite me to Raelyn’s and I tried to help you by going to her party, because you were so pathetically interested in it. Then I saw you sitting by yourself, eating alone at that table on her deck and about to cry, and it took me right back to the first time we met in English class. I guess I’m weak like that.”

I was shocked, and I was also so angry that I wanted to reach across the car and hit him. “I am not pathetic! I was back when—yes, I used to be ugly and dumb, but now—I’m not that girl, and I don’t want to be friends with someone like you anyway. Just stop this truck!”

“I’ll stop when we get to your fake castle,” he told me, and that was what he did. I got out as fast as I could but I did hear him call my name as I rushed toward the steps. I wavered and tripped, of course, and fell directly onto my face, so then I heard his car door slam and him walking across the driveway, repeating my name and telling me to stop. I managed to get the front door closed and locked before he could make it there. I dealt with my bloody nose and cried very, very quietly so that he couldn’t hear me over the noise of his knocking and of his own voice asking me to open up.

I’d learned in the business world not to bother with questions, since you should have already had all the information you needed. Also, you didn’t really want to hear the truth in the answers you might get. I never, ever should have asked Shaw that question. Of course we couldn’t go back, of course our friendship was over. I’d killed it, and there was no one to blame but myself.

CHAPTER 6

Five minutes into the morning, my first one here, and things was already not going as I'd planned.

“No sugar, but I do take a generous pour of milk. Whole milk, not a substitute,” Amber McCourt told me and slid a five across the counter. “Thank you, Grier.” Then she went back to typing something quickly into her phone, ignoring that I still stood in front of her desk, red in the face and fuming.

I was not her coffee fetcher. “Excuse me, Amber, but working together doesn't mean—”

“Amber, where are the pictures of Aden's birthday party on Saturday? I want to see!” another agent said as she bustled into the office. Amber switched from texting to gushing over her son and discussing the cake, the decorations, and the guests, who were millions of McCourt relatives. She still ignored me, though.

I left. Not that either of them had noticed, but I didn't have to stand there and listen to them gossip about a kid's party and the bad outfit some girl named Tally had worn because she still wouldn't listen to Amber's fashion tips. I left, yes, but I was not going to fetch coffee for her. I did get an umbrella and I did walk over to the café that had opened since I'd lived here in high school, one of the new businesses that was part of the downtown's revival. I went there, but it was certainly not because my new boss—no, I meant that it certainly wasn't because my *colleague* had given me a drink order. I just felt like getting something caffeinated, which was what I'd usually

done at work. I'd developed a serious coffee habit at my last job, taking down cup after cup, but that was normal behavior at that company. We all had spent a lot of time escaping to the shop in the lobby of our building, and I shuddered to remember the amount I'd put into their register and tip jar every week.

That was the reason I was now working for—I meant, that was the reason I was now working *with* Amber McCourt. No, I wasn't talking about a tip jar; I was talking about money.

When she started showing up to supervise her various relatives as they repaired my house, we'd talked a lot about me working for—*with* her, as her assistant, and what that would entail salary-wise. It was more than I was making at the fast-food restaurant, it was more than any of the other jobs I'd looked at in Chattanooga, too. And she was busy, like she was building her portfolio and busting her butt, so she really did need help.

I looked around and didn't see anyone familiar as I entered the coffee shop, not from high school, from church, or from the backyard barbecue that I'd recently attended but was not thinking about anymore. Yes, I might have run into someone because yes, I was working in town, and also yes, that wasn't great. I didn't want anyone to know about my problems, but they were all going to come out soon enough: my house was going up for sale this week. When it did, everyone would be able to walk through it and they'd all see that the place was a rotting pit. They'd know that whatever wealth and power my family had possessed was now gone, and that I hadn't been able to fix it.

In spite of the humiliation that was coming my way shortly, I told myself that I had constructed a winning situation. I would

work for—*with* Amber only until the sale of the house was final and I could push hard to get that deal done fast, using the California tactics that my agent didn't know. I would take my money to Los Angeles or wherever my final destination might be, and I would use it to set up my new, successful life.

I'd finally saved enough to pay off the outstanding debt and my utilities were back on. With my laptop now plugged in, I'd been able to work on my résumé (the multiple pages were too difficult to edit on my phone). I'd been sending that out by the handful as I applied for jobs all over the country.

The only place I wasn't looking was right here in Tennessee because I would need to get out fast when the word spread that I was in a success slump. It was, of course, only temporary but was hugely embarrassing anyway. But it really didn't matter, I told myself, because the next time I left this place would be the last time. I would go, taking whatever means of transportation I could afford (plane tickets might be beyond the budget, but the car still ran) and I would never, ever come back.

"Uh, Green? Order for Green?" the guy behind the counter called, squinting at the name written on a cup.

Close enough. I nodded and took the cardboard tray. Then I paused and poured some milk into one of the cups before I balanced my umbrella on my shoulder and walked back to the real estate office.

"Thank you," Amber told me when I put her coffee on her desk. I'd decided I might as well get something for her since I was already going for my own drink. Then she held out her

hand for change, and I slapped it over. “We have thirty-eight things to do and I made you a list.”

She sure had, another one. The list of tasks to complete at my house was done except for the cleaning that I’d have to accomplish before prospective buyers started showing up, and of course, the jobs that were too expensive to get to (installing a new roof, plastering the pool, paving the driveway, fixing the plumbing, adding railings, righting the leaning turret, et cetera). When I thought of all the issues that might have prevented a quick sale, I got ill, so instead I focused myself on Amber’s current list and worked steadily through the day. It felt good to get things done although the two of us did argue a lot back and forth about how I was accomplishing everything and how it wasn’t the way she would have gone about it herself.

At the end of the day, before I walked out, we discussed what we would do tomorrow (another long list) but then she smiled at me. “You’ve been a huge help,” she said, and in spite of knowing that I was better than this job and that I could have done a lot more, I felt a glow of pride.

“Thank you,” I told her.

“What are you doing now?”

“Um, nothing,” I said. “Going home.” I didn’t want to think too much about being in the empty castle by myself.

“Alone? Do you see Shaw Highsmith very much?” she asked, and my eyes narrowed.

“Doesn’t your family network already know the answer to that?” I asked her in return, and she got the stinky face.

“We don’t pry,” she told me, which I didn’t believe in the least. “I’m only asking because I knew his father.”

“Really?” I asked, my curiosity piqued. People said things about him, like, “Poor Paul!”, but they didn’t like to get into the details of what had happened. Shaw had never, ever talked about it when we had been friends. “Did you go to school with him?” I asked her. “I would have thought you were younger.”

She preened. “I am, and I only moved here after I got married. Paul Highsmith and my first husband were friends. After his overdose, my husband kept in touch with him, kept track of him.”

It had been so sad, that was what the ladies had always said when they talked about poor Paul. He had been at a high school party when he’d taken something—the details of that weren’t mentioned, but he hadn’t done anything different from what other kids had done before him. It had gone wrong. When he’d woken up after they revived him, he hadn’t been the same smart, fun guy that he was before.

“That was a nice thing of your husband to do,” I told her.

“Dawson McCourt had a very big heart.” Her eyes went to one of the frames on her desk and she smiled at it. “I didn’t know the family well, but I remember when Shaw was born. Paul’s father was so upset because of...well, the circumstances.”

I’d also heard the circumstances whispered about between ladies at church who hadn’t noticed that I was listening. There had been a one-night stand between Paul and a girl he’d met when he still wasn’t thinking straight and their brief encounter

had led to a baby boy, Shaw. His mother had shown up at the Highsmith house and left him with his grandpa, and I'd heard a lot more talk about how Paul's father should have kept a closer eye on him, because this was the worst possible result.

"I thought it would be a disaster," Amber continued, "but when we brought our girls over to meet the baby, there was Paul so happy and his daddy had little Shaw on his shoulder and was singing Waylon Jennings songs to help him sleep."

"Grandpa Highsmith was grumpy about everything," I recalled. "He was permanently angry, but he loved Shaw a lot."

"I didn't know how the two of them would take care of such a tiny little boy, the poor thing without a mother. We brought clothes and formula and we kept checking in as he grew but when my husband passed away, I lost touch with them. It was a hard time for my family."

"I'm sorry," I said, and I actually did feel sorry for Amber and her daughters. "I'm glad that you helped Shaw, though. His dad and grandpa tried, but they didn't always do what was best for him. They didn't have him in school regularly and he was really far behind. That was why he was so old as a freshman. We were the opposite because I was too young for the grade." My parents had managed to start me in school a year early, probably faking some documents to get me enrolled at age four. It wasn't due to their belief in my superior intelligence, though. With me at school, I was out of the house and out of their hair.

"I always felt bad that I didn't step back into his life," she said.

“He’s ok now,” I told her. “You don’t need to worry about that. He doesn’t need anybody now. I think he’s happy.” I wasn’t so sure, but I didn’t need to worry about him, either.

“When you talk to him, tell him I’m glad about that.”

“I won’t be talking to him. I don’t even have his phone number,” I answered, and her eyes widened. “We’re not friends anymore, which is fine with me, too. I don’t need anyone, either.”

There was a short silence before she said, “Well, then it all worked out.”

“Yes, it’s all great.”

She nodded. “Would you like to see the pictures of my son’s birthday party?”

No, but she really wanted to show me, so I nodded too and after a while I did get sucked in. We gossiped about all the people in the pictures and I learned a ton about her family, particularly her daughters. There was Aubree (named after her favorite aunt), Amory (the city where Amber had been born in Mississippi), and Aria (Amber had a dream when she was pregnant that the baby would be a singer but it hadn’t worked out). I heard more about their husbands and kids, their jobs and pets, their homes, their happiness. As she talked, other feelings besides that nice one of pride welled in me, and as I got into the car and leaned against the side window in order to see around the cracks in the windshield, I identified some of them.

Envy, that was part of it, envy of the smiles they’d worn in the pictures and the love they apparently had for each other.

There was also sadness, not because I wanted that kind of life for myself, but because...I didn't know exactly why, but hearing about them made me feel an ache that I couldn't explain, kind of a hollowness. The happier that Amber had been as she told me about her family, the emptier I got. I shouldn't have talked about Shaw and his dad, either, because that had been a lot more upsetting than I would have anticipated. After all, I didn't care about him, not since the argument we'd had on the way home from Raelyn's barbecue. No, I actually hadn't cared about him for longer than that: for a decade, he had hardly even crossed my mind.

All these thoughts were silly anyway, because I was awesome. Even if I wasn't exactly awesome at the moment, soon enough whatever emptiness I felt would be filled by my larger paycheck and the multiple job offers that I was sure were coming. Success would make me happy again, just as it had done in Los Angeles. I only needed to wait a bit.

I stopped at the gate at the bottom of my driveway, where the gate had been before Amber's helpful relatives had taken it down since it was non-functional. Then they'd efficiently removed it in one of their trucks. They'd taken care of everything like that, remarkably quickly and with a minimum of fuss, which seemed to be the way of professional people who knew how to do their jobs. I compared them to myself in my office in LA and felt just as bad as I had after talking about Shaw and hearing Amber's family stories.

The rain came down, the windshield wipers went back and forth, and I couldn't seem to remove my foot from the brake. I couldn't seem to push on the other pedal to make myself go forward towards the seven-thousand-square-foot, two-

bedroom, mostly empty house that needed cleaning, situated on the lot that was shaped like an irregular pentagram.

My heart sank further as I contemplated the future. This house wasn't going to sell, not even with my California tactics and Amber working it as hard as she could. You had to enter the kitchen through the powder room and one of the bedrooms was in the basement. It still needed that new roof, the leaning turret looked worse to me, and I'd remembered that the paludarium in the ballroom used to have vampire crabs and I didn't know where they'd gone. The pool didn't just need cosmetic fixes, but also was apparently leaking, and—oh no, was my windshield leaking, too?

I covered my face with my hands and then ran them over my hair. I felt it curling because it had gotten wet in the rain as I'd walked out from the office. I angled the rearview mirror and saw the beginning of a funnel cloud forming on my head, but what did it matter? No one would see me as I went into my big, dirty house, the place that I would be stuck with for my entire life. That meant I would be stuck here for the rest of my life, too, fetching coffee for Amber as the building rotted around me and I sat alone in the irregular pentagram, humiliated because I was...

No, no, there was no use in thinking like that, like a loser might. I was going to get out of here and be a success again. I could do it and I had to do it. This was me, the new me and not the idiot who'd left for boarding school as an ugly embarrassment. I pushed down hard on the accelerator and shot forward, the tires spinning on the wet, broken driveway as I sped toward the house. The garage doors worked now that Amber's family had stepped in but this car was dripping out

dark puddles of some kind of fluid when I parked and I didn't want to make a mess in there. Instead of opening them, I pulled as close to the porch as I could and then told myself that I would get out and go inside, but I would wait just one minute to relax here and prep for being alone, all alone for the rest of the night, and probably for longer.

The one minute turned into two and then several, and I was still sitting in driver's seat and looking at my front door, unable to push myself to enter. I'd been pushing myself pretty hard lately, like how I'd forced myself to take the job with Amber. Not like I'd had a lot of choice; it had been a financial necessity. And I'd been pushing in other ways, too. The weather had turned cooler as fall had arrived but I was pushing my body to exercise more for warmth instead of cranking up the heat at night in the huge house, which apparently had little to no insulation to retain the temperatures that I'd been paying an arm and a leg to achieve.

I was pushing myself to eat more, because my clothes were bagging again. Now the utilities were all on and I could use the washer and dryer, so that bagginess wasn't due to laundry issues. It was due to the fact that I was so worried that I could hardly force food down my throat. I was even pushing myself to get up and off the couch every morning, to start the day instead of pulling the blanket over my head and waiting until night came around again.

Actually, I might not have succeeded in pushing myself out of the car, except that headlights from another vehicle suddenly illuminated the interior, flashing in the rearview mirror and blinding me. A truck that I recognized as Shaw's stopped

behind me, Shaw who I had just been thinking about and wondering about, worrying about, too.

He was also the guy who'd told me that I was a joke, the guy who'd explained that he'd only gone with me to Raelyn's party because he was weak. He'd said that my strategies were dumb and didn't work. He'd never recognized the changes I'd made to myself, all the improvements I'd accomplished and how much better I was now. As I'd told Amber, he was fine on his own but he knew that I wasn't. Out of all the people I'd wanted to fool—I meant, out of all the people whom I'd wanted to show that I was doing well, he was at the top of the list. But he didn't believe that at all, and instead, he'd called me the P-word: pathetic.

I got out fast and walked toward the house. At least I would be on my own turf when we met again. We hadn't spoken even once since that terrible barbecue at Raelyn's, which actually, I hardly remembered. It had been a dumb night filled with stupid people, people I wouldn't associate with any more in the future and that group included Shaw Highsmith. What was he doing here, now? He'd had plenty of time to come and apologize for being so mean, and doing it straight to my face, too. He'd said right out that I was awful and ugly and he hated me. I hated him, too! I hated him.

“Get the hell out off my land!”

Shaw had stepped from his truck but he stopped walking when I yelled that at him. “I would have called—” he started to say.

“With the phone that you pretended not to have, you liar?”

There were no rocks around, so I picked up one of the small pots of flowers that Amber had set out to give the porch a

more “welcoming effect.” Like a bunch of pansies was going to make any difference! I would be stuck with this albatross house around my neck forever, or until the bank took it. Then I’d have to keep working for Amber and live in a town where everyone would see that I was an idiot.

The guy standing in my crumbling driveway already thought that. I let the pot fly.

“What the hell! Did you just throw a plant at me?” Shaw yelled. It hadn’t gotten anywhere near him due to physics and the curvature of the Earth. It wasn’t because of me, since I’d spent hours upon hours in the gym so I wouldn’t be a loser. I picked up another pot to try again because maybe I was pathetic, but I wasn’t a quitter.

“Now we’re even, and I said to get out!” I told him. “Turn your car around and leave or I will shoot. Did you hear me?”

“I heard you just fine. What are you going to use, a slingshot?” He shook his head and continued to walk forward. “I have news about the money. I didn’t come to argue or get hit with flowers, I only want to talk to you about that one topic.” Now he was at the foot of the steps. “Next time, I’ll call instead.”

“Next time, I’ll close the gate.” Except that there wasn’t one anymore because it had broken, and with the way the rain was starting to fall, I was fairly sure that the sinkhole in the back would reopen. I put down the pansies and rubbed my fingers over my eyes so that he wouldn’t see me cry, but—“Ow!”

“No, don’t touch them!” Shaw was now next to me, and he was using something soft to wipe away the dirt from the

flower pots that I had just deposited into my corneas. “Jesus, Grier. You’re going to blind yourself.”

I pushed away his hands and also tried to blink away the mud that had formed when the soil met my tears. “I don’t need your help! And I don’t care what happened to the money.” I swallowed. “Where is it? Do you have it?”

“Can we go inside? I notice that you have lights now, and we can get out of the rain.”

I hesitated for a moment but then nodded. “Ok. I guess.”

“Stop rubbing your eyes,” he ordered, and brushed off dirt from the front of his shirt, which he’d been using to wipe my face. “They’re really watering.”

“It’s from the irritation.” I let him follow me through the front door and I was actually glad that someone was there with me, even if it was just Shaw and I really didn’t like him at all anymore. I hadn’t paid to stage the house for the sale but Amber had brought over a bunch of furniture that she’d collected from various people in order to make it seem livable, rather than just an uninhabited castle/warehouse. I hadn’t resided here for almost a decade because even during the long summer vacations, I’d only back for a weekend or two. It had never felt like home during the single year that I’d been here for ninth grade, either. But now, with someone else’s possessions in it, it felt even stranger and less welcoming. I hated it more.

He glanced around as we went to the living room. “This is different. It looks like a real place to live now.”

“It’s different,” I agreed. Amber’s taste ran towards signs with inspiring messages, lots of throw blankets, and scented candles, so that was how the living room was decorated because she brooked no division on her team (since I was a junior member of that team, I was expected to keep my mouth shut even if it was my own residence).

He pushed on the cushion of the couch and frowned. “Still uncomfortable, though.”

“You said you came about the issue of the money. What about it?”

“Yeah,” he told me, but then he said, “I’ve also been thinking a lot about us fighting in the car after we went to Raelyn’s house.”

“We weren’t fighting. You answered my question.” It had been a grasping, ridiculous question that I shouldn’t have posed.

“I could have been more diplomatic.”

“No, there’s no need for that. I’m an adult and I can handle hearing the truth. And you were right, too. It’s impossible to go back in time and of course we can’t recreate the past, not after everything that happened. The accident.”

“I’m tired of hearing that word.” He seemed to be angry rather than tired, though. “It’s not an accident if someone runs you down and then keeps on going.”

“She didn’t mean to,” I said, unclear as usual about why I would defend my mother, but I always did when asked about it. “It was a mistake, even if you don’t like to hear that.”

“It wasn’t an accident to drive like she was at Daytona on a wet driveway at night. And you got into the car with her.”

“What do you want from me now?” I demanded. “Do you want to hear that I was stupid? Thoughtless? I know that I shouldn’t have done it. Should I be punished for the rest of my life?” After all, he would be.

“When it happened, I was furious at you for putting yourself in danger. All I could think was how I wanted to yell at you, to make you sorry for it.”

“Did you really think that I wasn’t sorry?” Had I said it? I mostly remembered screaming and then—then I was gone.

“If you were sorry, you didn’t show it,” he answered. “I remember being in the ambulance and my dad crying, and I remember lying in the hospital bed. I remember going home in pain and having to sleep in the living room for a year because I couldn’t walk up the stairs to my bedroom. But I don’t remember you being there for any of it.”

No, I hadn’t been.

“But now I can see it all with more perspective,” he went on. “You were so young, only thirteen. You weren’t old enough to go against your parents, no matter what they were doing. No matter how they tried to screw with people.”

“What...” I dragged myself back from a decade ago, feeling sick from the way my mind reeled. “What does that mean? What do you think they were doing?”

“Nothing good.” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a blue, cardboard-backed notebook that I immediately recognized.

“That’s one of your dad’s journals,” I stated. “He liked that kind.”

“You bought some for him at Christmas,” he answered, and that was correct. Along with all the terrible things that Shaw remembered about me, I was glad he’d kept that in his mind, too. “He wrote in them all the time, or drew stuff.” He ran a finger down its spine, over the name carefully printed there: Paul. “He said he was doing his work when we did ours.”

I watched his face soften as he thought about his dad. Paul Highsmith had sat with us at the kitchen table, listening to us discuss our school stuff and carefully moving his own pencil across the page. Shaw’s grandpa had puttered around in the background, cursing and complaining about things.

“I told you that I didn’t have a lot of financial records, but I do have these.” He opened the book and sat down on the couch, shifting his hips as the cushion didn’t give much beneath his weight. He’d filled out since high school but I still wouldn’t have called him heavy or thick. Muscular, yes, but—

I shook off those thoughts. “Yes? What about the journals?” I sat next to him to look at the page he’d opened to, and I saw the picture there. “Hundred-dollar bills?”

“My dad drew stacks of them, although I don’t know when he would have ever seen them in his life. And this.” He turned the page and there, carefully printed in the handwriting I also recognized, was the name “Huck Warren.”

“Why would he write my father’s name?” I asked. “When did he do this?”

“There’s no order to them and he didn’t date anything, but I know that this one was from after my *accident*.” He frowned as he said the word.

“It was an accident,” I said, slightly too loud in the quiet of this room. There wasn’t even the hum of appliances, because I turned them off to save on the bills.

“She had three prior DUIs. Your father must have paid—”

“No, she wasn’t drunk or high. I knew how her eyes looked when she was using.” My voice was still too loud. “She also wasn’t under the influence when she drove with my father in the car for the last time, because I’ve seen the police reports and her tox screen then was clean, too. She wasn’t impaired.” It would have been easier to accept both of those situations if she had been.

He shrugged, disbelieving. “Sure, fine. I know that this journal dates from after the *accident*, because there are other pictures in it of me in bed with my leg hanging in the sling. He drew the ambulance, too...Grier.”

I looked up, meeting his eyes. “What?”

“You’re really pale beneath the mud.”

“Mud?” I repeated.

“You have it all over your face,” he answered and I held up my hand to wipe it away but then saw how dirty my fingers were.

“I shouldn’t be sitting on the furniture. I have to keep things nice for the open—” I stopped, unwilling to let him in on my future plans.

“I heard that you’ll be putting your house up for sale this week,” Shaw commented. “Everyone was talking about it at church yesterday.”

“You went to church? You sat around gossiping?”

“I listened. One of the women in the choir is an agent who works in the same office as yours does. She said that you’d called everyone in town and that Amber McCourt was the only one who would even try to sell it.”

“I didn’t call everyone.” Two names had been left on my list when Amber had said yes, but it had turned out that one of those remaining agents had moved to Florida and the other had died the previous month. But the agents who had rejected me had probably talked about it, so had people here already known that I was going to sell? “I don’t want to discuss my house anymore. What do you think this stuff in the journal means?”

“I think it means that my dad did get money from your family, from your father. If you’re right, he got more than a hundred thousand dollars and I don’t know where it went.”

“The checks added up to that much,” I mused, “but I don’t know if that’s all there was. My father may have passed over more in cash, too, because I know he paid for other things that way. He’d give people suitcases full of it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“He bought my mother’s car with a big bag stuffed with hundreds, heavy enough that it was hard to carry. I watched the whole transaction and at the time, I thought it was a normal way to do business.” It had been at the company I worked for

in California, too, because they'd paid people off in cash to leave their apartments. The CEO had paid off local officials as well, and he'd also given money to some pretty scary looking individuals to help convince reluctant tenants to move out. I'd pretended not to know about those transactions.

Shaw stared at me. "A heavy bag with hundred dollar bills?"

I nodded. "I saw them." I used to spy on my parents all the time, watching from the staircase, opening mail, listening at doorways. It was how I'd found out information since they'd rarely spoken to me, like how I'd become aware that I was getting sent to boarding school. When my father was offloading my mother's car after the accident and buying the new one, I'd seen him through the window in the side of the garage as he'd packed a big bag full of money.

"Paper bills don't weigh that much. I can't imagine how many hundreds you'd have to put into a suitcase to make it heavy. How much did your mother's car cost?"

"I never thought about it," I said, because I'd tried not to think about them too much at all, and I reached to rub my aching eyes again. They felt like—well, they felt like they were full of sand, and that was because they were. I was sitting here with a dirty face like a child on a couch that I was supposed to keep clean, and we were discussing pictures in an old notebook? What was with my life?

"Hold on," he said, and in a moment, he came back with a wet towel. It was one from under the kitchen sink, not a good one from the powder room. "You can wipe off with that."

I took the rag but then I stared at him out of muddy eyes. "I guess you are weak."

“What the hell did you just say?”

“You told me that you are. You said that was why you kept being nice to me, because you’re weak and I’m pathetic.” And I knew that I was; temporary or not, it was the truth. I was underwater financially. I had taken the job with my real estate agent because I couldn’t pay my bills. And my looks? I had done all the much work on myself and it didn’t even matter because I was so haggard that I was turning ugly again. For the first time in my life, I hadn’t purposefully lost weight but somehow, I looked even worse than I had when I was fat. I had messed up everything, absolutely everything and I tried to tell myself that I could turn it around, but instead I rubbed my eyes again.

“Yeah, I guess I did say that to you,” Shaw answered. He didn’t sound angry anymore. “You know what I was thinking when I was looking through these journals, though?”

“Were you thinking that you should start looking on your property for freshly dug holes full of money?”

“My dad couldn’t have buried it because he had all the problems with the left side of his body. He couldn’t use a shovel,” he said. “But I did look through the whole house just in case there was treasure somewhere. There isn’t.” He shook his head. “But I wasn’t thinking about holes or even the money at all. What I was remembering was how the three of us sat together at that table. Paul missed you when you didn’t come around anymore.”

I didn’t think I could stand to hear another story about how much I sucked, not at the moment. Later, I might be able to

handle it better and believe that it wasn't true, but not right now. "No, please don't —"

"I was remembering how nice you were to him. He felt uncomfortable around so many people, but you acted as if you liked him."

"I did," I said. "He was nice to me, too. I thought you were lucky to have a dad like that, a parent who loved you so much." I took a breath. "Shaw, I'm sorry that I accused Paul of stealing. I didn't mean it. I know he wouldn't have done that. I know he couldn't have preyed on my father's guilt, and you were right—I'm sure neither my father nor my mother felt sorry about what happened. The more that I see about what was going on around here, the less I believe that they were normal in any way."

"About what? What do you mean?"

I ended up telling him how they had secretly put their assets in my name and how I was responsible for the castle, the pentagram of land, and the two mortgages and HELOC that my father had managed to take out on it. How had all that been possible? I had no idea, because I certainly hadn't agreed to anything but there was nothing in those mounds of paperwork I'd gone through that explained the situation. "I have to sell and hope it clears enough to pay all it all off," I explained. "I'm in huge trouble."

"Which is why you need the money." His eyes went to the journal.

"I'm sure it's gone. My father had also given away at least fifty thousand to a woman he was sleeping with in Georgia, paying her off for services rendered. I won't get that back,

either, and if these drawings mean your dad got a big chunk of money, y'all deserved it. I hope Paul spent it on something good and enjoyed himself."

Shaw was looking at me, quietly and unmoving.

"What?" I asked him.

"That's different from what you were saying when you showed up at my house over the summer."

"I was, uh, struggling at that point," I explained. Not that things had gotten much better since then, but at least nothing was coming as a total shock anymore like it had when I'd first arrived here. "My parents were hardly cold in their graves. I was confused, not sad."

"No?"

"No, because I hadn't spoken to them in years but—you knew. You were the only person who knew how things were in my family." When we were friends, I'd spent a lot of time talking to him, telling him how lonely and unhappy I was, how scared of a future in which I'd always be on my own. I'd babbled and whined, in other words.

He nodded.

"Which is why you thought I was pathetic," I concluded. "I guess I was back then, right? My parents believed it, too. They didn't want me around at all." They both had good reasons to resent me. My father had because my mother had trapped him with her pregnancy, so it was my fault that he was stuck with an addict/alcoholic wife who was losing her looks, the only thing that had made her in any way palatable to him. My mother hated me because I had come out so ugly that she

wincing when she saw me and I had never improved as I grew. The most I'd done for her was give her stretch marks and thinning hair. When the Highsmiths had actually seemed to want me to visit and sit at their kitchen table, I'd had a hard time believing it.

"I'm sorry I went to your house, demanding things from you like that," I said. "But I don't understand why you came here to show me your dad's pictures. What difference does it make now if he got money? It's gone and I have to figure out what to do next."

We kept talking, and thankfully Shaw didn't touch on the "pathetic" thing again. Instead, he stuck to more neutral topics like the sale of my house, real estate in general, his job, Amber, and even how the high school football team was doing. My attention was totally on those things and I was not thinking about how he had wiped my eyes with the rag, gently and carefully as if he cared about me. I didn't fixate on that at all and the evening went just fine. We talked for a while like normal people and didn't bring up the past, and maybe that was the best way to deal everything: we would ignore what had happened and would try to move on.

We couldn't recreate our history but when Shaw left that night, I had slightly more hope about the future. Maybe there was a chance that the two of us could get along or at least be cordial with each other. That was more than I'd had in ten years and I would take it. I would take anything I could get.

CHAPTER 7

“Well...it might have gone better.”

I could see how much it pained Amber to utter those words. What she'd wanted to announce instead was that my open house had been a total success, that we had more over-asking offers than she could keep track of, and that—as I thought she had long suspected—she was a real estate genius. “Might have gone better” was putting a hugely positive spin on what had happened today. I thought that other words were more fitting for this situation, phrases like “totally sucked,” “verging on the worst,” or “hang your heads and cry, ladies.” That last one was exactly how I felt, but I was a professional, too, so I kept that opinion and my tears to myself.

“There was quite a crowd,” I mentioned. I didn't feel the need to also mention that the crowd had consisted of only two groups: busybodies and Amber's family. There were just so many relatives, and I supposed that it was nice how they showed their support for her. I'd met her husband, her son, her daughters, their husbands, their kids, nieces, nephews, brothers- and sisters-in-law...a lot of McCourts.

They were better than the nosy people. When we had arrived from Memphis eleven years ago, after my father had built this fortress house, it had created a stir in town. Apparently, they still had questions about it, and they'd come today to sate their curiosity. They had also eaten all the brownies that one of Amber's nieces had made in an attempt to get buyers on a sugar high and place bids on the house.

That hadn't worked, because we'd had rooms stuffed with people who had no intention of buying but every intention of looking at each inch of the twelve thousand square feet of this place. Even now, with the open house officially over for an hour, I wasn't sure that we'd cleared them all out but I'd already performed what I hoped was my final sweep. I'd found a straggler whom I recognized as respected bank manager and perennial church volunteer Miss Debrah Molyneux. She'd been taking a selfie in the heart-shaped sunken bathtub.

"I guess that will do it for today," my agent/colleague told me, and held back a yawn. It had been a lot of work even for this woman, and I'd gotten the impression from her family (if I hadn't known it before) that she was a force to be reckoned with. I myself was also exhausted but rather than wanting to rest, I felt more like screaming and running away. Of course I couldn't run because it was getting dark outside and I'd fall on my face, but at least when Amber left, I could do the screaming part.

The comments and the questions had been as bad as I'd expected. I'd heard, "Oh, no, what a shame that you're selling!" from at least a hundred different people, along with the follow-up, "Why?" Amber had smoothly responded by telling everyone that of course this place was too big for one little girl like me! I was actually several inches taller than she was, but no matter.

Her words opened me up for more questions about my dating habits, and Amber had turned to wait for my answers, too. "Well, Grier? Why hasn't a nice young lady like you found a boyfriend?" she wondered.

I'd shrugged and smiled. "I haven't come across a guy I wanted for keeps!"

Did I even want a family, they countered, or was I married to my job? Which was what?

Amber explained that I was her assistant. "Colleague," I'd interjected, and she'd been displeased by that but had held it in.

Oh, I was working for Amber now? But they all had thought I'd moved to California and started a career out there. What had happened to that?

"She wanted to come home to Tennessee," Amber filled in again, smiling in a way that made me think of a barracuda.

But the worst times for me were when people noticed the problems with the house, the ones that were obviously long-standing, the ones that I obviously should have paid to repair—that any normal person would have kept up with if he or she had the funds to do so. "Yes, one after another!" was the correct answer to the question if there were issues with the pool. But I'd prepped a more diplomatic response and had said that my parents had let it go because they really weren't swimmers, and a buyer might want to get it inspected. There were big problems everywhere, and I tried to be as evasive as possible about all of them without jeopardizing Amber's real estate license by lying.

"Why is the place so empty?" That had come up again and again too. "Grier has removed the family pieces," Amber filled in and I'd nodded woodenly, although of course that was ridiculous. Mattresses weren't usually considered as heirlooms, and neither were curtains. I saw them all watching

me and coming to their own conclusions and I burned with shame. At least I'd looked good, or as good as I could get myself although I was gaunt and haggard and needed a haircut (badly), and although I'd ironed a big crease into the front of my skirt, and although I'd broken out on my forehead.

"It's the stress," Amber had told me. "I feel so fortunate that my girls have beautiful skin. Like porcelain."

"How fortunate," I'd seethed, and went quickly to the bathroom to apply more concealer. I'd watched way too many eyes focus on my acne, and I thought that when I did get a haircut, I'd ask for bangs.

Now I stood next to the hard couch (adorned with three different throw blankets) and tried not to touch my forehead as I waited for my agent/colleague to leave, but she really didn't seem to be in any hurry to go.

"I guess I'll clean up," I suggested, and she nodded but then sat down on the unyielding cushion.

"My word! I'm tired as anything," she said, and got the stinky face. "This is so uncomfortable."

"It's not bad. It's good for your back," I told her.

"I suppose it would be if you're sleeping on it," she said, and I watched a glimmer of confusion appear in her expression.

"You're not—"

"Hello? Anybody here?" a voice called, and Amber immediately stood and smoothed her perfect blonde hair, gearing up to tell the visitor that the open house had concluded.

I recognized who it was. “We’re in the living room,” I answered Shaw. I felt her eyes on me but then she got a huge smile when he came in to join us.

“Shaw Highsmith!” Amber announced. “It’s been a long time. I’m Amber McCourt and I knew your father.”

“In high school?”

“No, she’s much younger,” I said, and Amber’s smile widened even more.

“I held you when you were a baby,” she told him. “You had so much dark hair, it looked like you wore a toupee.”

He grinned too, and put a hand up on his head. “It’s a lot. I keep it short now.”

“In high school, it was so long,” I said. “All waves, but it’s not coarse or frizzy. You have really great hair.” I saw Amber looking at me. “He used to let me braid it.”

“Oh,” she answered, and that one word conveyed a lot.

Instantly, I was aware that she didn’t enjoy men with long hair, that her son would never have it, and that she wouldn’t have let her daughters braid any boy’s hair until he put a ring on her finger. Anyway, that was my assumption. “I like the cut you have now,” she said, bestowing a nod of approval toward his head.

They talked longer about Shaw as a baby and about his father as I listened. Finally, though, Amber wondered aloud why he’d stopped by. “Unfortunately, the open house is over and Grier had told me that the two of you aren’t really friends anymore.”

“Grier talked about me?” He turned to look in my direction.

“She asked me about you,” I said quickly. “She was prying for information.”

“I don’t pry!” Amber said, obviously offended, but luckily for everyone, that was the moment when her husband showed up to drive her home and she got very happy and they went off together.

It left me and Shaw alone in my living room. It wasn’t such a big deal to see him anymore, because we’d seen each other again to discuss the journals and read through them together, and he’d even given me his elusive phone number. We hadn’t discovered a thing about the money, but I liked that he seemed less angry now, that he was willing to talk to me at all. And every time I saw him, I felt just like I had in ninth grade: my stomach flipped in excitement and I felt a flood of happiness. But it wasn’t a big deal.

“You sell the house?” he asked, and took Amber’s former seat. “This couch is terrible.”

“It’s not as bad as the one you used to have, before you upgraded. That couch was so old and dirty, I’m surprised we didn’t get toxoplasmosis.”

“You’re not wrong,” he said, “but it was comfortable. This one is a little hard on the ass.”

And he had such a nice one, it would have been a shame to injure it, I thought, and then quickly changed the subject because I wasn’t interested in his butt. “No, I didn’t sell the house today because no one who came was actually interested in buying it. They were either my agent’s supportive relatives, or they were snooping. I had to fend off a lot of questions.”

“Like what?”

“You name it. They didn’t come right out and accuse me of being poor, but it was there.”

“That’s an insult,” he interpreted. “Are you serious?”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I only meant that I don’t want people to know about my financial state,” I said.

“Why? Why in the hell would you care what some woman from church thinks?”

“I just do,” I said simply.

“I never did. Neither did my grandpa or my dad. Why would we?”

“Good for you! I must have a trophy around here or a crown,” I snapped.

“I’ll take verbal accolades,” he informed me.

“I care about what people think and so does Amber. Most people care.”

“Everyone has already decided that your father was a crook.”

My jaw fell, leaving me gaping at him. “Wait, what?”

“Everyone around here thought he was some kind of drug-dealer, like on that show about making meth,” Shaw said.

“Isn’t that stupid?”

I looked at him guiltily, remembering the conversations I’d had about what he was doing back in the woods. “Really stupid,” I concurred.

“That’s why they came to the open house. They wanted to see if all their guesses about your parents were right, but it doesn’t

mean anything about you,” he told me.

That was the problem. I *wanted* it to be about me. I wanted him—no, I meant that I wanted all of them, all the people who’d been here today, to notice that I was a different person now. They certainly weren’t thinking that I was smart anymore, now that they’d witnessed how I’d let my house go to ruin. They weren’t thinking that I was successful, either, since I didn’t have the money to repair it and I had taken a job as Amber’s assistant, a title which she’d batted around a lot. They certainly weren’t thinking that I was pretty if I was zit-covered and tired because yes, this couch was too hard to sleep on. I sighed and at that moment, my stomach growled. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d eaten, not even one of the brownies that Amber had brought because all the gawking visitors to the open house had gotten them first.

“Want to go to dinner?” he suggested.

“Together?”

“That’s the idea. I wasn’t asking to satisfy my curiosity.”

“Um, yes,” I answered, but this time, I was careful not to read too much into it as I had when we’d gone to Raelyn’s house. No, this wasn’t a “date,” and he was probably just feeling sorry for me again. Now he could add “failure to sell house” to the list of things that I had done or was currently doing wrong. “Is that why you came over? You were hungry and wanted company?”

“No, I was driving past on my way home from Chattanooga and I wanted to see how the open house was going. Where’s your car?”

“Let’s take your truck,” I suggested, since mine still had the cracked windshield. It had spread more, actually, so now it was more like cracks held together by some glass rather than a functioning part of an automobile, and it was leaking some in the rain. It was fine, but I didn’t want to get into a discussion with Shaw about it.

“What were you doing in Chattanooga?” I asked once we’d settled on the plaid blanket covering his front seat. I quickly checked my forehead in the mirror and it looked bad, but it wasn’t the pulsating bullseye that I’d imagined. “Not physical therapy on a Sunday.”

“No, I was at the aquarium.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding as he backed up. “Remember that woman from Raelyn’s party, the one we saw when we first got there?”

Stacia. Yes, of course I remembered how she’d flipped when her eyes had landed on him. “No, I can’t say that I do. Was she the one who had the rash?”

“I didn’t see a skin condition,” he answered. I covered my forehead with my palm. “If she had one then, she doesn’t anymore.”

“You went out with her to the aquarium? What, as a...date?”

“Yeah,” he said again. “She got in touch a lot after that barbecue, and eventually I said sure, let’s do something. She wanted to go hiking but I’m not really up for that, so we went to the aquarium instead.”

“Oh.” I breathed in and out through my nose, blowing away any out-of-place emotion. “Well, that seems great.”

“Why do you sound so weird?”

Maybe I hadn’t blown away quite enough. “I don’t. I mean, if my voice is different, it’s from overuse. I was talking and talking to everyone today, trying to sell.”

“But you don’t think it worked.”

“I know it didn’t work. No one wants a house like that, not with the weird shape of the parcel, not with the maintenance problems.”

“Not with a built-in charcoal grill in the billiards room,” he added. “No one who knows anything about carbon monoxide would want that.”

“Ok, yes! The grill really has to go.” I sighed. “It was very entertaining for everyone who came, though. They were interested in all the different, um, features of the property.”

“Like the sinkhole?”

“That was filled,” I told him icily, and hoped that it wouldn’t reopen.

“At least you’re not defending the place anymore. When you were telling me before how great it all was, it was like you were delusional.”

“I wish I were,” I said, and sighed again. “I wish I believed that it was amazing and would get so many offers. I’m pretty sure it will go into foreclosure. My biggest concern now is paying all the people who did the repairs on it, Amber’s relatives. They did the best they could.”

“If we found the money, you could pay them.”

“Sure, or if we meet up with some kind Phaeacians.”

“Are you talking about *The Odyssey* again?”

I had been, because I had been rereading a copy I’d checked out from the renovated library on the main street of our little town. It was a beautiful building, and they’d totally redone the interior thanks to donors as generous as the Phaeacians in that epic poem. “Anyway, I don’t think either of those things is going to happen,” I said. “Why are you suddenly so intent on figuring it out?”

“It’s an interesting puzzle,” he noted, and we bounced out onto the street. The driveway really, really needed repairs. “I like reading my dad’s journals and trying to solve it because it makes me remember him so much. Why are you so sure that we won’t? It almost seems like you don’t want to look anymore, and before you were ready to call the police on me about it.”

“No, I wouldn’t have done that,” I said, but yes, I was pretty sure that this money was as gone as the pile that my father had turned over to his mistress in Georgia. I thought about him for a moment before I spoke. “When I was going through my father’s stuff, I found piles of old, old newspaper and magazine articles, like stuff he’d cut or torn out forty or fifty years ago. They were all about high-rollers, guys who had lots of money and pretty girlfriends and big, splashy lives. Guys like Alfonso, the Marquess of Portago.”

“Who the hell is that?”

“He was famous in the first half of the twentieth century, according to the article. My father had saved stuff about Howard Hughes and Hollywood actors in the Rat Pack, John Kennedy, Picasso, Henry the Eighth. It was interesting to read it all and it had told me a lot about him, Huck Warren as a man rather than just as my father.”

“He wanted the lifestyle? A playboy existence?” Shaw pondered the idea. “Yeah, I could see that.”

“It could be attractive to a lot of men,” I suggested, looking across the truck from the corner of my eye. “Lots of women, lots of money, lots of fun.”

“I guess so. I don’t really understand conspicuous consumption.”

“Is that the Veblen thing?”

“Did you study *The Theory of the Leisure Class*?” He clearly had, because he talked about it for a bit now.

Despite my advanced degrees, I had only looked at a few summaries of that book. “Judging by the house he built and the cars he bought, I guess my father was into conspicuous consumption,” I said, moving us back to a topic I had more of a grip on. Not too much of a grip, though, because I had just about as much knowledge of my father as I had about Thorstein Veblen. “From what I can find, his own father wasn’t in the picture at all and it doesn’t seem like he cared about his mother, because she was buried as an indigent in Memphis. Once I had her name, I tracked down a little information.”

“Too bad,” he said briefly. “Too bad for her, but he was still a dick. He built that stupid castle to be an important guy, the Hugh Hefner of Sequatchie County.”

“It’s funny that you mentioned him. There were a lot of old *Playboy* magazines among my father’s papers.” The naked women in their pages were beautiful, perfectly curved, with non-tornado hair, and clear complexions.

“I hate to tell you that men didn’t look at those and fantasize about being Hugh Hefner. My grandpa was a devoted subscriber for years and you know he couldn’t read very well.”

“I’m just saying that the materials I found gave me insight into my father,” I said sternly. “Doesn’t it make you see more where he was coming from?”

“Again, Huck Warren was an asshole,” Shaw stated. “No matter how you paint it up now, that’s what he was. Maybe he had an inferiority thing and he hated his mother, but it’s like Odysseus. There’s no excuse for treating people poorly. You said he had a girlfriend that he was paying off, right?”

I nodded but looked out the window in embarrassment.

“Then he was jerking your mother around and breaking up your family. His own mom got put in a pauper’s grave but he had at least a hundred thousand to hand over, and I’m sure that wasn’t from guilt. Most likely, he was manipulating my dad because Paul didn’t have the understanding to guard against that behavior anymore. He mostly saw the good in people, and sometimes they screwed him over.”

And that, exactly that, was what I was afraid of. I was afraid if we dug too deep, we’d find out what my father had been up to

and it would be another horrible thing that my family had done to the Highsmiths. I didn't want to know anything else. I didn't want Shaw to know about it, either.

"Do you remember when I came over to your house to study?" he asked.

Unfortunately, I did. It had only been once and it had been awful.

"Your mother was high and hit on me, and your father got mad about it and tried to box me," he went on, in case I'd forgotten one of the most mortifying moments in the catalogue of humiliation that made up a lot of my life. "Luckily he was too plastered to make contact when he swung, because I'd never been in a fight in my life and I certainly didn't want to hit some old guy."

"Yes, I remember that very clearly."

"I felt so awful about it," he commented and I stared.

"What? Why? You didn't do anything wrong. She knew how young you were because I told her." I remembered begging her to stop, to zip up her shirt, that he was sixteen and my friend. "My father should have been ashamed of himself for trying to fight you, a minor. None of it was your fault, though."

"I felt bad for you, Grier. You were standing there watching everything happen with this look of terror and horror on your face, like a scary movie had come to life in front of your eyes but you couldn't stop it. All I wanted to do was get out of there so your mother could go sleep it off and your father

would calm down, but then I was afraid that if you were alone with them, they'd take out their feelings on you."

Great, we were back to that old saw: "Grier's pathetic." "They were never physical with me," I answered angrily. "Never, ever, unlike how others got punished." I knew perfectly well that his own grandpa had whipped him with a belt.

"You know why my grandpa did that," he said. "I kept picking up snakes because I thought they would want to be friends, and he was afraid of me getting bitten by a rattlesnake or a copperhead. I wouldn't use a belt on a kid but I never picked up another snake after he did that once, either."

I thought about what Shaw had said. "Really? Would you?"

"I just said no, I wouldn't—"

"I meant what you implied about having a child. Would you want that, a family of your own?"

He didn't immediately say no to the idea and I watched him consider, his bottom lip jutting slightly as he thought.

"There's a guy with two kids who's on about the same physical therapy schedule that I am," he finally said.

"Sometimes his wife drops him off or picks him up with their baby and little girl. When they leave him there, his daughter cries like they're being separated by war, and when they pick him up they're all so damn happy to see him. His daughter starts yelling, 'Daddy! Daddy!' and the baby kicks and waves his fists. I like watching them." He smiled slightly. "I guess there are probably harder parenting moments, though. Like when they start trying to make friends with snakes who might be lonely."

“That does sounds nice. No, not making friends with snakes,” I clarified. Those parents probably loved their kids so much and obviously it was reciprocated. I didn’t remember feeling that way about my mother or father. Maybe “ambivalent” was the best way to describe our relationship, but I also remembered the relief when they were gone. That had been the best part about boarding school, actually, how I never had to worry about seeing them because they’d never set foot on the campus.

“I never met my mom, and my dad never saw her either after the one time they were together,” Shaw said. “He was drunk and she probably took advantage of him, or at best, she had the forethought of a topiary not to understand that sex without birth control would be a mistake. My grandpa couldn’t speak her name without also saying that he hoped she would rot in Hell. I found out that she died six years ago and he’d have been glad to hear it, but I was sorry. I never got to know her at all.”

“Maybe it was for the best.”

“Yeah, maybe.” He glanced at me briefly. “I always thought how nice it would be to have a mom and dad married to each other. I believed that up until I met your parents and saw what their relationship was like.”

I sighed. Yes, we were a cautionary tale. “I wonder what my mother thought when she met Huck. He was thirty years older, according to the birth certificate I found with his papers, and she was only seventeen. I think she hadn’t gone past ninth grade in school and had run away to Memphis. But I really don’t know much about them besides what I overheard during

their arguments. Until I saw that birth certificate, I didn't even know that his name wasn't really Huck Warren."

"What the hell was it?"

"Chester Zaklamany," I answered. "I don't know if I'm saying the surname correctly."

"So you're actually Grier Zaklamany?"

"Maybe he legally changed it along the way, but I don't know. I took all my own documents with me when I left for boarding school and they say Grier Warren on them, so that's who I am even if it is made up." I looked out the window at the fading light.

"You took your shit with you, your birth certificate and whatever, when you left home that young? You thought ahead to bring it?"

I'd had a feeling that I might not have been returning, and if I did, it wouldn't have been permanent. But I didn't want to get him thinking about how I'd left back then, not when we were talking so nicely. I asked more about his date earlier, about that woman with the really nice breasts. "Would that Stacia person be someone you'd want to have children with?"

"Where did that come from? I thought we were talking about your father and his criminality. Are you asking if I impregnated my date at the aquarium?"

"No! I didn't mean it had to happen today," I said, and wondered if he'd had sex with her somewhere else. "I was asking if she was someone that you might see yourself with in the future."

“Maybe I’ll get to know her a little better, first. How about you? Did you leave someone behind in Los Angeles?”

It was my chance to show him how popular and desirable I was. “I had a few boyfriends,” I started to say, but the rest of words, the rest of the story I’d prepped about the many men who wanted me, seemed to stick in my mouth.

“But nobody serious?” he prompted, and I shook my head.

“Remember how you used to be in love with the art teacher?”

Yes, that was what I’d told Shaw. I’d hinted that I had a crush on Mr. Gaudi and that had been why I’d always hung out in that wing of the high school building, a place where Shaw himself had class but I did not. He had believed me when I’d told him that, just like he’d believed that I’d wanted to help him with his Spanish homework because it was good review and practice for me, and that I just happened to keep making surplus cookies and other treats and that he was doing me a favor by eating them all. I’d carefully followed recipes, using groceries that I’d had delivered and paid for with my mother’s credit card. If she’d ever looked, those purchases really would have stood out because I couldn’t think of when she’d bothered to buy food for the house besides grain-based liquids like vodka and whiskey.

I thought about my dating life in California and found myself saying, “There wasn’t anyone, no one.”

“No one at all?”

“Oh, I mean, there was no one I was serious about,” I quickly corrected.

“I wondered. Over the years, I would think about you and if you’d settled down yet, or how your job was going. If you liked it out there,” he said. “You always loved living here so much that I didn’t know if you’d be happy anywhere else.”

“No, I absolutely adored living in LA,” I told him fervently. “I loved it even more. It was all really awesome.” Now I was back on track with the story I’d prepped. “Really great.”

“Except when you got fired and your boss left for Mexico.”

“Well, except for that. But I’m sure that if I’d stayed, I would have found another job really fast. It’s a little bit of a problem that no one can give me a reference from that real estate firm, since the main guy fled—I mean, since he left for Mexico as you said, and my more immediate bosses are not, um, available. They’re not answering me and I’ve tried to contact them in every way I can think of,” I stated more plainly. They seemed to have gone into hiding, and it didn’t look good for me when I applied for jobs in the industry, jobs beyond the one working for Amber. Working *with* Amber. I had to admit that my previous employer had evaporated and that there was no one who could vouch for my performance there. Maybe that was a good thing, though.

“Was the place you worked really a legit company?” Shaw asked. His tone was heavy with doubt.

“Yes!” I said huffily, and refused to discuss that any further. We were turning into a restaurant, anyway, so it was a good time to drop the subject. We went inside and were seated at a table that had a brighter light above it than I liked. It shone directly down onto my forehead problem and I thought about asking if we could move, but he had walked stiffly on the way

in here. It was better to let him rest his leg. He had to rest it, of course, because he'd been walking around Chattanooga with that Stacia, whom I was coming to vehemently dislike.

"Have you been here before?" I asked him, peering from behind my menu at the other diners at their tables. Some looked familiar and some I even knew by name, but I decided to ignore them all.

"I've driven past a lot but no, never. It looks good to me." His eyes scanned the paper menu. "I'm hungry."

"There's nothing to eat around the aquarium?"

"I didn't want us to spend too much time together on the first date. Are you going to get sick if I order catfish?"

He remembered how I hated the smell of that. "No, you should get what you want. You must have more experience with first dates than I thought if you've already worked out strategies."

"I've been out some," he agreed.

"Which is funny because when I got back home, everyone at church was telling me what a recluse you were. How you never left your house, you stayed inside and brooded your life away."

"I did some of that for a few years, but then I decided that I better get off my ass. It was boring to be lonely and angry all the time."

My throat closed a little as I thought of him feeling that way.

"You had your dad," I said, to reassure myself.

“I did and especially at the end, he needed me a lot. When he was gone, though, I was at loose ends. I decided that I had to push myself to do more, to get out and try things. That was when I started traveling and I did meet some women.”

I was sure they'd buzzed around him like flies over carrion. I hated them just like I hated that Stacia, but who didn't hate flesh-eating insects? “You liked the woman today,” I noted, and he shrugged.

“She's fine.”

That wasn't a ringing endorsement but Shaw had always been able to keep things to himself. I hadn't even known that he didn't have a mother until the first time I'd gone over to his house and noticed a total lack of female presence there besides his grandpa's dirty magazines.

“What are you getting to eat?” he asked.

Everything on the menu looked so good, my mouth was watering. It seemed like the knots that had tied up my stomach during the open house had loosened—if fact, I felt better all over. “I think meatloaf.”

“If I get the shrimp, want to split everything?”

I nodded happily. “I'd love to.”

The waiter came and we ordered, and we spent the time there eating instead of fighting, talking about dumb things instead of serious ones, and getting along together. It was almost like we were friends again, doing the same stuff we'd done when we'd hung out ten years before.

You couldn't go back. Both Shaw and I were very clear about that, how there was no way to recreate the past or rewrite

history. But this felt so good...

I tried to enjoy it, and not worry about what was to come. I tried to enjoy him and soak up everything I could because I knew how hard it was going to be when we were apart. It had almost killed me the first time.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, his fork halfway to his mouth.

“Nothing! Give me another shrimp,” I requested, and he did. We kept talking about the dumb things and I didn’t let my thoughts stray again to the future. No matter what success I’d find then, it wouldn’t compare to this.

CHAPTER 8

It was so degrading, I couldn't even meet her eyes. "No, of course not. I'm absolutely fine."

"That can't be true," Amber told me. "When I was thinking about it after the open house, I was appalled. I had no idea that you were staying in that strange castle without utilities and without any furniture."

"I've been fine," I said, for the tenth time. "I don't need another place to live. I don't need furniture and it really wasn't so bad to be without electricity. Pioneers didn't have nice couches and light switches, and they managed to do all right."

"They also didn't have well-fitting undergarments."

She meant bras.

"They also didn't have proper dental care," she said. "Would you want to live without that?"

I ran the tip of my tongue over my teeth. It had been a while since I'd flossed...

"When we first met and I went through the house, I had no idea that you were living there," she continued. "Your clothes weren't in the bedroom closet."

No, there wasn't a bar to hang things in the closet in my former basement room and I had felt uncomfortable about using my mother's giant walk-in, as if she still wouldn't have wanted me there. Instead, I'd kept my clothes in the bathroom and hanging on a shower curtain rod but when Amber had

come over and during the open house, I'd put everything in my car.

"Where are all your belongings now?" she probed.

"I don't have much."

"What about childhood possessions, or the things you must have brought back from California? Is it all in storage somewhere? No," she mused, "you wouldn't have rented a storage space since you don't have any money. You threw it all away on hair treatments."

"I did not throw away money on hair treatments! I'm sorry I ever told you about my former beauty routine." She had asked me if I had natural curl in my hair, and I'd said that what was on my head was more like a natural disaster and then had briefly discussed the procedures I'd implemented to tame it, and there had been a lot of them.

I hadn't noticed her jotting down the specific names of the processes but later that afternoon, she'd gasped, "My word! I totaled up what you spent on your hair in Los Angeles and it's enough to have bought a car, not just a new windshield!" And then I was very sorry that I'd admitted to everything.

She called my attention back to the present. "So where are your things? For years after I sold my home, I kept boxes and boxes of the girls' baby clothes and mementos over at my mama's place. I didn't have adequate storage until I remarried and we moved into our new build."

I'd heard way too much about her new-build house and spoke quickly to cut off that line of conversation. "My parents must not have saved like that," I told her. "I don't remember

coming across much when we moved from Memphis when I was twelve and I was in charge of packing my own belongings back then. I took some things with me to California and I did bring them here again. They're in a box in the closet of my old room."

"I've seen that box and it's very small," she said accusatorily. "Did you sell your furniture? Your kitchenware? Throw pillows and blankets? What about your shoes?"

Those were very important to her, I knew, because she and another woman in the office discussed their footwear almost on a daily basis. "I had rented a lot of the furniture that I had in my apartment in LA and I sold everything else before I left. And..." It was hard to admit the truth about my shoes, especially after all the time I'd spent trying to convince her of my blossoming career out there. "I only had one pair of shoes that I wore to work. I spent most of my money on exercise programs, makeup, skin treatments, and haircare."

I'd briefly shocked her into silence.

"They were very, very nice shoes. Vuitton," I explained. Their purchase had been almost an entire paycheck.

She glanced down at my feet. "Where are they now?" Her expression intimated that my current pair smelled terrible, or at least that something did.

"I had to..." Sell them. I'd sold them just like I'd sold my furniture, and my clothes, and the metal canes I'd been forced into using when I went to boarding school and they'd discovered my inner ear problem. They'd insisted that I had to employ some kind of mobility device, so I'd used canes (and boy, that made me even more popular).

But I'd sold those just as I'd sold everything that wasn't actually attached to my body, and since I'd been back here in Tennessee, I'd also sold a lot of the plasma that was circulating around inside it. "I lost those shoes," I told Amber.

Her stinky face came out in force again. "We've veered off course," she informed me, and redirected the conversational ship. "You can't live in that empty house, sleeping on that awful couch."

"I can, and I will!"

"My word, Grier, you are stubborn and silly! Don't you know that you might as well have painted a target on yourself?"

My fingers went immediately to my forehead but thankfully, my skin had cleared up. "What do you mean by a target?"

"I mean that you're living out there alone in a house that people think is stuffed with expensive items. What would you do if marauders broke in?"

They wouldn't have thought that I had expensive items if they'd attended the open house. "Marauders?" I repeated. "Is that really a problem around here?"

"No, not for most normal young ladies your age who have family, roommates, or a husband to keep them company," she answered smugly. "What about Shaw Highsmith? Where is he staying?"

"In his own house, since he's not my boyfriend!" I felt my cheeks flame.

"And if he were your boyfriend, he should still be in his own house!" she lectured. I rolled my eyes; I'd heard her opinions many times on relations outside of marriage and I wasn't

interested since I wasn't going to adjust my behavior to Amber's standards in any way. Besides, it didn't matter since Shaw was not, and would never be, my boyfriend.

"I just sent you several pictures of my casita so you can see how much you'd enjoy living there," she informed me. "Now, where are we on the list?"

We had a lot of actual work left on her list of things to do and we continued to argue and bicker as we completed them, especially when we were stuck in the car together on our way to inspect a possible listing. At least we managed to keep the peace in front of the potential client once we arrived there.

"It's so sweet to see a mother and daughter team!" that woman gushed to us, and I didn't turn to witness the horror on Amber's face at hearing someone suggest that she had a child like me. I'd seen pictures of her actual offspring and two out of the four of them had dropped by the office, so I had witnessed their beauty in person. Despite the money I'd spent on myself, in no way did I measure up to their natural charm. No, I told myself firmly, I was just as good as—I couldn't even make myself believe it, and I knew that Amber didn't.

"I'm not her daughter," I cut in quickly. "We're only colleagues."

"She's my assistant," Amber further qualified, and now I did turn to glare a little. She liked to share that nugget whenever she could, to which I usually countered that my former position had been as an executive vice president, and then she'd say that I wasn't anymore.

But now she beat me to the punch, speaking first so that I couldn't explain how I used to have an important title, that I

used to be better. “Let’s discuss how we can best present this beautiful home of yours,” she told the seller. “I have a real eye for staging.”

It sure wasn’t a beautiful home, but as always, Amber had a lot of ideas about how to make it nicer and she had the energy of ten or so people to make it happen, too. I listened and realized that despite my firm belief that I was ahead of her in both an educational and a professional sense, I was learning from her, too. I wouldn’t have admitted it because her head would have swelled to such an extent that she wouldn’t have been able to get back in her car, but it was true, anyway.

But after a few more hours of listening to all her advice, I was not feeling so charitable towards my boss—my colleague. In fact, later that night in my barren castle, I was fuming.

“Amber is a bully,” I told Shaw. Then I said, “Ouch!”

“Don’t stand directly under where I’m drilling or you’ll keep getting sawdust in your eyes.” He glanced down at me. “It’s in your hair, too. Damn, these doors are tall.”

He was fixing a hinge of the door to my parents’ bedroom. It was sagging severely, enough that it was dragging across the cement floor and making a horrible scraping sound. My father had wanted grand rooms so the ceiling was nineteen feet above us, an unusual and nonstandard height, as Amber had pointed out. He’d also wanted big doors, which meant that when Shaw got on the ladder to fix this hinge problem, he was so high above me that he was practically in the sky. I didn’t like it at all, and that was why I was standing under him and bracing the metal rails for safety. I was also prepared to catch

him if need be, or to throw myself down so that he would land on me instead of the hard floor.

“I don’t understand why you think Amber McCourt is bullying you,” he said, but then used the drill again so that I had to wait for a moment of silence to respond.

“Among other things, she insisting that I live in her guest house,” I explained. “She’s making it seem like it’s imperative, like I’ll die if I don’t, or like she might fire me if I refuse to follow her instructions. It’s workplace harassment.”

“Would she really fire you for that?” He ran the drill and a screw burrowed back through the hinge into the wood of the door frame.

“Well, probably not,” I conceded, “but she’s definitely trying to force me into doing what she wants and it’s so annoying. I think she tries to run her daughters’ lives, too. She said that she built the guesthouse in the first place because she was sure that the youngest girl was going to get divorced since she married a criminal. That hasn’t happened yet so the space is open for me. Amber’s twisting my arm to move in there, no matter how many times I tell her no.”

“Just keep saying it and eventually she’ll listen.” He started climbing down and the ladder seemed to shake, so I gripped it tighter. “Grier, get out of the way.”

I leaned slightly to the side so he could dismount, but I continued to hold on until he had reached solid ground. That meant we were standing quite close, but I quickly stepped back so my panting wouldn’t be mistaken for an inappropriate reaction to his proximity. I had been bracing myself really hard and was out of shape, that was all.

“There. That’s fixed,” he said, wiping off his hands on his jeans. “Were you worried about me on the ladder? You looked nervous.”

“No,” I said quickly, but then asked, “Did climbing it hurt your leg? Were you unsteady up there?”

“No, I was fine. I can’t run for miles anymore and I can’t hike on uneven terrain, but I was all right. I was just cleaning out the gutters at my house.”

Without anyone to hold the ladder for him? “Next time, I could help you with that.”

“Sure, I bet you would really like being elbow deep in rotten leaves.” He patted the wood panel of the door, painted in the sanguineous shade that my father had favored for a lot of surfaces in this house. “I think the hinge will hold it, at least until you get out of here.”

Until the bank sent the authorities to remove me, he meant. I’d been involved in those situations in Los Angeles and they were never pretty. I didn’t want to be someone’s sad grandma, standing on the curb outside of the apartment I’d occupied for the last twenty years and evicted only because of my lack of understanding of California tenants’ protection laws...

“What does Amber call that little place?” Shaw asked, interrupting that memory. “She doesn’t say ‘guesthouse.’”

“She says it’s her ‘casita.’ It’s very nice,” I admitted. “I saw pictures and it’s cute. Since she thought that her daughter would end up living there, she did it up, but now that woman has kids with the criminal husband and they’re all apparently billionaires, so she doesn’t plan to move. Anyway, it’s really

comfortable. Good insulation. Working utilities, plenty of dishes, no sinkholes but lots of throw blankets, and many, many scented candles.”

“It sounds nicer than where you’re living now,” he said, glancing around the cold, bare interior. I had the heat set at fifty-five and was wearing a lot of layers, and Shaw had kept on his own coat when he’d come in. “Anything else you want me to fix?” He made the drill whir and then blew off the tip. “I’m on a roll.”

“No, thank you.” I’d happened to mention to him that I’d tried to repair the sagging door by hammering on its bottom and he mentioned back how that was totally the wrong solution, although it had made sense to me. We happened to be sharing information in the first place because he’d texted to ask if I’d had any offers on my house, and then after we’d discussed the utter lack of interest in it, he’d suggested that he could come by to fix the door problem.

He’d also brought over his dad’s journals for us to look at again, which I found increasingly difficult. They made me think a lot about Paul and how much he’d loved Shaw, his only child. I couldn’t bear to look at the line drawings he’d made of his son hurt, the ones of Shaw in his bed with the angry marks across his injured leg, and especially the ones of him crying, large ovals that represented tears covering the page. The more I flipped through, the angrier I got that my own father had tried to manipulate this family, because that was what it must have been.

Shaw followed me back into the living room, which was still furnished with Amber’s cast-offs and the hard couch that had

given her the idea that I should live in her casita in the first place. It was such a ridiculous name.

“She doesn’t speak Spanish and I don’t think she knew that it meant ‘little house,’” I announced. “She just heard the name on some decorating show and decided that it would work for her place, too. I would call it the guesthouse if I lived in it.”

“So you’re considering it.” He sat on the couch and made a face. “Hang on,” he instructed me as I started to join him. He got up and took four or five of the throw blankets she’d artistically placed around the room, and then he folded them to make extra cushioning for us both. “Much better,” he praised his efforts as we took our seats. “You know, I don’t think it’s a bad idea for you to live there. You’re alone in this house and you’re pretty far from anybody else.”

“Your house is worse,” I pointed out. “You’re even farther away from civilization, such as it is around here. And I lived in a big city so I know how to take care of myself.”

“How?”

“Uh, how would I take care of myself? I guess...I’d call the police,” I answered, and he grinned in a way that was both attractive and condescending. “I’d fight, too. I took kickboxing and I really excelled at it.”

He just looked at me.

“I did ok and I didn’t fall too much,” I said, admitting part of the truth. Actually, although I had only fallen a small number of times, the instructor had gently suggested that it wasn’t the class for me. I felt that I’d learned enough anyway that I would have been able to defend myself against Amber’s

“marauders” or whoever else might have tried to besiege this castle.

Shaw held up his palms. “Ok, sure. You’re tough and can fight people off. You’re an ass kicker.” He pointed to the blue notebooks stacked on the coffee table that Amber had brought over. “Which one do you want?”

But I hesitated. “Are you sure this doesn’t make you sad? It isn’t upsetting to look through these, not at all?”

“I told you that I like reading the things my dad wrote. I like remembering him.” But he paused and added, “Yeah. It does make me kind of...I don’t know the word.”

“Melancholic,” I supplied.

“You were always better at English than I was.”

“It was only because I read so much. I spent most of my childhood at the public library in Memphis and I used to walk to the library in town when we moved here.” It had been miles, and you would have thought all the exercise would have slimmed me down. It had not because while I’d walked there, I’d eaten my weight in candy purchased with money I’d stolen from my mother’s purse.

“And I didn’t bother with books at all,” he said. “We were different like that. But I don’t mind reading these now, even if they do make me melancholic. I’m happy to think about my dad and also, maybe, to figure out how our families kept intertwined even after you and I—”

“Even after we were living in different places,” I filled in, which was the nicest way to say it.

“Even then.” He picked up one of the journals but I was still looking at him, feeling so fortunate that he was sitting here on this uncomfortable couch in my castle house but also so...not understanding. Confused? Maybe that was a better description for how I felt, but not exactly. It was more like there was a total hole in my grasp of the facts and I was tiptoeing around it. I’d been taking his attention as it came, without voicing the concerns I had about why he had seemed to relent and accept me again, but I was having a hard time avoiding the topic.

It was important not to ask questions, as I’d learned both in my career in business and also from my dealings with Shaw. Stupid questions were how I’d found out that he thought that I was pathetic, for example. I would have to get the information I needed in another way.

So I that was what I did. As I leafed through a journal, I tried to come up with a way...aha! “Look at this. It’s funny that we were just talking about it,” I said, tapping the page with a fingernail that really needed a manicure. “Your dad drew a picture of the library in town.”

“Yeah, Grandpa used to take him and he and I would go together, too. He really loved that place.”

I needed to work this around to our prior friendship, and I tried to step carefully. “You just said that you didn’t ever like books before,” I pointed out.

“So? I guess I got a taste for them.”

“You used to go there with me,” I further noted, and now he was frowning suspiciously.

“Yeah, I used to drive your ass to the library, too. So?”

“We spent a lot of time together, almost all the time after school when you weren’t working,” I stated. “We really were best friends.”

Shaw put down the journal in his hand. “You were absolutely my best friend that year. I thought we would be friends for our whole lives.”

It hurt to hear that, because I had thought it too and although I had done so well and found so much success, I had missed him. A lot. That was why I pressed on, needing to understand our situation now so that I wouldn’t be lost and alone again, not ever again. “You thought we’d be friends forever, and that was why you were so, so upset when I left. After the accident,” I said slowly.

“Are we seriously getting into this right now? Why?”

“I don’t understand why you don’t hate me anymore!” I blurted and immediately knew that it had been absolutely the wrong tactic.

And his words bore that out. “Who says I don’t hate you? Maybe I do,” he told me.

“That was such an immature remark,” I said, shaking my head. “You sounded like you were four years old and in kindergarten.”

“No four-year-old is in kindergarten,” he informed me, and I informed him right back that I had been. I’d started a year early because my parents hadn’t been able to wait to get rid of me and shaft me off onto the free childcare that the public school system provided.

“What are you trying to say to me? You want me to hate you? You want me to throw more rocks at your car?” His eyes narrowed. “Have you gotten that fixed yet?”

No, but I wasn't going to discuss it right now. “I don't want you to hate me but when I first came back here, you sure did. And now we're sitting here talking and you just fixed my door. I don't get it.”

“Do you want us to fight and argue?”

“No, but you threw that rock and then there you were saying that we could go to Raelyn's barbecue together—not as a date, of course, which I didn't think at all at the time, either—but there we were going off to a party together in a very friendly way. Which you later explained by saying that it was because you felt sorry for me,” I noted, and suddenly I had veered back onto the topic of me being pathetic, something I hadn't wanted to revisit since I'd heard those words come out of his mouth. “But you could have believed that and decided, ‘Good! Good, and I hope that pathetic woman gets attacked by marauders while she's alone in her castle, with a topiary on her leg and a sagging door!’”

“What marauders? Are you talking about pirates?”

Honestly, I had lost the thread and I had no idea what I was talking about anymore. “No,” I said, but I wasn't sure.

Shaw shook his head. “You're right. I have no idea why I'm here, pirates or not. I don't know why I went to church to talk to you after you showed up at my house. I don't know why I made any effort at all.”

“Because you still hate me!” I said, happy to hear that I was right but then suddenly he had stood and was walking toward the front door. “Wait! I didn’t mean that I wanted you to go. I want us to be friends again and I understand why we weren’t, but then I didn’t get why you were being so nice except...”

Oh. Because that was how he was. He was the same nice, generous guy who’d eaten lunch with me in the cafeteria, spending his time with a loser even though the girls on the soccer team asked him out. He was the same guy who’d approached a crying, ugly troll of a girl on the first day of school. He had sat next to me as the rest of the class had given me a ten-foot berth.

He paused at the step into the foyer. “It’s just like when I decided not to brood anymore after my injury,” he said. “I realized that I was spending too much time and energy still being angry at you. It hurt my feelings when you took off and left without looking back, when I needed a friend. I needed my best friend.” He moved to the front door and I followed as fast as I could.

“It was such a hard time,” I said, and then I wasn’t sure how to explain it any further without telling him things that I never wanted to admit out loud, or even think about anymore.

But he kept walking. “Yeah, it was a hard time. I was injured and my family had bills that we were accountable for. You know who had no accountability? Your mother. She drove away after she hit me and left me there.”

I knew that, because she hadn’t even slowed down until I had grabbed the wheel and moved the gearshift, jamming it back and forth until something happened to the engine and she lost

control. The car had gone into a ditch next to the driveway and still screaming, I had slipped and tripped but managed to run to where I thought that Shaw had been. His grandpa and his dad were also yelling and running out of their house in the woods. I closed my eyes briefly because the memories of the accident suddenly filled my mind, almost as if I could see it happening in front of me again. It was all right there.

I opened them as headlights flashed across my face. They were from Shaw's truck as he turned around and headed out of the driveway towards the street, leaving me and my stupid memories and my stupid mouth behind him. I stood there for a while, for much longer than I could hear the sound of his truck's engine, before I went back inside and shut the door behind me.

I had picked that fight because I hadn't done the proper prep work. I was never, ever good with spur-of-the-moment stuff, never. I remembered one specific time at work when my immediate boss, another vice president who had been there longer, asked me if I had properly served an eviction notice. Of course, the answer was supposed to have been "yes, absolutely, I did that." I hadn't done that; no one had, because the renter was being evicted without notice. In the moment that it became my responsibility and my fault, I had frozen. I had sat there gaping and then said, "No!"

I was an idiot, I decided. Once before, I had driven Shaw away because of being too young and stupid to handle the situation. Now I was older and I really was less stupid, because I'd gone to school and graduated at the top of my class, giving the valedictorian speech in high school even, but

But somehow, I was just as dumb as before. As fast as I crawled out of my hole, I pushed myself back into it.

I was still standing at the front door and wallowing when someone knocked on it hard, and in a tizzy of excitement, I spun around and flung it open. The smile on my face was to greet Shaw because he had come back, but it wasn't him standing there. Instead, I saw a guy that I didn't know, had never seen before in my life. It was dark outside because the season had advanced and the days had shortened, but he wore sunglasses anyway.

"Oh," I said. "Hello. Can I help you with something? Were you hoping to see the house?"

"Yes, ma'am," he answered. "I was." And he moved to step inside, but no.

"I'm sorry, you'll have to set up an appointment through the real estate agent who has the listing," I said, and stood my ground.

"This house is for sale? Where is Huck? Huck Warren?"

"Um, I guess that you haven't heard yet, but Huck is dead. He passed away in a car accident."

"Bullshit."

I blinked. "What? No, it isn't. He's definitely dead. You can look it up because it was in the news here. His wife was driving and she wrapped the car around a tree."

"He always said that she hated him." And he laughed.

I blinked again and this time, my mouth opened a little in shock. "He said that?"

“Who are you?” he asked instead, and I got a very bad feeling, even worse than before.

“Call the real estate agent,” I suggested, and tried to close the heavy front door. All the ironwork on it made it very unwieldy.

His big, black boot prevented me from moving it more than an inch. “I’m going to check on the story you just told. I wouldn’t like to find out that you’ve lied to me.”

“I’m not lying,” I said, and my heart pounded hard enough to make my voice shake. “He’s really dead and so is she, and maybe she did do it on purpose because she hated him or just because she was tired of living so unhappily.” It wouldn’t have been the first time that she’d tried to end things, but I didn’t need to explain my mother’s history to this stranger. “You need to leave.”

“If you’re lying, I’ll be back,” he answered, and that warning it scared the heck out of me. He removed his foot and I used all my strength to close the door hard and lock it. I went as quickly as I could through the rest of the house and made sure that everything else was closed and locked too, and then I checked it all again, for a second time. But if someone had really wanted to get in here, of course he could have. From the living room, I couldn’t hear glass breaking in a window of the basement bedroom or in the mini movie theater on the other side of the house. My father had designed that room with floor to ceiling windows which had always made viewing the screen very difficult, but all the potential openings would have made it easy for a stranger in sunglasses to get inside.

I went and sat on the couch on the pile of blankets that Shaw had made and I thought about how Amber might have been right about marauders, even though I would hate to tell her that. I also wondered why that man had wanted my father and why he hadn't believed that Huck Warren was dead. I thought about how he had immediately believed, though, that my mother would aim her car at a tree. Really, I didn't have much doubt of that myself. Maybe neither of them could take it anymore. They'd come here like royalty to live in a castle and then their utilities had been turned off. It was so sad that people had to live that way, with no cushion, no friends or family to fall back on.

I shifted on the small pile of blankets and told myself that no, my situation was not the same. I had sold my belongings but for me, it was only a temporary setback. Wasn't it? And I didn't have family like the millions of McCourts who had come to support Amber, but I didn't need them. Friends? I could make them again, if I ever wanted to. After all, I had been popular in Los Angeles. I had gone out all the time. I'd had boyfriends, too, and they'd been really into me.

I picked up yet another of the throw blankets to dab at my eyes, belatedly remembering not to get makeup on it since it didn't belong to me. I was scared of the man who had just been here and there was no one I could call—not the police as I had suggested earlier, because he really hadn't done anything, and not friends or family because I didn't have those. I'd made Shaw hate me again by throwing his niceness right back into his face and made him feel stupid that he'd bothered to try with me for a second time.

I heard thunder rumble in the distant sky and as I counted the seconds until the lightning, I thought that I needed to get out of here fast. I needed to restart and make a better life for myself, one where I could be happy. I had done it once and I could do it again, I decided, but when the bolt of electricity flashed outside the big window, I put the blanket over myself and gave up for a while. Maybe I could do it, but maybe I didn't deserve it.

CHAPTER 9

This guy was handsome, like a cowboy in an old-west movie. He and Amber went well together in terms of looks, I decided, and even better in terms of temperament. She ran in high gear at all times, but he complemented her perfectly since he was absolutely calm and mellow.

However, it seemed that even his easygoing nature had its limits, and she had come up against them. “No,” Jed told her firmly when she suggested for the tenth time that I would be better off if I let her do my hair and makeup. He’d smiled ruefully at me for the nine times before this one, the nine times when I’d tried to put her off myself, but now he was stepping into the breach.

She gave it another try. “Jed, with all my pageant experience —”

“No,” he repeated. “Grier said she didn’t want your help with that, and you need to respect her wishes. Her answer is final.”

I’d never seen anyone able to silence Amber McCourt or convince her to say uncle, but she did both right now when her husband drew the line in the sand for me. She smiled at him like she was totally besotted and then laughed. “I do know how to push,” she said, and then he laughed too and said indeed she did, and they kissed and laughed together.

It was actually a little sickening to see, considering how old they were and also that they were parents whose children would look to them for an example of how to behave. Their kids would see all this flirty happiness and mistakenly trust

that any marriage would be like this, with two people getting along and helping each other. That was why Amber's husband Jed was here, actually, to help her and also to help me. I was gathering up my meager belongings and bringing them over to their casita. She was also delivering and staging even more furniture and accessories that she'd scrounged up in an effort to help move along the sale of my castle. We'd had no offers, not one, and she had put it on the rental market as well. There were no bites there, either, not even a little nibble of interest.

Even though Amber had seemed to capitulate about doing my hair and makeup, she couldn't help giving me a few more tips about clothing and what season I would be, color-wise, as we carried my scant wardrobe to put in the back of my car. It was one of her favorite topics. "Let me see again," she said, and grabbed my wrist to examine my veins. "I'm having trouble because based on this evidence, I'd classify you as cool, but I also saw how you tanned when we met. You really need to wear sunscreen."

"Ok, sure." I pulled my arm away, but then she took my chin in her hand and drew my face down so that we were eye to eye. "Amber..."

"Look at that color," she murmured. "Beautiful."

"Are you talking about me?" I asked, confused.

She let go, dug into her purse, and took out a box of breath mints. "There you are. No, have two. You drank all that coffee." She snapped the box shut. "Yes, I was talking about your grey eyes. Did you get them from your mother or your father? They're spectacular."

“I think...from my mother,” I said, but the words were very choked because a large lump had risen in my throat. “Hers were the same color. Do you really think that they’re pretty?”

“Yes, and I’m going to say that you’re a summer,” she decided. “You’re a soft summer, but the tone of your hair threw me for a minute. With all that work you did on it in California, you never colored it? It’s naturally this shade?” She held up a thick lock and stepped close again to examine it for evidence that I was lying.

“It’s naturally a dark-blond mess,” I answered, regaining control of my voice. “If you’re thinking about doing a curl analysis, I’ll tell you now that world-renowned stylists have tried to classify me and the most they can say is that I’m off the chart. Then they wished me luck.”

“World-renowned,” she repeated and from the look she gave me, there might have been rotten eggs directly beneath her nose. “I have a niece who’s a stylist. She just got a chair at a salon in town so she’s only famous locally, but you should go to her.”

“I can’t right now.” My cheeks burned. “I can’t spend the money. I’m already not paying rent for the casita.”

“I didn’t ask you for rent. Why would you give it to me if I didn’t ask for it? I think my niece would enjoy working on you and she might comp her services in order to get the practice. It would be a challenge to her skills.” She turned my hair in her fingers, obviously displeased with it.

“Is it that bad?” I didn’t really need her opinion, since of course I knew more about styling than she did, but I couldn’t help myself from asking. “I’ve been straightening the heck

out of it, but without doing the regular chemical treatments since I left LA, I can feel the funnel cloud forming up there.”

She looked at me and started to laugh, and I found myself laughing, too. That felt nice, but I knew that it wouldn't last. I'd been boomeranging between being so sad that I could hardly keep myself from crying and so lonely that, again, I could hardly keep myself from crying. Either way, I was not very solid emotionally. My boss—my colleague had interpreted my behavior as me being scared in my house, because I had told her about my run-in with the weird guy in sunglasses. The day after it happened, I hadn't been able to hold in the story and had spilled the whole thing to Amber at work. She'd been comforting and sympathetic, but was also clearly thrilled that she'd been right about me being here alone.

But I wasn't scared or at least, I was minimally scared. Mostly, I was sad about Shaw. I was sorry that I had made him hate me again. I'd texted to say that but I also wrote that I understood his feelings, and I was leaving him alone. I had gone to church, though, in the hope of running into him, but my attendance had brought a new set of issues.

An older lady there, one whose name I'd never typed into the list of parishioners on my phone, had opened the door to a floodgate of new information. She had quietly told me how she'd known that my father had sold off my mother's jewelry because he'd done it at a store in Chattanooga, a store that her cousin owned. “I never would have said anything, but I heard you mention at the open house that some pieces from her collection were missing,” she said. “You can put your mind at ease that they weren't stolen.”

Had I admitted to that? Had I said that her jewelry was gone? It was true, and not just some pieces but all of them, and I supposed that my mouth must have gotten away from me on that stressful day. I did remember that despite all my preparation, I had received some questions for which I wasn't ready. It wasn't like me to say so much and go so far off script, though.

But I had obviously overshared, because more information followed which proved it: another lady admitted that she'd bought some purses when my mother had shown up at her door with the trunk of her Porsche full of them. "I know you said that her handbags were missing and whatnot, but she was selling them. I wanted to help her out so I bought a few, although I did think that forty dollars was a bit steep for this one," she told me, patting the genuine Chanel quilted handbag that hung on its chain over her shoulder.

There were other stories, too. Miss Shirene, who wore a musty-smelling hat, had quietly mentioned that I shouldn't worry, that she hadn't blamed anyone but my father for the problems with the less fortunate and with the carpet. When I hadn't understand what she meant, she'd looked horrified and then had haltingly explained. Huck Warren had volunteered to give financial counsel to the members of our congregation struggling with money problems, but he had been asked to stop because his behavior was 'untoward.' And the carpet? He had made a promise to pay for replacement flooring in the church community room, but then he'd stopped responding about the bills and had totally ghosted the committee in charge of the project.

They hadn't wanted to tell me any of that because they'd been sympathetic about my circumstances, but the truth now emerged. And the truth was that they'd all known a lot, and that what I'd believed was secret information was already out there—but they'd kept it to themselves. I wondered what they'd thought about me when I'd first come home and had acted like everything was absolutely fine. They'd known it wasn't, because this was a small town. Miss Betty had seen the moving trucks leaving the castle, probably taking the furniture away. Miss Debrah worked at the bank; she probably knew that my parents' checking account was overdrawn and maybe she was aware of the letters about the missed mortgage payments. But she, like everyone else, hadn't said a word. I had pretended and these people had let me do it, pretending right back to help me along.

“Let's get on the road,” Jed urged as he emerged from the house, holding his son's hand and carrying a final load. It was my undergarments, as Amber called bras and thongs, and she had made sure that the garbage bag I'd placed them in was tightly tied at the top to prevent anyone from seeing the contents. “We have the grandkids' soccer game this afternoon,” he reminded his wife. As she checked their son's car chair, she expounded on her granddaughter Gentry's interest in sports like soccer, versus more feminine pursuits like makeup and pretty clothes that her other granddaughter Teagan enjoyed.

“Maybe you and Gentry would get along,” she suggested as she eyed my outfit.

I yanked my coat tighter and marched off to my car. It was an ugly coat and I knew it, but I'd had absolutely nothing

appropriate for the cooler Tennessee fall. I hadn't wanted to pay for too many bags on the airplane coming from Los Angeles and I knew that my outerwear would take up the most room. I had sold it all instead and it had gone pretty quickly, which had been great at the time but had left me cold lately. So I'd driven to Chattanooga to a second-hand store—no, a place for vintage clothing, and I'd found what I had on now. I could admit it was ugly but it kept me nice and warm.

We finally left for her property, the new-build house that she shared with Jed that I'd heard so much about. It included the casita which I saw was not as far away from the main house as I would have liked. Amber insisted on helping me unpack, criticizing my belongings as she did, so that we were in a major argument by the time that Jed and their son Aden came knocking and telling her that it was time to get over to the field for the game.

"Let's go," she said, and they all seemed to be waiting for something. "Grier, put on that terrible jacket," she ordered me. "As a summer, you really shouldn't have bought yellow, but it will keep you warm on those bleachers."

"What?" I asked, and she started to talk about more flattering hues for someone with my seasonal coloring, but I interrupted. "You want me to go to your soccer game?"

"Believe me, I do not play soccer," she huffed.

"I mean, you want me to go to a family event?" I persisted.

"You're my assistant," she told me, setting my teeth on edge. "You should get to know everyone. My word, I talk about you enough that they feel like they already know you."

“Ok, I...wait, what do you say about me to them, Amber?”

We did argue some more but eventually I put on my yellow coat, which I already knew was ugly, and I went to her granddaughters' soccer game. Yes, everyone there knew who I was, and I had a lot of questions about what Amber might have imparted to them. I was directed to a space in the bleachers next to an extremely beautiful woman, a step-granddaughter named Tally. She filled me in on some of the family gossip, especially about Amber and how she had come to marry her current husband, Jed.

“She was knocked up with Aden when she walked down the aisle,” Tally told me as we sat together in the stands. “And she wanted a real wedding, too, not just a quickie ceremony, so they had to keep letting out her dress. It was pretty hilarious and it took her down a peg or two. We used to fight a lot but actually, Amber's ok as long as she keeps her opinions on my wardrobe to herself.”

We both heard a little cooing noise and she turned to her other side to check on her own baby, tucked in a carrier that her husband Owen wore and zipped up cozily in his coat with him. It was a red coat (a warm-toned red) and according to the color analysis that I'd been reading up on lately, Owen was really a winter. A cooler-toned shade, maybe a dark green, would have looked better on him but in spite of that, he seemed very happy. He put his arm around his wife and they both looked down at the baby like they were awestruck.

Most of the people at the game were paired off like Tally and Owen, but not all of them. At halftime, I met the niece who did hair and she was single. She agreed with Amber that I

would be a great client and said that she really wanted to try some new techniques on me, that she had just been to Nashville for a course and it had already given her a lot of ideas.

“But this isn’t so bad,” she said, playing with the strands near my face. “It’s damaged on the ends because of all the straightening you’re doing, so we’re going to need to cut—”

“No, the weight holds it down,” I interrupted her. “If it’s shorter, I will lose control. If I lose control of this, I lose control of my life.”

I was dead serious, but the stylist laughed and Amber made a noise like “tsk tsk.” “My niece is a professional,” she told me.

“It’s my head!” I snapped back, but we were interrupted as a blonde woman whom I recognized from the pictures on my boss’s—colleague’s desk approached at a near run.

“Mama, Bree is telling me that her Gentry is playing better than my Teagan, and you know—”

“Here they go,” another woman (a cousin? A niece?) muttered as two of Amber’s daughters began to bicker, and their mother stepped in to mediate.

It was really wonderful. It was almost magical, I thought. All of them were talking and arguing, but they had all come to cheer for two medium-sized girls on a soccer team. They broke off their disagreements to stand up and scream at the top of their lungs for them and with all the McCourts cheering together, it was like a wall of sound. When the game was over, they hugged each other and kissed cheeks, and seemed sad to leave, but they would all see each other the next day at

church. I had already said that no, I would not be attending with them because I would not be converting as Amber had requested. She was not best pleased but let it go.

I sat in the back seat with their son on the way home and listened to her and Jed talk, Amber inserting her strong opinions and her husband tempering them, the two of them discussing what they would make for dinner and laughing when their son suggested his ideas, including sour candy and popcorn. He was pretty cute.

They dropped me off at the casita after I firmly declined their invitation to eat at the main house with them. My new, temporary space was very nice, very free of weird guys in sunglasses who were vaguely threatening and with plenty of heat, although I felt bad about turning it up too high. The utilities for this place were under Jed's name because Amber had assumed that her daughter with the criminal husband would live here, and that woman would have no money because she'd be forking over everything to his legal defense team.

Despite the casita's upgraded features, though, I had a hard time falling asleep that night because my head was full of stupid things that were a waste of my time to consider. They were things that I didn't want in my life because I was much more interested in promoting my career, of course. But I kept thinking about them anyway, like about the little dark-haired baby snuggled up beneath the guy Owen's warm-toned red coat, about the sisters fighting and then laughing with each other, about the dad who put his arm around his daughter Teagan and said she'd done great on that field, although she was about as good at soccer as I was. That said a lot.

I went to my own church the next day, forcing myself to attend although it was hard now that I was aware of how much knowledge everyone else there had about me and my parents. I wanted to ask what they knew about their car accident, too; there were probably a lot of things that they were too nice to tell me. During the Mass, I sat plotting about how I would casually bring it up, prepping as usual and choosing the best tactics to employ.

But I didn't end up using any of those tactics and my prep work counted for nothing. As the service ended and after the priest blessed and dismissed us, I turned and saw Shaw sitting in the last pew again, just like when I'd seen him here once before in the summer. I thought that he looked different now from how he had then, and I watched him act very differently, too. In June, he'd kept his lupine eyes steadily on the altar and then on me as we'd argued in the vestibule. Now, he was meeting a lot of other eyes and also smiling a little and saying hello. He was friendlier for sure and I saw it reflected back to him from everyone else. It came back in force from the younger ladies who might have been single.

I actually threw a few elbows as I made my way out of the nave, which was not really churchy behavior but did make my passage faster. I arrived just after Shaw had but he didn't seem to be in any hurry to leave, himself. No, he was standing and talking to several people I knew and whose names I had included in the list on my phone, and also several younger, prettyish ladies whom I didn't know at all.

I had two choices: either I could walk on by, or I could make a move, and I hadn't gotten to be the executive vice president of a now-defunct and possibly criminal real estate firm by being

a shrinking violet. I marched quickly over to them and only reeled slightly as I did.

“Miss Debrah,” I greeted the one I recognized, the lady with the mole who worked at the bank. “How are you today?”

“I’m fine, Grier,” she answered, and she sounded surprised. I’d never sought her out before.

“Good.” I nodded. “That’s good.” I noticed that the other voices in their little grouping had quieted, and that the rest of the people who stood here were looking at me as if they were waiting for something. I had to give them something.

“I remember how you were taking pictures at my open house in the heart-shaped bathtub in my parents’ bedroom,” I mentioned to her. “I just wanted to tell you that my father copied that design from a brothel that he visited in Sparks, Nevada. He called it a cathouse, which is just another name for a place for prostitutes. You probably already knew that.”

She shook her head no, she hadn’t known that. Everyone was really staring now, but not like they were waiting. It was more like they were watching a horrifying video on their phones, or they were hearing an order from their boss to cut off water to a building in order to get the tenants out faster. I knew that feeling.

“I only know about cathouses because I overheard my father using the term with someone else on the phone. I used to eavesdrop on him and my mother because I was alone—I mean, because I wanted to know more about them—that was very rude of me,” I added, “and I’m aware that it was bad manners.”

Miss Debrah nodded slightly but she seemed even more confused. I hastened to explain.

“I also shouldn’t have gone through their personal things, and unfortunately that habit continued as I grew—not that I would go through your things or anyone else’s,” I assured her, “except if I thought you were doing something criminal. Like the headmaster at my former boarding school, I went through his desk because I saw his new car and I knew that he couldn’t have afforded it on his salary and also, there were a lot of unprepared students—anyway, I figured he was accepting bribes to get kids in. And he was,” I said, because I’d found the evidence. One of those bribes had been from my parents, in fact. I hadn’t actually finished ninth grade and I’d also been a year too young for their standards for a sophomore, but they’d accepted me anyway.

“Hey, Grier,” Shaw said. He separated himself from the rest of the group and stepped next to me. “Ready to go?”

I nodded blankly, a little unsure about why he would accompany me out of the building, but understanding that what I’d just monologued had not gone over the way that I’d wanted it to.

“What were you saying about cathouses? I’ve never heard that term myself, and it was really interesting how you brought it up in our church like that,” he told me once we were in the parking lot.

“I know that I shouldn’t have. I didn’t have enough time to review my preparation because I didn’t expect to see you there.” I glanced back toward the building, sorry that my tactic had failed. “I came last Sunday but you didn’t. I had a

lot planned to say but I blanked a little and anyway, it wasn't meant to be presented in a group setting with all those women fawning over you."

"I liked hearing about brothels better than when you were bragging all over the place at Raelyn's barbecue," he answered. He stopped next to my car. "Why in the hell haven't you gotten this windshield replaced? I'm going to—"

"If you send someone over to fix it, I'll call the police. I'll get to it when I do!" I told him.

"Ok, ok, calm yourself down. I broke it, though, so I'm responsible. I don't know why you keep arguing—"

"I have a lot of things prepped that I was going to say to you," I interrupted again. "Do you want to hear them? Will you listen?"

"Can we do this somewhere besides the parking lot?" he countered. "It's going to rain and we have an audience."

I turned to see a small of crowd forming close enough that they might have been able to hear our words, but they all immediately looked at the sky like the grey clouds above us were totally the focus of their interest.

"Your house is closer," he said. "Let's go there."

"No, I'm not living at my house. I'm temporarily staying in Amber's casita—her guesthouse. But today, it's her turn to host her family for their weekly party and I don't want them to see you. None of them will shut up about it for weeks." The wind swirled and I shivered, despite the yellow coat. "They gossip so much, which is actually very nice."

"It's nice that they gossip?"

“It’s nice that they’re all interested in each other. Mostly they say so much crap because they care a lot.”

He nodded. “Ok. Meet me at my house, then.”

“You’re really going to talk to me? You didn’t answer my texts, which someone would do if he was interested in communication. You didn’t show up here last Sunday, a place I might have been, and you haven’t been to the real estate office where I work every—”

Now it was his turn to interrupt. “The reason I haven’t done those things is because you convinced me to be mad at you. Do you want to convince me not to talk to you now?”

No, I didn’t want that. I shook my head and got into my car, and I followed his truck to his house. He stopped to open the gate, which looked freshly painted, and I followed him further up the long driveway. The house looked better, too, not repainted but also fresher. The plants in front had been trimmed down—probably Shaw had the proper tools to do it and also some background knowledge, unlike others who’d struggled uselessly and then had to pass over the job to Amber’s skilled relatives.

Anyway, the place definitely looked more welcoming, although the boulders were still there. He pulled off the driveway into a two-track I hadn’t ever noticed, maybe because the foliage was so overgrown before, and he steered between the trees. I stopped in front of the barricade of rocks and stepped out of the car, then slowly approached the front door.

It opened and Shaw looked out. “Come on,” he told me, then disappeared again.

The interior of the house looked the same, as in, a thousand times cleaner and better-furnished than it had when I'd come over as a teenager. He was still straightening things, though, like gathering a pile of papers and then even plumping a pillow. He caught me staring.

"Yeah, I like it neat," he told me, and sat down and leaned against the fluffed cushion. "Go ahead."

"What?"

"You said you had things to say. Go ahead." He crossed his arms over his chest.

"Ok." I was prepared for this, after all. I had figured out the best tactics and carefully planned my arguments so that each statement built off the last. My words would create an unbreakable matrix of solid reasoning that would prove my case: Shaw would have to like me again. I removed the yellow coat, felt over my straightened hair, and nodded. It was go-time.

I began by using his name, a smart move to show your connection to the listener. "Shaw, you and I..." I said, but the next words didn't immediately come to me. I just stood there and stared into his eyes and thought about how much I'd missed him, not only in the last week when he'd been angry at me but also during the years before that. I'd looked for him, scouring the internet for any trace, any picture, any news that would connect us again. I had tried very hard to forget, but I hadn't been able to.

"I made you hate me. It was my biggest fear and I made it happen," I heard myself admit. "I thought that I couldn't live without our friendship and when I lost it, I barely..." I paused

to recalibrate. “Once I had a little bit of you again, I worried every second that I would lose you for a second time and then I made it happen. I made you hate me all over again. You walked out of my castle and I don’t blame you because I was telling you to. I was sitting there saying that you couldn’t stand me, that I had hurt you and that I deserved to be shunned. It was so stupid of me and I heard myself doing it but I couldn’t stop.”

“Like when you were telling the ladies at church about cathouses,” he said. “Or in ninth grade, how you told the story about your period in our biology class—”

“That was not about my period, specifically, but about menstruation in general. I agree that it wasn’t the appropriate time for it,” I said, and to my amazement, Shaw smiled at me.

“You just gave a very, very nice speech. Was it what you had prepared?” he asked.

“It was just what I think.”

“Yeah, I didn’t figure that you’d spent time rehearsing it. It was a little choppy.”

I nodded, because it had been. “It’s the truth about me,” I said.

“You told me that I was weak,” he stated, and I shook my head.

“*You* said that. You were the one who said you had a weakness for me due to my pathetic-ness. My pathetic-osity.”

“Are those real words?”

I shook my head again. “I don’t think you’re weak. I do think you’re a nice person. You’re genuinely a good person, which

is why you tried to help me on that first day of high school. It was why you didn't keep throwing rocks at me when I showed up in your driveway this summer after all that time away."

"You were about to cry that day. I didn't think it was about me breaking your windshield, either."

"No, it was that I'd just lost my parents, and I know they were awful people and all that, but I didn't think they would die. I didn't know how to deal with their problems and I still feel like they're reaching out of their graves to punish me, to keep punishing me. Like they sent that guy to get me."

"What guy came to get you?" Shaw asked.

"The one with the sunglasses," I explained, and he seemed to wait. "A scary guy wearing sunglasses showed up at my house. He's the reason that I moved to Amber's casita."

After I said that, he told me to sit down and he handed me a tissue to wipe my eyes, and then he asked me to explain to him about the man who'd come over and scared me. "I wasn't truly frightened, because I'm a grown woman who lived in a very dangerous city and knows how to take care of herself," I said, "but it was unsettling."

"That was why you moved into the—what's it called?"

"The casita." He had hated Spanish class. "Yes, I made the mistake of talking to Amber about it, and she insisted that I come. Now she wants me to do family things with her," I said, and felt a little burst of happiness instead of the annoyance that I might have expected.

He was nodding. "I wondered why you were watching the girls' soccer game yesterday."

“What? How did you know that? Were you following me?”
But unlike his own reaction of anger when I’d run into him at the hospital in Chattanooga months before, I was thrilled and felt myself start to smile.

“No, I wasn’t following you. I went with Stacia to see her brother play his game, over on another field,” he explained, as if that was something totally normal. “I spotted you because of the color of your coat and then I watched because you were high up on those bleachers.”

“I wasn’t anywhere close to falling,” I said, regaining my power of speech. “I got down from my seat all by myself.”

“I thought I saw someone help you.”

“Just Amber’s son-in-law, Wyatt,” I said dismissively. “But he let go right away.”

“So you’re getting adopted into Amber’s family because some guy showed up and scared the shit out of you,” he summarized, leaving behind the interesting topic of attending soccer games to watch the sibling of a woman he hardly even knew.

“I’m sure that my father was up to things he shouldn’t have been, because his money came from somewhere and it went somewhere else, and there’s no good accounting of any of it. That means he was doing it in a sneaky way. An illegal way,” I admitted. “I would bet the guy in sunglasses was part of it. Hopefully, he did a quick search of ‘Huck Warren’ and saw that the first thing that comes up is a story about how my parents were killed in a car accident. Why wouldn’t he have believed me that they were dead?”

“Maybe your father had a habit of lying,” Shaw reasoned, which was correct. “Maybe he liked avoiding people if he owed them money.”

I thought of the unfulfilled pledge to recarpet the church. “He definitely did that.”

“He’d changed his name once before,” he went on. “Maybe it was to confuse his associates.”

“Maybe. I don’t want anything to do with it, though. Amber’s all over me to get my real estate license and anything criminal would derail that.”

“I thought you wanted to go. You were planning to sell your house and leave.”

“I was. I will,” I assured him. “No, I’m not staying. But even when I do go, do you think that maybe...you don’t have to like me again, but could you not hate me?”

He passed me another tissue. “Maybe it’s not a weakness that I have,” he said. “Maybe it’s more of a tolerance.”

“Toward me? Really? You mean that you can tolerate me?” My heart lifted in hope, because it didn’t sound so bad. It sounded wonderful that I could be tolerated.

“No, I don’t just tolerate you,” he continued. “I like you.”

“Really?” I repeated. It was too good to believe.

“I find the things you say pretty funny. The story about your period in ninth grade didn’t bother me like it did to the teacher and the other people in the class. You say lots of weird shit, and if you’re being yourself and not trying to brag on something, I like it. It’s interesting.”

“Really?”

“You made me think that I should hate you. You had me halfway convinced of it. I left your house agreeing that yeah, I still should have been angry, and yeah, you didn’t deserve my friendship. But then I remembered that I’m not the pissed-off teenager anymore, fuming about the shit hand of cards that life dealt me. I don’t want to be a man who walks around with all that bitterness. It took me a minute to get back to normal, so I needed some space from you to think things out.”

“I gave it to you. Remember? I didn’t keep texting, or coming around, or flying a drone over your house.”

“Yeah, you’re good at dropping me. No, I didn’t mean that,” he said quickly. “Listen, Grier, if we’re going to get along, I think you were right about your father’s money and my dad’s journals.” His eyes went to a shelf across the room where they were neatly lined up. “We’re going to have to act like everything in the past didn’t even happen. We won’t talk about it.”

We would ignore it just like my parents had in the immediate aftermath. When my mother’s black eye had faded and her broken arm had healed enough that she could remove the sling against doctor’s orders, they had gone right back to church. The night before I’d left for boarding school, they’d held one of their rare cocktail parties, too. It was in my honor, because they were telling everyone that I was leaving for California, but I hadn’t been invited to attend. Instead, I’d eavesdropped and spied from between the balusters of the staircase. I’d heard my mother talking about shopping in Atlanta and my father offering to show off her new vintage Porsche in the

garage, the one he'd bought that day with the heavy bag of money. It was the car that had replaced the one I'd put into a ditch next to Shaw's driveway and the one that, ten years later, she'd directed straight into a tree.

They'd never talked about the accident, not to me, not to other people in town, and maybe not even amongst themselves. It was as if it had never happened at all.

"I can do that," I said to Shaw. "I can pretend like it wasn't even real."

"Ok," he said, nodding. "I think it's for the best."

I wasn't sure, but if it meant that he was back, that I would have him again, I would do it. For Shaw, I would have done just about—no, there was no need to qualify. I would have done anything.

CHAPTER 10

I thought that I'd heard my name but I'd been leaned back in the shampoo bowl, so I wasn't too sure. When I sat up and the stylist was wrapping a towel around the now-wet monstrosity on my head, I spotted Raelyn waving at me. I hadn't seen her since the barbecue over the summer but now—"Oh, it's out!" I exclaimed as I stood, and she beamed.

"I had the baby," she agreed happily. His face was snuggled against her chest and she held her hand over his ear to protect him from the noise of the beauty salon. "That's my mom over there," she said, gesturing with her chin at an older woman who looked a lot like her daughter. "We stopped by to say hello, so I can get out of the house and she can fix up my hair for me. Some days it's hard to pull it all together! Want to see him?" She turned so that I could look at the tiny, sleeping creature pressed against her in his carrier.

"I sat next to another baby slightly bigger than this one at a soccer game," I said. "Yours is just as cute." I peered more closely. "He's actually adorable, like you may have created the perfect human."

"Thanks!" she told me. "Xavier and I sure think so and so do our parents."

The woman at the soccer game, Tally, had definitely also thought that about her child and her husband had agreed with her. Paul Highsmith had believed it—or maybe, he'd seen that his son wasn't perfect in all ways, because the two of us had laughed pretty hard when Shaw had seared eggs to the bottom

of their frying pan. The grandpa had complained but to Paul, it hadn't mattered.

That was the difference, then. I had seen it in Paul, and in Tally at the soccer game, and in Amber. Now I saw it in Raelyn, too: all the love.

She was talking about something else, though—she was asking about my hair.

“What are you planning for it?”

In my emotional state, I admitted the truth about the problem that grew from my follicles. “I’ll do anything to smoosh it down. My hair is naturally a tornado and it takes a lot of work to make it acceptable to society.”

“Oh, I don’t remember it as being that bad!” With her free hand, she tugged at the towel that restrained it and I stepped back before the beast could be liberated. “I mean, it was... large, and it was hard to sit behind you in math class, but the color is so nice. I love the blonde in it, all those natural highlights. So pretty.”

“Ready?” the stylist called from her chair.

“Come by my house when you’re done here and show me the results,” Raelyn said.

“Are you sure? My appointments always take a long time.”

“I’m sure. I want to see,” she encouraged, so I said that I would.

The appointment did take a long time, but there was a lot less criticism and fewer biting comments about bald eagle nests and sulfur-crested cockatoos (my previous world-renowned

stylist had been an amateur ornithologist and drew his coiffure comparisons from the bird world). I walked out with several inches gone but also with hair that wasn't totally straight. I'd been advised to stop fighting so hard against what I had, to let nature go a little. It meant that I cast a larger shadow from the neck up than I had before, but really, I didn't think it looked too bad.

And Raelyn loved it. "Mercy! It's so cute!" she whispered to me as she opened the door, which was before I had time to knock on it. "Jackie just went to sleep and it's not on me, but in his bassinet."

I supposed that was good. Weren't babies supposed to sleep in their own beds? But as she ushered me inside, complimenting my new hair and telling me more about him, I heard that it was not the case that babies slept in the places you had planned for them. I also learned that they didn't sleep according to the schedule you might have anticipated, either.

"I really thought I'd be able to work from home," she laughed, like it was funny somehow?

"What will you do if you can't work?" I asked.

"Don't worry," she told me. "We're ok on Xavier's salary and we both have our parents to help out. We'll be fine."

"That's so lucky."

"I know. I think I'm about the luckiest woman in the world, but also maybe the most tired, and my boobs are killing me. But if you have the inclination, I would encourage you to have a kid, at least one. I keep looking at him and thinking, 'Well,

I've done it. I've done the best thing I ever..." She stopped.
"Are you all right?"

"I'm great," I said. "Just great. Tell me about your boobs."

She did and I gained a lot more knowledge about a post-partem body than I had before, and I found it interesting instead of horrific or boring. I certainly didn't want to leave, especially because soon enough, Jack woke up in his bassinette. We watched him on the baby monitor snuffling for a minute before he opened his little mouth and wailed.

Raelyn changed him, fed him, then changed him again before she offered, "Do you want to hold him?"

I did, but I had never been so up close to someone so unusually small. She directed me as to how to support his head and she put a blanket over my shirt as a guard against baby fluids. "They'll come out of nowhere," she commented. "There you go. Wait, I'll get a picture of you holding him, and so pretty with your new hair!"

I hardly heard what she said, because I was very interested in the infant in my arms. "He's beautiful," I whispered, watching his little fists. "Hi, Jack."

"Aw, he must like you. He's not screaming like when my dad holds him. If you two are ok there, do you mind if I do a few things around the house?"

"No, go ahead," I urged. Amber was visiting her mother this afternoon and had given me the time off because both of us had figured that my hair appointment might have stretched late into the night. I had all the time in the world, but instead of going to the casita to search out more career opportunities, I

felt like I could take a break and stay here for a while. Oddly, I hadn't gotten much response back from my previous applications and submissions of my very extensive résumé. It was bothering me a lot—but less so, right at this moment. I smiled at Jack.

Raelyn raced around her house picking things up, putting in laundry, doing dishes, and talking to me as she did about the baby, her husband, her job, and her family. I listened and directed my responses back to Jack. “Oh, you spilled some bleach on the dark load? Isn't that silly?” I murmured to him. Had he smiled a little? I was entranced. “You're such a sweet boy.”

“Wait until he blows out his diaper,” she said, pausing to kiss his head as she was rushing by. “Are you sure you're ok holding him? You can sit like this and lean him against your legs,” she explained, demonstrating. “He likes to be up and looking around.”

Jack and I assumed the new position and he grasped my index fingers as we talked more. Suddenly, the front door was opening and Raelyn's husband was home, bringing dinner with him. I had no idea that it had gotten so late. He was very excited to see his son and a little grudgingly, I gave the baby over to his other parent.

“I'll come back and sit with him,” I offered. “Amber and I start early a lot of days so she can finish early and be with her son, so I could come then.”

“Really?” Raelyn asked. “You don't mind?”

“I like being with him and talking to you,” I said, and she threw her arms around me and hugged me hard.

“My gosh, I feel like crying. I can’t tell you how much help you were. Thank you!” She let me go and I stood still, a little shocked at the physical contact. “I forgot to send the picture I took.” She tapped on her phone as we figured out another day that I could come visit, which I realized that I was looking forward to. A lot, actually. I’d liked playing with Jack but I’d also liked listening to Raelyn and hearing about how she was doing. I left after saying goodbye one more time to the baby and to Raelyn’s husband, who was also so appreciative that I’d sat on my butt on their couch for a while.

When I got in my car, I looked at the picture on my phone and smiled at the serious little face that Jackie had. She had sent it to me and to Shaw, for some reason. When I arrived at the casita, there were several more messages that had gone back and forth between Raelyn and him, with Shaw saying congratulations and how the baby was cute, and her saying thank you and how glad she’d been for my help.

Then he wrote only to me. “What are you doing?”

I looked around the little house. It was lively with the bright colors and patterns that Amber enjoyed, along with the many signs on the walls exhorting me to do things like drink wine and live, laugh, and love. It seemed very flat right now. Very quiet.

“Nothing,” I answered. “I got my hair done but now, nothing. You?”

“I’m making dinner. Want some?”

I had just been thinking about the eggs we’d had to sandblast from the pan after he’d cooked before. “Sure,” I typed, and on the way over, I stopped and got a few things.

“Next time, pull around the rocks on the road through the woods so you can park at the garage,” he told me as he opened the front door and took the grocery bag from my hands.

“Why did you put boulders there, anyway? Is it to keep away the hoi polloi?”

“Huh? Do you mean the crowds of people who want to come here and see me?” He set the bag on the kitchen counter, the one he’d installed, and started to unload. “I put them there in a fit of rage after my dad died.”

“Why? I thought you said that people were coming to help you then. Were you trying to stop them?”

He studied the premade sandwich he’d just removed. “I think this purchase says something about your trust in my cooking skills. Yeah, I guess I was trying to stop them because I wasn’t really fit for company for a while,” he explained. “I was sad, and I was also angry. He died so young. He missed out—no, a lot got taken from him. His life wasn’t fair.”

“He got to have you. You made his life wonderful.”

Shaw paused and turned to me. “Thanks for saying that. We loved each other a lot and I was lucky that he was my dad.”

I nodded. That part of his life had been very lucky.

“Grier, you seriously brought soup?” He held up a can from the bag.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you. I thought you might have planned to cook only for one, and I’m very hungry.”

“Liar.”

I laughed, and I watched him jump a little. At least he didn't turn and frown at me like he had before when he'd heard that sound.

"I think your hair looks very nice, by the way. It's more like you had it in high school," he told me.

"Is it?" My hands raised to feel the funnel cloud. "Oh, no. I'll work on it later."

"What do you mean? What's wrong with it?"

"You just said—if it's like it was when we were in ninth grade, then it looks terrible. My hair back then had its own gravitational pull. It looked like something a cow vomited up from its fourth stomach."

"Cows have only one stomach, divided into four parts," he said. "See? I know a thing or two that you don't. Have a seat. We won't need the soup or the sandwiches."

I did sit at the table that we'd used a decade before, the one he'd repurposed into a desk but that now, again, held plates and silverware for a meal. "What do you mean about the stomachs?" I asked.

"Everyone thinks that there are four, but that's not right."

"No, you just said that you knew something that I didn't," I explained.

"Have you studied cows since in high school?"

"I mean that you're implying that there's a lot that I know and you don't know it," I said, frustrated at his lack of understanding.

“Well, remember that we were three years apart in age but in the same grade.” He placed a heavy pot on a cork pad between our plates. “You’ll love this,” he promised, and lifted the lid. It did smell delicious.

“When did you learn to cook?” I inhaled. Mmm.

“You still don’t know how?”

“My apartment in Los Angeles had one burner and a mini fridge,” I answered. “I also didn’t have a lot of time to practice.”

“Your job,” he guessed, and spooned out a large helping for me. “You said you were hungry.”

I tried to make myself wait, because the pasta on my plate was steaming heavily. “I put in twelve or thirteen hour days,” I said. “And I also worked out as much as possible.”

“The kickboxing,” he guessed again.

“I did every kind of exercise that I came across. Can’t you tell, at all? I’ve been working out in the casita.” I held up my arm and flexed.

Shaw reached over and gently felt my biceps. “It’s impressive. No, I mean it. I could tell that you’ve been doing a lot.”

Good. I tried the dinner and oh, it was so tasty. It took me a while to return to talking because I was quite busy stuffing in pasta as fast as I could take it. “We were in the same grade in school because my parents started me too early and yours started you too late,” I finally mentioned when my mouth wasn’t full. “Your dad and grandpa, I mean. It didn’t have anything to do with me knowing more.”

“We’re back to that?” He held his fork in the air, pointing to me. “Grier, I understood what you were doing, even though you tried to hide it.”

“What? Doing what?”

He shook his head at me, but he wore a small smile. “You helped me with everything. You were the reason that I passed those classes, even though I was so unprepared. You pulled me through.”

“You knew a lot!”

“I didn’t,” he said. “My dad and my grandpa loved me more than anything, but my dad wasn’t together enough to figure out that I needed a regular education at a school, and my grandpa didn’t trust the government enough to send me to one of its institutions. You sat at this table and showed me how study and learn. How many years of math did we go through together? You said you knew that I could do it, so you taught me. I couldn’t ever have graduated or gone on to college without that.”

“I was just—no, it was working together, not teaching,” I protested.

“It’s not ‘working together’ when one of the people knows nothing. You tutored me in Spanish, you went through English punctuation and grammar. We did science, history, and everything else. You used to help my dad, too. You would finish your own work in a second and then read with him, helping him bring back that skill. He never forgot how you did that.”

“I thought it must have been so frustrating, since he’d been able to do it before but then he struggled with it.”

“Every time I drove him to the library, he’d talk about you. He liked to say, ‘Grier showed me again.’”

“It was just the same with you,” I said. “You knew plenty and you only needed to learn how things were done in school, a little push. Paul only needed a reminder. That’s all.”

“Yeah, well, we needed a lot of pushes and reminders and you didn’t get impatient and you never laughed at either of us, even though you were a smart kid who lived in a castle.”

“I was an idiot back then. I was fat and grotesque, with stupid hair and no ability to talk to people. I constantly fell down and hurt myself. I was useless. Y’all were the ones who were nice to an outcast. You let me hang out here all the time and you must have wanted me to leave, since I was so annoying. But you talked to me and I hadn’t realized how...”

“What? How what?”

How lonely I had been. How it didn’t seem like anyone remembered that I existed, not even the school bus driver who sometimes went past my stop so that I had to try to chase her and flag her down while the other kids already riding laughed their heads off.

“No one here thought you were grotesque or annoying but maybe we should talk about something else,” Shaw suggested. “Something that’s not going to make you cry into your penne with parmesan and mushrooms.” He handed me a napkin, like he always did, and I nodded and wiped my eyes.

“Tell me more about that little midge of a baby that Raelyn has.”

“He’s not a midge! He’s beautiful. He looks like an exact mix of her and her husband,” I said, and felt steadier the more I spoke about something unemotional. Until, unfortunately, I got emotional all over again describing how sweet Jack was and how much he’d seemed to like me. “Raelyn says that no one has ever held him for so long besides her and Xavier. He didn’t cry even once and I told him all kinds of things, like how I sat next to a different baby at that soccer game. A bigger-sized one.”

“Probably means that it was older.”

“Probably,” I agreed. “It was just as cute, though.” I paused, thinking of how I could redirect the conversation to what I was curious about, namely the woman who had brought him to the soccer fields on that day. “You know, the sport of soccer was invented—” I began.

“I told Stacia that I didn’t think we should see each other again.”

“How did you know that I was trying to find out about her? No, I wasn’t,” I quickly said and he grinned.

“That tactic of talking around until you get to the real question is not your friend. Go ahead and ask me straight on out.”

“Ok, fine. Why aren’t you going to see Stacia anymore, not that I’m all that interested?” I asked very casually.

“I don’t want to discuss it with you,” he answered, but started laughing before I had time to sputter a protest. I watched him and listened, entranced at the sound and at how different he

looked from when I'd seen him in the summer. At that moment, I identified the change I'd noticed in him when I'd first come back here and he'd thrown projectiles from his window: it wasn't maturity, or anger, and it wasn't that he was in pain. The difference was that when I'd known him in high school, he'd looked happy, and that happiness had been gone on the day when he'd tossed the rock at my windshield. Now I saw it again.

"Hold up, are you crying more?"

I was, but I shook my head.

"I was kidding," Shaw said. "I'll tell you why we broke up. Maybe it's a weird reason, but it was about that soccer game."

Oh. Had he seen me, and then he'd realized that the woman he was with was totally subpar? Thank goodness he hadn't witnessed when I'd fallen off the stands, or this moment never would have come! "You saw me, and..." I hinted.

"No, it wasn't about you. Stacia was being rude to her brother," he explained. "The kid is actually her half-sibling and it turns out she doesn't like him that much—not him personally, but the idea that her dad replaced his family. Which I get."

I did too, so I nodded.

"She only went to the game because her dad promised her something, money or something, if she showed." He shrugged. "It was a bribe, her dad bribed her, which I found strange since she's an adult. And you don't have to like every kid, right? But she was mean to her brother. He ran to her after his game was over and Stacia wouldn't even answer him."

She told him to leave her alone, and he's little, like six or something. He was all excited to talk to his big sister and she was nasty back."

"What did you do?"

"I told him that I didn't know anything about soccer and I wanted him to teach me, because I thought he was an expert. We kicked the ball around for a while and he cheered up."

"You played soccer?"

"Yeah, me and a sport with a ball, and I didn't end up concussed and neither did the kid. But I couldn't think about Stacia in the same way, and we went out a few more times but I told her I thought we should stop."

"What did you say, exactly?" I was curious to know, since I'd been involved in more than a few breakups and it was always hard for the person who didn't realize that it was coming.

"I said, 'I don't think we should see each other anymore. You're a great girl but it's not going to work out.' And she asked why, and I said that there were a few things that made me understand that we weren't compatible, and goodbye. I didn't want to be mean to her, but why would she have been mean to him? Why would anyone do that to someone littler? Someone who couldn't really defend himself?" He paused.

"Is this making you cry again?"

I shook my head.

"I kind of thought you'd be happy that I wasn't seeing her anymore. You didn't seem to like her much."

"I had no real reason not to," I stated, and that was true. No, I didn't like her, but I'd had no real reason for that. "Now I do

have a reason, I suppose. I don't like people who are mean to kids. In fact, I think they suck."

"Well, it wasn't meant to be with Stacia, anyway. We had some fun, a lot of fun, but—"

"A lot of fun?" I quoted. "Are you talking about having sex with her? Were you sleeping together?"

Shaw swallowed a mouthful of pasta and wiped his mouth with a napkin. "Mostly I was talking about going out and watching sports, which she likes."

Belatedly, I remembered how his sex life wasn't my business. "Sorry," I said. "I shouldn't have asked that." I was, however, still burning to know. "You don't have to tell me about you and that woman because I don't care."

"I'm definitely not telling you," he said, which obviously meant that yes, they had been sleeping together. He must have seen something in my face, because he laughed again, and I found myself smiling back.

"I'm really not interested," I announced.

"Yeah, sure. How would it feel if the shoe was on the other foot and I was asking you about your sex life?"

"I'm not afraid to talk about it. I'm a very open person," I answered.

"Go ahead."

"Huh?" I asked.

"Go ahead and talk about it." Shaw put down his fork and leaned forward. "I'm all ears. Go on."

“Talk about sex? Um, ok.” I had nothing prepped, nothing at all, so I would have to wing it. “Sure, I don’t have a problem talking about sex.”

“You said that. I’m waiting.”

“Sure, sure,” I agreed. “Well, I guess I should start at the beginning. Way back when.” I swallowed, blinked, and drank some water.

“Want a beer?”

“Yes, definitely,” I said, so he got one for me and another for himself before returning to his seat. “The beginning would be freshman year, but it was only halfway. Halfway, because we didn’t finish.”

“Oh, you mean that you didn’t—”

“Nobody did.” There had been no orgasms for anyone that night. “He got it in, but then he fell asleep before he was done. He passed out, I guess. I probably shouldn’t have said that I would go back to his dorm room, because I could tell how drunk he was.” It had been after my first real college party, which I’d only had the privilege of attending because I’d trailed after my roommate and her large group of friends without their knowledge. “He woke up a little and rolled off, and then I left.”

“Jesus, Grier. That’s the worst sex story I’ve ever heard. You were a freshman in college?”

“Yes. I’d tried before, in high school, but no one was—the boys there were too immature.”

“I get it.”

I was afraid that he did, that he saw how desperate I'd been to rid myself of my virginity. Unfortunately, no one at my boarding school had been willing to participate in the effort with me. "The real first time was my sophomore year with a guy from my statistics class," I continued.

"Everybody stayed awake?" Shaw asked.

"He was thrilled with it," I said, and that guy really had been. It was his actual first time, since he hadn't even gone halfway like I had, and he was so amazed by the experience that he had cried afterwards. Tears of happiness, he'd explained, and then he'd wanted to do it again. I'd declined.

"And then I did it lots more times, with all different guys," I said. "I wanted to sample around."

"Like science," he suggested. "Like how you did the experiment testing the acidity of area waterways in ninth grade."

He had been the one to drive me around to various rivers and lakes and to hold the back of my shirt so that I didn't fall in while filling the test tubes. "Exactly," I said. "That was it exactly."

"So, there was nobody you were sleeping with because you cared about him."

"Oh." I'd walked right into that; what was I supposed to say?

"I cared about a few of them. They were definitely boyfriends, if that's what you're asking—my boyfriends, not anyone else's, and they loved me a lot. Several of them, loving me. Commitment."

"Yeah, I get it," he said again.

He probably did, because he'd always seemed to get a lot about me. "Well? Your turn," I told him.

"I never said I'd share jack shit about my sex life."

"You have to be kidding!" I protested. "I told you about the halfway thing. That's cheating if you don't take your turn and it's really unfair."

"Cheating, right. Ok, I'll swap virginity stories. I got a late start on things, so I was older than most when it happened."

I nodded quickly, wanting him to keep talking and move past the reasons why he had gotten that late start: the accident and his recovery. "Go ahead, tell me," I urged.

"I went to Alabama and saw the ocean for the first time, and I met a girl in a bar. I was fairly drunk and we did it on the beach with the waves coming in."

"So it was no good?"

"It was better than I could have ever imagined," he corrected.

"I did have sand in some uncomfortable areas for a while afterwards. It got very...ingrained." He winced slightly at the memory.

"That sounds better than the halfway experience." It sounded a lot better, even with sand in places it shouldn't have been.

"I hope it got better for you after that time," he said. "For real."

I knew what he meant when he said "for real," and it was that he didn't believe some of what I'd told him. Most likely, he doubted the part about the loving relationships I'd had with my boyfriends, something I should have prepped better. I

really should have had that memorized. “After the halfway time, it was truly awesome,” I promised. “Amazing and dreamlike.”

“Good.”

We sat in awkward silence. Of course, when we’d been friends in the past, we hadn’t discussed sex. On my side, there had been nothing to discuss (the farthest I’d gotten even in my daydreams was French kissing) and I’d never speculated about what Shaw had been up to. After all, I hadn’t even known that he was going out with girls, let alone imagined him having sex with them.

I considered it all now. How much of his clothing had he removed when he’d done it on the beach in Alabama? Had he ripped off his shirt, so that the moon could highlight the muscle I’d seen outlined under his old t-shirts in the summer? Had he slid off his jeans, so that...I thought for a moment about what was under the denim.

Scars. There were a lot of scars, and that was why he wore long pants all the time, even in August when it had been so hot. His entire leg was probably a big mass of scars that were a map of the pain he’d felt and continued to struggle with. I wondered if he’d been embarrassed when his former girlfriend Stacia saw them, if she’d made him feel better and said that they didn’t matter. They didn’t, after all, and if I ever found out that she’d made him self-conscious or ashamed of how they looked, I’d kill her.

I probably wouldn’t find out, because there wasn’t much chance that she’d report to me on their bedroom activities.

Shaw wasn't going to either so I'd never know, but I hoped they'd enjoyed their time together, for his sake.

"I hope you had a ton of great sex with Stacia," I announced. "She's really pretty so I bet she has a lot of experience and knew what to do, and I'm sure you enjoyed it. A woman like that could probably write a manual! But I'm not—this isn't slut shaming," I assured him. "I'm not shaming because it's envy—no, not envy, I'm not envious of her experience, because I have plenty, too. I have plenty of experience with all different men, a lot beyond the halfway guy and the one from my stats class. I'm not slut shaming myself either, because no judgement!"

"Sure, no judgement."

"I just hope you liked it a lot and had fun and that you'll find someone else to have more sex with soon, and you'll like it just as much. But I'm not going to ask about it because I don't care—no, I care about you, but I acknowledge that what goes on with your private parts isn't my business." I paused, dismayed. "Oh no, that's what Amber calls penises, and now I sound—"

"Thank you," he said. "I hope the same for you." He held up his beer. "Cheers to plenty of good sex."

"Cheers," I agreed, and after that, we talked about other things that didn't make him blush anymore.

CHAPTER 11

“**D**ivide and conquer.” Amber nodded. “I trust you.”
“Are you sure?” I asked her. “Are you totally sure?”

She squinted at me, adjusted a few pieces of my hair so that it was styled to her liking, and took a lipstick out of her purse.

“Use this. I got it over the weekend with an eye toward brightening up your look.”

“You got this for me?” I smoothed the new gloss over my lips.

“I went shopping with my daughters and we picked it for you,” she said and studied my mouth. “I knew it. It’s perfect! Let me take a picture so Aubree can see that I was right.” She snapped one with me protesting so she had to do another, this one wearing a smile that she directed. She also smiled at the screen when she looked at my image there. “See how nice!”

I thought she might have been right. “Do you think I look different?” I asked her.

“Yes, because you’re finally wearing the correct color lipstick as a soft summer,” she said with satisfaction. Then she made me go through our talking points again, the same kind of prep that I’d done at my former job. Except there, I’d done it alone, and it was really much easier to plan with someone who could give me a little guidance and a few suggestions, pointers to make sure that my tactics were going to lead me in the right direction instead of toward disaster. Finally, she deemed me ready.

I was totally able to do this without Amber's help; we'd met with potential clients together a ton of times, because she was really making a name for herself in the real estate market in our town so business was booming. I was very clear about how to present the best case to demonstrate why she was the agent to represent this seller. I was totally ready, but I did feel some pressure about doing it alone. I really, really didn't want to mess this up for her, but she insisted that she had to be at the other meeting.

The other meeting was at my house, and Amber hopped into her car and drove off toward my irregular pentagram property as I went in the other direction with a tote bag full of materials in my passenger seat. She had an appointment with a person who might have wanted to rent my house, and she had a feeling that this one was real and not just another voyeur who wanted to see the inside of the weird castle.

"She has friends in the area and wants a home close to them," Amber had explained after taking a call the day before. "For some reason, she's very excited about the shape of your land."

"She likes that?" I'd asked dubiously, and my colleague had shrugged.

"I guess so. Let's hope she also enjoys a lot of drafts due to cheap windows and a mirrored ceiling in the bathroom."

I really hoped that the renter would like all those things. I had about another month where I could keep holding on and making payments, but after that the house would belong to my creditors. Amber kept telling me that it wouldn't be so bad, that lots of houses went into foreclosure and it wouldn't affect me too much in the future. Maybe she was right and maybe I

should have just let it go, but it was harder than it sounded to sit back and let that happen. She wasn't someone who sat back either, so she understood, and I got the feeling that she was also getting anxious about offloading the dumb place. She would never have admitted it, though, because she preferred for me to trust in her real estate genius.

I watched the numbers on mailboxes and then my phone announced that I'd arrived, so I pulled to a stop in front of a house that reminded me of my own—not that the property was star-shaped or that the building had crenellations and merlons, but the atmosphere was the same. I remembered the car dropping me off from the airport when I'd flown in from Los Angeles last summer and how my own home had looked overgrown, tired, and vacant. Sad. It was how this place looked, too, as if no one had made any effort with it for a while, and also that no one cared.

A woman opened the front door and stepped out onto a small, concrete porch. I noted that there was a large crack separating it from the brick siding of the house. “Are you Grier?” she called as I got out of my car.

“Yes, ma'am,” I answered. “Mrs. Jones?”

She nodded once; she was. She looked to be about Amber's age and she was pretty in a faded kind of way and in a dirty kind of way as well. Maybe it had been a while since she'd showered and washed her hair. She was also wearing a very tight shirt and absolutely no bra, which I was aware of because it was cold today.

She looked at my car. “What happened to your windshield?”

No, that didn't look good to clients, which Amber had reminded me of. Repeatedly. "It got hit by a big rock," I said, which was true but then I added, "On the interstate," and that part was not. "Thank you for considering our team for your real estate needs." I had come up with that line on my own; Amber didn't know about the "team" part.

Mrs. Jones frowned and rubbed her hands over her arms.

"Come in," she said, and disappeared back through the door.

I followed her into a dark living room where the ceiling was low enough that Shaw would have hit his head on the fan. "I brought you this, from Amber McCourt," I said, reaching into the tote bag and removing the gift of a scented candle with an "Amber Sells!" sticker on its cellophane wrapping.

"Great." Mrs. Jones didn't bother to examine it, although it was a nice candle. She tossed it onto a couch already cluttered with various objects and what appeared to be trash. I stared at the cushion because I thought I'd seen something move—

"How much do you think I could get for this place?"

"Well, I'll have to take a look around, then Amber and I will compare notes and she'll email you her proposal," I answered, which was the answer we had rehearsed for that question.

Mrs. Jones shrugged and seemed annoyed, but she did lead me on a brief tour. The house was a mess, so bad that it almost looked like she'd done it on purpose. All the kitchen cupboards were open and dishes and pans were stacked haphazardly on every horizontal surface, including on the top of the giant old TV. A layer of clothing covered the floor and it was impossible not to step on shirts, underwear, and other

items like they were a rug. She walked right across it all and after hesitating for a moment, I did, too.

“That’s it,” she said when the examination of the interior was complete, but I mentioned that I also needed to take a look at the back yard, where she had a lot of bare dirt and an empty aboveground pool with a gaping crack in its side. I asked questions from the list that we had gone over multiple times at the real estate office and I typed the answers into my phone as she spoke. I tried to be as thorough as my colleague had been when she’d gone through my castle home for the first time. I also tried to keep my expression neutral so that I didn’t look like Amber when she’d seen the carpeted conversation pit in the garage: as if someone was shoving a sweaty armpit in her face.

“Ok,” I said as I exhausted my prepared questions and took one last picture of the chimney. Like the front porch, it also seemed to be separating from the rest of the building. “Thank you for having me here today and we will—”

“I know what you’re thinking about me,” Mrs. Jones said as she walked toward the front yard. I followed, stopping in the dirt where grass might have once been, but she wearily climbed the two steps to the porch. “I can tell you think this is a shithole.”

Maybe I hadn’t kept my face as neutral as I’d wanted. “I’ve seen a lot of houses,” I answered. “Everybody lives differently.”

“It wasn’t always like this.” She opened the front door and lit a cigarette, and smoking wasn’t going to help the smell inside. There was something rotten in the kitchen, I assumed, or

maybe under the layers of clothing on the floor. “I used to be on top of things.”

“I understand.”

“Yeah, sure.” She exhaled over her shoulder into the living room. “I need to get some money out of this. I need to go somewhere else and start again.”

“I definitely understand that,” I told her. “Um, here’s my contact information.” I stepped forward and she reached down for the little paper rectangle that I offered, one of a set of business cards that Amber had ordered with my name and the word “ASSISTANT” in a bold font beneath it.

“That’s how you spell Grier?” she asked. I nodded and she kept looking hard at it. “Grier Warren? Are you from here?”

“Yes. Well, I’m originally from Memphis.”

Her head snapped up. “Do you know Huck? Huck Warren?”

“Um,” I said, “um...” My mind flew as I considered how to answer. It was entirely possible that my father and this woman had been involved either romantically—sexually—or criminally. I was pretty sure that Amber would not want this listing, but I also didn’t want to mess up the opportunity. This was my first time doing something totally independent from her, and acknowledging my relationship with my father could kill it right now. “Um, did you know Huck?” I asked cautiously back.

“Yeah, we were friends for a long time. From Memphis.”

“Really?” The word dripped with skepticism. I’d never known my father to have friends or even people he’d

infrequently hung out with, and neither had my mother. They'd almost always been alone.

"Yeah, really," Mrs. Jones answered me, frowning. "Are you his kid? I know he had one. That you?"

"I'm his daughter," I admitted. "Are you aware that he died?"

"Yeah. That's why I have to sell. He used to give me money but then it stopped." She sighed. "I thought he might have left me something, like in a will, but I guess he didn't."

"No, he didn't," I said angrily. "Nothing!" What did she think she would get, a chest of gold while his daughter was stuck with a rotting house? Although, her own house was also close to if not actually rotting. I thought that I'd seen something skittering, too, once on the wall and once in the grimy shower.

She sighed again and used her sleeve to wipe away some of the dark makeup caked under her eyes. "Did Huck leave, like, a note? Were there messages for anybody?"

"No." My anger was replaced by grudging sympathy. Had she been waiting to hear since his death, imagining that he had remembered her somehow? "He didn't write to anyone and I don't think he had any money left," I said. "I haven't seen any assets."

"Yeah, the last few years have been lean."

"You mean with his business?" I hazarded, and she snorted.

"Right, his 'business.'"

Shaw had told me not to play around to get information, that I should come right out and ask questions if I wanted to know something. Maybe he was right, but I racked my brain for a

strategy to casually squeeze this woman for knowledge but also keep her as a potential real estate client.

Then she spoke up. “You now he used to manage bookies, right? That was what he was best at.”

“Um, yes,” I said steadily. What bookies? “I knew about the gambling stuff.”

“Yeah, he had a bunch of guys under him and he was making a shit-ton of money. It was great for a while but he skimmed too much off the top. Memphis got too hot for him. He had to get out of there and he wanted me to come, too. He had this idea that he’d be the king of the boondocks or something,” she told me. She looked over her shoulder and then twisted her greasy hair into a knot. “The house is kinda messy. I probably need to straighten up for y’all to sell it.”

“You should definitely do that,” I said briefly. “What was my father doing lately? Once he moved here from Memphis, what was he up to?”

Mrs. Jones hesitated. “You said you’re his daughter. Why don’t you know? Why do you have to ask?”

“I went away—they sent me away, and parents don’t tell their kids stuff, right? He’s dead and I want to understand—and a guy came to my house asking for Huck. He scared me,” I admitted to this stranger.

Her eyes narrowed. “Huck knew a lot of people that you don’t want to play with. Don’t open your door again.”

“No, I won’t, but if you could tell me something about my father—anything about my father,” I said. “He left me with nothing, just debts.”

“He was that bad off?” she asked, and I nodded. “I used to see his wife driving around in a fast little car. You look like her.”

I touched my face with my fingertips. “I do?” She couldn’t have been right about that, because my mother had been beautiful.

“I remember when he met her and she was so young. I told him not to mess around with a teenager, but he couldn’t resist.” She shrugged. “She was always strung out on something when I knew her. Did she clean up after she had you?”

I looked down at my shoes, the ones which Amber hated. My mother never bothered to hide her drug use from me so it wasn’t news, but I still didn’t like to hear that other people were aware of it. “No.”

“Huck wouldn’t talk about her but I could tell that he loved her, in his way,” Mrs. Jones said. “He wouldn’t leave her.” Her features moved from anger to a very unhappy expression, one that gave me insight into how she’d felt about my father. She must have cared about him, somehow. “I know he was doing something with cars. Merchandise.”

“Stolen cars and stolen merchandise,” I hazarded, and she didn’t deny it. It did explain my mother’s many purses, and all her clothes and jewelry. I remembered her closet as overflowing and there were always new things to admire, which I did whenever she went out and I could sneak in to peek around. My father had new things, too, mostly cars that came and went out of our big garage. “And he never got caught?” I asked. As far as I knew and as far as my internet searches had told me, he’d never been to prison. Once I’d

found his birth certificate, I'd gotten his arrest record under his real name and it consisted of only petty crimes, charges that had resulted in some fines and overnights in jail, but nothing serious.

"He was questioned and he got picked up a few times, but he was smart and careful. He was too careful," she said. "He got too cautious as he got older and he didn't want to take risks anymore. But he didn't know how to go straight, either, and the people he used to know were dying or quitting, retiring. He was getting old."

According to that birth certificate, he'd been thirty years older than my mother when they died. "Who was the guy who came to my house?" I asked.

"One of his fences? One of his suppliers? I don't know." Her eyes flicked away, down her street, and she shivered. "Stay away from all of them."

"My father gave you money for...a relationship," I said carefully. "He gave more to other people too, like another woman in Georgia—"

"He did? I knew it! That fucker," she seethed. "He was cheating on me?"

He'd been married, and not to her.

"How much?" she demanded and when I told her the amount, she called him more names and then lit another cigarette off the last one.

A car pulled into her driveway, where the pavement was in even worse shape than mine at the castle. The man behind the wheel didn't get out and Mrs. Jones took a final, deep drag as

she looked at him. She threw the butt onto the dirt lawn and told me, “I need to wrap this up.”

“Ok,” I agreed, but I had more questions. “My father also gave money to a man named Paul Highsmith. It was a lot of money and it wasn’t for a...relationship. Why he do that?”

“I don’t know everything he did. Maybe that Pat guy was working for him.” She waved her hand to the man in the parked car.

“No, Paul wasn’t working for him.”

“I don’t know any Peter and I have another meeting now,” she said.

“Yes, I’ll get going,” I announced. “My colleague, Amber McCourt, will be in touch with you about your listing.”

“Great.” Her eyes had been on the man in the car but she glanced over at me. “I’m sorry about Huck. I really am.”

She did sound sorrier about his death than anyone else had been. Somehow, she had actually cared for him. “I’m sorry for your loss, too,” I said and I watched her get sad again.

As soon as I got into my car, the driver of the other one got out and walked to her stoop. I saw her kiss him and I thought at first that her new boyfriend had low hygiene standards, but then I realized that I might have been watching the beginning of a business transaction.

Once on the road, I told my phone to call Amber but she didn’t answer, and she didn’t respond to the text I sent at the stop light in town. I headed to my castle to see if she was still there, finishing the appointment with the prospective renter. I hadn’t taken that long with Mrs. Jones, but my own cracked

driveway was already empty of cars. I needed to discuss this with someone and my circle of acquaintance was small. It consisted of Amber and Shaw, and I couldn't talk to him about my father.

And then I remembered someone else.

"Your father did what? A cathouse? Ok, you're going to have to start from the beginning," Raelyn said half an hour later as she waved me to sit on her couch. She'd answered her phone and said that I could come over, of course I could! So I had, and now I was spilling my issues to her.

"The beginning is, I guess, that my father and mother met and got together when she was at an age that it was illegal, and maybe that's why he married her. He might have agreed to it so he wouldn't be arrested and she was eighteen by the time they made it official. She had me a few months later."

"Can you imagine having a baby at that age?" she marveled.

"I can hardly deal now, and I'm so old."

"You're only twenty-four," I reminded her. "But no, I can't imagine that she got married and had a baby when she should have been graduating from high school. I always eavesdropped on them fighting, which was really the only way they spoke to each other, and he yelled more than a few things about being baby-trapped and how he'd been given a life sentence and she yelled back that she gotten one, too. I didn't mean to do that to either of them."

"What? Grier, don't be crazy! No matter how you came about, I'm sure they were both thrilled to have you as their little girl."

Raelyn, with two parents who loved her and with loving her own child so much, was never going to understand that part. “Anyway, it wasn’t a good beginning and it continued the same way. It wasn’t how you got married to Xavier, after loving him and being together forever—”

“We broke up for a while,” she informed me.

“What?”

“When we graduated from high school, I went to college but he stayed here to work for his dad. We tried long-distance, but it wasn’t fun. I was at a new place partying and meeting new people and he was still here, and we both got resentful of each other. So we broke up. We say it was mutual, but I know that he thinks he instigated it. I was the instigator,” she confided.

“I thought that the grass was greener on the other side, and I dated a lot of different guys. But then when I graduated and came home, we saw each other again at a party. I had never stopped loving him and he said, ‘Raelyn, we’re meant to be.’ He was right.” She moved the baby to her other breast.

“Sorry for the interruption. Tell me more about your parents.”

“No, I don’t think I need to,” I answered. It just didn’t seem right to trot out their sordid story in front of this sweet little boy and his mother, who obviously believed in true love, lasting marriage, and happily ever after.

“Are you sure? You sounded upset when you called.” She lifted Jack onto her shoulder and patted his tiny back.

“No, I’m good now.”

“Do you want to stay for dinner? It’s takeout again and Xavier’s friend is coming over.” Her face lit with excitement.

“You know what? He’s single! I wasn’t planning a set-up for tonight, but this is perfect. He’s a really nice guy, solid family, good job. No annoying habits that I know of and no crazy exes.”

“Why is he still single, then?”

“I guess...” Raelyn twisted up her mouth. “Xavier says that he’s enjoying his freedom, but I just think that he hasn’t met the right woman yet. Maybe you’re the right woman, though.” She was so excited about it, I was almost smiling back at her even though I had no desire to meet their playboy friend. “Stay!” she urged. “It might work out between you. Unless—you don’t have anything going on with Shaw Highsmith, do you?”

“No, nothing,” I answered quickly.

“Yeah, I figured when I sent him that picture I took of you and Jack. I thought, if Shaw likes her, he’ll say something about how pretty she looks, but he only talked about the baby. Sorry.”

“No, don’t be sorry,” I said, very fast again. “I’m just happy that we’re friends. I’m so glad of that. We text, and we went to a movie, and we’ve been to dinner. I made dinner at the casita for him and it turned out better than I would have expected. It’s so fun to be around him and I’m just glad that he tolerates me.”

“He tolerates you? That’s it?”

I thought for a moment. “It may be more than tolerance at this point, but it’s definitely not a boyfriend-girlfriend thing. Not

at all. Can you imagine?” I laughed, and Jackie jumped at the sharp, angry noise. “Sorry,” I said, and kissed his foot.

“I always thought you...” She stopped but looked at me. “In high school, I figured you had feelings. Definitely more than tolerance on your side.”

“Maybe I did feel that way back then, but it was a long time ago and I was very young, without much experience like I have now. I’m not a teenager in love anymore.”

“No, I guess not.” She sounded disappointed.

“You know, I don’t think I’m going to stay for dinner,” I said.

“Oh, are you sure? No pressure to get fixed up,” she told me.

“Thank you, but I should get going and do some work at home.” I had to tell Amber about the potential client, Mrs. Jones, and I wanted to ask her what had happened with my house, because she hadn’t texted me back yet. I didn’t have my hopes up but I was still curious. I also needed to think about Huck Warren’s “business,” because it was one thing to assume that your father had been up to no good, but it was another to hear straight out that he was a criminal and had deserved jail time. I figured I would need to work through that myself rather than sharing it with anyone, and that I would need to come to grips with the fact that my father had another mistress, apparently, and right in this town. She’d loved him, I thought, and she missed him, and it seemed like he might have ruined her life.

That was where my thoughts were centered as I drove to the casita. In Los Angeles, if there was any space open on the road, you pressed hard on the accelerator to fill it. No one had

ever seemed to care much about the speed we were all going as long as it was as fast as possible. I still wasn't paying great attention to the speedometer while I drove even after the months away from the big freeways there, and I also wasn't very aware of the posted limit on this road. At first, I didn't see the flashing lights behind me, either. The officer wasn't pleased at all about how long it took me to stop, and there were many other things that she also wasn't pleased about. It ended with me making a call and asking for a ride from the person I was sure would show up.

The first words that Shaw said when he saw me were, "Jesus, Grier!"

"Thanks for coming."

"I told you that I would get that windshield fixed," he continued. "Why didn't you let me pay for it?"

"It wasn't that bad. I could still see just fine." I could have, if I leaned a certain way, stretched my neck, and didn't move from that position.

"It wasn't that bad? The police had your damn car towed away because it wasn't safe for you to drive!"

"There's no specific section in the Tennessee codes relating to cracks in windshields..." I trailed off. "Yes, it was pretty bad." My stomach had twisted in a knot when I'd seen the blue lights in my mirrors and it hadn't yet untwisted. "I'll get it fixed, now."

"Too little, too late. Let's go," he said, and pointed to his truck.

I got in and I did appreciate the clear view through his own windshield. “I was also speeding a little,” I mentioned.

“Twenty-five over,” he said, looking at the citation I’d received under the dome light.

“My mind was elsewhere and I wasn’t paying total attention,” I explained.

“Or any attention. What were you thinking so hard about?” He flicked off the light and pulled onto the road, the wheels jerking angrily.

I hesitated but ended up telling him about going to the potential client’s house. “I was upset about what I heard, I guess,” I concluded.

“Yeah, it’s upsetting that your father was a crook and it’s upsetting that he had a girlfriend right down the road, but what did you expect from him? You knew he was full of shit and that he was cheating with the woman in Georgia. How is this different?”

“Because that woman was mean and she obviously didn’t care about him, but Mrs. Jones did,” I said. “And she’s living in squalor. I know Amber is going to say no to taking the listing, but I want to help sell that place and make her life better. I want to help her in a lot of ways. I already emailed her the results of a randomized study that determined the best way to quit smoking.”

“I’m sure she’ll give that a thorough read. You don’t need to take care of her,” Shaw told me. “Why don’t you focus on things that you should be taking care of for yourself, like your

damn windshield? How much are you going to have to pay on your car now?"

"You have to pay when they take it?"

"No, I'll pay because it was my damn fault," he answered.

"No, you won't," I shot right back.

"Why do you keep arguing with me? Jesus, Grier!"

"Ok, ok! I'll figure it out. You can stop and leave me there, at the corner," I directed him.

"We're nowhere near your casita."

"Mrs. Jones told me she used to see my mother driving in a fancy car, and then my mother drove that car into a tree and wrecked it, and all they left was a wreck behind them, too." I rubbed my eyes. "Could you imagine Raelyn acting like that? Or Amber? Hurting so many people like Mrs. Jones but I bet that's not even her real name, and you and your dad, and then just going off and dying and not taking responsibility for any of it? They're gone and everyone else has to keep on dealing with the problems they made and I hate them. I hate them both."

He didn't answer, but the truck slowed down and pulled to the side of the road, off onto the shoulder. Well, I'd said that I wanted to get out, so I unclicked my seatbelt and grabbed the door handle.

"No," Shaw told me and he reached across the seat and took big handfuls of my yellow coat. He used it to tug me until I was right next to him, and then he put his arm around me.

"You're sitting over there crying about your parents, and I

don't want you to. They don't deserve your pity. They don't even deserve your hate."

I rested my head against him, overwhelmed by emotion and at how close we were.

"They're not worth your tears," he said quietly.

"I know." I sniffled.

"I used to wish you didn't care about them so damn much," he told me. "I could see how they hurt your feelings all the damn time and they're still doing it even when they're dead."

"They hurt you more. My mother could have killed you and she ruined your whole leg. Your whole life! You were right, she deserved to be punished for it and all she got was a broken arm and I think our insurance rates went up. I wish y'all had sued them back then and won the castle and the nice cars and everything else."

"My grandpa wouldn't have sued. He didn't trust in the courts after he got in so much trouble for pulling the pin in a grenade to celebrate the fourth of July."

I sputtered a laugh but that made me cry harder. "It's not fair."

"No, it's not. But it's ok, now. I'm better and you've done so well. You did great in school and you had a good job, lots of friends. Now it's hard because of the mess your parents left, but you'll sell that house and if you don't, that's ok, too. Let the damn bank have it and they can figure out what to do with an extra castle. We'll get your car back and fix the windshield so you can see the road. You can drive yourself on out of here to your next job in Los Angeles and get your life back."

"I can get it back," I echoed.

“Sure, you can do it. You’re the most stubborn person I ever met besides my grandpa. Remember when the two of you were arguing about whether the Earth was a sphere? I had to put my hand over your mouth so you would quit. Otherwise, you probably would have followed his funeral procession into the cemetery to keep proving your point.”

“He was so wrong about that.”

Shaw laughed softly. “He was, but you’ve been wrong about a few things in your life, too. Don’t be like him, so afraid to admit to it. Ok? Like how you didn’t want to admit that you couldn’t pay to fix your windshield and you pretended you were just too busy.”

That hadn’t been the reason that I’d left it cracked, but I didn’t want to argue with him right now or do anything to give him the idea that he should pull away from me. I wanted us to stay like this for as long as possible, or maybe forever.

“You also pretended like you’re not shy, so you acted pushy and braggy at Raelyn’s house to hide it,” he said. “People are going to like you if even if they’re not aware that you were the valedictorian and that you were an executive vice president.”

“I don’t do that anymore when I’m over there now. I just talk normally and I don’t lead with information.”

“Good,” he answered.

“But in high school and in college, and even in my job, that didn’t work.”

“No, leading with information is a bad tactic.”

“I mean when I just acted like myself, like I do with you, they didn’t like me,” I explained. “No one did.”

“In ninth grade, you didn’t give other people much of a chance.”

I forgot that I wasn’t going to argue with him. “That’s not true! The problem was that they didn’t give *me* a chance. They despised me and they made sure I knew it. They showed me every day.”

And just like that, he pulled away so that he could look down into my face. “How’d they show you?”

“In a lot of ways,” I told him. I already missed his arm on my shoulders and the heat from his side pressed against mine.

“They showed me by ignoring me when I said hello or tried to talk to them, which was the easiest to deal with. Other things were worse, like in the cafeteria. I would walk really slowly with my lunch tray because I was so afraid that I would get wobbly and drop it. People would shove me in between my shoulder blades to make me let go of the tray and fall anyway. It was always such a mess and I was always so embarrassed to be the dumb spectacle.”

“What? Who did that?” Shaw demanded. “I never saw it.”

“It was only on Tuesdays and Thursdays, when you had lunch during sixth period and I had it fifth. PE was the worst, though. We had to change and I would try to go in a bathroom stall but the other girls would run ahead and stand in front of the doors and tell me they were occupied. I’d have to be out with everyone in the locker room and they said...” I couldn’t repeat what they’d said because even now, it stung too much. “I tried not to break down because they were worse when I did. They wanted me to cry.”

“You never told me any of that.” And he looked furious about it, ten years later and with me safe in the cab of his truck. “I would have made them shut the fuck up.”

“You weren’t allowed in the girls’ locker room,” I reminded him.

“I wouldn’t have cared where I was allowed. What else? What else did people do?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. Didn’t they tease you? I know they did,” I said. “I heard guys say stuff about how you were old enough to sign up for the draft as a freshman.”

“That was pretty funny,” he answered, and I did remember him laughing off a lot of those kinds of remarks.

“Didn’t it bother you, though? Didn’t it hurt your feelings?”

“I never gave one, single shit about what anybody in that school thought, said, wore, ate, or anything else,” he told me. “I didn’t care about anybody there.”

“Not anybody?”

“Well, one person.” Shaw tilted his head and his eyes met mine. “I cared a lot about you.”

And Raelyn had been right; I’d straight up loved him. I’d loved him with every little bit of me, from the top of my tornado hair to the tips of the orthopedic shoes that were supposed help me stay upright.

“You don’t have to pretend stuff, Grier. If somebody’s being an ass to you, you should tell me. Don’t act like nothing’s wrong. Don’t pretend to be somebody you’re not, either. Raelyn wasn’t impressed that you’d doubled up on math

classes in your senior year of high school, but she was impressed by how sweet you were with her son. No one's going to laugh at you and make you cry, and if they try, they'll have me to deal with. But I know that they'll love you," he said, and reached to put the car back into gear. I slid across the seat and after I'd re-buckled, we started down the street.

Would they love me, if I was just myself? Was that all it took? It was a nice thought, anyway, but to make someone love you, really love you, you had to be an amazing, spectacular person. You had to be kind to everyone and make them feel better about themselves and their problems. You had to be funny and also smart, but not a braggart about it. You had to work hard to improve your life but have the time to show up when people needed you.

In other words? You had to be Shaw. Ten years ago, I'd loved him completely. Ten years later, I still did.

CHAPTER 12

This was clearly not what Amber had been expecting.

“Oh,” she said, but there was a lot packed into that short syllable. I heard things like, “Why are you here so early, Shaw Highsmith?” and “I would hope you just arrived, because if you spent the night, that’s totally unacceptable.” I also heard, “Grier, you and I will be speaking about this later” and “I’m going to tell you exactly how far you’ve strayed, young lady, and I’ll tell you enough times that you’ll still be able to recite my words three months from now.”

“Good morning, Amber,” he greeted her, and then pointed to the frying pan with his spatula. “I can make you an egg. How do you like them?”

“Thank you, I’ve had my breakfast.” She gave me a look like I’d shoved an onion up her nostril and stalked inside to stand in the living room of the casita, centered between me at the doorway and Shaw in the kitchenette. “I came down to discuss our meetings yesterday. I wasn’t aware that you had company.” Her head flipped to Shaw and then back to me. “Company,” she repeated.

I knew exactly what that word meant, too: I had a man, an individual I’d claimed was not my boyfriend, in my house at seven AM, and even if he was my boyfriend, where were my morals?

“I stayed the night,” he explained, and flipped an egg as Amber’s blue eyes became the size of frisbees. Shaw turned

and saw her expression so he added, “I slept over but on the couch.”

That was not totally true. He had fallen asleep on the couch, but it was small and I’d shaken him awake enough to tell him that it was time for bed. He’d always had a hard time rousing himself out of sleep, and last night was no different; he’d followed me, mumbling and stumbling, and settled down in my room, and I had taken the couch myself. It made more sense because the casita wasn’t large enough for big furniture, and being as tall as he was, he wouldn’t have fit—

“I see,” Amber said, and now she turned to look directly at me. I had a feeling that she did see exactly what was in my mind and in my heart, so I went to the kitchenette to examine the pan of eggs and I suggested that they might be burning.

They were not. “Who’s the expert?” Shaw reminded me. “I’m the one with the chickens.”

It turned out that my colleague had been considering starting her own flock, and she gradually thawed as she asked him questions about predators and poop. I just couldn’t see Amber dealing with either of those things—well, I could imagine her staring down a coyote and taking out a raccoon, but poop? Never. However, the conversation was distracting (and disgusting) enough that we made it through breakfast without any confrontation (I made it by closing my ears to the poop talk).

We were doing dishes when she remembered that she was mad at me over Shaw’s presence this morning. “I wasn’t aware that the lease here allows for guests,” she commented.

“Amber, you know darn well that I don’t have a lease,” I answered. “I understand that you don’t want me to have men over. I won’t do that again.”

“Good,” she sniffed. She had a face like some of that chicken poop was in this casita, like things weren’t good at all. Shaw took that opportunity to say that he had a work call and had to go.

“Do you need a ride?” he asked me.

I didn’t want to discuss my car problems in front of Amber so I was shaking my head before he finished the question. “No, no, no, that’s all fine,” I told him, walking to the door to show him out. He gave me a look but said goodbye to both of us and then he was gone.

She turned on me. “What do you think you’re doing, Grier? This is not the way to catch him!”

“I’m not trying to catch him!”

“My word, of course you are!” she snapped and I also became enraged, mostly because any effort to “catch” him would have been futile and I knew it, and it broke my heart.

“I won’t be staying here for one night longer if you’re going to police me like this!” I told her. “I’ll go right back to my own house and live there.”

“In fact, you won’t, because it’s rented!” she announced exultantly, and I had to sit down on the couch. It had been much better for sleeping than the one in the castle, but I’d still woken up several times during the night. It had only been to check on Shaw, though.

“Did you hear me? I said, your house is rented!” Amber repeated, her voice louder, and my thoughts snapped away from the sweet way he had slept, with his fist under his cheek.

“How did that happen?” I asked her.

Amber had several things to tell me first. One was that she hadn’t been able to contact me because she’d been at the hospital all night.

“What? Why?” I gasped, but it turned out that her niece, Cassidy, had been giving birth and that she and the new baby were just fine. She segued into explaining that Cassidy’s husband was a country music star and that he and her niece were songwriters—

“I’m so glad about that. Really,” I assured her. “But what was the news that you couldn’t tell me because you were at the hospital? The news about my house?”

“Oh.” She got a little of the stinky face but relented. “Well, it’s a woman from Chattanooga, Missionary Ridge. I told you that she has good friends out here, close enough that she referred to them as her family, and she decided to rent a place near them.”

“Missionary Ridge isn’t that far away.”

“Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth,” Amber advised me.

“She doesn’t like to drive very much and she said that she’s signing the lease today. She didn’t quibble about the slant in the turret or the cracks in the pool, and I hate to tell you, but the sinkhole looks to be opening again.”

I covered my eyes. “Oh, no.”

“Oh, yes. But all this woman wanted to talk about was how the property is in the shape of a star.”

“A pentagram,” I agreed.

“It’s an ancient symbol, which any Christian knows. But she was talking about Greeks and something about a mathematical ratio, and medieval knights, and I don’t know what else. Well, something about it being the symbol of her church, which she attends in Knoxville every once in a while, but as I said she doesn’t care to drive. I told her that we have plenty of churches here and I invited her to come with me next Sunday. She’s a lovely person.” Amber looked very pleased, probably at the idea of a convert since I had declined that offer. “She owns a bookstore in Chattanooga near the university.”

I stared at her, thinking about the interview I’d had that past summer on the day I’d run into Shaw. “She owns a bookstore near the university? Is it also close to a big hospital?”

“I don’t know the area very well, but maybe. Selah invited me to visit and have tea with her there. But right now, we need to go to the office to send her the documents and get this settled. We’ll put your money right in the bank!” She glanced out the window. “By the way, I didn’t see your car parked outside.”

“Her name is Selah?” I persisted. “Is her shop called ‘Selah’s Magical Books?’ Because I went there and she gave me a rock. It’s a pink crystal and I think I still have it in my bag.”

“That’s a funny coincidence. Where is your car?” Her eyes narrowed. “Are you avoiding the question?”

Well, I had been. “I don’t have it right now,” I said.

“I’m aware of that. I spoke to the sheriff this morning.”

“You what?” My jaw dropped. “You already heard? Is that why you came over here?”

“That, and also because I saw an unfamiliar truck parked in front. The sheriff called me since he knows that you’re my employee,” she told me, drawing out the word. “He and my first husband were deputies together, many years ago now. We’ll go down later, pay the fines, and pick it up. You have an appointment with one of my nephews this afternoon to get the windshield replaced.”

“Amber!” I exclaimed, but then didn’t know what to say. She was butting into my business and solving all my problems, and that made me both angry and grateful. Those two feelings weren’t very compatible with each other.

“Let’s go,” she ordered, so I grabbed both the coat that she hated and the purse that she hated, and we left together in her car.

“I don’t understand how you let the glass get to that point,” she told me. “I know you don’t have two thin dimes to rub together, but I told you several times—”

“More like a hundred,” I muttered.

“—that I would have loaned you enough to cover the cost. A few weeks ago, I spoke to Shaw and he said that he’d offered to replace it. He told me that he’d hit your windshield with a rock by mistake so he was responsible for the damage. He said he set up an appointment but you informed him that you’d get the police if anyone touched your car and I have to say, that’s not a call that they would have responded to very happily.”

“First of all, I can’t believe that you talked to him about that. It’s not any of your business, Amber!” I exploded. “And second of all, I could have paid for the replacement but I didn’t want to.”

“Why?”

I was quiet, silent, but she kept poking at me with more questions. “I don’t want to tell you,” I finally answered.

“Why?”

“Because it’s a dumb reason! It’s dumb, but it’s how I feel. It was like...a reminder. It was a reminder of what we did to him and his family. Every time I got into the car, I looked at the cracks and I remembered when my mother ran him down. I could hear the sound of him hitting the glass and then moaning, I could feel the rain on my face and how my throat was raw from screaming. I have dreams about it too, where it’s happening again, but this was something real.”

“Oh.”

I looked over at her and she was nodding. “Do you understand what I’m saying?” I asked.

“I do,” she answered. “I’ve done something similar.”

I kept staring. “Really?”

“I know that you think I’m perfect, but I’m not,” she told me.

“Please,” I sighed.

“I’m really not,” she emphasized, in case I hadn’t believed her. “At one point in my life, I had a problem with pills and drinking. An addiction,” she said. “I treated my girls very poorly. I neglected them and a lot of my job as mother fell to

my oldest, Aubree. I've been trying to make it up to them ever since."

"Really?" I asked. I had known, of course, that she wasn't perfect, but I hadn't expected this. "You cleaned up for them?"

"For them and for myself. I couldn't have continued to live as I was, and it was very hard but it was very, very worth it. And in my purse right now, folded up in my wallet, I have a little note that my middle daughter Amory wrote to me. She asked if I would please come to watch her in her class play, if I would please stay awake for it. I missed it because I was passed out in my bed. That was just one of the many ways I hurt them."

I handed her a paper napkin from her large, neat stack. "Did they forgive you?"

"They have, but I'll always be angry at myself. I'll always be ashamed. So I understand about the windshield, but you're getting it fixed today."

I nodded and took a napkin for myself. "Shaw blamed me for the accident."

"Your mother hit him with her car! I remember hearing about it—it was all anybody talked about for weeks. Didn't he get in front of it? Why was that your fault?"

"She came to find me that night at his house. It was the first time she'd ever done anything like that. Honestly, I can't think of one other occasion when my mother picked me up from school, or brought me anywhere. She hated to be around me."

“That can’t be true.”

It was. “Shaw had visited my house, just once. She saw him there and, well, first she flirted with him and then she flashed him—”

“Oh, my word!”

“Yes. I told her to leave him alone, that he was sixteen and she admitted to being twenty-five, so it was totally inappropriate. She kept talking to me about him over the next few days, and I remember that I was so happy about that. She seemed interested in me, and she’d never cared before,” I admitted. It had been a heady feeling at first. “But she repeated that he was such a handsome man, so handsome, and I finally understood.”

“What?”

“My mother didn’t think that there was any reason that he would have wanted to be around a person like me, so he had to have been up to something. She admitted it when I asked her. She said, ‘He’s trying to get something from us. He’s after our money.’ And then she wanted to know if I was on the pill.”

“How old were you, Grier?” Amber asked. She sounded horrified and angry, too.

“I was thirteen, but I’m not sure if my mother remembered my age. She met my dad when she was a teenager herself, so maybe it made sense to her that I would...start young. And it made sense that she thought that Shaw was trying to use me for something. Just look at me,” I stated, and the words sounded bitter. They were.

“What are you saying?”

“Amber, come on,” I told her. “I’ve done the best I can without major surgeries, and I try to tell myself that I look great and all, but I have seen myself in the mirror. You have eyes, too, and they’re very critical ones. You don’t miss anything, so you can’t have missed me.”

“I know you worry about your hair, but I had no idea that you worry about your looks,” she said.

“My hair, my looks, my body, my balance, my personality, my everything. I’m not trying to get you to say nice things or lie to me, I’m just trying to explain what my mother thought about me and Shaw. She put a huge pile of condoms on my bed and she asked me if I’d ever been to the doctor because I should get the birth control shot or an IUD. Or something permanent. She thought he would try to get me pregnant, I guess, and I tried to explain to her that we weren’t having sex, that I was too young, that we were just friends, and that he wouldn’t have touched me like that even if he was blind drunk and had also been knocked on the head. She didn’t believe me.”

“Permanent, like your tubes tied? I don’t...” For the first time since I’d met her, Amber appeared to be at a loss for words.

“She kept saying that I had to stay away from him. He was my only friend! He was the only person I had,” I said. We had pulled to a stop at the real estate office but neither of us moved to get out. “She went to his house on the night of the accident in a full-on fury. She pounded on the door and Shaw’s grandpa wouldn’t have threatened a lady with a gun, but he did tell her to get the hell out. But I...it was the first time she’d cared about me. Now, I can see that she was only

interested in protecting her own interests, that she didn't want to share what we had with Shaw or with a potential baby. But at the time, I misconstrued her feelings as interest in me. So I got in her car. I remember being scared but really happy.”

“Oh, baby, bless your heart.” She sighed.

“And Shaw thought she was drunk. I'd told him about how she had DUIs and she took stuff, too, drugs, so he was telling me not to get in the car, and when I did, he ran after her as she backed down the driveway. Then she turned around and gravel flew everywhere, and he had caught up. He yelled, ‘Grier, get out!’ and she revved the engine. He moved away but when she hit the gas, the car spun all over, out of control. I'm sure it did look like she was drunk. He ran again, towards us. Maybe she could have swerved but I don't know. I just saw his face in the windshield.”

“The story that came out later was very different,” Amber said. “It must have been what your parents put around. I heard that Shaw had been drinking, and after what people knew about his father—”

“No!” I said. That was what people thought? That was what my parents had said, so that was what everyone here believed about Shaw, that he had been a drunk sixteen-year-old who had run in front of a car? “That's not right! Does he know that? Does he know that people think that?”

“I'm not sure,” she said. “I'm sorry all that happened to you, and to him. Y'all were both much too young to deal with it and your parents and Shaw's grandfather certainly weren't the people who should have been in charge, either.”

“Do you think...” I stopped. “Do you think that maybe she was actually worried about me? That she might have given me the condoms and shown up that night because she cared, not just about losing money or looking bad at church for having a pregnant daughter, but because she didn’t hate me?”

“I don’t know,” Amber said. If anything, she was honest, but I wished at that moment that she would have lied. “I hope that was true, but from what I’m hearing, I don’t think she should have been a mother in the first place.”

“No, she shouldn’t have been.” I took another napkin from her console. “It would have been better for Shaw if he’d never gotten involved with me and my parents.”

“Does he feel that way? Does he still blame you?”

“He says that he doesn’t. He says he understands that I was young, too young to stand up to my mother, and that was why I got into the car with her. I never explained the whole thing and how I was so pathetic.” As far as he knew, I had been happy about our ten-year separation, too. “I blame myself, though. I’m to blame for all of it,” I said.

“My word, Grier. I don’t think you’ll believe me, but no, none of that situation was your fault. You should listen to me about that and about everything else I say, but as my daughters continue to inform me, I have to let you girls make your own mistakes.”

I couldn’t talk about it anymore or I was going to spill out the rest of the story. “Are we going to get that lease signed?”

She also rallied. “Yes, we are, and I want to hear about your meeting yesterday, too.”

Amber did not understand at all why I wanted to associate myself with Mrs. Jones and why we would ever want to take on the sale of her disgusting house. But I fought for it and in the end, she told me fine, I would be in charge, then. I had to prepare the proposal and agreements (under her supervision, of course) and I would be the one to direct the clean-up/restoration effort at the house. She did, however, give me a list of people who could help with that, and most of them had the last name “McCourt.”

We got my car, too, and we got the windshield fixed right in the parking lot of the sheriff’s department before I could drive it away. Amber spent a long time talking to the employees she knew there and introducing me, telling them that I would stay out of trouble from here on out and that she would be watching me more carefully. It was something that should have made me angry, because I didn’t need my colleague more involved in my life, of course. And it did make me annoyed but it also, strangely, made me feel happy.

I worked a lot on the prospective listing and by the end of the day, we had inked the exclusive right to sell the home of Florentine Jones. I had also prepared a list of necessary fixes; cleaning was number one, and I’d suggested I could be a part of that effort. I thought it was a good way to find out more about my father, but I also really wanted to help her. I felt like he’d screwed her, in many ways.

That was what I tried to explain to Shaw when we met after work at a bar just a few doors down from the real estate office, a place that had been there for a long time but that had apparently reinvigorated in the last few years. He’d thought

we could have a beer and celebrate my new windshield and I was, as always, happy to see him anywhere.

“It doesn’t seem like Mrs. Jones has anyone to step up for her,” I told him, but he still seemed skeptical.

“You’ve met the woman one time. How do you know that?”

“Why would she live like she does if she has tons of supportive friends?” I retorted. “No one would walk around on top of clothes all day unless she had serious problems.” Then I had to explain about the severity of the mess, and he started talking about bugs. That made me itchy enough to drop the subject of cleaning, and also to put a reminder in my phone to borrow Amber’s coveralls. I’d seen her put them on before she’d ventured into the shed on my pentagram property, which had been a smart idea because the place had a mosquito problem due to the holes in the roof and subsequent puddles.

“Amber wants me to handle this on my own,” I mentioned.

“She’ll be the person nominally in charge, since she has the real estate license, but I’ll do the work and make it happen.”

“Sounds like you’re moving toward executive vice president level with her.” He raised his bottle, but I didn’t tap mine against it.

“You know, at my old job, I didn’t actually have that much responsibility. I had a nice title but I was never in charge of very much. Well, I was in charge of my boss’s coffee.”

“The guy who ran away to produce infomercials?”

“I think he’s just appearing in them, but no, not him. My direct boss was another executive vice president.”

Shaw sipped and then asked, “So everybody was an executive VP?”

“Pretty much. They didn’t give the title to the security guard, and the CEO was the CEO. But pretty much everyone else. It sounded good, but it wasn’t. I mostly did admin stuff and then also, unfortunately, we all did mean, terrible things to people. Tenancy laws there are very strict but real estate is worth a lot, so it made sense to try to get around them.”

“That made sense to you?”

“It made sense to the guy who owned the company,” I clarified. “We were always trying to screw people over and I tried to be like, ‘Well, this is the real world and somebody has to do it. If I don’t, another employee of this company will instead and I’ll get fired.’” I sighed. “I still felt awful.”

“Would you have kept working there if the CEO hadn’t fled the country?”

“Probably, at least for a while. I couldn’t just quit and not have an income, but I was actively looking for another job in Los Angeles. It’s funny, but I never seem to get much response to my résumé.”

“Let me make a guess about how long that is,” he said, and then pondered for a moment. “Four pages. You have a four-page résumé at age twenty-three.”

“It’s actually five, and I know that’s long!” I said. “I worked really hard to accomplish all the things on those pages.”

“Grier...”

“Do you like your job? Would you change it, if you could?” I asked. I didn’t want to discuss my résumé anymore, but I had

already decided that maybe it could be shortened. “You used to talk about doing other things.”

“You mean how I wanted to be a doctor? Yeah, I gave up on that idea before I was done with high school.”

Right, because I’d ruined his life.

“I had dreamed of going to med school and then doing some kind of groundbreaking research that would have fixed my dad,” Shaw admitted. “I thought that I’d somehow be able to help him, so he could get back to where he was before his overdose and stroke. But when I was in the hospital myself, I gave it up.”

I didn’t want to cry in a bar, but I got a cocktail napkin ready because if he kept talking about me destroying his dreams—

“It turns out that I get sick at the sight of blood,” he said. “I really can’t deal with it. I also don’t like the smell that everything medical gets, the antiseptic or whatever it is.”

“Well...I could see how those things might have be an impediment to becoming a doctor.”

“It gets worse. I can’t stand to see people in pain and suffering, either.” He smiled. “The guy who I shared a room with was having back surgery, and my back started hurting, too. The doctors thought I had some kind of problem that they’d missed.”

“What was wrong with you?”

“I was officially diagnosed with empathy. When my roommate felt better and went home, my back pain went away. I would have sucked as a doctor, and it turns out that I’m pretty good at what I do and I like it, too. Anyway, I’d

have bombed out before I ever got to medical school. I wouldn't have had you there to pull me through bachelor-level science classes.”

“You could have done it. I know you could have.”

“You've always had a lot of faith in me,” Shaw said.

“I just know how smart and capable you are. I think you could do anything,” I told him.

“Thank you. I remember you had doubts about my cooking, though,” he pointed out, but then he grinned again. “You know, I think the same about you. If you set your mind to selling that woman's house, then you can do it.”

“I don't know,” I admitted. “I wasn't successful in my last job. Amber is the person who managed to rent my castle house, too, not me. There are a lot of things to repair at Mrs. Jones' place and Amber gave me a list of her relatives, but I'd like to show her that I can do it on my own.”

“How about on your own, but with me? I could come over there with you and look around. I did a lot to my own house and maybe there are projects that you and I could wrap up without calling in the McCourt professionals.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really. I'd like to.”

I had to hold myself back very hard, because all I wanted to do was hug him. Ever since we'd sat so close in his truck and he'd put his arm around me, I'd wanted to be close to him again. That urge combined with overwhelming gratitude? It was almost impossible to prevent my arms from circling

around his shoulders so that I could press my face against his neck, and I knew exactly how he would smell, so delicious...

“What do you think?” Shaw was asking me.

“I think that would be amazing. Yes, please,” I answered, and we settled on a plan that didn’t conflict with my previous engagement at Raelyn’s house or Amber’s grandson’s basketball game, which I had also promised to attend. The calendar on my phone had a lot more things on it now, when before I’d only used it to schedule my different exercise classes and hair treatments. It was fun to look at the entries, and I sometimes did that before I went to bed so I would go to sleep happy.

“Shaw?”

We both turned when someone spoke his name. “Hey, Stacia,” he greeted the woman who stood next to his bar stool, and he sounded pleasantly surprised by her presence.

“Hey!” she answered, and gave him the hug that I’d prevented myself from bestowing. “You look great!”

“Do I? Thanks. It must be because of the new comb I got,” he told her, and they both smiled about that remark. “Stacia made fun of my hair things,” he informed me, which let me know that she’d been in his bathroom and was probably using those hair things, which also let me know that she’d stayed the night. Incandescent wrath seemed to have temporarily incinerated my vocabulary, so I only nodded in response.

“You remember Grier,” he said to her, and she finally looked in my direction.

“Oh, right. You won some kind of prize for economics. And you averaged above a four-point in high school and in college, and you got your MBA in two years even while working full-time.”

So she did remember me. Had I said all that to her?

“Good to see you,” I responded weakly. “I like your shirt.”

She frowned and answered, “I’m wearing a dress.” Then she smiled as she turned back to Shaw. “What have you been up to?” she asked him, leaning closer. I didn’t remember her breasts being so large and perfect. Had she really been this pretty before? Her hair was naturally straight, which I had already admired, and it had not one hint of frizz or breakage. She’d styled it in big, shiny curls that hung down over her shoulders, directing all eyes onto her chest.

“I’m going to run to the ladies’...” I started to say, but let the words die because neither of them would care where I went. She was showing something to him on her phone and as I slid off my stool, she was also saying that he should come sit at her table. I didn’t hear my name included in the invitation.

I went into a stall, locked the door, and stared at the initials and curse words carved into the chipped paint on the back of it. What was my move here? What was the best tactic? I mentally flipped through what I had seen in my former career as an executive vice president of nothing, but I couldn’t come up with anything that would have helped me to suddenly look better and be cooler and more like that woman out there with Shaw. I briefly thought of texting Raelyn or even Amber for advice, but I wasn’t going to bother either of them with my petty concerns about Stacia’s gorgeous breasts. And her butt

and legs looked great in that dress, too—which by the way, was short enough to have been called a top.

I couldn't stay in this stall forever, or even for another moment, because I thought that the woman in the next one over was having serious stomach problems. I washed my hands, checked my not-totally straight hair, and put on some of the lipstick that Amber had chosen. It was a great color, I had to give her that.

Shaw was still sitting at the bar when I came out, and I looked around for his former companion.

“I think she and her friends went to a different place,” he told me, although I hadn't been planning to ask.

“Who? Oh, Stacia?”

“Yeah, the woman you ran away from. Why'd you do that?”

“I didn't!” I plopped back onto the stool. My beer bottle was fairly warm to the touch but I swallowed the rest of its contents in a single gulp.

“I saw you get upset when I made that remark about my comb.”

“Why would I have gotten upset about that?” I asked. “Of course, I didn't, because I don't care about your hair—I don't really think you need to style it much since it's so short and neat anyway, and as far as tools—if you wanted to upgrade I wouldn't have suggested a comb but whatever, sure. I bet she uses a boar-bristle brush and if there's any combing, it's only wide-tooth and when her hair is wet, and she's very pretty. And that was a very short dress, no judgement—if her legs get

cold, that's her own problem, and I'm not jealous of her breasts."

"Ok, sounds good. Remember I told you that I broke up with her, that I was the one who ended it between us."

"Because of how she treated her brother," I recalled. "You didn't think she was nice to him."

"Yeah, and also some other things. We weren't very compatible, not in the long-term." He took out his wallet, signaling that our time at the bar was over. Well, it made sense that he wouldn't have wanted to hang out with me anymore, not when I was hiding in the bathroom and then making strange remarks about another woman's anatomy.

But his words had caught my attention for another reason.

"Are you interested in a long-term girlfriend?" I asked. He'd said before that he might have wanted to have a family and children, but he hadn't mentioned a timeline. "Is that what you're looking for right now?"

"You know what I want right now?" he asked me. "A chicken sandwich. Are you interested in dinner?"

I was, but also in the answers to my questions, so I continued to ask them directly instead of using any type of tactic as we moved toward the street. "I didn't know that you were thinking about settling down so quickly," I said. "Are you?"

"Let's take my truck and go together," he suggested, and unlocked my side. But when he walked around and also got in, he did finally begin to answer. "I do think a lot about the long-term. More than anyone besides my grandpa, you got to see how close my dad and I were."

I nodded. They'd had an amazing bond.

“And he died way too young. I told you that I was so pissed about the unfairness of it, but it also made me think a lot. I have no idea how much time I'll get on this planet. None of us do. It could be fifty or sixty more years, but it could be five or six more months.”

“No!” My hand shot over and grabbed his arm, a reaction to his words that my frontal lobe had no part of. My movement was all instinct, because the thought of him not being part of this world was not something I could deal with.

“I'm just saying that you never know. I want to really live the life I have and I'm realizing that shutting myself in my house isn't the way to do it. Am I going to act like Odysseus and jerk off for twenty years?”

“That really wasn't all his fault,” I argued again. “He had obstacles. The gods were against him.”

“Well, screw the obstacles. I want to live, and yeah, I want to be with someone I love. Know what I mean?”

I nodded, because I wanted that, too. Of all the things that had seemed important to me before, that one single desire rose up and cast everything else into shadow. I just needed to figure out the right tactic to make it happen. There had to be something I could do...

Oh, of course. It was me; I was the problem, as always. I had made slight improvements on the surface, but I remembered what Shaw had said to me this summer: I'd had ten years to make myself a better person, but I still sucked. No, he hadn't used those exact words, but it had been the message, and I

decided that he was right and I did suck. I had zero friends and even my own parents hadn't wanted me. It was little wonder that a guy would also reject me.

I was thinner, my makeup application was on point, and my hair was...less. I didn't wear clothing that resembled burlap sacks anymore and I was able to converse in a normal way, mostly. But there was a lot more to do on my interior, and I thought that I'd better get it fixed before Shaw found someone else; now that he was out in the world again, it was only a matter of time before that happened. I had a limited window to completely overhaul myself and become someone cooler, more considerate, funnier, sweeter, more empathetic, kinder, more loving, more...

"Grier. You're staring off into space like you're in a trance," Shaw said. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," I told him, and oh, I sure was. I was ready to be better. I would have to be.

CHAPTER 13

I could do it. I could do it, even though this wasn't going at all as I'd intended. Firstly, in my mind I had been able to breathe a lot better, but the plastic shield over my face was impeding that. I'd also imagined that Florentine Jones and I would get along and become friends, but the constant arguments were impeding that, too. I had planned for immediate improvements to the house, but bugs were impeding everything. There were just way too many impediments here but even though I felt like running off down the street in my protective suit, I had to keep trying.

I chose my words carefully. "This has to be done, because—" If we didn't, potential buyers would bolt in fear. I might have been forced to call the health department. The neighbors could come with torches and burn the place to cinders. Amber would kill me, actual murder with her own two hands.

"Because it's not a safe environment for you, and that's the most important thing," I finished. Although the face protector was clear, I felt that it muted emotions, so I made my smile larger than normal and also nodded fervently to convey a lot of false happiness and good energy.

"I've been doing fine here." Florentine Jones exhaled a long trail of smoke as she picked her way over the clothes on the floor. "I'm perfectly happy."

"Mrs. Jones, that can't be true. Your house is crawling with cockroaches and..." It was either lice or bedbugs, or maybe fleas. I wasn't getting close enough to figure it out and even the thought of them made me scratch—but I could do this. I

could clean up this house and we would sell it, another success to add to the list...something small and fast scuttled past my foot and I screamed, fogging up the plastic.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Shaw yelled from outside.

“No, don’t come in! I’m leaving. Temporarily,” I told Mrs. Jones, and I stepped out onto the porch and then down to the dirt lawn. “Is there anything on me?” I asked him, and he walked in a circle, checking my polyethylene suit.

“No, no bugs.”

I still seemed to feel them crawling, though. I pushed back the hood and took a deep breath of the crisp air, relieved to be out of the suffocating grime of her house. I took a moment to remind myself of my new personality goals before I spoke, and then I said, “Well, I think we’re moving in a positive direction.”

He stared at me. “You still won’t go in there without a face shield. Are you sure about the positivity?”

“She didn’t say no when I told her that we had to hire exterminators.” She hadn’t said yes, but I definitely hadn’t heard a no. “I think they’ll have to tent the whole building. I’ve never seen bugs like that.”

Shaw scratched his neck. “We can’t fix anything inside until they’re taken care of.”

“I know,” I sighed. There was so much that needed to be done, but I wasn’t going to subject him to working in conditions of total grossness. “Let me try one more time to talk to her, and then we can leave.”

“Zip up, then,” he directed. “Hold on.” He stepped closer and tucked some stray pieces of my hair back into the hood. “Now there’s nothing for them to grab onto with their claws.”

“Shaw!”

He laughed and then, so did I. It didn’t seem as bad that the house was infested while we were together and smiling.

“What’s going on out here?” Mrs. Jones stood on her porch, smoking again. “Are you laughing at me?”

“He’s laughing at me because I’m wearing this,” I answered. “I don’t think your situation is funny, not at all. I’d really like to help you with it and I wish you would let me.”

We’d been here for much too long as I tried to convince her of that. Before showing up in person, I’d also tried via emails, calls, and texts, and she hadn’t really responded. She definitely hadn’t agreed to the timeline I’d written out, dates and specificities of the tasks that she would need to accomplish with her house in order to put it on the market. I guessed that I just didn’t have Amber’s way of making—

“Come on in and we can start,” she said, and threw her cigarette butt into the yard. She had really good aim, because they were mostly in one big pile.

“Really?” I asked, and Shaw nudged me. “Ok, yes!” I quickly agreed, and followed her inside. While he did what he could in the yard, Mrs. Jones and I cleared out the trash and got at least ten loads of laundry sorted. Also, she promised to let me bring in exterminators.

“I don’t want to look a gift horse in the mouth,” I said, because Amber had warned me against that, “but what made you

change your mind so suddenly about us working on your house today?" We stepped outside and I unzipped my suit and pushed back the face guard.

"I was watching you with you with your boyfriend and how sweet he was being. It reminded me of Huck."

I didn't bother to correct her misapprehension about Shaw. "I remind you of my father?"

"No, he did, with how gentle he was."

"My father was gentle? Really?"

She scowled. "Don't look so surprised! I used to be a catch."

"No, it's not about you," I quickly told her. "I just can't imagine him acting that way."

"People have all different sides," she said. "Huck was a real asshat, but he had some good in him, too. Why else would I have followed him here from Memphis?"

I shrugged. "I thought you might have loved him but I didn't really understand that, either."

"I did love him. He loved me back, in his way."

That was what she'd said about my mother: he'd also loved her "in his way." "I never got any of that," I said. "He didn't love me."

"He talked about you. He said you looked like his wife, which is one of the reasons he didn't like you much."

"Oh. But I don't look like her."

"I can see it," she told me. "More like when she was young and they first met. You're quieter, though. She was damn

loud.”

“Yes,” I agreed, because I remembered her yelling.

“Huck always said that you were smart, too. That scared him. I know he thought it was just a matter of time before you figured out what a fraud he was. Your mama wasn’t quick like that but she was...what’s the word for hanging on?”

“Tenacious?”

“Yeah, maybe. She was...what is it?”

“Tenacious,” I repeated. “Why do you think so?”

“She kept him, didn’t she?”

“But in the end, she ran them into that tree.”

There was a short silence. “I don’t know how she stood him for so long,” Florentine Jones finally said. “I would have thought she’d have killed him years ago. He ruined her life.”

“I did that,” I told her. “I was the baby-trap for him and I ruined my mother’s life, too.”

She looked at me like I might be crazy. “He got her pregnant on purpose. It was his fault, how it all turned out.”

“I thought that she...what?” I asked in confusion. “No, he said that my mother trapped him, not the other way around.”

“What does it matter?” She lit up again. “They’re both dead, now. All the rest of us can do is keep on living.”

Shaw was sitting in his truck and I took a moment to remove the protective suit and toss it into the bed before I got into the cab next to him. “You’ll never guess who I just saw,” he greeted me.

Absently, I scratched my head. “Who?”

“Remember our old PE teacher, Mr. Brown?”

“The one who hated you and made you run all those laps on the bumpy track?” I asked. “Is there something in my hair?”

He checked. “Nope. But yeah, that’s the guy I mean. He just showed up for an appointment with Florentine Jones, and I think we know what their business was.”

“What happened?”

“I said hello, reminded him of my name, and asked how his wife was doing. He turned red like he used to do when he got mad at me in class and he left.” Shaw shook his head. “Dick. How’d it go in there?”

“Ok,” I said, thinking it over. She was right in what she’d said; my parents were gone, so why did it matter what they’d done, why they’d done it, how they’d felt, or whom they’d ruined? They were beyond blame and beyond any earthly feelings of love or hatred, for each other or anyone else. I just had to keep on living.

“Grier? I asked if you wanted to go home and shower. You seem kind of itchy.”

“Yes, I do,” I said, and so he drove in the direction of the casita. He talked about Mrs. Jones’ house and a revised schedule of repairs and I answered vaguely, not focused on our conversation.

“Grier,” he said again, and I looked up. “Welcome back. We’re at the casita. Are you awake?”

“I am. I’m tired from last night, from working at the hospital.” I yawned as proof. I’d signed up to help at the big medical center in Chattanooga where Shaw had been brought after the accident. After I finished at the office in the afternoon, I’d been going there and also to our church. There were so many committees that needed volunteers that my schedule had quickly filled up.

“Maybe you shouldn’t be doing all this,” he said. “It’s wearing you out. Amber keeps complaining to me that you’re drowsy at your desk.”

“Why are you two talking so much?”

“Do you think I can stop her?” He smiled. “Let’s go in.”

“This couldn’t have been the way you wanted to spend a Saturday,” I said when I was re-dressed and had finally finished with my hair. I felt better, a lot less prickly, and Shaw had hunkered down on my couch to watch football and also seemed pretty content.

“I don’t mind it,” he said. His own eyes were at half-mast. “I was up late last night so I’m tired, too.” He moved his legs to make room for me.

“What were you doing instead of sleeping?” I asked, but instead of answering, he hesitated. “What?” I pressed, but then remembered my new personality. “I’m sorry that I pushed. It’s none of my business and I sincerely apologize.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Who are you, lately? You’re not insisting that I talk? You’re also not complaining about the football on your TV.”

“I don’t mind sports.”

“You’re not prying and trying your weird tactics of fishing for information.”

“I don’t do that anymore,” I said primly.

“You’re volunteering all the time and two nights ago, I found you at your kitchen table trying to teach yourself to do a shot. How’d that go, by the way?”

“I still choke on water so I haven’t progressed to alcohol. But I’ll get there,” I promised. Cool girls could pound shots, and I’d be cool. Eventually.

“Why? Why do you need to do all these things?”

To be better, of course. To be kinder, nicer, more entertaining, more exciting. “I decided to make some changes to myself,” I said. “Like how I fixed the outside of my body, now I’m fixing the inside. What do you think?”

“I thought you were all right the way you were.” He yawned slightly, to show how interested he was in this line of conversation.

I remembered that he’d found me tolerable. “But now...” I started to say, and then reminded myself that I wasn’t a person who pushed for information anymore, a woman who bit down hard like a bad dog and then wouldn’t release. “Never mind,” I said, and smiled.

He frowned a little back. “Weird,” he murmured. We both watched the game, or at least he did. I stared at the screen and wondered what in the heck those men were doing and why anyone had ever thought it was a good idea. My own eyes started to slip closed.

“All right, I can’t stand the pressure,” Shaw announced suddenly. “I’ll tell you why I was up so damn late last night. I’ve been reading through my dad’s journals again.”

That woke me. “Why? I mean—there doesn’t have to be a reason except that you wanted to. Again, none of my business.”

“It is your business, because I’ve been thinking more about that money. The minimum hundred K that my dad got from yours.”

“Shaw—”

“No, listen,” he said. “I looked at the dates on those checks from your father and I compared them to my work and school schedule, just in case there might have been some kind of correlation.”

“And?” I couldn’t have stopped the word but then I added, “None of my business.”

“I didn’t see anything, but I wasn’t sure what I was looking for. I started to compare them to other things, like my phone bill. I opened my personal bank account and I noticed that one of those checks was dated close to the time that I made a cash withdrawal, me getting money right at the branch downtown. Only twenty bucks or so, nothing big.”

“And?”

“I hardly ever took out cash and I never went to the bank just to do that. If I was there, it was because my dad wanted to go and I drove him. He liked to be out of the house to do things but we didn’t leave too often. You remember the recluse thing we had going.”

I nodded.

“But we went to the library, we went to church, we went to the bank. I didn’t question him about what he was up to when he was on his own, because he was an adult and I wanted him to feel like he had freedom. I would wait in the car and he went into the branch, and he wasn’t carrying a bag of money and he didn’t come out with stacks of it, either. But he drew those pictures in his journal of piles of cash and he wrote your father’s name. I know that you and I weren’t going to talk about it, but I’ve been thinking a lot and you’re the person who would understand it the best. If anyone can.” He looked at me. “I looked harder at the checks from your father, and almost all of them had dates from just before I withdrew from that ATM. So I assume that I drove Paul to the bank, and he brought them in there.”

I hesitated but then ventured, “His bank statements definitely didn’t show anything.” Shaw nodded. “What if he had a different account?”

“He had only had one with my grandpa,” he answered. “I closed it when he died and that’s all that was under his name.”

“Maybe we should...no, never mind,” I said. “Maybe Amber has a relative...no, forget that.”

He sat up. “You can’t do that. Tell me, right now.”

“I don’t want to pry,” I said, and he smiled.

“Yeah, you do. Go on and give it to me.”

“I was just thinking that I would like to look very closely at Paul’s bank records. There might be something that I could spot, something that would stand out because I haven’t seen

them a hundred times already like you have. And I was also wondering if Amber has any McCourt relatives who work at that branch because maybe they could give us information. Miss Debrah from church is the manager there, isn't she?"

"What would they give us information about?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I don't know what we're looking for and—we shouldn't, anyway. It might make us argue." I gulped down the fear that rose in my throat, a choking bile.

"Are you that afraid?" he asked, and I didn't have to nod. He must have seen it in my face. "What if I promised that no matter what, we won't argue again? I won't stop talking to you, and you promise the same thing for me. I don't want that, either."

"Do you swear?"

"Yeah. Do you?"

I nodded, but my mind was looping through the final occasion on which we'd talked before our ten year break. I had called the old, yellow phone in their kitchen for the last time several months after the accident. I'd been at the airport on my way to California, and I really hadn't known if I'd ever return home. At the time, I'd thought that I probably wouldn't, so I'd wanted to say goodbye, goodbye forever. I'd ended up hearing him call me a bitch and I'd told him back that it was his fault, that he'd run out like an idiot and gotten himself hurt. I'd said that I wasn't his responsibility. I didn't need anyone, that was what I'd told him.

"Why did I say that?"

“What?” Shaw asked, and I realized that we were sitting on the couch in Amber’s casita, that ten years had passed, and that I’d spoken the question out loud.

“Nothing,” I answered. “Do you want to go look at that bank information?”

“Right now, maybe we could just rest. After all, I had that long morning of sitting on my ass in my truck while you worked.”

“That sounds really grueling for you,” I said, remembering to be funny. I was funny and cool, generous with my time, empathetic, kind. And he hadn’t just been sitting on his butt, because he had cleaned up the yard as much as he was able to without a magic wand. “I’m sorry you had to suffer while I was in the house with the insects crawling on me.”

He smiled and I got to see his dimple. “It was tough, and I appreciate your sympathy.” He let his eyes drift closed.

“That’s why I’m going to take a catnap. *Catnap*, not *cathouse*. Just want to make sure you heard that difference.”

“Got it,” I said, and watched him. He’d always had an ability to fall asleep close to instantly. I remembered sitting outside in the spring sunshine, and Shaw lying back in the grass with his face to the sky, smiling then too as he soaked it in. “You can put your head here,” he’d told me, and patted his stomach. So I’d lain down, using his abdominals as my pillow, and it had been one of the best moments of my whole life, as close to Heaven as I ever thought I’d get. I closed my eyes now to relive it, the feel of his lungs moving with each breath, the heady scent of his skin, and the warmth of his body so close to mine.

“Grier. Grier!”

“No!” I told my mother, and I was screaming at her to stop, please stop, that she’d killed him. But then I opened my eyes again, and it was Shaw instead. It was him, not as a sixteen-year-old bleeding and crying in his driveway, but as a grown man in Amber’s casita. He knelt in front of her couch and I was holding onto his shirt, my hands wrapped in twisted handfuls of the fabric.

“We were sleeping,” he said. “We both fell asleep. I think you were dreaming about the accident.”

Yes, I had been. “No, I wasn’t dreaming,” I answered. In boarding school, I’d had too many nightmares. My roommate sophomore year had complained and they’d made me go to counseling, but I hadn’t been able to talk about it then, so I’d made up things. I’d lied about losing the family dog, about my parents’ divorce. I’d never said that I’d almost killed my best friend with my negligence and I’d never explained how I’d left him to suffer.

“Grier, you were calling out in your sleep and crying,” he said, and touched my face.

“I’m ok.”

He brushed my cheek again with his fingertips. “Do you dream like that a lot?”

“No,” I answered, which was another lie. “No, I don’t. It must be because I’m napping in the middle of the day. I thought I was back at Florentine Jones’ house and there were bugs everywhere. Giant ones, biting me and chasing me.”

“That’s what it was?”

I nodded and sat up straighter. I put my hands underneath my thighs and smashed them down because they were shaking a lot. “That’s what it was,” I echoed. “Isn’t that dumb? Maybe the dream was prescient, though. I better be careful the next time I go there.”

Shaw didn’t believe me. His lower lip came out slightly as he thought and his eyes didn’t leave my face. “I dream about it, sometimes. Not as much anymore.”

I understood that he didn’t mean the bug-infested house. “Good,” I said. “I’m glad it’s not bothering you. I thought we weren’t talking about the past, though. We shouldn’t have started on the money again, and we should leave it alone. All of it.”

“Maybe I don’t dream about it as much because it’s not so central to my life anymore. I’ve had a lot of years to deal with it.”

“Mmhm,” I said, nodding. “Good. That’s good.”

“I like to think that I’m at peace with it now,” he continued.

“Is that why you threw a rock at my car, because of all that peace you feel?” My hands flew from beneath my legs and clamped over my mouth as he sat back, and then stood up. What was wrong with me? Was I trying to make him hate me again? What had happened to the new personality, the cool, fun woman? “I take it back,” I said, as if that would work. “I know you weren’t aiming at me. You just can’t throw for crud.”

“No, you’re right. It was really, really hard to see you this summer. It felt like I got hit with a rock, too.”

Great, that was the experience I wanted people to have when I appeared. I stood up too fast and immediately sat back down. Despite the many doctors I'd gone to, the idiopathic problem I had with my inner ears was never going to be better and it seemed like my personality would never improve either. I would always be the obnoxious person who reminded Shaw of the worst possible moments in his past.

"You ok?" he asked.

"I'm fine," I said. "Are you hungry? We could make something."

We did, mostly him with me sitting at the kitchen table and trying to maintain an interesting, cool, and lighthearted conversation that had nothing to do with bloody car crashes, stolen criminal money, or my involvement with any of those things. I caught Shaw looking at me a lot, glancing over with his lip out as if he were thinking, but I just smiled back. If I drove him away from me one more time with my thoughtless words, then I would...no, I wouldn't. I would be the new person who wouldn't make him do it again.

He left late, after asking several times if I was all right and then making plans for the next day for us to go to church together. "I've been feeling increasingly religious," he explained, when I remarked on his steady attendance. It was comforting for me and I was glad to go. I was also glad to tell Amber that I had so she would get off my back about it.

The next morning, we sat together in the last pew where he usually placed himself. It had been a quiet ride over, with neither of us discussing banks, hidden accounts, or terrible accidents. Once we were there, though, I couldn't seem to

make myself stop thinking about those things. Florentine Jones was right; there was no use in fretting about the problems that my parents had created. She was right except for one thing.

“I can let go of what they did, except for what they did to Shaw.”

“Me? What?” he whispered back, and I saw several people turn to look in my direction. I mouthed sorry to them and shook my head at him.

“You’re acting really strangely,” he mentioned as Mass ended. “What did you say so loud? Who did what?”

“Come on,” I said, and I walked us over to a group of women whom I knew much better from volunteering here. “How are y’all?” I greeted them, and they said good morning, Grier, and how was I doing?

“I’m a little unhappy,” I told them. “It came to my attention that there have been some unfortunate things said.”

They all glanced guiltily at each other and I wondered what they were thinking of. Whatever was on their minds, it wasn’t what I’d just referred to.

“So, ten years ago, my mother ran into Shaw with her car,” I began. “She wasn’t incapacitated but neither was he. I heard that my parents spread a rumor that he had been drinking, that he was drunk and that was why the accident happened. That was a lie. It happened because she was a bad driver and he was trying to help me because I was too dumb to get out of her car. She hit him because he was being a good friend. I don’t even know if it might have been on purpose, and I’m not sure

if she ran her car into the tree this summer deliberately either. I didn't really know my mother and my father very well, but I do know Shaw. Nothing that happened was his fault, and I hope that the story about him will change."

They stared at me for a moment, but then Miss Debrah spoke. "I didn't believe what they said at the time, and I never have since," she told me. "It didn't make sense with what we all knew about Shaw. We also knew your parents, and..." She stopped, disconcerted, and Miss Shirene with the musty hat took up the thread.

"We know that they weren't good examples for you and we all thought it was best that you got to go away to live your life elsewhere," she said. Then she looked past me, speaking to someone else. "I hope you never believed ill about us, Shaw, just as we never did about you."

"No, ma'am," he told her. "Y'all have been nothing but kind to my family, even when we had trouble accepting it."

"Good," I said. "That's good. I would hope the word spreads through town that in fact, it was my parents who were the instigators. I don't even know all the things they instigated, in fact—I think they were up to any number of bad things, including my father who had basically funded his own cathouse. Although, I shouldn't be using that term again, especially not here, and I apologize," I told them. "I've been trying to act like everything is fine but when your parents are like—were like mine, then obviously, things weren't—aren't fine, but I'm trying, and not because I want to pretend anymore but because I really do want to be fine and I think that will make me a more acceptable person. Which is what I

want, since I understand now that it's too late to solve things with them, if it was even ever possible. But—”

“Ok,” Shaw said, and I felt his arms encircle my waist.

“Enjoy the rest of your weekend,” he told the assembled ladies, and we walked toward the exit. We walked pretty fast and very close together because his arm stayed around me and kept me directly at his side. It was something I didn't mind at all.

“Finally,” he said when the church doors closed behind us.

“I'm sorry, I know I did it again,” I said miserably. Had that been cool, funny, and interesting? Had it been something that Stacia would have done? Absolutely not.

“It relieved my mind quite a bit,” he said. “I was wondering where you had gone off to and finally you were back.”

“What?”

“You were acting so strange,” he answered. We were approaching the car, but he hadn't let me go. “I couldn't tell what was wrong with you.”

“Wrong with me? Nothing,” I told him. “I explained it to you. I'm trying to be better on the inside, but what I just did back there in our church, talking about the cathouse again...”

“That's something that you could probably do without,” he agreed. “But I don't get that 'better' thing.”

“You know,” I said. “Cooler. More like—well, ok, I'll tell you. More like that Stacia.”

“Stacia Laska?”

“What other Stacia would I mean?” I asked irritably, and then remembered that I was supposed to be fun and not cantankerous. “It’s going to take me a while,” I explained. “All things that are worth it do. Just give me some time.”

“You don’t need time.” He stopped next to the truck but instead of letting me go, he pulled me to him. Shaw was hugging me, embracing me, holding me. “You don’t need to be any different.”

I roused myself out of my shock to answer. “I don’t? Yes, I do.”

“No.” I felt him nuzzle against my hair. “Thank you for saying that to them. Thank you for telling them.”

“They already knew.”

“But you said it for me. I know you’ve been wanting to hide all the problems with your parents, and you came right out and admitted all that. For me.”

Because I would have done anything for him.

“Thank you,” he said again. “And just keep being you, ok? Just you.”

I closed my eyes and decided that I would try it.

CHAPTER 14

She walked from room to room without saying a word, and then she stood at the windows that faced the back yard. The glass sparkled in the sun and revealed that the broken aboveground pool was gone, there were pots of pansies, and outdoor furniture adorned the power-washed concrete patio (I'd borrowed the set of chairs from the porch at the casita).

The inside was similarly improved. It wasn't totally furnished but Shaw and I had carried in a couch (his, from his living room) and we'd painted the walls, ceilings, and trim.

Florentine Jones and I had scrubbed every surface, too, and the best thing ever? The bugs were gone. All of them, every last one had been sent to insect Heaven (or the other way, depending how they'd behaved themselves). We'd worked so hard and I was proud of the effort, and I didn't care what my colleague had to say about it. I didn't care at all.

"Well?" I asked. I could hear a little tremor in my voice.

"What do you think?"

Amber McCourt turned around. "I can't believe this. It's a total transformation. You've done an amazing job, Grier. We are going to get top dollar for Florentine and—umh!"

The noise was because I'd collided with her, not to run her down like in one of Shaw's football games, but to hug her.

"Really?" I asked. "Really?"

"I'm so impressed," she said, and also seemed unfazed by my embrace. In fact, she hugged me back. "I had a feeling that you would do a good job, but it's even better than I expected."

She pulled back and put her hands on my shoulders. “I’m not sure that I could have done it myself.”

“Amber!” I gasped. “Do you mean it?”

She nodded, opened her purse, and removed a box of mints. “Take two,” she recommended. “You had a lot of garlic in that salad dressing at lunch.”

“It’s nice,” Florentine Jones agreed. She had already packed up her belongings, like the piles of clothes we’d washed and folded, the dishes we’d scrubbed, and the bags of makeup that we’d sorted through. “I could probably stay here myself.”

“That’s not possible,” Amber said briskly. “And the open house starts soon, so you should make yourself scarce. Not everyone will be supportive and it’s usually hard for people to hear negative comments about the home they’ve loved.”

Florentine laughed. We’d gotten to be on a first-name basis as we’d washed at least fifteen years of filth from the floors.

“No, I don’t give one shit about what people say,” she told Amber, who immediately adopted an expression indicating that the noisome smell that had previously pervaded the house still remained. Or maybe, she’d caught a whiff of what Florentine had said she didn’t give one of.

“Well, that’s nice,” my colleague told her, in a voice that indicated that it wasn’t.

“I’ll be glad to get out of here. Too many memories and I never liked it, anyway,” Florentine said. “This house was a gift from a former...friend.” Her eyes went to me.

“Grier told me that you knew her father,” Amber mentioned and I looked over at her, surprised that she’d brought it up. “I

assumed that you knew him in the biblical sense. Were you aware that he was married?"

Ah, of course. Amber wanted to enforce a little moral judgment; fortunately, Florentine didn't take offense at her question. "Yeah, of course I knew that. I was around when he took up with that girl. But Huck wasn't someone to stick to only one woman. Who cares?"

"You were mad that he had the other woman in Georgia," I reminded her before I could stop myself.

She sniffed. "I thought about that and I remembered how she was helping him with business. That was all. She was helping him with the money, just another patsy for him to use."

"How?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"Well, somebody's got to clean it. You can't just put dirty money in the bank and let the cops see it there. Don't you know anything?" she asked us, and Amber bristled.

"No, we don't know much about crime," she retorted. Her voice was acid.

"You mean that he might give someone money, cash and checks, and that person would do something to make it seem legitimate, and then my father would take it back?" I asked.

"Sure, or sometimes he just needed someone else to hold onto it for a while. Get it out of his possession and park it." She fidgeted. "I'm going outside to have a cigarette."

"No butts in the yard!" Amber ordered, forgetting that I was in charge, and hurried after her to direct where the smoking would occur.

I stood in the living room, thinking, but then I put myself back on task and performed the last-minute chores before potential buyers showed up. They did, and not only Amber's family and nosy people this time. We had priced this place right and I'd carefully planned the photos and struggled over the language in the listing, reading it to Shaw a hundred times to make sure it was right. It had worked, because we'd had tons of foot traffic. Both of us were thrilled, but at the end of the open house, I didn't want to stay to rehash the situation when Amber sat down to rest on the nice couch.

"Let's talk tonight. I have to go meet Shaw," I said. "He's waiting for me at the casita, and no, he's not going to stay over."

She looked pleased. "Good, because that's not the way to—"

"Amber, do not repeat the words 'catch him.'"

"I like him," she told me, and stood to adjust a few pieces of my hair, "and I know that you do, too."

"I want him to feel the same way," I admitted and she nodded. That was old news to her.

"You can't force someone to love you back, but I think you have a good shot at it."

"Really?" I asked.

She nodded again. "Go on and have fun with him. Wait! Put on more lipstick first." She smiled and told me, "You're a beautiful girl, Grier. And that doesn't matter in the least, not to me, or to Shaw. I hope it matters less to you now, too."

"Thank you, Amber," I said, and she adjusted more of my hair and told me to get going.

Shaw's truck was already parked outside the casita. "How was it?" he asked when I came in. "How many non-McCourt people showed up? Any offers yet?" He'd arrived at the beginning of the open house and had made a lot of pointed remarks to other visitors about how the place was so great and that he wanted to buy it for himself, but Amber had told him to leave. She said that with his height, he was making the ceilings seem too low.

"I think..." I felt myself smile as I plopped down next to him on the couch. "I think it was good. I think...I'm not trying to brag, but I may be good at this job, too."

He grinned back at me, but the expression fell away fast. "I already knew that. Amber does also, or she wouldn't be pushing so hard for you to stay here and get your license."

She was pushing that as hard as she pushed everything else, and it really was something to consider. "Florentine was happy," I mentioned. "She's ready to get out of here. She was talking about my father giving her that house, paying for everything. I think she wants to get away from the memories, and I don't blame her."

He got a strange look on his face, almost guilty. "I have to talk to you about that."

"First, let me tell you what else she told me. My father was laundering all his money from whatever crime he was involved in, which was probably what was happening when I saw him giving people bags of bills. Florentine said that his girlfriend in Georgia was helping with that and—"

"And so was my dad."

“What?” I stared at him, confused. “No, Paul wouldn’t have participated in something illegal.”

“I don’t know if he totally understood what he was doing, but he did take money,” Shaw told me. “He wasn’t laundering it, though, because he didn’t give it back. My dad gave it away.”

“What?” I asked again, my voice weak. “He what?”

“I thought about what you’d said, how you wanted to go through the bank statements I have from his account with fresh eyes,” he answered. “I went home after Amber kicked me out of the open house and tried it myself. I had been looking for large deposits and withdrawals, but this time I checked for anything that seemed weird, anything that I didn’t recognize.”

“And?”

“And there was a rental fee, an automatic debit, that showed up only two times and it wasn’t for a large amount, so I had missed it before. For at least two years, Paul had rented a safety deposit box. I looked in the church directory and called Miss Debrah, because she manages that branch. I don’t know if she was supposed to tell me or not, but she admitted that my dad did have a box there, a large sized one. The biggest they had.”

“How did he do that? How did he even know how to rent it?”

“She helped him,” Shaw said. “She helped him fill out the paperwork and showed him where to sign. My dad was the only one who could get into it, it was only under his name.”

“How does that relate to my father, then?”

“Miss Debrah said that he was cashing the checks he got from Huck, not depositing them. I think he put that money in his

box and it was some kind of scheme to hide it all. Since it was under Paul's name, it wouldn't have been traced back to your father if anyone like the police had come with a warrant."

"Paul wouldn't have done that without coaching and he wouldn't have done it if he thought it was wrong," I said.

"He would have, if it would have helped me," Shaw responded. "Like if it could have gotten me a college scholarship. He wanted me to go away, to start fresh and new and have a good life where I didn't have to take of him. He didn't understand that I wanted to take care of him, like he'd done for me. He would have done anything for me."

I reached over and touched his hand, and he held my fingers. "It only means that my father manipulated him." He'd found himself a patsy, just like Florentine had said. "Is that box still rented?"

"No, my dad closed it." He took a big breath. "Miss Debrah said that Paul came in one day upset and scared. Something must have happened, but I don't know what."

"It could have been a visitor like I had, the guy in the sunglasses."

"It could have been anything. He asked her what he could do with cash if he wanted to give it away. She asked him if everything was ok but he wouldn't tell her anything and he said that she couldn't tell me, either. She respected what he wanted and she helped him convert the bills into cashier's checks. He got one for the church, which she accepted on behalf of the congregation. She's the treasurer, after all. They recarpeted the community room with that donation."

The carpet that my father hadn't paid for. "What about the rest?"

"Remember the town library, how nice it is now that they renovated? My dad loved the place. He would have been very happy to see it."

We stared at each other. "He took my father's dirty money and gave it to a church and a library?" I asked.

"If so, there was nothing that Huck Warren could have done about it. Would he have called the police and demanded it back?" Shaw shook his head. "I wonder how he reacted when he realized that it was gone."

We worked out the timelines; Paul had made his donations in my sophomore year of college, almost exactly when my parents had informed me that they wouldn't be paying for any more of my education. But what exactly had happened to make him give the money away? It could have been one of my father's associates threatening him or it could have been that Huck himself stepped out of line enough to tip a clue about what a jerk he really was. We speculated for a while but finally decided that it was one of those things that we'd never really know, like how my parents' car accident had come to be, like why they'd stayed together, like why they hadn't been struck down by a higher power when they crossed the threshold of the church.

"I can't figure out how it would have worked," Shaw said.

"They weren't texting or emailing because my dad didn't do that. Grandpa would have shot Huck Warren if he'd shown up at our house. How did your father arrange it?"

I thought about Huck being struck down at the church. “I know how,” I said slowly. “Miss Shirene admitted some things. She told me that Huck was counseling parishioners who were in financial trouble but after a while, they put a stop to it. She said that he did something ‘untoward.’ I thought she meant that he was hitting on women, but he must have been roping people into working for him. Maybe when the church said no more, that showed Paul the truth about Huck, too.”

We looked at each other silently for a moment, both of us taking it all in. “So the money really is gone. Are you sorry?” he asked finally.

“I had already accepted that,” I said. “I’m sorry that my father was using people that way. I’m glad that his dirty money went to good causes instead buying more purses and more cars, but I wish it was there for you to have.”

“I wouldn’t have touched it,” he said.

No, he wouldn’t have. He knew right from wrong. “I’m sorry that you got involved with us, Shaw. I’m sorry about everything.”

“I’m not,” he told me, but that couldn’t have been right.

“You had a so many opportunities, so many things you could have done if I hadn’t shown up in ninth grade. I ruined it for you.”

“You didn’t ruin jack shit,” he said. “Maybe things went in a different direction—”

“The wrong direction,” I interrupted. “A painful, terrible direction. You’re lucky to be alive. Your dad could have gone to jail.”

“How do you know what would have happened if you hadn’t been in English class that day? Maybe I would have dropped out and ended up like my grandpa, drinking beer and talking about conspiracies. Maybe I would have gotten into a car accident anyway, maybe my dad would have robbed a bank instead of hiding money in one. I’m not sorry about how things went for me,” he said.

I shook my head. “No, you would have been fine. Better.”

“What I’m sorry about is that ten years passed before I saw you again. Well, it was seven,” he corrected. “I watched you going into church on a Sunday in the spring. You had just graduated from high school and it must have been one of the last times you came home. I saw you go in and I told my dad that we had to leave.”

“Because you hated me.”

“No, because I was so confused,” Shaw answered. “I was angry and hurt that you were just fine without me. There you were, happy and so lovely. So beautiful.”

“I was? You thought that?” I asked, and he nodded slowly.

“But I wasn’t fine,” I told him. “I hadn’t been fine for a long time. The last time I saw you was when I came home for Christmas during my first year at boarding school. I climbed over your gate and I spied until I spotted you coming out of your house. I watched you limping, in pain.”

“Why didn’t you say anything to me?” he asked.

“I just sat on a log and cried and then I walked home. It was a long walk,” I remembered, and I’d been cold. My nose had turned bright red with the temperature and with all my tears.

My mother had been absolutely repulsed when she'd seen me arrive, and she hadn't bothered to ask where I'd been.

"I wish I'd seen you there," he said. "It would have been nice to know that you hadn't forgotten me."

"Forgotten you?" I asked incredulously. "I thought about you every day. Every single day I remembered you and I was so sorry for what I'd done. I didn't leave you on purpose," I told him. "After the accident—after she hit you, my parents locked me in my bedroom. It was my jail. I think they were afraid of what I'd say, that I would tell the police or your family that she could have stopped or that she was driving crazy. I'm sure they wanted to minimize their contact with the authorities."

"Wait a minute. They locked you in?"

"For a while," I said. "For a few days. Then I wasn't allowed to leave the house and they had taken away my phone and my computer. I couldn't find out anything about you. I didn't know how you were hurt, if you would recover, if—I didn't think you were dead, because I thought I would have felt it." I'd thought the rotation of the Earth might have stopped if that had happened. "They were fighting all the time and that was when I overheard that they were going to leave and take off if things got more serious. In the end, though, they decided that I would have to leave instead. They were going to send me away, and I figured that I'd had enough. I took all the pills from my mother's shelf and I swallowed them down with a bottle of her gin, or maybe vodka. I didn't know the difference."

"What the hell? Grier..."

“They took me to the hospital, and they pumped my stomach there and made me stay for a few days. Then I went right into a treatment center and I was so glad, because that was when I had more access to news and a computer and I found out that you were going to be ok. I was so relieved, I remember crying all over the keyboard.”

“They still shipped you off to school after that?”

“I came home, gathered my things, and a car drove me to the airport the next day. That school didn’t actually have exceptionally high academic standards, and anyway, my father bribed them to let me in. I showed up with one bag, because I didn’t know that I’d need sheets and towels, all those things. I had only brought some clothes, my important papers, and some of your stuff. I had one of your shirts, a biology test you took so I could look at your handwriting, and some flowers you’d picked when we sat in the grass together. I’d pressed them in my geometry textbook.”

Shaw pulled in a breath. “I didn’t know. I didn’t know this. I didn’t know you tried to hurt yourself.”

“Nobody did besides my parents, and I don’t think it bothered them much,” I said, shrugging. “Do you remember when I called to say goodbye before I left?”

He nodded slowly. “Yeah. I think I yelled at you. I called you names.”

“We got into an argument and I was so angry at you, too. I felt like you’d abandoned me.”

“I didn’t know,” he said again.

“No, and I was just...I just wasn’t thinking right. I decided that I would show you that I didn’t need you anymore. Everything I did in the last ten years was to prove myself to you and to my parents. But I screwed it all up and nobody cared, anyway. My mother and father didn’t pay any attention when I succeeded and you still hated me. I didn’t have any friends or boyfriends. I lived in a crappy apartment in a building that my company owned and I paid too much in rent. Then my parents died, I came back home, and nothing was any better.”

“I thought that your life out there wasn’t exactly as you’d described it,” he told me, and I nodded miserably.

“It sucked,” I admitted.

“One thing that you just said is wrong, because I did not ever hate you, not once, not even when I said terrible shit to you out of anger and pain. Right now I need you to come here.” And like he’d done in his truck, he tugged me toward himself until we were sitting together, except this time, he pulled me onto his lap. I could feel him shaking.

“It’s ok,” I said, and I hugged him tightly. “It’s ok now.”

“No, it’s not. I can’t stand to think of you doing that, feeling like you were so alone and that you didn’t have another option. I wish I’d just reached out to you because what if—damn it, what if I lost you?”

“Good luck with that now,” I said, because I was not going to let go of him. Like, physically, I wasn’t letting him loose.

“I kept track of you through the years,” he said. “Your speech at your graduation was on your school’s website and I watched

it. I saw that you won that prize for your thesis in college, too. When I went to church, it was to listen to the ladies talking and try to hear more about what you were doing, how you were. I used to think about the sound of your laughter. I love that sound.”

“Really?”

“I missed you so much and I didn’t know that you gave me a second thought,” he told me. “When I saw you again this summer, it was like a boulder slamming into my chest.”

“I think you were the one with the rock.”

“I’m sorry,” Shaw said.

“I don’t care about the windshield.”

“I mean that I’m sorry about letting anything come between us,” he explained. “I’m sorry that we spent ten years apart.”

“We were really young, and maybe we both needed time to grow up. I sure did and I hope I’m better now,” I said.

“I don’t want you to try to change anymore, to think you have to be different. What’s wrong with what you’ve got? I don’t see anything that I don’t like.”

I thought about his dad, how he’d laughed at the eggs that Shaw had cemented into the frying pan when he cooked them.

“I guess you can see someone’s flaws and you don’t mind them.”

“What you believe are flaws are the things that make you the person that you are,” he said. “They make you Grier, my best friend, and the woman I’ve been missing for much too long.”

“Not anymore,” I told him, and his arms tightened.

“No, not anymore.”

That night, we slept together in the bed instead of one of us on Amber’s nice couch. We just lay there holding on to each other and talking about our future instead of the past. It did seem like there was a lot that was ahead, a lot of things to plan and look forward to. Maybe I could move into his house, Shaw thought. He’d started to clean it up, but we could do more together, like moving those boulders out of the driveway. Maybe we could go on vacation, I suggested, maybe to Mexico where we could use the Spanish we’d worked on all those years ago.

“Cas-i-ta,” I pronounced carefully, and he laughed. We both laughed a lot, the sound he said he’d missed. When I finally fell asleep, I did it with a smile on my face.

“Now, Amber, there’s no need for that.”

I sat up in the bed, a little confused because I was sure that I’d just heard Amber’s husband Jed speaking—but it was hardly light outside the window, and there was no reason that he should have been there. The side of the bed where Shaw had slept was empty and I unsteadily got to my feet, determined to find him and to figure out what was happening in the living room.

What was happening was Amber.

“Jed, I won’t have it,” she said as I walked in, rubbing my eyes and making sure that the tornado on my head was somewhat tamed. “You!” she said, and pointed a finger at me. “Young lady, you are in a lot of trouble.”

“What’s happening out here? I am not!” I answered heatedly.

“The heck you say! I looked out my window this morning and saw that truck again.” Now her accusatory finger moved to signal Shaw. “What have I told you about him sleeping here?”

“That I’ll never catch him that way,” I immediately responded, and she winced but he didn’t seem disturbed as he watched us from the couch. More than anything, it seemed like he was trying not to laugh.

“I didn’t mean that she should try to ‘catch’ you,” Amber told him, and turned on me, swinging her chin back and forth in disgust. “My word, Grier, it’s like I have to teach you everything!” I had another heated answer for that remark, and we argued more. Her husband only rolled his eyes.

“Well, she went ahead and did it,” Shaw suddenly announced, interrupting our discussion. “Grier caught me.” He got up from the couch and walked to me, and he put an arm around my shoulders and drew me close to his side. “We’re going to move in together.”

“Oh no, that dog won’t hunt,” she announced. “You will not be doing that without the benefit of marriage. I’m not going to choose the church, but a legally binding ceremony will occur before Miss Grier moves out of her casita. I have been down this road before with my daughter, and I’m prepared to go it again.”

“Amber, why?” I asked her.

“Because she cares about you,” her husband explained in his quiet, calm way. “When Amber loves somebody, she flies off the handle. She’s making you an honorary daughter, whether you’re accepting of that or not.”

“Really?” I asked her, and then I watched Amber McCourt wipe away some tears. “Oh, I love you, too,” I said.

“You better give her a hug,” Shaw told me, and it was much later when Amber and Jed finally left. In the meantime, we’d made breakfast and I’d gone to refresh in the bathroom, brushing my teeth carefully so that I wouldn’t see the mint box coming out her purse. She let me know that she wouldn’t expect me at the office until the afternoon and that also, we’d gotten a full-price offer on Florentine Jones’ house.

“I’ll work on that, and you determine your plans,” she recommended. “Remember that a legally binding—” But before she could conclude that piece of advice/order, Jed physically carried her from the casita.

When they were gone, I turned to Shaw. “We don’t have to,” I told him.

“We don’t have to do what?” He walked to me again and slid his hands over my hips to clasp them behind me. “What don’t you want to do?”

“I don’t—not that I don’t want to,” I tried to explain. “What she was saying, you know, the legally binding thing, that’s what I mean, but it doesn’t have to be. But it could.”

“I think you’re a little flustered. Is it because I’m about to kiss you?”

“That’s why,” I agreed.

“Well, let’s go ahead and do it, to get it off your mind.” He bent and for the first time, we kissed. It wasn’t like I had imagined, and I had imagined it hundreds and thousands of times before now. No, it wasn’t like that—it was better,

because his lips were soft but also hard somehow, and his tongue was gentle but also very exciting, and his hands moved to a grip my butt and that made me moan and pull him closer.

It was a small casita, so the bedroom was right there. It was easy to shed our clothes, too, so that we were both without them and back in the sheets together. It didn't bother me to be so naked because I got to see Shaw the same way. The first thing I did was reach for his leg, to gently touch the scars there.

"They're old, now," he told me softly. "They don't hurt and they don't matter."

They did, because everything about him mattered to me. He touched me like I mattered, too, very carefully at first. His fingertips traced over my jaw, and then his knuckles brushed over my cheekbones. Then his hand moved lower, and he brushed over my nipples, too, and they were already peaked and waiting. We kissed harder and deeper, and I didn't know what I was doing because after the halfway-sex experience and the time with my study group partner, I hadn't experimented more. And Shaw had said that his time on the beach was so amazing except for the sand—

"It's going to be better than anything," he murmured. "It's going to be the best thing we ever felt. Don't think about anything or anybody else, because I'm not."

And then he put his mouth on my breasts, and I didn't think anymore at all. It was Shaw, after all, so I trusted everything he did. Maybe neither of us was exactly expert, but he was right; it was the best thing I ever felt. He kissed my nipples and licked there, and he dragged his nose down my body to

nuzzle underneath my breasts, then down farther to kiss my stomach. He touched me so carefully but my hips jerked when he discovered my clit, whose location had previously been a secret to everyone but me. I knew what I liked but he tried new things, with his fingers and his tongue, and I liked that better. I liked it so much that I was calling out to him until I went over the top, clenching and releasing and coming.

I kept pulling him closer, wanting to feel the weight of him, but I wanted to touch him, too. It was almost overwhelming to rub my hands over his arms, to feel the muscle of his chest and stomach contracting as his body moved with mine, and to wrap my legs around him and hold him in the crux of my thighs, stroking against his erection. I touched him there, too, carefully because I didn't want to hurt him and I wasn't sure of how much pressure—he put his hand around mine and showed me.

“Grier,” he said.

“Yes, please,” I answered, he let go and let me guide him inside me.

And that moment, us together, was like—

I heard myself calling again, and he kissed me more and deeper while his hips moved faster and harder and then he moaned, and shook, and so did I. I couldn't let him go, not with my arms or my legs, but he didn't move, either.

Until finally he looked down at me and smiled, and I saw the dimple. “It was the best.”

I nodded. “It was. Can you kiss me again?”

He could, and did. Then he told me that we hadn't thought about protection, which hadn't been the smartest thing we'd ever done. "If we just made a baby, Amber will lose her mind."

"When she married Jed, she was already knocked up," I informed him. "That would be ok with me."

"We should get married pretty quick," he agreed.

"In case there's a baby?"

"Because I don't want to wait any longer to be with you. Ten years was enough. I love you too much to be apart from you."

"I love you, too. Always, I always have."

"I always, always will," Shaw told me, and I didn't ask for it but he kissed me again.

And I didn't make it to the office, but Amber was ok with that because the next day, she got to start planning a wedding.

"I guess you knew the way to catch him," she told me. "Or maybe, you didn't have to do much catching. I think it was just true love, after all that time."

She was right, although I didn't tell her and give her the satisfaction of hearing it. For Shaw and me, it was true love. After all that time, and forever.

EPILOGUE

“Thank you,” I said, and everyone applauded again. Shaw handed me a tissue and I wiped my eyes.

“Thank you for coming to congratulate us, and thank you to Amber for making me a partner—”

“Junior partner,” she cut in. That was what the new business cards she’d had printed said, too: my name with the title of Junior Partner in bold underneath.

I’d ordered my own cards. At the top of each of those was the name of our new company: Triumph Realty, and then my name, Grier Highsmith. Under that and also in bold, it said Partner, just the one word with no qualifiers. It had been a struggle to get our small business off the ground and it was definitely scary to go out on our own, but as she always said, we had plenty of people to fall back on.

“Hold up your glass to Triumph Realty,” Jed directed, and everyone clapped more, whistled, and yelled.

“Congratulations!” Raelyn told me. She stepped forward and gave me one of her huge hugs, which was more difficult due to the pregnancy belly in between us. She and Xavier had welcomed their second, a beautiful little girl, and I considered her and their son Jack to be my niece and nephew. Over time, I’d found a number of those on the McCourt side, too. Shaw and I didn’t have blood relatives, but we certainly had a lot of family.

Amber and I cut the sheet cake, and her daughters cut the other two sheet cakes, and that meant that the big crowd was

temporarily involved in eating for a while and the room quieted. It had been a squeeze to fit everyone into our new office space, but we had also opened the French doors that connected our area to Shaw's. His workload had increased a lot and he'd moved out of our kitchen to become the other tenant in the building.

Mostly he'd moved locations, he said, because he liked being able to look through the glass doors and see me there. I was also very happy to have him nearby. I still got nervous, anxious, when we were apart for too long, as if it might stretch out into years again.

"That's because you had terrible parents," Amber had pointed out when she spotted me watching Shaw typing on his keyboard at his desk. "They never gave you the sense of security that children need. Luckily, now you have a good example to follow."

She meant herself and Jed, and I never would have told her, but that was true. I watched her daughters and their husbands, too, and how they treated their children, and I paid close attention to Raelyn and Xavier. I wanted to make sure that I was going to be a success at the parenting thing.

Shaw finished his cake, took the last bite of mine when I offered it, and then tugged me to lean against him. His hand circled around to support our baby in my tummy. It hadn't happened after our first time together (or the second, third, or fourth later that afternoon and evening) and we'd decided that a little more planning made sense. So this pregnancy was very wanted, although...

“You’re going to be amazing,” he told me, because he always did seem to know what was on my mind. “You’ll be a wonderful mom. I have to say that I think I’ll be all right. I’ll try to be like my dad.”

“You’ll be perfect. Or close enough.”

“You just think I’m good at everything,” he said, and laughed.

I did, except that we were going to enlist Amber’s son-in-law Wyatt to help out with teaching our kids how to play sports. “I just think you’re so good at loving,” I explained. “That’s going to be the best thing for them.”

“Them? You think we’ll go for more than one?”

“Maybe eight? Ten?” I suggested. “Maybe we’ll have to expand and build our own castle.”

“Like hell,” he said, and I knew he was thinking of my former residence. My renter, Selah from the bookstore, had enjoyed staying there—up until the electrical fire. Apparently, nothing in the building had been done right, including the wiring. In the end, it had worked out for the best. She hadn’t moved much in so her losses were minimal and I had kept up with the insurance so we were covered financially. Selah, who’d loved that pentagram shape, had bought the land from us. She built her own vacation house, one that was significantly safer so that there was no leaning turret or indoor charcoal grill. She also filled the sinkhole.

“We won’t need a castle, but if we have a lot of kids, no one will ever be lonely,” I said.

“You won’t be, because you have me,” he told me. “You always will.”

“Good,” I said, and closed my eyes as I rested my head on his chest.

“What are you dreaming about?”

“Nothing,” I answered. “I couldn’t dream about anything better than this.”

Shaw kissed me, and I had been right. There was nothing better, nothing at all. We were meant to be, and however far the journey had been, we’d finally found our way home.

OTHER BOOKS

[The Smallest Moments](#)

[Here I Go](#)

[The Best Luck](#)

[Not About Love](#)

[It Isn't Over](#)

[The Right Kind of Magic](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jamie Bennett (that's me!) is the author of a lot of super-great books, including more [that take place in Tennessee](#) and [a bunch about football](#). You would really like them. In fact, you should probably read them right now, immediately.

Seriously. Go find them [on Amazon](#).

You can reach me via [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#) @jamiebennettbooks (and join the Rocinante group for extra updates).

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