

# VERONICA MIXON

## THREE FACES IN THE MIRROR

A NOVEL

# **THREE FACES IN THE MIRROR**

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Published by Sapelo Publishing

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*To my husband for his inspiration and gentle push to take this story and make it mine. You only see the best in me, and it is because of you, I write.*

*You are my forever.*

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*WILLA*

I GRABBED MY PHONE FROM THE BEDSIDE TABLE, OPENED THE calendar, and for the hundredth time, counted the days since my last period.

“Jesus.” I wasn’t actually calling for his help because Jesus and I weren’t that close. I’d stopped asking Him for miracles on the same day I stopped believing Santa Claus would bring me a new mommy.

But I’d spent too many mornings puking in the toilet I shared with three other foster girls to keep denying the truth. I blinked back tears. It was too late for blubbering. I pulled up the abortion clinic website and clicked on their contact page. My phone dinged with a pop-up email message. *Congratulations, Willa Elliott, your DNA results are in!*

My brain froze. My eyes dried. My thumbs flew over the screen, but I kept hitting the wrong letters. Why was I wiggling? Not like my mother’s name would be flashing with a loving message for her long-lost daughter. Would it?

Maybe—Ancestry.com did have private messaging.



Three weeks ago, on my eighteenth birthday, I'd bought an ancestry DNA kit, filled out the forms, spit into the test tube, and mailed the package back the same day. I wanted answers.

Who were my parents?

Where did they live?

Was I just the byproduct of somebody's sleazy one-night stand?

I rushed down the hall and into the living room. Sat at the wobbly corner table and adopted my Christmas-morning-foster-kid attitude, excitement laced with low expectations. I booted up the computer, logged into Ancestry.com, skipped over the FAMILY TREES and SEARCH buttons, and checked for a private message.

None.

I backtracked and clicked on my DNA STORY.

A green, yellow, and blue color wheel displayed my supposed ethnicity—sixty percent England, Wales, and Northwestern Europe, thirty-three percent Ireland and Scotland, two percent Other regions.

That seemed reasonable. At least my DNA matched my hair, a color my foster mom, Mrs. Rice, called ginger. And didn't green eyes come from Ireland? Or was that blue eyes? I'd zoned out during genetics in tenth-grade Biology. I mean, why bother when you couldn't fill in the names of your parents on the stupid family tree project.

I clicked on the next option—DNA MATCHES. The first block labeled PARENT/CHILD had no names. But I zeroed in on the second block—IMMEDIATE FAMILY.

*Richard Lambert*

All rational thoughts like *don't get carried away. This could be a fluke. There's no guarantee these people will welcome you into their lives* flew from my head, replaced with *I had a family. A real family.*

I clicked on Richard Lambert's name.

*Predicted relationship: Immediate family—separated by three degrees. Confidence: Extremely high—probable uncle or aunt.*

The hairs on my arms tingled.

I stared at the computer screen. Richard Peter Lambert—my biological uncle. The tingle slid up my arms, across my shoulders, and shot like tiny ripples down my spine until my whole body felt electrified.

I had a family.

An uncle, maybe more than one and probably aunts. I had grandparents. Real live grandparents. Or at least I hoped they were alive.

I wasn't just a foster kid. I had a relative. And if there was one, there was probably more. I had real blood relatives.

I popped out of the chair, ran through the living room, into the kitchen. Stopped. Listened. Crap, no one was home. Everyone was at the church bake sale in the park. I'd worked the late shift, and Mrs. Rice had let me sleep in.

Floating back into the living room, I plopped on the sofa. Maybe I'd only tell Mrs. Rice. I didn't want to give the tween musketeers misguided hope they could locate their family members. They were still years away from eighteen when they could legally post their DNA.

Maybe I could find this Richard Peter Lambert. I opened a Google search on my cell and typed his name. Four profiles appeared. The first, a British journalist, was seventy-four years old. Not likely he'd have a sister or brother the right age to be my mom or dad. The second Richard Lambert died on March 3, 2013, at the age of sixty-two. Still too old. The third, a twenty-year-old attending Stanford College was probably too young. But the fourth, a thirty-five-year-old attorney practicing law in Helena, Montana, passed the age test.

I'd always lived in Wyoming, right here in Rock Springs. For some reason, I'd imagined my birth mother lived close by, maybe one town over. But this Lambert guy lived in Montana.

If my birth family lived in Montana, how did I end up here? Did my mother drop me off in another state like an unwanted stray dog?

I returned to my ancestry family tree, drilled into Lambert's profile.

*Profession—Attorney.*

I typed *Richard Peter Lambert, Attorney, Helena, Montana*. A website popped. My heart lit like a sparkler on Independence Day. It had to be him. I skimmed the pages until I landed on his photo. Blue-eyes, chestnut hair, straight nose. The sparkle fizzled, and every ounce of happy drained away. This man looked nothing like me.

I leaned closer to the screen, peered into his eyes, expecting to feel some invisible current of connectivity, a metaphysical string joining me to this man, my blood kin. Nothing. Not even the goosebumps I sometimes got for no reason.

Didn't matter.

I found the contact number for Lambert's law firm and picked up my cell. I had a family. Real DNA proof that said we were blood-kin.

*IVY*

I BALANCED A STEAMING CAPPUCCINO ON MY LAPTOP, ESCAPED through the french doors of our master suite, and crossed the brick patio leading into the garden. The rumble of morning traffic in Savannah’s historic district was much less distracting than my husband’s dramatic temper tantrum over his newest floor lamp creation. I admired Rence’s passion for furniture artistry, his competitive spirit, his bold and fearless disposition—just not at seven o’clock in the morning.

I settled in a chaise lounge and switched the sound-bar on the side table to soft jazz. The scent of jasmine drifted over our garden’s privacy wall. I enjoyed the warm climate and southern charm of Savannah, but sometimes, during quiet times, I missed the majestic mountains of Montana.

I skimmed my emails and located Camille’s portfolio, a young designer I’d discovered on a New York buying trip. When I opened Allure eight years ago, most people in town considered my shop too European-high-end for Savannah. But it turned out women of the Low Country enjoyed having a local source for haute couture fashion.

The french doors creaked, and my six-year-old daughter, Abby, peeked out. She scampered over, the bottom of her pink princess nightgown dragging. “Mommy, I was looking everywhere for you.” She climbed onto my lap.

I brushed hair out of her eyes. “Are you excited about starting tennis camp?”

She buried her head against my chest. “I don’t want to go.”

“It’ll be fun. You’ll meet lots of new kids, and Emma-Rose will be there.” I kissed her head and smelled her apricot-honey shampoo.

“I want to play chess instead. Daddy says chess is fun. I don’t want to go to tennis school.” Her green eyes glittered with determination. Abby and her dad shared the same exercise philosophy—no sweating.

“You can’t join the chess club until third grade. You’re only going into first grade, Sweet Pea.”

“I’m not a pea. Grandma says you shouldn’t call people vegetables. Are you going to walk me to camp?”

”No, Mia will walk you. I have to go to work.”

“Can Daddy take me?” Her bossy tone evaporated into more of a whine.

”Maybe. You can ask him at breakfast.”

My phone buzzed. “It’s Uncle Peter.” I nestled the phone next to Abby’s ear.

“Hi, Uncle Peter.” She giggled, pushed the phone toward me, and slid off my lap. “I’m thirsty, can I have chocolate milk?”

“Only one glass. And let Mia help you.”

She disappeared through the french doors.

Hey,” I said to Peter. “Did you get my email?”

“I did. I see Rence isn’t joining us at Amelia Island?”

“Not this time. He’s introducing a new line of accessories from local artists—wood, clay, hand-blown glass. All one-of-a-kind. He’s heading to Europe for a month.”

“We’ll miss him.” No half-hearted brother-in-law joke. No jab about summer-European-work vacations. Nothing. Peter sounded off. A little tense.

”Is everything okay with you? The kids?”

“Are you alone?” His voice turned consoling, the same tone he’d used in September when he’d told me Dad passed away.

My heartbeat ticked up a level. “Yes, I’m alone. Why?”

“I don’t know quite how to tell you this...”

“What is it?” My heart ramped another notch.

“A young woman called my office. I wasn’t going to tell you... I mean, you’re over two thousand miles away. But the more I thought about it, two thousand miles isn’t that far. And I’m afraid you need to prepare.”

“What did this woman want?”

“She claims she’s the baby. Your baby. The baby you gave up.”

Sounds swirled. A car horn. The clip-clop of a horse-drawn carriage. Norah Jones singing “Come Away with Me.”

*The baby you gave up.* ”But how did she find you? She can’t be my baby.”

“She says—”

“Dad said no one would ever know.”

Silence.

Rence walked past the french doors. I lowered my voice. “Dad knew how to skirt the system. He was a judge. And Mom was adamant there be no trace of the Lambert name.”

“I’m sure Dad—”

“Mom found a doula. There’s no hospital record.”

“None of that matters now.” Peter’s insistence pushed me past reason and into bullheaded. Rushing water. The shower. Rence. I jumped to my feet and walked to the far edge of the garden.

“My baby has a family. A mother. A father. Dad arranged a private adoption. She went to a good family. And Dad used an attorney who promised there’d be no link to our family.”

“Ivy, you aren’t listening.” Peter’s courtroom voice penetrated my one-sided debate. “It’s different now. Anyone can find anyone.”

“How is it different?”

“Christ,” he blew a short, hard breath. “This is all my fault.”

“Your fault?”

“Kelsie’s sister. Remember Janie? She gave everyone DNA kits. Kelsie thought it would be a fun project for the kids to trace their heritage.”

I pressed the phone tight to my ear, tried silencing my thundering blood. “I don’t understand.”



“We all sent our DNA into Ancestry.com. Evidently, so did this girl. I never once imagined this could happen.”

“What happened?”

“It didn’t cross my mind when I spit into the test tube. But I checked and damned if she’s not listed as close family on my report.”

“Mommy,” Abby called my name.

I turned my back and faced the side street. “What report?”

“Ancestry.com’s online DNA report that lists my blood relatives—parents, siblings, uncles, aunts, all the way to fourth cousins. The list goes back so far, I don’t even recognize half the names on my list—”

Weightless, unanchored thoughts spun and twisted and crowbarred their way out of the emotional vault I’d slammed shut eighteen years ago.

Me screaming in pain.

A baby crying.

The doula placing a perfect little human on my stomach.

A cap of blonde hair. Two beautiful soul-searching eyes.

The doula snatching her away.

A sedative popped in my mouth, a soothing voice, *Hush now, darlin’, you’ll have plenty of time to have more babies.*

“I didn’t admit anything,” Peter said. “I didn’t give her any information about you.”

His assurances unleashed something in my chest too big and too black for words. I struggled for air. Confusion, curiosity, fear, shame—each new wave of emotion squeezed.

A question, long ago branded on my heart, slipped from my lips. “What’s her name?”

“Willa. Her name’s Willa Elliott,” Peter said. “I found her on Facebook, and Ivy, it’s spooky how much this girl looks like you.”

Peter’s words sliced my heart as clean as a surgeon’s scalpel.

*WILLA*

MY CELL VIBRATED WITH A MESSAGE. I SHOVED PHYSICS ASIDE and checked my screen.

*Need you to work a double*

Crap. I could ignore Tim. Pretend I'd gone shopping with Mrs. Rice and the girls. But he'd bombard me with texts until I answered.

I'd called Wings & Things, the dump of a sports bar where I worked. Tim answered.

"It's Willa."

"One of Sue's kids has the flu," Tim said. "You need to come in." His high-pitched voice sounded exactly like his sister Lydia, the real boss of Wings & Things. "Lydia's on the warpath. Might not hurt to be here by eleven."

Just the thought of working a twelve-hour shift made my legs ache. "It'll be almost midnight before we clear everyone out. I have a physics exam tomorrow. I need to study."

“You want me to tell Lydia you blew her off?” Tim’s voice turned as arrogant as his whispering squeak could manage.

It was too soon to risk pissing off Lydia. Three weeks ago, she’d finally let me out of the kitchen and on the floor. Without tips my school budget was blown. “I’m on my way.”

Fifteen minutes later, I hurried into Wings & Things, threaded my way around tables filled with screaming basketball fans, and pushed through the door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY. I stuffed my backpack into my locker. Lydia must’ve sprayed on her peony body wash again, her signature scent. The flowery odor mixed with the fryer grease from the kitchen and made my stomach roll.

I tied on my apron and peeked into the kitchen. Lydia and Tim huddled in the far corner, no doubt discussing whatever stick had wedged up Lydia’s butt.

Tim noticed me and held up three fingers.

I worked the tables in section three for the next twelve hours. Hauled beer and nachos and plates of french fries drenched in fake cheese until my feet were numb and my arms quivered.

The last four-seater in my section cleared out a few minutes after eleven. I headed for the lockers. I figured I’d made close to a hundred dollars in tips.

Lydia crossed my path at the bar. “Stop by my office before you leave.”

An uneasy prickle crawled across my shoulders. Everyone knew bad things happened in threes. I’m pregnant, my newfound uncle won’t return my calls, and now Lydia was probably sending me back to the kitchen. Without tips, I

wouldn't hit my savings goal this summer, and that meant no University of Wyoming in the fall.

I slid my backpack from the locker and played back my shift. The kitchen had kept up with my orders. No one griped about slow service. I hadn't forgotten condiments or straws or made anyone ask more than once for a refill on drinks. Maybe she just wanted me to cover for Sue again tomorrow.

Lydia's door stood open.

I knocked on the jamb.

"Come in." Lydia picked up a white envelope. "This is a week's severance pay. Tonight was your last shift."

I backed away from the envelope. This couldn't be happening. "You're firing me?"

"Mr. Norton's making a few changes."

"Norton wants me fired? Norton's never here. He doesn't know my name. Why fire me?"

"Our numbers are down. He says we have too much wait staff."

My throat clogged with tears. *No crying. Be an adult and make your case.* "We were packed tonight."

"Basketball season is almost over, and we'll be slow until football season."

"But I'm your most reliable server."

"You're my newest server, and you're leaving for college at the end of summer. And Tina and Sue have kids." Lydia gave the envelope a shake. "I included a letter of recommendation, but that's the best I can do."

“Lydia, I need this job. I need the money for my tuition.”  
And money for the abortion clinic.

“I hear Applebee’s is hiring. So is Denny’s on Stagecoach Road. They both have a steadier business.”

“I can’t work for a chain. They won’t hire anyone on probation.” Even if my social worker lived up to her promise and wiped my juvie record clean, it’d be at least another month before I could look for another job.

“Sorry.” Lydia’s tight lips and creased forehead brought back memories of Judge Threadgill’s expression right before spouting off his rules to allow me to live with Mrs. Rice. First rule—gainful employment.

“Can’t I go back to the kitchen?”

“We’re cutting the kitchen staff, too.”

“This sucks.” I grabbed the envelope. Lydia’s bullshit decision incinerated every entry on my spreadsheet outlining the next four years.

I stomped back through the kitchen. Tim lowered a baking pan filled with sudsy water into the sink. A flash of pity crossed his face. “I’ll give you a lift home.”

“Thanks.” My head pounded as if a woodpecker hunted for worms inside my brain. I grabbed a water from the cooler, opened a bottle of aspirin, remembered, and stuck the bottle back on the shelf.

I sat on the hood of Tim’s candy-apple red Firebird and waited for him to close down the kitchen. I opened Lydia’s envelope and verified tonight’s tips were included in my severance pay. Two hundred and sixty-six dollars. Adding this check to my savings brought my balance to \$3,604.83. Not near enough.

I'd spent hours strategizing with my school counselor to come up with a solid money plan for college. Even with financial aid and working part-time, I needed eleven thousand to get through four years. I had to save another thousand before starting school in the fall, then work part-time during school, and full-time in the summers to make it through. Now, all those neat columns on my fancy spreadsheet, checked and rechecked, meant nothing.

I had no job. Not enough money for college. And with Mrs. Rice's rule of no pregnant girls in her house, no home. I couldn't raise a baby with less than four grand in the bank. And chasing after a rodeo cowboy who didn't want to be a father, expecting him to pony-up child support, was no way to bring a kid into the world.

I couldn't put it off any longer. Wyoming law had abortion on demand for the first fourteen weeks, but after that, only for medical emergencies. And I was pretty damn sure procrastination didn't qualify as a medical emergency.

*WILLA*

DOWNTOWN HELENA REMINDED ME OF AN OLD TELEVISION western. But instead of dirt streets, hitching posts, and covered carriages, these roads were black-topped, trucks and SUVs filled the parking spaces, and the only cowboy on the street was an eight-foot bronzed statue.

The billboard above the First Interstate Bank flashed the temperature as sixty-two, but my borrowed white blouse clung like a second skin. *Walk across the street and get this over with. Face Richard Peter Lambert, verify your birth mother's name, and get on the bus back to Rock Springs.* I crossed the street and opened Lambert's office door.

The lobby stood empty. What if Lambert was out of town? Maybe that's why he hadn't returned my five phone calls.

A short, plump receptionist with the nameplate of Norma, checked out my jeans and blouse. "Can I help you?"

"I'd like to see Mr. Lambert." My voice came close to squeaking and held none of the swag I'd practiced in the mirror for the last two weeks.



Norma checked her computer. “Do you have an appointment?”

“No.”

“May I have your name?”

“Willa Elliott.”

Norma’s expression didn’t change, but her steel-blue eyes darkened to a deep gray. Yeah, she recognized my name. “Mr. Lambert’s unavailable.” The little snap in her voice reminded me of a displeased customer at Wings & Things. I plastered on my customer-is-always-right smile. “It’s okay. I don’t mind waiting.”

“His first available appointment is a week from Monday.” Norma rattled off her response straight-faced and didn’t take her eyes off me, didn’t check her desk calendar, didn’t look at her computer screen. She was lying.

The bus to Rock Springs left at two o’clock, and this was my last chance to get answers. No way I was letting this desk gatekeeper get in my way.

I looked over my shoulder, surveyed the empty seats behind me. “Yes, I can see you’re really busy. I’m not leaving until I speak with Mr. Lambert.”

“As I said, that’s not possible today.” Norma’s drop-dead tone remained firm, but her eyes shifted. The first tiny crack in her uppity self.

I looked past her, down a long hall that led to a set of closed doors. “Look, he promised to call me back two weeks ago. I’ve left five messages. You might as well tell him I’m here. I’m not going anywhere until I get my five minutes.”

Norma's mouth stretched so tight her bottom lip disappeared. But she rolled her seat back and motioned toward the chairs. "Have a seat." She walked down the hallway slower than a footless snail, knocked on the double door, and disappeared inside.

Within thirty seconds, Lambert barreled into the hallway. His shirt sleeves rolled to his elbow. A navy tie hung loosely around his neck. His face set in a hell-no greeting. "I'm busy. What do you want?"

I had a lot of experience with blustering drunks. Lambert's temper show didn't scare me. I removed a storefront photocopy of a boutique called Allure from my backpack. "Is your sister Ivy Rose Abernathy who owns this shop in Savannah?"

Lambert snatched the paper, then crossed his arms. "What are you after?"

"Answers."

He frowned, looked at Norma, then motioned toward the hall. "Let's take this into my office." He left me hurrying to catch up. Inside his office, he pointed to a black leather chair in front of his desk. "Sit."

I scanned the room. I didn't want to give the impression his fancy office bedazzled me, but I noticed his smooth, rich paneled walls, how my feet sunk into the soft pale gray carpet, and the brown leather sofa and chairs arranged around a stone fireplace.

Lambert sat behind a desk that could easily seat eight people for dinner. "I'll give you five minutes. What do you want?"

My mind spun with questions. Why did my mother abandon me? What's my father's name? Are my grandparents alive? Do I have cousins? Is there a family tree? Is there an empty spot where my name should be?

I clamped down my heart and braced for disappointment. "Is Ivy Abernathy my birth mother?"

"How much?"

Hoping for a yes, but expecting a no, I blinked. "What?"

Lambert slid on a pair of reading glasses. "How much money do you think this little stunt's going to get you?" He opened a desk drawer.

My brain did a slow reboot, blanked, stalled, then clicked in. "I'm not here—"

"How much?" He opened a black book.

My face blazed in shame. I stared at my hands, tried to figure out how this conversation got sideways, but Lambert's gaze burned through my skin, and I couldn't think straight.

Money. I'd never considered asking for money.

A scene from Mrs. Rice's soap opera popped in my head. A mom offering her son's pregnant girlfriend ten thousand dollars if she'd leave town and never return.

"Ten thousand." The words were out before I could call them back. They tasted bitter and rancid on my tongue, like a piece of meat gone bad.

Lambert didn't flinch. I watched his hand write the check, his fingers tear the paper from the book, then push the check across the desk.

I could've asked for more. How much more? Twenty thousand? Fifty thousand? What would these rich people pay to get rid of me, the smear on their perfect lives?

Lambert tapped the check with his pen. "This is all you get. Don't make the mistake of coming back. I'll file extortion charges."

His threat ripped through my chest and hit bone, but I accepted his check and took my time folding it in half. I slid the paper into the side pocket of my backpack and walked out of the room. I strode through the hall, across the foyer, and down the sidewalk. I walked the block and kept going. Passing one street, then another. I sat at a picnic table bordering a park.

On a bench near a small pond, a mom with two children threw pieces of bread to a mama duck and her four babies. A woman in black running shorts and a bright yellow t-shirt jogged by holding the leash of a little white, panting dog. The smell of charred meat from a hamburger stand nearby filled the air.

What now? I had Mrs. Rice's offer of paying fifty dollars a week to live with her until I left for college. But after that, I had only myself to depend on. And I had my appointment at the abortion clinic day after tomorrow. I was eighteen and jobless, and abortion was the smartest choice.

But no matter how many times I convinced myself, abortion was the best way to go, one nagging thought waded and bounced in my head like one of those neon cowboy signs advertising the next rodeo.

No matter how bad, how scary, or how desperate my birth mother had been, she hadn't made an appointment at an

abortion clinic. And that had to say something about her character. About her heart.

I played out different scenes in my head for the coming year, then rested my hands over my lower stomach and made peace with my decision.

No abortion. No adoption. And for now, no University of Wyoming.

*IVY*

MIA WALKED ABBY TO TENNIS CAMP, AND RENCE TOOK A phone call from his assistant. I slipped on a mint green dress with three-quarter sleeves, stuck a pair of three-inch sling-backs in my bag, and stepped into a pair of plain beige flats. My first-born child, the baby I'd handed over to strangers eighteen years ago, wanted to meet me.

My chest filled with a slow burn of shame. Shame that in ten years of marriage, I'd never shared my secret with Rence. Shame that my first response was to run. I grabbed my purse, flew down the stairs, and out the front door.

I passed through my front garden, the irises and agapanthus, and hydrangeas in various stages of eye-popping blue. The brakes on a tour trolley screeched to a stop. "And this is the Eliza Thompson House," a female tour guide's microphoned voice blared. "If you take the evening ghost tour, you'll hear stories of the multiple sightings of James Thompson standing in the window of Room 132 ..." I continued past the trolley, dodged a man in running clothes holding a map, wearing a look of confusion.

I'd heard stories about orphans searching for birth parents. Been drawn to the TV shows featuring adults tracking down parents and siblings, watched the touching reunions. But I never believed it would happen to me. My daughter would never find me because Dad left no link to our family.

And she had a mother and a father—a family. That's what I'd been told. My baby was in a family with other kids, happy and laughing. I always imagined her laughing. And in my story, her name was Sadie.

I waited on the corner for a group of bicycling tourists to pass, then turned left onto Barnard Street.

The first year I always imagined Sadie as a toddler learning to walk. Chubby cheeked and grinning with a head full of reddish-blond curls like me as a baby. The second-year, I envisioned her learning to talk, stringing funny nonsense words together in a conversational cadence like the daughter of my tennis coach.

At three years, I created an entire preschool scene in my head. Sadie learning colors and counting to twenty and singing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." Then I graduated from boarding school and came to Savannah for college. I met Rence and stopped imagining Sadie.

Rence had a smooth, charming, understated elegance, so unlike the jeans and cowboy-booted macho guys from Montana. The first day he breezed into my art class with his jet-black hair, searing blue eyes, and undeserved athletic grace, Cupid's arrow dead-aimed into my heart.

And Rence adored me. He loved my class design portfolio. Loved my long ginger-red hair, which he renamed rose-gold in honor of my old-fashioned name, Ivy Rose. A name he also loved. He loved my athleticism, the idea that I had played

competitive tennis, and enjoyed equestrian jumping. He mistook my shyness as innocence, and I let him think what he wanted.

Then Rence invited me home to meet his mama, and I got a taste of his world. A four-generation family rooted in southern tradition. A mother who would never, not in a million years, ship her daughter off to another state to live with a maiden aunt because she made a split-second mistake. And as further punishment, send her to boarding school for the remainder of her high school years.

I'd latched onto Rence and his perfect storybook life like a groupie to a rock star, and buried my memories of Sadie so deep it was if she never existed.

But Sadie does exist. Only her name is Willa.

And Willa wanted to meet me.

Cold fear crystallized in my core like an ice cube cracking in a martini glass.

I just needed a few hours to digest the news. That's all. A little time to figure out how to admit to the world I had another child. A child I'd never bothered to mention to the man I loved. A man who could shut down my brain for a solid ten seconds with nothing more than a smile.

Peter's warning voice whispered in my ear, *Tell Rence before the girl shows up at your door.* I tried imagining this conversation with Rence. Would I drop the news over martinis? During dinner? In bed, after mind-blowing sex left us both satiated and Rence's eyelids as heavy as stones?

I fast-walked through Orleans Square. What if Willa came to Savannah? Even if I told Rence and he forgave me, and we



accepted Willa into our lives, how would we explain the sudden appearance of a daughter old enough to vote?

And then there was Rence's mother. Georgia Leigh Abernathy, a fourth-generation Savannahian who defined the term "steel magnolia". I'd always suspected Georgia believed the state had been named after her and not the other way around. My mother-in-law would take this stunning revelation that she had another granddaughter with quiet dignity, and then bury me, one shovel of dirt at a time.

Her son, Clarence Beauregard Abernathy III, the namesake and grandson of a U.S. senator, might not have married a Yankee, but neither did he marry a nice southern girl. This newest breach of trust—another *I told you so*—was by far the worst in my long line of transgressions.

So much more disappointing than my refusal to join the garden club or to decline to sit on the country club's decorating committee or claiming agnosticism as my reason for not holding our wedding at the First Baptist Church of Savannah.

Over the years, I'd earned my mother-in-law's love with three redeeming qualities. An unquestionable fashion sense, a successful high-end Savannah clothing boutique, and I'd given birth to her little princess and only grandchild, Abby. News of Willa would burst ten years of my painstaking gains into smithereens.

I slowed and watched two teen girls hoarding the sidewalk outside a favored lunchtime spot called Lacy's on the Park. The tallest, dressed in flip-flops, strategically ragged-out mini-shorts, and a clingy mid-drift top, leaned against a brick wall built before the Civil War. She gathered her long auburn hair

over her shoulder, tilted her head, and smiled coyly at an iPhone held by her equally underdressed friend.

I couldn't take my eyes off Model Girl. Her long slender legs and arms, bright hazel eyes, beautiful smooth skin hiding behind too much makeup. These girls were close to Willa's age. Would she, too, come to this charming historic city filled with landmarks and beautiful parks and spend the last gorgeous days of spring snapping pictures of herself outside Lacy's?

I turned right on York, crossed into Wright Square, made a quick stop at Wright's Cafe, and bought my favorite stress reliever, a half-pound of peanut butter fudge. I popped two pieces in my mouth in quick succession.

Half a block from Broughton Street, the first bars of "You Really Got Me" played on my cell—Rence's ringtone. Anxiety bubbles rose in my throat, but I forced light and easy into my voice. "Hi, sweetheart."

"Where are you? When I got off the phone, you were gone."

"I have a problem at the shop with a large order," I lied with no hesitation.

"Cybil called from Paris, we have problems in London, and I have to start my European trip early."

"How early?"

"I leave today."

"Today?" Crushing disappointment railroaded my anxiety. Rence would be in Europe for close to a month. I'd planned a family picnic in Forsyth Park on Saturday with all his and Abby's favorite foods. And later, a romantic adults-only

dinner, maybe dancing, maybe sex...definitely sex. “What time’s your flight?”

“Late afternoon. I’ll leave straight from the office.

I pivoted. “I’ll come back and see you off.”

“I’m already walking out the door.” He sounded distracted, ready to be gone.

“How about lunch?” Could I spring the news of a grown daughter over lunch?

“I can’t today. We have our monthly staff meeting, and then I have to go straight to the airport.”

My worry slipped away. Rence’s trip gifted me with a month’s reprieve. I’d have weeks to work this out.

“I’ll ask my new assistant, Serena, to send you a copy of my travel schedule.” His voice softened. “I’m sorry we can’t say a proper goodbye.”

The understanding of what a proper goodbye would entail sent a head-to-toe shudder through my body. “It’s okay, honey. But we’ll miss you, and don’t get so busy you forget to call.”

“I’ll check in as soon as I land.” A loud beep. “Sorry, babe. I have to take this call. Love you to Pluto and back.”

“And into the next galaxy,” I finished our omega ritual, a sweet hyperbole that always left me feeling wrapped in Rence’s love.

I arrived at Allure with an empty box of fudge and a powerful thirst.

Ursula, my assistant manager, looked as chic as a Milan runway model in a brown and black geometrical sheath. She held up a red silk dress to a brunette wearing the new deep red

trump-sleeved dress I'd considered taking home last night. "This crimson number will look fantastic on you, too."

I caught Ursula's attention, pointed toward the back of the shop. "I'll be in the office."

She nodded, turned back to the woman, and waved toward the dressing room. "You're going to look stunning."

I grabbed a bottle of water out of the small cooler next to my desk. My cell buzzed with another call. Peter. My heart bumped against my chest. I closed my office door. "Hello."

"Willa just left."

"She came back?" My pulse zoomed close to a three-mile jogging range. "Why? What did she want?"

"Money."

"Willa asked for money?"

"She didn't come right out and ask." The edge in Peter's tone mixed with something I couldn't pinpoint.

I set the water aside and slid into my desk chair.

"It's a shakedown," he said. Peter's nerves manifested into anger.

I got antsy and talkative. "But what about her family? Where are her parents? What did Willa say about her family?"

"Nothing."

"You didn't bother to ask why she needed money?" I lowered my voice. "I'm sorry, Peter. I'm just confused. Did Willa say anything about her adopted family?"

"I did some checking. It seems she lives in a foster home in Rock Springs, Wyoming."

“A foster home?” I closed my eyes, tasted the bitterness of all-encompassing guilt. I tumbled back eighteen years—me asking Dad what would happen to my baby. Dad’s quiet assurance she would be in a wonderful home with parents who loved her. “What happened to her parents?”

“I have no way of knowing. But if she’s after information, she’ll probably petition the court to unseal her records when she turns eighteen.”

“Twelve days ago.”

“What?”

“Willa turned eighteen on June fourth. Twelve days ago.” My lungs burned, each fiery breath growing hotter. “Did Dad lie to me? Was there no adoption?”

“Lying wasn’t Dad’s style. But there’s something else you need to consider. Willa knows you own Allure.”

“She knows I live in Savannah?” A tingle of wonder slid through my skull—my Sadie searched and found me. And she had enough spunk to go to Montana and question Peter in person. A tiny touch of unease filtered into my admiration. Enough spunk to come to Savannah?

“I paid her off,” Peter said. “Gave her a check for ten thousand and threatened charges of extortion if she comes back for more. I’m pretty sure I scared her. But she’s tough.”

“Define tough.”

“Battle-scarred.”

It was if a hole burned through my rib cage, then fingers gripped my heart and squeezed. “Battle-scarred?”

“Bad choice of words. Willa just looks kind of rough. Tattoos, that sort of thing.”

In my head, Sadie was still three. She should be wearing cartoon stickers, not permanent ink. I readjusted my image, used Model Girl as a prototype, and gave Sadie-Willa my eighteen-year-old body with a tattoo on her— “Where’s her tattoo?”

“Did you tell Rence?” Peter asked.

“No. He has a business emergency. He’s leaving for Europe in a few hours.”

“I’d advise you not to wait.” Peter’s tone turned condescending and lawyerly and slid under my skin. “Nothing’s harder on a marriage than a breach of trust.”

Voices filtered through my office door. “The shop’s getting busy. I need to go.”

“I’m sorry this mess has been drudged up.”

Mess hardly portrayed the turbulence Willa’s sudden appearance would cause in our lives. “I’ll send a check today for the ten thousand.”

I went online and moved money into my checking account, then found my checkbook, wrote Peter a check, and addressed an envelope. Paying Willa to leave me alone might be the simplest way out of this problem, but it felt slimy.

Although, what if money was all she wanted? Maybe she didn’t want or need a mother. She was eighteen—an adult. Willa wasn’t my child, not really. Not like Abby.

My gaze lingered on a photograph on my desk. Abby at four, Rence swinging her high in the air. I’d caught Abby’s surprised delight.

Peter said Willa looked like me. Did she look like Abby, too? Did she have our green eyes, our rose-gold hair, and

milky white skin? The only thing Abby inherited from Rence was his temperament. Was it the same with Willa? Was there no evidence of her father, a boy named Noah, with a Jekyll-and-Hyde personality?

I placed Peter's envelope in the outgoing mail. Was ten thousand enough? Maybe Willa needed more. My curiosity turned into a hard-fast need-to-know. Why was she in a foster home, and why did she require money so desperately she hunted for me? Nothing about this seemed right.

I had to tell Rence, but would he be able to absolve dishonesty of this magnitude? Yes, of course, he would. Rence cherished our marriage. He'd forgive me because he was my world, and I was his. Because we had a beautiful daughter together. Because we were a family.

I would fly to Wyoming and find Willa. Let her know she'd be welcomed into our life. But first I had to explain everything to Rence. News this life-changing required thought and planning.

I called Rence's assistant and asked for his travel plans. A week in London, another five days in Barcelona, then two weeks in Paris. I checked my calendar. If I moved a few appointments and skipped the beach vacation with Peter's family, I could swing two weeks in Paris. Abby would still be in summer camp, and she loved our live-in nanny, Mia.

In Paris, while Rence worked, I could spend my days visiting fashion houses and meeting with prospective designers. But I'd fill our nights with romantic dinners and long walks along the Champs-Élysées. This trip could be our second honeymoon, the perfect environment to renew our commitment to one another.

And during our enchanting rendezvous in the city of love, I'd find the perfect time, the perfect place, the perfect words, to make him understand why I had never summoned the courage to share the biggest secret of my life—a daughter—a girl named Willa.



*WILLA*

THE BOEING 737-900ER TAXIED ALONG THE SALT LAKE CITY runway. I sat in the window seat on the twenty-third row and gripped the armrests with every bit of strength I possessed. The roar of the engine turned into a smothering weight and wrapped my body like a straightjacket.

I craned my neck to see past Susan, my talkative seatmate, still chatting about her dislike of Stephen King novels. Where were all the attendants? *I'm an idiot. I can't fly across the country.*

A baby in the seat behind me wailed. He wanted off the plane, too.

I couldn't do six hours and twenty-five minutes in a metal death trap. Where had the attendant said the floatation devices were stored? I should've taken a bus to Savannah.

Chatty Susan gripped my forearm. "Look into my eyes."

"Please." I clutched Susan's hand to my chest. "Help me. I need to get off. Now. I need off now." My lungs shrank. I sucked in a tight, tiny breath.

“Breathe, honey. I’m an experienced flyer. Just take long, deep breaths.” Susan’s soft, high voice didn’t match her frame.

“A stout woman,” Mrs. Rice would call her.

“I’ve logged over a million miles.” Susan smiled. I couldn’t look away from the deep red lipstick stain smeared over her teeth—the color of blood.

Bile crept into my throat. Oh, God, I was going to be sick.

“Come on,” Susan said. “You can do it. Breathe. Is this your first time flying?”

I nodded. My tongue too thick to speak.

Susan patted my hand, then pulled from my grasp. “The company I work for owns a chain of boutique hotels. We have two in Savannah.” Susan loosened her seatbelt and tugged her purse from under the seat. She removed a roll of breath mints, popped one in her mouth, and held out the candy. “Would you like one?”

I shook my head and tightened my seatbelt.

“I’m a wine buyer for the hotel’s restaurants. I get paid to visit vineyards all over the world.”

I searched through the pocket of the seat in front of me. I shuffled past the airline’s magazine, the vomit bag, yanked out the laminated safety sheet.

“Can I see that?” Susan took the safety sheet and exchanged it for an airline magazine. She flipped to a map. “I taste the wines of California, Italy, France.” She slid her finger to South America. “I also visit Chile and Argentina.” She smiled. “Don’t forget to breathe, honey.” She tapped the lower far corner of the map. “But Australia is my favorite country. I spend three weeks there every year.”

I needed air. I turned the knob on the overhead vent to full blast. I tried remembering the physics explaining how these monsters with wings got off the ground. *Drag, lift, thrust. Fluidity of flow. Descent angles.* Seemed so reasonable sitting in my desk at school, not so much when I was strapped and stuffed inside a cylindrical bullet with unflappable arms.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” a male voice blared, “this is your captain speaking.”

Heat shot up my back. Oh, God, something went wrong. An engine’s on fire.

“We lifted off a few minutes late,” the captain said, “but we have a tailwind, so we expect to arrive in Atlanta twenty minutes early. We’ve hit our cruising altitude of thirty-five thousand feet, and it looks like a smooth ride for the next six hours. Sit back and enjoy the flight. And thank you for flying Delta.”

“I always take the red-eye on cross-country flights,” Susan said. “I see no reason to waste my day on a plane.”

Thirty-five thousand feet. I closed my eyes, calculated feet to miles. We were flying over six miles above solid ground. I was going to die. I pressed my hands against my ricocheting heart.

*God, it’s me, Willa. I know we don’t talk much, but if you could see your way to getting me off this plane, I promise to stay on the ground for the rest of my life. And wasn’t I supposed to promise something in exchange for my life? For my baby’s life?*

*I promise to check in more often.*

I looked around for a pencil, but my backpack was under the seat. I’d have to unbuckle my seatbelt. I settled on working

out the math in my head. Six-hour flight, sixty seconds a minute. Twenty-one thousand six hundred seconds. Okay, I could do that. One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three—

At twelve hundred and three Mississippis, Susan tapped my arm and nodded toward the aisle.

A flight attendant rolled a cart to a stop. “Would you care for a beverage?”

“No, thanks.” I tried remembering where I’d left off, then saw the safety instructions in Susan’s seat pocket. I yanked the laminated card free, zeroed in on the picture of a man, his arms wrapped around a flat, yellow pillow. The attendant said to use the seat as a flotation device.

My seat was blue, not yellow. “Excuse me.” I shoved the safety card at the attendant. “Is the cushion on here the same as the one I’m sitting on? Does it work the same?”

The attendant’s forehead creased as if she didn’t understand. It wasn’t a hard question. Yes or no. “Does my seat cushion work the same as the pillow he’s holding?”

“Yes, it works the same.” She looked down at her beverage cart, but not before I saw her eyes laughing.

Susan ordered two glasses of wine. “Don’t worry. There’s no water between Salt Lake and Atlanta.”

“So if the plane crashes, we barrel into a mountain?” If that was supposed to make me feel safer, the effort could only be described as a herculean fail.

Susan took the safety card and nudged a glass of wine into my hand. “Wine is the healthiest sedative. Studies prove women should drink one to two glasses every day.”

Being pregnant meant no alcohol, no drugs, not even over-the-counter aspirin was safe for the baby. I considered explaining, but she nodded encouragingly. “Go on. It’ll calm you. I promise.”

A few sips of fermented grape juice should be okay. I two-handed the glass, sipped, then tightened my lips to keep from making a face. Beer had been my alcoholic beverage of choice. Generally because it was cheap and plentiful at the few parties that lasted late enough for me to attend—working until two AM put a crimp in my high school party life.

The wine’s fruity tart flavor left a tingling bitter aftertaste. After about half the glass, a warm blanket of heat spread down my throat and loosened my chest. One glass of wine probably wouldn’t be too much for the baby, and we were likely going to die anyway. I downed the rest, embraced the idea of liquid courage.

I rested back against the seat, closed my eyes. I mentally checked off my new firsts—first plane ride, first glass of wine, and the first time there was no one to ask for permission to travel. To drink alcohol. The wine felt warm, soothed my chest and meandered into my tummy, then did a U-turn. Bitter acid rushed a scorching path up my throat.

I handed Susan my glass, covered my mouth, and fumbled in the seat pocket for the vomit sack. I gagged, spit, coughed into the bag. Then it was like a chemistry experiment erupted in my stomach and headed for my throat. “Oh, God.” I gagged and spit again.

Susan rubbed my shoulder. “You okay, sweetie?”

“Bathroom.” Holding the bag, I unbuckled my seatbelt and stumbled to the back of the plane. I dashed into the minuscule toilet, threw the white bag in the waste bin, and washed out

my mouth in a sink the size of a cereal bowl. I looked in the mirror. A purple wine stain covered my right breast. I'd ruined my new white blouse. Washing with soap and water only made the spot bigger and more prominent.

Back in my seat, my head floated like a balloon tied to my neck.

Susan eyed my blouse. "Red wine stains are the worst. Better ask the attendant for club soda. Did you pack an extra set of clothes in your carryon?" Susan's tone indicated anyone with half a brain would know to do that.

I slid my backpack from under the seat, removed my University of Wyoming sweatshirt, a graduation gift from Mrs. Rice, and slipped it on. I shut my eyes and closed out the absurdity of flying miles above the earth.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Atlanta," the captain's voice carried over the loudspeaker. "The local time is 6:20 AM, and the weather is a balmy eighty-eight degrees. Crew, please prepare the cabin for deplaning."

Susan wrestled her carryon from under her seat.

I grabbed my backpack and stepped into the aisle behind her.

"It's such a coincidence we're both headed to Savannah." Susan checked her phone. "According to the Delta app, our next plane is already boarding eight gates away. We'll have to hurry."

Susan and I made it to the gate with only minutes to spare. According to the brochure inside the pocket of my new seat, this plane, an Embraer ERJ-170, had the same under-the-seat

life jackets, the same red signs above the side exit doors, and the same vomit bags in the seat pockets.

Susan sat three seats back. My new seatmate, a fifty-something brunette in dark blue yoga pants, matching jacket, and Nike running shoes, nodded at me and stuck her nose in a James Patterson paperback.

The flight attendants barely had time to hand out bottles of water and packages of pretzels before the plane landed in Savannah. I waited for Susan to roll her suitcase down the aisle, then followed. “Do you know if there’s a bus stop at the airport?”

“I thought you had family in Savannah. No one’s meeting you?”

I looked her square in the eye and said, “No. My visit’s a surprise.” My voice didn’t even wobble.

Susan and I walked down a short hall that emptied into a large room with rocking chairs. A man playing a baby grand piano sang, “Fly Me to the Moon.”

“This way.” Susan nodded toward the Baggage Claim sign hanging over the escalator. “Are you going to the downtown area?”

“Yes.”

“I’m taking a shuttle to my hotel. You’re welcome to ride along. And there’s a bus stop across the street at Forsyth Park.”

“That’d be great, thanks.”

Susan stepped to the first baggage carousel. *Delta—Atlanta 1265* flashed overhead. “Looks like we beat our bags.”

The conveyor started a slow roll. I moved aside so a woman with two children could drag a pink suitcase off the conveyor.

Susan collected a piece of dark navy luggage, placed her matching carryall on top. “You haven’t seen your bag?”

“Not yet.”

Ten minutes later, the conveyor stopped.

“That’s not yours?” Susan motioned to an oversized beat-up red suitcase, the only luggage left.

“No. I have a green duffle bag.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll stop by the Delta counter and file a report. Same thing happened to me last year. You usually get your bag delivered the next day.”

“But—” The duffle held my life, all my decent clothes, my shoes, my picture album the tweens put together for my graduation present. “I don’t have any clothes.” This sucked off the charts.

“Come on,” Susan said. “We’ll give Delta the address where you’re staying.”

Address? I had no address. I’d checked online for cheap hotels, made sure I could swing the rate for a week, but I’d planned to look over the four cheapest before deciding and checking in.

Susan walked me toward a counter and we got in line behind three people. “How long will you be in Savannah?”

I hadn’t anticipated the question. I should’ve. It was the kind of question I asked my customers at the restaurant all the time. *Why are you in Wyoming? How long are you staying?*



I had to say something, and lies were more believable if you stuck close to the truth. “I’m not sure how long. But I start at the University of Wyoming in August.”

“Who did you say you were visiting in Savannah?”

“My mother.” The words were out before I thought through the hundred reasons I shouldn’t tell this particular truth.

“How nice.”

“My mother owns a dress shop on Broughton Street.”

“Really? Which one?”

“Allure.” What difference could it make if I pretended Ivy and I had a real mother-daughter bond? It wasn’t like Susan and Ivy would ever meet. And just saying “my mother” made this trip seem more like a real visit and not a loser begging for help from a rich relative.

“Savannah’s lovely, the squares, the tree-lined streets,” Susan said. “Where does your mom live?”

I slipped my backpack off my shoulder and fiddled with the strap. I’d said too much. “I can’t remember the exact address.” The lie slipped out without hesitation, but it didn’t make sense a daughter wouldn’t know her mother’s address. Susan’s forehead wrinkled, and I rushed on. “My mom recently moved, and I bought a new phone right before leaving Wyoming. I didn’t realize until just a little while ago that my contact information didn’t transfer.”

Susan seemed to accept my lame excuse. “Delta will need your mom’s address to deliver your bag.”

I knew Ivy Abernathy’s address, and thanks to the Historical Society website, I also knew her Romanesque

Revival masterpiece was considered one of the most distinguished homes in all of Savannah. I knew the square footage totaled a whopping eighty-five hundred. I knew there were three bathrooms downstairs, and four upstairs, and the first-floor master suite had something called an atelier, which, according to Wikipedia, was a fancy name for an artist studio. But there was no way I could allow Delta to deliver my duffle bag to 57 Jones Street.

“We can Google the address of your mom’s shop. Allure, right?” Susan’s thumbs moved over her phone. “Here it is—1209 Broughton Street.” She enlarged the photograph. “I know this store. It’s a couple of blocks west of Bull.”

Mrs. Rice’s warning—*Oh, what a web we weave*—flashed, then morphed into my social worker Dorothea’s smooth round face—*no more lies, Willa. Lies lead nowhere. They ruin your life.*

“Our turn.” Susan gestured me toward the attendant operating the lost baggage counter. “I have a couple of days off while I’m in Savannah,” Susan said. “I’ll stop in and check out your mom’s shop. And if it works out, maybe the three of us can have lunch.”

*WILLA*

I LIMPED DOWN BROUGHTON STREET NURSING A BLISTER ON my heel. My fake Doc Martens, not the smartest shoe choice for walking. I passed the Starbucks on the corner of Bull Street, then backtracked and walked inside.

Exhausted, I stood just inside the door breathing in the caffeinated cool air and asked myself for the hundredth time today, why I'd left the only real home I'd ever known to hunt down a woman who, by every indication, didn't want to know me.

Ivy Abernathy had never listed on an adoptee registry, never sent DNA into any ancestry site, and hadn't tried contacting me after I tracked down her brother. A brother who'd paid me off and threatened extortion charges if I showed my face again.

Tears tingled my nose. So why was I here? What did I really think I could say that would convince Ivy to welcome me into her life? I was halfway across the country, dusty, dirty, and dragging around my overstuffed backpack. I glanced at my reflection in the display case. Dusty boots, wrinkled,

stained shirt, my hair escaping from my braid, frizzing in the hot, humid air. I could easily pass for a homeless person.

“Excuse me.” A man in an Atlanta Braves hat and Oakley shades tapped me on the shoulder.

I side-stepped and let him by, then followed him to the coffee line. Over the past two hours, I’d visited five budget hotels searching for a place to stay until I could figure out how to dazzle Ivy with charm, then make my pitch.

I didn’t expect fancy for \$68 a night. And I didn’t mind a two-mile walk into town or the sad pea-green room with the chipped bathroom sink. I didn’t even care that half the rooms at the last hotel kept their doors wide open, a clear sign the place had crap air conditioning. But the stream of men and women visiting the corner room, twitching, scratching, slapping their arms and chest as if bugs crawled over their skin, kept me from throwing my money down for a room.

I’d seen a few kids in high school with those same tells. Within a few days they disappeared into rehab or into the wind looking for another fix. I’d have to move up to the chain hotels, cut my stay down to a max of eight days.

Or I could walk two blocks, open the door to Allure, confront Ivy Abernathy, and just get it over with. But my feet hurt, my head ached, and my blouse had a wine stain as big as a grapefruit. I ordered the cheapest thing on the menu, a green tea, and joined the other five people waiting for their orders.

Should I ring Ivy’s doorbell in the morning and say, “Hi, I’m Willa, your daughter.” Or should I visit her shop, pretend to be a tourist, and strike up a casual conversation. Maybe talk about Savannah’s weather compared to Wyoming’s, mention my recent graduation from high school to slip in my age. Ask

her if she had children. Somehow squeeze in me being a foster kid. Check out her reaction.

A guy standing beside me—tall, thin, early twenties—glanced at my face. He moved his gaze to the backpack resting on top of my shoes, then to the three hotel brochures in my hand. “Visiting?”

“Yeah.” I leaned left and let a middle-aged woman grab a mouth-watering mocha Frappuccino off the bar.

“Daniel.” He offered his hand.

I switched the brochures to my left hand and shook. The first time I could remember a guy under twenty-five formally introducing himself.

Daniel had light brown wavy hair that he swept to the side before he spoke. The blister on my heel screamed, and I was a little envious of his brown Birkenstocks. No guys in Rock Springs would be caught dead in a pair of Birks.

“Where you headed? I mean, I could give you a lift.”

My tired brain couldn't seem to link four words together to form a simple *no thanks*.

He smiled. “I'm not an ax murderer. I have a buddy who works his way through college Ubering tourists around town. He owes me a favor.”

I laughed. “No, thanks. I'm checking out places but haven't decided where I'll end up. Thanks anyway.”

“How long you staying?” His eyes made me think of a summer sky right before a storm

“Not sure.”

He glanced at my overstuffed backpack, my H&M bag, then his gaze slid up, hesitated on the stain on my shirt. “Over a week?”

“Maybe.” I shifted my arm, tried covering the wine stain. “I really don’t know.”

“Horton,” a barista yelled.

Daniel claimed his coffee but didn’t leave. “It’s summer break. A couple of my friends went home. Won’t be back until late August.” His words came out in spurts. “They’d sublet. To offset their rent. I have keys. If you’re interested.” His crooked off-center smile was kind of cute. “My friend will rent by the week.”

“Willa.” The barista slid a large green tea across the bar.

I grabbed my drink. “Is it a hostel or something?”

Daniel’s forehead wrinkled, then he laughed, his teeth lined up like piano keys, so white they had to be bleached. “No. It’s efficiency apartments. For SCAD students.”

“SCAD?”

“Savannah College of Art and Design.”

I shouldered my backpack. “Oh, yeah. I noticed a couple of those signs.”

“You want to take a look? My building’s a few blocks away. The available apartment’s on the top floor.”

“How much?”

“Two hundred. Two hundred dollars a week.” He smiled, looked down at his feet.

Okay, not shifty. Shy. “Two hundred a week sounds reasonable.” Cute, shy guys had a way of sliding past my

defenses, got under my skin and into my pants. Cute, shy guys skated out of town as soon as you announced a baby grew in that sexy body he loved so much.

“Okay,” I said. No matter how cute, shy or not, guys were off-limits.

Daniel led the way outside, and I started a marked route in Google Maps to make sure I could find my way back in case the apartment didn’t work out.

We walked through Wright Square, turned left onto West York, and stopped outside a building that looked like every other three-story house on the block. But inside, Daniel’s building had been carved into eight efficiency apartments. The top floor overlooked a bank parking lot. The area seemed safe, the unit had decent air conditioning, and the price worked.

The only furniture in the room, other than the bed, was a nightstand, a straight-backed chair, and a small chest of drawers. A bathroom, slightly larger than the one on the airplane, was in the corner. A counter with a sink and a hot plate sat under a window on the far wall. I opened the under-the-counter fridge the size of a large microwave. Renting this place allowed me eat in and save money.

I paid Daniel in cash, thanked him, said goodbye, and locked my door. Then I called Delta and gave my new delivery address for my missing luggage.

Checking the map on my phone, I estimated the walk from my apartment to Ivy’s shop would take twenty minutes. I removed a small over-the-shoulder travel purse and transferred my money and ID.

I showered, twisted my hair into a quick french braid and swiped on a light coat of mascara. I changed into the green silk

blouse I'd just bought on sale for eight dollars at H&M.

I dug into my pack and found my roll of duct tape. *You'll be surprised how often you'll need duct tape*, Mrs. Rice had said when I opened my graduation gift, tagged college starter box. I reminded myself again why I left Wyoming—my baby deserved a family.

I used nail clippers to cut two small strips, made a quick Band-aid with tissue and tape, then slipped on my boots.

Susan's voice played in my head. *Maybe the three of us could have lunch*. But the offhanded invitation didn't matter. Susan was just friendly. She wouldn't call me or stop by Ivy's shop. I shook off my worry, locked my door, and walked down the stairs studying the Google map leading me to Allure.

My foot hit the bottom step, and Daniel's door opened. "Hey. A group of us are going to Spanky's for pizza tonight. You interested?"

"I have a thing. Sorry."

"If you get finished before eleven, Spanky's is in City Market. You can't miss it. There's a band tonight." He flashed his shy-boy smile. "I'll be singing."

"Really? I guess I'll have to stop by and check that out." Did I just say that? With a flirty voice? A wide full smile?

I hurried out of the building, down the sidewalk, and into a park. No. No, I would not stop by to see Daniel sing. It was like my brain refused to face my messed-up life. It seemed so much easier to pretend I was just a girl on a summer vacation. I picked up speed.

You couldn't walk three blocks in downtown Savannah without running into a park. I didn't slow down until I'd passed the big rock marking the grave of a Native American



Chief named Tomochichi. I passed the Starbucks where I'd met Daniel and turned left on Broughton.

I had no doubt I'd recognize my mom. I'd searched and saved tons of Facebook photos. Spent hours comparing my face to Ivy's, even photoshopping our pictures side by side. I definitely had my mom's bright green eyes and upturned nose, but we had different chins. And Ivy's face looked fuller, softer.

On Facebook, Ivy had tons of photos of a little girl. One had her blowing out candles. Ivy had tagged the shot as *Abby's fifth birthday*. Abby had the same gingery red hair as me, the same light complexion. But a beaming smile had turned her eyes into slits, making it impossible to tell if she had green eyes like Ivy and me.

I admit, my heart felt squishy with the idea I could have a sister. Would we have an instant connection? Were half-sisters really just different flowers from the same garden like the lady on *Long Lost Family* once said?

I passed a Tommy Bahama store and recognized the entrance to Allure. I stood in front of the window for a few seconds, pretended interest in the mannequin's blue silk blouse and skinny jeans. *Now or never, Willa*. I wrapped my fingers around the shop's wooden door handle, and a stream of sweat slid between my shoulder blades. The words I'd practiced so many times in front of the bathroom mirror vanished. I dropped my hand, backed up a step, and ended up a few doors down, on a bench, in front of an ice cream shop.

A part of me regretted my decision to face my biological mother. Even if she accepted me and welcomed me into her life, like all those birth mothers on television, how could she measure up to the perfect mom of my childhood dreams?

No way she would, but it was too late to change my mind now. I couldn't live in a dream world anymore. In real life, I had a baby to worry about. I needed help and a realistic plan for my future.

I checked the time on my phone. The shop closed in ten minutes. I rose, walked toward Allure, and didn't stop until I stood inside the boutique.

A brunette, who looked close to six feet tall, with spiky black hair who could've just walked off a *Cosmopolitan* magazine photoshoot, handed a hot pink dress to a woman in jeans and an I LOVE SAVANNAH t-shirt. Not Ivy.

I faked interest in the clothes on a store mannequin, fingered the bronze leather shorts, flipped over the price tag dangling from the sleeve of the long, mid-calf, beige jacket—\$439. I backed up a step and clasped my hands behind my back.

I counted three customers in the shop. Then I zeroed in on a petite woman. Every thought, every desire, every part of my plan, jumbled and mixed, as if my brain had been dropped in a whirling blender.

Ivy's gaze skimmed the store, sliding past me. She dashed to a rack against the wall, pulled a black and gold jacket from a hanger and held the piece against her chest. "What do you think?" She asked a plump, bleached-blonde woman.

The blonde tilted her head, and Ivy opened the jacket. The woman slid her arms inside and considered herself in the wall mirror. "Why, I think it's adorable."

Ivy pointed to the window, "That Stephen Malcolm skirt on the mannequin would look fabulous paired with the jacket."

She walked straight toward me.

Breath lodged in my throat like a glob of peanut butter. I didn't breathe or swallow or move. I just stared—it was like looking in a mirror rushing forward twenty years.

*IVY*

“MOMMY.” ABBY SKIPPED ACROSS ALLURE’S HARDWOOD floor and wrapped her arms around me.

I bent, scooped her up, and planted a noisy kiss on her lips. “What are you doing here?”

“We came to surprise you.” Abby wiggled herself down to the ground. “Mia says we have to ask you before we can have ice cream.”

I noted Mia’s makeup, her strapless sundress, her red high heels. “Hot date?”

She blushed. “No, just dinner with my parents.”

“You look beautiful.”

“Thanks. I thought I’d save time and bring Abby to you, but since you’re planning to take her out for pizza, I wasn’t sure about the ice cream.”

“No ice cream before dinner,” I said to Abby. I checked my watch. “We close soon. Why don’t you take off early, Abby can stay with me?”

“My cousin’s in town, and if it’s okay, I’d like to stay at my parents tonight.”

“Sure. But remember, I’m leaving for the airport in the morning at ten.”

Abby wandered to the scarf display. Playing dress-up would keep her busy until I finished up and could close the store. I unzipped a gold pencil skirt off a mannequin and turned back to my customer. “Stephen Malcolm creates magic with his silk designs. This will look fabulous with that jacket.”

By the time the last customer strolled out of the store, and I closed the register, Abby had rearranged all the scarves and turned her attention to the hats. “I’m hungry.” She plucked a wide-brimmed black hat from a display, plopped it on her head, and looked in the mirror. She tossed the hat aside. “I want to braid my hair.”

“Your hair’s already—”

She yanked at her intricate Dutch braid, which I was certain took Mia thirty minutes to create. She clutched her now-loose hair in her hand. “Braid it like this.”

“Like mine?” I picked up my over-the-shoulder braid.

“No.” She swept her hair to her back and used both hands to hold it behind her neck. “Like this.”

“You mean one long plait?” I finger-brushed her hair and began a tight braid.

She pushed at my hand. “No. Like the girl.”

“What girl, honey?”

“The pretty girl that looked like us.”

“I don’t know who you mean.”

She pointed her finger at a mannequin by the door. “She was over there.”

My brother’s voice echoed in my head. *Willa knows you own Allure*. I thought back, pulled in a fuzzy picture of a young blonde, back turned, leaving the store.

My heart stuttered. Could it have been?

No. I would’ve sensed something, intuitively known if Willa was only a few feet away. I smoothed and plaited Abby’s long hair into a loose braid and snapped her rubber band in place. “What do you think about picking up a pizza and watching a movie in my bedroom while I pack?”

Abby turned sideways, checked her hair in the mirror. “And chocolate ice cream?”

“Of course. Who eats pizza without chocolate ice cream?”

The alarm buzzed at six-fifteen. I slipped out of bed and staggered into the bathroom. I fumbled with the shower controller, then stood naked, waiting for the hot water to steam. I showered, dried my hair, applied makeup, and went to wake Abby.

She lay in a five-point star on her full-sized bed. I marveled at how one petite six-year-old could take up so much space. I sat on the edge of her mattress, pulled her into my arms, and breathed in the apricot and honey scent from her shampoo.

“Mommy, your hands are cold.”

“I’ll warm them on your tummy.” I tickled her ribs.

She giggled and scooted under her comforter. “No tickling.”

I stopped.

She peeked from under the covers and grinned. “Again.”

I tickled her sides, then her feet, and laughed at her shrieks. I pulled her close, pushed hair from her eyes. “Time to get up, Mia will be here in thirty minutes. We have to hurry, or I’ll be late to meet Daddy.”

“This is for Daddy.” She cobra wrapped her arms around me and squeezed. I lingered over her hug. Two weeks seemed too long to be away from Abby. I reminded myself, it was silly to nurse my anxiety. Mia was a responsible young woman, and parents planned vacations away from their children all the time.

The next half hour turned into a blur of activity: a hurried breakfast, last-minute packing, Abby’s tearful breakdown over a missing shoe, the airport limo arriving, Mia rushing in fifteen minutes late.

I ended up passing Abby off like a relay baton. “I love you, Abby. I’ll call you tonight.” She nodded, didn’t look away from the cartoon playing on the small TV in the kitchen.

I rolled my luggage into the foyer.

Mia followed me to the door. “I forgot to mention. I have a school interview in Charleston on Friday. It’s a morning appointment, so I’ll be back in Savannah in time to pick up Abby from camp.”

“If you run into traffic, call Ursula or my mother-in-law to help out. And don’t forget Abby’s bedtime is strict at nine o’clock.”

“Got it.”

“And remember to read more books and watch less TV with her.”

“Done.”

Outside, a steady rain had turned the sky a dull pewter. My driver scurried up the sidewalk and popped an umbrella. “Better hurry, ma’am. A bad accident has I-16 backed up for miles. We’ll have to take the back roads instead.”



*WILLA*

I SAT IN THE ONE STRAIGHT-BACKED CHAIR IN MY APARTMENT and considered my next move. Introducing myself in the privacy of Ivy's home would be more practical than in front of a bunch of strangers shopping for high-priced clothes that cost more than I made in a month waiting tables.

I opened the Savannah Historical Society website, and searched for 57 Jones Street, then scanned the photographs of the inside of Ivy Abernathy's home. The comment to the right of the first photo, a shot of the front of her three-story house, read, "History buffs will appreciate recent renovations that added modern amenities to the home without forsaking the elegant circa 1850 features of crown molding, ornate door frames, and the original wide plank heart pine floors."

The notation beside the foyer photo—"show-stopping double spiral staircase rises around a custom Venetian chandelier"—didn't begin to describe the castle-like feel of the room. The writer didn't even mention the matching mirrored chests, and the two gigantic white flower bouquets in blue and white urns, that looked like something Cleopatra might've had

in her living quarters. Or the gleaming floor that looked like a fancy chessboard, the pale green rug that appeared faded. Probably another original, an antique from the 1800s worth millions.

I'd studied all ten photographs for months, even downloaded some of them to my phone. I could quote the descriptions of the rooms from memory. But the most unbelievable, mouth dropping photo for me wasn't the foyer or the gourmet kitchen with its eight-burner stove or the dining room with the black table so shiny it looked like some kind of waxed marble. And it wasn't the living room with furniture that reminded me of the Obamas' private sitting room at the White House, a picture I remembered from a report I'd made in my eighth-grade history class.

No, for me, the most amazing room in the Abernathy mega-mansion was Abby's princess bedroom. A dreamy wonderland right out of a Disney movie. A four-poster bed decorated with tons of pink gauze sat on a raised platform in the center of the room. She had a three-story castle dollhouse with moats and drawbridges and a tower fortress with a Rapunzel balcony.

White and pink 3-D hearts floated on one of her walls. And over her bed, a light fixture, the website described as *a crystal mobile of Venetian hand-blown butterflies* hung from a ceiling of blue and white clouds with twinkling starlights. I couldn't imagine Cinderella having a more perfect bedroom.

How could a mother give only one of her daughters that kind of life? Shouldn't she love all her kids the same? Wasn't she a little curious how her oldest daughter turned out? What I looked like? Ivy never once came looking for me. To her, I

was nothing but forgotten garbage she'd dropped off in another state.

Last night before I went to sleep, I decided bolting from Ivy's shop yesterday was exhaustion and frustration, not jealousy. I lied. I was jealous, and desperate, and fucking mad. My kid and I deserved at least a little piece of Ivy Abernathy's grand movie-star life.

I pocketed my phone and checked the cash in my wallet. A sick, sinking sensation swept through me, but this time it wasn't morning sickness or jealousy over my little sister's perfect life.

Thanks to my lost luggage, I'd been forced to buy the green shirt. Then to bounce back from my crappy mood last night, I'd found Spanky's, where Daniel and his friends were playing. Daniel had the crowd on their feet and dancing in the open courtyard to "Uptown Funk."

A guy asked me to dance and invited me to join him and his friends at their table. A group of college students on their way to the Florida Keys. During a band break, Daniel stopped by. Turned out, shy-boy had a wry sense of humor, and I had a pretty decent time hanging out.

But my fun escape cost sixteen bucks. Now, after paying for my airfare and a week's rent, I only had a little over three hundred in cash left. My plan to confront Ivy hit the urgent level.

I slid my remaining money behind Peter Lambert's ten-thousand-dollar check and stuffed my wallet in the side pocket of my backpack. I planned to give the check back to Ivy. Today I'd find out if she wanted to make amends for abandoning me. But if all she wanted was for me to disappear again, ten thousand wasn't the price.

I hurried down the stairs and out the front door and smacked into a wall of drizzling rain. I dug my sweatshirt out of my bag, plugged in my earbuds, and slid my phone into my front pocket.

I followed the map's verbal directions to Ivy's house. The rain kept the tourists inside their hotel rooms, and I had Pulaski Square to myself. I walked up Bull Street until I hit Jones. I'd never seen houses so close together. Three-story homes, one beside the other with no space in between, ran for block after block. And every direction I faced held shades of green. Huge oak trees draped in spooky gray moss lined the streets, and a green plant I thought might be called English ivy grew on walls too high to see over. Clay pots were stuffed with blooming flowers and sat like miniature soldiers protecting the front doors.

Three blocks down, the houses grew larger, the front gardens bigger, and the cobblestone street narrower. This block had a total of three homes on the left, four on the right, and they were all twice the size of my apartment building. Ivy's home, a gray brick three-story, looked more like a bank than a house. The place had enough wrought iron trim to build a jailhouse. A white limousine with the motor running sat parked in front of an open wrought iron gate that had to be at least five feet tall.

I slipped across the road and burrowed between two neck-high bushes covered with pink blooms. I hoped the limo waited for Ivy's husband, Rence Abernathy. One less person to worry about when I introduced myself to Ivy as her long-discarded daughter.

The front door opened. Ivy rolled three suitcases onto the porch, and my plan melted away faster than a dropped snow

cone in July.

A short, skinny man wearing a chauffeur's uniform ran forward with an open umbrella. Ivy ducked and ran beside the man and slipped into the limo's backseat.

The driver returned to the porch and loaded the luggage into the trunk. The gate slowly closed, and the limo rolled away.

Now what?

Ivy had three suitcases. Three suitcases didn't mean an overnight trip. And I couldn't wait around Savannah forever, even if I allotted myself ten dollars a day for food. After paying rent, my money would only last one more week unless I dug into my savings, which I couldn't risk. All that stood between me and starvation was the two grand I'd left in my Wyoming bank account. I had to find out how long Ivy would be away.

Knocking on the front door, pretending to be a family friend, and asking how long Ivy would be out of town might work, but what if the husband answered? He might ask too many questions.

Maybe the store clerk back at Allure would know. I remembered the tall, skinny fashion empress with cagey eyes and nixed the idea of sliding any bullshit explanation past her.

I reconsidered knocking on the door, then noticed some kind of control box sitting to the left of the gate—probably a buzzer. Okay, I could do this. I flipped my hoodie off my head and debated whether to remove my sweatshirt.

Ivy's front door opened, and I slipped back into the bushes.

A pudgy brunette not much older than me, the one who'd brought Abby to the store yesterday, held an umbrella over Abby's head and wrestled with a small duffel bag. She must be the sitter. They walked through the gate and turned left, heading in the direction of Bull Street.

I pulled up my hoodie, crossed over, and followed.

At the corner, Abby slowed and pointed down, then wiggled her foot. The brunette handed Abby the umbrella, knelt, and retied Abby's white sneaker.

I hung back.

The brunette tucked Abby's t-shirt into the waist of her pink shorts and grabbed the handle of the umbrella. They turned right and followed Bull Street through Monterey Square. I did the same. They walked another two blocks and entered a large open area. A sign said, Forsyth Park.

The rain slowed, then stopped. The sitter folded the umbrella and tucked it into the duffel bag. She and Abby zigzagged through trees and park benches, skirted a fountain with a ring of angels blowing trumpets, and ended up at a tennis complex. A SWEET SHOTS TENNIS banner flapped against the fence. The sitter and Abby disappeared through the gate.

The sun came out from behind the clouds, and I removed my sweatshirt, tied it around my waist. Either I could tackle the fashion diva at Allure for Ivy's travel schedule, or I could wait for the nanny to come out, claim to be lost, and strike up a conversation.

Another girl, younger than me by a couple of years, pulled a dark-haired boy close to Abby's age up the walkway. "Come on, Roger, you're late."

I decided Abby's sitter would be my best shot for more information. I walked closer to the fence, hoping to head off the nanny, and noticed a Help Wanted sign. Someone had handwritten underneath, **APPLICANTS FOR TENNIS INSTRUCTORS MUST HAVE A SOLID B RANKING—WILLING TO WORK LONG HOURS—AND MUST LOVE WORKING WITH KIDS.**

My mind spun. I'd won second place at regionals. I liked kids, I could use the money, and working at Abby's camp would give me the perfect opportunity to get to know my little sister.

It felt like fate.

I walked through a gate leading to four tennis courts and into noisy chaos. At least thirty elementary-aged kids wandered around bouncing tennis balls on their rackets, then racing after them. A woman with stick-straight, chin-length brown hair, a style that always reminded me of a football helmet, held a clipboard in front of the practice backboard and chatted with a couple of the parents. Abby's sitter left using a small side gate.

Two teenaged girls wearing navy shorts and white polo shirts with some kind of emblem on the right sleeve walked to the backboard. "All campers line up," the older girl yelled.

None of the kids paid her any attention.

The shorter, younger girl blew a whistle and held up a bag of cookies. "Line up for treats."

Three of the boys raced forward, and the rest of the kids followed.

I figured the clipboard woman, dressed in a navy tennis skirt and the same white-collared shirt as the two teens, had to

be the leader. I waited until the last adult left, then approached her. “Hi.”

“Child’s name?” The woman held her pencil and clipboard upright.

“I’m Willa Elliott. I want to apply for the position.”

The woman lowered her clipboard. “What’s your ranking?”

“I don’t play competitive tennis. But I was on my high school team.”

“I don’t recognize you. Which high school?”

“Rock Springs High in Wyoming.” I grabbed an idea from my dancing partner last night headed for the Florida Keys. “I’m traveling this summer. I like it here and want to stick around for a while. I could use the extra money.”

“This is a city program. I’m supposed to hire teens from Savannah.” The brunette rolled her eyes. “But dragging them out of bed before noon is another story.” She took in my Doc Martens, my jeans. “I’d have to get permission from parks and leisure to hire someone from out of town.”

“I really love working with kids.” I scanned the courts, found Abby, and turned back. “I’m attending the University of Wyoming in the fall, and I’m short volunteer hours for my scholarship. I’d be willing to work for free until you can get approval if you write a letter to my guidance counselor.” Maybe they provided lunch. At least I could save on food money.

A little girl’s curdling scream filled the air. “That’s mine!”

A young blond boy shoved a cookie into his mouth.

The little girl’s face crumpled. “That was my cookie.”



“Peter, tell Angela you’re sorry,” the shorter teen said.

Angela’s cries spiraled, she pointed at Peter, “He ate *myyyy* cookie!”

The brunette shook her head. Her chin-length bob, plastered like dried paint, didn’t move. “As you can see, I’m desperate for help. It’ll probably take a week to get your paperwork through city hall, but until then, if you promise to show up by eight-thirty every morning, I’d be happy to keep track of your hours and write a letter to your school.”

My heart skipped a couple of beats. “I promise. I’m very dependable.”

The woman offered her hand. “I’m Bridget, and you’re hired. We wear uniforms. But I’ll supply you with two camp t-shirts. Can you change into navy shorts and white sneakers and start today?”

*IVY*

THE STANDARD TWENTY-MINUTE DRIVE TO THE AIRPORT TOOK an hour and twenty minutes. By the time I made it through security, my plane was boarding. I settled into my seat, accepted a complimentary glass of champagne, and my phone chirped with a call.

“Can you talk?” Ursula asked.

“I have a few minutes before my plane takes off. What’s up?”

“A woman named Susan called a few minutes ago. She claimed to be a friend of your daughter’s.”

“A friend of Abby’s?”

“No.” The tingling sound of Allure’s front doorbell. “Hang on a minute.” Distant laughter. “I’ll be right with you, ladies. You still with me?”

“Yes.”

“It was the craziest conversation. This woman, Susan something, I can’t remember her last name, claimed to know

your daughter Willa. I told her you only had one daughter, and her name is Abby. But Susan insisted your daughter Willa was visiting you.”

Ursula’s words muffled, drowned by the stronger and far more compelling voice in my head, Peter’s voice. *Willa knows you own Allure.*

“She said she’d tried to reach Willa, but she hadn’t answered her phone. Susan wanted to take you and Willa to lunch. I told her I didn’t know anyone by the name Willa, and you were out of town.”

“Ma’am, you’ll have to put away your phone, we’re about to taxi.”

I stared at the male flight attendant. *Willa was in Savannah.* I held up a finger, turned my shoulders, and faced the window.

“I wouldn’t have bothered you,” Ursula said, “but five minutes after Susan called, Delta tried delivering a green duffle bag for a Willa Elliott. Do you know anyone by that name?”

“Luggage?”

“One of those rolling duffle bags.”

I tasted Colgate toothpaste and stale coffee. I willed my brain to function. Willa was in Savannah? The hazy picture of the girl in the shop swam in my head. “Did you accept the luggage?”

“No. I told the Delta guy he’d delivered to the wrong address. He called his Atlanta office, said that Willa Elliot had called in another address. Evidently, the dispatcher forgot to make the change on the ticket.”

“Did the delivery guy give the new contact information? Do you know where Willa is staying?”

“No. Why would he tell me?” Ursula’s words slowed to a crawl. “Do you know Willa Elliott?”

“Not exactly.” My words sounded tinny as if they came from a long way off. I’d have to cut my Paris trip short. Stay just long enough to explain everything to Rence, then fly back to Savannah and find Willa. “If Willa comes to the store looking for me, please explain that I’m out of town, but I’ll be back in two days, three at the most.”

“Ma’am,” The attendant said, “We’re taxing. You have to discontinue your call and put your phone into airplane mode.”

“You said you’d be gone for two weeks,” Ursula said.

“I know. But I’ve had a change of plans. If Willa comes into the shop, get her contact information and text it to me right away.”

*The pretty girl that looked like us*, Abby’s voice rang in my ears. I fought to bring the girl into focus. She had long, reddish-blond hair plaited in a single braid. She wore jeans and a green blouse.

Willa was in Savannah.

Rain followed me from Savannah to Paris and showcased the city in shades of brown and gray, the perfect canvas for my mood. I sat huddled in a taxi.

The driver turned left onto rue de Rivoli and rolled to a stop in front of the hotel Le Meurice, a whole city block of sweeping arches that led into an icon of spirited French panache. Usually, I considered a stay at Le Meurice pure

luxury, but today the realization I had to disclose my past and a daughter Rence knew nothing about left me drained and too tired to think.

I paid the taxi driver and relinquished my bags to the bellhop. During check-in, I tried lining up my reasons for having withheld information of this significance for the ten years of our marriage. But the hard knot in my chest and my queasy stomach were proof I was nowhere close to prepared for my upcoming tell-all.

I pushed the conversation with Rence to possibly this evening, during the late-night dinner I'd planned at Le Mandragore, a romantic bistro tucked inside a small boutique hotel.

“Madam.” Pierre, the front-desk clerk, slid an eight-inch solid brass key across the marble counter. No cards with magnetic strips at Le Meurice. “Enzo will show you to your room.” Pierre tilted his chin, and a young man wearing a traditional bellhop suit, red pants, and a gold cropped jacket, magically appeared with my luggage.

Rence loved Le Meurice and booked a suite here anytime he traveled to Paris. He claimed the spirits of Dali, Zola, Warhol, and Dylan, artists who'd once called Le Meurice home, lived among the grandeur of the soft patinated walls, the centuries-old marble floors, the Venetian crystal chandeliers gracing the towering ceilings. According to Rence, his artist's soul craved the magic, inspiration, and splendor of the eighteenth-century hotel. I suspected the five-star service also had something to do with his fixation.

A tall, elegant scarecrow of a man approached. He wore a black morning coat with gray trousers and carried a tray of

pale amber liquid served in diamond cut flutes. “Would Madam care for champagne?”

I’d spent most of yesterday meeting with my Atlanta distributors before my overnight flight to Paris. Then, I’d slept fitfully on the plane. Champagne at eleven o’clock in the morning would do me in. “No, thank you.” I gathered my purse and passport, turned to follow Enzo, paused. “Actually, champagne sounds wonderful.” I plucked a glass from the tray. Sipped. Sipped again. “Why don’t you send a bottle to our room?”

The scarecrow half-bowed. “Certainly, Madam.”

I needed to settle my nerves, and I didn’t mind succumbing to the sedative found in an expensive bottle of champagne.

Enzo waved toward the elevators. “After you, Madam.”

I crossed the grand lobby decorated in the style of Louis XVI. The gray marble flooring, featuring white octagon insets streaked in pale pink, glistened like a thousand fiery opals. Towering white columns trimmed in eighteen-carat gold leaf graced six arched doorways leading down hallways to restaurants, solariums, and an exquisite overpriced spa. Four twelve-foot high urns, filled with a cascade of fresh white hydrangeas, flanked the four elevator doors.

“Third floor, please,” Enzo said to an elevator attendant.

I remembered reading the hotel had more than four hundred employees for their 160 rooms. If you breathed too heavily at Le Meurice, a staff member rushed to your rescue.

Enzo escorted me down a bright, well-lit hallway with floor-to-ceiling windows draped in mint green silk draperies. Bewitching crystal chandeliers ran the length of the hall, twinkling and breathtaking in their Venetian glory. I switched

to a tiptoe gait to prevent my three-inch heels from sinking into the plush pile of the slate gray carpet.

I surrendered my key to Enzo, who made a production of opening the double doors to 3415.

The suite, as lovely as the one I remembered from my last visit, overlooked the charming and meticulous Tuileries Garden. The expansive living room bore the same Louis XVI decor as the lobby. The sofa, two wingback chairs, and a partners' desk were all in the hotel's traditional gold, silver, and ivory, as were two sets of french doors leading to a balcony that overlooked the garden's famed Ferris wheel.

In comparison, the bedroom, decorated in the same color palette as the living area, seemed almost understated with a simple silk gold duvet and three lavender pillows.

Enzo checked the ice and the air temperature controller. He opened a cabinet, turned a knob, and adjusted Celine's volume as she sang serendipitously of the power of love.

I gave Enzo the expected over-tip and admitted the room-service attendant. Leaving him to set up the champagne I'd ordered, along with a complimentary bowl of fresh strawberries, I went into the bedroom to hang my jacket and slip out of my heels.

My cell phone rang with Rence's ringtone. "Hi, sweetheart."

"Have you arrived at the hotel?"

"Yes. And I have champagne waiting. Is your meeting over?" I scooped a laundry receipt off the floor and placed it on the dresser.

"Champagne?"

“Veuve Clicquot.” I opened the closet door. “Your favorite vintage.”

“Are we celebrating something?” His voice filled with concern.

“I haven’t seen you in almost two weeks. Champagne seemed appropriate.” I stepped to an eighteenth-century Regence Lyonnaise commode, opened a couple of drawers. Both empty.

“I’ve missed you,” he said. “And champagne sounds perfect. I wish I’d thought of it. And I have exciting news.”

I checked another drawer, empty. “Does it have something to do with your missing clothes?”

“Jean-Louise Jouffre requested a meeting.”

“Jean-Louise Jouffre?”

“*The* Jean-Louise Jouffre. The most sought-after hotel and resort designer in the world.” Rence rushed his words, his tone almost giddy. “Jouffre did Le Meurice’s renovation two years ago. I lost out on that work, but he’s been awarded a five-year design contract with the Ritz. He wants to discuss custom work with me.”

“You’re not in Paris, are you?”

He blew a quick breath. “No, I’m in Lyon. It was all so sudden.” He exhaled. “This is a dream contract. Working with Jouffre’s team will catapult my work. Every designer in Europe will be calling me.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this last night when you called?”

“I was afraid you’d change your plans and not come. And I’d hoped to be back by the time you arrived, but we’ve had a little hiccup—”



“When will you be back?”

“By Friday. I swear. I know that’s three days away, sweetheart. But I need to be onsite while we work out the glitches.”

“But we have front-row seats to *Into the Woods* at the Théâtre du Châtelet tonight, and I planned a lovely late dinner at Le Mandragore.”

“I know. I know. I’m sorry to ruin your plans.”

My news couldn’t wait three days. I had to get back to Savannah. “I’ll fly to Lyon.”

“As much as I’d love to see you, I’m slammed with meetings. And we’re not staying in Lyon, we have property tours in Aquitaine, Bretagne, and on Thursday we have a meeting at the Hotel Royale.”

A headache clawed its way over my skull and settled behind my eyes. This wasn’t going to work. “I’ll go back to Savannah and fly back Friday or Saturday when you’re free.”

“That’s crazy. You’ll be exhausted with all that flying.” Exasperation skated through his voice. “Please stay in Paris. Splurge and spend a day at the hotel spa. I promise I’ll make this up to you. I’ll be back in time for dinner on Friday. We can order room service and stay in our suite the entire weekend.” His voice grew quiet and soft with what sounded like remorse. “You’ll be okay without me for a few days, right?”

A part of me filled with bitter disappointment. Another part sagged with relief. “I have appointments with a couple of design houses,” I said. “More than enough to keep me occupied for a couple of days.” And, if I were honest, I found

an ounce of solace that my life-changing news would have to wait three more days.

“You’re the best, honey. I’ll call you tonight. Love you to Pluto and back—”

Celine ended her ballad, and Michael Bolton’s crooning voice filled the room. I uncorked the bottle of champagne, poured a flute to the brim, and let Michael explain how a man loved a woman.

*WILLA*

THANKS TO AN EAST-FACING WINDOW IN MY APARTMENT WITH a broken mini-blind that didn't quite close, the morning sun woke me long before my alarm buzzed. I rolled over, unplugged my cell phone, and popped out my earbuds. Since arriving in Savannah, I'd gone to bed with the sound of music playing in my ears, low and comforting, to drown out the scary buzz in my head that popped in anytime I stayed still for more than five minutes.

My ability to sleep—my normal, dead to the world for twelve hours straight kind of sleep—had disappeared. Maybe it was the bigger bed or, the bigger room, or that I woke every few hours to slog to the bathroom and pee.

And the nightmares had started up again, so I'd taken to sleeping with the lights on. Each dream vivid and scary-real, came with a new detail I hadn't remembered from the night Jim died. It was if my mind sent more pieces and more questions with each dream—but so far, the new fragments didn't connect.

The only person who knew the whole picture and could connect the fragments was Ryder. I had his new phone number, but his accompanying message had been clear. *I'm out and headed for Florida. Keep my new number for emergencies—307 975 4232.*

I never knew two sentences could rip out a heart. Ryder had been released from prison a year earlier than I'd expected. But he hadn't tried to see me. But what did I expect after three years? And a baby wrecked any chance of us hooking up anyway.

I slipped on my new pair of navy shorts with a stretchy elastic waistband, my Savannah Sweet Shots t-shirt, and a pair of white, slightly used Vans I'd scored from Sandra's Closet, an upscale thrift store on Hull Street.

My luggage arrived yesterday, but I'd tossed out my old sneakers back in Wyoming. Shedding clothes to fit into one duffel bag, one backpack, and one lone box that I'd left in Mrs. Rice's attic hadn't given me much choice.

I grabbed my backpack and headed out. In the beginning, I enjoyed my short half-mile walk to camp. Liked to imagine what it'd be like to live in one of the brownstones with cobblestone streets and neat tiny courtyards. Then a few days ago, I started making a detour before work.

I walked through Wright Square and found Jones Street. It was the prettiest area in Savannah with its red-bricked paved streets and huge trees lining the sidewalks. The branches met in the middle and shaded the entire road.

I stopped in front of Ivy's house and counted the eight balconies lined with black wrought iron—I mean, who the heck needed eight balconies on their house? I'd been coming here a lot over the past few days. Usually, I'd come early,

before the neighbors started moving around, while Abby and her nanny Mia were still asleep. I'd walk through the side gate and crouch down in front of the bay window that looked into the living room.

Yesterday, I got a little braver and walked to the back deck and peeked through the kitchen window. I wanted to see where Ivy cooked, imagine I sat at the counter on one of the barstools. I'd pretended she and I were talking about our day, what I wanted for breakfast. Ivy's kitchen made Mrs. Rice's look like a broom closet.

I checked the time, not quite seven. I still had loads of time before I had to worry about Mia and Abby. They never woke before eight o'clock. I opened the latch on the side garden and walked to the back porch and sat in one of the wicker rockers. After a few minutes I got up and checked the back door. The doorknob didn't turn.

It was wrong to be here. I knew that. But all the same, I wanted to go inside and take off my shoes. Leave them on a mat, in what the historical society website called the mudroom, and pretend I lived here. I tried to walk into the kitchen, open the fridge, and pick out my favorite yogurt. Peach. I'm betting Ivy would have peach yogurt since she lived in Georgia. And maybe eat some leftover lasagna, my favorite. "Hey, Mom," I imagined saying, "Will you make me a cheese omelet this morning?"

For some reason, my imaginary game made me antsy, and I didn't want to hang around this morning. I left through the same side garden gate and walked up Jones. I turned right on Bull and headed for Forsyth Park and the tennis courts. Today as I passed the brownstones, I imagined they were clapboard instead of brick and the street dirt instead of cobblestone, so I

could pretend I was in Wyoming, on the way to Mrs. Rice's house. And for just a few minutes, the hardball of fear, lodged at the back of my throat, loosened.

All week, I'd arrived thirty minutes early and tried making myself indispensable to Bridget, my boss. I volunteered to check-in the students, freeing Bridget to chat with the parents or hide out in the pro shop and nurse her last cup of coffee.

This morning the sun seemed brighter and hotter than usual, and my forehead throbbed. I'd forgotten to grab a bottle of water and left my sunglasses on top of the chest in my apartment. By the time I walked to the courts from Ivy's house, my shirt clung to my bra like Velcro, and tears had pooled in my eyes for no reason.

Bridget sprinted through the gate ten minutes later. "I'm so late. Sugar, my poodle, shot out the back door this morning. She's in heat, and I looked like an idiot running down the alley in my robe and house shoes, with every stray dog in the neighborhood chasing after me."

Bridget stuffed her tote bag under a folding chair. "We need to get the balls out. The cookies. Need to put water bottles on ice." She hurried past me, looked back. "Tracy called in sick, and Cindy has an orthodontist appointment and won't be here until eleven. It's just you and me this morning. God, I need a cup of coffee." Bridget disappeared into the pro shop and left me to ready the courts.

Today, I planned to mention to Abby's nanny, that Abby seemed to miss her mom. Get Mia to give up Ivy's travel schedule. Abby didn't seem to know when her mom would be back from Europe.

All thirty parents arrived within minutes of one another. Abby appeared at my side. "Can I be captain again today?"

I looked up just in time to see my best chance to learn Ivy's return date wave goodbye. "Sure."

"And can me and Emma-Rose be in charge of snacks?"

I smiled at Emma-Rose, Bridget's niece and Abby's best friend. "I think that can be arranged."

Abby wrapped her arms around my legs. "Look, Coach Willa, we're twins."

I glanced down, and a funny tingle ran up my spine.

Abby wore her Savannah Sweet Spot camp t-shirt, navy shorts, and a brand-new pair of white Vans. She swung her head to the side, pointed to her braid. "We match like twin sisters."

My heart exploded like a shooting star.

Bridget walked by and gave us a once-over. "You know, Abby's right. You two look enough alike to be sisters."

I tempered my breathing, moved hair off my neck, and allowed a new layer of sweat to evaporate.

Bridget's phone beeped. She looked down and shook her head. "Now what?" She stabbed at the receiver. "Hello." She rolled her eyes. "Okay, hope you feel better soon." She disconnected, massaged the three inches between her eyebrows. "Cindy threw up at the dentist's office. She can't work the afternoon class."

Within the hour, three kids complained of stomach cramps, and one threw up on my shoes in the middle of the round-robin competition. Bridget said a virus must be going around, and since I'd fought a headache and nausea most of the morning, I thought Bridget might be right. Four o'clock finally

rolled around, and I barely had time to wave at Mia when she picked up Abby.

Craving a tall glass of iced Coke and a two-hour nap, I mentally took stock of my freezerless refrigerator and headed for River Street. As much as I wanted to rest, I couldn't stand the thought of being alone.

I sipped a Coke and mingled with tourists buying t-shirts and eating fresh-out-of-the-oven pralines. I splurged on a lemon gelato at River Street Treats, found a bench overlooking the water, and sat watching a tanker ship cruise to port. Another larger boat loaded a line of tourists on board. The sign at the bottom of the ramp read *dinner cruise*.

Boats, one named after Juliette Gordon Lowe, the Girl Scouts founder who'd lived in Savannah, ferried people from one side of the river to the other. Across the river was the biggest hotel I'd ever seen, a towering palm-treed fortress. *What would it be like to stay there?*

I remembered reading about Juliette Lowe on a brass plaque stuck on the corner of one of the four-story mega-houses. All over town, little brass markers gave the history of a building or a statue or one big-ass rock. A lot of homes had names—the Davenport House, the Owen-Thompson House, the Sorrel-Weed House—but I had no idea why some were named and others not. I also didn't know if Ivy's house had a plaque. I hadn't worked up the nerve to go to the front door yet.

On Sunday, I'd planned to hop on one of the open-air trolleys, take a tour of the city, and ask the guide to explain why some houses had plaques and others didn't. But when I stepped up to the ticket counter and learned the cheapest tour cost thirty-three dollars, I backed away. I didn't have that kind



of cash to spare. So I stopped by the used bookstore on Broughton Street, bought a couple of romance novels, and spent the weekend reading and catching up on my sleep.

I spooned the last bite of gelato into my mouth and climbed the stone steps leading back to Bay Street. I meandered past Ivy's boutique and pretended to admire a blue dress with poofy balloon sleeves displayed in the window, an outfit I could never imagine wearing. No sign of Ivy.

I could go inside, wait until the sales clerk finished with her customer, and ask when Ivy would return. But the idea of trying to convince the snooty saleswoman, dressed in sleek silvery-gray slacks and four-inch matching pumps, to give up information on the boss's travel schedule made my stomach cramp. I'd figure out a way to hit up Mia for information tomorrow.

I walked up Drayton to Parker's convenience store, grabbed another Coke, and picked up a small box of saltines and a can of chicken noodle soup.

My cell phone buzzed a text, and I recognized Daniel's number.

*Playing tonight at Spanky's. Come early. I'll buy dinner.*

The band ate free, so I wouldn't be a mooch for sharing his dinner, but I was sick of pizza. It's the only thing I'd eaten for dinner for the last three nights. I started to beg off, then remembered my dwindling cash. I placed the saltines and soup back on the shelf.

*Six-thirty good?*

*See u then.*

I rushed back to my apartment, showered, and slipped on a sleeveless linen tank dress, the only decent outfit I had left that

didn't pinch my ballooning waist and show off my teeny baby bump. I headed for Spanky's.

Daniel waved a hand in the air and pointed to a table in front of the stage. I skirted around a couple of four-seaters and joined him.

"I've already ordered." Daniel pulled out my chair. "Can you stay and listen for a while?" His fingers grazed the phoenix tattoo on my wrist.

"Sure." I pulled my arm away and readjusted my purse, hanging on the back of my chair.

Daniel, no longer shy around me, used any excuse to touch my hand or my arm or brush a stray hair from my face. I needed to back away, make it clear I had no interest in hooking up. But other than Bridget and the high schoolers I worked with, Daniel was the only person I knew in Savannah.

Ken, one of the waiters and a friend of Daniel's, delivered a hot cheese and pepperoni pizza along with a pitcher of soda. "Boss says the music needs to start at seven."

"We'll be ready." Daniel plated a piece of pizza and handed it to me.

I tilted my head. Something about Daniel looked different. "You look more tanned than usual. Did you go to the beach today?"

"Jet skiing."

"Sounds fun." I tested my pizza.

"I went with Roger." The trumpet player in his band. "His brother runs the Jet Ski rental shop on Tybee. We're planning to go again tomorrow."

"I hear Tybee's a lot of fun."

“I reserved an extra Sea-Doo.” He shrugged. “You said you’d never seen the ocean. No better way than on a Jet Ski.”

“I have to work tomorrow.”

“We’re not leaving until four-thirty.”

“I’ve never driven a Jet Ski, and I’m pretty sure the rental cost isn’t in my budget.”

“Driving a Sea-Doo’s easy. I’ll give you a quick lesson. And Zeke, Roger’s brother, gives us a sweet after-hour rate.” Daniels stuffed a half-piece of pizza in his mouth, chewed. “If you want to go, it’ll be my treat.”

I knew it wasn’t a good idea to lead Daniel on. But this might be my one and only chance to swim in the ocean, to see what an island looked like. “If you’re sure you don’t mind, I’d love to go.”

“Willa!” Two small arms wrapped around my neck.

I recognized the blue fingernail polish. “Abby! What are you doing here?”

Mia walked up and looked around. “It’s kind of early for Spanky’s to be this busy on a weeknight.”

“We’re playing tonight,” Daniel said. “Crowd won’t thin until after our last set.”

I pointed at two empty chairs. “You guys can share our table.”

Mia slid into an empty seat. “Thanks.”

“Mia, this is Daniel.” I tickled Abby’s ribs. “And this squirt is Abby.”

“We know each other,” Mia and Daniel said in unison.

Abby beamed and climbed into the chair beside me. “I didn’t know you liked pizza, too.”

I leaned down, whispered, “It’s my favorite.”

Abby giggled. “Me, too.”

“You singing tonight?” Mia asked Daniel.

“Yeah.” He checked his phone. “I need to do a soundcheck before we start.” He kissed my cheek. “Don’t go anywhere.” He turned to Mia. “Keep my girl company.”

Heat slid up my neck.

Mia’s gaze followed Daniel across the patio. “I didn’t know you were seeing Daniel.”

“He’s exaggerating. We’re just friends.”

Mia dug out crayons and a coloring book for Abby. Abby turned to a picture of a zebra, chose a purple and a green crayon.

I tapped the picture. “That’s going to be a cool-looking zebra.”

Abby nodded. “I’ll give it to you when I finish.”

“Daniel’s cute,” Mia said.

Yeah, well, cute equaled trouble in my world. “How do you know him?”

“He’s from Savannah. Everyone knows everyone in Savannah.” Mia looked from Daniel to me. “You could do a lot worse. He’s a good guy from a nice family. I went to school with his sister. She’s studying at Clemson and headed for medical school.” Mia sighed and placed her hand over her middle. “I’m going for my final interview at the Citadel tomorrow. I’m so nervous.”

“You applied to a military school?” Memories of hard-ass Threadgill threatening to send me to a boot camp for delinquent youths if I didn’t follow his list of rules brought on a full-body shudder.

“My dad and brother went to the Citadel. It’s like a tradition in my family.”

I couldn’t help but be impressed that Mia, twenty pounds overweight, would consider going through the rigorous physical workouts at the Citadel.

*Wait.*

That meant Mia planned to move to Charleston. “What about your job?”

She shrugged. “Ivy’s planning to advertise for a new nanny.”

“You live in, right?”

“Yeah.” Mia sighed. “I’m going to miss the luxury of my own room and bath. Dorm rooms at the Citadel are more in line with military barracks.”

My heart skittered like a stone across a pond. I asked Mia, “Have you heard from Abby’s mom?”

“She called Abby this morning—”

Abby held up two fingers. “Mommy’s coming home in two sleeps.”

Mia laughed. “It’s how we keep track of time.”

Ken rushed past, spotted Mia, and backed up. “What’ll you have to drink?”

“Can I have a Coke?” Abby asked.

Mia frowned, then shrugged. “Two Cokes and a pizza Margherita.”

Daniel began singing “Shape of You,” and surprisingly, Abby knew every word of the tricky first chorus.

“This is one of my favorite Ed Sheeran songs. Daniel’s really good.” Mia’s upper body moved to the beat. “I wonder how long he’ll be able to hold out.”

I leaned across the table to hear over the music. “Hold out?”

“According to Daniel’s sister Trish, when he told his parents he wanted to go to SCAD, they went bonkers, and he moved out. He’s using student loans to pay for his first year of school. His mom’s a bigwig at First National Bank, and his dad’s a surgeon. I guess having an artist for a son wasn’t in their game plan.”

Daniel sang and moved over the stage like a pro. “Life has a way of blowing-up game plans.” I grabbed Abby’s hand and gave her a quick dance lesson. Abby picked up the moves in no time and seemed to have a great time.

I hoped Ivy and Rence would be as easy to win over when I pitched myself as their new nanny.

*WILLA*

TO KEEP THE TWELVE KIDS IN TENNIS CAMP FROM SQUEALING, bouncing, and running during drill practice, I separated them into two teams and made a game out of cleaning up balls and rackets. By three o'clock on Fridays, the kids had the attention span of gnats.

I found Bridget slumped in one of the umpire chairs under an oak tree. "I think tennis is over for the week. Maybe we could give the kids another bottle of water, an extra power bar, and call it a day."

Bridget waved her hand. "Whatever. You're in charge."

"You know you could pass for an extra in *Walking Dead*, right?"

Bridget held her skull between her palms. "My head feels like a banging bowling ball. I must've caught the virus."

"I can handle parent pickup. Why don't you go home early?"

"Really? That would be great." Bridget grunted, rose to her feet. "See you Monday."

I passed out snacks, then kept the kids busy hunting for stray balls until their parents arrived. Twenty minutes later, at four fifteen, I still had two unclaimed kids. Richie, a sandy-haired cutie with a constant supply of knock-knock jokes, and Abby. I reopened the snack box. “Either one of you want another snack?”

Abby scrunched her nose. “Nah.”

“Knock-knock,” Richie started his tenth joke of the day.

“Who’s there?” Abby said.

“Gladys.”

“Glady’s who?”

“Gladys it’s Friday.”

Abby frowned. “That’s dumb.”

Richie shoved aside the power bars and plucked a package of cheese crackers from the box. “My dad likes it.”

Richie’s mom arrived, and he high-tailed to the front gate.

I slung my arm over Abby’s shoulders. “Looks like we get to hang.”

“My mommy and daddy are coming home tomorrow.”

“Yeah? I bet you’re excited.” I had a plan worked out. I’d call Bridget Sunday evening, ask to come in at noon on Monday. With Abby in camp, and hopefully, her husband Rence at his office, if I arrived at nine, Ivy should be home alone.

I checked the time on my phone. Daniel was due in ten minutes to take me to Tybee Island. “Let’s cool off inside.”

The pro shop, crammed with shirts, hats, rackets, and balls, was at least thirty degrees cooler than the outside temperature.



Abby meandered over to a display of tennis balls.

Sandy, the leisure activity director, stuck her head through the office door. “Where’s Bridget?”

“She went home sick,” I stood in front of an air vent and breathed in a blast of cool.

Sandy handed me the phone. “It’s Mia Barrett.”

“Hi, Mia, it’s Willa.

“I need to talk to Bridget.”

“She’s not here. Everything okay?”

“I’m in Charleston. At the hospital.” I caught a hitch in her voice.

“What happened?”

“I totaled my mom’s car.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. But I have a goose-egg and needed stitches. Now, the ER doctor is insisting I get a head x-ray and some other stupid test.” Her voice broke. “Sorry, I’m still kind of shook up. I need Bridget to take care of Abby for a few hours.”

“Bridget left early. She has some kind of flu bug.”

“I don’t know what to do about Abby.” Mia’s voice slipped into a high-pitched-coming-unglued range. “I’ve already called Ursula, Ivy’s store assistant, but it’s her day off, and she’s not answering her cell. Abby’s grandmother is out of town. My mom can’t watch Abby because she’s on her way to Charleston to pick me up. And I don’t know when I’ll be released from the hospital.”

Abby sat across the room, on her knees, rearranging the display of tennis balls.

“Abby can hang with me.”

“Are you sure?”

“No problem. Just text me when you’re back in Savannah, and I’ll bring Abby home.”

“I really appreciate this. The address is Jones Street, number 57. Four blocks from Forsyth Park.”

“I know the street.” My cell phone buzzed in my pocket. I slid it in my hand and pressed the silence button. Probably Daniel. “Don’t worry about Abby. Take care of yourself.” I disconnected, laid the store phone on the counter.

“Hey,” I called to Abby, “Mia’s going to be a little late. It looks like we get to hang for the rest of the afternoon.”

Abby jumped off the floor. “Yay!”

I checked my cell and read Daniel’s message.

*At courts. Where are u?*

I texted him back. *Coming.*

“Ready?” I opened the door and followed Abby outside. Bonding with Abby was more important than seeing the ocean for the first time. I’d just explain I couldn’t go today.

I spotted Daniel across the courts and waved.

Abby slipped her hand into mine. “Are we going to your house?”

I envisioned my one-room apartment versus Ivy’s three-story brick mansion. “Maybe we’ll get ice cream and hang around Market Street.”

“I love ice cream.” She sprinted forward, turned, and ran backward-facing me. A tennis drill, she’d mastered the first

day of camp. “What’s your favorite ice cream flavor? Mine’s chocolate.”

“Wow, what a coincidence. That’s my favorite, too.” I cut diagonally across the last court to where Daniel waited. “You remember my friend Daniel from last night?”

Abby turned a smooth one-eighty and sized him up. “He sings in the band.”

Laughing, I said, “You’re right.”

“I remember you, too,” Daniel said. “You’re Mia’s friend, and you like to dance.”

“Me and Willa are going for ice cream.” Abby’s tone clearly excluded Daniel from the fun.

“Really?” Daniel cut his gaze to me, raised a brow.

Abby walked toward the front gate, and I whispered, “Mia had a car accident in Charleston. She’s at the hospital.”

“Bad?”

“Come on, Willa, let’s go.” Abby had her hand on the front gate clip.

“Give me a second.” I turned back to Daniel. “She hit her head and needed stitches. She’s having some tests. Abby’s mom is out of town, and I’ve got Abby until Mia gets back to Savannah.”

“That’s cool. She can come with us,” Daniel said as if it was the most natural thing in the world to have a six-year-old added to our plans.

“I can’t go. I’m really sorry.”

Daniel and I walked toward Abby bouncing at the gate like Peter Rabbit heading to Mr. McGregor’s garden. He squatted

to eye level. “Hey, you want to go to Tybee? Play on the beach. Have an ice cream?”

I laid my hand on Abby’s shoulder. “That’s not a good idea —”

“Can we build a sandcastle?” Abby shrugged off my hand, stepped closer to Daniel.

“Sure. I build awesome castles with moats and towers and everything.”

“Daniel, really. We can’t go. I don’t know when Mia will get back.”

He stood. “Charleston’s a couple of hours away, and if they scheduled tests, she won’t be out of the ER for hours yet. We’ll finish riding and be at Market Street having dinner long before Mia’s back in Savannah.”

I had gone to an ER one time for stitches but knew nothing about tests or the length of time they’d take. On the other hand, Daniel’s dad was a doctor, so Daniel would know about wait times.

“Please, please, please.” Abby grabbed my arm, hugged it to her chest. “I want to go. Please, please, please.”

“Come on.” Daniel shot me one of his crooked shy-boy smiles. “What else are you going to do in this heat?”

He had an excellent point. Even with an ice cream cone, walking around Market Street in ninety-five-degree heat, Abby would get bored fast, then tired, then cranky. And I really wanted to see the ocean.

“Please, Willa. Can we? Can we? Can we?” Abby begged.

If building a bond with Abby was the objective, ice creams and sandcastles would be a great opportunity. Scoring Mia’s

nanny job was the ultimate goal, the perfect temporary solution to my money problems and the best way ease into Ivy's world. For that plan to work, I needed Abby to be crazy about me.

Daniel checked his phone. "Phillip's here."

"Who's Phillip?"

"He's a friend of mine who likes jet skiing. He's also our ride to Tybee. Who's ready for the beach?"

"Me. Me. Me. Me. Me," Abby squealed. "And don't forget the ice cream."

"How far away is Tybee?" Maybe it wasn't smart to take Abby in a car with a stranger.... "Can't we walk?"

"Walk? Tybee's at least fifteen miles." Daniel pulled me a few steps toward the street. "Phillip's Chevy Tahoe has plenty of room."

I pulled back. Ready to suggest we go to Tybee another day. But Daniel wrapped his arm around my shoulders and grabbed Abby's hand. "Phillip's a professional driver. He's the friend I told you about that's working his way through SCAD Ubering tourists around Savannah. But we need to get going. Phillip drives like an old man."

I didn't budge. "I'm not sure this is a good idea."

"I want to go," Abby said as if her wants finalized the deal.

"Seriously, it's a twenty-minute drive," Daniel said. "We'll spend less than two hours at the beach and come straight back. I'll even spring for hamburgers at the Crystal Parlor."

I chewed my thumbnail.

“Please. Please. Please, Willa.” Abby hopped on one foot, then the other. “I love sandcastles.”

Daniel and Abby, hand in hand, walked toward the guy standing beside a black SUV. “I bet you’ve never eaten a mushroom burger,” Daniel said to Abby.

She stuck out her tongue. “Yuck. I hate mushrooms.”

I gave in and followed Daniel and a grinning Abby to Phillip’s car.

Daniel made the introductions, then climbed into the backseat with Abby and me.

Phillip didn’t seem to mind riding solo up front.

We circled the park, and I craned my neck to get a better view through the window. Hundreds of palm trees, at least forty-feet tall, lined the median in two long continuous lines. I’d never seen so many palms in one place. “What’s the name of this road?”

“Victory Drive.” Phillip flipped the Sirius station and tuned into “Havana” by Camila Cabello.

Abby’s shoulders moved to the beat.

I couldn’t hold back a laugh. I should relax, enjoy this time alone with my little sister. Abby was having a good time, and Daniel promised we’d be back long before Mia. No need to let jumpy nerves ruin everyone’s fun. “I’m going to text Mia and let her know where we are and what we’re doing.”

“Probably won’t go through,” Daniel said. “Hospitals discourage phone use by blocking cell reception except in the waiting areas.”

“I’ll send it anyway. She’ll see it at some point.” I sent the text and slid my phone back into my backpack.

Twenty minutes later, Phillip crossed a bridge and passed a WELCOME TO TYBEE sign. I counted three marinas and tons of sailboats, motorboats, floating houseboats.

Daniel pointed to a boat across the bay. “That’s a shrimp boat. See the nets flared out on each side? He’s trawling.”

I put my window down and breathed in the salt air. This might be my only chance to see the ocean, or an island, or walk on the beach.

I wanted to capture the whole big, fantastic scene in photos, so I’d always remember this day if my new nanny plan backfired and I ended up back in Wyoming.

People wearing sunglasses, bathing suits, and floppy hats walked down the streets with shopping bags, eating shaved ice, and carting around drinks with miniature umbrellas. Tybee was just as crowded as Savannah’s downtown, but a completely different vibe from the historic brick buildings fifteen miles away.

Phillip parked in front of a royal blue, one-story building. The sign over the door read Zeke’s Surf Shop. Everyone piled out of the car.

I held Abby’s hand and followed Daniel and Phillip into the shop. Abby and I could watch them jet ski for a while and then find an ice cream shop.

A blond, blue-eyed, twenty-something guy, so tanned his skin resembled soft, worn leather, looked up from waxing a surfboard.

“Hey, Zeke,” Daniel waved. “Roger around?”

Zeke nodded toward the open back door. “He’s trying out one of my new wave runners. He tagged two Sea-Doos and

one Jet Ski for you guys.” He threw Daniel a ring of keys banded together. “The blue ring opens the padlock.”

I flipped through a rack of cute swimsuits. I checked the price on a bright blue bikini and hung it back on the stand. No matter how adorable, I didn’t have forty-eight dollars to spare.

Phillip pulled a life jacket out of a giant bin. He removed his shirt, threw it on a bench by the back door, and slipped on the vest. “Give me a key to one of the Sea-Doos, and I’ll go find Roger. We can meet up on the backside of the pier.”

Daniel handed him a key, then turned to me. “You ladies need lifejackets.”

“Kids’ gear is on the bottom shelf,” Zeke said. “Since your girl is new, she’ll have to hear the safety spiel.”

“Oh, I’m not planning to ride. Abby and I will grab an ice cream cone, then find the pier and watch you guys after we build the world’s greatest sandcastle, right, Abby?”

Abby sat in front of a display of postcards busily rearranging the packs. I walked closer. She had a color-coordinating plan going on—all the orange sunsets in one row, the blue ocean pictures in another.

“You won’t have any problem riding a Jet Ski,” Daniel said. “We don’t go far offshore, and I’ll take Abby on my Sea-Doo until you get the hang of the ride.”

“I don’t know anything about Jet Skis.”

“Can you swim?”

“Well, yeah. But I don’t drive.”

“You’ve never driven a car?”

“No. Just snowmobiles and motorcycles.”



“That’s even better.” Daniel said. “A Jet Ski handles similar to a snowmobile.”

“Look, Abby doesn’t have a swimsuit, and…” I turned a circle and scanned the store. “Abby?” My heart fell to my toes. I headed for the back door leading to the ocean. Visions of Abby, bobbing in the water, calling for help, trailed through my head. “Abby, where are you?”

“I want this one.” She ran down the middle aisle waving a pink lifejacket plastered in white and blue flowers. “Can I wear this one? Please. Please.”

I slapped a hand over my chest. “You scared the bejesus out of me.” I bent to eye level. “Daniel’s going riding with his friends. You and I are building a sandcastle.”

“But I want to go riding.” Abby’s face crimped, and her eyes filled with tears.

Crap, this beach idea was tanking. Abby was going to end up hating me. ”Let’s go find ice cream.”

“I want to go riding.”

I wanted to go, too, but it wasn’t happening. “You said you wanted to build a sandcastle.”

Abby’s mouth trembled. “I don’t want to build a sandcastle anymore. I want to ride on the bike.”

Was she faking to get her way, or was she really disappointed? If she got mad and told Ivy she didn’t like me—

“Come on. What’s the big deal?” Daniel said.

I gave Daniel a drop-dead glare. “You’re not helping.” I turned back to Abby. “A Jet Ski isn’t a bicycle. I don’t know how to drive one. If you don’t want to make castles, we’ll get

an ice cream and walk on the beach. We can collect seashells.”

“I want to go riding.” The kid actually stuck out her chin, crossed her arms. She looked like a miniature pissed-off Buddha.

I came to bond with Abby, not to disappoint her. I backtracked, started over. “I’m really sorry. It looks like a lot of fun, but jet skiing is only for adults.”

“Kids go. Look—” Abby shoved a finger at the poster on the wall of a man and a boy riding a wave runner. “That boy is riding.”

Daniel laughed. “She’s got you there.” He grabbed my hand, pulled me toward a rack of lifejackets. “It’s really safe. Zeke will give you all the dos and don’ts, and you totally control your speed.”

I looked into Abby’s pleading eyes. Daniel’s excited face. The poster on the wall. Oh, hell, why not. I wanted to go. “We’ll ride for thirty minutes. Then we’re building sandcastles. Deal?”

“Deal.” Abby accepted a high-five. “And we get ice cream after.” She shoved her arm inside the pink jacket.

A few minutes later, Zeke finished his safety talk and pushed a clipboard across the counter. “Print your name and sign at the bottom of the page.”

I tried printing my name, shook the pen. “Pen’s out of ink.”

Zeke fumbled in the drawer, then looked under his register and handed me another pen.

I scanned the page, printed Willa Elliott and Abby Abernathy on the first line, and started reading.

“You have less than two hours left on the water,” Zeke said to Daniel. “Machines need to be in the pen by seven.”

“Copy that.” Daniel grabbed Abby’s hand. “We’re burning daylight. Let’s roll.”

“Yay! Come on, Willa. Let’s go.” Abby bounced off with Daniel.

I gave up reading, signed my name at the bottom of the form, and ran to catch up. “Wait for me.” You’d think Abby was going to Disney World instead of a quick ride on a Jet Ski.

*WILLA*

I HELD ABBY'S HAND AND FOLLOWED DANIEL DOWN A LONG wooden walkway leading to a sea of gray-blue water. Waves crashed onto a sandy white shore. I lingered on the steps and soaked in the beach vibe, the rolling ocean, the clean salty air mixed with a hint of fish.

I'd made it to the ocean—another first for my list.

People, young and old, walked, sunned, and played Frisbee on sandy dunes. Spindly grass Daniel called sea oats had sprung up in patches without any particular pattern. A few yards down the beach, a massive structure with concrete beams and a wooden deck stretched far into the ocean. “Is that the pier?” I asked.

“Yep. A band usually plays under the pavilion on Friday nights. It's pretty cool to dance under the stars. Maybe we'll come sometime.” Daniel walked to a roped-off area on the water's edge.

A heavy metal chain connected two machines that resembled floating snowmobiles. I'd learned to drive a

snowmobile at fourteen. About the same time Ryder taught me how to handle a Harley. Without a driver's license, I'd been relegated to ride his bike on washed-out, bumpy backroads.

A Jet Ski zipping through water had to be easier than dodging potholes and mud on winding mountain roads. And it would be fun, a memory Abby and I could share.

Daniel unlocked the chain and pushed a Jet Ski knee-deep in the water. "Come on." He waved me onto the seat. I tightened the straps on Abby's lifejacket and fastened her snaps. Then, I buckled my vest and climbed on the Jet Ski. I scooted my butt up and gripped the handles. The seat fit more like a snowmobile, but the power reminded me of Bessie, Ryder's Harley.

"Remember, Jet Skis have hand brakes." Daniel pumped the brake handle.

"Like a Harley," I said.

"Not exactly. Jet Skis coast to a stop when you're braking." Daniel fingered a red button. "If you hit the kill switch, the engine dies, but the machine will still move forward." He ran through a few more basic instructions. "That's about it. Nothing complicated. I'll take Abby with me until you get the hang of it." He lifted Abby onto the back of his seat, swung his leg over, and settled in front. "Hold on to me."

"Okay." Abby wrapped her arms around Daniel's waist and grinned at me.

Seeing Abby sitting on Daniel's Jet Ski shot an uncomfortable tingle between my shoulder blades. Abby was my responsibility. "Don't go fast or get too far ahead of me," I said.

“We’ll take it slow,” Daniel yelled over the engine. “Just follow me.”

Daniel kept a slow and steady speed, and my jitters gave way to the memory of having power between my legs. But I made sure to test the one big difference of the Jet Ski, the kill switch. I hit the red button a couple of times, not having a fast-stop brake would be important to remember.

I slowly built up speed and wind swept over my body. The air off the ocean was humid and heavy compared to the dry mountain air of Wyoming. But the sensation of riding the water and riding snow were similar. I loved the feel of my body accelerating with the machine, the open freedom moving over the water. I tilted my face to the wind. I was having a blast, and my earlier hesitation over jet skiing evaporated.

Daniel waved to his friends, and they gunned their engines in response.

I knew Daniel wanted to play in the waves. I would in his place. “I’m okay to take Abby.”

“You’ll do fine.”

Daniel and I pulled into shallow water, and he transferred Abby onto my machine.

“Abby and I will just cruise around.” I turned a slow circle. “Go have fun.”

Daniel motored over to Phillip and Roger, and the three of them raced off. They looked like three roosters with plumes of water for tails.

I checked over my shoulder and smiled at Abby. “You ready to have some fun?”

She pulled at her life vest. “It’s too tight.”

“It’s supposed to be tight.”

“I don’t like it.” She yanked at the top.

“It’s like wearing a seatbelt in a car. You can’t ride if you don’t wear a jacket.” She frowned but didn’t complain.

I took the first wave, up and over the crest, spun a slow one-eighty, and readied for the next. I’d watched surfing contests, always amazed at the size of the waves. These seemed tame compared to the rolling action those guys mastered.

“Let’s go with Daniel,” Abby yelled over the motor.

I turned in time to see Daniel bouncing over a wave barreling full speed toward Phillip and Roger. I recognized their game of chicken. Ordinarily, I’d be out there barreling across the water and staring them down.

I shook my head. “No way.” I eased over the next wave. “Those guys are idiots. We’re staying by the pier.” I looked down at the murky water and had a sudden chilling thought. I couldn’t see the bottom and had no idea what swam underneath us. Eels? A shark? My heart beat against my chest.

“Go faster,” Abby pumped both arms.

“You’re a little daredevil.” Like me. Dozens of people were swimming in the water—no reason to go postal over imaginary sea creatures. I clutched Abby’s arms, wrapped them around my waist. “Hold on tight.”

I zoomed the Jet Ski back and forth in front of the pier, with Abby cheering and screaming, “Do it again. Do it again,” until my lower back ached from bouncing and leaning.

At Daniel's suggestion, I'd left my phone in a locker at Zeke's shop to keep it from getting soaked. I had no idea of the time, but the sky had grown darker. Probably close to seven. Mia might've texted. She'd be worried if I didn't answer.

"Time to head back," I said.

Abby tightened her arms around my waist. "One more time. Please, just one more wave."

I turned a full circle, readying for one last wave, but the clouds overhead looked angry and mean. Storm mean. Riding up and down the beach, I hadn't noticed the wind getting stronger. I scanned the beach. A kid chased after an umbrella dancing across the sand. I hadn't noticed how much the crowd had thinned. The few people left were hurrying to pack up.

"We're heading back. Now. Hang on tight." Sharp, stinging needles of rain pelted my cheeks, pinged my arms and legs.

Abby whimpered. "The rain hurts."

"I know. I'm sorry. Hang on." I fought to keep the bow of the Jet Ski turned toward shore. A giant wave rushed forward, pushed the Jet Ski sideways, and I struggled to right the front of the machine. I looked back to gauge the next wave.

A mountain of water rolled toward shore, growing, doubling, then tripling in size. Too big. Too strong to ride.

*Go now.*

*No. Wait.*

*Maybe I could ride the top, like a surfer.*

I gripped the handles. "Don't let go," I yelled. The Jet Ski bounced and bobbed like an inflatable toy in a mad, churning,



endless sea.

I somehow kept the Jet Ski upright and rode over the wave, glanced back. Another crest swelled higher and angrier as if the ocean had risen up and formed a monstrous gray wall of fury marching to shore. I bent low, turned the Jet Ski toward land, and hit the gas. I'd have to outrun the beast.

A white blanket blocked my vision. *No. No. Not fog. Not now.*

I squinted, searched. No beach. No pier. Nothing but a thick white mist. I pressed my elbows and pinned Abby's forearms to my sides, then zoomed. We hit one wave, then another. Up and over. *Pretend you're on a mountain road. Focus on keeping the machine upright.* Ryder's warning pounded in my head. *Focus. Don't lose control. You can do it, Willa.*

The sounds of a roaring freight train chased my back, bearing down closer and closer. I stole a look behind, and my heart sank. A barricade of black water churned ten yards away.

No matter how fast I drove, I'd never make it to shore before the wave hit. I let go of the handles and grabbed onto Abby's arms. "Hold tight," I yelled over a deafening clap of thunder.

I braced my feet and legs and stared at the wave, a black wall hanging in space. Like a giant dancing cobra, rising up and up, higher and higher. Then in one screaming blast, the wall exploded and rushed toward us.

*IVY*

LIGHTS SPARKLED INSIDE THE WINDOWS OF THE LE MEURICE, and the moon peeked through a blanket of low-lying clouds, giving our hotel a castle-in-a-fairytale air. The view from our balcony would be stunning. But the conversation I'd planned to have three days ago, the conversation I absolutely must have before leaving Paris tomorrow morning, negated any chance of romance and admiring gorgeous views. No more delays. I had to tell Rence about Willa tonight.

I tried settling my shaky nerves with a quick breath and followed Rence into the lobby. His brown hair glistened black in the flickering chandelier lights. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with smooth, clear skin, and a dark stubble that needed constant effort to keep from becoming a beard. His gray pinstripe suit, custom-designed by the famed Milan tailor Nichola Trieste, fit impeccably.

A silver-haired clerk at the front desk looked up and over-smiled. "Good evening, Mr. Abernathy." By his eager tone, you'd think Rence owned Le Meurice or a large chunk of stock. The clerk handed over a brass key.

Rence slid a folded fifty-euro across the counter. “Please have a bottle of Veuve Clicquot 2008 sent to our room.”

“Champagne?” I asked. My head already swam from my pre-dinner martini, and our full-bodied cabernet shared over dinner. “We have an early flight.” And my confessional would require a clear head.

Rence raised my hand from the crook of his elbow and kissed my fingertips. “This is our last night in Paris. And I want to make up for desecrating your plans the day you arrived.”

We crossed the lobby, and I allowed Rence’s comments extolling the elegance and panache of the marble-tiled space to flow past.

We stepped into the elevator.

“Third floor, please,” Rence said to the attendant.

I’d intended to summon my bravery and disclose the secrets of my past over a quiet dinner. But once we arrived at the restaurant and settled into a private corner, my brain stalled. Then, my tongue grew thick after a martini, thicker still after my first glass of wine. During dessert, I decided my mind would be much clearer after a brisk walk back to the hotel. Now, excuses, each well-articulated and heartfelt, stacked in my head, in the razor-thin space separating reason and guilt, but suddenly none seemed sufficient for my decade-long secret.

Rence unlocked our suite, and a cold sweat worked over my skin. I waved toward the french doors. “Let’s sit on the balcony. I need to talk to you.”

He grabbed my hand. “Later.” Eyes twinkling, he pulled me into the bedroom, an expectant smile covering his face.

Roses. Red, white, pink, and yellow buds in crystal vases filled every open space in the room. Mounds of petals were strewn across our turned-down bed. My apprehension dissolved into laughter. “My God, Rence. This is amazing.”

He laughed a deep, delighted chuckle. “I know it’s elaborate and overdone, but I’m ecstatic.” He twirled me, then snuggled me to his body. “What a trip. We wowed Charles Jouffre’s team, and I’m positive we’ll get the Ritz contract. Next year Abernathy Industries will have the highest sales in our seventy-year history. And, my designs will finally have a five-star showroom.”

He waltzed me toward the bed, kissing my neck. “And—” He unzipped my new red dress. “I have the most beautiful and understanding wife in the world.”

Shame hit me hard and fast. I loved this man with every fiber in my body. I had to explain. Now. Nothing else mattered.

“Rence—”

The doorbell rang, and his cell phone chimed in the living room.

He raised a finger. “Just a moment, sweetheart.” He directed room service to set up the champagne and answered his phone.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the floor-length mirror—my salon updo exposed thin, colorless lips, and my eyes reminded me of a desperate cornered animal. I unraveled my french twist, brushed and fluffed hair around my face. I swiped on lip gloss, removed my dress, and grabbed the hotel robe from the closet.

Rence walked into the bedroom, gripping his phone. Creases framed his sapphire eyes, the tiny lines that added distinction and worldly wisdom to his handsome face appeared more pronounced.

“What’s wrong?”

“That was Serena. Something’s happened to Abby.”

Every drop of blood in my body chilled. “What happened?”

“Some kind of accident. Serena said it sounded serious, but the police wouldn’t give her any information.”

“Police?” My shrieking voice bounced off the ceiling. Abby was with Mia. Why would the police call Rence’s assistant, Serena?

His phone rang again. He jerked it to his ear. “This is Rence Abernathy. Yes, officer, I’m Abigail Abernathy’s father.” He tilted forward. “On Tybee? What kind of accident?”

A cold foreboding crept up my neck. “What’s happened?” I stood close to Rence, tried hearing the conversation, but I couldn’t make out the mumbling voice on the other end.

I flew across the room, searched the dresser for the clutch purse I’d taken to dinner. I needed my phone. I shoved vases of roses aside. Crystal crashed to the floor. Water and glass shards drenched my bare feet. No phone.

I combed the bedside table. My gaze swept over sparkling vases of every height and width. Dozens, everywhere. Where was my purse? I scanned the red, yellow, and pink petals piled on the gold duvet, spotted a silver flicker.

I dove for my clutch, found my phone, and sat. I pulled a shard of glass from the sole of my foot. Blood oozed over my heel.

I called Mia's cell, but the call dropped. I looked for a tissue, then swiped the phone screen on my white robe, wiped my sticky bloody fingers on my sleeve. I checked the time—four a.m. in Savannah. I punched our home number. *Pick up. Pick up. Pick up.*

Rence moaned and staggered against the wall. His face drained to alabaster white. The hand not holding his phone to his ear clutched his throat. Then he gasped, dropped his hand, staggered, and slid to the mattress. Pink petals floated in the air, swirled and drifted back to the gold spread.

“Accident.” He bent at the waist, gripping his phone. “On Tybee?”

A myriad of blinking stars pirouetted in front of my eyes. I crawled through the rose petals to his side, grabbed his arm. “What’s happened?”

*Abby in an accident. On Tybee Island. A car accident?*

*But Mia didn't own a car.*

Rence disconnected.

I couldn't inhale a full breath. “Tell. Me.”

He inched up and off the mattress, like an old man too weak to support his body. I scurried off the bed and went to his side. He drew me close, buried his face in my neck. “Ivy. Oh, God.”

Anger and fear whirled in my chest. I pushed him away, gripped his shoulders, and peered into his eyes. “What happened?”

Tears welled in his eyes. Rence never cried.

I gripped his shoulders, shook. “Tell me what’s happened to Abby?”

“She’s gone. Abby’s gone.” His voice, high and strained, broke into a sob.

“Gone?” I hunted his contorted face for more. “Gone where?”

He cupped my cheeks in his palms. His hands as cold as blocks of ice. “Our baby...our baby drowned.”

He crushed me against his chest. His heart thumped like a metronome in overdrive and filled the room, melding with the sound of blood rushing my ears. “Drowned?”

He rocked me in his arms, his body shaking with sobs.

Bile climbed my throat and coated my tongue. I tried breaking his hold. He must’ve misunderstood. It was if we were in the center of a turntable, the bed and the dresser and the roses whipped around us in a dizzying circle. I struggled for air, closed my eyes, then reopened, blinked. I tried focusing on Rence’s face. Fought for air. Then blackness.

The next second I came to, still standing, Rence holding me upright. He squeezed and pushed air back into my lungs. “No. No. It can’t be true,” I said. My body numbed to the cut of his words, so deep pain had yet to rise to the surface. “It’s not true. It’s not. Why would Abby be at Tybee?”

Rence cocooned me in his arms. I buried my elbows into his chest, twisted free, and stumbled back. “No. You’re wrong.”

Serena was wrong.

Rence was wrong.

The police were wrong.

They had to be wrong.

I grabbed my cell from under a pile of yellow and pink petals, hit redial. “Abby’s with Mia. Abby’s at home.” I pressed the phone tight against my ear, counted the rings. One. Two. “Abby’s safe in her bed.” Three. “Abby’s nowhere near Tybee Beach.” Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight...



*WILLA*

I WOKE TO THE SUN DRILLING INTO MY EYEBALLS. MY HEAD banged, my eyes burned, my throat was desert dry. Based on the sun's rays peeping through the broken blind in my apartment, I estimated it was close to nine in the morning.

Daniel's parents had dropped me off at my apartment last night, instead of Detective McNab, who'd also offered to drive me home. And then, Daniel's mother insisted her son go back with them to Wilmington Island instead of staying downstairs in his apartment. I was glad. I couldn't listen to another one of Daniel's claims that the accident wasn't my fault, that I was blameless.

I showered and allowed another avalanche of tears to mingle with the scalding water. My body was numb as if every nerve ending had been stripped, then shredded.

I used a stale white towel to dry myself and pulled on a t-shirt and a pair of loose shorts. I guzzled water straight from the faucet, then crawled back into bed. Shaking from the inside out—my bones, my bowels, my heart—I relived the terror.

Last night, sitting on the sand, I'd waited to feel. To feel anything. Then a silhouetted Detective McNab had walked toward Daniel at the water's edge. A floodlight swept over McNab, and I had seen what he clasped to his chest. A pink safety vest with white and blue flowers. Abby's lifejacket.

I had known before the detective gripped Daniel's shoulders. Before Daniel's body sagged. Before his knees gave way and he hit the ground. I had known McNab's words would be horrible.

And when Daniel staggered over the sand to where I sat, fell to his knees, and sobbed, I was numb and didn't feel the pain that made him cry. Even when he begged for my forgiveness, blamed himself for insisting I take Abby jet skiing, I hadn't felt his pain. Not then. Because he was wrong, he had to be wrong. They were all wrong. Daniel and the detective, the woman police officer who sat beside me on the beach. Everyone. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong.

Abby wasn't dead. She couldn't be dead.

But then her body washed ashore, and all the useless hope in my heart turned into a black hole and sucked me down into the familiar bottomless black of nothingness.

Today, lying in bed, remembering Abby's laughter, her dancing eyes when I agreed to take her on the Jet Ski, I could finally feel. I could feel everything.

Sharp, searing pains stabbed my heart, and I relived the destruction I'd caused. I relived every wrong I'd ever committed in my entire miserable life.

*Abby. Abby. That sweet little girl is gone, and I'm to blame.*

I curled into a ball, squeezed my eyelids to block the memory. Shut out the world.

Again, I awoke—this time to pounding on my apartment door.

“Willa.” Pound, pound, pound. “Willa, open up.” Daniel’s voice.

I rolled a pillow over my ears.

“I have a key. Open the door, or I’m coming in,” Daniel said.

I stumbled out of bed, fought with the deadbolt, and cracked open the door.

He stood, in jeans and a wrinkled white t-shirt, with a thin black man I didn’t know. Daniel pushed open the door, wrapped me in his arms. “You scared me when you didn’t answer. Are you okay?”

Okay? I’d never be okay. A tear leaked out of my eyelid, then another. I clung to him, blubbered through my tears. “I should’ve...never...ever taken Abby on the Jet Ski.” I held on to him and tried finding relief from my misery. I found none.

Drained, I stepped back, used my shirtsleeve to wipe away tears, and sized up the man with Daniel. He wore dark dress pants with black Nikes, and he had a full head of dreads. He nodded a greeting. “Jace Pratt.”

I looked back into the apartment at my bed, craved to crawl back under the sheets.

Jace held up a Starbucks bag. “I brought sustenance. Caffeine and sugar.”

My stomach rolled. “I can’t—”

“We need to talk.” Daniel pulled me inside. “This conversation can’t wait. There’s no time.”

I dragged my backpack off my one chair and eased onto the bed.

Daniel sat beside me.

Jace walked to my mini kitchen counter and unpacked his sack. “Green tea. Daniel said you were a fan.” He pressed the warm cup against my wrist. Then laid a croissant on the bedside table. “Drink the tea. You’ll feel better.”

What I felt was an overwhelming need to put my head on my pillow, close my eyes, and hunt for the nothingness of sleep.

Jace handed Daniel a cup, then set his drink on the nightstand and swiped sand off the chair. He sat. “Daniel called me this morning and filled me in on last night’s accident.” He sipped his drink as if waiting for me to speak.

I stared at Daniel’s arm, focused on the two freckles above his wrist bone.

“Daniel’s concerned,” Jace said. “And he has every right to be.”

I slid my cup of green tea a quarter turn and waited.

“Daniel believes Detective McNab plans to bring charges of involuntary manslaughter against you for Abigail Abernathy’s death.”

The air gushed out of my lungs. “Manslaughter? Like murder?”

“I’m a defense attorney,” Jace said. “And I have contacts in the Tybee police department. I did some checking, and I agree with Daniel’s assessment. There is that chance.” The

attorney's soft voice mingled with my thoughts. Some of his words were clear and understandable; others echoed and died.

“But it was an accident. The storm.” I searched Daniel's face for confirmation. “I didn't kill Abby. The waves. The Jet Ski overturned. Abby slipped off.”

The horror of the storm, of Abby disappearing into the black, angry sea, crashed down. Me screaming Abby's name, over and over. The waves pounded, one after another, until I couldn't breathe, couldn't see. Until I became so hoarse, I could no longer scream Abby's name.

“My source said Detective McNab expects Abby's parents home today, late afternoon.” Jace's eyebrows drew together. “McNab's scheduled a meeting with them at seven o'clock tonight. As it stands now, after meeting with the parents, he'll likely issue a warrant for your arrest.”

Shock escaped my body as a whispering moan.

Daniel gripped my hand. “I told my dad I was the one who talked you into going on the Jet Ski. That you didn't want to take Abby.”

“If you're arrested,” Jace said, “Daniel's father has agreed to post your bail. You shouldn't have to spend more than one night in jail.”

The tea slipped from my hand. Hot liquid stung my bare legs. I ran for the bathroom, slammed and locked the door. Sliding down the wall, I crouched into a ball.

No jail. Not again. Never again.

*IVY*

MY ANGER HIT IN WAVES, PURE AND PRIMAL, AND overwhelmed my pain. I had a frantic desire to claw and punch and kill, and then a switch in my brain would flip, and I'd collapse in Rence's arms.

I plundered through my purse and found the bottle of Valium the hotel doctor prescribed to enable me to survive our nine-hour flight home to Savannah.

"Sweetheart, you can't take another pill." Rence stood in our bedroom, barefoot, his shirt untucked. I caught the quiver of his hands, the strain around his eyes, the pale, taut lines of his face.

I dry-swallowed a Valium.

He turned away, entered his closet, removed a pair of brown loafers from the shoe rack, and slipped them onto his bare feet. "Detective McNab is due any minute. After he leaves..." His voice faltered, and he cleared his throat. "We have an appointment with Chase and Ward."

Chase and Ward—the funeral home.

Since the first day I'd held Abby in my arms and pressed my lips to her fragile scalp, I knew my life's purpose. Her new-baby scent filled my lungs with energy and excitement. Magical lifeblood that connected her to me and me to Rence. Abby had been our lifelong gift to one another.

I didn't have the strength to choose Abby's last bed or pick out the music we would play to say goodbye. I didn't possess the stamina to dictate words that described my baby so they could be chiseled into a piece of granite and placed in Bonaventure Cemetery in the Abernathy family plot.

"Mia—is she coming with the detective?" I had so many unanswered questions.

"No. Only Detective McNab."

The doorbell chimed eight bars of Beethoven's Ninth. A vision ran through my head of Abby sitting at the piano, two-fingering the keys, and attempting to sound out the melody. *She should start piano lessons this year*, Rence had said. I had a list of potential music teachers lying on my desk.

Rence glanced at the Valium bottle, still clasped like a vial of salvation in my fist. "That'll be McNab at the door." He held out his hand.

"I can't."

"We have no choice."

But I did have a choice. I could refuse to take Rence's hand and walk down the hall and hear the shocking details of the impossible. I could clasp my hands to my ears and scream. And scream. And scream. Scream until everyone left me the hell alone.

I accepted Rence's hand but slipped the Valium bottle into my pants pocket. I wanted it close, easy access to slide another

pill into my mouth. One more pill would turn everything dull and gray, cover me in the soft, suffocating blanket of empty.

Somber voices filtered from the foyer. Who answered the door? Ursula, or Sandy from next door. Or the mother of Abby's best friend. Or one of the countless neighbors who had arrived carting casseroles and cakes.

In the foyer, a tall man with a bushy white mustache and curly, salt-and-pepper hair stood beside a winged griffin partners' desk that served as our entrance table—a wedding gift from Rence's mom.

Beside the man was the sweet, soft-spoken lady who had moved in two houses down. "I'm so sorry." She hugged me to her breast, and the faint odor of permanent wave drifted past. I couldn't for the life of me remember her name. She turned to Rence, hugged him, and hurried out the front door.

The gray-haired stranger offered his hand. "Detective McNab."

"Rence Abernathy." Rence shook his hand, pulled me closer. "My wife, Ivy."

Rence and I sat on the edge of our chintz sofa in our beautifully decorated living room. I'd wasted the better part of a year on this room. Each shade of green had to be perfect, every couch and chair elegant yet comfortable. The windows had been replaced with double panes, then tinted to protect the antique carpets. I should've ordered from Rooms to Go and devoted every free minute of all my days to Abby.

The detective chose the cream leather barrel chair across from the sofa. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

"My husband said you've spoken with Mia." My voice sounded strained and hoarse. "All my calls, at least twenty,



have gone straight to her voicemail. Same with her home phone. Why were Mia and Abby on Tybee Island?”

Detective McNab removed a small black notebook from his shirt pocket. He flipped a couple of pages. “Mia Johansen had an automobile accident in Charleston on Friday afternoon. She was driving a car owned by her mother, Sandra Johansen, a 2019 Buick LaCrosse. Mia Johansen suffered a mild concussion.”

“Where was Abby?” Rence asked.

“A woman working at the tennis camp volunteered to keep your daughter until Mia returned to Savannah.”

Rence drew a sharp breath.

“But I told Mia to call my mother-in-law, or Ursula, my associate, for back-up.”

McNab referred to his black book. “Mia Johansen claims she tried calling your associate, Ursula Barrett, also your neighbor Kathy Taylor. Neither was available.

“Why didn’t she call my mother-in-law?”

“The grandmother, Mrs. Abernathy, was at Jekyll Island attending a regional Garden Club meeting. Ms. Johansen’s fourth choice, the tennis coach Bridget Campbell, had left for the day. Mia knew one of the assistant coaches, and the woman offered to look after your daughter for a few hours.”

“And this assistant took Abby on a Jet Ski?” Rence’s voice quivered with rage.

My rage burned lower, in the depths of my belly, like a roaring eternal flame.

“Yes.” McNab turned another page in his notebook. “The woman claimed a sudden storm caught her off guard. She lost

control and the Jet Ski capsized. Abby was a passenger.”

I tried picturing the scene, but I’d never ridden a Jet Ski, and the picture wouldn’t come together. I sagged against Rence. “Abby must’ve been so scared. She swam in pools, not the ocean.” I pressed my hand to my mouth and pushed back tears. I couldn’t fall apart. Not now. Not before I understood what happened to Abby. I refocused on the detective. “Wasn’t Abby wearing a life jacket?”

“Several eyewitnesses to the accident attest that your daughter was wearing a life preserver when the machine capsized.”

“If Abby had a life jacket—” Rence dropped his head into his hands.

I pulled him close. “If she had a jacket, how did she drown?” I asked.

“It would be speculation for me to say, but when we found the jacket, none of the three buckles were clipped.”

Rence straightened. “Are you saying this woman put my daughter on a dangerous and powerful machine, in the ocean, during a storm, and didn’t secure her safety vest?”

The detective shut his black book, stuffed it into his shirt pocket. “I didn’t say the jacket wasn’t secured. I’m simply stating that when the vest washed a quarter-mile ashore from your daughter’s body, the buckles weren’t locked into place.”

“Did Mia give this woman permission to take Abby jet skiing?” Rence’s eyes flashed fire.

“No.”

“Did Mia give this woman permission to take Abby to Tybee Island?” Rence asked.

“No, not according to Mia Johansen’s statement.” McNab’s flat, unemotional eyes held Rence’s fiery gaze. “Ms. Elliott concurred she didn’t ask your nanny for permission to take your daughter to Tybee Island.”

“Then this woman’s blatant recklessness murdered my daughter, as surely as if she’d shot her in the head. She deserves to be behind bars.”

A headache sprang behind my eyes, and I pressed my fingers to my temples. I couldn’t think clearly enough to put the pieces together. It made no sense. I turned to the detective. “I don’t understand why this woman agreed to babysit Abby, then drove fifteen miles, rented a Jet Ski, and took Abby in the ocean. In the middle of a storm.”

“It seems that before Mia’s accident, Willa Elliott had made plans to go jet skiing with her boyfriend.”

My racing thoughts skidded to a stop and tumbled back.

Willa?

I gripped the arm of my sofa. “This assistant coach. What did you say her name was?”

“Willa Elliott.”

Rence’s voice faded into Ursula’s voice...*she said she flew to Savannah with your daughter Willa...do you know anyone by that name?*

*WILLA*

I SLIPPED MY ARM THROUGH THE STRAP OF MY BACKPACK AND leaned against a massive rock. The brass plaque on the front described a Native American chief named Tomochichi. When I first arrived in Savannah, I assumed the boulder was a headstone. But according to the sign, the chief wasn't buried here in Wright Square. The rock's just some sort of monument.

I recognized the rumble of Ryder's Harley Davidson from three blocks away, an Iron 883 he'd named Bessie. I waited a few seconds more, then stepped to the street. Ryder rolled to a stop and handed me a Scorpion helmet that matched his own. I'd always complained the helmet made me look like Darth Vader. But this time, when I strapped it on, I welcomed the instant camouflage.

My frantic phone call to Ryder's emergency-only number with the news I needed to get out of Savannah had lasted less than twenty seconds. His only comment—where and when. My tears had always thrown Ryder into protection mode. His questions would come later.

“Give me your bag.” He stuffed my backpack in the storage compartment, and I swung my leg over the bike’s dual seat. He shifted Bessie out of neutral, circled the block, and headed down Bull Street. He turned west on Bay and headed for the interstate.

I had no idea where we were going, and I didn’t care. Just away from Savannah. Away from the memories. Away from Detective McNab and his threat of jail.

Two hours later, on the backside of Jacksonville, Ryder pulled into a Huddle House diner. He headed for a corner booth, sat with his back to the wall, and faced the door, just like always.

I slid into the seat across from him.

He scanned the room, then gripped my hands. “God, it’s so good to look at you.”

His touch brought on an odd mix of emotions. Relief and fear fought for first place, old feelings for Ryder skidding in at a close second. Feelings I’d worked hard to quiet. “Thanks for coming.”

“Always.”

His answer pinged my heart, but I tamped it down. Once, I had believed Ryder’s *always* claim. I finger-combed the knots in my hair and nodded at his vest. “The Suns?”

He pulled a menu from between the napkin holder and the hot sauce bottles. “The name seemed like a good choice since I already had the rising phoenix tat.” His gaze slid to the matching tattoo covering my right wrist.

I kept my eyes level and didn’t look at the phoenix on his left wrist, and the female angel inked over his right. But the memory of the day we’d chosen our art rushed into my head—

the promise we'd made to one another to burn our past and rise from the ashes into a new future together.

I pushed away the memory and tried not to notice Ryder's soft brown curls, the color of maple syrup. Or his nose sitting on his face a little off-center, his three-day beard that nailed Easy-Rider-bad.

Questions I'd saved up for three years piled into my brain and landed one on top of another. *Where have you been? When did you move to Florida? Do you have a girl? Does your heart beat faster when you think of me? Do you think of me?*

I forced my voice not to sound too scared or too relieved—or too anything. “How many guys you riding with?”

He opened his menu. “Seven. Counting the chics, we have twelve in all.”

He rode with five women, and one of them would be his. I absorbed the sharp, shooting pain slicing my heart, then shoved it down deep. “Not like you to ignore fate.”

A flash of confusion crossed his face.

“Counting you, your gang has thirteen members—unlucky.”

A smile found his lips and eased into his eyes. “Then, I guess you joining up will fix fate.”

Exhausted release tingled down my spine. Ryder planned to accept me into his world without question. Of course, he would. Not his style to hold a grudge. “How long's your gang been riding?”

“Angel—” His eyes turned as flat as his voice. “Cut to the chase. Why'd you call?”

*Because when things turn bad, you're always the one I run to.* I opened my menu, but the words on the page ran together.

Our waitress, a gray-haired, grandmotherly type with an armload of dirty plates, stopped at our table. “What y’all want?”

“Water, please.” I wasn’t hungry, but I hadn’t eaten since lunch yesterday. Not healthy for the baby. “Go ahead. I’m still looking.”

“Two eggs over easy, raisin toast, and loaded hash browns.” Ryder shut his menu. “And coffee.”

“I’ll have scrambled eggs and wheat toast.” The waitress left, and I stuck my menu behind the napkin holder.

“Your need to get out of Savannah involve cops?” he asked.

The image of Abby’s face pushed its way in. Blood rushed from my head, but I forced myself to meet his stare. “And if it is?”

“I need to understand what I’m up against. My decisions affect more than just me now.” He didn’t seem resentful, just curious. I’d asked for help, and just like always, he’d come to my rescue.

But Ryder had changed. Little differences, and not only the new swagger in his walk. Something more. A calm assurance he’d never had before.

And he was right. I owed him an explanation. By now, Detective McNab’s warrant would have my face plastered across cop stations all over Georgia, probably all over the South.

I wanted to tell him everything. How I might look whole, but my insides were empty and dried up. How panic and anger and fear took turns ripping through my body. How the numb acceptance of anyone I loved being torn away never surprised me. Only this time...this time, God's punishment was more than I could bear—he took Abby.

But our breakfasts arrived, and I told Ryder none of that. While we ate, I gave him only the facts of my story. I began on the day Dorothea and I had left him on the courtroom steps being hauled away in handcuffs and walked him through the next three years. I left nothing out.

To Ryder's credit, he only interrupted once to clarify a name. His eyes hardened when I got to the part about taking a gap year from college to search for my mother. When I described the Jet Ski accident and broke down, Ryder offered no condolences. But he didn't judge, and he didn't lecture, either.

I skipped my three-week fling with Josh and me being knocked-up, for now. My tiny baby bump was easily hidden under my loose t-shirt and yoga pants. And if Ryder had a girlfriend, bringing me, his ex, into their lives could cause trouble. Trouble he must think he could handle but protecting me while I carried another guy's kid wouldn't sit straight on his shoulders. Not the Ryder I knew.

“Could be they issued a warrant, but maybe not.” He forked the last of his hash browns into his mouth. “Attorney could be wrong. Wouldn't be the first time those jackasses fucked up.” He removed a buzzing phone from his vest. He read his message, then his fingers moved over the screen, and he shoved the cell back in place. “I'll tap a few connected friends in Savannah, see what's up.”



“You have friends in Savannah?” I pushed my half-eaten breakfast away.

“We need to hit the road,” he said. “Harley shop in Ormond Beach should be open by the time we pass by.”

I followed him to the door. “Something wrong with Bessie?”

“No. Something’s wrong with your clothes.” He held the door for me. “You forgot everything I taught you?”

I couldn’t help rolling my eyes. “I remember. Bikes aren’t dangerous, just unforgiving of ignorance.”

He mounted Bessie, started the ignition. He rolled two fingers in the air. “And what else?”

“Only fools ride without protective gear.”

He gave my black t-shirt and cotton pants a long, cool once-over, then slipped on his sunglasses. “And, Angel-face, you’re seriously lacking leather.”

I swung my leg over the seat, and like I’d done a million times, slid my thumbs in the belt loops of his jeans. “How far to Ormond?”

“Should be there by ten.”

“Where we headed after that?”

“Does it matter?”

“No.” As long as Ryder had my back, I was safe.

For the next hour, I lost myself in the rumble of the engine, the vibration between my legs that at one time had caused a deep itch in my belly—back when my arms were wrapped around the guy I thought I’d die without.

But Ryder wasn't that crazy-in-love, eighteen-year-old kid with a mega-chip on his shoulder. And I wasn't that same fifteen-year-old looking for a good time. Abby was dead, and the police blamed me.

I might not be able to hide forever. But if the cops found me, without Ryder's help, I had no way to keep my baby out of the system. And no kid of mine was going to be left behind like a piece of garbage.

An hour later, we rolled to a stop. "Is this Harley's headquarters or something?" My gaze swept the block, took in the brick building, the shiny glass, the four-foot Harley Davidson sign overhead.

"No. They have shops this size everywhere."

"Shop? This place is bigger than the Rock Springs Mall." Inside, everything was Harley—t-shirts, caps, rows, and rows of shiny new bikes.

Ryder pointed to the escalator. "Leather's upstairs."

I got off at the second floor. Racks of clothes filled every available wall. The center space held five long rows of bikes so shiny and pristine I'd have assumed they were new except for the sign overhead reading GENTLY USED. Five sales clerks, dressed in what must be the official uniform of jeans, boots, and black t-shirts with the Harley emblem on the sleeve, worked the floor.

Ryder walked over to a white low-rider and circled the bike. "Hop on."

"Why?"

"I want to see if it fits."

I didn't move.

“Come on. Sit on the damn bike.”

No use arguing. When Ryder wanted something, he dug in deeper than a tick. I nestled my butt on the seat—lots of shiny chrome, sleeker than Bessie. I ran my hand over the slimmer gas tank, admired the glossed pearly white.

Ryder stepped back, tilted his head. “White looks good on you, Angel.”

A female sales clerk peeked around Ryder. “You have an excellent eye. That Street 500 just came in yesterday. Low mileage and has a stellar maintenance history. Best deal in the house at forty-nine hundred.”

I slid off the seat. Waited for Ryder to tell the tall, leggy brunette—Suzette, her name tag said— we were only looking.

Ryder considered the bike again, nodded toward the leather racks. “Can you show us some chaps?”

Suzette smiled. “Sure thing.”

I eased between them, turned my back to Suzette, and faced Ryder. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

Ryder held up a finger to Suzette. “Give us a second.”

She nodded at me. “I’ll pull some chaps for you to consider.”

“Ryder, I’m low on cash,” I whispered. “The only money I have is in Rock Springs at the Wells Fargo Bank.”

Ryder didn’t blink, and he didn’t glance away. It was like staring down a tree.

“I can’t risk using my ATM card. The cops will figure out where I am.”

“How much you have in your account?”

“Two.”

“Hundred?”

“Thousand.”

Ryder nodded. “On the way out of town, we’ll stop at an ATM so you can draw out the maximum. In the morning, you can make another withdrawal. That should give you breathing room until we figure it out.”

“Police will trace the withdrawals. Know I’m in Florida.”

“They won’t find you.”

“I can only get three hundred a day off my debit card. Chaps and a vest will run close to five.”

“That’s okay.” His gaze slowly rolled down my body. “We’ll figure out a way you can pay me back.”

I didn’t need to see behind his dark sunglasses to read his meaning. My body shuddered with the memory of his hands on my skin.

He slid his fingers behind my neck, pulled me close, and kissed my temple, then ran his hand down my back. His unexpected touch was tender and sweet, yet the thrill it aroused was deep and not at all innocent.

“If you want to hide, Angel, you have to blend. The only way you can blend in my world is to ride a bike. You can handle a Harley, but you need to look the part.”

*IVY*

MY DAUGHTER KILLED MY DAUGHTER.

The realization spun my world out of control. How—it couldn't be— “I can't—”

I must've stood because Detective McNab grabbed my elbow and steadied me. “I understand. Again, I'm sorry for your loss.”

I stumbled out of the room, down the hall, into our master suite, and finally into the bathroom. I shut and locked the door, slid to my knees on the cold travertine tile, and fought the urge to vomit the gnawing, groping fear swelling in my gut.

If what the deceive said was true, Willa knew Abby. She worked at her tennis camp. She carried Abby to Tybee. She put her on a Jet Ski during a storm.

Why?

“Ivy.” Rence rapped on the door. “Are you okay, sweetheart?”

How could I explain this to Rence?

“Sweetheart, are you okay?”

“I need a minute.” A strange roaring in my ears stifled a high wailing horrible noise halfway between terror and pain.

“Honey, open the door. Let me in.”

A detached part of myself knew I was making the horrific sound pulsating in my ears.

Rence rattled the doorknob. “Please, honey, open the door.”

When I didn’t answer, he added. “Our appointment at Chase and Ward is in half an hour.” His voice, weighted in sorrow, added another layer of guilt.

I used the wall to pull to my feet, splashed cold water on my face. “You go without me,” I said through the door. I had to think. Just a few minutes alone. Pressure built behind my eyes. “Please. I can’t go to the funeral home. You do it.”

“Peter’s arrived.” Rence tried the doorknob again. “Come out, sweetheart.”

Peter. Peter would somehow make sense of this. I unlocked the door. “I need to see Peter.”

“He’s in the upstairs guest room.” Rence ran a hand down my arm, and his touch sent a wave of shame so strong I bent at the waist.

He folded me into his arms. “Sweetheart, I’m here.” He dried my tears with tissue from his pocket. A staple we now carried everywhere. “Why don’t you speak to Peter, but then we have to leave for the funeral home.”

I rushed down the hall and up the back staircase.

Peter was in the hallway. His hair had begun to gray over the past six months, and his face looked fuller, a little more like Dad. I shoved him back into the guest room and shut the door. Sat on the edge of the bed and wrapped my arms around my waist. “Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God.”

Peter sat beside me. He rested his hand over the crown of my head. “I’m so sorry, Ivy. I can’t believe Abby’s gone.”

“My fault—”

He folded me into his arms. “Abby’s death was an accident.” I burrowed in, wallowed in the warmth of his love. His soft cotton shirt caressed my cheek, and I caught the familiar scent of Oud Wood, the cologne I’d splurged on last year for his birthday.

“This isn’t your fault.” Peter’s tone was confident and sure, but he didn’t understand.

I pulled back. “She’s here.” I searched for an explanation, but McNab’s claim had exploded in my head and left behind too many slivers and pieces. I couldn’t seem to string a coherent sentence. “She’s in Savannah. Willa Elliott...she took Abby. On the Jet Ski.”

Peter’s face turned as white as his shirt. “But I saw Rence. He didn’t say anything about Willa—” He pulled back. “You haven’t told him, have you?”

“No. I didn’t have a chance. I was going to tell him last night in Paris, and—”

“You have to tell him.” An immense underwater silence filled the room. “He has the right to know, Ivy.”

“I can’t tell him now.” The thought of inflicting more pain on Rence doubled me over. I grabbed my stomach. “It will destroy him. He’ll never get past it. He’ll never forgive me.”

“There’s nothing to forgive. Getting pregnant and giving birth to Willa was a childhood mistake. You were only fifteen when she was born. You don’t know Willa. Abby’s death isn’t your fault. You’re not to blame.”

But no matter how adamant he spouted his words of absolution, the real truth rang through. If I’d faced my past when Peter first called with news of Willa, if I’d asked to meet with her instead of allowing Peter to pay her off, Abby would be alive.

A knock sounded on the door.

Rence walked into the room, his glassy eyes red from crying. “Peter, would you mind driving Ivy and me to the funeral home? I’m still unsteady from the sleeping pill I took on the plane.” His worried eyes landed on me. “And Ivy’s in no condition to drive.”

“Of course,” Peter said.

I went to Rence’s side, and he wrapped his arm around my waist and walked me down the stairs. “I’m not going to the funeral home,” I said.

He stopped at the bottom of the landing. “Sweetheart, we have to make important decisions.”

He was right. Of course, he was right. I should go. But... “I can’t do it.”

He sighed, nodded. “Why don’t you lie down, try and rest?”

I turned for our room. What kind of mother shirked her last duty for her child? But I couldn’t go. I needed to think. An odd sound, like a hurting animal, stopped me mid-step. I looked back.



Rence leaned against the wall, his head bent, one hand clutching his car keys, the other holding his forehead. His face was ravaged with despair.

I hurried to his side, holding him in my arms. Pain radiated between us, stabbing his heart, then mine, faster and faster, until drawing a full breath was impossible. I leaned against the wall, pulled Rence's weight against me, and cried myself out.

Peter and my assistant, Ursula, stood to one side, as if unwilling to interrupt our interlude of grief. Finally, Peter removed the keys from Rence's hand and led him toward the back door.

Ursula hugged me to her side and drew me into the kitchen. "Why don't you try and eat something?"

"I can't eat." My mouth had a horrible copper taste. Probably the sleeping pills or the Valium or the half bottle of pinot grigio I'd drunk on the plane. "Maybe just water."

Ursula opened the ice maker and filled a glass. "Bridget, the tennis camp coach, is in the living room. She asked to see you."

"Bridget? I want to talk to her."

"I'll go get her."

I eased onto one of the barstools and sipped my water. The burn in my throat eased. A welcoming numb filled my body. When Mom died three years ago, and I didn't shed a tear, I consulted a grief counselor who spent an hour a week for three months walking me through the five stages of grief. Denial. Anger. Bargaining. Depression. Acceptance. I dutifully worked my way through every chapter and cried my way through the acceptance epilogue.

But now, I wanted nothing more than to cement my feet in denial. Embrace my dazed refusal to believe, rebuke reality. The stage where no matter what anyone said, you knew—you just knew deep in your soul any minute you would wake up from this horrible nightmare. Please, God, let me be a player in a cruel, heartless dream.

Bridget peeked around the doorjamb. I motioned her forward, and she sat on the stool next to mine. Her red-rimmed eyes clouded with emotion. “I’m so sorry.”

I didn’t know Bridget well. I took in her earnest face, her full mouth, her brown eyes, and wanted to grip her shoulders, shake and scream, *If you’d been at the courts doing your job when Mia called, Abby would be alive.* Instead, I asked, “Willa Elliott, the girl who carried Abby to Tybee, is she from Savannah?” I hoped, against all reason, there were two Willa Elliotts.

Bridget’s face turned crimson. Was that guilt, or did she sense my underlying anger? “No. I think Willa’s from Wyoming. At least that’s where she said she’s going to college in the fall.”

College? The news threw me. Willa’s reasons for being in Savannah now even more confusing. “Did she say why she came here?”

Bridget’s gaze fell to her hands, and she played with an amethyst ring on her finger. “No, she said she was traveling around for the summer and liked Savannah.”

“How’d she get the job with you at the tennis camp?”

Bridget shifted, glanced away. She didn’t want to answer my questions. I no longer cared. My ability to empathize with anyone else’s discomfort had evaporated with a phone call in

Paris. “Did she apply, did she know someone? How did a Wyoming teen work in a city of Savannah tennis camp program?”

“Willa agreed to work for volunteer credit hours,” Bridget said. “She said she was short a few hours for her scholarship. I’d give anything not to have gone home early yesterday.” Tears pooled in her eyes.

My heart filled with righteous satisfaction. I had no inclination to spare this woman or anyone else an ounce of guilt. I hurt, and everyone who let Abby down would damn well bleed too.

“Willa is one of the most responsible teens I’ve ever worked with. Abby loved her. I’m sure she’s devastated.”

My field of vision contracted to one black point, then disappeared altogether, leaving behind a bright, blinding void. “Have you called her? Tried to reach her?”

“Yes, but she’s not answering her phone.”

Bridget’s voice floated over me like an early morning fog.

“Abby even dressed like Willa, wore navy shorts and the same kind of sneakers so they’d match. Abby told everyone who would listen that she and Willa were twins.”

Twins? The fog dropped away.

A sad smile crossed Bridget’s face. “They did look alike. Their hair and eyes were almost the identical color.” She surveyed my face, then the messy braid spilling over my shoulder. Her brow furrowed.

I picked up my water glass and walked to the sink. “I’m a little tired.” Sounds of her barstool scratching wood reached me.

“Please, let me know if there’s anything—anything I can do.”

I nodded but kept my back turned. The news Abby claimed Willa as her twin swirled like a tornado in my gut. Did Abby feel some kind of connection? Did Willa tell her they were sisters?

“Ivy.”

I jumped at the sound of Mia’s voice.

She flew into my arms. “I’m so sorry.” She buried her face into my neck.

Mia’s mother, a woman I’d only seen a couple of times, lingered in the kitchen doorway. “Mia has a concussion,” she said. “But I couldn’t keep her away.”

I extracted myself and swept my hand toward my breakfast table. “Please, sit down.” I waited until Mia and her mother chose their seats, then sat on the opposite side. I wanted to see Mia’s face when I asked my questions.

Mia had sleeked her long brown hair into a ponytail, which accented her swollen sky-blue eyes. Her face and neck, usually the color of Irish cream, were now blotched in shades of pink and red. The edge of a yellow and violet bruise peeked from under a bandage on her forehead.

“I heard you had an accident.”

“I tried to call Ursula, and I called Kathy and Mrs. Abernathy.” Mia rushed her words like people do when they want to tell their side of a story. “But Ursula didn’t answer her cell. I left messages for Mrs. Abernathy on her home phone and her cell, but she didn’t call back. And Kathy was out of town, but she suggested I call Bridget and ask her to help out. But Bridget was sick and—”

“I know. Detective McNab told me.” I pushed my anxiety aside and forced understanding into my voice. “But he also said you told him you knew Willa Elliott. How do you know her?”

“Mostly from the tennis camp. We’d chat when I picked up or dropped off Abby.”

“I was only out of town four days,” I said. “In four days, you got to know her well enough to ask her to watch Abby?”

Mia’s mother squirmed in her seat, but I ignored her, kept my focus on Mia.

”Abby and I ran into Willa on Market Street Thursday night. It was crowded, and there were no tables, and Willa invited us to sit at hers. Abby really liked her.”

“And from that one dinner, you trusted her with Abby?” My tone held more accusation than question.

Mia dropped her head.

Sandra rested her hand on her daughter’s forearm. “We should go,”

Screams of fury pounded my skull, and I massaged my forehead. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply Abby’s death is your fault, Mia.”

“Willa is so nice. And she’s dating Daniel, Dr. Horton’s son. I’m friends with Daniel’s sister. And it was only for a few hours, just until Mom and I got back to Savannah. Daniel said Willa didn’t want to go to Tybee, but Abby wanted to build a sandcastle and—”

“Mia, honey,” Her mother patted her hand, “you’re not supposed to overtax yourself.”

Mia's eyes pleaded for understanding. "Daniel called me yesterday. He said Willa had never seen the ocean. She'd planned to play on the beach with Abby while Daniel and his friends went jet skiing."

"Then why did she take Abby on a Jet Ski?"

"Daniel blames himself. He said he and Abby talked Willa into going jet skiing."

"Don't defend Willa to me."

Mia recoiled as if I'd slapped her.

Her mother wrapped an arm around Mia's shoulders. "Come on, sweetheart, you need to go home and rest."

"Abby was crazy about Willa," Mia said. "She wanted to dress like her, do her hair like her."

I wanted to howl and wail and accuse Mia of shirking her duties to watch over Abby, but deep in my heart, I knew Abby's death wasn't Mia's doing. And I didn't have the stomach or the energy to throw blame on her just to unload my guilt.

"I loved Abby," Mia whispered, then followed her mother out of my kitchen.

My conversations with Mia and Bridget added even more questions about Willa. Did she purposely get a job at Abby's camp? Did she manipulate Mia into...what? Wrecking her mom's car?

Did Willa get the job with Bridget as a way to wheedle her way into my life?

A new wave of grief slid over me, despair too deep for introspection. My misery came in waves—the twist in the pit of my stomach, the anguish, the questioning torment. I'd

regret my decision to travel to Paris, leaving Abby in Mia's care until I inhaled my last breath.

I yearned for the numb nothingness of sleep. I walked down the hall to the master suite, found Rence's bottle of Lunesta.

A knock on the door stopped me from popping a pill in my mouth. I palmed it instead and opened the door.

"Ivy." Ursula walked in with a *Savannah Daily Newspaper* fisted in her hand. "You need to see this. There's another front-page story on Abby's death in the afternoon paper. All the local TV channels are covering the story."

My temples throbbed, and I sat on my bed. "I can't face reading about the accident right now."

"You have to look at it. Rence and your brother will be back any minute."

"I can't read—."

"Don't read, just look." She folded the paper and placed it in my hand.

I brought the newspaper close, blinked, and stared at Abby's smiling first-grade photo next to my FaceBook profile picture. But it was the photo under the article titled TYBEE DROWNING that tore through me, a smiling face that could easily be mistaken for me as a high school senior.

The caption read—POLICE HUNT WOMAN IN CONNECTION WITH CHILD'S DEATH.

A primal, inhuman sound scraped my throat.

*WILLA*

I TURNED OFF THE SHOWER, GRABBED THE EXCUSE MOTEL 6 called a towel, and dried myself. I still hadn't figured out how my night with Ryder would go. One hotel room, one queen-sized bed, and one secret the size of the Grand Canyon lay between us.

Being with him was as close as I'd ever get to having a family. No matter how long Ryder and I had been apart, we had no self-consciousness or awkward moments. At least not yet. Right now, I'd go anywhere with him and do whatever he asked of me just to stay safe in his orbit. But if I were honest, I wouldn't have been so willing to slide back into Ryder's world if the cops weren't on my ass.

I'd hidden my growing four-month baby bump under yoga pants and a loose t-shirt. But naked? And if Ryder accepted my baby and me into his new world, what kind of life would that be for my kid? However Ryder made his living, based on his history, it wouldn't be legal.

I stared in the mirror and looked into Abby's eyes. I turned away from the mirror and from my sister's memory. Dorothea,



my probation officer, said I repressed traumatic memories, a kind of forced blackout that pushed reality aside as if it hadn't happened.

Like that night in my bedroom with Jim. But Ryder stabbing that asshole didn't come anywhere close to me causing Abby's death. I'd killed my little sister. Destroyed any chance of becoming a part of the family I'd fought so hard to find.

*Don't think about it.*

*Abby's drowning was an accident.*

And Jim and Abby belonged in separate boxes, on separate shelves, far, far away from each other.

I abandoned my memories of Jim, of Abby, of Ivy, of wanting to belong to a family.

The only person I'd ever truly belonged to was Ryder.

I switched off the bathroom light and stepped into the bedroom.

Ryder had muted the TV and turned the lamp down to the lowest setting.

I slipped in beside him, closed my eyes, and let his soft snore lull me to sleep.

Like an untethered ghost, I floated—everything below blurred and faded. I hovered over the room and gazed through a heavy mist.

A body. A man.

A man lying in a river of red.

Red. Everywhere red.

*Hurry. Have to hurry.*

Fear scraped like sharp, pointed fingernails on the edges of my mind.

*Run, hide.*

But I didn't know why.

A hand, quick and sure, rose out of the red river, through the fog, grabbed my neck, and forced me to the ground.

The fog drifted away, and the man was Jim. I could smell his bourbon breath. See the lust in his eyes. Feel his hands ripping my panties.

*No. No. No.*

I fought his arms, bucked my body.

Shiny steel danced over Jim's head. A knife. Taunting, gleaming like a welcoming light. I gripped the wood handle, thrust the blade down. Again, and again, and again.

“Willa. Wake up.”

Ryder. Ryder came to save me.

He crushed me to his chest. “Shh, now. It's okay.” He swept my hair back. “There you are. There's my Angel.”

I swallowed back bile. “Oh, God. I'm going to be sick.”

He grabbed a bottle of water off the nightstand, twisted the cap. “Drink.”

I pushed the bottle away. “Can't.” I pressed my fingers to my lips. “The dream. It's so real.”

“Same nightmare?”

“Yeah.” My heartbeat gradually slowed. I took a few long breaths. My brain no longer felt like mush. “I’m okay now.”

He laid me back on the bed, stretched out beside me. “Close your eyes. I’m right here.”

“I won’t be able to sleep.”

He nuzzled my neck, kissed my shoulder. His hand slid up my thigh and then under my shirt. “I’ll help you relax.”

I wanted to say no, meant to say, *wait. We have to talk first.* But his palm cupped my breast, and my mind cluttered with our past. And then, nothing mattered but his hands on my body. His thumb flicking over my nipples, heat spreading between my legs. I turned into him, fisted his soft curls in my hand, and pulled his mouth to mine.

When I woke, Ryder was gone, but I forced myself to stay calm. I rolled out of bed and cracked the blinds. His bike wasn’t parked beside my shiny new ride. A rolling wave of panic hit every nerve, every cell.

Ryder insisted on making the ATM withdrawal in Ormond Beach while I waited in the parking lot across the street. Would he—could he—have stolen my cash? I grabbed my backpack and yanked out my wallet. The money was there. I counted—close to four hundred dollars.

Ryder hadn’t screwed me out of my money, but if he’d left and I was here alone, I’d have to risk another withdrawal. I stuffed the cash in my wallet beside the useless ten-grand check from Ivy Abernathy’s brother.

Where would Ryder go?

He would never abandon me. He wouldn't. He'll be back. My chest expanded as if something warm had been poured inside my heart. I just knew. This is what real love felt like. Trust.

I showered, dressed, and repacked my backpack. Ryder was still AWOL.

I straightened the bed, wiped the water off the bathroom counter, anything to keep busy. He'd drive up any minute.

I flipped through the TV channels, settled on *The Price Is Right*, and turned the volume to low.

The rumble of an engine filtered through the window, and no matter how much I'd pretended I knew he'd be back, my chest fluttered with relief. All the love I'd denied for the past three years rushed forward. Then a stab of guilt hit me. I owed Ryder the truth. The real truth. The whole truth.

Ryder walked in, scanning his phone and holding a takeout bag. He wore jeans and a dark blue t-shirt, his wind-blown curls framed his face. He'd never looked better.

"Hey, beautiful." He shot me the smile he saved only for me. "Hungry?"

I walked to him, wrapped my arms around his neck, and planted a kiss on his lips, aimed at letting him know how much I'd missed him. "Something smells good."

He nuzzled my neck. "Breakfast can wait."

I laughed, danced back. "I'm starving."

He handed me a Styrofoam container and a can of orange juice. "Betty Sue's Diner, three miles up the road, serves the world's best flapjacks. Prepare to be amazed."

I sat on the side of the bed, popped the top of the orange juice, and drank. “How long before we get to your place?” The sooner we left and the further we got from the bank cameras that would’ve caught Ryder withdrawing money from my account, the easier I’d feel.

He leaned against the dresser, poured syrup on his pancakes. “Twenty minutes south.”

“You live near Daytona?” Suddenly my throat felt sandpapered. I set my fork aside.

“Just outside the city limits.”

“Then why did we stay in a hotel last night?”

He opened his orange juice, sipped. “Let’s eat, then I’ll explain.”

I’d learned over the past four years that listening to the whisper inside your head saved a shitload of heartache. I’d ignored the goosebumps and low rumble in my head on the night Jim died. I’d pushed away from the same nagging tingle when Daniel convinced me to take Abby to Tybee. And right now, staring into the eyes I trusted most in the world, my head buzzed like a swarm of bees had taken up residence in my skull. “You have roommates or something?”

“I had a friend watch my house last night. Made sure the cops hadn’t made our connection. All’s clear. Finish your breakfast, and we’ll head to my place.”

As soon as I forked the first bite of pancake in my mouth, I knew Ryder’s world’s-best claim was valid. “God, these are unbelievable.”

“It’s the lemon juice.”

I came close to choking. “And you know this how?”

“I rebuilt the engine in Betty Sue’s 1974 Mustang a couple of months back. Sweet little ride. Betty Sue swore me to secrecy, then gave me the recipe.”

“You’re a mechanic on the side?”

“I have a shop down the street.”

“A shop? You mean like a garage?”

“Three bays, an office. Not a big deal, but it pays the rent.”

“You own a business?” I tried to imagine Ryder as a businessman, a boss. The image didn’t gel. “What about The Suns? How does that work with owning a shop?”

“You think I tool around all day with a bunch of randy guys and gals, mimicking Hell’s Angels?” He licked syrup from his lips. “And it’s a club, not a gang.”

I tried catching up. “So, The Suns is a motorcycle club?”

He grinned. “Disappointed?”

“That’s cool.” Pride slipped into my voice, but fear swam in my blood. Ryder owning a business meant he couldn’t pick up and vanish into the wind if the cops started sniffing around. He’d be stuck here in Daytona. “You’ve only been out of prison for a few months. How’d you save enough to buy a garage?”

He stared at me, as if working out what and how much to say. Then he sat beside me on the bed. “Do you remember the night Jim waited on the porch for us to get home? The night he accused me of snitching him out?”

“Yeah, I remember. But he’d been drinking. He was always paranoid when he drank.”

“That time, his rant was true.”

My heart slowed to a stop. “You snitched out Jim to the cops?”

“No, to his dealer, a guy named Shaker. Jim was skimming. Topping off his weed with tobacco and repacking. He pocketed the profits. I let Shaker know. When I got out, Shaker set me up with a garage.”

“Dealers don’t give away businesses for no reason.”

“It’s a reward for honesty.”

“And what else do you do for Shaker?”

“I trick out a few of his cars, take some calls, deliver a package now and then.”

Ryder’s garage might do some legit business, and The Suns might masquerade as a riding club, but I doubted the cops would be fooled for long. I glanced at the bedside clock. “It’s ten o’clock on Monday morning. Isn’t your shop open?”

“I went in early and got my other two mechanics lined out. I’m taking the rest of the day off. I need to get you settled at my place before I leave for Miami.”

“You’re leaving me alone?”

He pulled me close. “Just for one night. I’ll be home tomorrow.”

I pushed away enough to see his face. “Can’t I go with you? Please. I’m too antsy to be alone.”

“We’ve hit a snag. You gotta stay out of sight for a while.” Worry creased his eyes. “I tapped a friend in Atlanta, and he confirmed there’s a warrant for your arrest.”

*IVY*

RENCE WALKED THROUGH OUR FRONT DOOR HOLDING HIS mother's right arm; my brother, Peter, grasping her left. Two bookends holding a grieving Georgia upright. Her watery eyes swollen and red, unspoken evidence she'd spent the morning crying. She kissed my cheek, her wrinkled lips dry against my skin as if, like me, all the moisture from her body had been shed in tears.

I dropped in behind the trio. I needed Rence alone before he read the newspaper, or tuned into the news. I'd beg forgiveness and understanding, explain why my spoken vows for better or worse, richer or poorer, hadn't included sharing every secret in my past. Then I had to find a way to tell him my first child, the evil one, killed our angel.

Rence settled Georgia in the living room by the fireplace in a teak antique rocking chair with a seat too deep for her five-foot-three frame. The tips of her beige pumps barely touched the floor. "Can I get you anything, Mother? Water? Iced tea?"



“Maybe a glass of tea.” Georgia clutched her fist to her chest, poignant distress encased in her eyes.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Peter said, “I’m going to call and check on Kelsie and the kids. Verify their flight arrangements.” He ducked into the hall without meeting my gaze, likely hoping to avoid the emotional fireworks.

Rence poured tea from my grandmother’s Baccarat beverage pitcher that someone had placed beside a refreshment tray of cookies and nuts. I wondered why someone thought Italian wedding cookies an appropriate snack for a bereaved family. He put the glass beside his mother, turned to me. “Come and sit.”

I perched on our handcrafted Chesterfield sofa. A piece Rence had designed a few years back. The soft celery color blended seamlessly with the hand-knotted silk rug I’d found puttering through an antique store in New Orleans while Rence attended a three-day furniture conference.

Rence tugged me closer, folded my hands into his, and molded me to his side as if the heartbreaking reality of Abby’s death bonded us into a single unit.

“What will we do without our Abigail?” Georgia’s lips moved in silent prayer. “I brought Rence’s confirmation Bible for Abby. And I hope you’ll consider burying our princess in the white lace dress I bought her for Easter.”

An image of Abby’s lace-covered body lying inside a wooden box flashed in my head. My legs twitched, the urge to run from the room overwhelming. I inhaled and pushed air into my shrinking lungs.

“Rence said the funeral home is putting together a video memorial of Abby,” Georgia’s eyes filled, a tear slipped down

her wrinkled cheek.

I'd seen those videos at funerals, haunting, and beautiful depictions of the dead. I didn't want to see Abby's sweet, smiling face playing on an overhead screen. My baby should be here, alive, in this room, flitting from the chair to the sofa, demanding every second of her grandmother's attention.

"Did Detective McNab call?" Rence asked. "He promised to give us an update on the case."

A wave of panic filled me. McNab, a detective, would surely be curious about the physical similarities between Willa and me. "I'm not sure if he called."

Rence removed his cell from his jacket.

I stilled his hand. I couldn't allow him to learn about Willa from the police. "Georgia, will you excuse Rence and me for a few minutes?" My voice sounded odd as if I were trying to be someone normal.

"Just let me check in with McNab, then I'll get Mom settled upstairs," Rence said.

Peter returned.

"Peter, I need to a few minutes alone with Rence. Will you stay with Georgia?" I rose and kissed Georgia's cheek. I wrapped my fingers around Rence's arm, led him through the hall, into our bedroom, and shut the door.

"I appreciate how taxing mother can be," Rence said. "But I couldn't leave her alone in her big house. I should have talked to you before inviting her to stay with us until after the funeral."

"Georgia can stay as long as she'd like." Clasp ing his fingers in mine, I drew him to the small sofa in our sitting

area.

He sat, leaned his head back against the cushion. “I don’t see how we’ll get through this. And tomorrow at the church...”

I sat at the far corner of the sofa and faced him. “I need to tell you something. Something important.”

He must’ve noticed tension in my voice because he straightened.

“When you’ve been together for more than a decade like we have, we’ve become each other’s GPS. Our life, a digital map that I know so well, I could draw it by heart.” I drew in and seared his open, loving expression to memory—the look a husband wears when he knows he’s staring into the eyes of his soulmate.

I placed my hand over my racing heart. “And then one day when you least expect it, you’re faced with an unfamiliar road that leads to a bridge you never saw before. A dangerous, nefarious crossing—and the only way across is to run like hell to the other side. I’m about to do that. Hurl myself across the divide, and I’m hoping you’ll be on the other side waiting with open arms.” I had to say the words. “The girl who took Abby on the Jet Ski—she’s my daughter.

Rence blinked, and his mouth moved silently, then, “What?” His eyes turned into slits. “What?”

A quickening in my chest expanded, steeling my heart against what was to come. “The girl on the Jet Ski, Willa Elliott, is my biological daughter.”

His face lost color, and his jaw went slack. Then something akin to confusion, only much, much more

profound, crossed his face. “Ivy, what in the hell are you talking about?”

“When I was fourteen, I got pregnant. With Willa.” I pulled a throw pillow into my lap, ran my fingers through the fringe.

“Pregnant?” Rence’s whispered response reverberated like an exploding bomb.

I refused to face the shock in his eyes and focused on a Savannah riverscape painting hanging on the far wall. “My father didn’t want my name attached to a scandal, and Mom was against abortion, so they sent me to live with my dad’s sister, Aunt Sophie, in Wyoming.”

I put the pillow aside and met his gaze.

His skin had turned a sickly pale green. “Are you saying you gave birth to Willa Elliott?”

“Yes.” I drew in a breath, wishing the air held the bravery I needed to make it through breaking Rence’s heart.

“But...” He massaged his forehead, moved to his neck. He swallowed, clenched his jaw, unclenched. His gaze darted from the window, to the bed, to the far corner. He looked everywhere but at me. Then he turned, searched my face as if I were someone he should know but didn’t recognize. “Where has Willa been all these years?”

“I gave her up for adoption the day she was born. I assume she grew up in Wyoming, but I don’t know her or anything about her. The morning you left for Europe, Peter called and said an eighteen-year-old girl had visited his office claiming to be my biological daughter.”

“Peter—”

“Willa found Peter through a DNA website.”

“DNA website?”

“It seems there are several, and they can link your DNA to family members. Peter showed up as Willa’s uncle.”

“This—this—my God.” Rence stood, then as if his knees couldn’t hold his weight, he slid back onto the sofa. “Why didn’t you say anything before now?”

”I was going to tell you the night Abby drowned.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before?” His words were halting and hesitant as if this unbelievable story was beginning to seem real. “Why didn’t you tell me before we married? Or when you were pregnant with Abby? Or when you gave birth to our daughter? I don’t understand.”

He rose again and backed away from the sofa, from me. “Did you—did you introduce Willa to Abby? Is that why Mia trusted her?”

“No. No.” I hurried to him.

He held out his hand like a traffic cop.

I stumbled back. “I told you, I’ve never met Willa.”

“She worked at Abby’s camp. How could you not know her?”

“Mia dropped off Abby, picked her up. I didn’t know Willa worked at the camp.” My voice came out quick and defensive. I reigned in my panic. “I wanted to tell you about Willa, about my past. It’s the reason I flew to Europe.”

“Why didn’t you tell me then?”

“When I arrived, you were in Lyons. And you didn’t want me traveling to you, so I planned to explain everything the

night you got back to Paris, but then the detective called.”

He held his body rigid, his fingers fisted. “In the ten years of our marriage, you couldn’t find the right moment to say you had another child? Didn’t you think I had a right to know?”

I cringed. His venom wrapped words plunging like needles into my heart. “She isn’t ...wasn’t my child. I gave her up for adoption.” The heat of shame crawled up my back, my neck. “I should’ve told you. I realize, but when we met, I just wanted...”

I searched for the magic words to make him understand. “I just wanted to be the girl you thought you loved.” *I wanted it desperately, so damn bad that remaking myself into your perfect soulmate was as natural as breathing.* ”And after we met, it seemed as if the months I was pregnant and the day I gave birth...it was like they never happened.”

A rap on the bedroom door. “Rence.” Georgia’s voice. Another quick knock. “Rence, the detective’s on the phone. And you need to see something on the television.”

Rence walked toward the door.

“Wait,” I pleaded.

He turned, his pupils so large they looked like marbled onyx.

I risked stepping closer, my fear growing like a rushing tide. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Please, Rence. Please forgive me.” I reached for him, to touch, to connect, to absorb his hurt, and somehow make it disappear.

”Don’t.” He backed up. “Don’t touch me.”

“I don’t know the words to make this right.” Tears constricted my throat and left my voice raspy and faint.

Rence's expression flattened, but the depth of his pain written there, in his eyes, sliced my battered heart wide open. The urge to fall to my knees, crawl to him, wrap my hands around his ankles and beg, swept through me. "Please, don't push me away. I need you. You need me. We'll need each other to get through this. I know I should've told you, but I was so young, and you were so perfect—"

I tried squashing my hysteria. I had to find the right words, the right phrase. I couldn't lose him. "I didn't tell you because I thought you wouldn't love me if you knew the truth."

Another louder rap. "Rence," Georgia said. "You need to talk to the detective."

"I'm so, so sorry." My voice, soft and pleading. "I should've told you. I'm a thousand times sorry."

Rences's broad, muscular shoulders sagged. He opened the door and went to calm his grieving mother and take a phone call from Detective McNab. To hear once again that my daughter killed our daughter.

*WILLA*

I STARED AT THE NEAT STACK OF PANTIES IN THE DRESSER drawer—some frilly, some sheer, some red, some black. Most had matching bras.

“Willa?” Ryder’s voice floated down the hall of his two-bedroom cracker-box house. A scent of sandalwood followed him into the room. I’d sprayed the expensive cologne on his neck when we’d stopped at the mall to buy my pair of black leggings to match my chaps. Used it as an excuse to smell him, get close. Remind him of our night together, and all our future nights together.

I dangled a pair of red lace see-thru thongs on my finger. “Look what I found.” I counted on the same fiery darts stabbing my heart to shoot out of my eyes.

Ryder’s gaze dropped to the open drawer, and his *oh, shit* look filled his face. The same look he’d had when I caught him getting a little too friendly with Cindy Thompson behind the gym in the eleventh grade.



“I told you this was my roommate’s room.” His voice stretched as tight as the strings on a new tennis racquet.

I dropped the thongs on the floor. Slammed the drawer shut. “Your roommate is female?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about before I took the phone call.” He leaned casually against the dresser, but I could tell from the look in his eye he wasn’t finished stomping on my heart. “You really shouldn’t be in Carole’s room,” he said with no apology in his tone. No softness to ease the shock.

“Don’t you mean your room?” I yanked another drawer open and pointed to stacks of boxer shorts and folded t-shirts.

“Don’t go postal.” He reached for my arm.

I yanked away, pushed the heels of my palms into my eye sockets. *No crying. No crying. No fucking crying.* I pointed to the closet where his jeans and a leather jacket he’d had since high school hung. “How was this supposed to work, Ryder? Me in the extra bedroom. Your other hoochie mama in here. You slip across the hall whenever you get the urge for a little strange?”

His forehead turned into one giant crease as if I had his balls in my hand squeezing. Perfect.

“It wouldn’t be like that,” he said.

“Not like what?” My threatening tears dissolved, and my voice went perfectly calm.

He wiped his palm over his mouth in a careless, hopeless gesture. “You’re going to have to give me a little time to work it out.” His darting gaze made me sick.

God, how incredibly stupid to believe he still loved me just because I'd never shaken him off my skin. "Was our hook-up last night supposed to be payment for your trouble?"

"Babe, I just need—"

I forced my voice hard and sealed my fate. "Look, all I need from you is to crash here for a couple of days until I figure things out. Then I'll get out of your hair."

He held his hand up. "Angel, slow down."

"My name's Willa."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Carole lives here."

"Yeah. I get that."

"I can't change that."

"Not asking you to." My hand drifted down to my belly.

I wanted to inflict pain. Physical pain. The burning, torturous pain. The kind of pain he was piling on me. "There are things you don't know. There was this guy in Rock Springs." I half-shrugged. "We had a thing."

Ryder's face softened with relief. He smiled, but his grin broke in a couple of places. "I haven't exactly been a monk for three years."

I brushed off the guilt plucking at my conscience. Why did I feel like a cheater when he was living with Carole? "I'm pregnant. Four months along."

We stood three feet apart, eyes locked. We stayed that way for so long, I swore I could see into Ryder's soul. Back to us sneaking our first kiss under the backyard oak tree. The tearful goodbye three years later, when Ryder made me swear I'd

keep my mouth shut, study in school, and make something of myself.

An engine roared.

Ryder's head snapped to attention. "That's Carole. I need to talk to her. It'd be best if you'd get out of this room." He gave me a couple of seconds to agree, but when I didn't move, he walked out the door taking his sandalwood scent and my shattered heart with him.

I went back into the guest room and stayed for over an hour. But I had to pee and couldn't hold it anymore. I opened my door and peeked down the hallway. No sounds came from the other bedroom, so I tiptoed into the hall. A murmur came from the kitchen. I stepped closer and listened.

"It's not permanent. Just give me a few days to work out a plan." Ryder's voice sounded like a plea.

"Doesn't matter. None of it matters. You shouldn't have brought her to our place." By Carole's steely tone, she definitely made the rules. "You get rid of her, or I will."

"I'll move her in the morning," Ryder gave in like a pussy-whipped mama's boy.

I slipped back into the guest room. Ten minutes later, two motorcycle engines rumbled. Ryder said he'd be gone, overnight, and Carole must've tagged along to Miami. Which meant I had the place to myself. I hit the bathroom. Waited ten minutes, didn't hear movement, so I checked out the kitchen.

I opened the refrigerator and took stock. Milk, eggs, cheese, a loaf of bread, a jar of peanut butter with the grape jelly already mixed in. I grabbed the carton of eggs and two slices of American cheese—I'd make an omelet. The kitchen,

not much bigger than the bathroom, looked recently renovated with green countertops and stainless steel appliances.

I carried my omelet into the living area and settled on a blue suede sofa with six frilly pastel pillows. That had to be Carole's contribution to the decorating. I shoved the pillows to the floor, found the remote, and flipped through the channels. Settling on a mystery movie, I tried concentrating on the who-done-it and not McNab's warrant or Ryder's slutty new babe. I gave up, switched off the movie, and focused on my next move.

I looked around Ryder's house, one he paid for with drug money, and admitted his world wasn't what I wanted anymore. I didn't want to bring my kid up on the wrong side of honest. But without a new identity, how would I earn enough money to pay rent, buy food, and in five months have my baby? A fugitive couldn't just walk into a hospital and give birth, then walk back out with their baby.

I showered, washed my hair, found a bottle of Tylenol PM in the medicine cabinet, swallowed two, and crawled into bed. I had only two viable options—beg Ryder to help me get a fake identity and live the rest of my life as a fugitive, or call Daniel's attorney friend Jace Pratt and ask him to help me fight the charges. By the time I closed my eyes, I'd made a new plan.

I slept for ten hours, not even waking to pee. At eight o'clock, I showered and dressed in my new black tights and the green blouse I'd bought on Broughton Street the day I arrived in Savannah. I braided my hair but didn't bother with makeup. I toasted two slices of bread, slapped on some peanut butter and

grape jelly, and washed my food down with two cups of freshly brewed coffee.

At eight-thirty, I called Jace Pratt's office and left a message on his voicemail. I made my bed, spent ten minutes on a handwritten thank-you note to Ryder, and included the address where he could pick up the motorcycle he'd bought me. I propped the note against the pillow on my bed, walked down the hall, and out the front door.

I used the app on my phone to find Widman Way and parked the bike in the lot beside the two-story beige building. I didn't spend one useless minute rethinking my decision—I strode across the parking lot.

I careened to a stop on the entry steps, slid a hand over my belly, and didn't move or take a breath. Holy shit. It happened again. I laughed out loud. My baby was moving. Inside of me. I wanted to tell someone. I looked around, and reality stole my three seconds of happy.

I grabbed onto the memory and held it close to my heart. My baby would love me. We'd have each other, and that would be enough.

I opened the door to a building I'd never seen, located in a city I'd never visited, and breathed in a scent scorched into my memory—the sickly sweet smell of fear.

I stepped to the counter. "I'm Willa Elliott."

"How can I help you?" the police officer asked.

I held my phone against the glass, the front page of the *Savannah News* covering the screen. "My name is Willa Elliott. I'm here to turn myself in."

*IVY*

MY DARLING ABBY WAITED, ONE ROOM AWAY IN THE anteroom of Savannah's famed Episcopal Christ Church. That's what Rence said, but Reverend Burke claimed Abby wasn't in the mahogany box on the brass stand. She now lived in heaven, running, playing, sitting at the right hand of God.

Reverend Burke was wrong.

When I woke the first morning after Abby died and the horror of what had happened crashed down, I remembered a documentary I had seen years before—*What the Bleep Do We Know?*—which explored a theory on quantum physics that delved into the possibility of a person living simultaneous alternate lives, in other worlds, on other planets, in other galaxies. I embraced the concept with every neuron in my brain. No one really died.

We lined up behind the casket, me, then Rence escorting Georgia, Peter, his wife, Kelsie, holding the hands of my niece and nephew.

I couldn't do this. I couldn't walk Abby down this aisle. I couldn't bury my baby in the ground. But I stepped in front of the wooden crate like a wooden soldier set for battle.

Reverend Burke walked to the right of Abby, swinging a thurible back and forth. Smoke curled around the casket and swam toward the ceiling. This woody, pungent odor of frankincense heightened the sick, hopeless pain encasing my heart.

I followed behind the rolling brass stand like a condemned prisoner scuffling to a firing line. Eric Clapton's haunting voice crooned, "Would you know my name if I saw you in heaven?" Somehow, I arrived seated beside Rence. He held Abby's christening Bible in one hand. The other gripped Georgia's fingers.

I conjured the image of Abby in her other life in another galaxy. A life where she still ran into our room in the early morning and hopped in between Rence and me, snuggling and angling for croissants and hot chocolate and video games. A life where I held my daughter in my arms and kissed her good morning. Abby's face so vivid in my head, so real, she just had to be alive. Somewhere. In some other galaxy.

Easy to presume when your world blew apart, so did everyone's, but the funeral home's black limousine pulled into our driveway, and I noticed the trash collector had taken our garbage and left the cans in the alley, just like every other Monday.

We walked through the back door to insistent ringing.

Peter headed for the kitchen. "I'll get the phone."

Rence escorted Georgia into the living room.

Ursula met me in the hall, grabbed my elbow, and led me to our master suite. “I’ll handle the caterers. Maybe you’d like to lie down for a few minutes before everyone arrives?”

I didn’t ask about caterers I didn’t hire and guests I didn’t invite. I eased the bedroom door shut and turned the lock. Relieved to not stare into Rence’s eyes, witnessing his heartbreak and his unvoiced allegations.

I drifted to the floor. A harrowing moan slipped from my lips like an animal wounded.

“Ivy, are you okay?” Ursula’s voice.

I lay prone on the hand-chiseled hickory floor.

Another knock. “Ivy, the guests are arriving,” Ursula said as if this was to be a celebration, and I the hostess. I was sick of guests. Our neighbor Deborah brought over a chicken and broccoli casserole yesterday, or was it the day before? She hugged me and whispered, *try celebrating Abby’s life, not her death*. A stupid adage from a foolish woman.

I rubbed, then scratched my forearms until red welts formed. My skin itched with the thought of Deborah and her inept homilies.

In the bathroom, I threw cold water on my face. This pretend wake was a sham. What life were these eating, drinking neighbors and friends pretending to celebrate? A life of six years? Abby didn’t get a chance to live her life.

I left my bedroom and walked down the hall to perform my last duty as Abby’s mother. In the living room, a tall, brown-haired woman who lived down the street scanned the room. Her gaze landed on me, skirted away, then slithered



back as if she craved to simultaneously seek me out and avoid me at the same time.

The real reason my neighbors and so-called friends lingered over half-full drink glasses and finger-food lay with an industrious local reporter who'd managed to hunt down my senior class photo. For the past forty-eight hours, pictures of Abby, Willa, and me, side by side, splashed morning, noon, and night on the local news.

No one at the funeral had worked up the nerve to ask about Willa. But now, in this informal setting, it was only a matter of time. An underlying tension, ripe with gossipy questions, wafted through the air like cheap drugstore perfume.

Rence and I were suddenly on par with the teen mother in the news last month, the one who forgot her toddler in the back seat on a sweltering ninety-five-degree day. Or, the dad too hyped on smack to notice his three-year-old slipping out the front door chasing the family dog into a busy street.

Negligent, uncaring, unfit parents.

Georgia, like me, now close to catatonic over our notorious standing in the community, sat with Rence in the den. They watched the memorial video of Abby playing on the beach, opening Christmas presents, wearing a tiara, and blowing out candles on her princess castle birthday cake. Andre Bocelli's soulful rendition of "Ave Maria" played in surround-sound throughout the house. I ached to sit beside Rence and hold his hand. But if I walked in, he'd find a reason to walk out.

Ursula threaded her arm through mine, and ushered me out the side door. The bistro table in the corner of the deck held a bottle of wine and a cheese plater. She pointed to a chair. "Sit."

“What time is it?”

“Six-thirty.”

Four hours since my last Valium. I poured a generous glass of sauvignon blanc.

She draped her short black jacket over the back of her chair and shoved the plate across the table. “Eat.”

“I don’t want anything.” I sipped my wine.

Ursula squeezed my hand. Her mouth forming a sad smile. “I’m so worried about you.”

I couldn’t summon the energy to verbalize false platitudes.

“I talked to Peter,” Ursula said. “I know the story behind Willa.” She held up her hand. “Before you get pissed off, I hounded him. Reminded him with he and Kelsie leaving tonight, you needed someone to protect you from that slimy reporter Tandy Burton.

“Burton waylaid me at my car, last night. She wants to talk to Rence. Said the public deserves to hear from Senator Abernathy’s grandson. My God, the senator’s been dead for more than twenty years.” Ursula sipped her wine. “I know Joe Kuchar, the publisher. I could make a call, ask him to lay off.”

I tapped my glass to hers. “Thanks for that. But Rence and Georgia have a lot more experience with the press than I do and they insist we ignore Burton. Don’t stoke her interest.”

”I can’t imagine what you’re going through, and God knows I don’t want to add to your burdens, but I think you should know that Daniel Horton stopped by the shop yesterday. I’m only telling you because I’m sure any day he’ll show up here and attempt to see you.”

The name sounded familiar, but the reason remained fuzzy.  
“Daniel?”

“The boy with Willa and Abby on Tybee.”

My heart leaped. Daniel was a witness to the accident. He could explain the impossible to me.

My exuberance faded with a thud. Grilling Daniel wouldn't bring Abby back. Nothing would bring Abby back. My mind kept returning to that one cold, immovable fact like an enormous wall I couldn't climb over.

I looked at Ursula, but in my head, I saw Abby running toward a massive stone wall, her hand outstretched, asking me to follow. I blinked, blinked again. Ursula's worried face faded in. Must be the Valium. Valium mixed with Rence's sleeping pills and wine.

“You know Daniel's mother,” Ursula pulled my attention back. “Cheri Kay Horton. She's the VP at Savannah State Bank who's such a fan of Henri's silk suit collection. I think she bought three last year.”

“Daniel is Cheri's son. Daniel told Mia that he was the one who talked Willa into taking Abby on the Jet Ski.”

The soft tinkle of a child's laughter drifted over our privacy wall.

“He rambled on and on yesterday,” Ursula said.

“Who?”

“Daniel. He wouldn't leave until I promised to give you his number.”

The itch for a Valium crawled over me. I finished my wine instead, poured another glass to the rim. My vision blurred, a

red cloud of rage circled my brain. “I want to see Daniel. Do you have his number? Call him.”

“Now?” Ursula considered me with a calculated uncertainty. “Maybe you should wait a day or two.”

The french doors opened, and my neighbor Kathy walked across the deck. “Ivy, Detective McNab is here, and he’s asking to see you.”

There’d only be one reason the detective would be here today—Willa.

I hurried inside and found McNab in the study. He stood beside a stoic Rence, while a running, laughing Abby played on the flat-screen above their heads.

I closed the door, picked up the surround sound remote, and muted Bocelli. McNab watched Abby open a Christmas present. Then he centered his attention on me. “I’m sorry to intrude on such a difficult day, but I have a few questions.”

“Of course.” My stomach churned. He’d surely have questions about Willa, if she were my child, if I knew her. My head felt empty, my body jittery. I shouldn’t have drunk wine without eating.

“Have you arrested her?” Rence’s voice cut into my nerves.

McNab considered him, and then looked at me. “Willa Elliott is in police custody.”

Maybe it was the wine or the pills or burying my daughter today, but the news failed to wrest any emotional response.

McNab focused on me. “Perhaps I could speak with you in private.”

Rence’s penetrating gaze dared me to agree.

“I have no secrets from my husband,” I said.

My answer didn't seem to faze McNab one way or the other. He waited until Rence and I sat, then joined me on the sofa. He removed a pen and black notebook from his pocket, flipped it open. “Is Willa Elliott your daughter?”

I hadn't expected such a direct question. I should have, after the side-by-side photographs. “I can't say for sure, but I think so.”

“What difference does it make?” Rence sat in the chair across from us, his tone was as cold as his glare. “My wife doesn't know this girl. And Willa Elliott had no one's permission to take Abby on that Jet Ski.”

McNab didn't acknowledge Rence, keeping his focus on me. “Do you know Willa?”

“No,” I answered.

“You've never spoken to her?”

“No.”

“Did you know she was in town?”

Something in McNab's expression made me think he knew the truth. Rence did not.

*No lies. No lies. No more lies.* “Yes, I knew she was in town.” I needed to explain, or this news would hand Rence another reason to pull farther away from me. But before I could say more, he shot out of his chair.

“You said you'd never spoken with her.”

“I haven't. Ursula called, caught me at the airport, the day I left for Europe. She said a woman came into the shop and claimed she flew into Savannah with my daughter, Willa.”

Rence towered over me. “You lied to me? Again?”

He stood so close he prevented me from standing. “No. I didn’t lie. It never came up and—”

“Mr. Abernathy,” McNab stood and laid his hand on Rence’s shoulder. “Let’s all cool down. Perhaps it would be better if you waited outside.”

”This is my home. I will not wait outside.” Fire flashed in Rence’s eyes.

McNab dropped his hand to his side. “Then, I’ll accompany your wife to the station for questioning.” McNab faced off with Rence. “I need answers. And I need them from your wife without your input.”

“Please, Rence. I don’t want to go to the police station.” Rence graced me with a look of pure disgust and stomped out of the den.

McNab sat back on the sofa and ran his finger down the open page of his black book. “Have you been in contact with Willa Elliott?”

“No. I’ve never seen or spoken to her.” A candle on the side table, next to an eight-by-ten photo of Abby, burned the sweet, pungent scent of eucalyptus and fig, a birthday present from Abby. I rose, walked, blew out the candle, and stowed it in a drawer. That candle had to last for the rest of my life.

“You said a woman, a friend of Willa’s, stopped by your shop. Do you know her name?”

“No. Ursula didn’t mention a name.” I sat in Rence’s chair.

“Has anyone in your family been in contact with Willa?”

“Yes, she visited my brother at his law office in Montana.”

McNab made a note. “Is your brother here today?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll want to speak to him.” McNab stared at my hands, and I stopped spinning my wedding ring.

“Did Willa visit Allure?”

“I’m not sure. But if she did, I didn’t speak with her.”

“Did she come to your shop while you were in Europe?”

I shook my head. “Not that I know of. Detective, Rence said Willa’s indictment is for involuntary manslaughter. What difference does it make if she visited my shop?”

“Intent.”

“Intent? I don’t understand. What does that mean to this case?”

“Security cameras verified the same day Willa Elliott arrived at the airport in Savannah, she visited Allure. The next day she secured employment with the tennis camp your daughter attended. Then she made a point of befriending your nanny. And according to the tennis coach, she devoted extra attention to Abby. These are clear signs of stalking. And stalkers have intentions. Motives for their actions.”

I stared into the detective’s unblinking eyes. His earlier words slamming into my ear drums... *I didn’t say the jacket wasn’t secured. I’m merely stating that when the vest washed a quarter-mile ashore from your daughter’s body, the buckles weren’t locked into place.*

“You believe Willa could’ve purposely drowned Abby?” I might’ve believed negligence led to Abby’s death, but never, not even once, had I imagined Willa as a cold-blooded murderer. My brain stretched for a reason, a less horrifying

explanation. “Why would Willa kill Abby? Peter said she only wanted money. It can’t be true—” McNab’s face faded.

“Mrs. Abernathy, take a deep breath. You’re okay. Put your head between your knees.” He gently pushed my head down. “Breathe.”

I gulped air and inched my body back up. “Why? Why would Willa want to harm Abby?” The question filled me with a fresh nauseated wave of disbelief.

If Willa purposely killed Abby, I was to blame. I should have known Abby was in danger. A good mother would know. When Ursula told me Willa was in Savannah, I should’ve canceled my trip, scoured the city until I found Willa, faced her, found out what she wanted. I should’ve protected Abby.

“We don’t know if Willa intentionally harmed Abby.” McNab’s cadence slowed as if he wanted to explain further. He hesitated for a moment, as if he held something back. “I need to look at every possibility.”

*Please God, let him be wrong.*

“Can you ask your brother to join us?”

I eased up to standing, waited for my head to catch up, and went in search of Peter.

The house was quiet. The kitchen counters wiped clean, no food platters sitting out, no people.

Ursula came out of the powder room. “Is everything okay?” She grabbed my arm. “Come, sit.”

“Not now.” I peeked into the living room. “I’m looking for Peter.”

“I think he’s upstairs packing.”



I sent Peter a text. *The police want to speak with you. We're in the den.*

“Where’s Rence?” I asked.

“In the garden.”

No doubt with his eye on the back gate. McNab wouldn’t get away without Rence flagging him down and asking more questions about Willa.

Ursula found her purse in the hall closet, then turned back. “Do you need me to stay?”

“No, but thank you. For everything.”

We hugged, and she walked towards the foyer, looked back. “You know you can call me anytime.”

I didn’t trust my voice and only nodded.

Peter came down the stairs, and we stepped back into the den.

“Detective.” Peter sat in the chair Rence had vacated, and I sat on the sofa.

“You wanted to see me?” Peter’s quiet confidence eased the panic clawing up my spine.

“I understand Willa Elliott visited your office in Montana,” McNab said.

“That’s correct.”

“How many times did she visit?”

“Once.” Peter fished his phone from his pocket and swiped the screen. “She called first on June 10th, then showed up on June 16th.”

“What was the purpose of her visit?”

”She claimed to be looking for her birth mother.” Peter’s voice took on his lawyerly tone, short and concise.

“And she believed you could help her?”

“Yes.”

McNab made a note. “Why would she assume you could help her?”

“She had an Ancestry.com DNA report that listed me as a close relative, an uncle,” Peter said.

McNab turned to me. “Mrs. Abernathy, are you listed on her report?”

“No. I don’t think I could be. I haven’t submitted my DNA to any of those companies.”

McNab refocused on Peter. “Did you share your sister’s location with Willa?”

“No.”

“How do you think she found her?”

“I assume the Internet,” Peter said. “She had a picture of Ivy’s shop. Asked me if my sister owned Allure in Savannah.”

“And what was Willa’s state of mind when she came to your law office that second time?”

“Calculating. Like she had an angle. I assumed she wanted money.”

“And did you give her any?”

“Yes.”

“How much?”

“Ten thousand dollars.”

“Did she demand that much money?” McNab’s expression, like his voice, remained even.

“She didn’t make any demands.”

“But she accepted the money.”

“Yes.”

“Cash or check?”

“Check,” Peter said. “But she hasn’t cashed it.”

“Willa didn’t cash the check?” I hadn’t realized.

McNab kept his focus on Peter. “How long has Willa had the check?”

“Just over four weeks,” Peter said. “Detective, your questions are leading me to believe you think Abby’s drowning might not be accidental. Do you think Willa Elliott purposely harmed my niece?”

“I’ll be turning in my findings to the county prosecutor.” McNab got to his feet. “Willa Elliott will be arraigned in court tomorrow morning. She’s hired a top-notch defense attorney. I’m certain her lawyer, Jace Pratt, will attempt to have her released on bail.”

“Attempt?” Peter said.

McNab stuffed his black book in his shirt pocket. “Thank you for your time. I’ll see myself out.”

How did Willa hire an expensive attorney, and why wouldn’t that attorney get her released on bail? I turned to Peter. “What don’t we know?”

Peter rose, drew me to my feet and rested his forehead against mine. “I know it’s useless to ask you not to worry, so

I'll just promise to make calls when I get home and see what I can find out."

My first instinct was to run find Rence like I always do when I have a problem too big to figure out on my own. Together we'd plot a path to the solution. But this time, there was no solution.

Abby was dead, and Willa was in jail.

*WILLA*

I ENTERED THE TYBEE ISLAND POLICE STATION THROUGH THE side door in an orange jumpsuit and ankle irons, handcuffed to a U.S. Marshal. I didn't know the marshal's name or rank or his favorite rock star. Other than *Get in, get out, and pick up your pace*, the marshal wasn't big on talking.

He was a small man, short, and thin, somewhere around the age of fifty, with watery blue eyes that continuously scanned his surroundings, as if he expected someone to jump out of the bushes and haul me away at gunpoint.

"Prisoner Elliott," the marshal announced to a uniformed officer behind a chest-high counter.

Every nerve in my body quivered. *You can do this. This jail's no different than the one in Daytona.* If I'd survived three days with a half-crazed bunkmate threatening to beat the hell out of anyone who passed in the hall, I could survive a few more hours until Daniel's friend, Jace Pratt, arranged my release.

I shifted, locked my knees to keep them from shaking, and tried to gather enough spit to swallow. Another uniformed officer, wearing the nametag E. Crowley, barreled through a set of double doors. I wouldn't put him much over twenty—buzz cut, tall and a little fat, soft around the middle. He looked more farm boy than cop.

The marshal searched the keys on a ring attached to his belt, slid a long skinny one into the handcuffs, and twisted. He handed me off, then waited for Crowley to attach another set of cuffs to my wrists. This time the restraints were fastened in front. The marshal reclaimed his ankle irons, then stuck a clipboard under Crowley's nose and tapped a line near the bottom of the page. "Sign here."

Crowley scribbled on the form, then walked me to a chair against the wall. "Sit."

"Got any coffee?" the marshal asked.

"First door on the left." Crowley waved him down the hall, then skimmed the paperwork the marshal left behind. "Name?"

"Willa Elliott."

"Middle name?"

"Ann."

"Date of birth?"

"June 4, 2002."

"Again?"

"Excuse me?"

Crowley scowled. "Speak up. Date. Of. Birth?"

"June. Fourth. 2002."

“Address?”

I considered giving Mrs. Rice’s address, but I’d been gone for over a month. In Daytona, I’d listed my address as the efficiency apartment in Savannah, but I hadn’t paid this week’s rent.

Crowley huffed, then said, “These aren’t hard questions. Address?”

“None.”

Crowley set aside his clipboard and led me through a short hall and into an office with a beige metal desk, a gray file cabinet, and no chairs. He stopped at what looked like an ordinary laptop, except instead of a keyboard, this computer had a glass surface. Looked like the same fingerprint machine as the one at the Daytona PD.

He gripped my finger between his thumb and index finger and rolled the pad of my finger on the glass. He repeated the process with each finger, then push-rolled my thumb last. Seconds later, ten white fingerprints appeared on the computer’s screen.

Crowley placed my back against a white cinderblock wall facing a black hanging camera. “Don’t smile.” The camera flashed and clicked. “Turn to the side.” Flash. Click.

He led me down the hall to a female officer with the nametag S. Brown, standing by a door marked Women. Brown was about my height, somewhere around five-three, and looked about thirty. She had spiky black hair and wore no visible make-up. She waved me into an empty stall and handed me a plastic cup. “Leave the door open.”

I peed into the cup, but the handcuffs were clunky, and urine splattered over my hand. I handed the container to

Brown and spotted a canister of liquid soap hanging on the wall. I wanted to scrub my body, get rid of three days of jailhouse crud that crawled like a centipede up my spine and over my skin. “Can I wash my hands?”

“You’re going into holding,” Brown said. “There’s a sink in your cell.”

Back in the hall, Crowley grabbed my arm with more effort than required and hauled me across the room.

“Can I get something to drink?” I asked. “I’m really thirsty.”

”Hey, Brownie,” Crowley yelled. “Bring a bottle of water.” He walked me down a short hall and opened the door to a cell. He backed me up to the bench inside. “Sit.”

I did.

He unlocked my handcuffs and stepped into the hall. The door clanged.

It was as if fear sliced me in two. A film of sweat, the kind no shower could remove, slimed my body. My breath shortened, the walls closed in inch by inch, until I couldn’t catch a full breath. I stuck my head between my legs like they taught us to do in health class in eighth grade. *Don’t think. Don’t look. Don’t imagine. You’ve already made it through three days.*

My breath slowed, and I opened my eyelids, looked over the space. This holding cell was larger than the one in Daytona but other than the metal bench I sat on, everything looked the same. Two cots with mattresses not much thicker than one of Mrs. Rice’s old bed quilts. An open toilet and a small sink.

Hairs on my arm and neck prickled. Gaze detection, a skill I’d picked up during my two months in juvie. I searched the



ceiling for a pair of eyes and locked on the camera hanging above the door. Another camera was suspended in the far corner of the ceiling.

I pushed to my feet and walked to the sink. No soap. I ran cold water, scrubbed between my fingers and up my forearms. No towel. I shook my hands and slung water to the cement floor.

Brownie appeared and tossed a water bottle through the bars. I caught it midair.

“When can I see my attorney?”

Brownie’s smug face looked as if she ate newbies like me for breakfast, right after her triathlon workouts. Officer Smug pointed to her face. “I look like your personal assistant?” She wiggled all ten fingers in the air. “You see your social calendar in my hand?” She laughed so hard you’d think her joke had scored a punch line on *Saturday Night Live*.

I waited until Brownie left, then twisted the top off my water bottle and drank. The liquid didn’t begin to cool the heat soaring through my body. I shook out my arms, paced the cell. Just a few more hours and Pratt would have my paperwork wrapped up. His assistant had said I’d be arraigned within twenty-four hours after arriving back at Tybee.

I continued my pacing, counted my steps, one, two, three, four, five, turn. Back, one, two, three, four, five. Turn, one, two—

A door clanged down the hall. I stopped, listened for steps. Nothing.

I stretched my back and lightly massaged my stomach. Thanks to the water, I had to pee again, but no way I’d squat in the open. What if Pratt walked in at that exact moment? And

the overhead cameras fed to a monitor in this building. Someone, somewhere was watching me.

I walked to the mattress, rolled out the pad, and sat. Would Jace Pratt be able to get me out, as he promised? I worried about my past burying me with the judge. But Dorothea had said my sealed record meant I didn't have to claim my arrest on college applications or when applying for any future jobs. I wasn't sure that included the police or my attorney or another judge.

*Think positive.* Pratt would get me out on bail. Daniel would back me up in court and explain that the sudden storm had monster waves and caused the accident. In a day or two, this nightmare would be a bad memory. I'd be back in Wyoming; I'd figure out a way to support myself and my baby. I'd go to college. I'd start a new life. Forget about Ryder. Forget about being a part of Ivy Abernathy's life.

My daydreaming stopped cold. My heart rolled a slow flip. But what about Abby's life. Her laughing face swam in front of me, and my memories tumbled back to the beach, the ocean. *Faster, Willa. Faster.* A pitching screech. A wall of water. *Abby. Abby! Where are you?* The swirling black sea pushing me away from the Jet Ski. Away from Abby.

I had no idea how long I sat on the metal bench reliving that day in the ocean—searching for anything I could've done differently that would've saved my little sister. I had no watch or clock or phone. But enough time passed for me to accept that taking Abby on the Jet Ski had been wrong, and now my baby would pay for my bad decision.

Enough time to convince myself Pratt wouldn't show. I had enough time to worry that Daniel's dad, Dr. Horton, had backed out of paying Pratt for my defense, and that was why

he hadn't appeared like his assistant had promised. Enough time to worry that Detective McNab might've found out about Jim and my arrest. Maybe he told Pratt, and he'd decided against being my lawyer.

Footsteps echoed down the hall, and Brownie came into view. "You've got a visitor." She unlocked the door.

Relief skated down my spine. "Is it okay if I pee first?"

"The way an arraignment hearing works is that you'll be brought into the courtroom, in handcuffs, by a court official." Jace Pratt sat across a scarred wooden table that held two straight-backed wooden chairs. He'd pulled his dreadlocks into a loose tail and slung his brown jacket over the back of his chair.

"I'll be sitting in the audience. When your name is called, you step forward, and I'll join you. We'll have less than five minutes to make your case for bail."

"But, I'll get out, right?" I leaned forward and ran sweaty palms over my thighs. "You said I wouldn't have to spend more than one night in jail, and I've already spent three nights down in Daytona and looking at another here."

"I said one night before you ran away to Florida with Easy Rider. You left against my explicit directions to stay put in your apartment. Personal recognizance bail is almost impossible now. You're a flight risk."

Blood rushed from my head. Black dots swam in front of my eyes. I shouldn't have called Ryder. I should have stayed in Savannah, faced Ivy, and... "What's that mean—personal recognizance bail?"

“Comes down to trust that you won’t run. You’ve already failed the test.”

“But I wasn’t in Savannah when Detective McNab issued the warrant. And I turned myself in within forty-eight hours.” This conversation wasn’t following my plan.

“I’ll look for the right time to push hard on those two facts. I could ask the judge for an ankle tether, but where would you live? You claimed to be homeless.”

“I didn’t pay my rent on Saturday.”

“You have enough money to pay rent?”

Seventeen hundred in savings, and I’d surrendered over three hundred in cash in Daytona. “Enough for a couple of months.”

“Doesn’t matter—you have no family in the area to take custodial responsibility. I doubt even the most lenient judge would award bail.” He studied my face.

I knew I looked terrible, my hair in a sloppy fraying braid, my face slick with oil, and a big-ass pimple on my forehead.

“Speaking of family. What’s your relation to Ivy Abernathy?”

“She’s my birth mother.”

“You know this as fact, or is it a supposition?”

“Fact.” He didn’t look convinced. “I have DNA proof.”

His eyes darkened a shade. “Explain.”

I gave a Cliff Notes version, starting with my Ancestry.com test to the morning I’d called his assistant.

Pratt wrote on a legal pad. “Anything else I should know?”

“No.”

He stopped writing, looked up. “You’re telling me the truth?”

If I owned up to my past, explained about Jim, Pratt might tell Daniel and his surgeon father. Dr. Horton might change his mind about helping me. “No, there’s nothing else.”

“You sure?” Jace gave me the same raised eyebrow, creased forehead, and steely eye as Mrs. Rice did when I claimed saving money was my only reason for taking a gap year from college. Two minutes later, I’d fessed up and told my foster mom about hunting down my birth mother. But Jace Pratt wasn’t Mrs. Rice. But in my experience, I had no reason to trust courts, judges, or attorneys.

“I’m sure,” I said.

He tapped a finger on one of his papers. “Because it says right here, you’re pregnant.”

Shit. The drug test in Daytona. “I didn’t know my pregnancy would interest you.”

He shook his head, wagged his finger in my face. “No. No. That’s not how we play this game. Everything about you interests me. And if you want my help, you will be thorough and truthful. Understand?”

I nodded.

“Nope.” He wagged his finger again. “I’m going to need to hear the words.”

“I understand.”

“Confidential communications between a client and attorney are protected by law. Anything you tell me is private.”

“Everything?”

“Yes. How far along is your pregnancy?”

“Four and a half months.”

“Since you arrived in Savannah less than six weeks ago, I’m assuming the baby’s not Daniel Horton’s?”

“No.”

“I won’t have access to the prosecution’s evidence, damaging or exculpatory, until after the arraignment. So you must come clean with anything that might hurt us in front of the judge. We have an attorney-client privilege.”

I ran his words around my head, considered blurting out my past and get it over with. But I remembered seeing a cop show on TV when a detective found a way around the guaranteed privacy of client and attorney conversations. Some were protected, some weren’t. I couldn’t be sure which kind Jace Pratt and I were having.

And besides, I’d never been convicted of a crime. Charged and convicted weren’t the same. My charge had resulted in probation only because I’d been a ward of the State, any other teen would’ve walked away with a slap on the hand and no record. And Judge Threadgill had lived up to his promise and exonerated me. So in reality, I had no record.

I looked Jace Pratt square in the eye and kept my mouth shut.

The next morning, I lined up with seven men and another women. We all wore khaki scrubs and blue Crocs, and stood in front of a podium sitting a couple of feet in the air, leaving no doubt who held power in this courtroom.

A sign on the front of the bench read The Honorable Christina Hartley. The judge entered from a single door behind a high-backed leather chair.

Right away, Judge Hartley reminded me of Judge Threadgill, the juvie judge back in Wyoming. They both had gray hair and wore long black robes, but that wasn't their only similarity. Judge Hartley had the same —*I've seen it all, so save your breath*—eyes as Judge Threadgill. I had a sinking feeling telling Jace Pratt the whole truth would've been the smart move.

"The state versus Willa Ann Elliott," said a man wearing a dark blue uniform.

As instructed by Pratt, I stepped forward.

Pratt hustled to my side. "Good morning, Your Honor."

Judge Hartley peered over her glasses and smiled wide. "Good morning, Mr. Pratt."

A judge smiling had to be a good sign. The judge liked Pratt. He could push for bail and maybe an ankle tether. My nerves quieted into a steady hum.

Hartley's gaze swung to me. She studied me in silence.

I kept my face forward but switched my gaze a few inches above her shoulder. Memories circled in my head. Another court, another attorney by my side, another judge ordering me into detention. So used to the baby kicking, I didn't register Jace's elbow jab for a second.

"Please identify yourself for the record." The bailiff used a tone that said this wasn't the first time he'd asked.

"Willa Elliott."

“Willa Elliott,” the clerk read, “you are charged with count one, involuntary manslaughter: count two, second-degree murder.”

The room went squirrely. I grabbed Jace’s arm. “Murder?” I found the judge’s flat, unreadable eyes. “But I didn’t kill Abby. I swear to God. It was an accident. The Jet Ski turned over.”

Pratt grabbed my elbows, brought my face close. “Shut up.” His peppermint breath washed over my cheek.

I pulled back. “No. It was an accident. The wave—” He gripped my hand—pain shot from my fingers into my wrist.

“Don’t say another word.” His whispered growl froze my brain. He released my hand and blood rushed back into my fingers.

Pratt’s attention shifted to the judge. “Your Honor, the prosecutor’s new charge, is outrageous.” Jace glared at the other attorney, a woman I hadn’t noticed until now.

Dark-suited, the woman had slicked her hair into a low ponytail. She stood behind a long table holding files and a small laptop. Her body tilted slightly forward, as if she rested on her toes, ready to spring.

She glanced in my direction, and her hungry-to-win eyes zapped any hope I had of getting out of jail. I’d seen the same look in opponents on the tennis courts. The opponents who fought the hardest. The ones who laid back like a starving tiger waiting for the perfect opportunity, before landing a kill shot.

“Yesterday, when my client arrived in Tybee Beach, the charge against her was involuntary manslaughter,” Pratt said.

“New evidence has surfaced, Your Honor.” The tiger’s voice was as sleek as her navy suit.



“From involuntary manslaughter to murder.” Judge Hartley slid her glasses down her nose. “That’s a big jump, Counselor.”

The prosecutor strode toward the judge. This would be her kill shot—determined, ruthless. “This is a heinous criminal act involving a six-year-old child, Your Honor. And a clear case of fratricide.”

“Your Honor.” Jace’s voice held the same disbelief that screamed in my head. “Ms. Turner is grossly exaggerating. No doubt a terrible and unfortunate accident occurred, but there is no malicious intent here. None whatsoever. And fratricide? Really?”

Fratricide? I searched for the meaning—killing a sibling.

“The State recognizes the insidious and unpalatable nature of this crime.” The tiger lady’s tone now seemed almost friendly.

I struggled to make sense of it all. Unpalatable—distasteful. Insidious—sneaky in a bad way. But what did those words mean in legal terms?

The tiger brushed her hand over her white blouse, then flashed her black eyes over me again. She flicked down and took in my cotton scrubs rolled up three inches to keep me from tripping over my plastic Crocs. Air rushed from my lungs. I looked at Pratt. *Do something. Say something before she buries me.*

“Given the magnitude of the charges,” Turner turned back to the judge, “the State requests the defendant be held without bail.”

Tears sprang into my eyes. *No crying. Show no weakness.*

“Your Honor.” Jace’s voice punched the ceiling. “Miss Elliott has no priors, and the State has offered no proof for their specious claims. This is a grave charge with no evidence. In light of this, I’d ask the court to set reasonable bail of twenty-five thousand dollars surety.”

“On the contrary. The defendant is homeless and a flight risk.” The prosecutor flipped through a stack of papers, pulled one free. “And Willa Elliott has a criminal record in the state of Wyoming.”

She turned and faced Jace and me. Her expression taunting, as if to say—*this is your punishment for defending trash no one wanted.*

“Well, go on, Counselor,” Judge Hartley said. “Don’t keep us waiting. My courtroom isn’t a mystery of the week.”

“Three years ago, Willa Elliott and her eighteen-year-old boyfriend, Ryder Thornton, were charged with the murder of James Alexander Booth, Willa Elliott’s foster parent.”

I’d never seen a black man pale to gray before. Now Jace Pratt knew the whole truth.

*WILLA*

*THREE MONTHS LATER...*

I had an overwhelming tiredness deep inside, but a shot of twitchy energy made me want to run in place, to do something. Not easy in a six-by-eight cell.

My newest roomie, Ginger, peered over the top bunk. “What time is it?”

I gauged the shadow across the floor. “Around two.”

Ginger huffed and disappeared back into her nap. She was my fifth roommate since I arrived twelve weeks and three days ago. Ginger slept twenty out of the twenty-four hours a day and only left her bunk for meals and our one hour of outside recreation.

Jailhouse etiquette prohibited asking what landed a prisoner on the inside. I didn’t mind the unspoken rule. I wasn’t looking to advertise myself as a child killer. Didn’t matter though, word got around, and most of the other women

steered clear. That was fine with me—fewer questions about Abby.

I'd learned in social humanities class that the Aborigines in Australia, and some tribes in India and Africa—refused to say the name of their dead. At the time, I'd thought the idea strange, but not anymore. Just a flashing thought of Abby stole my breath and left me empty and shivering in a cell that had to be over eighty degrees.

Although, my refusal to say Abby's name didn't keep me from thinking about her. Her excitement over winning a game. The speed of her forehand shots. The way her nose scrunched when she laughed. The day she'd dressed like me and called us twins. I slid my hand over my belly. We had looked a lot alike. Would my baby look like Abby?

My stomach jiggled. Rhonda, one of the other pregnant inmates, called them bunny hops. She said the little bumps every second or two, was the baby hiccupping. I pressed my hand against the spot on my stomach, closed my eyes, and tried to imagine a live baby inside.

Mrs. Rice's voice drifted through my head: *Being pregnant is the only chance a woman has to assist God in a miracle.* My heart warmed, then Abby's face swam inches from my eyes, and the warmth mutated into pain so sharp I couldn't breathe.

The gate at the end of the hall clanged open. I counted the slow plod of heavy footsteps—one, two, three. Henry, the guard on duty, stopped in front of my cell, dangled a pair of handcuffs on his finger.

I scooted to the edge of my bunk. "Me?"

"Yep." Girls made fun of Henry because he was seven feet tall and towered over the other guards, but had a squeaky

Alvin-the-chipmunk voice. But I thought he was the nicest guard on our block.

I held my wrists through the slot and let him snap the cuffs in place. “You get shackles today.” He unlocked the cell door and motioned for me to sit on my bunk.

“Where we going?” Ankle irons meant Henry planned to lead me outside the cell block, either to the infirmary or to a private room reserved for attorneys. But I wasn’t sick, and Jace Pratt had visited yesterday.

“Private room.” He knelt, added one cuff to my right ankle, then another to my left. My legs had swelled since breakfast, and he had to fasten the ring of metal above my ankle.

“Who’s here?”

“Never seen the woman before.” Henry motioned me to stand.

A woman? I didn’t know any women in Savannah who’d visit me in jail. Maybe my tennis camp boss, Bridget? “Has she got short brown hair?”

“Nope. Long.”

Ginger sat up, looked at my hands, then my feet, flopped over, and faced the wall.

Roomies on the inside were either like blood sisters, backing each other till death, or convinced they were short-timers soon to be sprung, who didn’t take an interest in anyone else or their troubles. The latter attitude described Ginger.

Henry wrapped his hand, the size of a catcher’s mitt, around my arm and led me past three other cells. He waited for the click and clang of the master lock. Then we walked into

the holding zone. We waited for the gate to close, then for the next gate to open. Henry stopped at the fourth door and led me into a room the size of a small bedroom.

A woman I'd never met sat at a wooden table. I guessed her to be around thirty. Not a lawyer, in her plain navy pants and a red striped t-shirt. Maybe Pratt's assistant?

Henry escorted me across the gray concrete floor and paused in front of the empty chair. "Ma'am," he said, "knock on the door when you're finished."

"Remove her handcuffs, please."

"Warden says all prisoners out of the cell block should remain in cuffs."

"It's my call." Her tone came across as more firm than agreeable. "Please free the prisoner's hands."

Henry unlocked the cuffs but left on my ankle shackles. "Knock when you're finished." He left and closed the door.

I rubbed my wrists and sat.

"My name's Marissa. I'm your assigned advocate."

"What's an advocate?"

Marissa opened a green file folder. "Women who give birth while incarcerated are considered high-risk for early births. Pregnant inmates are assigned a health professional. We refer to ourselves as advocates. You're also entitled to a special diet, an extra pillow, two blankets, and a double mattress."

I considered the woman's claim. "I've been here over three months, and no one's mentioned this before. And how come the other pregnant women in my cell block don't have two mattresses?"

“Advocates are generally assigned after the seventh month of pregnancy, but we’re short-staffed and running a few weeks behind.”

Sheila was only five months, and Rhonda not quite seven. Maybe Marissa could answer some questions I’d saved up. “If I don’t get out before the baby’s born, will I deliver in a hospital or the infirmary?” I’d asked the jail nurse, but she never gave up information. Always claimed to be out of the loop.

“You’ll deliver your baby in a hospital.”

“A doctor or midwife?”

“Doctor. In fact,” Marissa opened the file, “you have an appointment tomorrow with Dr. Patel. He’s an OB-GYN.” She removed a brochure paper-clipped to the folder. “This is reading material covering changes in your body over the next...” She looked at her file. “Eight weeks. You’re taking your prenatal vitamins?”

“I don’t get vitamins.”

Marissa made a note. “I’ll see the warden about that and have one delivered to your cell every day. Supplements seem to be a hot commodity in the kitchen.”

“Offsets the crappy food.”

Marissa let go of a weak-smile. “You’re scheduled for checkups every two weeks with the doctor, and I’ll be monitoring your health reports until your baby is born.”

I opened the brochure, showing a mother holding her baby to her breast, titled WHAT TO EXPECT.

“Have you given any thought to what will happen to your child once you deliver?”

*Only constantly.* "I'm going to keep my baby."

"You have family who'll assume custody until you're released?"

"I don't have any family."

A flicker of pity crossed Marissa's face, then vanished. "A trusted friend?"

No matter how guilty Daniel might feel, I couldn't see him volunteering to raise my kid. And according to his one and only letter, he'd transferred to a school up north and left the area. The only other people I knew in Savannah were Bridget, my old tennis camp boss, and Mia, Abby's nanny. I hadn't wasted time considering those options. "I don't have friends in Georgia."

"Have you contemplated adoption?"

I shook my head. "Absolutely not."

Marissa jotted something in my file. "If you give birth while incarcerated, the state will assume custody of your child."

"But just until I'm released."

Marissa sat back in her chair and gave me a get-real look. "This is how it works. If you're sentenced to less than two years, you'll be able to keep your baby. After two years, your parental rights are forfeited, and your child will be eligible for adoption."

"No adoption," I said the words strong and loud. I didn't want any misunderstandings. "I want my baby."

"Being eligible for adoption doesn't necessarily mean your baby would be adopted."



I tapped the green file. “Write that in your report. I’m not signing my baby away.”

Marissa gave me another look swimming in pity. “You’ll get twenty-four hours with your baby in the hospital. After you return to prison, the only way you’ll see your child while incarcerated is if a family member or friend assumes custody and brings the child for visitation.”

In the last twelve weeks, stuck in jail-hell, I’d grown to want this baby more than anything I’d ever wanted in my life. I didn’t understand exactly how or why, but my baby and Abby were connected. And not just by blood— it was more, something deeper, something stronger. I couldn’t lose track of my baby. “I won’t sign papers giving my kid away.”

“You don’t have to sign. You gave up your rights when you were arrested.”

Marissa stuffed her file into her briefcase and walked to the door. Knocked. “Guard.” She turned to me. “I’ll see you get the extra bedding by the end of the day, the vitamins every morning, and I’ll check in once a week until the baby’s born.”

“But you’ll tell them, right?” I shuffled forward as fast as my shackles let me. “You’ll tell them I don’t want to give up my baby.”

“I’ll talk to the warden,” Marissa said. “But the decision isn’t his. It’s a Georgia state law.”

*IVY*

MY NEW PHONE DINGED WITH A TEXT. I'D THROWN MY OLD cell into the birdbath after Tandy Burton, the who-cares-if-you're-mourning-I-want-a-Pulitzer reporter from the *Savannah News*, called for the seventh time in two hours. Only two people had my new number, Ursula and Rence. I walked to the kitchen counter and picked up my cell.

*Working late. I'll stay at Mom's.*

I breathed out my relief. I didn't think I could bear spending another night tiptoeing around Rence's mistrust, looking into his sad, mournful eyes, before he scurried out of the room. I had my own sad. My stomach, my chest, even my mouth had a horribly sad, bitter taste.

In the past three months, Rence and I had adopted new house rules: No talking. No touching. No more, *I'm sorry, please forgive me*. The last decree mine—I'd given up somewhere around five hundred.

I poured another glass of wine and didn't bother texting back to ask what he was working on, if he'd eaten dinner, if he

planned to come home in the morning for a shower. The nights Rence made it home, he sat in the den, hands folded on his lap, watching the video tribute to Abby. I refused to walk into the room. It was as if the vibrations from his agony crept into my mind and put fingers all over my pain.

Last week, after one too many scotches, he'd said again, "Why would you come to Europe if you knew Willa was in Savannah?" Pain had entombed so profoundly in his eyes they no longer looked alive.

"I wanted to tell you about Willa in person." *How many times did I have to explain?*

"But I can't understand why you left Abby unprotected," he said.

"I was already on the plane when Ursula called. And she didn't have contact information for Willa. I didn't know how to find her. I didn't know she worked at the tennis camp."

I made excuses, but Rence was right. I knew Willa was in Savannah, and deep down, I'd been happy that my Sadie wanted to meet me. But I didn't admit that to Rence. I didn't reveal that secret to anyone.

Rence opted to stay with his mother several nights a week, claiming he worried about her grieving for Abby all alone.

Loneliness had become my natural appendage, like an arm that had grown roots inside me, pressing against my chest. I didn't work or answer my phone or walk outside during daylight hours. I didn't do anything but sleep and wait for Willa's trial to begin on October sixteenth. Seven more days.

Detective McNab said Willa opted for a bench trial instead of a jury trial. According to the internet, that meant the judge would decide guilt or innocence. I didn't allow my brain to

think beyond the trial, as if the judge's decision would redirect my life. Innocent—Rence would forgive me. Guilty—I didn't let my mind go there.

I peeked through the kitchen blinds. Rain streamed across the window and brought with it relief from a ninety-degree day. But the air in the house had turned stifling, clawing, unbreathable. I had to get outside.

I poured my glass of wine into a go-cup, a decision that was no longer out-of-bounds, and grabbed my keys. I congratulated myself for leaving the half-full wine bottle behind. That's how low my new bar was set.

Twenty minutes later, I cruised my usual route, past the Tybee Visitor Center and Zeke's Surf Shop, and parked facing the beach. My dashboard lights annoyed the brewing headache behind my eyes, and with no food in the last...when did I last eat? This morning? Yesterday?

I needed air. I shut down the engine, kicked my sandals off, and headed for the beach—my new nighttime hangout.

I walked past a playground, along the boardwalk, then sat on a bench at the end of the pier. The ocean waves rolled in as blue-black as the sky, and the rain settled into a steady mist that cooled my skin.

According to Detective McNab, Abby went into the ocean less than a hundred feet from the end of this pier. But who knew how far the riptide carried her body before she inhaled her last breath?

I finished my wine, threw the cup in the trash, and walked back down the pier. I turned right, found the hard, wet sand at the water's edge, and let the water rush between my toes. I imagined Abby's fatal route. Envisioned the angry sea, her

fear. Did she sink immediately or spend her last minutes gasping and begging for help? Did she call for me?

I no longer cried for Abby. My agony went deeper than tears. Tears were for those people who still railed at the injustice. I was different. I deserved my pain.

The price I'd paid for one wrong decision at the age of fourteen hadn't been enough for God or karma or the universe or whoever the hell controlled my life. That one mistake had rippled through the cosmos, waited until I'd built my perfect life, married the perfect man, given birth to the perfect child, before sweeping back in to wield death and destruction. I was tainted. Marked. My precious Abby was gone and it was my fault. I hadn't protected her. No one was safe in my orbit. Maybe Rence was right to protect himself.

I walked north and paid homage to Abby's watery trail of death. A half-mile down the beach, at the Sand Dollar Inn where Abby washed ashore, I moved further inland, sat in the soft sand.

I tried envisioning my baby girl after the waves pushed her back to land. Her blue lips, her long blonde hair wet and sandy, her one white shoe still on her right foot. But the picture wouldn't gel.

Instead, the image of a living, breathing Abby in a pink and yellow striped bathing suit danced before my eyes. My girl jumping up and down, begging Rence and me to please, please, please build a sandcastle. On that day, hungry, tired, and ready for home, we'd made excuses not to stay. I'd pinky-swore-promised we'd build one next time.

But there was no next time for us.

Daniel said Abby wanted to make sandcastles. Did she get her wish before she died?

My body shivered. I couldn't push the air out of my lungs. I pushed harder. A weary whispering voice said, *You're not dying. It only seems that you can't breathe, but you're breathing.*

I sucked in the ocean air, then another breath. After a while, my muscles relaxed, but an underlying sense of despair remained—my penance for not protecting Abby. I lay back on the soft sand and invited guilt to wrap my body in the black blanket of grief.

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I woke to an early morning beach walker passing by. “Isn't it a beautiful day?” she said.

I rolled on my side, pushed up till I was sitting. The horizon showcased the rising sun in streaks of red, orange, and blue. Car engines behind me competed with the soft call of gulls overhead. I'd spent another night on Tybee Beach.

I stretched my aching back, brushed sand from my shorts, and walked to my car. My head pounded from a morning-after wine binge. I searched the storage compartment for aspirin, ignoring the burn in my empty belly. I opened the aspirin and popped three.

At Victory Drive, I joined a line of sleep-deprived locals in a McDonald's drive-thru and ordered a cup of coffee. I pulled into a parking space and called Ursula.

“Do you have Daniel Horton's number?” Up until now, I'd deflected his calls, but I had to know if Abby had built her

sandcastle.

“Good morning. You’re up bright and early. Are you coming into the shop today?” Ursula’s greeting was a reminder I’d become one of those abrupt, graceless people who only focused on their own self-absorbed life.

“I’m sorry.” Half-true, I didn’t have the energy to care one way or the other. “I haven’t had my coffee yet. Do you have Daniel Horton’s number?”

“His mom, Cheri, was in the store last week. Daniel doesn’t live in Savannah anymore. He transferred to a different school, somewhere up north.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“Are you planning to come in today?”

“I don’t think so. I’m not sleeping well.” Only fifteen hours a day.

“Tandy Burton hasn’t visited the shop in weeks. It might do you good to come in, even if only for a couple of hours.” Her voice softened. “Our racks are looking a little bare. You could stay in your office and place a few orders. You wouldn’t have to see customers.”

“I’ll see how my morning goes.” See if I made it past ten o’clock without succumbing to the pull of a sleeping pill.

“Jace Pratt called again.”

Willa’s lawyer left weekly messages for me at home and at the shop. I ignored them.

“He says there are things you need to know before the trial. He’s left five messages, says he must speak with you today. He claims he’s tried contacting you, but you’ve turned off your home phone.”

“Okay, thanks. I’ll check in with you later.”

I considered ignoring Pratt’s message again, but my mind burned with curiosity. I had an unwavering need to know exactly what happened that day on the beach, understand why Willa came to Savannah and sought out Abby and not me. I wanted to talk to Willa, face to face. I wanted to look her in the eye, demand she explain her motives. I wanted to know why she took away the one, innocent, true thing in my life.

And I no longer cared that Rence disagreed, forbidding me to call Willa’s attorney.

I found an old text message from Ursula with Pratt’s number and placed the call.

I wanted to know if Abby built her sandcastle, even if I had to see Willa to find out.

“Hello.” A gruff, sleepy voice answered.

“Jace Pratt?”

He cleared his throat. “Yes.”

“This is Ivy Abernathy.”

Sheets rustled, a bed spring creaked. “Thanks for calling back. I’d like to talk to you. Anytime today.”

I brushed sand from the legs of my shorts, considered my stained t-shirt. “My house. Give me an hour.”



*IVY*

I SHOWERED OFF BEACH SAND, SWITCHED THE COFFEE POT TO brew, stuffed the beans back in the fridge, and obsessed over my decision to meet with the lawyer defending Willa. I had the right, even the duty, to learn all I could about Willa, a child I'd brought into this world. Rence would be livid with my decision.

At seven-twenty, the doorbell rang.

*You could just ignore the bell. Take a sleeping pill, climb into bed, and sleep away the ache and pain and the memories.*

I walked down the hall and opened my front door.

“Please, come in.” I waved Pratt into my foyer.

His expensive dark suit was the only thing that fit his lawyerly reputation—tough, dedicated, brilliant tactician who touted justice. Or so said, Detective McNab.

With my brother a lawyer, and my dad a judge, I was versed in the expected courtroom appearance of serious dark suits and muted ties. I suspected Jace Pratt's style of neon-bright accessories adorning his conservative suit, coupled with

his friendly smile, worked well with the press. But I was less sure how his shoulder-length dreads played with a judge.

I led him into the living room, and suddenly the space seemed too stuffy and pretentious. “Would you like to sit in the garden?”

“Sounds great. And if you happen to have a cup of coffee, all the better.” His vowels swam with southern charm.

“I just made a fresh pot. You take cream or sugar?”

“Black, thanks.”

In the kitchen, I poured two mugs, opened the french door, and led him to the garden bistro table. “Thanks for agreeing to see me on short notice.”

“Took you three months to return my calls. Thought I better jump in before the water froze again.” He slung his jacket over the back of the chair, loosened his lemon-yellow tie. “I was beginning to think you didn’t like me.” His natural smile and deep velvet voice were a little disarming.

“I want to see Willa.”

His smile dissolved. “Why?”

“I have questions.”

He eased onto the wrought iron chair. “What questions?”

“Why she came to Savannah? Why she volunteered at Abby’s tennis camp instead of contacting me?”

He sipped his coffee, searched my eyes as if pursuing some long-lost truth.

I resisted the urge to explain my gut-wrenching need to know my first child, to find out for myself if she was capable

of premeditated murder as Rence and Detective McNab believed.

“I think meeting Willa could be a good idea, but this close to the trial...I can’t risk a visit unless her advocate agrees.”

“Advocate?”

“Marissa Connors. She’s a therapist who works with pregnant inmates.”

A stab of shock punched my heart. “Willa’s pregnant?”

“Almost eight months,” Jace said.

My days had turned into a painting from Goya’s black series, intense and haunting and laced with an undeniable underlying fear of insanity. “And she’s under psychiatric care?”

“Prison’s an ugly place for an eighteen-year-old accused of murdering her little sister. And she’s distraught over what will happen to her baby. Your grandchild.”

His chastising tone sent bristling heat to my cheeks.

“There’s something important I need to discuss with you,” he said. “Daniel Horton’s father, Dr. Horton, agreed to pay the cost of Willa’s defense. But two weeks ago, he capped his payment at twenty thousand dollars. We’ve surpassed that amount.”

*Pregnant. Willa was pregnant. Eight months pregnant. My first grandchild would be born in prison. Eight months. Willa had been four months along when Abby drowned.*

“I’m working pro bono.”

“The Horton’s are paying for Willa’s defense?” I’d never thought about who paid Jace Pratt. Certainly never considered

the Hortons were involved. Cheri hadn't mentioned anything to Ursula, or I would've known. Did Rence know? Did he know Willa was pregnant?

"I'll stay on my dime and see Willa's case through the trial, but I want to interview two possible character witnesses in Wyoming. Willa's probation officer, Dorothea Keene, and Willa's most recent foster mother, Josephine Rice. To move forward, I'd like my travel expenses covered."

The french doors opened, and Rence stepped onto the patio wearing shorts and a sweaty t-shirt.

Why had he come home after his workout today of all days? I slid off my stool. "Rence, this is Jace Pratt."

"Why are you in my house?" Rence's voice pulsed with fury.

Shocked silence rang in stereo.

Silence from Rence standing in the doorway arms splayed in a Superman stance.

Silence from a stoic Pratt, his gaze steady and unwavering.

Silence from me. A defiant retort rested on the tip of my tongue.

One look at Rence—white-faced, jaw as tight as a fist—and I had more sense than to say anything inflammatory. "Mr. Pratt is here at my invitation."

"Get out." Rence's growl mirrored a snarling animal.

An alarm bell sounded at the corners of my consciousness, high and persistent. "I've asked for Mr. Pratt's help. I want to see Willa. I have questions only she can answer."

A flush of bright red swept Rence's face and neck, he pivoted and stomped into the house.

Pratt slipped his phone out of his pocket. "If you give me your cell number, I'll forward Marissa Connor's contact information, and we can go from there." He picked up his briefcase. "I have early court."

"I'll see you out." At the front door, I remembered Pratt's reason for contacting me. "I'll let you know later today about covering your travel expenses to Wyoming."

"I'll be in touch then."

My neighbor, Baxter Fox, hurried through my front gate. He gave Pratt a nod, then Pratt got into an emerald green BMW convertible and left.

"My assistant tried reaching you last night to set a time for the appraiser," Baxter said.

"What appraiser?"

"The real estate appraiser. We want the highest possible appraisal before setting our selling price, and Travis is the best in Savannah. He stays booked, but he's had a cancellation at two o'clock this afternoon. Will you be home?"

Understanding unfolded. Rence came home this morning to inform me he wanted to sell the house. Our house.

I ignored Baxter and went to find Rence. I checked the kitchen, then the upstairs guest room he'd recently claimed for sleeping—both were empty. I headed for the master suite and found him.

"Baxter Fox just left. Did you order an appraisal on our house?"

Rence threw underwear and socks into two open suitcases.

“Why are you packing? Where are you going?” He couldn’t travel. Not now. Not a week before Willa’s trial.

“I’ll stay at Mom’s until the end of the trial.”

I looked at his luggage. He’d stuffed in at least eight suits.

“Then I’ll find a new place.” He tossed in a stack of shirts still on the hangers.

“A new place?” My heart skipped as if my brain had stalled and forgot to issue the command to beat.

He pitched two pairs of shoes into the smaller case—his favorite two pair of dress loafers.

The impossible scenario registered. “You’re leaving me?”

“Yes.”

The finality in his tone robbed my breath, and my knees went slack. I leaned against the dresser. He couldn’t be serious. But why not? We hadn’t talked or touched or had a meal together since Abby died. Our marriage had turned into a phony replica of the original, like a cheesecake made with tasteless tofu.

I rushed forward, blocked his suitcase with my body, and grabbed his arm. “Wait.”

He yanked away. “Don’t.” His quiet demand burned my heart.

“Rence, please. Can’t we talk about this?”

“I can’t believe you invited that man into our home.”

The hostility in his voice suffocated my desire to beg. I swallowed a lump of indignant pride. “I need to see Willa. Talk to her. I’m sorry if that hurts you.”

*Sorry, sorry, sorry. I was so damn sick of that five-letter word.*

He leaned in, his handsome face contorted, his eyes so intense I backed away. “*You’ve destroyed our marriage.*”

“I made a terrible mistake,” My voice raw with need. “Please, Rence. Your life isn’t the only one ripped into shreds. We have to move past this.”

“Your decision to keep your past a secret, only tell me about Willa when you had no other choice, negates our marriage. You robbed me of the chance to be a good and understanding husband, a loving partner—the chance to have empathy for my wife. You didn’t trust me enough to share the most intimate details of your life.

He shoved his hand through his hair. “Christ, Ivy, what kind of marriage do we have? A marriage without trust is nothing but a pretty picture.”

I shuddered with the shame of the truth in his words. I hadn’t trusted him, his love, or our marriage. “I know I hurt you. I don’t know what else to say but that I’m incredibly, achingly sorry.”

Rence resumed his packing.

My body trembled with the seismic shift in our relationship. “You want to sell our home?”

“Abby’s everywhere in this house. In every room. In the air I breathe. It’s unbearable.”

“But what about me?”

He faced me, his eyes flat and determined, his decision already made. “Right now, I don’t care about you.”

Reality resonated, as cold and hard and unfeeling as polar ice. Love was no longer the bond that cemented our marriage. The only thing that united Rence and me now was Abby's death.

He stood in front of the window, thin and sharp-looking. He must've lost twenty pounds since Abby died. His square jaw tight, his mouth pressed into a firm, unwavering line.

"Please don't do this. Can't we talk? Find a way through. I'll do anything. I won't see Willa or her lawyer if that's what you want." I swiped at tears. "Please, Rence, don't leave me."

His face held something dark that I couldn't, didn't want to understand. "By inviting that man into our house, you disrespected Abby's memory." He shut and locked his luggage.

I couldn't let him leave me. We had to work this out. Begging hadn't worked, maybe reason would. "Jace Pratt is an attorney, not the devil."

"He's the enemy who represents that maniacal monster who killed our daughter."

Tossing maniacal monster in my face scorched my heart and claimed space alongside my despair over losing Abby—over the genuine possibility of losing Rence.

"Willa's my biological daughter. She might be a monster. But maybe she's just a scared teenager, alone in the world. A young woman who made a horrible mistake. I owe it to myself, to Abby, and to Willa to find out the truth." I waited for an acknowledgment of the authenticity of my statement.

Nothing. No flicker of understanding. No softening in his face. No sign of empathy in his eyes. Only cold resolute.



“If you can’t grasp my need to know...” The voice in my head screamed—*Don’t say it. Don’t say it. Don’t say it*—“then living apart might be the best thing for us both.”

He heaved his luggage off the bed and extended the handles.

”You’re right about this house being full of Abby’s memories,” I said. “And for that reason, I will not sell. Not right now. Maybe never.”

He stacked the smaller case on top of the larger. “Then you’ll have to buy my half because I’ll never live in this house again.” He rolled his three cases into the hall.

For the first time since I was eighteen and Rence arrived in my art class, I had no desire to follow him.

I called Jace Pratt.

He answered on the first ring.

“I’ll assume Willa’s legal bills, but I want to see her as soon as possible. And I’m going with you to Wyoming.” I planned to learn all I could about Willa Elliott. I had the right to seek the truth. My truth. Not Rence’s truth, or Detective McNab’s truth, or the reporter Tandy Burton’s truth. Mine. A truth I’d ignored for eighteen years.

*IVY*

JACE PRATT ARRANGED A TWO O’CLOCK APPOINTMENT WITH Marissa Connors, Willa’s health advocate. I still wasn’t clear on why visiting Willa in jail required permission from a therapist.

Dr. Connor’s practice was housed on the first floor of a brick building on Drayton Street. The reception area was decorated like a family room and designed for comfort. Four overstuffed, mismatched chairs held pillows cross-stitched with bolstering messages—*Be the change you want to see, The future belongs to those who believe in their dreams*. The space had a lived-in, just-out-of-med-school vibe.

An IN SESSION sign hung on a closed-door with *Marissa Connors, Ph.D., LMFT* spelled in gold letters.

I set my purse in one of the over-stuffed chairs, then noticed a client sign-in placard propped beside an iPad on a wooden stand. I typed my information on the digital form and picked up a *Savannah Now* magazine. I recognized the featured home on the cover as the riverfront home of a local writer.

The door opened, and a dark brunette in her early thirties hurried out. “Hi. I’m Marissa Connors.” She shook my hand. “Come in.”

Dr. Connors wore distressed jeans, a white blouse, and a pair of brown plaid sneakers. Her long chestnut hair was pulled into a loose ponytail. My outfit, lavender silk slacks, matching blouse, and peep-toed taupe pumps, meant to impress, now seemed overkill.

The doctor’s inner office bore a similar design to the reception area: earth-tone furniture, green plants, the causal ambiance of home.

“Please, have a seat.” She motioned at a brown leather chair and sat on the matching loveseat across from me.

“I appreciate meeting me on such short notice,” I said. “I want to see Willa, and her attorney, Jace Pratt, indicated you’d have to authorize my visit.”

“Mr. Pratt called and filled me in.” She smiled. Then paused as if waiting for me to say more.

Something about her expectant expression sent an itch between my shoulder blades. I searched for something relevant to add—a solid reason I needed to see Willa that didn’t appear self-serving. I blanked.

After what seemed an interminable amount of time, she finally said, “My understanding from Willa is that you two have never met.”

I wanted to correct her, but my answer got stuck in my memories. Have I met Willa? Unless you count the two minutes the doula laid her warm, slimy, perfect little body on my chest and snipped the umbilical cord. Unless you count the heart-stopping moment her eyes met mine and ripped a hole in

my heart that has never healed. Unless those few milliseconds between mother and child count, Willa and I have never met.

“That’s correct,” I said. “We’ve never met.”

“Willa’s in a vulnerable place. I’m not sure meeting you is in her best interest.”

The itch between my shoulder deepened. I’d never considered Dr. Connors might refuse my request. “I don’t understand.”

“How much do you know of Willa’s life?” The question was justifiable, and of itself, understandable, but the guilt of truth singed my stomach. “I know very little. I was young, only fifteen. I gave her up for adoption the day she was born.”

“What are you hoping to accomplish if you do see Willa?”

“I just want to talk. Understand her motivation for bypassing me and working as Abby’s camp counselor.”

She opened a mini-fridge that subbed as an end table and withdrew two bottles of water. She placed one in front of me, then unscrewed the top of hers and sipped. “I remember reading you were on a European trip when your daughter, Abby, drowned.”

Her voice held no undertones, but tears hovered heavy against my lower lashes. “I will regret my decision to leave Abby with her nanny until I draw my last breath.”

“I’m not making a judgment.” Dr. Connors’s tone mellowed. “I’m only implying Willa may have attempted to make contact with you.”

“She didn’t.”

“She claims she dropped into your shop, Allure, and also went to your home.”

“Willa came to my home? When?” In a span of seconds, I slipped from determined and certain to off-balanced.

”I’m not sure. But she shared that on those visits, the chance to introduce herself never seemed appropriate.” Dr. Connors held my gaze.

She was going to refuse my request. “But if Willa came to Savannah from Wyoming to see me, she must’ve had a reason. I want to understand.”

“It’s understandable you’d want to interpret Willa’s intentions.”

The truth collided with the guilt burning in my stomach. I had to convince Dr. Connors, the gatekeeper, to give me passage to Willa. The need to know more about her and her relationship with Abby now trumped everything in my life. “Please, I’d appreciate you sharing anything that might provide insight into Willa’s state of mind.”

Dr. Connors studied me for a moment as if she were weighing my intentions on some invisible self-serving vs purity scale. I had the feeling I came up short.

“In general terms, orphans often suffer from abandonment issues, and many believe they’re unworthy of love.” Dr. Conner’s voice took on a conversational, friendly rhythm. “But right now, Willa’s suffering anxiety over the fate of her unborn child. A visit from you would be emotional. I’m not sure Willa’s physically up to an intense meeting.”

“I only want to talk to her. I’m not planning to badger her with questions.” But wasn’t that exactly my plan? I had a long list of questions tucked inside my purse.

“Willa’s my client and her needs come before yours. My most pressing concern is keeping her mentally strong. Strong

enough to make it through her trial and pregnancy. Pregnant inmates have an increased rate of difficult deliveries and a higher risk of stillborn births.”

Dr. Connors pushed to her feet. Her unspoken dismissal ringing clear. “I’ll let Willa know you reached out. But I’m sorry, I’m unable to approve a visit.”

Self-righteous indignation jumped up my spine. I tried pulling the words together, but remorse and unworthiness jostled for space, and my brain couldn’t decide which emotion to embrace and what to say.

I drove home, the closer I got, the more suffocating my despair. A life without Rence was inconceivable. A world without Abby unbearable.

I gripped the steering wheel. *Willa*. The word was ripe with pain and forever mixed with my undying love and grief for Abby. I dragged myself from the car, trudged through the back gate, and there stood my neighbor Baxter Fox. Shit. Another kind of guilt twisted my stomach. I’d forgotten about the house appraisal. “Hi, Baxter.”

“The appraiser waited until two-thirty.” His perturbed expression and squinty eyes cleared my exhaustion.

“I assumed Rence would call you.” Baxter’s irritation hardened my voice. “He never should’ve put our property on the market without consulting me. I’m sure you can understand I want no more changes in my life.”

“Rence signed a six-month listing agreement.” Baxter acted as if the agreement ended all discussion.

Rence’s willingness to turn away from the only home Abby had ever known poured molten steel into my spine.

“Well, you have a problem then. Because my house is not for sale.”

“Is Rence here?” Baxter asked.

A flush of heat hit my neck. “We have joint ownership. Whatever contract Rence signed isn’t binding without my signature.” I wasn’t sure my assessment was correct, but it seemed reasonable.

Baxter eyed the house, turned, and left. No doubt on his way to call Rence.

I walked into my kitchen, let the air of home settle around me. Within these walls, I sensed Abby’s spirit. I would use the proceeds from my father’s estate, work twenty hours a day at Allure, scrimp, save, and take whatever means necessary to buy Rence’s half of the house. I would never agree to sell.

I would never leave Abby again.

*WILLA*

I SHUFFLED OUT OF MY CELL, ANKLES SHACKLED, WRISTS cuffed, and followed Henry down the hall to the visiting area. Something had gone wrong with my feet. My toes were numb and had swollen to twice their normal size.

Henry gripped my arm with his giant paw. “You okay?” One of his fingernails cut into my skin, but I was too tired to complain.

“I’m just exhausted and cold.” Sweat dripped into my eyes, and I tried raising my wrist to wipe my forehead, but Henry’s iron grasp kept my arms from reaching past my chest. “Can I get a blanket?”

“It ain’t cold in here, and you’re sweating like a pig. You sick?” Henry pushed the buzzer for the first set of doors to open. He led me into the holding cell and waited for the doors behind us to close, then the one in the front to open.

“I’m okay.” Just the short walk from my cell had left a slick film of sweat on my skin. I blinked, squinted, and tried



bringing the long hall into focus. I blinked again, and my vision cleared.

I studied my feet for a clue to the ache in my shins. I wiggled my toes. They looked like little smoky sausages people served with a side of BBQ sauce. “Who’s waiting in the room?”

“Your head doc.” Henry loosened his grip, turned right, and opened the door to one of the private meeting rooms.

“Hey, Willa.” Marissa’s forehead creased. “You’re pale. You need to sit down. Are you dizzy?”

“She’s sweating like a snowman in a sauna,” Henry said. “Girl needs to go to the infirmary.”

“I’m fine. Just tired is all.” I plopped into the folding chair and held out my wrists.

Henry unlocked the cuffs, then patted my shoulder. His touch soft, almost dainty, as if being seven feet tall required him to be extra careful. “I’m outside if you need anything.”

I moved an inch to the left, then two to the right, searching for a comfortable spot. I gave up and rested against the back of the chair. “I’m tired all the time. And my head gets loopy sometimes. Is that normal? Sheila and Rhonda think something’s up.”

“Sheila and Rhonda, they’re also pregnant, right?” Marissa opened a red file and removed a piece of paper.

“Yeah.” Even upside down, I recognized the logo for my gynecologist’s clinic. “And they think something’s going on.”

“They’re right. I talked with Dr. Patel’s office, and your most recent urine sample is showing a higher than normal protein count. And your blood pressure readings are over the

desired level. He's ordered the infirmary to collect a daily urine sample, and he wants blood pressure readings emailed to his office three times a day."

I sat up, clutched my belly. "Is there a problem with my baby?"

Marissa gave a quick head shake that only strung my nerves tighter. "Your baby's fine. It's you we're worried about. Dr. Patel suspects preeclampsia. It's not uncommon in pregnant teens."

I relaxed against my chair. Okay, not the baby. "What is the clamp thing?"

"Preeclampsia is high blood pressure. High blood pressure is always a concern, but in pregnant women, it can be difficult to treat. Dr. Patel recommends keeping your stress to a minimum. We can request moving you to a solitary cell. And if visits to the common areas or showering with the other inmates agitates you, I can request limited interaction with the general population until the baby's born."

More special treatment? That didn't sound as simple as a little high blood pressure. My heart raced to sirens-blaring-and-cops-on-your-ass speed. "You gotta be honest with me. Is my baby in trouble?"

At my last sonogram, Dr. Patel said I was having a girl. Now I envisioned my baby, her arms, her legs, her toes. Her hair the color of Abby's, more blonde than mine, and eyes as green and glistening as colored glass. "Is she going to die?"

"No. This is about you. We take care of you...that takes care of your baby."

"My daughter."

Marissa's face relaxed. "Right. Your little girl." Marissa might look calm, but her voice had a skippy kind of worry like she picked through her words before she spoke. "Preeclampsia puts you at risk of having an early delivery. That could...or can result in your daughter having a lower birth weight. But the death of an infant or the mother is very, very..." She slid her hand across the table and squeezed my fingers. "...very low."

I didn't like Marissa's tone of voice like she was holding back, worried I'd go berserk. "Preeclampsia." I tried out the word on my tongue. "What's the *pre* part?"

"It means you're at a higher risk of having eclampsia than other pregnant women."

"What's eclampsia?"

"Let's don't worry about that right now." Marissa released my hand. "I want you in a private cell, away from the other inmates."

I knew there was more. "But what is it? What's eclampsia?"

"It's a condition that can cause seizures in pregnant women. That's why we're going to monitor your blood pressure."

"Seizures?" I'd witnessed a girl in juvie having a seizure. We were at lunch when her eyes rolled. Then her whole body started jerking. No matter how calm Marissa tried making the news, a seizure would definitely be dangerous for my baby.

"Dr. Patel sent me this information on preeclampsia." She handed me a piece of paper. "Symptoms are extremity swelling, blurred vision, headaches, nausea, and weight gain."

So far, your weight seems stable. Have you had any of the other symptoms, like headaches?”

I thought back over the past few weeks. “I’ve had a few. Maybe I should start keeping a list of anything that seems off.”

“That’s a good idea. How about your vision?”

“Sometimes, things get fuzzy.” I lifted my leg and stretched out my arms. “And I look like an overstuffed pork sausage.”

Marissa’s laugh filled the room—a little too loud, too forced. It chilled my blood.

“How do you feel about moving into a private cell?”

Was she crazy? “No way. If I have a seizure, I want someone close by to yell for help.” I’d have to show Ginger how to stick something in my mouth and hold my tongue down like the juvie guard did for the other girl. God, why couldn’t I room with Rhonda or Sheila or anyone who stayed awake? The juvie guard had used a spoon to hold down that girl’s tongue. I needed to swipe one from the mess hall tonight.

“Okay, we’ll play it day by day. I’ll check on you more frequently until the baby...until your daughter’s born.” She closed the blue file. “I’m a little anxious about telling you something else, but I’m hoping you might welcome the news before your trial next week.” Marissa’s forehead looked like one big wrinkle.

Crap, what now? “Just tell me straight out.”

“Your birth mother, Ivy Abernathy, wants to meet you.”

The simple statement I'd longed to hear my entire life—*Your birth mother wants to meet you*—crowded into my worst fear.

“She wanted me to add her to your approved visitor list.”

I jerked forward, leaned so far over the table Marissa moved back a few inches. “Did you put her on the list?”

“I spoke with Dr. Patel's office right before she arrived and knew your blood pressure readings were high. I'm afraid a visit with her could add to your stress. I'm sorry, but I turned her down.”

My relief let go in one long breath. I slumped against the back of my chair. *Thank God. I never wanted to meet Ivy Abernathy. Ever.* But the burning question working its way out of my brain and into my mouth ticked like a time bomb.

“Does she blame me for Abby drowning?” Months of trapped tears blasted free. “Does she? I know she does.” Of course, she did. Marissa didn't need to tell me. Ivy Abernathy hated me for taking Abby jet skiing. For coming to Savannah. For ever being born.

Marissa pulled her chair beside mine and wrapped her arm around my shoulders. “No, honey. She doesn't hate you. I didn't approve her visit because when you meet for the first time, feelings old and new can escalate emotions. Right now, that's not a good idea.”

“I don't want her on my visitor list.”

Marissa reached inside her jacket pocket and pulled out a tissue, dabbed at my tears. “The important takeaway is that facing your birth mother in the courtroom won't be as horrible as you believe.”

“I dream about the accident, but it mixes with the night Jim died. The ocean turns into a river of blood.” *And in my dream, I was the one who stabbed Jim, not Ryder.*

“Innocent people can experience guilt, even when they did nothing to harm a person purposely.” Marissa’s tender voice faded into her shrink voice. A voice that reassured, a voice that said, trust me, I know what I’m talking about.

“If you stuff guilt, pretend it’s not buried deep inside you. Pretend that nothing bothers you. If you don’t deal with regret and hurt, your pain can manifest as dreams. A way for your subconscious to act out your worst fears.”

Panic, as familiar as an old friend who’d come for a visit and never left, slid over my skin. “I’m so afraid the judge will send me away for twenty years and I’ll never know my baby.”

“I know you’re scared. Anyone would be—”

“Ryder went to prison for stabbing Jim to protect me. But maybe I did it, and that’s why Abby died.”

“You think Abby’s death is punishment for Jim Booth dying?”

“I don’t know, but it’s all mixed together, and I’m the common denominator.” I couldn’t stop taking huge, gulping sobs. “And now...what if preeclampsia is the way God’s going to punish me and take back my baby?”

Marissa gripped my hand. “Abby didn’t die because your boyfriend stabbed your foster father. Ryder protected you from being raped. Abby’s and Jim’s deaths are unrelated. And neither one has anything to do with your preeclampsia diagnosis.”

My forehead throbbed. “Why do some people get a Cinder-fucking-rella life, and others only get a messed-up pile

of shit?”

Marissa shook her head. “Don’t have an answer for that one.”

“Abby’s dead, and it’s my fault. I should’ve saved her.” My eyes were like water faucets dripping tears.

Marissa shoved a handful of tissues in my hand. After a few minutes, I dried my eyes and blew my nose.

“I believe you’re suffering from what we call compassion fatigue. A type of guilt that comes from believing you didn’t do enough to save someone. And in this case, your sister’s death is triggering the emotional turmoil over Jim’s death. You’re assuming blame for things you didn’t do.”

“But I am to blame for Abby’s death.”

“A storm is to blame for Abby’s death.”

“If I hadn’t taken Abby to the beach, she’d be alive.”

Marissa nodded. “That’s true. But Willa, that argument can be made for every death that’s not of a natural cause. It has a name, the butterfly effect—small changes resulting in large differences. Some people call it universal chaos.”

None of Marissa’s psycho-gibberish made sense. It didn’t explain Abby being gone. Didn’t explain why some people had regular lives, regular moms and dads. And some of us weren’t good enough to have even one year or one month or even one day with a real family. Nobody got it. No one understood what it was like to grow up and never really belong to anyone.

“If you hadn’t come to Savannah,” Marissa raised her hands, palms up. “Abby would be alive. If you’d contracted the flu instead of your boss, Abby would be alive. If Ivy

Abernathy had not gone to Paris, Abby would be alive. If the nanny hadn't had a wreck..." She raised her hands a couple of inches higher. "You see where I'm going with this?"

I appreciated Marissa's trying to make me feel better, but I knew my bad decisions had killed Abby. And no soft-spoken butterfly babble would change my mind.

"Jace Pratt said the trial is set to begin next Thursday," Marissa closed her file and stuffed it into her briefcase. "He doesn't believe it will last more than two days, three at the most. I'm torn whether to request a trial delay until after your baby's born."

"No." I grabbed onto Marissa's arm. "Please don't. I want this part over. If they convict—"

"I don't want you to worry about the trial until after the baby comes. The stress could be too much. We have to think about you, your health, the baby's health. I requested hospital confinement this morning, but Dr. Patel thinks it's too soon. I've requested an audience with the judge to ask for a postponement."

"If I'm convicted, the quicker I start my sentence, the faster I get out of here." I wiped my face and took a long breath. I had to make Marissa understand. "Look, I spend twenty out of twenty-four hours a day lying on my bed, but I never relax. Every woman in this prison believes I'm a child killer. Some ignore me, but others...I'm pregnant now, so they leave me alone. But once the baby comes, I'll have to keep a bad-ass attitude to keep a few of the jailhouse bitches who wear hair-triggers like a badge of honor from shoving me into a shower stall and teaching me a lesson. I want this over. No delays. I mean it, Marissa. Do not postpone my trial."



Marissa's expression made it clear she didn't agree. "Okay. I'll leave word with the warden you're allowed to call my office anytime."

She took a business card out of her briefcase. "My cell number is listed if you have to call after hours. I'll leave the order on your file, but depending on the nurse on duty, you may have to remind the staff to notify me if you go to the infirmary."

"I won't take any chances with my baby." I stood, and Marissa wrapped me in a hug. Her softness penetrated my bad-ass wall for the second time. Tears gushed from my eyes.

"Oh, honey." Marissa's voice turned gentle. "It's going to be okay."

I pushed away, wiped my eyes on the bottom of my scrubs. "Jesus, I don't know what's wrong with me today."

"Crying is good. You release a lot of stress when you cry." She placed a hand on my belly. "Remember, if you take care of yourself, you'll be taking care of your baby."

I stared at Marissa's hand, then placed my hand over hers. "I will."

"I'll be checking on you more often now. Every two days until you go into labor."

I blurted out the question dancing in my head for weeks. "Will you be at the hospital? Will I see you after the baby's born?"

"I'm not supposed...." Her mouth twisted funny, then she nodded. "We're friends now. I'll stay in your life as long as you want me. But after the baby is born, we'll have to visit in the general population room with the other family and friends."

My body felt fifty pounds lighter. “You will? You’ll come to visit me for real?”

“Of course.” She opened the door. “And I’ll see you in a couple of days.” She nodded at Henry standing outside the door and walked double-time toward the exit.

I extended my wrists toward Henry.

“Your attorney just checked in,” he said. “No reason for you to go back to your cell, then turn around and come back.”

Why was Jace here? He wasn’t due for two more days.

Henry scrunched his eyes and looked me over.

I knew I looked awful after blubbing on Marissa’s shoulder.

“You need some water?” he asked. “I can get a bottle from the break room.”

“That’d be great, Henry. Thanks.” My headache grew stronger. I sat and rested my head on the table.

Henry came back. “Here you go.” He placed the bottle by my arm along with something wrapped in a napkin. “I brought you a cookie, too. Gotta feed that baby and keep up your strength.”

New tears erupted like an unplugged sink. I was a wreck. I had to put a stopper in my emotions.

“You gonna be okay?” Henry’s worry only made me cry worse.

“I think my baby’s in trouble. I have some kind of disease.” I hugged my belly, and my girl stretched, then curled inside my stomach. This baby was the only person in the

world that was mine. The only way I'd ever belong to anyone else.

A smiling Jace Pratt walked into the room.

Henry nodded and shut the door.

Jace plopped his briefcase on the table. "We got an offer to plea bargain."

"Bargain?" I straightened. "What's that mean? Can I get out?"

"The prosecution is offering to drop the second-degree murder charge if you'll plead to involuntary manslaughter."

"What's that mean?"

"The technical definition of involuntary manslaughter is the commission of an unlawful act that causes the death of another person resulting from illegal or reckless conduct by the perpetrator."

I pushed against my forehead and tried releasing the pressure in my head. "But would I still have to go to prison?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"They're offering a sentence of five years, eligible for parole in three. Follow the rules, and you'll be out by the time you turn twenty-one."

My temporary relief vanished. I sat back and crossed my arms over my chest. "No."

"No?"

"I already told you, I can't agree to anything over two years in prison, or the state of Georgia will take my baby." I dropped my hand to my belly and gently pushed the baby back

to center. “You said we had a good case. You said you could get me off.”

“I said, in my opinion, they couldn’t win a murder conviction against you, but I’ve never promised you an acquittal.”

“If I’m inside for three years, they can adopt out my baby.”

Pratt stared at my hands laying on my bulging stomach. “Willa.”

“No more than two years. That’s my final decision.”

“If I find your baby a home while you serve your sentence, someone who will assume temporary custody until you get out of prison, will you consider the offer?”

“You mean like a foster home?” I thought of Mrs. Rice. “Maybe. I’d have to meet the foster family before agreeing.”

He looked as if he wanted to strangle me. “Look, I’m a good attorney. I’m damn good. But I can’t guarantee the judge will find you not guilty. And if we go into court defending against second-degree murder and lose, your sentence could be as much as twenty years.”

“But you said they changed it to manslaughter. That should be easier, right?”

“Their offer of manslaughter stands for forty-eight hours. If we go to court on Thursday, we’ll be defending against second-degree murder. And the prosecution’s case just got stronger with a new witness on their list.”

I closed my eyes, said a quick prayer to God. A recent habit I’d adopted. So far, it hadn’t made any difference. “Who’s the witness?”

“Your ex-foster mother, Sarah Booth.”

My last image of Sarah surfaced—pale gray face, eyes slit tight, pointing her finger at me saying, “That’s her. She’s the one who murdered my Jim.”

A red haze flickered on the edge of my vision. I pressed my hands against my ears to stop the buzzing. Jace Pratt’s wild-eyed face was the last thing I saw before the room went black.

*IVY*

OUR SOUTHWEST FLIGHT LANDED IN ROCK SPRINGS, AND I collected my overnight bag and followed Jace Pratt across the tarmac and into the airport terminal. I helped Pratt find his rental car slot, C23, stowed my luggage in the trunk, and climbed into a black Chevy SUV.

And all the time, I kept up my self-pep-talk. *You're doing fine. Keep your chin high and eyes dry. Don't think about Rence or Abby or Jace's heart-stopping story of Willa's fainting spell and her escalating health problems. Push away the thought of your first grandchild being born behind bars. Just keep moving, or life will railroad over you and leave behind a cardboard replica of Ivy Abernathy. Wrap your bleeding, desecrated heart in a blanket of numb.*

Jace Pratt's main objective was interviewing Willa's foster mother, Josephine Rice, and a woman named Dorothea Keene, whose relationship with Willa sounded closer to a probation officer than a social worker. Pratt planned to assess Rice and Keene as character witnesses.

My motive for flying to Wyoming was to get to know Willa through these women's eyes—Willa's wants, her wishes, her character, her heart.

"How far away does Josephine Rice live?" I asked.

"About fifteen minutes." Pratt started the engine and merged onto Interstate 80. He fiddled with the controls and settled on a country station for thirty seconds, then switched it off.

I'd lived in the lush green mountain ranges of Montana growing up, a world apart from the hard clay hills of Wyoming. This part of the west had miles of stark, arid land with plants the size of giant beach balls. Tumbleweed—dried and leafless shrubs—racing toward the Rocky Mountains in search of water.

"Josephine Rice is a widow raising her granddaughter, Samantha, plus three foster daughters under the age of thirteen." Pratt played with the air conditioner controls. "Over the past nine years, she's fostered eleven children, all girls."

The number shocked me. Her home sounded like a boarding house.

"How long did Willa live with Mrs. Rice?"

"Two and a half years. Dorothea Keene says Rice and Willa have a healthy relationship. I hope she makes a credible witness because we're going to need someone to offset Sarah Booth."

Jace had explained earlier that Sarah had been Willa's caretaker for more than nine years, until Willa ended up in jail, charged with accessory to the murder of Jim Booth, Sarah's husband. Jace planned to stay the night and formally depose Sarah Booth tomorrow morning.

“I spoke to my brother about Willa’s situation. He said prior criminal charges without a conviction couldn’t be used against an accused.”

“Technically, you’re correct,” Pratt said. “But this is a bench trial, and the judge could give the prosecution leeway on that front. The prosecutor’s job is to ruin Willa’s character. And an experienced prosecutor like Naomi Turner will happily use Sarah Booth to accomplish that feat.”

“So you need Josephine Rice’s testimony to equalize Sarah’s claims.”

“Yes, and Dorothea Keene’s. According to the transcripts of Ryder Thornton’s trial, Sarah Booth painted Willa as a conniving liar who had the hots for Sarah’s faithful husband.”

“Did Willa’s boyfriend stab Jim Booth in a fight?”

“Again, according to his trial transcripts, Ryder Thornton claimed Willa texted him, stating she didn’t feel safe and wanted to leave. Ryder drove to the Booth home, climbed through Willa’s bedroom window, and pulled Jim Booth off Willa. The two men scuffled, and Ryder stabbed him.”

“Pulled him off?” Pain from this news is as fresh and shocking as the day Detective McNab said Willa had been with Abby on the Jet Ski. *This will all be over soon, and you can fly to Montana and collapse in your big brother’s arms.* “Are you talking rape?”

“It wasn’t clear if the assault consummated.”

I tried to focus on what Jace was saying, but I couldn’t get past rape. Willa was my daughter, and the injustices of her life ripped through me like the contractions I bore the day she was born. “And Willa’s boyfriend went to prison for protecting her?”



“Thornton had a couple of brushes with the law on his record, drugs, bar fights, but overall the judge believed his self-defense claim and only sentenced him to three years.”

“Did Willa have other problems as a teenager?” Because it seemed reasonable she would’ve acted out the pain of her life.

“Nothing popped in her school records.” Pratt turned onto what appeared to be the main road. Stores and office buildings lined the street. “And I’ve never heard of many troubled teens with a 4.0 GPA. Willa’s pregnant and in trouble now, but she wasn’t a messed-up kid before she put off college for a year to find you.” I caught the impatience in his tone. I wasn’t sure Pratt even liked me. At this point, I wasn’t sure I liked me.

“As far as I can tell,” he said. “Willa came to Savannah to meet you in the hopes of becoming a part of your life.”

This account of Willa was so at odds with the picture Rence and Detective McNab painted. “Why did you choose a bench trial over a jury? Wouldn’t a jury be more sympathetic?”

“Statistically, juries have more sympathy in civil trials, less in a criminal, especially when a minor child is injured. And Naomi is sure to play up Willa’s juvenile record—that’d be too dicey for a jury. But a judge will understand Willa wasn’t convicted and rule against relevance. Most judges are fair. Fair is all we can expect. I can work with fair.”

I tried to imagine Jace Pratt, a strikingly handsome black man with mesmerizing gold eyes and a soft, smooth voice, maneuvering a judge like my father. A flame of doubt ignited in my gut.

”Studies show judges are more likely than juries to acquit when they view the evidence favoring conviction as weak,”

Jace added as if he'd read my thoughts.

"You think the case against Willa is weak?"

"I do." He slowed the car, turned on his blinker, exited the interstate. "The only thing keeping this case in the public eye is your family name. A biological daughter given up at birth is charged with killing her younger sister. And she happens to be Senator Abernathy's great-granddaughter. This case slips into tabloid fare. Everyone in Georgia is watching this case, including the state's attorney and the governor."

I knew Tandy Burton's interest in the story rested with the Abernathy name, but I'd been too wrapped up in my pain of losing Abby to consider what the public scrutiny would mean to Willa's case. "How do you feel about Willa's judge?"

"Judge Hartley is a native of Savannah, hard-nosed but usually fair."

A native of Savannah would know Rence's grandfather, or at least his reputation—my flame of doubt flared.

Pratt turned left, then right onto a dirt road. A few single-wide trailers were splattered among the small clapboard houses. He slowed at a rusted black mailbox. "412 Elderberry. This looks like the place."

A light gray ranch style, with a sagging front porch, was not the kind of house I'd imagined when I agreed to give Willa up for adoption.

Pratt knocked on the front door.

A girl around four years old, with round brown eyes and a heart-shaped face, opened the screen door.

"We're here to see Mrs. Rice." Pratt's smile extended into his voice.

“Samantha Rice, you know better than to answer the door.” A tall brunette with streaks of gray placed her hand on the girl’s shoulder. I assumed she was Josephine Rice; she wore faded jeans and a navy and tan plaid shirt. I guessed her age to be early fifties.

”You must be the attorney,” she said to Pratt. Her gaze fell on me. “And I see Willa found her mama.”

My chest tightened. I was accustomed to answering to Abby’s mom, not Willa’s.

She opened the door wide. “I’m Josephine, but my friends call me Josie.” Her open and friendly smile left the impression she made friends with ease and expected me to call her Josie.

“It’s nice to meet you, Josie,” I said.

She pulled me into a hug. Her arms, strong and sure, wrapped entirely around me. “Sorry as I can be to hear about your little girl.” She held me at arm’s length and peered into my eyes. “But, I know my Willa could never hurt a child.” She added pressure to her fingers clasped over my shoulders to make her point. “Never.”

I groped for a reasonable response. I was counting on this woman to offer a window into Willa’s head and into her heart. And I held on to the hope Josie’s assessment was right. Because if Willa’s childhood damaged her enough to take Abby’s life, then my decision eighteen years ago had destroyed both my children.

Pratt extended his hand. “Jace Pratt.”

Josie scanned his face, then accepted his hand. “Dorothea’s on her way. Come on back to the kitchen. I have a fresh pot of coffee and a warm, just out of the oven, apple-walnut cake. I

want to hear how my girl's doing and how you plan to get her out of this mess."

*IVY*

JACE PRATT AND I WALKED INTO JOSIE'S SMALL LIVING ROOM. Willa had lived here in high school. I slowed and pictured her at the computer desk in the corner completing her homework. Lazing on the blue faded sectional watching movies on a television released before flat-screens hit the market.

Josie turned right. "The kitchen's this way."

We followed her into the hall, and the smell of cinnamon and nutmeg greeted us. The kitchen—large, clean, and lived-in—had a faded linoleum floor and light oak cabinets. Ruffled yellow curtains hung at the window over a double sink, and a gleaming white industrial mixer sat on the white and gold speckled Formica counters.

A sense of warmth filled me. This could have been my grandma's kitchen when I was a girl.

"Have a seat." Josie motioned toward the pedestal table. A cake decorated with chopped walnuts sat in the center. "How do you drink your coffee?"

"Black." Jace turned to me.

“I’ll have the same,” I said.

Samantha climbed into the chair next to mine and graced me with a bright-eyed smile. “My name’s Sammie. I’m four, but my birthday’s in two weeks. Then I’ll be five.” She raised her hand and spread her fingers wide.

Something about Sammie reminded me of Abby. She had dark hair instead of blonde and a long straight nose. Her eyes were brown, not vivid green, but they sparkled with a precocious spirit that made my heart tingle. I swallowed and fought back a lump of tears. “What type of birthday cake are you hoping for?”

“White with chocolate icing.”

Abby’s favorite had been cherry chip with pink sprinkles.

Sammie tilted her head and scrunched her mouth into a pout. “How come you didn’t bring Willa?”

Josie placed three white mugs of coffee on the table. “Sammie, go find the Disney station and let the adults talk.” She handed Sammie a grape juice box.

“But I want cake,” Sammie whined.

“You just had cookies and milk. You can have a slice of cake with the other girls when they get home from school.” Her tone was firm, but loving. “Go on now.”

Sammie slunk through the door.

Josie cut three generous servings of cake. “This was my granny’s recipe. My girls love it.”

“It looks delicious.” I forced a forkful down my throat and tasted Halloween and Thanksgiving in the one bite.

“My secret’s black walnuts.”

Jace removed a phone from his jacket pocket. “I hope you don’t mind if I record our conversation. It’s easier and more exact than writing notes.” He withdrew a file from his briefcase.

“Fine with me.” Josie pulled out a chair and sat. “How’s Willa? Her letters are crammed with questions for the girls, but she never mentions much about herself. I was surprised to learn last month that she’s expecting.” She frowned but looked more worried than disappointed.

“Willa’s looking forward to getting the trial finished. The welfare of her baby is her biggest worry. More specifically, if convicted, who will raise her child.” Jace’s matter-of-fact tone revealed no personal opinion on Willa’s future.

“You do your job properly, and she’ll be the one raising her baby.” Josie sipped her coffee. “Now, tell me what I can do to help Willa.”

He tapped his cell. “Meeting with Josephine Rice, Thursday.” He swiped his screen. “Two-seventeen p.m.”

He sampled his dessert and smiled. “I’d never admit this to anyone else, but this could be better than my nana’s apple pound cake.” He opened his file. “First, I want to thank you for agreeing to see us today and answering a few questions. I’ll ask that you speak your answers. Nodding and shaking your head won’t register on the tape.”

“Okay,” Josie said.

“How long did Willa live with you?”

“Two and a half years.”

“Can you tell me about Willa?”

Josie sat back. “She’s a good girl. Studied hard in school. Pulled straight A’s. She loves math. Had the highest math SAT score of anyone in the school, and won a scholarship to the University of Wyoming. Willa wants to be an engineer.”

“Her guidance counselor said Willa accepted the scholarship, then asked for a gap year.”

“Her scholarship didn’t include housing or food. Willa didn’t have enough money saved to take her through four years of college, and wanted to work and save for another year. Now I suspect the baby had something to do with her decision.”

“When she left Wyoming, did you know Willa was expecting?”

“No. Like I said, she gave us the news last month, in a letter.”

“I’m surprised she didn’t confide in you.”

She frowned. “I’m not. Not really. I tell my girls no babies in my house. I say it so they’ll keep their heads on straight, but...” She exhaled a sad breath, “I’d take it back if I could.”

Josie’s guilt mixed with mine and seemed to fill the room.

“I understand you agreed to take Willa in after Jim Booth died,” Jace said. “Did you know Willa? Is that why you agreed to become her foster parent?”

“No, I’d never met Willa. But Dorothea took over her case after Jim died, vouched for her. And Dorothea thought it best to put Willa in a home without a man.”

My heart pounded a steady, angry beat. I tumbled back to my earlier conversation with Jace. Jim had tried to rape Willa,



or maybe he did rape her. Either way, if Jim Booth weren't already lying six feet under, I'd stab him myself.

"Willa complained about Jim to her social worker, a woman named Karen Shoal," Josie said. "Shoal offered to transfer Willa to the girls' home in Cheyenne. At the time, Willa didn't want to change schools and live away from everyone and everything familiar. And she had a boyfriend here in Rock Springs."

"Ryder Thornton?"

Josie nodded.

"It would be helpful if you'd speak your answers for the recording."

"Sorry. Yes, Ryder Thornton was Willa's boyfriend back then. After the trial, Dorothea had a hard time finding anyone who would house Willa. Fifteen-year-olds are hard to place, but a young girl involved in a murder was next to impossible."

"But you agreed to foster Willa?"

"I did. And I've never been sorry. Dorothea thought my younger girls might help Willa settle in because she'd been so close with Sarah's daughters. Sarah's first husband ran off with the secretary of the Methodist church," she added. "Housing foster children for some people is a way to make extra money."

By Josie's pinched mouth, I assumed she believed Sarah to be one of those.

"And fostering Willa gave Sarah a dishwasher and built-in babysitter to boot." She stirred her coffee. "Of course, that's just my opinion."

"Did Willa ever talk about Jim or Sarah?" Jace asked.

Josie's eyes flashed heat. "No, and I never pushed. It was difficult enough for Willa to stay in town and live down the talk of the trial. When she arrived at my door, she was as lost and afraid as a bird with a broken wing."

The numb shell I'd constructed to insulate my emotions and ensure I remained at arms' length of this conversation didn't so much fall apart as fray at the hems and sides like an old coat. The image of Willa, the broken bird as Josie called her, nuzzled its way through the ripped and torn seams.

Jace flipped to the back of his file. "According to Willa's school records, she graduated with merit."

"She took all honors classes, earned over a 4.0 GPA. She worked part-time since the day she turned sixteen. I've fostered fourteen girls, and so far, they've all grown up to make me proud."

Her voice held a note of sadness. "But Willa was my shining beacon. She worked so hard to make a future for herself." Josie grabbed a napkin from a heart-shaped holder and dabbed at the corner of her eye. "That child's trouble breaks my heart."

The doorbell rang. "That'll be Dorothea. I'll be right back."

She returned with a heavysset black woman carrying an overstuffed briefcase. But her face was what held my attention. I'd never seen eyes so compelling without enhancements. She wore no makeup, not even lip gloss, and had the natural beauty every woman craved and few possessed.

Jace extended his hand. "Jace Pratt."

“Dorothea Keene.” She slipped into a chair and considered me. “You don’t have to tell me who you are. You and Willa are cut from the same pattern.”

Dorothea’s gaze brush-stroked my skin. Her eyes held expectations. Expectations that sent an uneasy tingle down my spine. “I’m Ivy Abernathy, Willa’s biological mother.”

Jace explained he was recording the conversations and walked Dorothea through the same questions he’d asked Josie. Dorothea’s praise for Willa rivaled Josie’s, and both women’s accolades struck me as sincere.

“Can you explain why the police charged Willa with being an accessory to murder in Jim Booth’s death?” Jace asked Dorothea.

“Because she ran. By the time the police arrived, Willa and Ryder were long gone. One of them—Ryder, I suspect—had the foresight to leave Willa’s torn nightgown and ripped panties behind.”

Josie placed a cup of black coffee and a piece of cake in front of Dorothea.

Dorothea tasted the cake, glanced at Josie. “Black walnuts?”

“Makes all the difference,” Josie said.

Dorothea doctored her coffee with sugar and cream and resettled her gaze on Jace. “By the size of the sheriff’s search, you’d think those two kids were Bonnie and Clyde reincarnated. Three weeks after the murder, they ran out of money, walked into the police station in Cheyenne, and surrendered.” She huffed an irritated breath. “Sheriff Tilson charged Willa with second-degree murder.”

“I only found the charge for accessory to murder,” Jace said.

“There were a bunch of trumped-up charges in the beginning,” Dorothea said. “Thank goodness for the cool head of Judge Threadgill. He waded through the crap, and after the police admitted Sarah had been stumbling drunk when they arrived, the judge threw out the other charges.”

“And Willa never gave you any trouble, Ms. Keene?”

“No. Judge Threadgill gave Willa probation and a list of conditions most teenagers would’ve ignored. Willa met or exceeded every one. No contact with Ryder was the one rule that broke her heart. But as far as I know, she obeyed Threadgill’s order.”

“So you’ll testify that Willa gave you no trouble?”

“Absolutely.” Dorothea didn’t hesitate. “In three years, she only missed one check-in. It was the last month of her probation. She apologized and rescheduled.”

Josie gathered the plates and wiped cake crumbs from the table into her hand. “Willa did everything required to clear her record. But I guess that doesn’t matter now.”

“It’s my job to make it matter,” Jace said. “As I mentioned over the phone, I’m asking you both to be a witness to Willa’s character. I received an email this morning—the trial begins on Wednesday. I estimate Willa’s trial will last no more than three days. You should plan on testifying on Thursday, but it may be as late as Friday. If you fly on Wednesday, we can meet early Thursday morning, and I’ll prep you.”

Dorothea checked her cell. “I’ll have to move around a couple of meetings, but as long as you cover my expenses, I can make it work.”

“School’s back in session.” Josie grabbed a calendar from a kitchen drawer. “With travel, that’d mean four, maybe five days away. I can’t leave my girls that long.”

“Can you get a sitter?” Jace asked.

Josie snorted a hard, joyless laugh. “I doubt it. No matter how much you offer to pay, people won’t take on the responsibility of foster kids. My brother-in-law died last month, and I couldn’t find anyone willing to stay with the girls so I could go to the funeral. I ended up loading us all in my car and driving to Idaho.”

Jace’s expression confirmed my fear: Josie’s testimony was crucial to Willa’s case.

“You could bring the girls to Savannah,” I said. I’d find someone to watch them. Ursula had a niece who sometimes babysat for Abby.

“I can’t take them out of school for four days. The state’s too strict on foster kids’ school attendance.”

“What about your sister?” Dorothea said.

Josie’s eyes lit. “My sister is crazy about the girls. I can ask her. I’m not sure Liz could afford the airline ticket right now, but maybe if I paid half...”

“I’ll pay Liz’s travel expenses,” I said.

“I’ll ask her tonight and let you know first thing tomorrow.” Josie drew a line through the following week in her calendar and wrote Willa in capital letters.

Jace tapped his pen against the folder. “We still need to cover a few questions that may come up during cross-examination. Other than Ryder, did Willa have boyfriends in high school?”

“Not too long after Christmas, a boy named Josh started hanging around,” Josie said.

“You have the last name of Josh?”

“No.”

Jace looked at Dorothea.

“I never asked. She told me once that he rode broncos on the rodeo circuit. He skedaddled out of town all of a sudden. I remember asking how he did in the big Rock Springs Rodeo. Willa said he left town before the show.”

Jace scribbled notes on his pad.

“Josh wasn’t around more than a few month,” Josie added. “Evidently, it was a month too long. I figure he’s the father of Willa’s baby.”

“What do Willa’s boyfriends have to do with her case?” Dorothea asked.

The question hit a nerve and boiled my blood. I leaned in. “Are you thinking this information is relevant because Willa was with three college-aged boys when—”

An image of Abby alone in an angry ocean filled my head. My heart clutched. I lingered a moment with the familiar image, hoping for something new to appear in the picture, something to give me peace or closure. But the impression faded, and I focused back on Jace. “You think the prosecution is going to make Willa out as a party girl, don’t you?”

Jace closed his notebook and stowed his pen in his shirt pocket. “If I were the prosecutor, that would be my strategy.”

And in an old southern conservative city like Savannah, depending on the judge, the tactic could play well.

“Willa didn’t party. She worked.” Josie said.

“That’s why you’re coming to testify.” Jace slid a business card across the table. “I’ll have my assistant book your flights and your hotel accommodations.”

I’d come to Wyoming to learn about Willa, sort through her life, and assess her character. But as much as I tried to confine myself to the role of a sideline listener and barricade my heart from Willa’s horrific childhood, I failed.

I grieved for the abandoned child shifted from home to home. The teenager who lived through hell only to lose her first love. The young woman who bravely struck out to find her past and build a new future, only to be accused of destroying the family she’d hoped to join. At least that’s the picture my heart wanted to believe—the image I needed to believe to remain sane.

Sammie’s head peeked around the kitchen door. Then she ran to Josie’s side. “Grandma, I can go with you.”

Josie patted the girl’s head. “No, baby. You can’t miss school. Preschool is just as important as big school.”

Sammie’s bottom lip trembled. “But I want to see Willa. She hasn’t called like she promised.”

Sammie’s earnest face tugged on my heart.

“She writes to us every week.” Josie nestled Sammie to her side.

“Why don’t you draw her a picture and send it with your grandmother,” Jace said. “I bet that would make Willa real happy.”

Sammie’s eyes twinkled. “I’ll draw our house with me in the yard. She likes my house pictures.”

Jace and I said our goodbyes and headed for the airport.

I'd come for Willa's truth. Josie and Dorothea had convinced me the opinions of Rence and Detective McNab, like the picture Jace feared the prosecutor Naomi Turner would paint, held little if any merit. Rence's demand that Willa be punished wouldn't bring our Abby back. And now, what would happen to Willa's baby?

Staring into my future—no Abby, no Rence, Willa in jail, my grandchild a ward of the state—sucked my last ounce of energy. I lay back against the seat, closed my eyes, and shut off the world. Tonight, I'd talk it all over with Peter and make a plan of how to handle Willa's trial and how to win back Rence's trust.

Jace and I arrived at the airport an hour and twenty minutes before my flight to Helena.

"Let's have a bite to eat," he said. "There's something I'd like to discuss with you."

I assumed he'd drop me off and leave. "Sure."

I scanned the menu board at the only restaurant, a deli offering an array of sandwiches, hot dogs, and chili. I opted for sparkling water and a package of cheese crackers. Jace ordered two chili dogs and a large order of fries.

We sat at a table by the window with a view of planes taxiing to the gate.

"Naomi Turner offered a plea yesterday," Jace said.

"And you're just now telling me?"

"It's complicated."

"But it's a good sign the prosecution wants to settle, right? What are the terms?"



“Naomi Turner will reduce the charge to one count of involuntary manslaughter with a maximum sentence of five years, eligible for parole in three. Chances are high Willa would be out by the time she turned twenty-two.”

I shoved my unopened crackers aside. “I don’t think Willa should serve any time. I know she made a horrible mistake taking Abby on the Jet Ski, but I don’t believe her intention held malice. She was doing a favor for Mia that turned into a nightmare for everyone.”

“I agree one hundred percent. But our opinion won’t hand Willa an acquittal. I can put you on the stand, and you can tell the judge you don’t believe she should convict Willa. But your testimony is a paradox, holding weight as Abby’s mother, but because you’re Willa’s mother too, anything you say will be regarded as biased.”

I sat with that assessment, mulled it over and tried to find fault, and finally accepted his point was valid.

“The judge will determine if Willa’s guilty of involuntary manslaughter and second-degree murder. And while I believe I can beat the second-degree murder charge, negligence isn’t a convoluted term. Willa is an eighteen-year-old adult who signed a waiver as the responsible party for Abby without parental consent. She ignored an incoming storm, which further risked Abby’s life. I can’t change those facts.”

“Is Willa going to accept the plea?”

“She won’t accept a plea deal that puts her in prison for more than two years. That’s the maximum the state of Georgia will keep a minor before making them a ward of the state.”

“Willa’s willing to risk twenty years in prison?”

The waitress delivered Jace's food, and he waited until she left. "She agreed to accept the plea on one condition." He poured ketchup on his plate, sprinkled extra cheese and jalapeño peppers on his hotdogs, and reached for the salt shaker.

I slapped my hand over the shaker. "Well? What's her condition?"

"I have to find someone to take her baby. And not just any someone. Willa's demanding to meet the potential caregiver to decide if they're worthy. She's adamant the baby not be adopted or placed in the foster care system."

Jace dragged a fry through a mound of ketchup. "As far as I can see, that leaves only you."

I couldn't even summon a response.

*IVY*

JACE POPPED ANOTHER FRENCH FRY INTO HIS MOUTH AND chewed. “Well? What do you think about taking custody of your grandchild until Willa is released?”

The fate of Willa’s baby, my grandchild, never left my thoughts for long. The topic had been on my list to discuss with Willa yesterday when Marissa rejected my prison visit. “Why do you suppose Willa picked me? It doesn’t make sense. Me giving her up at birth is the reason she’s refusing to consider adoption for her baby.”

“Willa isn’t considering adoption because *she* wants to raise her child. And Willa hasn’t exactly chosen you. If you agree, then I’ll float the suggestion to her. I’m hoping it would give her the peace of mind to accept the plea deal.”

After Abby died, lonely had become my natural state of being. And with Rence’s emotional abandonment, my loneliness had grown roots, become entrenched. The idea of sharing my world, giving someone else entrance into my life, a place in my damaged heart, petrified me. But a baby? A baby didn’t sound so frightening.

Jace ate a couple more fries. “I’m willing to make a case to the judge, and with Willa’s advocate, Marissa Connors, on our side, I can’t see a reason why you wouldn’t be able to take Willa’s baby home from the hospital.”

My stomach churned. Having a baby in the house might remind me too much of Abby. What then? It wasn’t as though I could hand the child back, say *Sorry—it didn’t work out*.

This was my first significant decision without Rence’s input. He’d never agree to bring this child into his life. But his opinion no longer mattered—he’d left our relationship, our house, and now, maybe even our marriage. This was my decision.

My heart trembled as if I were perched on a tight bench between the ghost of Abby and my unborn grandchild. Jace’s proposal meant welcoming Willa and her child into my world forever—they’d demand the maternal place in my heart reserved for Abby.

Last night, lying awake, I’d decided to take it slow, get to know Willa, try to learn to love her, and then her child. This option, Willa accepting the plea and serving three years behind bars, didn’t fit that plan.

“I don’t know. I need to think about it.”

“No problem,” Jace said. “We still have twenty minutes before you have to head through airport security.”

I checked his face. Surely he was joking. I couldn’t tell.

The idea of taking Willa’s child didn’t sit level on my shoulders. Rence and I had worked out every detail of Abby’s birth, even choosing her preschool months before she was born. But Willa arrived into my life a grown woman. We had

no shared memories. She had a personality and life experiences entirely separate from mine.

Willa. Just her name elicited a sharp pain. And no matter how hard I tried to change it, Willa would forever mix with my love and longing and grief for Abby.

But I was being offered an opportunity to right a wrong after the hell I'd unwittingly put in Willa's path. Willa's child, like Willa and Abby, hadn't asked to be born. Didn't this baby deserve a piece of the devotion I'd once heaped on Abby, love that Willa had deserved and not received?

"Okay, what's required for me to accept temporary custody?"

Jace pulled a file from his briefcase. "Sign on the highlighted line, and I'll start the proceedings." His jaw muscles softened, and his eyes brightened, visible proof the weight of this decision had jumped from his shoulders and settled on mine. He handed me a pen.

I scanned the pages and read my name. "You prepared the documents?"

"I'm an optimist."

I added my signature to the highlighted lines, assured Jace I'd be in Savannah by Tuesday evening, and walked to my departure gate filled with questions and worries to share with Peter. I'd planned to ask my brother to attend Willa's trial and show his support, but if Willa followed Jace's advice and accepted the plea deal, there'd only be a hearing for her sentencing.

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Thanks to a tailwind, my flight arrived in Helena ten minutes early. My shuttle plane deplaned on the tarmac, and the sign over the entrance to the terminal—Big Sky Country—welcomed me home. A stuffed moose and a rearing bear guarded the entry door, rendering the atmosphere inside more of a hunting lodge than an airport.

Peter's instructions were to meet in baggage claim. I rolled my carry-on bag through the main entrance hall and glanced up. The ground shifted under my feet with an earthquake none of the other travelers seemed to experience.

A sign welcoming visitors to Helena hung above the portrait of a smiling, dark-haired man with mesmerizing aquamarine eyes framed in jet black lashes. A plaque below the oversized photograph read Mayor Noah Cunningham.

I stood frozen in memories. My mother's endless crying. My father's disappointed gray-blue eyes. Years of loneliness. I remained riveted on the photo of a handsome, slightly pudgy man and remembered the teenaged boy who'd radiated the same winning smile.

Noah Cunningham—Willa's biological father.

"Thought we were meeting in baggage claim." Peter wrapped a firm hand around my forearm. "You're blocking foot traffic."

I forced my feet to move past Noah's photograph. "He's the mayor?"

Peter guided me onto the escalator and whispered, "Later."

In baggage claim, I must've pointed to my suitcase, Peter must've grabbed it, and I must've followed Peter to his truck.

Seated in his Ford F150, I managed to squeeze out, "Why didn't you tell me Noah still lived in Helena?"

Color flushed my brother's cheeks.

"You could've warned me he was the mayor."

Peter darted a look in my direction. "Why would I give you news of Noah?"

"How long has he been back in Helena?"

The muscles in Peter's jaw tightened. I'd made him uncomfortable—I didn't care. I was sick of secrets or taboo topics or whatever the hell Noah was in my family.

Peter kept his gaze fixed on Highway 15. "Noah came home after college. No different than a hundred other guys."

"Has he ever asked about me, wondered why I left town?"

"Mom made it common knowledge you left for boarding school in Tennessee."

"Odd that no one found my sudden departure unusual, don't you think? I always wondered if anyone asked about me. My teachers, the principal? My tennis coach...? You, Mom, none of you ever said." And I was too ashamed to ask. "So I was banished to the East Coast and boarding schools while Noah lived the life of the hometown college football star."

"What did you expect Mom and Dad to do? Force Noah to marry you? You were fourteen."

"And Noah was eighteen." Resentment swirled in my voice, in my head, my heart. Somewhere deep inside, I knew my anger had a connection to the injustices of Willa's life. "And, technically, what happened that night falls under statutory rape."

Peter's face pinked. "Jesus, Ivy."

Our silence sucked all the oxygen from the car. I rolled down my window and let the cool air rush over my face.

“Look, I’m sorry about what’s going on in your life, but...”

“Never mind.” I waved him off. “Doesn’t matter.”

“Prosecuting consensual sex between teens in Montana means an ugly, beastly trial.” Peter switched to his mundane lawyerly voice.

“Don’t placate me, Peter.”

“That kind of trial ruins lives—the life of the accuser and the defendant. And the chances of Noah being found guilty would have been very, very slim. You know this.”

Yes, I knew the statistics because Dad quoted them to me, over and over. Even at fourteen, I knew he needed to assuage his guilt for not going after Noah.

“Why are you bringing it up now?”

“Because Noah took advantage of me.” I’d never said the words out loud. Never gave them weight. Even in my darkest moments, I’d taken the blame and held tight to my secret. “Noah had a flask of liquor that night. Did you know that?”

“He wasn’t the only one.”

I remembered Peter and his girl swinging in the backyard hammock. A flash of silver in the moonlight. “And Noah is the one who suggested we take a walk. Then he led me into the woods, deep into the woods away from anyone who might interfere.”

“You didn’t have to go, Ivy.”



“I was fourteen. Noah was the captain of the football team and the most popular boy in school. Of course, I would go. What girl wouldn’t have?” I was flattered, excited, and all too anxious until his gentle kisses turned demanding, and he grew octopus arms too strong for me to control.

Peter lowered his window as if he needed more air. “You know how hard it would have been to prove statutory rape? In Montana? Twenty years ago? Half the town would’ve crucified you, and the other half would’ve let them.”

“You mean the same town that elected Noah as their mayor?”

“Look, Noah is respected in Helena.”

“Are you two still buddies?” The idea slapped me in the face. “Do you socialize with him?”

“It’s a small town. We go to the same church. I’m on the Chamber board of directors.” Peter had his excuses ready. Had he worried I might ask? “Why do you want to rehash this now? Isn’t your life hard enough without dredging up more pain from the past?” He pulled his truck into his garage. “We can discuss this later. Kelsie’s making pot roast, and the kids have been working on a surprise for you ever since you called to say you were coming for a visit.”

Peter didn’t understand my sudden anger because he didn’t know the depth of my distress. He didn’t know Rence had left me. He knew we’d lost our precious Abby, but he didn’t know Willa now risked spending three years behind bars. And he didn’t know I’d agreed to assume custody of her baby—my grandchild, Noah’s grandchild. “Is Noah married? Does he have children?”

“I don’t understand these questions.” Bewilderment filled Peter’s voice. “Is your sudden interest in Noah because of Willa?”

“Yes. Maybe. I don’t know. But you’re right. We can discuss it later.” I needed time to digest my latent feelings. And get a handle on the emotional rollercoaster threatening to drop me on my head.

“Aunt Ivy!” Sophie’s seven-year-old voice punctured my eardrum, then the whole group—Kelsie, Sophie, and Alex—pounced.

I stepped from the truck, and Kelsie pulled me into a hug. “We’re so glad you’re here.”

I tugged the end of her new hairstyle, a chin-length bob. “What’s this?”

She blushed. “Do you like it?”

“I do.” I turned her shoulders. “I love this look on you.”

Sophie jumped like she was on a pogo stick. “I baked a cake for dessert. Salted caramel. Dad says caramel is your favorite.”

“It is my favorite.” Maneuvering through a family night celebration brought on a deep melancholy. Abby should be here, laughing and reveling in the attention of her cousins and her aunt and uncle.

Two-year-old Alex clung to my leg. His curly brown hair framed deep brown eyes. I scooped him into my arms. “How’s my boy?” He wrapped his fat little arms around my neck, and I nestled my nose into his skin, breathed in his baby scent. I closed my eyes and fought to pull in a memory of Abby at this age.

“Down.” Alex squirmed in my arms, and I set his feet on the floor.

“Go on in.” Peter waved toward the door. “I’ll stow your bags in your room.”

“Come on, Aunt Ivy.” Sophie pulled me through the hall and into the dining room.

Construction paper, glue, and glitter littered the table. Christmas photos of Sophie, Abby, and Alex lay beside ticket stubs for a family sleigh ride. Snapshots of our family playing in Central Park. The playbill for *The Nutcracker*. An eight-by-ten photo of our fishing trip on Amelia Island, with Peter carrying Alex in a sling and Abby atop Rence’s shoulders.

My heart ached with the memories. “You kept the playbill for *The Nutcracker*?”

“I’m a packrat.” Kelsie gathered a few of the photos into a pile.

I ran my finger over a picture of Abby and Sophie skiing in Colorado. “I don’t think I have this one.” My chest tightened, and my head turned as heavy as a wrecking ball. I couldn’t maneuver down this lane, memories of a life I’d never have again. “It’s been a long day.”

I moved toward the hall. The stairs. The guest room. Escape. “I need a few minutes to unwind and unpack.”

“Sure, go. Your room is the first door on the right.”

The guest room mirrored Kelsie’s personality and had all the small comforts of home, including fresh flowers in a crystal vase.

I walked into my private bathroom. Lotions and fragrant, flowery soaps in a woven basket were on the counter, but I

craved meds. I opened the medicine cabinet, searched for ibuprofen, found the bottle, and downed three.

I needed to inform Peter of my decision to become a temporary guardian for my grandchild. Grandchild—my grandchild—the concept incredibly surreal. I lay across the bed, waited for the fatigue sweeping over me to drag me under. My eyes lost focus, but the throbbing pulse between my eyes threatened to explode into a what-have-I-done migraine.

By dinner, my ferocious headache had dissipated into a mild ache at the base of my skull. All through the meal, I feigned interest in Kelsie’s garden club antics, managed a few bites of Sophie’s lopsided cake, ignored looking at Peter. But mostly, I obsessed over telling Noah about Willa. I couldn’t stifle my need to move a moment longer.

“If I promise to clean your entire kitchen after breakfast tomorrow, can I call it a night?” I stifled a fake yawn. “It’s past ten in Savannah.”

“Sure. No problem.” Kelsie waved my hand away from collecting plates. “I’ll take care of the dishes.”

Peter stacked his dinner plate on top of mine and reached for Sophie’s. “I scheduled a light day at the office tomorrow. My last appointment is just before noon. You could come by, and we can go over the papers to finalize Dad’s estate. They’re ready to sign, and then we can go to lunch.”

“Okay. I’ll be there.” I turned to Kelsie. “I like your new haircut.” The sassy, layered bob framed her pretty ingénue face. “I’m thinking of getting my hair chopped off.”

Sophie’s eyes rounded. “You’re going to cut *your* hair?”

I fingered my thick, single braid. “I’ve been thinking about it.” *For a full thirty seconds.* “I need a change.” A huge change. A forever change. For as long as I could remember, I’d bent to the will of others—first my parents, then Rence. And since I’d only kept my long hair for Rence— “Maybe I could visit your stylist while I’m here?”

“My stylist is my niece, Layla. You remember, my sister Janie’s daughter?” Kelsie ran fingers through her hair, and the layers drifted back into place. “Layla’s fresh out of cosmetology school, but she has a knack with hair. I’ll call her.”

“Sounds perfect. The only time I’m not available is lunch tomorrow.” I headed up the stairs.

After all the drama of the day, I craved sleep. A hot shower and one of Rence’s sleeping pills slipped into my overnight case should work. The other option, asking Kelsie if I could bring the half-full bottle of merlot to my room, hadn’t seemed appropriate.

I turned the shower to hot, but three short raps on the door stopped me from stepping under the spray. I slung a towel around my naked body and opened the door.

“Sorry.” Kelsie held a phone. “I’m talking to Layla, and she’s booked solid for the next two days, but she can come over here tonight if you’re not too exhausted. She’d love to see you and work with your hair.”

I swept my braid over my shoulder. “That’d be great. I’ll shower and come down.”

By the time I made it downstairs, Layla—tall and lithe, with a Dove-soap-creamy complexion—had arrived. She’d swept her light brown hair into a messy ponytail, wore tight

cropped jeans, a white midriff ruffled shirt, and four-inch white wedges. She looked fantastic. If Layla lived in Savannah, I'd ask her to model for my shop in the annual Southern Women fashion show.

I sat at the kitchen table, and she handed me three hairstyle books. "See if any of these ideas work for you."

I skimmed the pages and found a short cut, above the ears with heavy bangs, a style that could be worn sleek or spiked. "I'm thinking something like this."

Kelsie and Layla peeked over my shoulder, then simultaneously pulled out chairs and sat. Their nightwalker expressions—glazed eyes, slack mouths—made me laugh.

"What's wrong?"

"Sometimes it's better to go slow." Layla swiveled the book and studied the style. "I usually suggest to my customers that they cut no more than six inches at a time. Two or three inches above your shoulders might be a good start for now. You can trim more, little by little." Her voice coaxing and tentative, as if she were talking a crazy woman down from a ledge.

"You know what they say, you can always cut more, but you can't glue hair back," Kelsie added.

I tapped the photo. "Nope. I'm ready. I want this style."

Kelsie nodded, but her eyes screamed, "No."

Little Sophie clutched my wet hair. "Let's measure. Maybe you could donate your hair to kids with cancer. Mom, remember how Candice donated hers?"

"Wigs for Kids," Kelsie said.

“That’s a great idea.” I hugged Sophie to my side. “I can donate in Abby’s memory.”

“It’s a great program. And I can take care of the details.” Layla draped a cape around my neck, brushed my hair into a loose ponytail, and secured the bottom with a second rubber band. “Last chance to change your mind,” she said.

My certainty had begun to wane, but I pushed my fisted hand in the air. “Carry on.”

With the quickness of a seasoned stylist, Layla pulled my hair tight and snipped.

Sophie picked up my ponytail from the floor. “Wow, this is enough for three wigs.”

“When you send in the hair,” I said, “please don’t forget to donate in the name of Abigail Rose Abernathy. I’ll write it down before you leave.”

“You’ll get a certificate of thanks from the Wigs for Kids organization and a photo of the children who receive your donations. One of my customers brought in her packet. It’s really moving.” Layla combed, snipped, combed, and snipped some more.

Twenty minutes later, I stared into the mirror. Tears rushed my eyes. I hadn’t thought past my desire for change.

“You’re disappointed.” Layla tugged on my bangs.

“No, I love it.” And in the mirror, I did. But deep in my soul, I mourned my mornings with Abby, deciding how we’d wear our hair—french braid, over-the-shoulder plait, ponytail or messy bun, long and loose.

Layla rearranged snippets of hair. “I warned you not to go too short.”

I reached up and stilled her hands. “I love the cut. It’s just that Abby...” I couldn’t say more. At the sight of Sophie’s crestfallen face, I mustered a quick smile. “So, what do you think, Soph?”

She perked up. “You look fancy, Aunt Ivy.”

I considered the cut from different angles. It represented freedom. And for a reason I couldn’t explain, I felt more in control than I’d been since Abby’s death.

Kelsie grabbed her phone. “Sophie, stand beside Aunt Ivy and Layla. Let’s get a photo.”

I smiled, posed, and even accepted a glass of wine to toast the new me.

But later, in bed, even after two glasses of wine, I couldn’t push the image of Noah Cunningham’s smiling face out of my head. I didn’t have the right to keep Willa from knowing her father’s identity. Which meant facing an eighteen-year secret.

Secrets, I’d learned, were sneaky seeds that couldn’t be hidden or buried or wished away. Just when you think a secret has decayed and rotted, and dissipated into nothing—it surfaces, searches you out, and demands its due. No more secrets.



*WILLA*

I SAT ON MY CELL BUNK, SUCKED A HARD BREATH, AND TRIED riding out the sharp piercing pain shooting behind my eyes.

*Something's wrong.*

*Infirmary. Go to the infirmary.*

*Call the guard.*

I edged over my mattress, stopped. The room spun. I eased back until my spine found the wall.

*Ginger. Tell Ginger.*

I floated inches above my body. Tasted starch. Sweet. Pasty.

*Guard. Call guard.*

“I don’t know what happened.” Ginger was talking. “She went stiff and started jerking around on her bunk, moaning, like she was possessed or something. She told me if it happened, I was supposed to hold down her tongue. But I couldn’t remember where she hid the spoon. I thought it was under her pillow—”

“We need a stretcher in cell 36. Stat.” Henry’s voice.

“What’s wrong with her?” Ginger again. “Why’s she so white?”

“Stay with me, Willa.” Henry. *Henry will help.*

“One, two, lift.”

I flew.

*Sleepy. Tired.*

“Is she going to die?”

Beep. Beep. Beep. A pair of dueling hammers played against my skull. I hovered between gray mist and black nothingness.

“Willa? It’s Dr. Patel.”

I opened an eye. Light drilled into my brain, and I squeezed my eyes closed.

“Welcome back.” Fingers pushed against my shoulder. “Don’t move.”

A throbbing ache shot through my head. I lay still and let the pain fade. “Where am I?”

“You’re in the hospital.”

*Hospital?* Realization penetrated my fogged brain. I fought through the searing light stabbing into my eyes and grabbed Dr. Patel’s wrist. “Is my baby okay?”

“You and your baby are stable. But your blood pressure’s high. You need to stay calm.”

A woman in green scrubs leaned over the bed. She blotted my forehead with a wet, chilled cloth. Her name tag read

Rosemary.

“Are you sure my baby’s okay?”

“Your baby’s fine.” Dr. Patel wrapped a cuff around my arm, and a machine whined behind my head. He made a note on a clipboard. “I’m keeping you overnight for observation.” He pressed his fingers to my wrist. “Are you tired? Do you ache anywhere? How’s the head?” His gaze didn’t stray from his watch.

“My head’s ready to explode.”

He made another note on the clipboard. “You’re dehydrated, but you’re receiving fluid through your IV. Your headache should subside soon. I’ll give you a mild sedative to sleep, but I want you to have a light meal first. Soup, Jell-O, nothing heavy.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You need to eat. You and your baby require sustenance.”

“Okay. I’ll eat.”

He patted my shoulder.

“What happened? Did I faint?”

“From the description the guard provided the EMTs, you likely had a seizure. Not uncommon with preeclampsia.” He put the clipboard into a slot at the foot of the bed. “Are you up for visitors?”

Visitors? “Jace or Marissa?”

“Both.”

The nurse named Rosemary raised the head of the bed.

“My headache seems better already.”

“Good. I’ll check on you after my evening rounds.” Dr. Patel waved Marissa and Jace into the room. “Her numbers look stable. I’ve ordered forty-eight hours of observation.”

“That should give us enough time,” Marissa said. Thanks, Doctor.”

Dr. Patel looked at me, then back at Marissa. “She needs to rest. Keep your visit under fifteen minutes.”

“We will.” Marissa’s walked over. Her face reminded me of Mrs. Rice when one of the girls had a fever. “You gave us a scare.”

Jace stood at the end of the bed. “Gave us a couple of uneasy hours, that’s for sure. But you’re good now. You’ll be fine. Everything’s fine.” His voice didn’t sound like he believed what he said. But before I could ask why, he said, “Do you remember what happened in your cell?”

“My head turned light, and I floated.”

”Visitor hours are already over, and we don’t have long before the nurse throws us out.” Marissa pulled a chair to the bed and sat. She rolled her lips in the way she did when she had something hard to say. “Jace and I want to share an idea with you.”

“What is it?”

“What do you think of relocating to Ivy Abernathy’s house until the trial begins?”

*IVY*

I DROVE KELSIE'S LAND CRUISER PAST HELENA CITY HALL, circled the block, and searched for a parking space. My appointment with Noah Cunningham was for eleven o'clock, the clock on the dash read ten-fifty. I turned left and did a quick sweep of the next block. Helena had added a slew of new shops and restaurants over the years and, similar to Savannah, minimal parking.

I'd returned for Mom's funeral five years ago and Dad's funeral last year, but those were the only times I'd been back since being shipped to Aunt June's eighteen years ago. My parents had seemed relieved when I married Rence, and we'd decided to live in his hometown. Even our wedding, at Georgia's urging and my parent's blessing, had been in Savannah.

Finally, I spotted parking in front of a bar called The Hay Bale, a building that had once housed J & M Tack Shack. As mayor, Noah's office was in City Hall, a three-story brick building, two blocks away, standing sentinel against a blue Montana sky.

The thought of facing Noah after all these years left a thin layer of sweat crawling like a thousand tiny spiders over my skin. Every nerve in my body sizzled with an eighteen-year secret.

I'd spent so many years denying my past the memories of that night with Noah were almost a blur, a distant dream that could or could not have happened.

But it did happen. And Noah and I had an eighteen-year-old daughter as a result.

I was here for Willa.

I opened the car door and climbed out. The closer to City Hall I got, the faster my heart sped. By the time I climbed the steps and opened one of the double doors, doubts buzzed in my head like termites on a mission.

I entered the foyer, then leaned against the cold brick wall to steady my breathing. Noah won't take this news well. And who could blame him? Not one whisper of a baby daughter in almost two decades?

Peter's right, I should just let the past be.

*Leave. Don't do this.*

My mouth tasted like chalk. What in the hell was wrong with me? I didn't have to face Noah. At least, not today. Made more sense to wait and see if Willa even asked about her father.

A lady in a yellow blouse walked by.

"Excuse me. Would you know where the restroom is?" I asked. She pointed to the right. "That hall, second door."

In the restroom, I splashed cold water on my face and stared in the mirror.

*You have to do this. It's the right thing—for Noah, for you, and most of all, for Willa. No more secrets.*

My new short, brave, and in-control haircut left me feeling exposed. “I have to do this,” I said to the pale woman in the mirror with the trembling hands and flushed cheeks.

I swiped on concealer to hide dark circles under my eyes and repeated, “This is the right thing to do.” I applied a strong red lipstick. “You’re doing this for Willa.” I inhaled three deep cleansing breaths and went in search of my past.

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A fortyish woman with shoulder-length auburn hair staffed the second-floor reception area. Her over-plucked eyebrows gave her the look of permanent surprise. The nameplate on her desk read *Evelyn Taylor*.

“Ivy Abernathy to see Mayor Cunningham,” I said.

Evelyn referred to her computer screen, typed something and looked up. “You’re not on Mayor Cunningham’s calendar. You’ll have to talk to Trina.”

“I made an appointment this morning.”

She tapped again. “I’m sorry, but your name’s not on today’s calendar. You can wait for Trina, over there.” She gestured to a group of chairs against the wall.

Maybe this was an omen. I should leave. Go to Peter’s office, settle Dad’s estate, have a nice lunch, then spend the afternoon with Kelsie and the kids. I turned for the elevators.

*What was wrong with me? I would not be an ostrich, running from the truth, sticking my head in the sand.*

*I ran a successful business. Traveled three continents negotiating with world-renowned fashion houses. I could handle this tell-all meeting.*

I sat, picked up a *Time* magazine.

A woman who appeared barely old enough to vote strode toward me. She wore an aqua dress, six inches above her knee, and one size too small. She'd paired the dress with sparkling silver shoes that had never once, in all my years in the fashion industry, passed for business appropriate. "I'm Trina. Are you here to see Mayor Cunningham?"

"Yes. I have an eleven o'clock appointment."

"Something's up with my computer, and the mayor's calendar is a mess. But follow me to his office, and we'll sort it out."

She led me down a hallway that opened into a reception room with a chest-high counter where I assumed Trina worked. Four black leather rolling boardroom-type chairs were shoved against one wall. The ornate wood door behind the counter, labeled *Mayor's Office*, stood closed.

Trina positioned herself behind the counter and stared at her computer screen. "Mayor Cunningham's on a phone conference, but he shouldn't be too long. What's the nature of your business today?" She poised her fingers over her computer keyboard.

"My reasons to see the mayor are personal."

Trina frowned, then shot me a quick smile. She kept her fingers in ready-typing position. "He likes to know the subject of discussion before he sees visitors. Mayor Cunningham hates surprises."



Then the mayor was in for one helluva bad day. “Tell him Ivy Lambert is requesting just a few minutes of his time.”

Trina’s fingers clicked over the keyboard.

Too nervous to sit, I strolled to the window and stared at the busy street below.

The mayor’s door creaked opened.

I turned.

“Ivy.” Noah hurried over to me, wearing the same winning smile of his youth, but his beer belly and thinning hair made him appear older than his thirty-seven years. “What a nice surprise. Peter didn’t tell me you were in town.” He kissed my cheek.

“I need to speak with you.”

“Sure, come on back.” He kept his welcoming tone and once inside his office, closed his door. “Care for coffee or maybe a cup of tea?”

“No, thanks.”

He motioned toward two wingback chairs. “Please, have a seat.” He settled in a high-back brown leather chair and rested his elbows on his desk, an impressive oak slab with natural bark edging. Usually, I’d ask if a local artisan designed the piece, but not today.

“I want to express how very sorry Piper and I were to hear of your daughter’s death. I can’t even comprehend your pain, losing a child.” Noah consoling words threw me off my planned spiel.

I spat out the first thing that came to mind. “You married Piper Douglas?”

“Married eleven years.” He swiveled an eight-by-ten silver frame showing a photo of Piper with three kids, two boys, and a girl.

Piper Douglas, head cheerleader, looked the same. Same slim body, same big toothy smile, same shoulder-length, dark brown hair.

I had spent most of last night playing out scenarios of how this meeting might unfold. Around two this morning, I’d decided on a soft-ease-into-it approach. But now chit-chatting seemed a ridiculous idea. “I’m here to give you some shocking news.”

Noah’s eyebrows shot to his receding hairline. “Shocking?”

“You have a daughter.”

“Yes.” His brow furrowed. “A daughter and two boys.”

“No, you have two daughters.”

His face remained impassive, but after a few seconds, understanding slowly dawned. His eyelids fluttered, his breath shortened. He eased back in his chair. “What exactly are you saying?”

“We have an eighteen-year-old daughter named Willa.”

He pressed his fingers to his temples. “You’re telling me —”

“I am.”

“Shit.” He paled. “But Peter’s never said anything about it. I thought you only had one little girl.”

“My dad arranged for an adoption.” My voice held a surprising amount of control, and none of the jumping pulse,

palm-sweating, nauseating nervousness I felt.

Noah's stubby fingers inched over his chin. "Jesus." He glanced at the family photo on his desk. "What...why are you just now telling me?"

I'd already thought through this question and the answer. "Honestly, I think I was ashamed. I was only fourteen and until that night, a virgin. My parents forbade me to see or talk to you. And when you didn't call or try to see me again, I had no reason to go against their wishes." My throat suddenly felt dust dry. "Do you have any water?"

He grabbed a bottle out of a refrigerator built into his credenza and handed it to me. "You want a glass?"

"No. This is fine." I guzzled half the bottle.

His phone buzzed.

"Mayor, your next appointment has arrived." Trina's voice came through the speakerphone.

He looked at me.

I shook my head. "We're not done."

He spoke toward the phone. "I'm going to be a while."

"Mrs. Kirkpatrick says she has another appointment right after and needs to see you now."

"Then she'll need to reschedule. And no more interruptions." He turned his chair and stared out the window as if a resolution to this new discovery was written in the leaves of the maple trees. A little more blood had seeped out of his face. His skin now looked a sickly gray. "I just don't understand why you never told me."

“You were a big football star, college scouts fighting over you. Everyone in town believed you’d end up in the NFL. And truthfully, I welcomed being shipped off to Wyoming.”

My voice cracked, and I wanted to laugh—or maybe cry. I pinched the bridge of my nose, tried to remain calm, civil. “God, Noah. That night...” My chest tightened, and my breath came out choppy. “In today’s world, that night would constitute date rape.”

His body stiffened. “That’s not true.” His voice carried an edge of defiance and what sounded a lot like panic. “I mean...” He shoved his chair back, bent at the waist, elbows on his knees and rested his head in his palms.

Silence swam like toxic fog in the room.

He raised his head and sat back in his chair. “Maybe I did get carried away. But we were just kids.”

“I was a kid. You were legally an adult.”

“I was in high school. Just a kid, too.”

“You encouraged me to drink alcohol. You knew what you were doing.” My tone left no room for denial.

His jaw clenched tight. He wiped his mouth. “I can see you’re upset, and I’m truly sorry.”

He slipped on an expression of remorse, his soft and pleading eyes matching his voice. It was like a mask he kept tucked away, but close by and readily available. His forlorn expression sent heat up my neck and into my skull.

“I had problems in high school. Big problems.” His voice like warm oil, slipping over his words. “I craved a football scholarship so damn bad I took steroids for over a year to

bump my stats. I built muscle mass, even impressed a few college scouts, but I got into a shitload of fights.”

“Noah, none of this—”

“Coach, my parents,” he rushed on like people do when they’re trying to convince you a lie is a truth. “the few friends I had left, came together and convinced me the steroids had turned me into an aggressive jerk. I quit the pills and ended up washing out with a knee injury.”

He held up his palms. “I know it’s no excuse. But it’s the truth. I drank big time at Peter’s party, and I can’t recall how I got home. I don’t remember much about that night, but I swear I don’t remember pressuring you to have sex.”

His words were like ice water sloshed in my face. “No.” My voice, low and harsh, commanded attention. “That night changed my entire life. It took me away from my parents, my hometown, everyone I loved. You do not get to forget. Not one minute. Not one second. Not one millisecond. No excuses.”

He rolled his chair back as if moving out of my wrath. His gaze shifted from one corner of the room to the other, and he didn’t or wouldn’t meet my eyes. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what else I can say.”

His face, at first glance, even his voice, if you didn’t listen too closely, might pass for apologetic, but I suspected there was more fear of this conversation going public than any remorse for his actions eighteen years ago.

He raised his palms in a conciliatory gesture. “What do you want from me?”

What did I want from Noah?

I didn’t plan to file charges.

I had no appetite for generating more pain in this world and possibly ruining Noah's life or Piper's, embarrassing their children. Abby's death, Willa's trial, the very real possibility I might lose Rence had rearranged my priorities. And Willa was the most compelling reason for facing my past today.

After what Willa had lived through as a foster child, years in the same house with Jim Booth, I couldn't imagine disclosing her conception resulted from a one-night stand bordering on date-rape.

But in case Willa should want to know her biological father, I squared my shoulders and summoned courage into my voice. "I'm here today for two reasons. To face my past, and to force you to deal with yours. Facing your past includes acceptance of Willa, our daughter."

I stared at the man who'd stolen my childhood, and relief flooded my body. Relief that after today, I had no more secrets harbored deep in my soul.

"Willa spent time and money to find me." I had no intention of telling Noah of Willa's legal problems. There was nothing he could do to help her. "And I don't know if she plans to reach out to you, but if she makes contact, I expect you to greet her with open arms. If you do that, I'll allow the night and your questionable behavior to stay in the past. But if you brush Willa off, turn your back, or give her any reason to think she's less than whole, you'll regret your decision."

No words. He simply nodded.

I accepted the nod as acceptance of my terms. "I would recommend you tell Piper you have another daughter. In my experience, secrets can destroy a marriage." I gathered my purse and left.

I walked out of Noah's office door, past Trina's desk, rode the elevator to the first floor, and strode to Kelsie's car without one tear escaping.

My heart rate skyrocketed with exhilaration. I'd faced, fought, and conquered the traumatic event that had shaped my life. My body felt lighter. No more secrets.

Then my phone buzzed. Jace's number. "Hi, Jace."

"Willa's had a seizure. She's in the hospital."

My few moments of exhilaration vanished. "I'll leave for Savannah right away. Tell Willa I'm coming."

*WILLA*

A KNOCK AND MY HOSPITAL DOOR INCHED OPEN. A SHORT-haired, gingery blonde peeped around the frame. “Hi, I’m Ivy. Can I come in?”

My freaked-out-brain stalled along with my mouth. None of the cool responses I’d spent hours crafting since Jace told me that he and Ivy had gone before Judge Hartley and requested house arrest popped into my head. I stood flatfooted in front of the window and searched for words, any words, like *hi*, or *sure*, anything sounding halfway normal.

Then I realized Ivy hadn’t moved.

She’s your mother. *Walk, smile, invite her in.* But my feet, the two-ton boulders anchored to the floor, refused to move. I managed to bend my neck briefly, hoped it resembled a welcome-in nod.

Ivy shouldered the door open wrestling shopping bags in both hands. She looked crisp and fresh in lavender pants and a matching jacket. The color reminded me of an early morning



Wyoming sky. And she had on a wicked pair of cream and tan snakeskin heels.

She clicked across the linoleum floor and placed her bulging bags on the end of the bed. “How are you feeling?”

My mother was here in the same room. “I’m okay.” My excitement, suffocating under a thick layer of panic and doubt, lay quiet. Ivy Abernathy was only three feet away, but the earth hadn’t trembled. No one screamed their joy and hugged. No one touched. And I was the same—tired, fat, in desperate need of an hourlong hot shower and three days of uninterrupted sleep.

I had studied Ivy’s face in at least a hundred Facebook photos hunting for any teensy similarity between us. I knew her eyes were almost identical to mine, same rich jade, same gold flecks around the edges, same odd shape Ryder called a teardrop flipped sideways. But now, in person, Ivy’s eyes looked a lot kinder than mine, softer and friendlier.

“You’ve cut your hair.” I slapped my hand over my mouth. *You meet your mother for the first time, and you talk about her hair?*

She laughed. She had Abby’s laugh—open and almost a giggle.

“You laugh like Abby.”

Ivy’s smile disappeared quicker than dandelion fluff in a gust of wind.

My heart stopped, then deflated. I shouldn’t have mentioned Abby. But now that I had, I should explain just how sorry I was that she drowned. But the pain of remembering Abby mixed with my guilt, and I stood like an idiot staring into Ivy’s teary eyes.

I combed my brain for a perfect word, or phrase, or anything to bring her beautiful smile back. But I didn't know a word powerful enough to explain the hurt in my heart. The world without Abby was too sad for words.

A black gloom filled the air around us. The same black gloom that took over my head when I thought of Abby on that awful day disappearing into the dark, angry water. I hunched my shoulders, braced for Ivy's anger. I had it coming. Questions. Accusations.

"It's wonderful to meet you," she said.

My thoughts slid to a stop. I retraced her words. *It's wonderful to meet you.*

"Would it be okay if we hugged," she asked.

Every racing thought in my brain froze.

Ivy walked across the room and opened her arms. I dove in. I wrapped my arms around my mother and held on. Really held on, a lingering embrace of love. Ivy, me, the baby between, binding us like a real family.

All my fears that I didn't deserve a mother's love, all the niggling doubt I'd lived with every day that I could remember, disappeared and left behind a soft, warm peace. I had so many questions, but none were important enough to spoil this moment.

I gasped and grabbed my belly.

Ivy gripped my shoulders. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure? I can get the nurse."

"It's nothing. The baby just kicked my bladder."

Ivy dropped her hand. Then she walked back to the bed and opened one of her bags.

*I've upset her. Quick, say something else.* "Dr. Patel says I'm having a girl."

Ivy smiled at me, but it was off. No wide grin. No sparkle in her eyes. No happy.

"A little girl? That's great," she said. But her voice sounded like her smile, a little fake. And she stood with her back too straight.

A prickle on my neck kept me from saying more.

Ivy held up a navy and white striped top. "I picked up a few things for you, tights, a pair of maternity jeans, and a few maternity tops in case you want to change before leaving for home."

*Home.* Goosebumps popped on my arms. Ivy said home. My mother. My real mother was taking me home.

"Marissa said you wore a size seven shoe," She unloaded two shoe boxes. "But I remembered how my feet swelled when I was pregnant, so I bought a seven and an eight just to be safe."

I looked at my feet. Orange scrubs rolled to mid-calf. Blue Crocs and a prison-issued ankle bracelet all in full view.

"Maybe you'd prefer the jeans to the tights." She stacked clothes on the bed.

I wanted so much to wear regular clothes, walk into a regular room, sit at a regular table, use a regular toilet. "If it's okay, I'd just like to leave. For home." The last part came out strangled as if I'd swallowed a wad of gum, and it stuck in my throat.

Ivy nodded, but her mood was different. Probably second-guessing her decision to share her home with a prisoner. An oily-faced prisoner with a big-ass pimple on her chin. A prisoner that waddled instead of walked, wore plastic shoes and an ankle bracelet.

Ivy shoved the clothes she'd stacked and both pairs of shoes back into the bags. "I'll go see if your discharge papers are ready." She left the room so fast you'd think she was a doctor answering a code blue.

I unrolled my stupid prison pant leg and covered my ankle bracelet. *What did you expect? And stop crying.* I grabbed a tissue, blew my nose. *Focus. You agreed to this deal for the baby. She's the only thing that matters. You've wasted enough tears on Ivy Abernathy. No more crying. Not one single tear.*

*WILLA*

MARISSA, JACE, AND IVY SAT SHOULDER-TO-SHOULDER AT Ivy's dining table as if united in their shock. Since arriving, less than an hour ago, I'd repeated my reasons for rejecting the plea deal at least five times.

My nose and cheeks tingled; a new onslaught of tears wouldn't be far behind. I was so tired of blubbering like an idiot. Everything seemed to make me cry.

I looked up and stared into the most elegant light fixture I'd ever seen, then my gaze swept down to the two opaque glass bowls I'd seen only through the window. Up close, they reminded me of a sculpture I'd studied in my eleventh-grade art class. The house looked a lot fancier from the inside.

Jace tapped his phone. "The prosecution extended their offer three days because you were hospitalized, but we're running out of time. Are you absolutely certain you want to go to trial?"

"Yes, I'm sure." Chickenshit-scared rested just below the surface of my brave stand.

“This isn’t the time to be stubborn.” The way Jace barked his words was beginning to piss me off.

“You need to make the right decision for you and your baby,” he added as if he didn’t know all my decisions were a hundred percent about my daughter, which was the only reason I’d come back to face Ivy and the law.

“I refuse to let my kid believe her mother is a killer. That would be worse than not having parents.”

Jace handed me a tissue.

I didn’t realize I was crying. I tried breathing away the pain stabbing my chest, but doubt and this bullshit fear I couldn’t shake caused my heart to race like I’d just played the hardest tennis match of my life. No matter how many lawyer words Jace used, if Sarah showed up in court, Ryder *had* to testify. “We need Ryder to testify. I don’t understand—”

“I told you. He’s not an asset. We don’t need him,” Jace said.

“But Sarah—”

“I’ve met Sarah. Don’t worry about her. You have to trust I know best,” Jace loosened his tie.

Ivy hadn’t said a word since she brought in a tray of drinks and a basket of blueberry muffins and invited Jace, Marissa, and I to sit at the table. Now, her gaze seesawed between Jace and me.

Marissa’s expression switched from her steady, blank-faced shrink gaze into an x-ray squint boring into my brain.

Jace checked his phone, rifled through his briefcase, drew out a yellow ruled pad and shoved it across the table. “Second-degree murder.” He handed me a pen. “Write that down.”

I caught his flared nostrils, his scrunched-up eyes, and my fearless streak cracked. “I’m really tired.” And shaken, shattered, stunned, and every other “s” word I couldn’t think of. Scared shitless, an even better description. “Why can’t you give me the reason Ryder can’t testify?”

“I know the judge,” Jace said. “Ryder won’t help our case.” He pointed to the pad. “Write. Second. Degree. Murder.”

I scribbled the words. I needed time alone. I’d text Ryder, beg him to come. He was the only person who knew Sarah and could explain how horrible my life had been back then.

“Guideline sentencing,” Jace said. “Ten. To. Thirty. Write that down.”

I dropped the pen, balled my fingers into a fist to keep them from shaking. “I get it.”

“You’re throwing away involuntary manslaughter with a guaranteed sentence of five years and a chance of parole in three.” Jace pointed at Ivy. “And you have a family member willing to assume custody of your child.”

“Stop yelling at her. You’re only scaring her more than she already is.” Ivy rose and moved to the chair beside me. “What Jace is trying to explain is... if we go to trial, we could lose. And even if Judge Hartley gives you the minimum sentence, ten years is a long time.” She brushed hair off my face.

Her fingers were soft and warm, and I couldn’t help myself, I leaned in. I ached to bury my head in her neck and let go of my pretend bravado. But desperation and fear smeared my tongue with a chalky, bitter taste, and the right words to explain why I couldn’t do what Ivy asked were stuck between my brain and my lips.

Jace and Ivy and Marissa all believed Judge Hartley would rule against me. Maybe the judge would, but if I signed Jace's papers, I'd have zero chance of ever clearing my name and proving my innocence.

"And what if the judge doesn't give you the minimum?" Ivy gathered my hands and held them between hers. "Fifteen years is an even longer time."

My resolve melted. For the first time in my life, my mother was sitting right beside me, offering advice, wanting to help with the hardest decision I'd ever faced. Maybe Ivy was right. Every wrong decision I'd ever made flashed in my head. Maybe I should listen for once in my life. Sign the damn papers and just get it over with.

"You'll miss so much of your life, so much of your daughter's life." I heard the plea in Ivy's voice, and my gut said her worries were real. Her intentions good. But life had a way of blowing good intentions to hell. And a lot could change in three years. Look at Ryder. Three years ago, he'd promised to always stand by me. Now he didn't even return my texts.

And if my trial went wrong, how could I give up my baby for ten or fifteen years? No matter how warm Ivy hugged, and no matter how seductive her mothering, Ivy was a stranger.

"I'd like a word with Willa," Marissa said. Her voice almost as harsh as Jace's. "Alone."

Jace checked his watch, then pushed out of his chair. "We have twenty minutes before Naomi Turner rescinds her offer."

Jace and Ivy left, and Marissa changed chairs to sit closer. She gave me a sad little half-smile and rubbed my arm. "How are you feeling?"



I could tell by the worry crowding into her voice, she didn't agree with my decision to go to trial.

"I can't do it," I said. "I can't sign a paper that says I killed Abby. She was my sister. I could never, ever, on purpose hurt her. Ever." I wiped my cheeks with my crumpled tissue. "I don't want my kid to believe her mother's a murderer."

"Pleading guilty is only a formality. And you would be pleading to involuntary manslaughter, not murder," Marissa switched over to her I-know-everything therapist voice. She always appeared so sure. So fucking calm. But it wasn't Marissa going behind bars, and it wasn't Marissa's daughter who would be without a mother.

"I'll have a prison record. Every job application for the rest of my life will ask the question, and I'll have to answer yes." My argument bounced off the walls and boomeranged back into my ears.

Marissa sat back, made that crimped tight-lipped expression. Another sign she didn't agree.

I pulled in my mad and rewound my argument. Started again. "If I sign the papers, it won't matter if I go to college and work my ass off. No matter what I say or how I explain it, my daughter will always wonder if her mother is a killer."

I tried keeping the drama queen out of my voice, but why couldn't these people see something so obvious. "I don't understand why Ryder can't testify."

I could read every shade of emotion on Marissa's face, doubt, confusion, her worry that my bullheaded stand would backfire. All her feelings matched my own.

She rolled her lips inward, a sign she had something important to say. "I know you're worried that Ryder is the only

person who can explain to the judge what your life was like living with the Booths. And he's the only one who knows the truth about the night Jim Booth died. But if you decided to refuse the plea deal and go to trial, you won't have to worry about Jim's murder. His death won't be an issue. That case has nothing to do with Abby's death. The judge already ruled to disallow any reference."

"But Jace said Sarah would be testifying. And—"

"She may testify, but Sarah can't mention Jim's case." Marissa sounded so confident, but she didn't know Sarah. And no matter how hard I tried barricading my fear, memories of that night sneaked in silent and choking, like smoke slipping under a door.

Me, naked and crouched in the corner.

The bloody knife at my feet.

Ryder grabbing clothes from the closet and pulling me through the open window.

Sarah screaming, "You killed him. You murdered my Jim!"

*IVY*

I STACKED EMPTY CUPS, GLASSES, AND A PLATE WITH A HALF-eaten blueberry muffin on my dining room table.

Willa sat in a chair using a crumpled tissue to blot her eyes. “Do you think I made the right decision?”

“I don’t know, sweetheart. But I think you made the decision your heart led you to make.”

Everything had happened so fast. I hadn’t had time to consider what it would be like when Willa and I were alone. Nobody sitting between us to talk over the empty spaces. But I realized, like me, she didn’t need to fill the quiet with chatter. I liked that about her.

The idea that I picked and chose what I liked about Willa gave me a little shock. I knew it was because I didn’t consider her my child. Not really. Not like Abby.

I never pecked through Abby’s character traits. I embraced everything, even her sassy temper and picky appetite. And I had filtered everyone and everything in Abby’s life. The

vocabulary she heard, the television and movies she watched, the people who were allowed into her orbit.

Willa had lived her eighteen-year life with no one to guide her aspirations, her accomplishments, her tragedies. No filters had been set for the people circling her orbit.

*Well, Ivy, this broken young woman is your child, and she needs you.*

“We go to trial tomorrow,” I bolstered my voice. “Our goal now is to win your case.” I abandoned clearing the table. “Are you hungry?”

“No.” She made a face similar to Abby’s when I suggested Abby finish her green beans. For a moment, the memory, so bright and so Abby, robbed my breath.

“You should eat something. How about soup and saltines?”

“I’m so scared,” she whispered. Her eyes pleaded for something, answers, assurances, affection, anything.

“I know,” I said with all the sincerity I could find in my heart. But I didn’t know. Not really.

It was true that my heart ached for Willa, the child at two who’d lost her adoptive parents. Tiny little Willa shuffled from foster home to foster home. And I marveled at her bravery to travel two thousand miles seeking love and acceptance from a stranger with matching DNA. No wonder this beautiful, strong woman with emotional scars seemed a bit crass and a lot unsteady.

I held out my hand. “Why don’t you come into the kitchen? I’ll heat some soup.” I settled her on a stool, placed a container in the microwave. “This chicken noodle soup is more like a stew. I buy it by the gallon from a local deli. Abby

loved it.” A memory of Abby sitting on the same stool sneaked into my heart.

Willa sitting in Abby’s chair. Willa eating Abby’s favorite soup. I squashed a stab of resentment that Willa wasn’t Abby and grabbed two bowls.

I opened the fridge. “What would you like to drink? How about milk?” I checked the date on the milk carton, sniffed. “Looks like your choice is orange juice or water?” I turned.

Willa sat, shoulders slumped, silently weeping.

Her shattered, lost expression imploring me to find a way to ease her pain. I sat beside her and rubbed her back. “Oh, sweetheart. You must be petrified.”

“I know I shouldn’t have taken Abby on the Jet Ski, but I swear to you...” The sincerity of her grief drew me in. “I loved Abby.” She raised a shaky hand and covered her trembling lips. “I tried. I tried. But the waves. The storm. I promise you, I tried. I tried to find Abby.”

She wrapped her arms around her waist as if holding her baby close. Love me, everything about her seemed to whisper. And it was impossible not to love Willa on some level. But no matter how hard I tried, a part of my heart, the part that ached and bled and yearned, the broken part, belonged to Abby. A daughter Willa had stolen.

“I thought I could handle the Jet Ski. I’ve been riding a Harley and snowmobiles since I was fourteen.”

“Sweetheart.” I rubbed her back. “I know Abby’s drowning was an accident.” I used the right tone, the right cadence, instilled the right amount of pressure in my consoling back rub. But could I absolve her? Would I ever really forgive her?

I hoped so.

I really, really hoped so.

Willa had begged for my forgiveness. In the car on the way home, twice during Jace's discussion of Naomi Turner's plea offer, and even when I pointed her down the hall to the bathroom.

Marissa had pulled me aside and warned against saying anything disingenuous. "Just let Willa speak her piece." So I kept my fears and thoughts and pain to myself and handed Willa another tissue.

She dried her tears, and we made it through bowls of soup.

"Let me show you your room. Dr. Patel ordered rest. And you must be tired."

And God, I needed to be alone.

I hung her new clothes in the guest room closet. "I'll be downstairs." I pulled the duvet back, fluffed the pillow. "Try to sleep."

Willa kicked off her Crocs and lay on the bed. Her face pale, her hair disheveled. She looked adrift in a sea of white sheets.

"Can you hand me my phone?" Willa asked. "I texted Ryder, and he might call. I need to talk to Ryder."

I found her phone and put it in her hand. She closed her eyes.

In the kitchen, I steeped a cup of green tea and settled in the garden off the kitchen. The sunny morning had turned into a cloudy afternoon that matched my desolate mood.

My brain was in a holding pattern. My emotions pushed to a numbness I usually only experienced after two martinis. Today had beaten me down. Meeting Willa for the first time, listening to Jace and Marissa discuss her case, revisiting all Willa had been through in her short life.

And Willa's striking resemblance to Abby stabbed my heart again and again. Her mannerisms—the way she scrunched her nose and held her mouth. The way she bit her lip when she concentrated. Watching Willa was like seeing Abby twelve years into the future.

But Willa wasn't Abby.

Abby was dead.

Abby would never say with red, weeping eyes, "I'll sign the plea agreement if you think I should."

Life decisions of that magnitude were impossible for anyone to make. How could I make them for my daughter—especially a daughter I hardly knew. But now, I feared my emotional straitjacket had failed everyone, Willa, her baby, me.

The gate squeaked. Only one other person had the key to our back gate. My numbness faded into blood-sizzling dread, and I scrambled to my feet. I'd have to explain Willa's presence.

Rence appeared. His eyes widened as if he'd never expected to find me in our garden. His gaze settled on the back door. "I need a few things from my closet."

I blocked his path, forcing him to look at me.

His face held the emotions of a slab of marble, cold, hard, and my heart sagged.

Rence was one of those people who raised undivided attention to an art form. When he granted you his focus, it was if a laser beam pointed directly into your heart. Positive energy so strong you could almost reach out and touch it. I'd long ago become addicted to his mood-altering attention. But he gave me none of that now. No empathy, no energy, no magic.

"I'd hoped we could talk," I said.

"There's nothing to discuss. We'll let the attorneys hammer out the details. Shouldn't be too complicated."

"Attorneys?" Blood rushed from my head. "What do you mean, attorneys? Have you filed for a divorce?"

Guilt flushed his face, and his eyes darted away. He had. "Without even considering a separation?"

I wanted to wail. Fall at his feet. Beg. I'd promise anything. That's what my heart said, but my head somehow regained my earlier strength and said no. So I faced him, concentrated on breathing. Slower, slower still, until the frantic pounding in my chest subsided.

"I don't want a divorce." I'd remind him of our undying devotion to one another. Remind him of our love. Remind him of our perfect marriage.

"A marriage worth saving is built on truth and trust," he said as if I'd telepathically delivered my intentions. "I have no faith in us anymore." His words knifed my heart. "And evidently, you never had faith in me." The blade twisted.

I'd never allowed myself to articulate, even in my head, the reason I'd held my secret from Rence. But now hearing the words from his lips, the reason landed with a horrible thud.

He was right. I hadn't trusted him with my truth or with my shame.



He tried pushing past me.

“Willa’s inside,” I said.

His face flushed with fury.

“She had nowhere to go.” My excuses scrambled together. “She’s my daughter. Willa’s Abby’s sister—”

“Willa Elliott killed my daughter. Because of her, Abby’s gone. Because of her, Abby will never be a teenager or go to college or get married or have children. How dare you bring that murderer here? Get her out of my house.”

“Your house?” My peripheral vision burned in red. “This —” I swung my arms. “This is *our* house. Yours *and* mine. And since you’ve moved out and declared you’ll never live here again, it’s pretty much just mine.” I beat a fist over my heart. “My house.”

“Get her out.” In the past, Rence’s anger would’ve sent me scurrying to obey, but not this time.

I shook my head, slow, determined. “Willa is my daughter. She’s welcome here.” I stared at his face, the color of pickled beets, and felt nothing, in my heart, in my soul. No heart-crushing love, no desolation. Nothing but emptiness.

He strode back to the gate, hesitated, long enough for me to wonder. What would I do if he turned and hurried back, swept me into his arms like he’d done a million times before and quietly, respectfully, lovingly, asked me to send Willa away?

But he inched one step, then another, another, until he disappeared.

I eased into a chair, pulled my knees to my chest, and wrapped my arms around them. My whole body throbbed with

exhaustion, and I didn't have the energy to sob over the injustices in my life—Abby's death, losing Rence's trust, Willa's horrendous childhood.

I had to find the strength to accept Willa as my child. Be the mother she could trust, the mother she needed.

My Abby was dead.

Rence wanted a divorce.

Cold realization crystallized in my core. I only had Willa now. Willa and her baby.

*WILLA*

I SAT BESIDE JACE AT A SIX-FOOT TABLE. A WAIST-HIGH railing separated us from Ivy and Ursula, the store clerk from Allure. I couldn't hear the conversation between Judge Hartley and her bailiff, but I figured the judge complained of the temperature. The courtroom had to be eighty degrees.

An oversized wall clock read eleven twenty, and so far, we had what Jace called opening statements. First, the prosecutor, Naomi Turner, strutted around the courtroom similar to my bail hearing. The same stalking tiger, only this time she wore a skinny black skirt and bright blue blouse. She gave the judge a hundred ways she planned to prove I was guilty.

Then Jace, wearing a gray suit and bright yellow tie, his dreads pulled into a ponytail, stood quiet and respectful in front of the judge and gave a hundred reasons Naomi Turner was full of crap.

I had no idea which attorney won the debate. Judge Hartley's face resembled a blackboard without a single chalk mark.

Yesterday, Jace drew a diagram of the courtroom to give me an idea of what to expect, but he left out the size of the room, a freaking maple tree could grow under this roof. And he didn't mention so many people would be here.

Who were all these people?

As if by magnetic force, my gaze slid left, across the aisle and into the fiery eyes of Abby's father. It didn't take much imagination to see hate rolling off him like a dense black fog.

*That, my little Angel, is one tight-assed dick,* Ryder's voice whispered in my ear as clear as if he were sitting beside me.

*Ryder. Where are you? Why haven't you answered my texts?*

Abby's grandmother, Georgia Abernathy, sat beside Abby's dad. I recognized her from Ivy's Facebook page. Every few seconds, Georgia sniffled then released a whimpering sigh, sending a jolt of dread down my spine. Judge Hartley had to hear the woman crying. I dragged my gaze away from the crying woman and faced the judge.

Ivy leaned over the railing and squeezed my arm. Again. Not that I didn't appreciate the encouragement, but Ivy's continuous need to reassure me made my stomach jumpy.

"Court will take a one-hour recess," Judge Hartley said. "With luck, we'll have air conditioning by the time we reconvene. Court dismissed."

Jace tucked his files into his briefcase. "My assistant's delivering our lunch. We'll stay in the building and avoid the press."

Ivy said something to Ursula, then followed Jace and me through a side door, down a short hall. We stopped off at the

bathroom, then went into a room with four chairs, a square wooden table, and a window with bars.

”How’re you holding up?” Ivy asked.

I pointed to my bulging tummy. “You mean other than the swarm of bees buzzing inside my stomach?”

“You need to eat. Three teaspoons of yogurt and half of a banana aren’t much of a breakfast.”

That was half of a banana more than she’d eaten.

Three short raps, and the door swung open. The female court officer walked in with a white bag labeled Charlie’s Cafe and three bottles of water.

“Hope you’re up for all-the-way cheeseburgers,” Jace said. The smell of charred meat floated in the air.

Ivy opened the food bag, handed Jace a wrapped burger and a paper boat of fries. “You want fries?” she asked me.

I grabbed a bottle of water. “Maybe in a few minutes.”

Jace unwrapped his burger. “Opening statements were about even. So far, so good.”

Ivy pushed a burger and a boat of fries toward me. “You need to eat.”

I picked up a fry to appease her need to mother me. “What happens next?”

“After lunch, the prosecution will begin calling witnesses,” Jace said around a bite of his burger. “They usually begin with the police and layout the scene. The only cop on Naomi’s list is McNab.”

Ivy shoved a few fries around, but none made it into her mouth. “Who are her other witnesses?”

“The coroner, Dr. Sandberg, the young men with Willa at the beach.” Jace opened his file and read from a list, “Daniel Horton, Phillip Faust, Roger Gerrig, and his brother, Zeke Gerrig, who owns the surf shop.”

I matched the names with faces. I barely knew any of them and had no idea what they’d say. Except for maybe Daniel. But other than the half-page letter saying he’d been accepted into the Rhode Island School of Design, I hadn’t seen or spoken to him since the morning he’d brought Jace to my apartment.

“And Sarah Booth.” An edge of irritation wormed its way through Jace’s voice. The same edge he’d had yesterday when I refused to accept Naomi’s plea deal. “I’ve already deposed the young men. Found nothing damaging in their testimonies. Sarah spent most of her deposition off point and belligerent. We’ll see how she handles herself today.”

I rocked forward. “Sarah’s testifying today?”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Jace acted as if Sarah were nothing more than my friend from high school. “I might drag out my cross on Daniel and Zeke and push Sarah’s testimony until tomorrow morning. I want the judge to hear Josephine Rice and Dorothea’s testimony right after I break Sarah on cross.”

“What do you mean break her?” I asked.

“Show the real Sarah Booth. Break her down.”

What Jace didn’t understand was that Sarah wouldn’t stop until she made the judge believe I was a manipulating monster straight from hell. “Sarah’s gonna tell the judge I killed Jim.”

“No. She won’t,” Jace waved off my worry. “I can handle Sarah.

“You don’t know her like I do.”

“I know that a month after Jim died, Sarah spent six weeks in a rehab program for alcoholics and addicts—that’s my wild card.”

“If that’s true, why is Naomi Turner putting Sarah on the stand?” Ivy asked.

“For control. By subpoenaing Sarah, Naomi grabbed the opportunity to coach her testimony,” Jace said. “Make sure she doesn’t mention Jim’s death and risk a mistrial. It’s a smart tactical move.”

Jace dipped his last fry in ketchup. “You and I need to talk body language. The judge watches everything you do. She’s like your mother—” his gaze skittered to Ivy, then back to me. “Or your worst teacher, the one with supersonic hearing and laser eyes in the back of her head. Judge Hartley doesn’t miss anything.”

The bees buzzing in my stomach swarmed.

He wiped his hands on a napkin. “This afternoon, I want you to concentrate on loosening up. This morning you were as stiff as a statue.” He tossed his greasy napkin into the white bag, cleared a spot on the table, and pulled out a file.

“You’re like me at your age.” Ivy sounded surprised. “I’m shy, too.”

I wasn’t shy, every nerve in my body jangled like a screeching siren, like one of the jonesing meth addicts back at the jailhouse. I was way more worried over Ryder deserting me than looking stiff in front of the judge. No matter what Jace said, Sarah had a plan, and she’d bury me.

Ryder was my only hope.

He knew Sarah. He’d known Jim, and what my life had been like back then. And Ryder was way better with words

than me. But I needed to talk to him for another reason. If this trial went wrong, and Ivy ended up with my baby, there were only two people I trusted to keep an eye on things, make sure Ivy did right by my baby girl. Ryder and Mrs. Rice. But Mrs. Rice lived in Wyoming. Ryder lived only a few hours away.

“Taking five deep breaths will help.” Ivy tossed her half-eaten burger into the empty bag.

Jace held up a headshot of Sarah. “When this face gets on the stand, do not look away. Do not give the impression you’re embarrassed or ashamed. Look straight at her.” He pointed at Sarah’s red full lips. “And no matter what words come out of this mouth, do not cringe or lower your head. Sarah Booth is our enemy. We will crush her.”

Crush Sarah? I couldn’t see slow-talking Jace getting the best of chatter-bug Sarah. No way.



*WILLA*

I FOLLOWED JACE AND IVY INTO A MUCH COOLER COURTROOM.

“All rise,” the bailiff said. “The Court of Chatham County is now in session, the Honorable Judge Christina Hartley presiding.”

Judge Hartley entered from her private door. “Is the state ready to proceed, Ms. Turner?”

Naomi Turner rose. “Yes, Your Honor.”

“You may call your first witness.”

“The state calls Detective Donald McNab.”

Detective McNab stepped through the low swinging door. He wore a dark suit, and his gray hair slicked back. He walked to the witness stand and raised his right hand, promised to tell the truth and only the truth.

The bees in my belly morphed into stinging yellow jackets attacking my guts.

Turner brought out a set of photographs, asked the judge if she could introduce them as evidence.

Judge Hartley agreed.

“Permission to show the evidence on the screen, Your Honor.”

Jace jumped to his feet. “Your Honor, blowing these images to poster size is a prejudicial tactic to injure my client. And it is insensitive to the Abernathy family.”

Judge Hartley flipped through photos. “Any reason you have to show these on the screen, Counselor?” she asked Turner.

“It’s easier for the witness to clarify pertinent points, Your Honor.”

The judge frowned, turned to Jace. “I’m sure the Abernathy family has reviewed these by now, Mr. Pratt. Overruled. I will allow your request, Ms. Turner. But I urge you to use good judgment.”

“Yes, Your Honor.” Turner’s appeasing tone didn’t match her conquering eyes.

My heart collapsed to my swollen feet. Turner planned to nail me with these pictures.

The lights dimmed, and Turner clicked a remote.

Abby’s face, as bloated as a puffed jellyfish, flashed. Groans from the galley drifted past me, but all I saw was the angry red line running from Abby’s left cheek to her dark blue lips. Acid slammed into my throat, and I slapped my hand over my mouth.

“Drop your hands—lean back. Breathe,” Jace whispered.

I swallowed, managed to drop my hands, but refused to look up. “I can’t—”

“Eyes straight ahead. Practice Ivy’s deep breathing.” I tried looking at Judge Hartley’s nameplate, but my gaze kept straying to the photos flashing on the screen.

Turner guided McNab through the terrifying night I tried so hard to forget.

*Zone out. Imagine the mountains. Think of the pond down by the old barn. Remember Ryder’s promise to always be by your side. To never let anything bad happen again.*

But nothing doused my fear. Every awful photo Turner posted would bury me deeper and deeper. I had no hope of winning this case. I should’ve followed Ivy’s advice and taken the plea deal.

“Detective, can you tell the court why you believed the defendant orchestrated the death of Abigail Abernathy?”

“Objection.” Jace catapulted to standing. “Your Honor. Please. My client is innocent until Ms. Turner proves otherwise. Which, I might add, will be impossible.”

Judge Hartley tilted her reading glasses down. “Sustained.” She turned to Turner. “And you’ll do well not to try my patience with legal improprieties, Counselor.” She slid her glasses back in place. “I will remind the prosecution and the defense. There is no jury. And I can promise you, grandstanding will ricochet and bite your backsides.”

“Yes, Your Honor.” Turner appeared almost repentant until she turned her back to the judge. Then her sly smile resembled Ryder calling the side pocket before burying the eight ball.

Turner resettled her gaze on McNab. “In your own words, Detective, could you explain why you arrested the defendant?”

“Following protocol, I conducted a background search on the four teens who were with Abigail Abernathy on the night

of her death.” McNab sat in the witness chair soldier-straight, eyes straight ahead, his voice sounded like one of those automated assistants on a cell phone.

“And what were the results of your search?”

“Nothing of consequence on the three men, but the defendant, Willa Elliott, had a sealed juvenile record and deserved further scrutiny. So, I dug a little deeper.”

“That’s very interesting.” Turner was faking surprise, but she knew every last detail of my juvie record. By now, everyone did, even the judge. “And what did you find?” Turner asked.

McNab removed a black notebook from his pocket, flipped a page. “The defendant arrived in Savannah on June twentieth. By nine-thirty the next morning she’d secured employment with the summer tennis camp Abigail Abernathy attended.”

“And the defendant’s employment appeared too coincidental?” Turner asked, her voice friendly, next-door gossipy.

Jace pushed out of his seat. “Objection. The prosecution is leading the witness.”

“Sustained. Counselors.” The judge glared at Turner, then turned her steely eyes on Jace. “Let’s all save time and agree that I’m abundantly clear on the law—federal and state. Move this along.”

“I’ll rephrase, Your Honor.” Turner walked closer to McNab.

“Don’t bother, Ms. Turner.” Judge Hartley waved Turner back to her seat. She turned to McNab. “Address the court, in the same manner you report to your commanding officer. And spare me any unnecessary adjectives.”

McNab referred to his notes. I'd give every penny in my savings account to see inside his black book.

"I found the defendant's behavior suspect," McNab said. "Her actions seemed manufactured, and too coincidental. As I said, I felt they deserved closer scrutiny. I analyzed footage from security cameras located between the Abernathy home and Forsyth Park's tennis courts, and confirmed on the morning the defendant secured employment, she followed Mia Johnson, the Abernathy's nanny, and Abigail Abernathy to the tennis camp."

"Did the defendant converse with the nanny?" Turner asked.

"It didn't appear she did. We checked..." McNab thumbed through his black book. "Eight cameras in all. Verified the defendant remained a few yards behind the nanny and the victim from the corner of Jones Street, through Forsyth Park, and into the tennis complex."

"Leading you to suspect...?"

"Objection."

Judge Hartley pulled her glasses halfway down her nose, shot Jace a-you're-stomping-on-my-last-nerve look.

"Your Honor, the prosecution is—"

"Mr. Pratt, do I need to remind you that you opted against a jury?" She pointed at the empty jury box. "And I know grandstanding when I see it. I also know what information is relevant. Now allow this testimony to move forward, or we'll be here for the next month."

She turned back to McNab. "You may continue."

McNab hesitated a second, then glanced down at his notes. “The defendant’s action led me to suspect she had an ulterior motive to acquire the tennis counselor position.”

He made my plan to spend time with Abby seem ugly and dark. Once Sarah added her bullshit...

The unmistakable clanging of a cell door reverberated through me. This judge would never in a million years set me free.

*WILLA*

TURNER WALKED TO THE WITNESS STAND. “DETECTIVE McNab, did you locate other evidence to support the second-degree murder charge against the defendant?”

An underwater silence floated in the courtroom, and I braced for the inevitable hit. But what was it? What had I done that would make this cop think I’d purposely harmed Abby?

“Yes,” McNab said. “Photos on the defendant’s phone.”

I mentally flipped through the photos on my phone—a few selfies, shots of the other foster kids, my friends at graduation. Some pictures of Ivy and Abby. Nothing shocking. I had a couple of swimsuit photos. Nothing even close to sexting like most of the kids played around with. Nothing that would bury me with the judge.

“Your Honor.” Turner opened a file. “Permission to introduce twenty photographs into evidence and display them on the screen.” She handed a stack of prints to the judge, another to Jace.

Jace inhaled a slow breath—not the relaxing kind. The kind you sucked in right before a fist slammed into your gut.

I leaned over his shoulder, recognized a shot of Ivy. I couldn't make any sense of these photos wiggling out Jace. But my gut said Tiger Lady held a trick under her bright blue sleeve.

Judge Hartley handed the photos to the bailiff. “Go ahead.”

Turner delivered a stack to McNab. “Can you confirm these are the images found on the defendant's phone?”

McNab turned the photos over, sifted through. “Yes, these are the images.”

“Were you able to determine their origin?” The lights dimmed, and Turner clicked on the first photograph. A face shot of Ivy laughing.

McNab stretched to look at the screen. “I can confirm the photos were downloaded from Ivy Abernathy's Facebook page.”

Turner clicked through eight shots. Most were shots of Ivy and Abby, but a few included Abby's dad. Then Turner started on the side-by-side comparisons I'd played around with comparing my facial similarities with Ivy's. That didn't seem like a big deal. Everyone played around with photoshop.

Enlarged, the photos only made Ivy and me look even more alike. Nothing the news and the reporter for the Savannah paper hadn't already pointed out. What was I missing? These photographs didn't make me look guilty or crazy—nothing more than maybe a little curious.

Turner paused on a photo of Abby blowing out five candles on a birthday cake. “And this photograph also came



from Mrs. Abernathy's Facebook page?"

"Yes."

"And this?" She clicked.

Abby's squinting eyes filled the screen.

I'd enlarged the photo months before I left Wyoming. Before I'd met Abby. I only wanted to see if Abby's eyes were the same green as her mom's, the same green as mine. But I hadn't been able to tell because Abby had smiled too big, scrunched her face too tight to see her eye color.

One afternoon back in Wyoming, I showed my friend Becky the photos. Becky was the only person I told about Ivy and Abby besides Mrs. Rice and Dorothea. Becky used photoshop to draw a red circle around Abby's eyes and said, "This girl's eyes are the same shape as yours. See?" She drew another darker, bolder circle to make her point. "This kid has to be your sister."

But now, on the screen, the sweet picture of Abby blowing out her candles looked distorted and made Becky's red circles seemed grotesque and ugly.

"Can you explain to the judge why you found some of these photos disturbing?"

"Objection. Your Honor, the prosecutor is leading the witness. Again," Jace said.

"Sustained." The judge removed her glasses and rubbed her nose. "Detective, give me your rundown report."

"Willa Elliott arrived in Savannah. Six hours later, she visited Ivy Abernathy's shop but chose not to approach her biological mother. The next day she secured employment with

the tennis camp Abigail Abernathy attended. The following day, she began her daily visit to the Abernathy home.”

Turner hurriedly clicked through seven photos of me; one standing in Ivy’s yard, another looking into her dining room window, a couple of me sitting in the rocking chair on her back porch, a couple of me peering through the french doors that lead into her kitchen and breakfast room. Who took these pictures? A neighbor?

“What’s the origin of these photos?” Judge Hartley asked.

“The Abernathy’s outside security cameras.”

My mouth went dry, and my heart used my chest-wall as a backboard. I’d never considered Ivy would have security cameras. But stores had them. Schools had them. Banks had them. I should’ve figured fancy houses would have them. Why hadn’t Ivy mentioned this already, asked me about it? I turned.

Her lips were ringed in white, and she stared in Rence’s direction. I was pretty sure Ivy hadn’t known about the photos.

Jace was either a good faker or, he wasn’t concerned. It was if he’d known and didn’t think the photos were a big deal. But me trespassing had to be important or else why had McNab and Turner made such a big deal of showing the photos.

“How long did the defendant remain on the Abernathy’s property?” The judge asked.

“Fifteen to twenty minutes on average.”

“Anything else?”

McNab referred to his book again. “Within days of securing her job as a tennis instructor at the victim’s summer

camp, the defendant befriended Mia Johansen, the Abernathy's nanny. And the tennis coach." He thumbed a page in his book. "A Mrs. Bridget Overstreet. Mrs. Overstreet reported the defendant devoted the majority of her free time to Abigail Abernathy. Willa Elliott also Google mapped the Abernathy residence and saved images related to the Abernathy family, including the Abernathy home's floor plan.

A roar rushed my ears. Detective McNab and Naomi Turner were painting me as some kind of psycho. But nothing, not one thing McNab said, was a lie or an exaggeration. Every word he'd said in his clear slow-talking way was true.

I'd been too nervous approaching Ivy the first afternoon I arrived in Savannah. Then the next morning, I'd watched Ivy climb into a limo with three suitcases and drive away. And I *had* followed Mia and Abby to the park, then tricked my way into a job, lying about needing service hours for my scholarship. And McNab was right. I had saved tons of pictures of Ivy and her family. Sneaked around her side garden, sat in her wicker rocker on her pack porch. I had pretended I lived there, that I belonged.

"In short," McNab said, "the defendant exhibited what we consider warning signs of a stalker. Trailing, following, shadowing, befriending under false pretenses. Statistics reveal stalkers often harbor ulterior motives."

"Objection." Jace stood. "Your Honor, this is an outrageous assumption."

"Your Honor," Turner's voice overrode Jace's. "The detective is an expert witness in this field. He's testifying strictly on the merits of why he delved into the defendant's past and built his case."

"Overruled."

Judge Hartley's thick-framed black glasses covered her eyes, and I couldn't tell by her expression if Hartley bought the bunk McNab pedaled.

Jace bumped my shoulder with his. "Quit rocking."

Turner strode to a table marked Exhibits. She searched in a box and pulled out a child's lifejacket.

I tumbled back to the last time I'd seen the pink and blue vest—to the beach. Daniel falling to his knees beside me, tears streaming down his face. "I should've never insisted that you take Abby on the Jet Ski."

Jace gripped my knee. "Don't. Look. Down."

Tiger Lady dangled the jacket from her index finger. "Is this the life preserver Abigail Abernathy wore when she washed ashore?"

"No."

"No?" Turner faced Jace. Her raised brow screamed *Gotcha*.

My chest tightened, and I couldn't breathe. What was she going to say now?

"Abigail Abernathy wasn't wearing a life preserver when her body came ashore. The jacket washed up half-mile south of the body."

"Is this the jacket the defendant rented for the victim to wear?"

Jace half-rose and the judge waved him down. "This isn't new information, Counselor," Judge Hartley said. "We've already heard from the owner of the surf shop that he rented this jacket to the defendant. Get to your point, Ms. Turner."

Tiger Lady appeared unfazed by the judge's scolding. "Were you able to determine if Abigail wore the jacket while jet skiing with the defendant?"

"Several witnesses confirmed seeing the victim wearing the jacket," McNab said.

The judge leaned over her bench. "I'll need an eyewitness or a stipulation, Ms. Turner."

"The defense stipulates Abigail Abernathy wore the jacket," Jace said, in the same tone the judge used when she pulled her glasses down her nose and pinned someone with a glare.

"The prosecution stipulates the victim wore the jacket, Your Honor," Turner said. "But not that the jacket remained fastened."

Judge Hartley nodded. "Continue."

Turner turned back to McNab. "Was the jacket fastened when it washed ashore?"

"No. The clasps were open."

"All three?"

"Yes."

No. That couldn't be right. I'd fastened Abby into the jacket. Double-checked the snaps. "I clipped them." I whirled and faced Ivy. "I buckled Abby's lifejacket. I swear, I did."

Jace yanked my arm. "Sit."

Ivy's empty stare shot a surge of adrenaline into my legs, and I leaned over the railing. "I clipped Abby into her jacket."

"Counselor. Control your client," Judge Hartley's voice boomed over the courtroom.

“Sit down.” Jace shoved me back into my chair. “And don’t move.”

“I have no more questions for this witness.” Turner pranced back to her seat. “Your witness.”

I bent at the waist. “I’m gonna be sick.” I pushed the back of my hand against my mouth, bile slid up my throat and onto my tongue.

Jace stood. “I have no questions for this witness, Your Honor. And my client requests a brief recess.”

“Very well. We’ll reconvene at three o’clock.” Judge Hartley rapped her gavel, the sound as hollow and empty as my future.

*IVY*

I LEANED OVER THE COURTROOM RAILING AND TAPPED JACE'S shoulder. "I want to talk to you about McNab's testimony before Willa returns from the bathroom."

"Give me a minute. I need to fact-check something." He hurried through a side door leading into an area marked PRIVATE.

"Have you no shame?" Georgia stopped at the end of my row. Her voice mirroring her accusing brown eyes. "How can you sit here and support Abby's killer?"

For a second, all I could do was stare at my mother-in-law. My heart beating so hard I wondered if I would be sick. "Abby wasn't murdered. Her death was an accident." My confident voice didn't betray the questions hovering on the edge of my mind.

"You heard the detective's testimony. That monster..." Georgia pointed at Willa's chair, "purposely left Abby's lifejacket unfastened. She found a way to get rid of Abby."

Heat poured off my skin, and I stood ready for battle. Then I looked at Georgia, really looked. I saw her puffy eyes and the dark circles underneath, and I remembered her age.

I squashed my initial instinct to lash out at her injustice against Willa. “A tragedy stole Abby from our lives.” I forced myself to swallow and fought the tremble in my voice. “We’re all hurting. My pain for Abby, like yours, aches and clings to my heart with every breath I inhale. Blaming Willa won’t bring Abby back to us.”

Rence crowded into our conversation, the agony of loss written in the creases of his face. “Come, Mother.” He escorted her down the aisle.

Jace appeared back through the side door and lowered me into my seat. “Are you okay? You look flushed.”

I clasped my hands in my lap, attempted to regain my wits.

“What did you want to talk to me about?”

I pushed Georgia and Rence from my mind and refocused on Willa and the trial. “Why didn’t you cross-examine McNab?”

“He didn’t say anything contradictory. It was the smarter move to get him off the stand.”

“Everything the detective said damaged Willa, and you countered nothing.”

“This isn’t a jury trial. The best defense for Willa is not to try the judge’s patience—”

“But what about storm surge?” My mind stretched for the words to make Jace understand Naomi was winning. “The surge explains Abby’s unclasped lifejacket.”



“Not according to the manufacturer’s safety director.” I caught the worry in his tone. “The magnitude of the storm surge logged on July 9th wasn’t sufficient to open the clasps on Abby’s lifejacket.”

Willa walked through the side door.

Jace rose, straightened his tie, and buttoned his jacket. “Could you remind Willa not to talk to you when court is in session. Her histrionics at the end of McNab’s testimony came close to having her removed. Judge Hartley won’t overlook another outburst.”

Willa sat. Her eyes red and puffy. “I swear to you, I buckled Abby’s jacket.”

“Okay.” My brain still working to decipher Jace’s defense strategy, the strength of the storm.

“You believe me, right?”

Willa’s tone begged for reassurance, but I couldn’t shake Jace’s conversation with the manufacturer of the life vest. I’d always blamed the storm surge for Abby’s jacket coming off.

“I even rechecked Abby’s snaps when she complained her jacket was too tight.” Willa’s voice was fast closing in on panic. “I told her. I explained the vest was like wearing a car’s seat belt. She couldn’t ride the Jet Ski without the jacket being fastened tight.”

Jace poked his head between us. “Did Daniel hear you tell Abby that?”

Willa turned to Jace. “What?”

“Did Daniel hear you tell Abby she had to wear the jacket or she couldn’t ride on the Jet Ski?”

“No.” New tears slid over Willa’s cheeks. “Daniel had gone off with his friends.” She turned back to me. “But I swear, I buckled her in tight.”

The conversation between Willa and Jace faded, and memories crowded in.

*“Stop fiddling with the buckle, Abby. You have to wear a seat belt.”*

“Ivy.” Willa teetered further over the rail, her eyes pleaded for understanding. “I promise you. I fastened Abby’s jacket.”

I touched her pale cheek. “Don’t worry. Everything will be fine.” I whispered my lie. Nothing, not one thing, was fine.

Ursula slipped in and sat beside me. I looked past her and found Rence across the aisle, sitting ramrod straight, face forward, his demeanor inflexible. Had he known the importance of the unfastened vest to McNab’s case? Probably. He called McNab for weekly updates.

“All rise.” The bailiff’s voice. “The Court of Chatham County is now in session—”

I needed to talk to Rence. Or McNab. Or the judge. Somebody. Jace would know what to do. I leaned over the rail and nudged Jace’s shoulder. “I need to talk to you.”

He shook his head. “Not now.” He pointed to the judge’s bench, then turned his back.

Judge Hartley raised a brow at Jace, swept her gaze over Willa, then met my gaze. She acknowledged me with a slight incline of her head.

I had no idea what was behind the judge’s resolute signal. If it was meant to give comfort, it was a colossal failure.

“Ms. Turner,” Judge Hartley said, “you may call your next witness.”

*IVY*

I KEPT MY GAZE PINNED ON RENCE AS IF BY TELEPATHIC communication, I could force him to turn in my direction. He shifted, smoothed his jacket lapel, but didn't look my way.

“The state calls Sarah Booth,” Naomi Turner said.

A medium-tall plump brunette strode through the swinging door and walked to the witness stand. She wore a black and white silk top and white ankle pants. If her top had been two inches longer and her pants one size larger, she'd have hit a fashion bullseye.

She scanned the room with squinted eyes. She had one of those mouths that appeared overstuffed, like a bulging suitcase of teeth that wouldn't quite close. Her gaze hesitated on Willa, then shifted to Naomi Turner. Sarah squared her shoulders and, without being asked, raised her right hand.

The bailiff swore-in his overeager witness.

I didn't like Sarah Booth on sight.

Naomi Turner walked toward the witness stand. Her black skirt and cobalt blue blouse appeared perfectly tailored for her

fit frame. “State your name for the record.”

Sarah pushed her curly hair behind one ear, then primped it up a couple of inches. “Sarah Jane Booth.”

“May I call you Sarah?” Turner said, giving the impression this was the first conversation the two had enjoyed.

“Sure.”

“Sarah, can you explain to the court how you know the defendant, Willa Elliott?”

“She was my foster child for seven years.”

“So you must know the defendant very well. “

Sarah’s half-snort, half-laugh came across as harsh and ungenerous. ”I’d say I know her better than most anyone else you could talk to. When she came to live with me, she was scared of her shadow. Why I had—”

“How old?” Turner cut in. “How old was the defendant when she came to live with you?”

“Seven or eight.”

“And she lived with you until she was how old?”

“Until her sophomore year in high school. Maybe fifteen, I can’t remember. Old enough to know how to get what she wanted.”

Based on Josie Rice’s assessment, no one in Sarah’s orbit got anything but her leftovers. So far, I had no reason to think otherwise.

“Did the defendant have boyfriends?”

“Just the one.” Sarah rocked her head back, slung her long hair over her shoulder in what looked to be a prolonged practiced move. “She dated Ryder Thornton. He started

sniffing around when Willa turned thirteen. Those two were like two peas in a pod riding around town on his Harley—”

“So, Willa and Ryder were close?”

“Thicker than thieves.” Sarah’s lips tightened.

“Did Ryder have a pet name for Willa?” Turner asked.

“Objection.” Jace leaped from his seat. “Relevance, Your Honor. A pet name in high school is hardly an issue in this case. The prosecutor’s line of questions seems like a fishing expedition.”

“If you’ll allow me leeway, Your Honor, my question will speak to the defendant’s character.”

Judge Hartley frowned. “Overruled. But...” She removed her glasses and fixed Naomi with a freezing stare. “Get to your point, Counselor.”

“Thank you, Your Honor.” Naomi shifted her butt, moved an inch, and shifted again. She resembled a woman trying to find comfort on a man’s bicycle seat.

“What was Ryder Thornton’s nickname for Willa?” Turner asked.

“Angel.”

“Angel?” Turner’s voice rose in syrupy fake surprise.

“Ryder said Willa’s face was so angelic she could convince anyone of anything. And that sure as hell proved true.”

The hairs on my neck bristled.

Judge Hartley leaned toward Sarah. “There will be no swearing in my courtroom.”

“Sorry, ma’am.” Sarah turned back to Naomi. “Ryder even tattooed an angel with Willa’s face on his arm.”

I dragged my gaze from Sarah to Jace. Surely something in this back and forth qualified as an objection. Jace's face appeared emotionless, but he clutched his pen like a sword.

"The angel's naked, too." Sarah's nasal tone whined. "Well, except for her long hair wrapped around her private parts. Obscene if you ask me."

Judge Hartley waved her hand at Turner. "Move this along, Ms. Turner."

Sarah pointed at Willa. "That girl's a liar. Always has been. And leopards don't change their spots."

My dislike of Sarah Booth careened into pure, unadulterated loathing. *Sarah got a babysitter and dishwasher in Willa*, Josie had said. After seeing Sarah in action, Josie's opinion had the unmistakable ring of truth.

"No further questions for this witness." Turner walked back to the prosecution table

Jace pushed away from the defense table and walked to the witness stand. "Ms. Booth, was Willa Elliott your only foster child?"

"No. I had another girl, Sheila. She was my Jillian's age."

"So Sheila is younger or older than Willa?"

"Younger by five years."

"That would make Sheila thirteen?"

"That's right."

"Does Sheila still live with you?"

"No."

"Really? Why not?" Jace's tone now carried the syrupy surprise.

Sarah looked at Willa, and her face transformed into spite, then a blaze of hate. “I took my husband’s death hard. I just couldn’t handle so many kids.”

Willa hunched over. *No. Sit straight. Don’t let the likes of Sarah Booth color your truths.*

“So you voluntarily gave Sheila back to the State of Wyoming?” Jace raised his palm in a stop signal. “And before you answer, I should tell you. I have a sworn statement from Sheila’s social worker, Ms. Theresa Rowe. And if necessary, Ms. Rowe’s willing to testify.”

Sarah squirmed, checked her nails. *Here comes another twisted truth.* “After my husband died, I fell apart.”

I scanned the judge’s face. Her expression was stoic and flat. Surely, she discounted Sarah’s now teary voice as fake.

“Isn’t it true, Ms. Booth, you fell apart before your husband died? Isn’t it true the state threatened to remove Sheila and Willa from your home, as well as your two biological children, months before your husband died?”

Sarah sucked in a breath, placed a perfectly manicured hand over her heart.

I looked at Naomi Turner, certain she’d object to Jace’s questions. Her face appeared unruffled as if nothing Jace said worried her.

“Ms. Booth, didn’t you go to rehab after the state deemed you an unfit mother?” Jace asked.

Sarah’s face blushed to blood red. Her hand dropped into her lap. “I finished rehab, and I got my kids back. I hold down a full-time job at Cole’s SuperMart.” With each defensive answer, Sarah dropped on the credible witness barometer. The tension knotting my neck eased.



“Holding a permanent job is commendable.” Jace’s tone held not one whiff of condescension. “But when Willa lived with you, that wasn’t the case, was it?”

Now it was Sarah staring at her hands, like a kid being forced to admit a lie.

Willa seemed to remember Jace’s instructions, raised her head, and stared at Sarah. But her shoulders remained bowed in, and her profiled cheek as pale as a winter’s snowflake.

“Isn’t it true when Willa lived in your house, your only income derived from fostering children? And when your husband was convicted of possession of a controlled substance and placed on probation, your status as a foster parent was in jeopardy?”

Willa had been forced to live in a foster home with a pedophile drug dealer. Guilt and shock claimed equal measure in my heart.

Sarah’s fingers wrapped around the railing as if preparing to hurdle her body over. “Jim’s arrest was a giant misunderstanding.”

“Yes. I’m sure that was the case.” Jace walked to the defense table and gathered a stack of papers. “Did you and your husband drink alcohol, Ms. Booth?”

“Objection.” Naomi Turner didn’t bother to rise. “Your Honor, Ms. Booth isn’t on trial.”

“The prosecution introduced Ms. Booth as a character witness against the defendant. Therefore Ms. Booth’s character is relevant, Your Honor.” A tempered irritation filtered through Jace’s tone.

“Sustained,” Judge Hartley said. “The witness will answer the question.”

Sarah's hands remained locked on the railing. She looked from the judge to Naomi. Jace moved into her line of vision.

"Did you and your husband drink alcohol?" he asked.

Sarah tried peeking around Jace to Naomi.

Jace shifted left. "The judge ordered you to answer my question, Ms. Booth."

Sarah lifted her chin. "We drank some."

"Every day?"

Her chin drifted down.

"Yes or no, Ms. Booth."

"Maybe."

"I'll take that as a yes." Jace walked back to the defense table, opened a file, and looked over a sheet of paper. "Isn't it true the police were called to your home six times in four months for domestic disturbances?"

Sarah's eyes flashed fire, and she pointed at Willa. "Because of her."

Jace scanned the papers in his hand and slow-walked toward Sara. "Yes, that seems to be true. Willa Elliott is mentioned in every Sweetwater County domestic disturbance logged for your residence."

The statement dangled in echoing silence.

"Willa's listed as the underage child placing the 911 calls from your home phone. And on every one of the complaints, the responding officer noted in their report that you, Ms. Booth, were, and I quote, intoxicated, or, inebriated, and one officer described you as staggering drunk."

Sarah's eyes burned, but her mouth remained fastened.

“Your husband, it seemed, was only plastered half of those times.” Jace walked back to the edge of the witness box. His expression bland, as if destroying Sarah’s integrity brought him no pleasure.

“You know what I think, Ms. Booth? I think it’s easier to trash the girl who knows all your dirty little secrets than to take responsibility for your messed-up life.”

“Objection.” Naomi jumped up so fast her laptop skidded across the table. “Is there a question?”

Jace waved his hand. “I withdraw my question, Your Honor.”

“What question?” Turner muttered.

“I have nothing more for this witness,” Jace added.

The judge dismissed her, and Sarah bounded off the stand like a kid let out of detention.

I marveled that Willa had made it through living seven years in the Booth household.

“Ms. Turner, you may call your next witness,” Judge Hartley said.

“The State rests, Your Honor.”

“In that case, we’ll reconvene at nine o’clock tomorrow morning.” Judge Hartley rapped her gavel.

Jace collected his files, stuffed them into his briefcase. “My assistant texted. Television reporters are camped outside the courthouse. She’s bringing my car to the back door. I’ll drive you to your car.”

“No,” Ursula said. “The press will spot her in the parking lot and swarm like locusts. Give me your keys, Ivy. I’ll bring

your car to the back door.”

“That is a better idea,” Jace said.

Rence and Georgia filed past, his mother leaning on him for support. My heart softened with worry as she shuffled by. Nothing good would come from this trial. I had to talk to Rence, but alone.

Jace helped Willa to her feet. Her slumped posture and pale skin verifying the day had sucked the last of her energy.

“I’ll see you at my house in twenty minutes,” I said.

“I’ll drop Willa off,” Jace said, “but I can’t stay. My son has a little league game tonight.”

“You need to plan on staying for a few minutes.” I tried lightening my voice and not add fuel to today’s drama, but my voice came out high and strung as tight as my nerves. “We have to talk.”

*WILLA*

I WALKED THROUGH IVY'S HOUSE, ROOM BY ROOM, SEARCHING for a quiet spot to text Ryder. No matter how many warnings I'd issued to my heart, I wanted to connect with him.

I wanted to tell him about Sarah's testimony. And I wanted to ask him if he'd keep an eye on my little girl if the trial went bad and the judge convicted me tomorrow.

I passed through the ginormous gourmet kitchen with its eight-burner stove, a refrigerator the size of the cooler at Wings & Things, and miles of gray stone countertops.

Two blonde women who could be twins, wearing jeans and TEATIME CATERING t-shirts, crisscrossed from the breakfast room to the bar piling little round pies and raw vegetables onto trays. Another younger, chubby brunette ladled a steaming, shrimpy smelling liquid into a copper urn. The smell rolled my stomach.

Ivy had invited Mrs. Rice and Dorothea for dinner, then hired caterers to cook the meal. Is that how rich people entertained company?

Jace sat at the dining table, scowling into his phone. He'd slung his jacket over a chair and loosened his tie.

"I'll be in my room for a few minutes," I said.

He looked up, and his frown smoothed away. "You okay?"

"Just tired."

His gaze drifted down, his attention already back on his phone.

I lumbered up the stairs, paused on the landing to catch my breath, and closed the door to my dreamy sherbet getaway. The entire bedroom—the bedspread, pillows, the wallpaper, the drapes—were all soft, pale colors of raspberry, orange, and lime. Even the cushy plaid chair looked cool and crisp. I felt like an imposter in this room. Like I'd sneaked into someone else's life, slipped on their skin, but it didn't fit right. Too tight. Too smothering. Too everything.

Last night, I'd fallen asleep in Ivy's comfy plaid chair staring at the stars, obsessing over the trial, wondering what it'd be like to have my baby while in prison, which made me think of Ryder.

Ryder hadn't returned any of my texts—not even a thumbs up when I sent a message that the judge approved me moving in with Ivy or when I texted that my nightmares were escalating and I needed to talk to him. Not even a heart when I typed out a message admitting I'd always love him and pushed send before my head told me to hit delete.

*Leave him alone. Let him have his new world with his new girl.*

I stood in front of the mirror over the dresser and considered piling my hair on top of my head, adding some

blush and lip gloss. But my legs ached, and the bed, the comforter, the soft pillows, coaxed me with a nap.

I plopped on the mattress. My lean muscular body had slowly faded and left behind a ten-pound ball that kicked, poked, and prodded me from the inside. I lay flat on my back, rubbed my stomach to put my soccer-ball kicking baby girl back to sleep, and played my what-if game.

What if I'd never come to Savannah?

What if I'd never sent my DNA to Ancestry.com?

What if I hadn't hooked up with the cowboy in a sad attempt to get the feel of Ryder off my skin, the taste of him out of the inside of my lips?

What if, what if, what if.

Piped-in music drifted out of two overhead speakers. The relaxing song seemed familiar, something I remembered from tenth-grade music class, maybe Mozart or Beethoven. I rolled on my side and closed my eyes. Ten minutes, then I'd get up and face all the disappointed faces.

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After my nap, I found Jace and Ivy downstairs, huddled at the dining room table.

Ivy's face switched from a worried frown into a pretend-smile. "Willa, come join us. Josie and Dorothea called, they won't be here for another hour. That actually works out better because I need to talk to you."

Ivy's phony smile and over-happy voice made my heart fidgety. I caught the odor of shrimp from the chafing dish on the sideboard and walked to the far side of the table.

Jace rubbed the back of his neck. He did that when he wanted to talk about something important. “Ivy and I were just discussing Abby’s life vest.”

I pulled out the chair beside Ivy. “I swear, I snapped Abby’s clips. I tested—”

“I believe you.”

“You believe me?” I hunted for the belief in Ivy’s face, in her downturned eyes, in her trembling mouth. Real belief, not just her regular reluctant acceptance.

Ivy picked up a paper red napkin from a stack on the corner of the table “I’m sure you snapped Abby’s clasps.” She twisted the napkin between her fingers. “I suspect Abby unbuckled her lifejacket.”

*Abby unbuckled it?* ”Why would she? Why do you say that?”

“Because Abby couldn’t stand anything binding or tight around chest and waist.” Ivy dropped the napkin, pressed her hand to her lips, and hummed a quiet moan. Like her throat had clogged and she was trying to clear it.

My brain exploded with questions. “But I don’t understand —”

“This is a huge break for our case,” Jace’s eyes sparkled, and he practically bounced in his seat.

Ivy took my hand in hers. “I’m so sorry I didn’t make this connection earlier. But it wasn’t until today when McNab mentioned the life jacket again, and you explained how Abby complained it was too tight, that everything clicked.”

“What clicked?”



“Abby was the only kid I knew who could unfasten her car seat at two years old. She never stayed buckled into a regular seatbelt, no matter how much Rence and I scolded or threatened.” Ivy spoke so fast it was hard to keep up.

“She hated dresses with sashes that tied around her waist. Threw a fit over wearing anything binding, like her heavy winter coat over a sweater.” She stopped, shook her head. “I didn’t put it together. If I’d just been clear-headed when McNab came to the house that first afternoon. But with the funeral, and I’d taken a Valium, and a sleeping pill on the plane ... and I’d had a glass, maybe two glasses, of wine.”

What did Ivy’s sleeping pills and wine have to do with Abby?

She dropped my hand. Her expression turned sad, as if she might cry. “I should’ve made the connection. But I didn’t know McNab would attach so much weight to the life vest. Rence was the police contact. He’s spoken with McNab at least once a week since Abby died.”

I wrapped my fingers around Ivy’s arm, pressed hard and made her look at me. “But I buckled Abby’s vest. I swear to you, I did. It was completely snapped.”

“If the vest were tight, when you weren’t looking, Abby would’ve unfastened the clips.”

My mind spun like a merry-go-round gone wrong. Did I check Abby’s lifejacket during the ride? I didn’t. She sat behind me, and I had no clear view of her or her lifejacket.

My body turned as light as a helium balloon, all air, nothing floating inside but a giddy relief that left a warm, sugary lemon taste on my tongue.

“—We ended up using duct tape to keep the locks secure, or at least I did.” Ivy was still explaining. But it didn’t matter anymore. I hadn’t killed Abby. It wasn’t my fault. I wouldn’t go to prison for twenty years.

“Rence used tie wraps to keep her fastened in her seatbelt,” Ivy said.

“Your husband should be the one to testify.” Jace’s voice turned lawyerly, like in court. “He has to be the one to admit Abby abhorred seat belts or anything tight around her.” He checked his phone, shoved a file into his briefcase.

“Why can’t I do it?” Ivy’s voice filled with fear or something close to it.

“The judge will expect you to defend Willa because she’s your daughter. But Abby’s father sits behind the prosecutor, sending a clear message he wants Willa convicted. His testimony will hold more weight.”

“Rence won’t agree to testify on Willa’s behalf.” Ivy’s absolute tone doused the light and airy hope inside me.

“How about your nanny, Mia,” Jace asked. “Did she know about Abby’s tendency to unbuckle her restraints? Her dislike of tight clothing?”

“Yes. Mia knew. It’s the reason we didn’t allow Mia to drive Abby anywhere. She walked her to school every day.”

“Then we’ll subpoena Mia.” Jace stood.

Ivy shook her head. “Mia’s in Germany, staying with family for a few months.”

Jace sat back down, drummed his fingers on the table. “I could ask for a postponement, enough time for her to fly back.

But Naomi will object. And Hartley won't rule in our favor because you and your husband can testify to the same facts."

"What can we do?" Ivy asked.

"Your husband has to testify." Jace picked up his briefcase again. "And he needs to be convincing."

Ivy fiddled with her wedding ring, but Jace stared her down, and she finally nodded. "Sure, I'll ask him." She bit her bottom lip and looked anything but sure. "I'll beg him if necessary, but—"

"Rence is crucial for an acquittal." Jace hesitated in the doorway. "Call him tonight. If he refuses, text me. I'll petition the judge and label him an uncooperative witness."

"Rence is stubborn." By Ivy's tone, I knew she didn't have much faith in persuading her husband of anything. "If you force him into testifying, his attitude could jeopardize us with the judge."

"Then, it's up to you to convince him." Jace checked his watch again. "I have to go."

Jace left, but I couldn't quiet the fear screeching like an owl in my head. "Your husband, he won't lie about Abby unbuckling herself, will he?"

"I'll figure it out. I'll find a way to make him testify and admit to the truth." Ivy placed her palm on top of my stomach. "I promise. I won't let you or this baby down."

Ivy's eyes looked so honest and sincere, but I remembered Abby's dad and his fiery stare, the lines on his face that spelled revenge. Rence Abernathy wanted nothing more than for me to pay for Abby's death.

*IVY*

JOSIE RICE AND DOROTHEA KEENE STEPPED INTO MY FOYER, and Willa dove into Josie's arms. "I'm having a girl."

Josie hugged Willa, then me. She looked different today, more stately in black pants and a plain buttoned-down white blouse. Her hair, a mass of soft curls, framed her angular face and softened her simple style.

Dorothea wore a bright orange, ankle-length sundress. Her long dark curls hidden under an intricately braided turban of the same color. "Having a baby is a life-changer," Dorothea swept both hands over Willa's belly. "This little one will give you a new perspective on why you wake up every day."

Willa laid her hands over Dorothea's, her eyes gleaming, she had a level of enthusiasm I had never seen from her. "I'm so excited to see you both. Thanks for coming."

I wished for a camera to capture this heartfelt reunion. Willa often mentioned Josie, her admiration for her foster mother evident anytime she spoke Josie's name. But Willa

never spoke of Dorothea, and their warm bond caught me by surprise.

I escorted the group into the living room and settled Josie and Dorothea in the chairs by the window. Willa and I sat across from them on the sofa.

“Have you decided on the baby’s name?” Josie asked. “Family names give a child a good foundation and gift them with a piece of their history.”

“I haven’t picked one yet.” Willa’s cheeks blushed crimson. I suspected her embarrassment came from having no family names to choose from.

I patted her knee. “You still have plenty of time.”

I put aside my unease over my upcoming conversation with Rence and focused on our guests. During dinner, I answered Dorothea’s questions about the history of Savannah and spattered in a few rich tidbits about John Kelso, the notorious antique dealer of *The Garden of Good and Evil* fame.

By dinner’s end, Willa had only consumed two or three bites. Josie pointed to Willa’s still full plate. “I know you don’t like shrimp, but the chicken popover is delicious.”

“I’m not very hungry.” It looked as if the effort to answer took more energy than Willa had to spare.

Josie sipped her glass of chardonnay and considered Willa. “You’re too pale for my taste.”

“She looks like death on a stick,” Dorothea added.

Willa’s day in court had left behind a ring of dark circling her sunken eyes. And her morning energy had long ago disappeared.

“She needs a good night’s rest.” Josie drained the last of her wine. “And after this delicious meal, I could use an after-dinner walk.”

Dorothea pushed away from the last of her praline cheesecake. “Well then, we’ll walk back to our hotel.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “I can call a car.”

“Hotel’s only three blocks,” Josie stood.

“I’m sorry to be a spoiler,” Willa said.

“Come, walk us out.” Dorothea helped Willa to her feet.

Outside, an overcast sky hid the moon, and the only light in my front courtyard filtered from gas lanterns lining Jones Street. Tourists, drawn to the turn-of-the-century ambiance, walked both sides of our road.

Dorothea and Josie flanked Willa and strolled down my walkway. I got the impression that, together, this team of three had conquered more than a few battles.

Willa stopped a few feet from the road. “I’m not allowed to go any further.”

Her obedience, said without complaint, sent heat spiraling down my spine. At eighteen, she should have the spirit of a feisty filly—question authority. Laugh at rules. Dare anyone to hamper her dreams. Instead, this lovely girl waited at the end of my drive, poised on the edge of an empty, bleak future.

Josie pushed Willa’s hair off her forehead and then kissed it. “I like your mama,” she said. “I think you can trust her, the same as you do us.”

Dorothea clamored for her hug, then held Willa at shoulder length. “You need to remember your DNA comes from that woman,” she pointed at me. “Not Sarah Booth, or even Josie.

So you take the traits you want and leave the rest alone, just the same as your girl will do with you.” She eyed me for a second. “You’re lucky you got a good mama, that’s not always the case.”

A sudden overpowering maternal desire to protect Willa filled me. I walked forward and wrapped my arm around her waist.

A ghost-tour trolley rolled to a stop at the Eliza Thompson House. “That’s what we should do, take the midnight ghost tour,” Dorothea said.

Willa laughed, a deep and uninhibited sound, different from the other times she’d loosened up enough to laugh. “If you wanted to see ghosts, you should’ve booked a room at that B&B. Rumor has it a Civil War hero walks the hall at night.”

Josie made a production out of shuddering. “No, thanks.”

Willa and I waved goodbye and waited until Josie and Dorothea were out of sight, then went back into the house. The caterers were packing the last of their supplies, and without Josie’s cheery laugh and Dorothea’s easy banter, the house felt lonely.

“It’s a beautiful night. Would you like to sit outside?” I asked.

“I am kind of antsy. Outside sounds nice.”

I opened the french doors, and we stepped into my walled garden.

Willa circled one of the wicker lounges.

“You want help sitting?”

“Please.” She stretched out her arms.

I eased her into the lounge chair, then busied myself lighting the gas lanterns and watering a few of my wilted plants—a cicada’s chirp mixed with the faint laughter of a party a few houses over.

“If you don’t mind me asking, have you told the father about the baby?” Prying wasn’t my style. I didn’t know much about Willa’s past, but I knew about keeping secrets. Mainly, the way they reared without notice and mowed over years of happiness.

“Josh and I don’t talk. I don’t even know where he is. I only knew him a couple of months.” I didn’t detect any resentment in her voice.

“So, he’s not planning to be part of the baby’s life?” I picked dead leaves from a container of pink begonias.

She didn’t answer, and I looked over.

Her turmoil was visible, not only in her hesitation to answer but in her flushed face and downcast eyes.

I slid a chair close to her lounge. “I’m sorry I pried.”

She plucked at the tassels on her blouse as if they were petals on a daisy—*He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me.* “When I told Josh I’d missed my period, he bolted. Didn’t even text a goodbye. Josh doesn’t want anything to do with me or my baby.”

“He’s young. He could change his mind.” Not that Noah showed any desire to be part of Willa’s life.

She loosened her long braid and finger-combed her hair. A heartbreaking fear filled her face and reminded me of a lost child in a store.



I shoved away my urge to gather her in my arms and assure her I would fix everything. Judge Hartley was the only woman in Willa's world who wielded that kind of power.

The party down the street quieted, and the only sound trickling over the wall was the occasional passing car. I stretched across the side table, switched on the soundbar, and soft jazz drifted from the speaker.

"I'm not sure this is the right time to talk about this," Willa said, "but I wanted to ask you something."

I hauled over a stool and propped up my feet. "You can ask me anything, anytime."

"Why didn't you want me?"

Her voice held hurt, and confusion, and more than a shred of resentment. But what did I expect? I clasped my hands in my lap, pulled in the memories.

"I was fourteen, and Noah, your biological father, was eighteen when I learned I was pregnant with you. I stayed in denial for over two months, by the time I worked up the courage to tell my parents, I was almost twelve weeks."

"That doesn't explain why you gave me away?"

I cringed at the term "gave away." It sounded as if she were a puppy or an old pair of shoes.

"Why didn't you just get an abortion?" Tears sprang in her eyes. Willa didn't want the truth. What she wanted now was the same thing she'd wished for throughout her life, a mother's love. The kind of love she'd never had, but every child deserved.

"An abortion was never discussed. Mom pushed for adoption, and she was adamant Noah and his parents have no

say in my decision. She gave me a long list of reasons I should follow her advice.” The hardball of truth lodged in my throat. “And if I’m honest, I didn’t put up much of a fight.”

Willa’s laser focus unnerved me. I wiped perspiration from my lip, smoothed my blouse. “I believed adoption meant you’d live in a happy, loving home with a family who cherished you.” My voice trembled, and I swallowed back tears. “I’m so incredibly sorry that wasn’t the life you lived.”

“You never checked on me?”

“No.” And today my answer seemed incredibly cruel. How could I just assume all was as promised without making absolutely certain my child was in a loving home. “I wasn’t given information about your adoptive family.”

“Did you ask? Your dad, he was a judge, right? Did you ask him for my adoptive parent’s name?”

“No.”

“You just forgot all about me.”

“I never forgot you. Not for one day.” I pushed past my guilty lie. Admitting to my selfish decision to put the memory of Willa out of my mind would only hurt her more. I was through inflicting pain. And if a lie made her feel valued, then I’d lie. “I promise you, I never forgot about you. Ever.”

“I just don’t understand how a mother can give one child this kind of life.” She swept her arms wide, encompassing my house. “And not care what happened to her first baby.”

She lowered her gaze, settled her hands on her stomach, but didn’t say more.

I cleared my throat, but all my thoughts and excuses and pleas for forgiveness jammed together like putty. The second

time, I cleared my throat, I said, “I did abandon you. And it doesn’t matter that I was only fourteen when I became pregnant, barely fifteen at your birth, or that my parents refused to discuss the arrangements of your adoption. I simply wasn’t brave enough. That’s no excuse. There are no excuses for what you’ve been forced to live through. I can only ask for your forgiveness.”

She seemed to melt into the chaise, and her eyes grew shiny with tears. “I’m glad you got to have Abby for at least a little while. She was so perfect.” Her voice softened, turned wistful.

I waited until the sharp pain piercing my heart eased, then said, “I’m glad you had Abby, too—for a little while.”

We sat and listened to the silence between us—it seemed to have so much to say about Abby and the trial and Willa’s future.

I reached across and tucked a strand of Willa’s hair behind her ear. When she didn’t pull away, I let my fingers linger an extra few seconds on her cheek. “Why did you decide to have your baby instead of having an abortion?”

She leaned her head against my fingertips, closed her eyes. “People say abortion is a choice. They make it sound like a woman is choosing between a pair of shoes or a new purse. But I think women only choose abortion because they have no other choice.”

She didn’t say anything more, and for a moment I wondered if she’d drifted off to sleep.

“I planned to have an abortion. I even made an appointment at the clinic. But no matter how many times I told myself it was the right thing for me, that I had a life to lead

and no time or money to raise a baby, I remembered that no matter what you'd faced, no matter how hard your decision was to make, you didn't make an appointment at a clinic." She met my gaze. "That's why I came to Savannah to find you. I thought you'd understand."

*IVY*

I PATTED WILLA'S THIGH, SWUNG MY LEGS TO ONE SIDE AND rose from the chair on my back porch. "Are you at all interested in the other half of your parentage?"

Her eyes grew into two giant green orbs. She swung her feet to the side of her chaise lounge and faced me. "You mean like details?"

"Yes."

"Sure, I want to know."

"Your father's name is Noah Cunningham, and he lives in Helena. I went to see him last week when I visited my brother, your Uncle Peter."

"Does he know I found you?"

"Yes, he knows."

"Is that why you went to Montana?" Her tone slipped into vulnerable again and gave me a moment of uncertainty.

"It was one of the reasons." With the stress of the trial, I should have waited to discuss Noah. "But we can talk about

Noah another time. Just know that if you want to meet him, I'll arrange it."

"Does he want to meet me?"

Her open, expectant expression cautioned me to weigh my words. "Noah agreed to meet you." Or he damn well would if I called.

"But he doesn't want me in his life, does he?" Willa's vulnerability slid closed leaving a harder shell. The same shell Peter described the first time he'd met Willa. The same shell she'd shown just a minute ago when she questioned me about abandoning her.

"It's just... Noah's married. He has three kids. And until seven days ago, he didn't know you existed. I never told him I was pregnant."

Willa was far more astute than I'd been when I blindly followed my mother's decision. "I know I can never truly make up for the life you lived. But I hope with all my heart that one day you trust me enough to allow me to try."

"Tell me a story about my grandparents."

"Your grandparents?" I headed for my back door. "Don't move. I'll be right back." I hurried through the kitchen and down the hall into the den, shuffled through the photo albums until I found the one of Mom's family.

I flipped on the garden's outside light and dragged a stool close to Willa. "This is my mom's family album. Great aunts and uncles, your great-grandparents, are in this book."

I found my parents' wedding photo. "These are my parents. Don't you think my mother, your grandmother was beautiful?" And unsmiling. My tuxedoed father wore a mischievous grin in the formal picture that had graced my

mother's dressing table when I was a girl. "Mom's name was Amelia Grace."

"She looks nothing like us." Willa's amazed tone sounded just like Abby's when she learned Cinderella's fairy godmother granted wishes.

"We take after my Dad's sister."

"I love the name Amelia," she said. "I think Mrs. Rice is right, and my baby should have a family name."

"Amelia would be a beautiful name." I turned the page, tapped a photo of my grandparents. "And her mother, my grandmother, was Lauren Pheb." I laughed at Willa's wrinkled nose. "So, no to Pheb?"

"Phoebe is kind of cute." Her attempt at bone-throwing made me laugh.

"Yes, Phoebe is cute. And Lauren is also nice." I ran my finger over another photo of Mom and her siblings. "This is Mom on her sixteenth birthday with her sister, Rebecca, and her brother, Leslie. Leslie's a unisex name, so that could work."

"They're all nice names, but I like your name, Ivy Rose. I'm thinking maybe of Willa Rose. That would give her roots, like Mrs. Rice says, from her mama and her grandmama. But if it's okay with you, I'd like to call her Rosie."

My heart filled with awe. Willa, a child I'd borne at fifteen, a girl who for eighteen years never heard a kind word, or any word, from my mouth, wanted to name her child after me.

Undeserved tears swam in my chest, my throat, my eyes. "I would be honored. And since Rose was Abby's middle name, you'll also honor your sister."

Surprise flashed in her eyes. “That would be cool.”

Giving away Abby’s name pinched my heart, then a quick sense of warmth oozed in.

Willa turned the pages of the album with the care of a book collector viewing a priceless find. If her familial roots were important enough to name her child after a mother she barely knew, Willa had to want to know more about her father.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to contact Noah? You could at least talk to him on the phone.”

Willa hugged the photo album to her chest. “I don’t think I want to meet him right now. I don’t want to interfere in anyone else’s life. Finding you is enough.”

My heart filled to bursting. I had done nothing to deserve this amazing young woman, but did we ever earn the good or the bad that fate handed us?

I pressed my hand against her cheek. Her eyes so sincere, soaking in every word I spoke.

“You have my promise, from this day forward, you will always have me and so will Rosie. But if you change your mind and want to meet Noah, just let me know.”

Standing by Willa’s side meant facing Rence, and I couldn’t put off calling him any longer. I suggested we turn in, and we said goodnight. I headed for my room.

I concentrated on what to say, tried several approaches in my head, but nothing seemed to fit. I finally decided to tug at family memories. He answered his cell on the third ring. “Yes.”

“It’s me.”

Silence.



“Rence?”

Nothing.

“Please, don’t hang up.”

“I wouldn’t...I’m not.” His voice, thicker than usual. One too many drinks, maybe? He cleared his throat. “I’m surprised you’d call.”

I barreled on before my sliver of bravery vanished. “I wanted to talk about an idea I have about Abby.”

“About Abby—” His voice grew weaker. Was he crying?

I closed my eyes, tried envisioning him. Maybe this would be better in person. “Where are you?”

“At Mom’s.”

I didn’t have the strength to face Georgia again today. “Are you alone?”

“Mom’s sleeping. I’m packing. I have a problem with the Jouffre account. Teddy quit and things...I could lose the contract. I’m leaving for Paris tomorrow night. “

“How long will you be gone?”

“Until I can find a suitable replacement for Teddy.”

“Who’ll run the business here?”

“Krista and Peter will split the work.”

“I’m sorry. I know how much working with Jouffre means to you.”

“What’s your idea?”

His abruptness shocked me back to my purpose for calling. “I want to build a park to honor Abby. There’s an empty lot

next to her school, and at the last parents' meeting, the director mentioned a need to extend the playground."

"And you want to dedicate the playground to Abby?"

"Yes. I want to design statues of her favorite cartoon characters, or maybe just plaques. I don't know. I haven't gotten that far. But the theme would emphasize princesses. Remember Abby's birthday trip to Disney?" The memory shot a wistful ache into my voice.

"She went crazy over the character parade," he said. Ice clinked into a glass. Refreshing his drink. "Abby loved the costumes."

"She loved Cinderella. She wore that costume for a month after we got home."

"And don't forget, on the plane to London too." He laughed and sounded like the old Rence. "She wouldn't take off her tiara for the entire three weeks we were in Europe."

"Remember how she wanted to invite all the characters to her birthday party that year? She insisted they would want to share her big day."

"I'd forgotten about that." His voice softened with love. I missed that voice, ached to hear it even in my dreams.

I paced our bedroom and allowed the memories of our old life to settle around me, around him, then took aim. "Remember how she cried when we left Disney World?"

"How could I forget seven hours in the car with her sniffing and whining?"

"Oh, she stopped crying when she started in with her move-to-Orlando campaign."

“So, she could go to school with Cinderella...” A sob choked his words. Another tinkle of ice hitting glass, then a sipping sound. It would be scotch. Glenlivet. “I never understood why she thought Cinderella went to school.”

“Remember how she kept popping over the back of our seats to seal the deal?” I grabbed a tissue off the dresser, wiped my eyes. “She must’ve unfastened her seatbelt a dozen times.”

Silence can be excruciatingly loud.

“We had to stop at a Home Depot and buy tie wraps because you were out.” I counted five beats. “McNab doesn’t know about the tie wraps and the duct tape, does he?”

My heart raced with the fear of failure.

“Willa had no right taking Abby on a Jet Ski.”

“Please, Rence. You have to tell the judge the truth. You can’t let Willa take the blame for Abby’s jacket being unclasped.”

Right before he disconnected, I thought I heard him gasp.

*IVY*

I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT WOKE ME UP—ONLY THAT I SHOT INTO consciousness as if someone had stabbed me in the heart with a syringe of adrenaline.

“No. No. Don't.”

*Willa.* I flew out of bed, up the back stairs and threw open the guest room door.

Willa was huddled against the headboard, knees drawn to her chest, breathing short, uneven breaths.

I gentled my voice and extended my hand as if approaching a frightened colt. “Willa. It's Ivy.”

Her gaze focused beyond my shoulder, and she appeared unaware of me.

I laid my hand on her knee. No response. “Willa.” I rubbed her leg. “Willa.”

Her gaze cleared. Realization settled, first in her eyes, then her face relaxed. “I woke you. I'm sorry.”

“Are you okay? Do you know where you are?”

“Sherbet room.” Her voice still thick with sleep.

“Sherbet room?” I searched for a correlation.

She held her palm against her forehead. Her skin so white her lips looked like two blue slashes separating her nose and chin. “The colors,” she said. “reminds me of sherbet ice cream, orange, lime...” She dropped her arm. “I’m at your house. In your guest room. I’m sorry I woke you.”

“You had a bad dream.”

Some color trickled back into her cheeks.

“Do you often have nightmares?”

“I only have one nightmare.”

I sat next to her. “Do you dream about Jim’s attack?”

“Over and over. And sometimes, the day Abby died is mixed in. It makes no sense. I have no memory of the night Jim died. Maybe that’s why the nightmare is mixed up, and always different. Sometimes I know it’s Jim, sometimes I don’t recognize who’s after me. Sometimes Abby’s there, and I have to save her. And blood. So much blood.”

She rested her head against the headboard. Closed her eyes. “There’s blood everywhere—on me, the floor, the knife.”

“Have you talked to Marissa about this?”

“We talked about it once.” The color in her face faded again. “Ryder claims he stabbed Jim. But I think I might have killed him, and Ryder lied to protect me.” She bent, hid her face in her hands, and sobbed. “Ryder went to jail for three years. That’s why he won’t answer my texts. He’s done enough for me.”

I sat on the bed and ran my hand over her back. “You’re not responsible for Jim’s death. He attacked you. And if Ryder says he stabbed Jim, then he must’ve. That was Ryder’s way of protecting you the only way he could.”

Willa tucked into a ball and sobbed.

I ignored my instinct to cover her body with mine and offer comfort. I knew a good cry, a purge of pent-up emotions would provide her some relief. I waited until she sobbed herself out, then found a box of tissues in the bedside table. “Willa, you may have made mistakes in your life, but Jim’s death wasn’t one of them.”

“You don’t understand. I’m not innocent. When Jim moved in with Sarah, I liked his attention. He made me feel pretty and smart.” Her voice was raw from sobbing, but I could sense she had more to say.

I slid to the floor, sat with her face next to mine, and continued rubbing my hand across her back.

“Jim always brought me gifts,” she sniffled, wiped more tears. “Nothing expensive. A candy bar or stuffed animal he picked up at the dollar store. But something special, just for me. I loved his attention.”

“What kid wouldn’t?”

“But then, Sarah started drinking in the afternoon, and she’d go to bed early.” Her voice hitched, her words mixed with tears. “On those nights, Jim waited until the other kids were asleep, then he’d ask if I wanted to watch a movie. His movies always had sex scenes. They made me uncomfortable, but I didn’t want to disappoint him. I always pretended it didn’t matter.”

She sat up and rocked in place. “God, how stupid.”

“I’ve read about this kind of thing. It’s called grooming,” I climbed onto the bed and sat beside her. “The perpetrator builds an emotional connection with the minor child to gain trust. Gifts, compliments—it’s part of their plan. You did nothing wrong. You aren’t to blame for wanting attention. You were a child. He’s the villain.”

“But I encouraged him when I took his gifts. Watched his movies.”

I cradled her face. Her watery eyes begged me to take away her pain. “Jim was a pedophile. Nothing you did or didn’t do caused him to prey on you. And Sarah was supposed to keep you safe. Sarah owns Jim’s death, not you or Ryder.”

Willa put her head on my shoulder. “I should never have taken Abby on the Jet Ski. Never gone to Tybee. I shouldn’t have come to Savannah.”

A part of my heart screamed *Yes. Yes. Yes. You shouldn’t have come.* The other part ached for the broken child, my child, inside this beautiful young woman.

I turned her chin until our eyes met again. “You can walk down the I-shouldn’t-have road. I’ve walked it plenty of times, but I can tell you it only leads to a dead end.”

She held on, and we cried together.

I cried for Abby, for my lost marriage, for Willa’s horrendous childhood, and for her uncertain future. We cried for what seemed like hours. Finally, I wiped my eyes, handed Willa another tissue, and turned away from my glass-half-full outlook.

“There’s no use dwelling in an unchangeable past. You have a long future ahead of you, a child to raise, and a

beautiful life to live. Abby's not coming back to us. I have to make my way in a world without her, and so do you."

I shoved my pain into the deepest part of my soul. I didn't have the energy to fight the emptiness Abby's death left in my heart, because today I had to be strong for Willa.

I slid sideways so I could see her face and look into her eyes. "I know you've always depended on Ryder for protection, but Ryder's in your past. You have me now. You have a family." I pointed to myself, then back to her, to her baby bump. "You, me, and Rosie, we're a family."

She sniffled, wiped the last of her tears. "Okay."

"Why don't you try to sleep?"

She wriggled down under the sheet. "I have some money. Not much, not even two thousand dollars. But if I'm found guilty, I want to give it to you to help cover the baby's expenses." Her voice turned soft and sleepy.

I tucked the sheets around her. "You aren't paying me to keep Willa Rose. What kind of grandmother do you think I am?"

The corner of her lips turned up. Her eyes drifted shut, then opened. "And I'll return the check."

"What check?"

"The one your brother gave me."

I'd forgotten about the check. "I'm sorry, honey. Peter shouldn't have assumed you simply wanted money." I folded the comforter over her feet. "But why didn't you cash that check?"

"I thought if I came here, gave you the check, you'd see I didn't want money. I only wanted my baby to have a family."



She rolled onto her back, stared at the ceiling. “Do you think the judge will believe Josie and Dorothea, after what Sarah and McNab said?” Her voice no longer groggy.

“Absolutely.” I switched off the bedside lamp. “Stay positive. Everything will work out.”

Life was under no obligation to give me what I desired, but I clung to the belief that Rence’s true character would shine through, and in the end, he’d do as I asked and save Willa.

*WILLA*

IVY AND I ARRIVED AT THE COURTHOUSE FIFTEEN MINUTES later than usual. But I suspected Ivy planned it that way. “See, told you they wouldn’t start without us.”

She gave Jace a do-not-push-me look and motioned for me to sit.

The bailiff did his thing, the judge did hers, and Jace called Mrs. Rice to the stand.

“She made straight A’s.” Mrs. Rice wore her special occasion outfit, the light blue suit with her frilly beige blouse. The outfit she’d worn to my high school graduation.

“Willa worked part-time since the day she turned sixteen,” Mrs. Rice’s voice didn’t quite reach friendly. “But she always found time to help my girls with their homework.”

“Did you trust Willa with your other children?” Jace asked.

“I did. My girls loved her. Willa was their big sister, let them play dress-up with her clothes, helped them with their schoolwork. She had a lot of practice taking care of the Booth kids. Practically raised Sarah Booth’s two girls.” She looked at

the judge, her lips were pressed tight as if she wanted to say more but knew she shouldn't.

“Willa ever give you any trouble?” Jace’s voice was neighborly like he and Mrs. Rice were having coffee in her kitchen.

“Willa didn’t break her curfew and followed my rules without bellyaching. I’ve raised a lot of girls in the last fifteen years. Willa’s my pride and joy.”

My eyes burned, I blinked back tears. Mrs. Rice had never said that before. Not in those exact words.

“Did Willa have a lot of boyfriends?” Jace already knew the answer. He’d explained he had to bring up the baby’s father first. Nothing to worry about he’d promised.

“No. One boy hung around the house for a few weeks. Josh, a rodeo boy chasing his dream.” The corner of her mouth pulled into a one-sided frown. Her expression for anything she disapproved of.

“Willa had plans. She got into the University of Wyoming with a full scholarship.” Mrs. Rice opened her purse, withdrew a tissue, and wiped the corner of her eye. “Broke my heart to hear of her troubles here.”

“Did she tell you why she came to Savannah?”

“She told me she wanted to find her birth mother. I pestered her about spending the money. But she had her heart set, and I couldn’t fault her wanting to know where she came from.” She turned to the judge again. “My Willa would never hurt a child. I’d bet my life on it.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Rice. Nothing else for this witness, Your Honor.” Jace returned to his seat.

Judge Hartley smiled at Mrs. Rice. Not a big smile, more like she wanted to assure Mrs. Rice, she did okay. That had to be good. I wasn't surprised the judge liked Mrs. Rice, everyone did.

"Your witness," the judge said to Turner.

"No questions, Your Honor."

Judge Hartley checked her watch. "Call your next witness."

Jace stood. "The defense calls Ms. Dorothea Keene."

Dorothea wore a cobalt headwrap and a flowing royal blue and burgundy floor-length skirt with a matching burgundy blouse. She walked to the stand, tall and majestic as if she were a black priestess called to impart wisdom. I knew Dorothea had no problem giving her opinions.

The bailiff swore Dorothea in, and Jace asked her to state her name for the record.

"Dorothea Keene." Dorothea's deep voice would carry like a preacher's, all the way to the back of the room.

Jace pulled a file from his briefcase and removed a typed sheet of paper. "Please tell the court your occupation."

"I work for the State of Wyoming social services."

"And Willa Elliott is one of your cases?"

"For the past three years. The state released custodial rights on June fourth of this year when Willa reached the age of eighteen."

Jace referred to the paper in his hand. "In your own words, Ms. Keene, please give the court an overview of Willa's life as a ward of the State of Wyoming."

“Willa became an orphan at two years old when her adoptive parents died in a car accident. Shortly after that, she became a ward of the state and was placed in the foster care system. Her first set of parents experienced financial hardship and ceased fostering children. The second couple divorced. Willa’s third foster family moved out of state.”

Old feelings that Dorothea had forced me to admit, not being good enough, smart enough, pretty enough, rushed into my head. *That’s trash. Throw those thoughts right out the door where they belong. Being an orphan is not on you. And it’s not a life sentence for not being loved. Making your mark in the world, learning to give and receive the right kind of love—that’s on you.* Dorothea had preached in a hundred different ways over the past three years.

“And then where did the State of Wyoming assign Willa?” Jace sounded as if he and Dorothea were discussing someone’s job history, not my life.

I lifted my chin, pretended it didn’t faze me to hear someone drilling my past down to a few footnotes on a report.

“From age nine until fifteen, Willa lived in the home of Sarah Booth.”

“And you took over Willa’s case when she left the Booth home?”

“Yes.”

Jace walked to my side as if he knew this part would be hard for me to hear.

“Why were you assigned to Willa’s case?”

“I’m a licensed therapist and specialize in childhood trauma. Alcoholism is a disease that affects every member of

the family.” Dorothea didn’t mention that it was Judge Threadgill who assigned Dorothea to my case.

“So you placed Willa in Josephine Rice’s home?” Jace said.

“Yes. Willa was fifteen at the time and had experienced years of living in a dysfunctional family environment.”

Dorothea glanced away from Jace to me. She gave me a don’t *worry I’ve got you, girl* look. ”Willa needed structure and nurturing, as do most children. Josephine Rice is one of the most steadfast foster parents in the Rock Springs area.”

“Any other reason you chose Mrs. Rice as Willa’s foster mother?”

“Willa loved children. Josephine has three young foster girls. Willa thrived in Josephine’s home.”

“Did Willa give you any problems?”

“No.”

“Not even the normal teen attitude most kids go through in high school? Like smoking, drinking.” Jace sounded like he didn’t believe Dorothea, but it was an act. He knew my record was clean since moving in with Mrs. Rice.”

“I hold monthly phone conferences with school counselors for each of my cases. Willa had nothing on her school record that indicated those kinds of issues. She played competitive tennis, won the regional finals her senior year, worked part-time, and graduated with over a four-point GPA.”

“Did she have a lot of boyfriends?” Jace asked.

“She dated a boy named Josh for a few months.”

“Did you know him?”

“He wasn’t from our area and didn’t stick around.” A tiny hint of disappointment seeped into her voice.

“No more questions, Your Honor.” Jace came back and sat by me. He smiled, so everything must be okay.

Judge Hartley turned to Naomi. “Do you anticipate a lengthy cross-examination?”

Naomi flipped a page in her notebook, moved her chair back, and got to her feet. “I only have a couple of questions for clarification, Your Honor.”

“Proceed,” Judge Hartley said.

She smiled at Dorothea, but Dorothea didn’t bite. Naomi Turner would bring up my juvie file. “Ms. Keene, what’s your title with the State of Wyoming?”

“Social services counselor.”

“Is that different than a Wyoming State social caseworker?”

Turner must know Judge Threadgill assigned Dorothea to me after Jim died.

“Yes, it’s different.” Dorothea leveled a *Don’t push me, girl* gaze on Turner. I’d seen that look before.

“How’s it different?”

“I’m a licensed therapist.”

“So you’re assigned the problem kids?”

Dorothea seemed to raise three inches in her seat. “Problem kids?” Her voice crackled with heat. “I have problem parents. And an occasional problem foster parent. But I do not have problem *kids*, Counselor.”

She looked at Judge Hartley. “I’m a licensed family therapist, and my assigned cases are minors who’ve experienced and/or lived with trauma.”

Judge Hartley nodded at Naomi. “Mrs. Keene, please address your answers to the prosecutor.”

Dorothea refocused on Turner.

Turner would keep pushing until Dorothea had to admit I’d been arrested, prove Jim dying was my fault. Once a killer—

Dorothea’s head tilted slightly. Her right eye raised a fraction. I’d seen that look. Dorothea’s *Be very sure you want to walk down that road* stare.

Turner must’ve gotten the message because she did a parade-pivot and walked back to her seat. “I have no further questions, Your Honor.”

My heart sailed over the net—game—set—match.

“Court is recessed for twenty minutes.” Judge Hartley rapped her gavel.

Jace scanned the courtroom, turned to Ivy. “Where’s your husband?”

“I’ve tried all morning to reach him. He hasn’t answered my calls or texts. I finally called his assistant. She told me Rence left for Paris early this morning.”

Jace’s bug-eyed expression stole my few seconds of happy.

“Can you subpoena him? Force him to testify?” I’d never heard Ivy’s pissed-off voice before.

“I’d have to disclose to the judge why your husband’s testimony is important,” Jace said. “Hartley will never agree to a trial delay to wait for information she knows you can relay.”



For the first time since he walked through my apartment door with Daniel, Jace sounded unsure.

My ten seconds of optimism evaporated.

*IVY*

JACE SAT BESIDE ME IN THE FIRST ROW OF THE COURTROOM gallery, all set to give me his trial witness pep talk. But his eyes held the worry of trapped prey.

“I’m going to call you as my next witness.” But Jace wanted Rence as the next witness. I wanted Rence as his next witness. My call last night had backfired, and I’d overplayed my hand, hit too many memory buttons. Now Rence had run to Paris.

“The bare facts of Abby’s death haven’t changed throughout the trial.” Jace lowered his voice. “None of Naomi’s witnesses, other than McNab, have offered evidence of gross negligence or purposeful intent to harm.”

His confident tone eroded a little with each word like sand dripping from an hourglass. Or maybe that was my imagination, hard to tell with the whirring blood rushing in my ears.

This was all Rence’s doing. He knew the weight McNab placed on Abby’s unbuckled lifejacket. Rence had held the

power to stop Willa's trial with a few descriptive words, *duct tape, and zip ties*. But he'd said nothing while Willa was charged, went to jail, and then almost lost her baby

"Dorothea and Josie's testimonies landed inside the positive column," Jace said. "Now, it's up to you to cast doubt on McNab's lifejacket testimony." Jace acted as if I could still my chaotic thoughts enough to speak coherently as if my tongue wasn't thick and close to useless.

"Absolutely." I embraced a fake-it-till-you-make-it rallying cry. God, I'd give a million bucks to have a glass of wine right now.

Jace drew in a deep breath like every part of him was starved for oxygen. "Okay, this is how it'll go. First, I'll establish you as Willa's birth mother. Only answer the question I ask. Don't elaborate. Be concise. The fewer words, the better." Each rule Jace spouted pushed my anxiety a little closer to full-out panic. *Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe in calm, or you'll fail Willa. Again.*

"And it's important to look at me, not the judge."

"No problem." I kept up my charade of serene. Clasped my hands to keep from fanning my burning face. Someone must've turned on the heat instead of the AC.

Jace's expression contained enough relief to make me believe he'd bought my promises. "You have only one reason for being on the stand—to testify that Abby had a habit of unbuckling her restraints. That's it."

"Don't worry. I can be convincing." An old Oscar Wilde quote came to mind: *The basis of optimism is sheer terror.*

Judge Hartley's private door opened.

Jace returned to the defense table.

“All rise,” the bailiff said. “Court is now in session. Judge Christina Hartley presiding.”

*Keep calm*, I ordered myself. My body revolted. Chalky mouth, short irregular breaths, a provoking itch settled between my shoulder blades. I shifted, rubbed my back against the chair, and tried to reach the itch.

“Is the defense ready?” Judge Hartley’s voice pierced the air like a New Year’s Eve firecracker.

Jace hustled to his feet. “Yes, Your Honor.”

“Call your next witness.”

“The defense calls Ivy Abernathy.”

I commanded my knees to stand, walked to the witness stand, raised my right hand, and took an oath to speak only truths.

*Don’t look at the judge.* Jace had warned.

I looked at the judge. I’d seen more warmth in my granite kitchen counters than in Hartley’s brown eyes.

“Ms. Abernathy, at what age did you give birth to Willa Elliott?” Jace stayed by the defense table. I assumed to encourage the judge to notice Willa’s pale face and sunken eyes. See the young pregnant girl with a broken spirit.

“I was fifteen when Willa was born.” My voice sounded weak. I cleared my throat.

“Did you see your daughter, Willa, through the years? Keep in contact?” Jace asked.

My gaze drifted from Jace to Willa. *Did you check on me?* “No. I surrendered my parental rights the day she was

born. My father, a federal judge, handled the private adoption.”

Silence.

I looked at Jace, his face a mask of disapproval.

*Answer the question I ask. Don't elaborate. The fewer words, the better.*

Heat flushed my neck.

“When did you learn Willa grew up in Wyoming’s foster care system?” Jace walked a few steps in my direction, holding my gaze.

”A few months ago.” On the morning of June sixteenth, twenty-three days before Abby died. But I didn’t say the words. I followed the rules, stayed concise.

“So you were unaware Willa’s adoptive parents died in an automobile accident two years after her birth?”

“That’s correct. I was unaware.” My voice sounded stronger, surer, Jace wasn’t frowning. In fact, his face showed no emotion.

Then he asked his next question. “How about your parents and your brother? Were they aware?”

My mind tumbled back. Why would he ask that? “No.” No one in my family could’ve known. No way dad would’ve allowed the state to bounce his grandchild from foster home to foster home. “We didn’t know.”

“Mrs. Abernathy, do you believe Willa is responsible for your daughter Abby’s death?” Jace’s tone, calm and clinical.

“No.” I faced the judge. Whatever else happened today, I had to get through to Judge Hartley. “No. I believe...” Tears

clogged my throat. I used the ice pick stabbing pain of losing Abby as my strength. I could not forsake another child. I had to make the judge understand. “I know, from the depths of my soul, Abby’s death was a horrific accident.”

“Ms. Abernathy.” Jace stepped toward Hartley and caught my eye. Then launched into his set up. “Detective McNab testified the lifejacket Abby wore on the day of her death washed ashore a quarter of a mile from Abby’s body. The detective also testified the three fasteners on Abby’s safety vest weren’t clipped.”

Jace picked up Abby’s blue and pink vest from the evidence table. The last thing that touched her precious body before she drowned. I ached to touch the vest, take it home, keep it forever close.

“Do you have any thoughts why this vest washed ashore unfastened?” Jace asked.

“I believe Abby unsnapped her vest.” I focused on Jace, but in my mind, I saw Abby’s face scrunched in concentration, pressing the release on the jacket clips. And then my mind rushed with guilt. I should’ve been more adamant, scolded her harder, made her understand the danger, the reason restraints were necessary and weren’t an option. It was a mother’s job to keep her child safe. And I failed. I failed both my daughters.

Jace shook the vest to get my attention. “You think your six-year-old daughter could have unfastened herself out of this vest while riding on a Jet Ski?”

*Short answers.* ”Yes.”

“Can you explain to the court how you reached this conclusion?”

*Concise. No rambling.* “Abby didn’t like anything binding—tight clothes, belts, sashes, her car seat as a toddler. And when she got older, the car seatbelt.”

“Would she complain or cry or ask to have the restraining item removed?”

Not my Abby—stealthy as a magician. “No. She’d remove her clothes if they were tight, or unlock the buckle on her seatbelt. I had to use duct tape to secure it.”

“As a toddler, Abby could escape from a car seat?” Jace added a surprised note to his voice.

“Yes. Many, many times.”

“And you resorted to duct tape to keep her safely secured in her car seat?”

“That’s correct.”

He placed the jacket back on the evidence table and returned to Willa’s side. “Mrs. Abernathy, do you believe Willa bears responsibility for the death of your daughter, Abby?”

“Asked and answered, Your Honor.” An abundance of irritability swam in Naomi Turner’s tone.

“Sustained,” Judge Hartley said.

“Your witness.” Jace’s quiet, polite voice slammed into me. Now would come Turner’s inquisition. I steeled my resolve.

Naomi remained in her seat, tapped a pen, the look in her eyes as calculating as a politician judging the mood of a rowdy crowd. Then she slowly rose to her feet. “I know this must be very difficult, Ms. Abernathy. Please accept my condolences on the death of your daughter, Abby.” It was if she’d parked

her tone in neutral. No animosity, no distrust. “I’ll try to remain sensitive to your loss.”

Her polished, sleek voice and fake concern sparked a flash fire in my chest.

“I’m having a difficult time imagining Abby, as a toddler, unclipping her car seat. Car seats restrain millions of children, yet you’re claiming Abby unfastened hers with no help from an adult?”

“That’s right.” *Careful*. Remember Naomi’s smart, cagey, and patient, although her squint made me think her patience might be running on the thin side.

“Perhaps you can explain how Abby managed that feat.”

*Breathe*. ”Abby was very persistent. When she was three, I purchased four different car seats, hoping to find one she couldn’t unfasten. In a matter of days, she’d mastered each one. Over the next few weeks, I must’ve borrowed five more different styles from friends, but I never found a car seat Abby couldn’t undo. I finally gave up and used duct tape.”

Naomi raised her gaze to the judge, then swept the gallery. *Looking for Rence? Tough luck, he ran. I’m all you’ve got.*

“I find it amazing Abby was the one-in-a-million child, perhaps one in a billion, who had the dexterity to break out of her car-seat restraints.”

“My husband and I nicknamed her mini-Houdini. But Rence used zip-ties.”

“Excuse me?”

I made an interlocking chain with my thumbs and index fingers. “Rence figured out a way to connect the strap of



Abby's car seat to the car's seatbelt to keep Abby secure. But I found it easier and quicker to use duct tape. I carried a pair of scissors and a roll of tape in the car."

"I see your husband isn't in the courtroom today to confirm your fascinating claim."

"Objection, Your Honor. Does the prosecutor have a question for Mrs. Abernathy?"

"Sorry, Your Honor. I'll restate." Naomi's five minutes of frustration seemed to have sanded the softness off her face. Her cheekbones were more pronounced, her nose thinner, even her chin looked sharper. "Where is your husband today, Mrs. Abernathy?"

"On his way to Paris. He had a business emergency."

"How convenient."

"Your Honor." Jace remained in his seat, but his voice carried over the room.

"Watch yourself, Ms. Turner." Hartley's face remained unreadable.

Turner stalked back to her table. "No further questions."

I faced the judge and grabbed my last chance. "Willa spending years in prison won't bring Abby back." Months of frustration and despair bubbled to the surface. "Please, I beg you."

"Mrs. Abernathy, you're excused," Judge Hartley said.

"Abby's gone. Sending Willa to prison for an accident isn't justice."

"Ms. Abernathy, I've excused you. You may step down." Judge Hartley's still empathetic tone gave me courage and

fueled me on.

“Willa’s a loving girl, a good person. She would never hurt her sister.”

“Ms. Abernathy. Please, step down, or I’ll ask the bailiff to remove you from the courtroom.” The judge’s tone now less understanding.

But this was my only opportunity to speak for Willa. To say what I knew in my heart was true. In my periphery, Jace walked in my direction. I gripped the edge of Hartley’s bench. “Please. I’m begging you not to take away Willa’s chance of having a full life. Of raising her child.”

“The judge dismissed you.” Jace came inside the witness box. “This isn’t helping Willa.” He gently guided me down the steps, opened the half-gate, and eased me into my seat. He faced the judge. “The defense rests, Your Honor.”

“Court will take a one-hour recess.” Judge Hartley disappeared through her private door.

Jace, Willa, and I returned to the same waiting room we had yesterday, a space slightly larger than my walk-in closet, with one barred window, one scarred table, and four wooden chairs.

I pulled out a chair and motioned for Willa to sit.

She resembled a sleepwalker, eyes open, moving, sitting, but not talking.

“Will the judge make her decision today?”

Jace offered me a maybe shrug. “She’s only taking a short recess.”

I walked to the window. The room seemed to close around me, stifling and warm, airless. I needed sunshine, fresh air.

“The judge making a quick decision is a good sign, right?”

Jace looked at Willa, his brown eyes soft. “Sometimes.” He looked at me, and his cold stare shut down any more questions. “I need to make a few calls, and the reception inside the courthouse is blocked by design. I won’t be long.” He removed his phone from his briefcase and left.

I pulled out a chair and sat. “I think the judge taking only an hour recess is a good sign.” I slid closer to Willa and held her hand. Her fingers were swollen and a little red. I searched my memory, weren’t swollen hands and feet a symptom of high blood pressure? I should’ve brought the blood pressure kit Dr. Patel sent home from the hospital.

I wrangled another chair closer. “Here, put your feet up.”

Willa kicked off her shoes, settled her legs on the chair. “Thank you for saying I wouldn’t hurt Abby.” She pushed a smile onto lips that looked so sad my stomach twisted. “I’m so scared.”

I wrapped her in my arms and pushed certainty that I didn’t feel into my voice. “The judge will do the right thing. You’ll see.”

I ran my fingers over her long braid. “Can I get you anything. Water, maybe?”

She shook her head and didn’t say anything.

I leaned back to look at her, make sure she wasn’t crying, and for just a splinter of a minute, I saw Abby, in bed, complaining of feeling hot and tired, her lips chapped with fever, begging me to stay with her and make her better.

A roll of thunder reverberated through the room. Rain wouldn’t be far behind.

Willa and I sat, too scared for conversation, and too edgy to relax. I wanted to pace, but she'd laid her head on my shoulder, and I didn't dare move away from giving her whatever small bit of comfort I could.

Finally, the door opened, and Jace walked in. "Time to go." He picked up his briefcase and led us down the hall.

The cloudy sky had stolen the sun's rays, and a depressing sense of gray had dropped over the room.

The bailiff said all the same things, and Judge Hartley sat behind her bench. I searched her face, hunted for any hint of her decision. But Hartley kept her poker mask intact.

"The defendant will rise," the bailiff said.

Jace helped Willa to her feet to hear the judgment that would forever change our lives.

"On the charge of second-degree murder," Judge Hartley's unyielding tone sent goosebumps of misgiving over my body. "I find the defendant not guilty."

Air gushed from my lungs. My heart skyrocketed with relief, pure, sweet soothing warmth.

Then I noticed Judge Hartley's upright posture, her raised chin, and ice water shot through my veins. "On the charge of involuntary manslaughter, I find the defendant guilty as charged."

My throat slammed shut. I dove from my seat. My body bent over the railing like a snapped twig. "No. No. No."

Willa slid into her chair.

I strained to reach her. Stretched my fingers, and tried to gather her, absorb her shock.

She doubled over, and my arms couldn't reach. She pressed her face into her hands.

I tipped further, my fingers barely grazing her back.

She whimpered, the moan of a small animal in excruciating pain.

I had failed to protect Abby, and now I had failed Willa. For the first time in my life, I conceived the true meaning of miscarriage of justice. And I was powerless to right the wrong. And Willa—Willa was broken.

*WILLA*

MONDAY MORNING, I ENTERED THE CHATHAM COUNTY courthouse with Jace and Ivy. “Rosie still hasn’t moved, not even a little kick.” I stumbled and lost my shoe.

Ivy knelt and helped me put the stretched-out ballet slipper back on. “Babies sometimes go quiet in the last few weeks of pregnancy. And we’re walking too fast.” The last words aimed at Jace.

He slung the strap of his briefcase over his shoulder. “Here, let me help you.” His warm, strong hands wrapped around my shoulders, but nothing eased the looming disaster waiting inside this building.

Fear didn’t need the ring of an alarm clock to wake up—fear never slept. Its sticky arms wrapped around my neck the second Judge Hartley pronounced me guilty and blew hot, sour, terrifying thoughts in my ear all weekend.

*You won’t see Rosie’s first steps or hear her first words. She’ll learn to color and read and dance without you. And she’ll never forgive you.*

In the courtroom, I dropped into my seat at the defense table. A faint scent of lemon floated in the air. Someone had polished the dark wood table to a sparkling shine. If I leaned a little left, I could see the reflection of the bags under my eyes and my too-oily hair. Why should I wash my hair for Judge Hartley to sentence me to ten years in prison?

*You'll rot like garbage in an eight-by-eight cell, eating soggy food, and beg for any drop of news from the outside.* Heckling fear, my new constant companion, played out a war in my brain.

A woman I barely knew would be raising my Rosie. A woman who'd abandoned me the first hour of my life. But Ivy had raised a remarkable, feisty, spirited little girl, and given Abby a princess life. The kind of life I'd dreamed of as a girl, the type of life I wanted for my daughter.

Jace had said this morning's sentencing hearing would take less than an hour. I would sit quietly, breathe in the lemon, and pretend my heart wasn't beat-boxing like a rapper on speed for the next sixty minutes. I'd be the model prisoner, give no reason for Judge Hartley to deny Jace's request that my incarceration begin after Rosie's birth.

I wanted time with Rosie and Ivy. See how they bonded before I disappeared. I wouldn't allow Rosie to visit me in prison. I didn't want that memory in my daughter's head whenever she looked at me.

Last night, I'd calculated the days. I'd be away—eighteen hundred and twenty-five if Hartley sentenced me to five years. Eight years equaled two thousand nine hundred and twenty days. I couldn't bring myself to consider anything longer.

I cradled my stomach. *Why are you so quiet, Rosie? Do you already hate me for abandoning you?*

“All rise.”

I braced one palm on the table, rested the other against Rosie, and lumbered to my feet. I used both hands to rub my sides. *Come on. Kick or stretch. Move little girl.*

Judge Hartley came through her private entrance and instructed everyone to take seats. “Before sentencing, I’ll allow oral statements from those impacted by Abby Abernathy’s death.”

The judge looked at Ivy, but then her interest drifted back. “Mr. Abernathy, you wish to address the court?”

Blood seeped from my skull, and my body went numb. Rence Abernathy couldn’t be here. Ivy said he was in Europe.

Abernathy sat in the first chair of the last row.

Rence Abernathy would demand the maximum sentence—twelve years. He’d make sure I served every one of the four thousand three hundred and eighty days.

I searched Ivy’s face, silently begging, *please do something.*

Ivy, a zombie with dead eyes and a colorless face, offered me nothing but a shrug. A shrug that said I did my best, sorry it wasn’t enough.

Abby’s dad sat in the witness chair, his face as hard as the bronze statues in Savannah’s parks. But he looked different today, no jacket, no tie, no fiery hate in his eyes.

“You have the floor, Mr. Abernathy.” Judge Hartley’s tone quiet and respectful.

Rence’s gaze found me and held. It was if the hurt in his face grew and stretched between us, wrapping and squeezing and stealing my breath.



Finally, he shifted and looked in Ivy's direction. "After Abby's death, I blamed everyone," his voice soft and difficult to hear. "I blamed my wife for traveling to Europe to meet me and leaving Abby behind in Savannah. Our nanny, Mia for being away from Abby. Someone had to pay for Abby's death."

His focus shifted back to me. "So I heaved most of the blame on Willa Elliott for taking Abby to Tybee Island and putting my six-year-old daughter on a Jet Ski. I've battled my fury over losing my daughter every hour of the day since she died. Ivy and I had built our world around Abby—"

Maybe it was the pain running through his voice or the tilt of his head, but looking straight at Rence shocked me. I'd always believed Abby looked exactly like me, like Ivy, but Abby had inherited her dad's chin, his thick black lashes, and I heard Abby in his voice, and it made the hurt and pain of his words a hundred times harder to hear. I wanted to shut out his voice, but I couldn't. I had to listen. I'd caused his pain.

"I wanted someone else to experience the agony I have to endure," he said. "Willa was my easiest target." His voice, a deep baritone, echoed and sounded lost, almost confused.

"Grief and fear are soulmates..." Rence blinked like he was trying not to cry. "The thing about death—life goes on. Even when you face a loss so huge you can't imagine how you'll get through the next day, the next minute, the next second, the world keeps turning—the seconds keep ticking."

His attention locked on me, and the day at the beach roared through my memory like a head-on collision—Abby's face. The monster wave barreling down. The paramedics loading a white-sheeted Abby in the ambulance.

The memory stretched from my head to my heels and a sick nauseating reminder that if I hadn't chased my dream of finding my birth mother, Abby would be alive. And Rence Abernathy and Ivy wouldn't be suffering this misery.

"Justice for losing Abby won't come from destroying you," Rence said to me. "Ivy's right about that. And she's right about Abby hating constraints. It is probable that Abby unbuckled her own safety vest. And perhaps if she hadn't—"

He surged to his feet as if bolts of electricity zapped the witness chair. "That's all I have to say."

He rushed past me, then Ivy, then out of the courtroom.

After another second, it registered. Abby's dad hadn't demanded I rot in jail. My head spun, then a pain ripped into my back. I gripped the defense table and rode a convulsing cramp clawing up my spine. Red and black stars danced in front of my eyes. Oh God, I couldn't faint. Not now. The spasm eased, then ebbed away.

"I rarely offer an opinion on whether the prosecution's case is worthy of being brought before my court."

I forced myself to focus on what Judge Hartley said. This was it. This is where she'd tell me how long I'd spend in hell.

"But today," she said. "Today, I'm making an exception. And I'm speaking directly to you, Ms. Turner, when I say the DA's office missed or ignored crucial evidence in this case. You scurried down a rabbit hole when you found the defendant had a sealed juvenile record."

I had no idea what Hartley's words meant to my case. But before I could ask Jace, the judge turned her piercing gaze on me.

“After listening to two days of testimony, I concede to the prosecution on one matter. When you, Willa Elliott, signed a consent waiver without parental authorization and carried a minor on a dangerous ride that resulted in her death, your actions were reckless.”

The last breath of hope in my heart faded.

“But, part of my job is to assess the charges made against the defendant. Determine if the accused’s actions constitute reckless endangerment. Were they purposeful, without concern for the welfare of the minor, or were the actions simply misguided youthful behavior?”

My throat closed up. I couldn’t breathe. This is it. This is when Hartley will lay out all the reasons she’s sentencing the maximum number of years allowed by law.

“But, I find no evidence of malice in Ms. Elliott’s intention.”

No malice? That had to be good. I turned to Jace. He looked straight at Hartley. No malice had to be good. But I still swallowed spit as dry as sawdust.

“Ms. Elliott, I’ve reviewed your juvenile file, and I concur with your mother. Fate tossed evil and pain in your path, but there’s no way to sugarcoat the facts. Abigail Abernathy’s death may have been an accident, but your actions on July ninth led to the death of your half-sister. You’ll have to live with that truth. I suspect you’ll find guilt is the heaviest weight you’ll bear in life.”

Hartley slid on her glasses and read from a paper. “Willa Elliott, I sentence you to three months of imprisonment. Your ninety-two days pretrial incarceration meets this requirement. I

further sentence you to probation in the amount of five years.” She rapped her gavel. “Court dismissed.”

It was like zero gravity and fireworks and a million Christmases all in one. I jumped out of my chair. “I don’t have to go to jail. Right? That’s what she said. I don’t have to go back.”

Jace wrapped me a hug that lifted me off my feet. “That’s exactly what she said.”

And then Ivy was beside me, hugging and jumping. All three of us laughing and crying and jumping up and down. It was if a window opened and sunshine and fresh air full of hope and relief blew in.

A clawing, searing pain ripped across my lower back, and my leg muscles turned to mush. I sucked in a short, hard breath and grabbed my back.

“Something’s wrong.” The cramp snaked across my sides and gripped my stomach. “I think Rosie’s coming.” I clutched Ivy’s hand. “But it’s too soon.” I looked down at the water pooled at my feet.

*IVY*

I ARRANGED THE “WELCOME HOME” BALLOONS AND A stuffed pink rabbit on the breakfast bar, visible when Willa walks in from the garage.

The doorbell chimed—the crib delivery. I hoped the Baby Bliss crew worked fast because I only had an hour before leaving to bring Willa and Rosie home from the hospital. I opened the front door.

Rence’s keys dangled from his finger.

My mind bounced and dashed like a border collie trying to corral sheep. Why was he here? And now?

“I wasn’t comfortable letting myself in.” He rolled in his largest piece of Bric’s luggage, a Father’s Day gift from Abby. My heart twisted with the memory of her sitting on top as Rence rolled her through the Atlanta airport.

My brain finally linked words together. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“I didn’t want to leave for Europe without talking to you.” He tilted his head, looked me over. “You look good in short

hair.”

“Thanks.” I’d spent a few extra minutes on my hair and makeup. Thinking we’d probably take a lot of photos on Rosie’s first day home. “Do you need to pick up more clothes?” Or is it possible you’re back home to stay?

Rence shifted in place like his shoe pinched. “I wondered... I’m unsure of what’s expected here. Do you want to pack the rest of my things, or should I hire someone?”

His words had the unmistakable scent of an end. The end of our marriage. The end of his love. The end of anything Rence in my life. The thought of my life without him knifed my gut. But I wouldn’t, couldn’t sink into the bottomless chasm of black nothingness I’d worked so hard to leave behind.

So I breathed in his clean, fresh, just showered scent and coerced my voice to near normal. “I’m headed out for an hour. It’s a good time to take whatever you need.” And I wouldn’t have to witness Rence removing bits and pieces of our life together.

The doorbell chimed again. He reached for the knob, then dropped his hand. “Sorry, old habit.”

“It’s your house, too.” My nerves made my tone a little sharper than I intended. I opened the door to a young man wearing a BABY BLISS t-shirt. “Delivery for...” He checked his clipboard. “Ivy Abernathy. Crib and changing table.”

“Great.” I widened the door.

“This is the place,” he called to another man wearing the same shirt, waiting at the end of my drive.

“Take the stairs. Second room on the right.” I moved aside, let the delivery men pass.

Any possible way of softening the news Willa and Rosie were moving in evaporated. “Willa’s being released from the hospital today.”

Rence remained rooted in place. He looked as shocked as if he’d been slapped.

“Why don’t you pack whatever you need while I organize the furniture set up?”

He rolled his luggage toward the master suite, leaving behind a cloud of silent disapproval.

I detoured to the kitchen, shoveled ice in a glass, considered pouring a glass of wine, but filled it with water instead. Swallowing the cool liquid did nothing to quell the shooting pain pummeling my heart. Rence’s move-out day had to come sometime. Next would be divorce papers, then a court date.

I finished my drink and hauled myself up the back staircase to Willa’s room where the crib and changing table were almost assembled. I tucked tiny sheets in place, folded the pink chenille blanket inside the crib, and escorted the men to the door.

I steeled my heart into a tight ball and went to face Rence.

In our bedroom, a half-full suitcase lay open on our king-sized bed. Rence sat in the chair by the window, the wooden box holding the greeting cards he’d given me over the years at his feet. A stack of envelopes lay in his lap, one card in his hand. “I didn’t realize you kept these.”

His gaze drifted over the sitting area, to the bed, then back to me. “Ivy, I’ve searched my heart every day for a route back to you, to the life we shared. But every road I go down is paved with betrayal and pain too deep to push aside.”

It was irrational to believe I could look into Rence's eyes and know with certainty what he felt in his soul, that I could detect love under his cloak of hurt. But irrationality didn't change what my heart knew. Rence still loved me. "Have you filed for divorce?"

"Yes." His tone was firm but with the smallest tremor in his resolve.

"How long will you be in Europe?"

"A year."

A stab of fear crawled over my back. Why so long? Because he was running from Abby's death and the disintegration of our marriage. He was running from me.

He traced the front of the card with his finger. I recognized it from our last anniversary, remembered the tender handwritten message inside—

*Love isn't seen by the eyes*

*It's felt by the heart*

*Recognized by the soul*

He put the card back, handed me the box, got up, and shut his suitcase. "I'm sorry I hurt you." His voice was soft with an ache of regret. "You could come with me."

He kept his back to me, but the air between us electrified, and my heart unfurled like a flag in a summer's breeze. "Come with you?"

"We could start again in Europe. France or Italy." He turned then, and said, "London, you always loved London. We'll wipe away all the horrible memories." His pleading tone brought back memories of me begging, in this very room, imploring him to understand and forgive me.



When I didn't answer, he turned back to his luggage and snapped the locks. "If we lived somewhere else, far away, maybe we could put everything back together." His hope, edged in silent conditions, held me in check.

"You're capable of forgiving me for not telling you about Willa?"

His eyes clouded. No, not yet. Not true forgiveness. Not a forgiveness that would include Willa and Rosie in his life.

But I reveled in his desire to forgive, and his wish to rebuild our life filled me with promise. "I'd leave today, shut down Allure without a second thought, and follow you anywhere in the world, but I can't abandon Willa again."

Sadness crept over his handsome face, and I had a sudden desire to say anything, do anything to erase the deep crevices framing his eyes. But I inhaled a long calming breath and held my yearning and desperate desires at bay.

"I know it may sound crazy, but Abby's here, in our house." I held my hands palms up, open and inviting. "I sense her presence. Her spirit and love. I can't imagine living anywhere else."

A tortured, haunting expression filled his face. *You're choosing Willa, a girl you barely know, over me, your husband.* Rence's words came across so clearly, he might as well have spoken them aloud.

"Willa looks so much like you...so much like Abby. Seeing her leaves me empty. I can't bear it," he said.

"I know," I whispered. And I did know. As much as I'd grown to love Willa, there were times I still looked away, made excuses to leave a room, and sought privacy, a solitary place to mourn Abby.

I picked up the greeting cards and put them back in the box. “I understand you need to leave.” I opened his suitcase and slid the wooden box inside. “But I’m not going to sign your divorce papers right away. I’m going to wait for you to change your mind. I won’t wait forever. But I’ll wait.”

I relocked his luggage, then faced him. “And while you’re traveling the world, making your furniture designs famous in the five-star resorts of the world, I want you to do something for me. I want you to remember us—you and me. What we had. What we were to one another. And I want you to find your way back to me, to us.”

He must have shifted the five steps, or maybe it was me, but somehow I ended up in his arms.

“I miss you so much,” his soft aching voice filled me. And for a moment, our hearts beat in unison, slow and loving. Then he stepped away, rolled his suitcase down the hall and out of the only home we’d ever shared.

I had no idea if my destiny included Rence’s absolute forgiveness and acceptance of Willa and Rosie. But his admission that he missed me wrapped my heart in an optimistic peace. Goodbyes aren’t necessarily forever, and for now, that realization would have to be enough.

*IVY*

*TWO MONTHS LATER...*

A roaring fire and an almost-decorated Christmas tree were the only traditions I'd kept this year. Not succumbing to sleeping pills and hibernating until the New Year was a testament to the many grief books I'd consumed over the past two months.

I usually hauled out the holiday décor the first week of December, but without Abby and her Christmas excitement, I couldn't bring myself to embrace the season.

I woke every morning, reminding myself of a quote I read one night while battling insomnia. *She no longer wrestled with grief, but sat with it and made it a sharer of her thoughts.* It was how I balanced the loss of my precious Abby, a scar on my soul, with my promise to Willa to be the mother she deserved.

Now at six o'clock, exhausted from working a full day at Allure and then hauling boxes from the attic, I sat on the living

room sofa and slid Rosie's carryall sideways so I could see her better.

My beautiful dark-haired granddaughter looked nothing like Willa, or me, and nothing like Abby. No blonde hair or green eyes for our Rosie. She had thick black curls and eyes the color of decadent dark chocolate.

Willa nestled my old-world St. Nick onto a three-foot reindeer and set them on the fireplace hearth. The hearth and Santa looked bare without live poinsettias surrounding the base and blooming cacti on the mantel, but Willa was ecstatic over the idea of decorating more than just the tree.

She opened my this-and-that box. "What's in here?"

"A bit of everything."

Rosie whimpered.

I searched her carryall, found her pink pacifier, and popped it in her mouth. She latched on, and her eyes drifted shut. Having a newborn in the house had hardly taken any adjustment. Willa was a wonderful mom, a compulsive-mama-of-the-year type, often forcing me to fight to have grandma time.

Willa picked up my mom's silver-winged angel, my tree-topper, and fluffed the lace and tulle gown. "She's beautiful." She repositioned the ladder next to the tree, and we worked on arranging the angel on the top branch. My chest tightened with memories of Rence and Abby fastening the angel in place last year.

No tears today. Today was for Willa and Rosie and our first Christmas together. "Our tree rocks. Maybe dressing the house on Christmas Eve should be a new family tradition."

“That would be so dope.” Willa’s delight for any family-oriented event propelled me through the hardest of days. Taking family photos was her favorite. She snapped selfies of us everywhere, in the parks, at the river, in every room. She and Rosie softened the ache for my past life with Abby and Rence and coerced me into a world of now.

Rosie stretched, but she didn’t wake. Unlike Abby, Rosie slept often and well. Abby had always seemed to be in a battle with sleep as if she was aware her time on earth would be short, and she refused to miss even a minute.

Willa folded the ladder and set it against the wall. “What time are you leaving tomorrow?”

“I’m on the six-fifteen flight to Atlanta, then the overnight flight to Paris.”

Rence’s mother, Georgia, and I had a quiet lunch at the club before she left to celebrate Christmas with Rence in Europe. We’d exchanged Christmas gifts, and she’d sent presents home for Willa and Rosie. Georgia wasn’t yet willing to be an active part of their lives, but the hatred had burned off, and maybe a bit of acceptance was creeping in.

When we hugged goodbye, Georgia said, “Rence plans to spend New Year’s in Paris at the hotel Le Meurice.” She kissed my cheek, then added, “In the end, we only regret the chances we didn’t take.”

My pride scoffed at the idea of flying to Paris and surprising Rence, but my heart said, *he’s the mate to your soul.*

Two days ago, a round trip ticket to Paris arrived in the mail with a simple note attached—*I miss you, R.*

I no longer believed my world had to be perfect for me to be happy. True happiness came from accepting the imperfections of my life, the scars on my soul, the failures of myself and those I love. So I would go to Paris and perhaps as Rence said, in another city, in a place without so many painful memories, maybe we could find our way back to one another.

I rose and found the two white envelopes on the bookcase. “Come sit with me.”

Willa settled next to me on the sofa, and I handed her the first envelope. “Merry Christmas.”

She slipped out the brochure. “You’re giving me driving lessons?”

“I am. And when you graduate from driving school, we’ll car shop.”

“You’re offering to buy me a car?”

“That’s what parents do when their children graduate from high school and get accepted into a great engineering school. Georgia Tech’s Savannah campus is across town. You’ll need transportation.”

“But they haven’t accepted me yet.”

“They will.”

Rosie stirred, and I picked her up, nestled her over my shoulder. “And, you’ll need a way to take Rosie to daycare.” I handed her the second envelope. “This is your inheritance.”

Willa’s face scrunched, and my heart rolled a soft-somersault. Her expression reminded me so much of Abby. “Inheritance from whom?” she asked.

“Your grandparents. As my daughter, you received a portion of my parents’ estate.”

“Me?”

“You’re my daughter, sweetheart. And even though your grandparents didn’t have the pleasure of knowing and loving you, your Uncle Peter and I agreed they’d want you to have your rightful inheritance.”

“I’m in shock.” She held the paper by her fingertips as if the bank statement were priceless antiquity.

“You should have enough for tuition, living expenses through college, and Rosie’s daycare.”

“I can’t believe this. Oh, Ivy, I don’t know what to say.” Willa’s smile, like Abby’s, never failed to lighten my heart.

“You could say, ‘Thanks, Mom.’”

“You want me to call you Mom?” Her eyes welled, and tears trickled into her voice.

“You calling me Mom would be the best Christmas present you could give me.”

She swiped away tears. “God, I’m a wreck.”

“I think you’re perfect.” An overwhelming sense of peace filled me. No matter what happened, Willa and I would have each other.” I kissed the baby’s soft cheek. And we would have our Rosie.

I placed Rosie in her carryall. “We need to get ready. Our dinner reservations are at seven-thirty, and The Pink House will be busy tonight.”

“Wait.” Willa rummaged through the this-and-that box, plopped an elf hat on her head, and handed me another. “Let’s take our first Christmas selfie.” She linked her arm into mine and ushered me to the fireplace. We adjusted our elf hats in the mirror above the mantel.

A hearty vocal rendition of Jingle Bells filtered into the room, and Willa pointed out the window. “Look, carolers.”

But my gaze remained locked on the mirror—at the image floating like a hologram above our heads—Abby’s grinning face.

Willa held her phone at arm’s length. “Smile.”

I grabbed her phone, swiped the screen, and found the photo. It was there. A faint shadow tucked between Willa and me. To anyone else, the blue-green orb would look like a sparkle from the lights on the Christmas tree. I brought the phone closer. Maybe it *was* just the lights. But every nerve in my body tingled.

My beautiful, feisty Abby, with her sparkling emerald eyes and infectious laugh, just had to be alive somewhere, on some other plane—laughing, playing, running around in princess gowns and tiaras, and planning her next party.

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*Sneak Peek*  
*FIVE LIVES*

## CHAPTER 1

### *KACY*

*YOU ARE THE ARTIST OF YOUR OWN LIFE, DON'T HAND THE paintbrush to anyone else.*

I often recite this simple life quote to my clients. A reminder we steer our lives, and therefore control our destinies. But not even the smallest, tiniest corner of the mental landscape I'd spent fifteen years painting, depicted me at thirty-eight, single, and pregnant with Peter's child.

Yet, here I sit, two doors down from my office, in the last stall of a three-toilet bathroom, gripping a urine-stained white plastic dipstick. The streak of blue growing deeper and darker. Disbelief at my level of stupidity surged into dread, then segued into something closer to disgust.

How could I have had unprotected sex?

I'm a trained family therapist with a thriving practice that affords the corner office in Savannah's premier medical building. I teach life coping skills to clients of every age and ethnicity. I conduct fact-based studies to support my successfully blended family theories and present my findings

at symposiums all over the world. But none of my therapeutic go-to coping skills came within a million miles of managing the life-altering truth this strip of blue represents.

My brain latched onto one enormous reason this pregnancy is catastrophic. The father was Peter.

Peter spends eighty percent of his days in the rugged, war-torn mountains of Afghanistan and Iraq. He's a die-hard patriot serving our country. His calling is dangerous. His missions perilous. His days and nights erratic and volatile.

And for the past ten years, Peter has been my best friend.

But growing up, Peter was the cute kid next door. The cute kid I babysat for extra money. The cute kid who grew up to be the type some women refer to as a *player*. Who lives by the motto: three dates or less. No attachments. No promises. No unprotected sex.

Except for six weeks ago.

Home on leave, Peter was visiting when I received the call from the San Francisco police that my father had died with my fifth-grade photo clutched in his hand. I sobbed uncontrollably for my heroin-addicted dad's sad and lonely life. I cried for the broken little girl who lived in my heart, the one who had never stopped missing her dad.

Peter insisted I needed music and booze, but mostly booze. We went out clubbing, dancing, chugging tequila shots. We ended up back at my place. Always the protector, Peter announced, "I'm going to stay in your spare room."

That night I didn't want to be alone, and I didn't want to think about the next day's flight to San Francisco to claim the body of my father, arrange transport to Savannah, schedule his

burial in our family plot in Bonaventure. I didn't want to think about anything. Nothing at all.

So when Peter and I hugged goodnight at my guest room door, I lingered. "Thanks for being there for me today."

He traced a finger down my cheek. "Being away from you —" He swayed, grabbed my arm, then stumbled sideways. We used the wall for support. "Being away from you is the hardest part of leaving." His breath reeked with tequila.

My head went light, and the room spun. I leaned against Peter's chest in an attempt to steady myself. The emptiness of loss dragged me under. He must have seen something in my face because he tightened our hug.

Looking back, I blame the next part on the booze. My fingers dove into his hair, and I turned and found his lips. He hesitated no more than a millisecond.

His lips warm, his tongue searching. My body vibrated, and our kiss grew hot and hotter. Shock waves of desire shot flares straight to my center. I pulled at his shirt, desperate to get through the cotton and touch flesh.

Peter turned and pressed my back against the wall, and with practiced precision unbuttoned my shirt and unbuttoned my bra, then he half-carried, half-pulled me to the bed.

The next morning, nursing a killer headache, I made a pot of coffee and carried two mugs into the guest room—no reason to be ashamed. Sex was a natural response to heightened emotion. Mix in the alcohol, and best friends can end up in bed.

I woke Peter, sat on the bed, and wasted no time relaying a recent conversation I'd had with my gynecologist. At my last

appointment, Dr. Chamberlain suggested, “You might want to consider meeting with a specialist about freezing your eggs.”

Freeze my eggs? I was thirty-eight, not forty-eight. “You think freezing eggs is necessary at my age?” I’d asked.

“I’m only recommending you begin giving the idea consideration. Are you sexually active?”

“Not at the moment.” *Which was true until it wasn’t.*

“If freezing is something you want to try, you should consider going off the pill to allow your body to ovulate naturally.”

Peter said nothing, but his bugged-out eyes said enough. My carelessness surprised him.

“I’ve been on the pill twenty-plus years. My ovulation will be hit and miss for months. We don’t have anything to worry about.”

Peter placed his coffee on the nightstand, then met my gaze. Guilt, or something close, swam in his eyes. “I’m sorry. I have no excuse. We were both drunk, but I should’ve used protection.”

“The likelihood of me conceiving the first month is low. No, lower than low.”

After more assurances we’d be okay, especially since I planned to stop on the way to the airport and pick up a Plan B, or whichever new morning-after pill the pharmacist recommended. We moved on to what this meant to our relationship.

Peter agreed with me. We had to put the evening behind us. No matter how great the sex or our chemistry, we would resume our platonic normal.

I loved Peter, but I refused to explore the idea of a romantic relationship. I couldn't risk being any more than friends with a man addicted to the rush of danger.

I stuffed the life-changing dipstick in a CVS bag, the plastic clattering against the other two positive sticks, walked back to my office, and threw the bag into the trash. I checked the time, three-ten. I had twenty minutes until my next appointment. I inhaled a long yoga calming breath and slow-released the air. Focus, Kacy. Compartmentalize.

My next client, a first-year college student, suffered survivor's guilt. She opted to attend an out-of-state college, leaving her younger brother and sister with their alcoholic mother and an absentee father. I knew about the pain and heartbreak of absentee fathers.

Peter would be an absentee father.

I Googled the accuracy of over-the-counter pregnancy tests. According to the US Women's Health Organization, the accuracy rate registered at ninety-nine percent when administered correctly. Zero chance that three different pregnancy tests, from three different manufacturers, got it wrong.

My twenty-year go-to MO for working through a personal problem, text Peter. Only this time, Peter is more than just a best friend concerned only with my problem. This would be his problem too.

A chastising voice, sounding suspiciously close to my sixty-year-old over-involved mother's, whispered—*Peter's hunting terrorists. What can he do? Worrying him is selfish and unnecessary.* And, deep down, Mom would probably be thrilled to have a grandchild. Am I thrilled? Would Peter be thrilled? His parents would definitely be thrilled.

My body. My decision.

Didn't matter what anyone thought. I just needed a little time to think and regroup. I had seven hours before Peter called for our weekly video chat. Seven hours should be enough time to soothe the knot burning a hole through my intestines.

But down deep, in the heart-of-my-soul, I dreamed of marriage and family. No other reason I had spent five years and every spare dollar painstakingly remodeling the perfect family home. And Dr. Chamberlain had a valid point—at thirty-eight, my biological clock was ticking. How many more chances would I have to be a mom?

I shook off my glass-ball gazing. Rested a hand over my tight, flat, hundred-crunches-four-times-a-week abdomen and latched onto two truths.

This child was not the answer to my dream family.

And raising a child alone was not how I wanted to live my life—not even close. Single parenting had no place in my detailed and well-planned life canvas.

## CHAPTER 2

### *PETER*

I FINISHED MY LAST SET OF SQUATS AND HEADED FOR THE showers. This base, Al-Assad, was one of two US military sites targeted by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard in revenge for a US drone strike killing an Iranian major general. This gym was one of the few base amenities still standing.

“Captain Adams.” Colonel Borland’s staff sergeant threaded through the stationary bikes and rowing machines.

I tapped my earbud and paused “Paradise” by Coldplay.

“I have a message from the colonel.” He handed me a white, wax-sealed envelope.

A shot of adrenaline sizzled in my veins. A waxed seal denoted classified—for your eyes only. I broke the seal.

*\*\*\*Confidential\*\*\**

*Sender: Colonel J. Borland*

*Receiver: Captain Peter Adams—Jackal Team*

*Subject: 12 JULY: 0700 briefing*



A briefing message hand-delivered instead of emailed meant Jackal Team had a mission. My spine tingled with cold anticipation.

Like most lifers, especially those in Recon, the Marine Corp Reconnaissance division, I craved purpose and the blood-pumping defensive attacks of sorties.

I checked the time. Damn, I was fifteen minutes late for my weekly check-in with Kacy. I sprinted past the remnants of our old quarters, now a pile of steel and rock. A grim reminder of the dangers embedded in these desolate mountains and what an enemy's Scud missile could do. It was a miracle we'd only lost three men in the last airstrike.

I opened the door to a former supply building, emptied during the subsequent downsizing, and now Jackal Team's HAH—home away from home. American presence in the region was low, and rumors ran high that we'd be completely out within the year.

I dumped my backpack on my bunk and placed my laptop on the cardboard box I used as a bedside table. Opening my FaceTime app, I tapped Kacy's photo. Twenty seconds later, her face filled the screen.

"There you are." I sat on the corner of my mattress. She'd piled her hair on top of her head and wore no make-up. She looked ready for bed. In Savannah, it was three o'clock in the afternoon. "You sick or something?"

"No. I'm taking a couple of days off." She looked a little pale.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Everything's great." Her eyes darted away, then back to me. She licked her lips. Smiled. In less than three

seconds, she'd managed to exhibit three classic signs of lying. If she were my captive, I'd dismiss anything she tried selling.

I slid across the mattress, pressed my shoulders against the wall, and reconsidered her face. "You're pale, and you look tired. You sure you're feeling okay?"

She touched her cheek, then her lips. "Just exhausted. I spent an hour chasing Ms. Rice's Labrador around the neighborhood. Brutus is terrorizing my cats. They're scared to come out from under the porch."

"By your cats, you mean the neighborhood ferals you feed?"

"I'm up to four." She glanced away again as if she had a hard time meeting my eyes, or maybe a noise outside distracted her. She looked back at the screen. "My neighbors are starting to call me the creepy cat woman."

"You'd rock the black leather."

Her eyelids fluttered, then she laughed, but it was a second late. Her mind was somewhere else. "So, what's up with you? You had any interesting missions this week?" Her flat voice held none of its usual warmth, and Kacy never asked about my work. She knew better. My team's sorties were off-limits.

I noted her slumped shoulders and her hands in constant movement smoothing the pillow in her lap. She reminded me of a local Afghan being questioned by a uniformed soldier. She wanted to end our conversation as quickly as possible. This mood of hers had something bigger behind it.

"What's wrong, Kace?"

"Nothing's wrong." She repositioned the pillows behind her back.

“You sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Why?”

“I’m a trained interrogator. I can read a remote flick of your eyelash and know if you’re lying. And you, Dr. Norris, are lying.”

”Yeah, yeah.” No condescending eye roll. No chastising lecture on the difference between body language and mind reading. She looked left again, towards the large picture window in her bedroom. Definitely evading.

“What’s up?”

Her gaze swept back to her screen, her forehead as wrinkled as a pug pup. “I told you, nothing’s wrong.” Too much force behind her denial.

“Really? Because you look like shit. You got the flu or something?”

“Said I was fine, Adams. Let it go.”

Were those tears backing up? I gave her my best stink-eye. “Don’t make me call Rena.”

The threat of calling her mom netted me the eye roll, followed by a quick grin. “God, if you call Mom, she’ll gush for a week.”

“Yeah. I’m thinking Rena’s crushing on me.”

Her half-snorted laugh sounded genuine, and my concern settled some.

“Mom’s been crushing on you since you were in ninth grade.” Her cheeks colored close to normal, and her eyes dried. “And you egg it on. Showing up last month for Sunday

dinner with flowers in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other.”

“I know how to treat my women.”

The little color she’d regained, drained away faster than a downed Scud missile.

Shit. A thoughtless comment considering I’d treated Kacy to unprotected sex last month. Something I don’t do. Ever.

I softened my voice. “Christ. I’m sorry. I mean…” I needed to make this right. “I thought we were okay. Before I left, you said you wanted us back to normal. Platonic normal, I think you called it.”

“We are okay.” Tears pooled in her amber eyes. “We are back to normal.”

If this mood was about us having sex, why is she just now bringing it up? Why not in last week’s call, or the week before that? Whatever’s going on, it’s not about us. “Something’s wrong. You’re crying. You never cry.”

She leaned back as if to put more distance between us. “I cried on your shoulder for two hours last month.”

I gave her my best don’t-bullshit-me stare. “Stop evading. Give it up.”

She yanked at the bottom of her t-shirt and said nothing. Kacy and I always talked about everything, her problems, mine. The only subjects off the table were my sorties and her patients. She couldn’t look me in the eye—this had to be about our last night together.

This weirdness was the reason we’d kept our relationship “friends only” for twenty years. I might not be able to fix this

seven thousand miles away. Fuck me—I'd ruined the only relationship I'd ever had worth saving.

“Peter...” She bent forward and rested her head on her knees.

The need to pull her into my arms, to soothe and protect, to beat the hell out of the asshole who'd hurt her, exploded in my chest. Only, I was the asshole— “Talk to me. Tell me what you're feeling.”

She might've sniffled, but her head was still on her knees, and I couldn't be sure. Then her shoulders moved. What the hell? Kacy had super-hero fierceness. Nothing shook her. She always knew the answer to every problem, or at least she made you think she did.

I had to fix this. “Whatever is bothering you, we can talk it out. Nothing can't be fixed.”

She raised her head, then squeezed her eyes tight. “I'm pregnant.”

I swallowed dry spit. “You're pregnant?” The news hit like a scud from a silent drone. Big news, life-changing, no wonder she's whacked out. I massaged my forehead, surprised at my icy fingers. “Who's the father?”

## CHAPTER 3

### *KACY*

ON MY COMPUTER SCREEN, PETER SAT ON HIS COT IN SLACK-mouth shock. His green eyes flat, his shoulders slumped. Then, like sand filtering through an hourglass, he straightened in tiny increments, and his coloring returned to his normal olive tone.

“Who’s the father?” His words struck like a butcher’s knife into my heart. No. Worse. A scythe slicing my limbs one by one. Stop. Talking.

How could he refuse responsibility? Likely denial.

I’d tell a client this was a reasonable initial response. Advise them to remain calm. Give Peter a minute to process reality. But Peter isn’t a client in couples’ therapy. He’s the father of my unborn child.

I could lie, tell him the father was someone else, someone I met recently. Ten minutes ago, I hadn’t even planned on telling him about the pregnancy. I could let Peter off the hook. I could do that, probably should do that. Why burden him with something he has no say in changing?

But I couldn't lie. He'd know in a second. And even if he pretended to buy-in to my lie, the deception would always be between us. Growing and mushrooming until our friendship disintegrated. Lies erode trust. Without trust, we'd have no true friendship. Above all, I didn't want to lose Peter.

"You haven't mentioned that you were seeing anyone." His voice was an octave higher, but oddly controlled. He was a master at hiding emotions. Probably something they taught in Special Ops 101. But if you knew where to look, visceral signs were woven into his expression—the quick flash of surprise, the small band of white ringing his lips. His inferring the baby isn't his is more hope than belief.

"I'm not seeing anyone," I said. "Last time I had sex, you were in the room. Or, more accurately, in the bed."

His pupils enlarged. He blinked, recovered. Said nothing.

Heat flashed in my gut. Lucky for him, he was seven thousand miles away, or I'd slap him into reality. "Dumb ass. Me and you. We're pregnant. You're the father."

He inhaled a quick breath. I knew that look. Peter was about to tell me the dangers of his job. How he never knew when or if he would return. All the reasons he was unattached.

My head turned as light and gooey as melted marshmallows. "I know what you're going to say." I didn't want or need to hear it. Didn't matter anyway—I'd made up my mind. But for some reason, his blank face pissed me off.

He stared at me—me at him.

He kneaded his forehead. "I'm not devoted father material."

I took a mental step back. Pushing Peter for the reaction I needed was self-serving and would change nothing. I counted

to ten, found my calm. “The thing is, you are a devoted father—to your men. And like all good dads, you put them before anything else in your life.”

I pulled my gaze away. I wasn’t in the right mind space to read the emotions skittering across his face. Instead, I focused on the landscape of a field of red poppies on my far wall. “I’ve decided to abort the pregnancy. I have an appointment tomorrow afternoon.” No matter how realistic the words, my chest still tightened.

“God, Kace. I’m sorry. Incredibly sorry.” His tender voice shattered my resolve, but I kept my gaze averted.

“It’s a simple procedure. I just thought...” I swallowed a lump of tears. “I don’t know what I thought. It just didn’t seem right not to tell you.”

“I’m glad you told me. And I’d give anything to be there with you.”

I pushed out the hurt and turned back to the screen. “Abortion’s the right decision.”

He leaned forward, his face taking up the entire screen. “It might be the right decision, but that doesn’t make it any easier.”

Once again, Peter drilled down and hit the core of my pain.

“What time will you get home?” he asked.

“The clinic estimates three hours. My appointment is at one o’clock.”

“I have an early morning briefing, but I’ll call as soon as it’s over and make sure you’re okay. But, I should be there holding your hand, taking care of you afterward.” Men



laughed in the background. “Are you going to the clinic alone?”

Tomorrow would be a hellish day, an emotional roller coaster. I had to shut down this call. I didn’t need Peter’s concern. He wasn’t here now, and he wouldn’t be here tomorrow for me to lean on. This, I had to face alone. “Yes, I’ll go alone. There’s a sedative involved, so I’ll order a car.”

“Why not call Rena or your receptionist, Sally. Either of them could go with you.”

“I’m a big girl. And the last thing I want is to explain this to my employee or my mom.”

“I’m so sorry—”

“I’ll be fine.” And I would be fine. Abortion was the only call here. As much as I loved Peter, admired him, and his passion, he was right. He wasn’t father material.

This child was not the answer to my dream family. Raising a child alone was not how I wanted to live my life. And having this child wouldn’t be fair to Peter. Serving his country and keeping us safe was enough of a burden for him to bear. And, this decision was mine alone.

## CHAPTER 4

### *PETER*

IT WAS MIDNIGHT IN SAVANNAH, BUT I HAD TO CALL. I grabbed my phone.

“This is a surprise,” Kacy’s voice was wide awake even though she sat in bed, leaning against a pile of blue pillows. “Twice in one day.” She muted her TV and offered me a tentative half-smile. “What’s on your mind, Corporal?”

I tried smiling back, but it stuck halfway. Words tumbled in my head like rocks and water and mortar in a concrete mixer. Whatever I said now would solidify and become permanent. “I can’t sleep.”

“Me, either.”

“I don’t want us to jump to a mistake. Rush a decision without looking at all sides.”

She stiffened. Inhaled a long breath. So much courage in that breath. So much selflessness. She’d listen for however long I needed because she’d want me to be okay with her decision. Her face hardened. “I know what you’re thinking—”

“You can’t. Not this time. Because I don’t even know what I’m thinking.”

“Don’t drama this up and make it harder.”

“I admit, I haven’t thought this through, but I think you should wait. On the abortion. Take a few days to consider all the options.” Sweat drenched my shirt as if I’d just finished a hundred count of push-ups. “I’m not ideal. I get that. Not the father you ever imagined for your kid.” Before she shut me down, I had to get this out. “Still, I’ll be there in whatever ways I can. I’ll support you, financially, emotionally, as much as my job allows. And I’ll be there for you and the baby as much as I can, whenever I can. I know how much you want a family.”

She made a sound in her throat that a rabid dog would’ve backed away from. Then she squinted as if she wanted to see into my brain.

I decided to spit out the idea that had bombarded my head for the last four hours. “A baby will change our lives. And having a kid together will cement us together forever. But we already are. Cemented together. So nothing changes between us. “

Something swept across her face. Something vulnerable. She shrugged as if her shoulders were too heavy to lift, and my heartbeat pounded in my ears. I rushed on, “Will you consider waiting? I’ll be out of pocket for a few days. Could be longer. I’ll know more in a few hours. But can you wait?”

Her eyes shined with tears. Her gaze traveled in the direction of her window. She looked so small, so defenseless as if she’d run out of verbal ammo.

“I know you have it all figured out. I don’t mean to add more pressure.” But I was. Rushing in, using what she called my testosterone knee-jerk reaction. “I know, I don’t have the right to butt in.”

She gave a hard and fast head shake. “No. You have a right because I opened the door.” Her voice cracked. She was close to crying.

My gut twisted, then pulled tight.

“I can’t talk anymore,” she said. “I need some time to process. Call me in the morning.” Her face disappeared.

I stared at the blank screen. Now I’d screwed it. She had her plan mapped out. Hadn’t asked me to muscle in with my take. But I had. And now—

“Hey, Midas,” Scorp pulled aside the blue tarp separating my sleeping quarters from the kitchen. “Making a protein bar run. Need any?”

“No, thanks.” I closed down my phone and removed the map from my pack. I’d check in with Kacy in the morning before the team took off. If I got enough notice. Damn. I shouldn’t have called and muddied up her decision.

But I had no choice. I had to put Kacy and the baby aside and get my head centered on tomorrow’s objective. Failed missions equaled dead soldiers. I’d be no help to Kacy or the baby dead.

Hi,

If you enjoyed this book, I'm guessing you'll probably enjoy my other books. Sign up for my free newsletter to get exclusive deals and be the first to hear about my new releases before anyone else. You can get on my email list here:

<https://veronicamixon.com/index.php/joinmymailinglist/>

My readers are the lifeblood of my writing, and I continually strive to deliver a page-turning read that keeps you up late into the night, and when you've finished the last chapter, leaves you wanting more.

If you enjoyed this book, please tell your friends, family, and coworkers. And as a special favor, I would very much appreciate you taking a moment to rate *Three Faces in the Mirror*.

Happy reading,

*Veronica*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A special thank you to Suzanne Purvis, editor extraordinaire, who patiently guided me through the first, second, third, and on and on, drafts of this book. My undying gratitude for setting the writing bar so darn high! You're a marvel and a talent, and I'm fortunate to have you in my writing life.

And to Katelyn Mixon-Bevilacqua, the marketing genius who handles all the details so I can write, write, write. You are a godsend, and even better, incredibly talented. But most of all, you are funny. And funny is what keeps us both sane.

Also By VERONICA MIXON

*Changing Tides*

*The Blood Gold Abduction*

*Loblolly (release date September 2020)*

*Five Lives (release date April 2021)*

## AUTHOR BIO



Veronica began storytelling at a young age, somewhere around three, when a host of imaginary friends lived in her bedroom closet and encouraged her penchant for spinning tales. A career in marketing, twenty years of world travel, and a large and boisterous southern family supply her with ample material for the mysteries and family sagas she loves to write. She lives on the Georgia coast with her husband and her eleven-year-old Standard Poodle, Jasper.

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