

GRACE MEYERS

The
CHRISTMAS
REUNION

Holiday Hearts
• 1 •



THE CHRISTMAS
REUNION

HOLIDAY HEARTS
BOOK 1

GRACE MEYERS



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CHAPTER ONE



“Oh hey, Heths, one more thing.”

Heather winced when she heard her 29-nine-year-old manager, Reese, use the nickname that she’d asked him countless times not to call her. She was standing at her work locker in the breakroom, trying to unwind a little bit from her nine-and-a-half-hour shift, before hopping in her clunker of a car and driving home to her cold, empty apartment. She’d been working non-stop for eight days straight and was in desperate need of a weekend, but something about the tone in Reese’s voice made her think that he was about to ask her to stay on for the late shift.

“What do you need?” Heather was less than two years shy of forty, and the only thing she hated more than being on her feet all day and dealing with gripping customers, was the fact that her boss was nearly ten years younger than her. He’d been made manager because he had a business degree from some online university that Heather had never heard of. She wasn’t even sure it was an accredited school, but she kept this opinion to herself for fear of getting fired.

“I just wanted to remind you that starting the day after tomorrow, you’re going to need to be wearing your Christmas uniform to work.”

Heather wasn’t sure whether she should feel relieved or devastated. On the one hand, she was glad Reese hadn’t asked her to stay late, but on the other, the aforementioned Christmas uniform was a literal nightmare. Every year, she and the rest of the waitstaff had to swap out their plain black vests for green

and red striped ones, which were made out of stiff polyester and were impossibly itchy. “I lost mine,” she said quietly, as she gathered her things out of her locker. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay,” Reese said with a shrug. “That just means you’ll have to get another one, and the cost of the old one will come out of your next paycheck.”

Heather sighed as she shut her locker door. She let her forehead come to rest on the cold metal of her locker and closed her eyes. “Let me look in my closet first,” she said, knowing full well that the uniform was tucked into the back of one of her dresser drawers where she’d stuffed it away after last year’s holiday season graciously came to an end. “Maybe I can find it.”

“I thought you might,” Reese said. “But let me know if you come up short. I can always order you a new one!” He waved on his way out of the breakroom, and once she was alone, Heather sat down at the table where day in and day out she ate her sad, rushed lunches alongside her equally exhausted coworkers. Dropping into the chair, she felt the muscles in her lower back cry out and she could practically hear them begging her not to get back onto her feet for the rest of the night.

She took her phone out and saw two missed calls from Kiki, and since it felt so good to rest for a second, she decided to call her best friend back before leaving the restaurant and turning in for the night. Kiki answered right away.

“Hey!” she said. “What gives? I thought you got off work like an hour ago.”

“I was supposed to, yeah,” Heather said. “But these people came in right as my shift was ending and you know how Reese is. He told me I didn’t really have a choice, since they sat in my section and another waitress hadn’t shown up yet to take over for me. My only options were to bail and leave the poor new girl with double the workload, or suck it up and serve them.”

“Did they at least tip you well?”

Heather shrugged. “They tipped fine. Not as much as I would’ve liked, but isn’t that always the case? Anyway, I’m exhausted and want to get out of here before Reese finds another excuse to keep me late, so tell me what’s up.”

“I was calling to see if we were still on for drinks tonight.”

Heather sucked hair through her teeth, making a hissing sound. “Oh, shoot. I totally forgot we made plans. Sorry. You know how these long shifts just make me so scatterbrained. Raincheck?”

“Sure, no problem. Is that punk going to give you a day off anytime soon? We could finally check out that new brunch place everyone’s been raving about.”

Heather laughed. “What would we order at a place like that?” she asked. “I don’t know if I could even afford a small stack of pancakes with their prices.”

“During the holidays, maybe you could,” Kiki said. “People always tip more during the holidays. The giving season has already started at my salon.” Kiki worked as a manicurist at a nail salon just down the street from her dingy apartment. She and Heather had met when they were waiting tables together nearly twenty years earlier. Kiki spent those years putting small amounts of money away each month so she could afford to go to beauty school. Her dream was to become a hair-dresser but that program was twice as long and three times as expensive as the nail technician program, so she opted to do that instead and had been working as a manicurist for the last decade or so. It was a thankless job and she made most of her money on tips just like she did as a waitress, but at least she didn’t have to be on her feet all day.

Although, working hunched over at the nail desk for eight hours didn’t exactly do wonders for aging spines either.

“We’ll see,” Heather said. “I think I should be able to knock off early tomorrow, and then I definitely get Sunday off because I’ve had that marked as my day off on the schedule for like three weeks straight. Reese will probably ask me to work on it at the last minute, but I’m determined to hold my

ground and say no. Even though I could use the money, I could use the rest even more.”

“Plus, Sunday is *brunch day*.”

Heather shook her head, smiling. “Not for people like us. Sunday is ‘lay on the couch and try to soak up as much relaxation time as possible before you have to go back to work’ day.”

“I think it can be both,” Kiki said. “And then after we eat, you can come over to my place and help me start decorating for Christmas.”

Heather bit the inside of her lip and just barely held herself back from groaning. She really didn’t like this time of year, and Kiki often accused her of being a Scrooge. Or a Grinch. Or generally just a holiday downer. Heather didn’t really mind being called a grouch, but she did try her best not to take away other people’s joy. She understood why others loved this time of year so much, and Kiki especially didn’t have very many things to look forward to, so Heather took no pleasure in dashing her Christmas spirit.

But she also didn’t exactly want to join in on the festivities either.

“Maybe,” she said. “It just depends on how tired I am. Listen, I gotta run. I heard it was maybe going to start snowing tonight, and you know how my car is when there’s—well—any weather at all really.”

Kiki laughed. “Yeah, I’ll let you go. I don’t want to have to come dig you out of a snow bank like last year.”

“I’ll text you tomorrow about brunch.”

“Sounds good! Drive safe.”

They hung up and Heather pushed herself up to her feet, ignoring the pain in her muscles and heading through the backdoor. It was a blustery night in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Heather’s patchy winter coat was doing little to stave off the icy wind. The zipper on the coat was broken so Heather had to hold it closed with her hands as she ran across the street to where her car was parked. She shut the door and let out a

heavy exhale, then turned the key to get the engine going so she could get the heat going.

The first two tries, nothing happened, but thankfully on her third attempt, the car roared to life for the first time all day and she felt something akin to excitement. Even though she'd worked late, there was still enough time in her evening to take a hot bath and watch a little TV before bed. These were the simple pleasures that Heather had grown very attached to ever since she moved out of her hometown and had to start fending for herself in the city. Her nighttime and morning rituals were very important to her. Since she spent her entire workday talking to strangers non-stop, she always looked forward to having some quiet time to herself at the beginning and end of each day. Even if it was just half an hour, twenty minutes maybe, where she could have some peace and serenity, she would take it.

Driving through the city streets, she made a conscious effort to keep her shoulders down and not scrunched up around her ears. She had been so overworked and stressed the last few days and was taking it out on her own joints by holding herself in such odd, tense positions.

Gotta stop doing that...

A few of the houses in her neighborhood were already lit up with strings of Christmas lights and someone had even put up an inflatable Santa in their front yard. He was huge, with rosy cheeks and two chubby hands that held up a sign that read *Merry Christmas To All, and To All A Good Night*.

She found herself smiling, ever so slightly, as she read the message to herself in her head. Turning the corner onto her street, she wondered if it was possible that this year, the holidays wouldn't be so bad. They always brought with them a lot of negative emotions, and terrible memories, but perhaps she could finally start to make some new, happier memories. Maybe she could spend Christmas with Kiki and actually try to get into the holiday spirit. She liked hot chocolate and warm fires as much as the next person, so maybe there was a chance she could carve out a little slice of happiness for herself that year—if she really put her mind to it.

This idea made her smile stretch even wider and she actually let out a little laugh as she dashed up the stairs of her apartment building and punched in the code to let her into the main door. Inside, it was nice and warm, and there was a tiny pink Christmas tree sitting on the desk next to the mailboxes. She had a feeling her landlord, Vin, hadn't been the one to put it up. He'd never decorated for the holidays in the past, and the few times Heather had interacted with him, he hadn't exactly struck her as the kind of person who bought pink trees from the bargain bin at the crafts store.

Still, the little tree looked nice, and Heather didn't hate the way the blue and lime-green ornaments adorning each branch caught the light from the stairwell.

Maybe this year I'll even get a tree of my own...

She hadn't put up a tree since she was a kid still living back home with her parents. Back then, she used to *love* Christmas. December was really the only time of year that her father spent time with the family, and he was always in such a good mood, which meant that her mother was less on edge. In general, everyone in her house was happy when the holidays rolled around and Heather used to cherish every single second of it, and she would be deeply saddened whenever it came time to celebrate New Year's because she knew that her dad would be back to work January 2nd. Not just that, he would be back to his cold and unforgiving self.

She thought of this rollercoaster of emotions and the fact that now it was as if she was riding it backward as she climbed up the stairs to the third floor and walked down to the unit all the way to the end of the hall. Nowadays, she started out the holiday season feeling miserable and rejoiced every time she heard the fireworks ring out on New Year's Eve. It was the complete opposite of what she'd experienced as a child, but in a way, that meant it was very fitting. Her life in almost every aspect felt so different than her life growing up in fancy suburbs along Lake Michigan.

But she wouldn't dwell on all that tonight. She had a hot bath and some bad reality television waiting for her inside the drafty one-bedroom she'd been renting out for just under a

year now. She was so excited to get inside her apartment, in fact, that she totally ignored the colorful slip of paper that had been taped to her door. She figured it was another flier for someone's band or a takeout menu to whatever new hole-in-the-wall restaurant had opened up in the vacant lot one block over. She put her key in the lock and felt a rush of cold air brush past her as she stepped inside her dark entryway/kitchen. She flipped the light on, and only then did she see the words printed in bold at the top of the piece of paper.

EVICTIION NOTICE

Gasping, she ripped the page off of her door and scanned the first few sentences, which were not quite as aggressive as those first two words but still made her stomach drop. She was being kicked out of the apartment, apparently because people in the unit next door to hers had been filing noise complaints against her, but she knew that was impossible. She was quiet as a mouse and always watched TV on her laptop with headphones on, so there was no way anybody around her was hearing much of anything. This was her landlord making up stories so he could break her lease early and try to get a new tenant in there at a higher rate before the start of the new year.

There was always an influx of college students looking for housing in late December and the start of January, and because they were desperate to find a place to live before classes started, it was easy for landlords to charge them an exorbitant amount. The only reason Heather had managed to get her hands on this apartment in the first place, which was just a few blocks from the University of Michigan campus, was because the previous tenant had been a student who dropped out halfway through the semester back in March leaving the landlord high and dry. Technically, she should've been allowed to stay in that apartment until March 15th of the following year, but was there even a way for her to fight back against this?

Even if she accused her landlord of making up the noise complaints, she couldn't prove it, and he had so much power over the other desperate and poor tenants, that they would back him up if he threatened to kick them out too.

She'd been down this road before, with other shady and greedy property owners and she wasn't interested in dealing with again.

Feeling deflated, but honestly too tired to actually carry the weight of all this just yet, Heather dragged her wary body to the bathroom and ran the hot water. She had to be out in less than a week or so said the threatening slip of yellow paper, but at least she had a place to call her own for a couple more nights. She would start packing up her things over the weekend and hopefully, Kiki wouldn't mind letting her crash on her couch until she was able to save up enough money to fork over the first month's rent and a security deposit on a new place.

Just thinking about how many more doubles she'd have to work to scrape that amount together made her want to cry, but Heather managed to push those concerns down for now. She got into the tub once it was full of steaming hot water and laid her head back. Closing her eyes, she shook her head and a single tear fell from her eye as a cynical thought floated through her mind.

And here I thought this holiday season might've been different.

Here I thought Christmas might've actually been nice for a change...

CHAPTER TWO



The next day, Heather told Kiki what happened and her friend reacted exactly as Heather thought she would. First, filled with fiery indignation, Kiki went on a rant about how all landlords were pretty much evil, and that even the ‘good ones’ would screw you over if given half the chance. She then started to flip through an outdated phone book that a previous tenant had left in Kiki’s apartment and gave numbers over the phone, telling Heather she needed to call someone to fight her case. After Heather reminded her that she didn’t have any money to hire a lawyer, Kiki changed her tune and told Heather that she should just pack up all her things and come over to her place that very instant.

“I have to leave for work soon,” Heather said. “But if I get off early like I should, then I’ll have time to come back here and pack up most of my stuff. Then I’ll come around.”

“And you’ll stay here for the month, yeah?”

“It’s not going to take me an entire month to find a new place...”

“It might,” Kiki said. “Besides, it’ll be fun having you around. I know you’re not a huge fan of the holidays, but I think it’ll be nice to have some company. Nice for *both of us*. Sometimes it feels really isolating here in my apartment on the other side of town. I miss the days when we used to live closer together.”

“I’m only going to stay as long as I need to,” Heather said. “But... uh... thanks for being so quick to offer. It means a

lot.”

She was pretty sure she could hear Kiki smiling through the phone. “Yeah, well, it’s not as if you would ever actually *ask* for my help.”

“That’s not true,” Heather said. “I called you when my car got trapped in the snow and asked you for help, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, but only after you tried to dig yourself out all on your own for over an hour,” she said. “You risked giving yourself frostbite *and* losing your job before you swallowed your pride and dialed my number. Talk about stubborn.”

Heather pursed her lips. She was sitting at the small table by the window in her kitchen, savoring the last few sips of her instant coffee. “Well, either way, you’re taking a nice moment and turning it into a sour one. I was just trying to say thanks for always being there for me when I needed you regardless of who asked or who offered or whatever.”

Kiki laughed. “No thanks necessary. I’ll get some wine on my way home from the salon tonight and we can start looking for a new apartment if that’s what you want. We can make a drinking game out of it or something. It’ll be a blast.”

Heather smiled. “If you say so.”

That night, after getting off work at a reasonable hour for once, Heather went back to her apartment and threw the majority of her things into a couple of bins she’d kept from the last time she moved. She didn’t own very many clothes and had even less trinkets and the like. She only had as many dishes as a single woman needed, which was to say a couple of plates, a couple of bowls, and a handful of missorted silverware. Everything she owned, besides the chair and table she purchased at a thrift store a few months back, fit into the trunk of her car. She took it all with her to Kiki’s, vowing to come back in a day or two to get anything left behind.

Kiki’s apartment was in a duplex and she had the lower level which meant her front door opened up right out onto the street. She was sitting on her couch by the window when

Heather pulled up, staring out at the snow that was beginning to fall. Heather parked her car on the curb and waved, but Kiki was lost in thought and didn't notice her.

Kiki had been right about one thing—Heather didn't like asking for help so she didn't make a big fuss out of grabbing all of her things out of the trunk on her own. She made multiple trips, taking one box at a time up to Kiki's front stoop, and then going back for more. Kiki was no longer at the window so she didn't see her friend struggling to get the heavier boxes all the way from her car. Once all her stuff was piled up by the door, Heather knocked, and about thirty seconds later Kiki opened the door with two glasses of red wine in hand. She frowned when she saw the boxes and bags.

“Wait... You unloaded all of this without me?”

“It wasn't really too much,” Heather said, a little out of breath but determined to appear totally casual. “Not a problem.”

“But—” Kiki sighed. “I was going to insist we do a little toast and then I was gonna help you get everything out of the car.”

“Now we can toast the fact that everything is *already* out of the car,” Heather said, reaching for one of the glasses.

Kiki rolled her eyes but clinked her glass against Heather's anyway, and they drank. Afterward, Kiki helped Heather bring all her things inside and pile them neatly in the corner of her living room. “Feel free to put stuff wherever,” she said. “And sorry the couch isn't a pullout, but at least it's long enough that you should be able to stretch out no problem.”

“It's perfect,” Heather said. “All I really care about is having a roof over my head now that it's getting to be winter. Plus, you're one of the few people I know who actually has a *working fireplace*.” Heather walked to the other side of the living room and ran her hand along the top of the mantel. It was smooth, and she was reminded of the massive fireplace that took up the back wall of her living room growing up. Above it hung a gaudy oil portrait of her and her parents that Heather's father had commissioned when she was in middle

school. She had a terrible time the day it was painted, seeing as she was only eleven years old, and holding still for that long was quite a challenge. But Heather had always been an obedient child who did what her parents asked of her, so she did her best to stand around without complaining for what ended up being nearly four hours.

She remembered thinking that if she ever grew up and had kids, she would *never* make them do something that boring, nor would she ever put up a painting that was so humiliatingly haughty.

“Whatcha thinking about?” Kiki asked, saddling up to Heather’s side with a plate of sugar cookies she’d just pulled out of the oven. They were made from the cheap dough that the grocery store sold for half-off the day before it expired, but Heather didn’t care. She knew they were perfectly safe to eat, and she even smiled with delight as she popped one in her mouth and the warm, sugary goodness melted over her tongue.

“Nothing,” she said. “I was just thinking that I should’ve picked up some firewood on my way over.”

“I’ve got some,” Kiki said. “It’s just in the back. Hopefully, it didn’t get wet. I put a tarp over it, but sometimes the wind blows it off. I’ll go check.” Kiki headed out through the back door of her apartment and Heather made herself comfortable on the couch that would be serving as her bed for the next couple of weeks. It was comfortable enough, and since this neighborhood was safe and cozy, Heather was generally happy to be there. She was still upset over everything that happened with her landlord, but she had been in more dire straits before. She wasn’t going to let this minor hiccup derail her entire life. She would do whatever it took to land back on her feet, even if it meant working doubles for the entire month of December.

Perhaps working so much would end up being a blessing in disguise anyway—because then she wouldn’t have to wallow alone with her own thoughts during the holidays. As much as Heather liked having peace and quiet, this wasn’t the time of year for her to have too much time on her hands. Otherwise, her mind might travel to some of the darker, colder

corners of her memory, and the last time she let that happen, she ended up not being able to get out of bed for nearly two weeks straight.

Kiki had been the one to pull her out of that particular downward spiral, and Heather was determined not to let her friend see her that way again. She wouldn't let herself think too much about her past, and make sure she found something to occupy her time on Christmas Eve since the restaurant would be closed. She made the mistake last year of just assuming she'd be working that day, only to find out on the 23rd that she wasn't booked for even a single shift. She'd gone to the homeless shelter that day and volunteered for as long as they needed and she would do the same thing this year, not just on Christmas Eve, either. She planned on signing up for volunteer shifts whenever she could for the next little while. Anything to keep her busy, and the fact that it also helped out her community, was a plus. Now, all that was left to do was convince Kiki to come with her.

"Hey," she said as her friend came back into the room and tossed a couple of logs into the fireplace. "I was thinking about doing some more volunteering this month, if you're interested."

"More?" she balked. "Heather, you already go to the soup kitchen twice a week, which you hardly even have time for as is."

She shook her head. "Nah, I had to cut down to once a week as things started to pick up at the restaurant."

"Even still, it's too much for one person. You deserve a break every now and then too."

"I take breaks," Heather said. "Every night when I come home and crawl under a warm blanket and go to sleep on a real pillow, I'm taking a break. The people we serve at the soup kitchen are the ones who never get a break."

Kiki sighed as she bent down to get going on the fire. "I know, I know. And I'm happy to help volunteer when I have time, it's just..." She glanced over her shoulder and Heather had a feeling she knew what she was going to say. "It just

makes me really sad sometimes, you know? I like helping out, I really do, but when I see those poor women show up with their kids, and she's all skin and bones and..."

She trailed off and sniffled a little as she went back to dealing with the fire. "I give money sometimes..."

"I'm not trying to make you feel like you're not doing enough," Heather said. "I understand how busy you are, and the fact that you even show up every now and again means you're doing more than most people."

"But compared to you..."

Heather laughed. "It's not about comparisons. It's about helping people." She got up and went to sit on the floor next to Kiki. "Listen, I swear I didn't bring it up to hurt your feelings. In all honesty, I'm asking you to volunteer with me so that I can keep my mind busy for the next month. You get it, right?"

Kiki looked over at Heather and nodded. "Yeah, I get it."

"So you'll do it?" Heather said, perking up.

"When I have time, sure," she said. "As long as you promise that we can relax every now and again while we're living together. I understand that you feel a responsibility to give back because you know what it's like to be unsheltered, but I also think it's important that you remember that you deserve to enjoy the life you have, even if other people don't have all the same luxuries you do."

Heather frowned and looked at the fire, which was finally starting to spark to life. "I know that..."

"Do you?"

She didn't answer right away. She knew what Kiki wanted to hear, but she would be lying if she'd told her friend that she didn't sometimes feel like she was still paying off her debts. Sure, she'd known what it was like to be unsheltered and to live on the streets with no money and no prospects. But before that, she'd been living in immense wealth, surrounded by rich, arrogant people, who looked down on anyone who didn't have everything they did. Her parents had more money than they knew what to do with, and instead of giving to charity or

donating to a worthy cause, they spent most of their millions on things like lavish European vacations and designer handbags. They also gave a lot of money to their church, even though Heather never really understood what the church did with all that cash.

Besides the few times she questioned—strictly in her head, of course—where the money from the church was really going for seventeen years, Heather hadn't batted an eye at that way of life. She happily accepted all the things that came with being wealthy and never questioned why it was that people like her had so much when others had nothing at all.

She likely would've grown up to be just like her parents, hoarding just as much money if not more, and never giving a second thought to those less fortunate than her. Had she not been forced to walk away from that life at a young age, she would've become the kind of person she would nowadays turn her nose up to.

So Kiki was right. Sometimes Heather felt as if she needed to give back tenfold in order to make up for all the years she never did anything for anyone but herself. But she couldn't admit that out loud. Not when her friend was just trying to make sure the two of them had a nice time living together.

"I swear," she said after a while. "I will find time to relax and take care of myself, okay?"

Kiki smiled. "Great! We can start now by finishing off that entire plate of cookies and that entire bottle of wine."

CHAPTER THREE



The next day was supposed to be Heather's day off, but Reese had called her a little after 10 and asked if she could come in. She knew this was going to happen, and before she'd found out she was getting evicted, she would've probably told him she was too exhausted and needed to be off her feet for a day.

That was then, this was now. More than a day off, Heather needed to start saving up to find herself a new place, so she had no choice but to accept whatever shifts came her way. She told him she'd be there soon, but before she hung up, he reminded her to wear the Christmas uniform, now that it was December first.

She knew exactly where her Christmas uniform was, tucked away at the bottom of one of the boxes in the corner of the room, and she sighed heavily as she pushed herself up from the couch to go scrounging through all her things. She'd hung up with Reese unceremoniously but hadn't been snarky enough to get herself in trouble. Still, she had a feeling he was already in a bad mood just from the way he spoke to her on the phone that morning, so when she showed up at the restaurant forty-five minutes later and saw that it was packed, she knew it was going to be a long day.

Her first table was crowded with teenagers she learned from hearing some of their conversations were in town for a soccer tournament. They were all boys and were rowdy and rude when they ordered. They threw napkins at each other and made fart noises whenever she walked away from the table.

When it came time to pay the check, she could see all of them look at each other with nervous expressions, and so she stood there with her arms folded, waiting for any one of them to cough up a card or some cash.

“Uh, I’ll get this,” one of the kids said, reaching out for the bill. “I just have to grab my wallet out of my, uh, car.”

None of the boys looked old enough to drive, and Heather had been working in the restaurant business for long enough to spot a group of dine and dashers from a mile away. She raised a brow and said, “You’ve got a car?”

“Uh... yeah,” the kid said.

“What kind of car?”

“Er—well—it’s my dad’s car actually,” he said. “I’m just—uh—borrowing it. It’s parked right outside, I swear. I’m just going to run and get my wallet and then I’ll be back to pay.”

“Uh-huh,” she said. “That’s exactly what I’m sure you’d like me to believe, but here’s what I think your plan *really* is. I think you’re going to go outside and book it back to whatever hotel you and your friends are staying at for your soccer tournament. And then you’re going to text all your little buddies here, and one by one each of you are going to get up and leave the table until it’s empty and nobody has paid. It’s a cute trick really, and it would’ve worked back in the day. When I was your age, you could get away with stuff like that... but nowadays, it would be *very* easy to find you kids. You see, we’ve got security cameras all over this joint.”

She pointed to one of the cameras that was stationed in the corner directly above their table, failing to mention that it hadn’t actually been functional in years. Some of the boys started to shift around in their seats nervously, and one of them whispered something to his friend and then they both got out their phones and started texting anxiously.

“Yeah, well—” The kid who took the check scoffed. “You don’t know our names or where to find us. Just because you’ve got us on camera, that doesn’t prove anything. That

camera doesn't even have audio, I can tell. You wouldn't have any recording of this conversation."

"Are you actually under the impression that none of your friends have mentioned dining and dashing on any of their social media accounts?" She looked around the table and laughed. "Oh, sweeties, this is the problem with sharing so much of your life online. I've been watching you take videos and pictures the whole night, snickering and probably telling all of your little friends about your plans to bail out on the check. So, really, all I would have to do is upload the video footage from that camera into facial recognition software, it would find your social media accounts in seconds, and we'd have all the proof we needed."

She saw a few kids take their phones out worriedly, and she smiled at them. "And don't bother trying to delete your posts... Once it's out there... it's always out there."

Heather wasn't one hundred percent certain of the legitimacy of anything she was saying, and she didn't have a clue whether or not that was how facial recognition software worked, but she figured this would be enough to scare one of the kids into calling his parents.

And she was right.

One of them did call his dad, and begged him to leave the hotel and come figure all of this out. Heather waited by the table with a satisfied smile, and fifteen minutes later, a man in a very expensive looking suit marched into the restaurant and straight over to where his son was sitting with the rest of the team.

"What's going on, Blake?" he barked. "I was in the middle of a very important meeting."

"She's not letting us leave until we pay," the kid grumbled under his breath. "But I forgot my credit card in the room and nobody else has enough money to cover the bill."

The dad's eyes flashed with anger, and Heather hoped that he wouldn't be *too* hard on his son. Sure, the kid messed up, but he couldn't have been older than fourteen, and he looked

more or less apologetic. But then the man turned to face Heather, and directed all of his anger at her instead.

“What is your problem, lady?” he said. “These kids are just trying to get a good meal before their soccer game this afternoon.”

“Sir, they were going to leave without paying,” she said, taking a step back. She had not anticipated things to go this way. “I couldn’t just let them do that. They ordered a lot of stuff, and—”

“How much is it?” he sneered, taking out his wallet. He said something under his breath about how ‘boys will be boys’, as if Heather had somehow been in the wrong for demanding that these kids pay for the food and service they were given.

“Well, the bill comes to \$85.68,” she said.

“And I suppose you’ll be expecting a tip as well.”

She didn’t know what to say to that, so she just looked down at her feet and waited as he pulled out a \$100 bill and tossed it at her. “Keep the change,” he said. “Consider it a thank you for wasting my damn time. C’mon boys, let’s go.” He waited for all the boys to get up from the table and head to the door, and then smiled at Heather and added, “By the way, nice outfit.”

She looked down at her horrendously ugly holiday vest and felt her cheeks grow red with anger. She was mere seconds away from chasing that man down and giving him a piece of her mind, but then she remembered how badly she needed this job, so she settled for just scowling at him as he walked out, and then went to the back room to take her break early.

There she found some much-needed alone time, and she even managed to close her eyes and take a five-minute cat nap before Reece came marching into the room with a furrowed brow. “There you are! You’ve got a new group that just came in.”

“Okay,” she said. “Just give me a second, I still have ten minutes left on my break.”

“I’ll give you five,” he said. “They were just seated at table six.”

“Reese,” she said before he could walk away from her. “It’s not about how much time you will *give me*. I am legally allowed a fifteen-minute break at this point in my shift, so that’s how much break time I’m going to take.”

“Heather,” he said. “Don’t be like this. We’re all on the same team here. We all want the restaurant to run smoothly, and—”

“And it will run just as smoothly if I take ten more minutes to rest and relax. It will probably run even more smoothly because I’ll be in a better mood. In the meantime, the people at table six will be fine.”

Reese took a step toward her and stared down at her from above. “Heather, I’m not telling you again. You’ve got five minutes, although now it’s more like four, and then I want to see you back out there taking their orders. And where’s your light-up pin?”

“I’m not wearing that,” she said. “It’s way too bright, it gives me a headache.”

“It’s part of the Christmas Uniform.”

“You didn’t make me wear it last year,” she said.

He shook his head. “I don’t know what has gotten into you, but I don’t like this new attitude. We’re about to head into one of the busiest times of the year, and I need you to show your dedication to this restaurant, okay?”

“My dedication!” She laughed. “I work longer hours than anyone else here, including you! How is that not a sign of my dedication? Not to mention, I have been picking up everyone else’s shifts for the entire year. Whenever anyone else needs to go to the doctor or their car breaks down, they call me, and I show up with a smile on my face to do their job. Well... okay, maybe I’m not always smiling, but I show up!”

“That’s right,” he said. “You do. And that’s what I need you to keep doing, starting now.”

“In ten minutes,” she corrected him. “And I’m not going to count this little interruption as part of my break, it’s not fair.”

“Heather—” He lowered his voice, speaking to her as if he was not just an authority figure over her, but almost as if he thought he was her dad. This filled Heather with a fiery rage, and she didn’t even let him finish his sentence.

“Don’t you *dare* talk down to me like that,” she said, rising up out of her chair. “You have no idea the kind of crap I’ve had to deal with today. No, you know what, not just today, every day that I’ve worked here. Customers are rude, and sometimes inappropriate, half of them leave loose change instead of an actual tip, and yet you never hear me complain. Thanks to me, I saved you and the restaurant from losing out on almost \$100 earlier today, *and* I was admonished in the process by some rich jerk. And now, all I’m asking for is a fifteen-minute break, which is my *legal right*, and I’m not going to let you or anyone else tell me I haven’t earned it.”

Reese stepped back, eyes wide. “You can’t speak to me like this,” he said. “I can have you fired.”

“Go ahead!” she said, throwing her hands up in the air. “See how well this place runs without me around to pick up all the slack.” She started undoing the buttons of her Christmas vest. She had an old, tattered black t-shirt underneath, and once she shrugged the vest off her shoulders, she threw it at her manager. “I give you three days a week at most before you come crawling back and begging me to put that terrible vest on again.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” Reese said. “We’re going to be just fine without you.”

She grabbed her things from her locker and laughed right in the kid’s face. “Yeah, right. I’ll make sure to keep my phone on vibrate so that I don’t miss your call.” And with that, she marched out of the breakroom and left her job of eight years behind.

Back at Kiki's house that night, Heather realized when she walked up to the door that she had no way of getting inside. Kiki hadn't given her a key, since she assumed Heather wasn't going to be back until well after Kiki was done with her errands. But it was only mid-day now and Kiki wasn't answering her phone, so Heather pulled her hood further down in front of her face and sat down on the stoop to wait. She blew hot air into her hands and then rubbed them together to create some friction, and that's when she heard a soft little meow from behind her.

Kiki had been feeding the stray cats in her neighborhood ever since she moved in, so there was often a group of three or four mangy little felines hanging out by her door and begging for food. Heather had never been particularly fond of cats, and she hated how loud these strays were in the morning when they thought Kiki might be awake and making breakfast inside. But this little cat didn't make quite as much noise, and she moved a little slower than the rest of them.

Heather watched as the black and white spotted cat walked over to her with careful movements and laid down within arm's reach. She looked up at Heather and blinked, then laid her head down and yawned.

"Aren't you cold?" Heather asked. "That concrete has to be freezing."

The cat didn't move or make another sound, so Heather reached out and gently ran her fingers over the cat's back and scratched between her ears. She guessed this cat was getting up there in years, seeing as she didn't seem to like to run around with her playful little friends who were currently chasing each other behind the dumpster across the street.

"You're just an old, sleepy little thing, aren't you?" Heather laughed. "I can relate. I may not be *that* old, but some days I feel like I'm just about a hundred. I've been really putting my body and my mind through a lot the last few decades... It starts to take its toll after a while." She smiled

down at the cat. “But you must know all about hard times since you have to spend night after night out here in the cold.”

The cat sat up and rubbed her head against the back of Heather’s hand, but shortly after that, Kiki came around the corner and scared them both.

“Oh, hey!” she said loudly, and Heather stared while the cat took off and ran around the corner. “What are you doing back home so early?”

Heather made a face. “It’s a long story. I’ll tell you once we’re inside and I warm up a little.”

Kiki opened the door for them both and got busy making coffee the moment they were inside and Heather huddled up under the blanket on the couch. Once she had a cup of fresh, hot coffee in her hand, she told Kiki everything that happened that day, and her friend listened with eager attentiveness.

“So you just quit?” she asked at the end of Heather’s story. “Just like that?”

“Well, I’m not really sure if I quit,” she said. “Or if I was fired. It’s a little unclear. Reese threatened to fire me, and I basically dared him to do just that, and then I left before he could really say much else. Either way, I’m pretty sure I don’t have a job to go back to, so I guess it doesn’t really matter if I was fired or if I quit. The result is the same.”

“Do you really think he’s going to call and beg for you to come back?”

Heather shrugged. “It’s hard to say. They definitely aren’t going to be able to run the restaurant as well without me, but I’m not so sure that Reese will decide not to call me just out of spite. It depends on how stubborn he is.”

“Well dang, Heather,” she said, whistling softly under her breath. “This is big news. I mean, what are you going to do?”

Up until that moment, Heather had sort of been running off fumes. She’d had such a terrible morning, and it had felt so good to tell Reese to back off and walk out of there as if she didn’t have a care in the world. But now that her mind was starting to clear and she was having to actually think about the

repercussions of what she just did, the panic finally settled in. She widened her eyes and held her coffee cup tightly between both her hands.

“Oh, my God... what *am* I going to do? I don't have a place to live and now I don't even have a job! I'm totally screwed, Kiki!”

“Woah, woah, hang on. Let's just take a breath, shall we? You do have a place to live, you can stay here with me for as long as you need to, and as far as the job thing goes, you'll be able to find something in no time. Waitressing jobs are a dime a dozen out here and with someone with your amount of experience, it's not going to be a problem! When I said what are you going to do, I meant, what are you going to do with so much free time?” She smiled. “I was trying to make you feel better.”

“I'll be looking for a new job, that's what I'll be doing with my free time. And the problem with just taking up any old waitressing job is that I'd be starting over somewhere new,” she said. “Which means I'll be given the starting rate, whereas at my old job, I'd been getting steady raises over the years.” She started to take her phone out of her pocket. “I've gotta' call Reese and beg him to let me come back.”

“No, you can't!” Kiki knocked Heather's phone out of her hand.

“Kiki!”

“Well, I'm sorry.” She bent down and took the phone and slipped it under her leg so Heather couldn't easily grab it. “But as your best friend in the entire world, I can't let you do something like that. You were overworked and underappreciated at that job, and you don't deserve to be treated like dirt! You will find something better, I *know* you will, and in the meantime, I've got enough money saved up to float the two of us. We'll be okay, for now, so this isn't something you need to worry about.”

“Kiki, I'm not going to take money from you—”

“Consider it a loan,” Kiki said. “I’m just going to be buying the groceries and paying the bills for a while, but it’ll all even out in the end. I know it will.” She smiled and patted Heather’s leg. “Now c’mon, let’s go do something that’ll cheer you up.”

“Like what?”

“Like drop by the soup kitchen and see if they need any helping hands,” she said.

Heather couldn’t help but smile a little. That did actually sound like a nice way to spend her afternoon, and it would make her feel just a little less of a failure. “Yeah, okay,” she said, nodding. “That would be nice.”

“Not exactly the ringing endorsement I was going for, but I’ll take it. Let me just finish my coffee and put on something a little warmer, and we can go.” Kiki got up and headed into her bedroom but Heather called to her when she was just halfway down the hallway. “What’s up?”

“Er—well—” She cleared her throat “You know, I was just —”

“If you’re trying to tell me how much you appreciate and love me,” Kiki said. “Then don’t try too hard to express your feelings or you might hurt yourself.” She disappeared around the corner, but then she poked her head back into the room and grinned. “And I love you too.”

CHAPTER FOUR



It turned out to be a very busy night at the soup kitchen and Janice, the woman who ran it, was happy to have two more volunteers on hand. She put Heather and Kiki to work right away and they spent most of the afternoon and evening serving dinner and then cleaning up afterward. Kiki headed home before Heather since she had work in the morning, saying she would be up until ten, but if Heather got back later than that, she would put the key under the mat for her.

Ten minutes before closing time, Heather was just about to pack up a container of baked mac and cheese and put it in the fridge, when someone she recognized showed up by the back door and peered around the corner.

“Constance,” Heather said in a whisper, scaring the living daylights out of the older woman who had clearly been trying to sneak inside unseen.

The woman clutched her chest and dashed inside over to where Heather stood by the fridge. “You never saw me.”

“Constance,” Heather said again, putting a hand on her hip. “What are you doing here? And why didn’t you come by and get something to eat when we were still serving food?”

Constance was probably in her mid-sixties and she’d been coming around that very soup kitchen for as long as Heather had been volunteering there. Unlike some of the other unsheltered people who came through looking for food, Constance always dropped by at odd hours and never seemed to have a good grasp of what time of day it was. Heather

couldn't say for certain what sort of mental health issues the poor woman was grappling with, but what she did know was that Constance was generally a very mild-mannered and kind woman. She just got confused and was very suspicious of people she didn't know.

"I thought you were just about to start dinner," Constance said, but Heather could tell the old woman was lying.

"Why would you be sneaking in the back then?" Heather asked. "If you thought we were just about to start serving dinner in the main dining area, what are you doing back here?"

Constance looked at the back door and let out a little laugh. "Oh, that? No, no, that's not what you think. I wasn't trying to sneak in."

"Then what *were* you doing?"

Constance looked over her shoulder as if checking to see if there was anyone else listening, then she leaned in close and said, "Alright, you caught me. I was trying to sneak in, but not because I was trying to spend the night here. I know that's against the rules. But I just had to dash inside for a second because that woman I've been telling you about, she's back."

Heather sighed. Constance had been convinced that a woman who worked for the government had been following her around for over a decade now, and no matter how many times Heather or the other volunteers tried to quell her fears, Constance didn't accept anyone else's version of events besides her own.

"It's true," Constance said. "She's here, and this time, she's been trying to send me messages. I think she wants to get out of the FBI, and she needs my help to do it. She has insider information that could tear the fabric of our nation in two, and she's worried that they are going to kill her once they find out that she knows, well, what she knows."

"Wow," Heather said. "That's pretty intense."

"You're telling me," Constance said, wide-eyed. "And I want to help her, but I don't know how yet. I need to find a way to be there for her without getting myself in any trouble. I

don't want to be implicated in anything serious, so that's why I'm still dodging her. Just let me hang out here for a few minutes, and then I'm sure she'll move her search to another part of town and I can be on my way."

Heather smiled. "You know something, Constance, I think you should write a book."

The woman laughed. "Who? Me?"

"Yeah," she said. "You should write all this stuff down. I think it would make for a bestseller. I mean I would read it, it's got everything! Mystery, intrigue, national security, what more could you want?"

She shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other. "You think people would really be interested in reading my life story?"

"I think people would be interested in reading, your, uh, your stories, yes." She refrained from saying 'life story' but thankfully Constance didn't seem to notice the distinction. "You've got such a boundless imagination, that I think you'd really be able to make these stories jump off the page. I know you might not have access to a computer, but you could use the one at the library, and I could get you set up with an email so you could save all your documents by sending them to yourself."

Constance rubbed her hand up and down the length of her other arm nervously. "But... Surely you can't be serious. You're pulling my leg, yeah? Nobody actually cares about me or what I have to say."

Heather's smile broke a little and she reached out to put a hand on Constance's shoulder. The woman, who shied away from most people's touch, trusted Heather and didn't move a muscle. "Constance, I'm being serious. I would read that book if you wrote it, and I *absolutely* care about you and about what you have to say."

She smiled and put her wrinkled, skinny hand on top of Heather's. "Thanks. That means a lot." Then Constance's

stomach growled and Heather opened up the fridge to fix her a plate since she'd missed the dinner shift.

After she finished eating, Heather helped Constance set up an email address using her phone and then gave her a detailed list of instructions to take with her to the library so that she knew how to log in and create a new document once she was on her own. Heather couldn't be sure whether or not Constance would actually take her advice and write any of this story down, but she hoped she would. She felt that if Constance could just find a way to get some of her thoughts and worries down on paper instead of having them always whirling around in her head, she might be able to think more clearly.

And she also wasn't lying when she said that she thought Constance could write a stellar book. The many stories she'd cooked up over the years were entertaining if nothing else, and Heather had always found Constance to be a fun and engaging conversationalist. She would probably be a good writer as well.

And if not, then setting up an email was at least free and there had been no harm in spending some time together after the soup kitchen closed, talking and catching up.

Kiki was still up when Heather got back, but she was already in her pajamas and brushing her teeth. She rinsed her mouth out and asked Heather what had kept her so long., Heather told her about Constance and the idea that she should write a book.

“Oh, I would totally read that,” Kiki said.

“I know!” Heather laughed. “I said the same thing. We'll see if she decides to give it a try. Hopefully, she doesn't lose that piece of paper I gave her with all the login information.”

“Did she have someplace to go tonight?” Kiki asked. “It's going to get really cold. I was just reading about it.”

“She promised me she was going to the shelter down the street and they bring everyone inside on nights like this whether or not they have a room for them.” Heather went into

the kitchen to make some sleepy-time tea and tried not to think back on the freezing cold night she spent on the streets her first few weeks in Ann Arbor. She hadn't yet found a job or a place to live, and since she had no experience being unsheltered, she also had no clue where any of the homeless shelters were or where to find them. It wasn't until she met some other people who were down on their luck, that she learned what was necessary to take care of herself while she was going from shelter to shelter. She learned how to make a small amount of food stretch for a week, and knew the soup kitchen schedule by heart.

It was actually a volunteer at the soup kitchen who had offered Heather her first-ever job, and that was how she was able to scrape together enough money to rent a room in this incredibly run-down house in the bad part of town. She met Kiki around the same time, and she was amazed at how much better life could be when you had a bed to sleep in and a friend to talk to.

Still, on nights like this, when the wind was blowing hard and the sun seemed like it was never going to rise, Heather couldn't help but remember how scared she'd been when she first arrived in the city.

She truly didn't think she would live long enough to see her life turn around.

And now that she'd more or less lost everything all over again, that fear was starting to creep its way back into her head and her heart. And she knew if she wasn't careful, it would end up taking her over completely. Staring down at the kettle that was only now just starting to boil, Heather forced herself to take a few deep breaths and let them out slowly.

You're not a kid anymore, she reminded herself. And you know how to take care of yourself.

You're not a kid anymore...

And you're not alone.

Once the water was done boiling, she put it into an oversized mug with two tea bags resting over the side and took

the cup with her into the living room. She settled down onto her couch bed and looked into the flickering embers of the dying fire Kiki must've made when she got home a couple hours ago. She took a sip from her mug, even though the contents of which were still really hot, and tried to let the warmth comfort her from within. Heather had a tendency to be a glass-half-empty kind of person if she wasn't careful, and after everything she'd been through that week, it was getting harder and harder for her to hang onto any hope for her future.

But then she thought about Constance, and about the things she *did* have in her life, and tried to wrap herself up in feelings of gratitude and contentment. That gratification wouldn't last forever, and she was fairly certain she would wake up the following morning with the same feelings of panic and regret she'd been grappling with ever since she had her fight with Reese. Still, if this little exercise in appreciation could get her through the night, that would be enough.

The next day, Kiki went into work early but was home before lunch. Heather had spent the whole morning sifting through job postings, and feeling increasingly more anxious about her prospects. By the time Kiki walked through the door shortly after noon, Heather was just inches away from falling over the edge of a full-blown meltdown.

"I'm telling you!" she said, getting up off the couch and following her best friend into the kitchenette. "There are no jobs! At least, none that I'm qualified for. If I want to find something that pays a living wage, then I need to first get my hands on a college degree. But it's not like I'm going to be able to sign up for classes without any money! It's a catch-22."

"There are jobs out there for people without degrees," Kiki said. "There have to be!"

"Not really," Heather said. "I found a few waitressing jobs, but even with my experience, they are going to start me at their lowest possible hourly rate because they know they can get away with it." She groaned. "It's just so frustrating. I'm a good worker, and I'm smart. Just because I didn't spend four

years skipping class and going to Frat parties, doesn't mean I'm not capable of working at a desk job, you know?"

Kiki, who had been putting away some of the groceries she'd brought home with her, closed the fridge and walked over to Heather. She put her hands on her shoulders and smiled kindly. "You're going to find something, okay? Maybe there's an opening at the salon. I'll ask my manager tomorrow. But, in the meantime, what do you say we head over to your old place today and get the rest of your stuff? Then I thought we could stop by that thrift store over where you used to live and see if they have any cheap Christmas decorations."

Heather made a face like she was in pain and shrugged away from her friend's touch. "The only thing that sounds less fun than going back to my old apartment is going shopping for Christmas decorations."

"Aw, c'mon," she said. "Don't be like that! I just want to get some string lights and maybe a little tree. Even someone who hates the holidays as much as you has to admit that string lights are very pretty..."

Heather smirked. "They're alright."

"They are more than alright!" Kiki argued. "They are magical. Christmas lights are by far my favorite part of the season, and I think both of us could use a little cheering up right now. Don't get me wrong, I like my apartment and all, but it can feel a little dark and dreary this time of year when the sun goes down so early. I think having some string lights would really liven everything up. Really? What's the harm in just checking out what the thrift store has?"

"Well, for starters, it's a waste of money."

"I disagree." She folded her arms. "Things that bring people joy aren't a waste of money."

Heather laughed. "Now that's a slippery slope. Next, you're going to say those overpriced jeans we saw at the mall last month will bring you joy and then use it to justify an even more expensive purchase."

Kiki gasped. “Oh, my God, I forgot about those jeans! Gosh, those were cute... I wonder if they ever went on sale. Oh, or maybe that store will have a holiday discount or something. Now I think we should hit up the mall while we’re out and about too.”

Heather rolled her eyes. “You’re missing the point.”

“No,” she said. “*You’re* missing the point. We have to get your stuff from your old place before your landlord gets it into his head that he can sell it or something, and then we’ll find something fun to do afterward to lighten the mood. If you really don’t want to go shopping for decorations, that’s fine, but what I’m not going to do is come back here just so you can sit on the couch and scroll through endless job postings until you lose your mind.”

“Fine,” Heather grumbled. “I have to pick up my mail anyway.”

“Perfect!”

Kiki put a hat on, and Heather got bundled up as well, and the two of them headed across town. They took Kiki’s car since it was bigger. The only things Heather had left back at her apartment were a few books, a couple of dishes, and her kitchen table and chair. It wouldn’t take them long to load up the SUV and get the heck out of there, which was great, because the last thing Heather wanted to do was have a run-in with her old landlord.

At the building, she didn’t see Vin’s car parked out front, so she exhaled with relief and she and Kiki quickly grabbed all her stuff and threw it in the back. Kiki jumped into the driver’s seat, and at the last second, Heather remembered her mail. She told Kiki she’d be right back, and ran inside to retrieve whatever random bills or credit card offers had been stuffed into her box.

She tried her key on the box that used to have her name on it, but someone had scraped it off sometime in the last couple of days. The lock wouldn’t budge. Frowning, she flipped the key around and tried it again, but the darn thing didn’t move even a fraction of an inch. Huffing, she pulled it out and

inspected the jagged metal edge, as if she would be able to find an anomaly, and that's when she heard someone clear their throat behind her. She turned to see Vin standing in the doorway of the lobby office with a pile of mail in his hands, smiling like a hyena.

"Is that my mail?" she demanded, walking right up to him and holding her hand out expectantly. "You can't take my mail."

"I didn't take it," he said. "I had the locks changed and told the mailman to leave your stuff with me until you got your address switched over. If anything, you should be thanking me for making sure your mail didn't all get sent back."

"Can I just have it, please?"

He dropped the pile of coupons and envelopes into her hand and then looked at her key ring. "Can I have the key to your old unit?"

"I left it on the kitchen counter," she said.

"And how do I know you didn't make a copy?" He sighed and put his hands in his pockets. "I guess I'll just get the locks changed on that door too. Just to be safe."

"Vin, I didn't make a copy of my old key. Why would I do something like that?"

"So you could try to sneak back in and use the shower or something when the new tenant isn't home." She scoffed, but Vin shook his head. "You'd be surprised. A lot of people do that. Vagrants especially. And since I know you spent some time on the streets yourself, I assume you know all the tricks." He tapped the side of his temple. "You still think like them."

The way he said the word 'them' made it clear to Heather just how much disdain he had for those struggling to find stable housing. Heather was so mad, she came close to spitting in his face. Vin was quite a bit taller than her, but she thought there was a good chance she could catch him by surprise if she reached out and slapped him right then while he was bent down and getting in her personal space.

“You have *no* idea what those people deal with,” she said. “You’ve never had to think

about what your life might look like if you didn’t have the safety and security of a home to come back to each night. Go ahead and sneer, and make your little comments, because, at the end of the day, I know that every single one of those people is stronger, smarter, and far more deserving of respect than someone like you. You’re nothing but a greedy bully who spends all his nights alone drinking in his sad, little apartment.” Vin looked wide-eyed, and this made Heather feel even more emboldened.

“Yeah, that’s right,” she said. “I’ve seen you taking out the recycling, I’ve heard the clinking and clanking of a half-dozen empty whisky bottles.” She tucked her mail under her arm and offered Vin a knowing smile. “You think you’re so much better than the rest of us, but you’ve got your problems too, and everyone knows it. So go ahead and throw stones if that makes you feel better, but don’t you dare think for even *one second* that the rest of us don’t see right through you *and* your glass house.”

A rush of satisfaction washed over Heather as Vin struggled to come up with a way to respond to such a takedown, and she turned her back on him before he could mutter so much as a word. She walked out of the building and let the door swing shut behind her, not looking back a single time at Vin or her old life.

CHAPTER FIVE



Kiki was so excited after Heather told her everything that went down with Vin, that she insisted the two of them go out for drinks to celebrate. It was still early in the day, so Heather convinced her to ditch the idea of going to a bar and the two of them headed to one of their favorite Mexican restaurants instead. Kiki ordered a pitcher of margaritas, however, and that's how she and Heather ended up more than a little tipsy on a Monday afternoon.

Heather wasn't much of a drinker, not only because she had seen the uglier sides of substance abuse while living on the streets, but also because she simply couldn't afford to drink very often. But since she was drinking on someone else's dime that day, since it felt so good to just let loose a little, she did her best to help Kiki drain the pitcher and laughed her way through their sloppy conversation. Kiki was telling her a little bit about this woman who had come in to get her nails done for her wedding, but the story she was telling wasn't making a whole lot of sense.

"Wait, wait," Heather said, waving a hand in the air and spilling a little bit of her margarita. "She came in *today*? To get her nails done for her *wedding*? Who gets married on a Monday?"

"No, that's the thing!" Kiki said. She was practically shouting, and Heather could see some of the other diners looking at them out of the corner of her eye, but she didn't care. She was having a great time. "She's getting married this weekend, but she came in to get her nails done today because

we have a deal going right now on Mondays where you get fifty percent off a manicure if you come in for a pedicure too!”

“So... she’s going to try and keep her nails looking nice for the entire week leading up to her wedding! What if she chips them?”

“I said the exact same thing!” Kiki laughed. “But she told me she was going to be extra careful. As if that ever works.”

“Man, that sounds so stressful.” Heather pushed her back into the booth behind her and sighed. “Then again, every part of planning a wedding sounds stressful to me. Heck, the idea of being married sounds like a rough go.”

Kiki smiled. “Really? I think it would be nice. I’ve always wanted to find someone and get married.”

“I know,” Heather said. “When we first met, back in the day when we still worked at Hooligan’s Grill, you had all those pictures that you’d cut out of bridal magazines hanging up in your locker.”

She blushed. “Oh, my God, I forgot about that... How embarrassing.” She shrugged. “Aw, but we were so young back then, so naive.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Yeah,” she said, nodding. “I guess you’re right. I was young and naive and you were... you were like this wise old lady trapped inside the body of a nineteen-year-old. I was still dreaming that one day my prince charming would come into the restaurant and I would be serving his table and we’d meet and fall in love and you...” She trailed off just in time.

Heather didn’t know exactly where Kiki was going with that sentiment, but she knew it was probably nowhere nice. Back then, when they first met, Heather was just barely getting her life back on track after what could only be described as a traumatic and sorrowful end to her teenage years, and since then, neither of them had ever really talked about the time before they met. Kiki knew the gist of what Heather had been through, but she learned early on in their friendship not to bring it up unless she wanted to put Heather in a really, *really*

bad mood. One that often stretched on for hours if not days after the fact.

“Well, anyway,” she said, smiling and shaking her head. “We don’t have to think about that now. I’m just glad I grew out of that stage and am no longer waiting around for a man to come into my life and fix everything.”

“But you just said you would like to get married one day.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Kiki confirmed. “But it’s different now. Back then, I remember thinking that finding the right guy would completely turn my life around. I was only just learning how to take care of myself and I was pretty bad at it, so I used to daydream about someone coming to rescue me so that I wouldn’t have to struggle anymore... But then I met you and you helped me realize that I was perfectly capable of doing things on my own. Nowadays, I just want to get married because I think it would be nice to have a companion, not because I’m afraid to be alone.”

“Huh,” Heather said. “I guess that makes sense...”

“Do you really never think about finding someone? Don’t you ever get lonely, sleeping in bed at night without anyone there next to you?”

Heather frowned and really gave this question some thought. It had been a long time since she thought about the idea of dating or finding someone to spend her life with. As a teenager, she’d always believed that she would meet someone at some point. That had been the plan, after all.

Her parents had expected her to go to college after high school, preferably for her to attend one of the Ivy League institutions either of them had gone to, and ideally, she would meet a smart young man while she was there. After graduation, it would be expected that the two of them would get married and then she would have to give up any and all ambitions she had outside of being a wife and mother and start bringing children into this world. Heather had been raised in a very religious, traditional community, and all the young women in that community were taught from a young age what their purpose in life was. Heather would be sent to the best

college she could get into, not because her parents cared about her getting a good education, so much as they cared about her meeting the right kind of man.

But Heather had messed all of that up when she was only seventeen years old, and now, more than twenty years later, the thought of doing something as traditional and normal as getting married just seemed utterly ridiculous to her.

“Yoohoo,” Kiki said, snapping her fingers in front of Heather’s face.

“Oh, sorry.” Heather shook her head and realized she’d been zoning out, thinking about her past. “What—what did you just say?”

“I was asking whether or not you ever get lonely,” Kiki said. She finished off the rest of her drink in one sip and then put her glass down hard on the table, so it made a definitive clunking sound. “And then I started to ask you about your high school boyfriend, but pulled back...”

“David? Why would you ask me about David?”

“I was curious if either of you had ever talked about marriage...” Kiki shrugged awkwardly. “I dated this kid in high school, and at the time it seemed so serious, you know? When you’re a teenager and you’re in love, it can start to feel like the real deal... He and I used to talk about how we would get married and have a huge family together... And then he cheated on me with my own lab partner, so it was probably a really good thing that we didn’t tie the knot.”

“Yeah,” Heather said with a laugh. “That’s a very good thing.” She poured the rest of the pitcher into her glass and drank it all down in one gulp. Kiki watched her with a surprised expression and laughed when Heather put her cup down and let out a satisfied sigh.

“Dang,” she said. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you drink this much.”

“Yeah, well,” Heather said. “It’s your fault for bringing up David.”

She sighed. “I was worried that saying his name would upset you... I’m sorry. It sort of slipped out, and then you didn’t even hear me which meant I had an opportunity to just let it go and pretend I never said anything. And instead, I repeated myself... which was stupid, I know, but it’s just that you never talk about him, or your parents, or about J—”

“Don’t,” Heather said, cutting her off.

“Right... Sorry.” Kiki tucked her chin into her chest and didn’t say anything else. Heather felt bad for shutting her down like that, but then again, Kiki knew better than to bring all of this stuff up. Especially at this time of year. It was probably the alcohol that was making it harder for Kiki to filter herself and Heather forgave her for the little slip.

“You want to go home now?” Heather asked.

“We didn’t even order any food,” Kiki said, laughing a little.

“I know,” Heather said. “But the pitcher alone is going to be \$25, and we’ve got food at home. Let’s just split the bill and go back to your place to heat up that frozen pizza we bought.”

“Yum, that does sound good,” Kiki said. “But no need to split the bill, I’m the one who insisted we get the pitcher... and I’m the one who ruined the night by talking about *you know what*.” She whispered the last part as if that would make it easier for Heather to hear it.

“It’s fine,” Heather said. “Let’s just drop it though, okay?”

“For sure,” Kiki said, acting like she was zipping her lips up and then locking them. “Consider it dropped.”

The waiter came around and gave them the bill and Kiki paid it, leaving a very generous tip. After being a waiter for so many years, she and Heather both made a point to tip very well whenever they could afford to.

Outside on the curb, Heather suggested they walk instead of shelling out the money for an Uber. “We might as well go for a stroll while the sun is still out. And I’ll drive us back here

in the morning to pick up your car, assuming it doesn't snow too much tonight."

"But what about your stuff?" Kiki said. "If we leave my car sitting here on the street, someone might break in and take your things."

Heather stared through the window into the back seat, looking at some tattered paperbacks and a table that had one busted-up leg, laughing. "Honestly, they'd be doing me a favor. I will grab my mail though, that's not something I need to leave lying around for someone to snag." She took the pile from the floor near the front seat and zipped it up into her jacket so it would stay dry in case the snow came early.

The alcohol had warmed Heather up quite a bit, so she wasn't even cold as they made their way back to Kiki's house. They chatted casually, mostly about nothing, and then Kiki went into another story about a different strange client she saw earlier in the week, and Heather tuned in and out as she focused on walking in a straight line and not appearing too intoxicated.

A couple blocks shy of Kiki's street, they passed a playground that was covered in snow and icicles were hanging from underneath the slide. Still, there was a little girl playing on the swings. She was wearing a pink puffer coat and matching pink boots, and her long dark hair was pulled back into a braid. Heather watched her kicking off the ground to try and get higher on the swing, then looked around to see if she could spot the girl's parents. At first, she didn't see a single adult around.

"Is she all alone?" Heather asked. Kiki had already started to walk ahead, seemingly having not noticed the girl at all. She turned back with a frown.

"What?"

"That little girl, is she—" But as she said this, a woman appeared from over by the jungle gym, holding another baby on her hip and smiling at the little girl. She walked over and put her baby into the other swing, buckling him in safely, and

then proceeded to push both her kids gently so they could swing together side by side.

The three of them were all smiles and laughter, and Heather found herself unable to look away. Kiki came up beside her and said nothing, just slipped her arm around Heather's and rested her head on Heather's shoulder.

Heather felt like this was Kiki's way of apologizing again for what she said at the restaurant, and she made a point to pat Kiki's arm before saying they should get going. "The wind is starting to pick up, and I really don't want to get caught out here in a storm." She took one last look at the happy little family, and then the two of them continued their stroll back to Kiki's apartment. When they arrived at the building, Heather saw her favorite, older cat standing off to the side of the door. She was watching them with wary eyes but was curled up into a little ball, probably to try and keep warm. She must've been really cold because she didn't even scurry off when they got closer to her.

"Aw, poor baby," Kiki said.

"Is there anything we can do for her?" Heather asked. "She looks freezing."

"Technically, I'm not supposed to have pets in the apartment you know, otherwise, I would probably end up letting all the strays inside."

"But what would be the harm in just bringing her in for the night?" Heather asked. "Your landlord would never know, right...?"

Kiki put a hand on her hip and shot Heather a disbelieving smile. "Did you really just say that? You, of all people, want to break the building rules for the sake of a stray cat? You once told me I couldn't use the microwave in your old apartment because you were worried it would blow a fuse and that the landlord would use that as an excuse to kick you out."

Heather put her hands up in the air. "I know, I know, and this is your place, and it's your name on the lease so I realize it's asking a lot, but... I don't know. The other cats are all

young and they run around together like their friends. But this one... she seems like she's kinda old, and like she might not be able to find a warm spot for the night. I would hate to come outside tomorrow morning and find that her little kitty heart stopped in the night." This was mostly the margaritas talking, and Heather was surprised to hear herself saying all of this, but now that it was out there, she couldn't take it back.

"Well, if you say it like that," Kiki said. "You basically give me no choice. I can either let the cat inside or forever be known as the woman who sentenced the poor creature to death."

"Does that mean she can come inside?"

Kiki opened the door and sighed. "Yeah, sure, whatever. It's just one night, and my landlord will never know."

Heather smiled and then bent down and reached for the cat, who was so tired and so chilly, that she didn't even seem to have the energy to be afraid or to fight back. She allowed herself to be lifted off the ice-cold concrete and brought inside where it was warm and wind-free.

Kiki locked the door behind them and then got a fire going. Heather put the cat down on the couch and went to the kitchen to look for something the cat might want to eat. When she removed her coat, all the mail that she'd tucked inside spilled out onto the floor. She sighed and got down on her knees to pick everything up. She looked at each item as she retrieved it from beneath the kitchen table. The first two things were coupon books offering discounts to places she never shopped at. The third thing was her last electricity bill from her old apartment, and there was also a credit card offer slipped between some coupons, but that was it.

Or so she thought.

She gathered up all the mail and put it on the table, only to see the corner of a light blue envelope poking out from under the fridge. It must've slid over there when she dropped everything. She bent down to retrieve it and noticed right away that it was most certainly not a bill. The envelope was square instead of rectangular and the person who sent it had

handwritten Heather's name and address. There was no return address, but the handwriting was neat and the writing was in cursive.

Heather racked her brain, trying to come up with who in her life might've sent something like this to her. Could it be a wedding invitation? But who did she know that was getting married? No one. Then she wondered if any of her friends from her previous jobs were having a baby, but even if they were, none of them had enough money to throw fancy baby showers with handwritten invitations. Shaking her head, she flipped the envelope over and slid her fingernail under the flap. Kiki came into the kitchen just as Heather pulled the folded-up piece of paper out.

“What's that?”

“Not sure,” Heather said. “It was in with my mail.”

“Oh, is someone getting married?”

“I don't think so,” Heather said, opening the piece of paper and beginning to read. She took it with her to the kitchen table and sat down underneath the overhead light so she better read it.

Dearest Heather,

I'm not exactly sure how to start this letter. It is somewhat unclear to me how much contact, if any, you've had with your Beatrice and Steven over the years. Therefore, I'm not sure what you do and do not know about your father, mother, and the last few years of their lives respectively.

I know your mother would've left specific instructions as to how and when I should contact you, had she known how little time she had left. That said, she did what she could, and amended her Will just in time so that it included you.

I suppose now comes the part where I must inform you that Beatrice Engles passed away last week. She had cancer and decided to stop undergoing chemo treatments after a year of trying to beat that horrible disease. I am sending you this letter to request that you meet me in Saugatuck, at your mom's

vacation home, so that I may give you all that she left you in her Will.

You most likely do not remember me. I was hired as a housekeeper shortly before you left home, so we only met each other a handful of times. Be that as it may, I knew your mother very well. We were great friends, and I loved working for her these last twenty years.

I know all of this may come as a bit of a shock, and it's my understanding that you may not have even learned of your father's passing five years ago. If that is the case, then I regret being the bearer of two pieces of sad news.

Please, if you have any questions, bring them with you to the lake house and I will hopefully be able to clear everything up. I will be there for the entire first week of December and will be expecting you. I realize that you might not have any desire to speak with me or to accept any of your inheritance, but if there is anything I can say to persuade you to make the trip, let it be this—your mother loved you. It may not have always seemed like it, but she really, really loved you.

And she tried to make it right at the end... She was just a little too late.

Thank you for your time, and I do hope to see you soon.

With love,

Annalease Roy

Heather read through the letter twice, but still, the words all seemed garbled and nonsensical. She had grown perfectly still and totally silent as she read, which apparently Kiki took notice of because her friend came to sit across from her at the table. She stared at Heather with a worried expression.

“What is it?” she asked. “Is everything okay?”

Without saying a word, Heather handed Kiki the note and allowed her to read for herself. Less than a minute later, Kiki gasped and put the letter down on the table between them. “Oh, my God, Heather... are you okay?”

Heather turned to look at her finally. Cocking her head to the side and furrowing her brow, she said the only four words that were coming to mind.

“My parents are dead.”

CHAPTER SIX



After the initial shock wore off, Heather stumbled her way through a number of different emotions. First, she was frankly just confused, and dubious. She questioned who this Annalease Roy woman was, and accused her of making the whole story up.

“But—to what end?” Kiki asked. They were sitting on the couch by the fire, and the little cat they rescued from outside had warmed up enough to realize where she was. She’d freaked out at first, probably feeling like she’d been trapped inside, but once Kiki gave her some food and put a blanket down next to the fire for her to lay on, she curled up once more and calmed down. “I just don’t see what this woman would gain from making this story up...”

“I don’t know either,” Heather said. “But people do crazy things all the time.”

“Are you sure the name doesn’t ring any bells?” Kiki asked. “You don’t remember there ever being a woman named Annalease who came to clean your house?”

“I don’t know!” Heather threw her hands in the air. “We had housekeepers coming and going all the time. My dad used to fire them for no reason, I swear. He would be angry about something else and take it out on the help.”

Kiki winced. “That’s awful.”

“You’re telling me,” she said. “Which is another reason why I don’t trust this woman. She says that she and my mother were good friends, but how could that be true? How could

someone who worked for my parents think of them as anything besides petty and cruel? My dad was awful to the people he hired.”

“But it says nothing about your dad,” Kiki reminded her. “Besides the fact that he passed away. Annalease only mentions being friends with your mom, not your dad. Didn’t you tell me once that your mom was the one that was easier to get along with?”

Heather scoffed. “I guess. But that’s not really saying much. My dad set the bar pretty low.”

“Let’s just assume, for a second,” Kiki said. “That maybe this woman is legit, and that everything she wrote in this letter is true... How would you feel then?”

“I mean—I don’t know.” Heather folded her hands up in her lap and stared down at her thumbs. “It’s... complicated. If my parents really are dead, then obviously that’s... sad.” She knew she probably sounded very emotionally detached, the way said ‘That’s... sad’, but if she was being perfectly honest with herself, she was having a hard time caring about the deaths of two people who never really cared about her.

“You know,” Kiki said. “You’re allowed to be upset, even though your parents were exactly the best people. You can still be sad that they’re gone.”

“I know that...” Heather sighed. “And maybe I am *a little* sad, but at the same time, why should I be? I haven’t talked to either of them in twenty years, and it was their choice to cut me out of their lives. They threw me out of the house when I needed them most, knowing full well that I had no money and nowhere to go. I’m sure they knew I ended up on the streets because people talk. News would’ve gotten back to them, and still, they didn’t come for me.”

Now, the tears started to well up in the corners of Heather’s eyes, and her breathing became labored. The feelings of doubt were melting away, and they were quickly being replaced by anger and hatred.

“I was their *only child*,” she added. “And they just cast me aside like I was nothing to them, and now I’m supposed to care that they’re gone?”

“You’re not *supposed* to do anything,” Kiki said. “I was just saying if you did feel sad or—”

“No, you know what?” Heather said, getting up and grabbing the letter from the kitchen table. “I don’t feel anything. I’m still half convinced this whole thing is a trick, but even if it’s not, it doesn’t matter. I’ve lived the last twenty years without any help from them, and I’m going to keep it that way. They wrote me out of their Will all those years ago and just because my mom had some end-of-life change of heart, that doesn’t mean I’m going to accept her pity.”

She took the lid of the garbage bin and threw the letter inside, along with the little card that was also in the envelope and had the address of the vacation home in Saugatuck written on it. Then she put the lid back on and slapped her hands together with satisfaction. “There. We don’t have to talk about it anymore. It’s done.”

“Are you really just going to let your inheritance sit in a bank account somewhere? Are you really not going to at least go hear what that woman has to say?”

“Yes I am,” she said. “And no I’m not. I don’t care, Kiki. That money—it’s like a payoff. It’s like my mom was trying to absolve herself of all her sins before she died by just putting my name down on a piece of paper. It’s ridiculous. Where was that money when I was homeless in the city? Where was she when I was a scared teenage girl with no one looking out for me?” She scowled. “I’m not going to give her the satisfaction.”

“Yeah, but Heather... she’s dead.”

There was a finality to the way Kiki said this, and the words felt like someone twisting the knife that had been plunged into Heather’s heart the moment she read Annalease’s letter. So maybe she did care... just a little bit.

But not enough to fish that letter out of the trash and go to some lake town she'd never even heard of. She exhaled heavily and told Kiki that she didn't want to talk about it anymore. Then she went into the bathroom to take a hot shower, and by the time she got out, Kiki had turned on the TV, and the two of them sat together on the couch with the cat, watching a reality singing competition.

Neither of them said another word about the letter.

That night, Heather dreamed about the day her parents kicked her out of the house. In reality, it had all happened very fast, but in her dream, it was as if time had slowed down, and she was watching the scene play out from the sidelines. She was a third-party observer instead of someone who was actually part of the action.

She watched as her seventeen-year-old self stood by the front door with a hurriedly packed suitcase and tears streaming down her face. Her father was yelling, pacing back and forth across the rug in the living room, while her mother tried to calm him down. Even though Heather had heard him say that she had to go, she didn't fully believe him. Sure, she'd gone upstairs and thrown a couple of items of clothing and her toothbrush into a bag, but that was her attempt at calling his bluff. She thought that once she got to the door, he would stop her, but he didn't.

Next, she tried opening the handle, and at the sound of the door creaking, both her parents froze. Her mother looked over at her in horror, bringing her hand up to her mouth. Heather stared at her father, begging him with her eyes.

Please, Dad... she thought. Just tell me I can stay.

Steven Engles steeled his gaze and his mouth was nothing but a straight, determined line. He'd made up his mind about this, and she knew better than anyone that when her father had come to a decision, there was no way to convince him to change it back. He'd said she was no longer welcome in his house, that she was no longer a part of their family, and that he never wanted to see her again. He accused her of not only

betraying him, but of betraying their church and even betraying God himself.

Even if he did allow her to stay—how could they possibly come back from this?

Heather turned and took a step out the door, and she heard her mother cry out—

And then the dream ended.

Heather bolted upright on the couch as she felt the weight of something pressing down on her chest. The little stray cat was tossed to the side when Heather sat up and she realized that what she felt had been the cat just trying to get cozy. She let out a sigh of relief and reached down to pet the nervous kitty.

“Sorry, little one,” she said. “I didn’t mean to scare you. It’s just usually when you feel a weight on your chest in your sleep, it’s a bad thing.” She laughed as the cat hopped back up onto the couch and curled up by Heather’s feet. “There you go, that’s much better.”

She readjusted her pillows and draped a little bit of the blanket over the cat so she would stay warm enough, and then laid back down. “You know something, I kinda like having you around. Maybe when I start looking for my own place again, I can try to find one that allows pets. I always thought having animals was a waste of money, but I don’t know... you’re not so bad.”

The cat purred and blinked slowly, and that’s when Heather remembered reading something about how cats blink at people they trust, and to show them respect, you were supposed to blink back. She did so, unsure of how well the cat would be able to see her in the dark, and then both of them laid their heads down and went back to sleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN



The next day, Heather woke up with a raging headache, and she was reminded of a third reason why she never really drank all that much. *Hangovers*. She squinted her eyes against the unexpectedly bright sunlight that was pouring in through the living room window, and got up to make some coffee. The cat was still sound asleep at the foot of the couch, so Heather tried to be quiet as she went about her business.

As she did, however, all the things that had happened the night before slowly started to come back to her, and when she went to throw out the old coffee filter, she remembered the letter.

Oh, God... the letter.

Staring down into the garbage bin, she actually took a second to try and see if there was any sign of the discarded piece of paper. She couldn't see anything that resembled the letter or the blue envelope it came in, and after a few seconds, she shook her head and threw the coffee filter on top of everything else. What was she doing? She didn't actually want to find that letter. She'd made up her mind the night before that she wasn't going to go to Saugatuck and meet this woman. She was happy with the way her life was, and she didn't need or want *anything* from the people she once called Mom and Dad.

Kiki came into the kitchen shortly thereafter and groaned as she lowered herself down into a chair. "Am I the only one who feels like someone hit me over the head with a sledgehammer before I went to bed last night?"

Heather laughed. “Nope, I’m right there with you.”

“Seriously,” Kiki said. “I thought I could hold my liquor better than this.”

“Face it, Kiki,” she said. “We’re almost forty. It doesn’t matter what we do, this is how a pitcher of margaritas is going to affect us from here on out.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me.” She let her head rest on top of her hands, her reddish blond hair falling over her face like a shield. “And how dare you say I’m almost forty. I’m only thirty-seven.”

“Yeah, but you turn thirty-eight in like a month.”

“Hush up!” she said. “It’s not polite to remind a woman of the fact that she’s aging! Inside, I feel like I’m still twenty-seven going on twenty-eight, and that’s all that counts.”

Heather smiled and put a loving hand on her friend’s back. “Sure it is. Coffee will be ready soon.” She went into the living room, sat down on the couch, and closed her eyes for a few more minutes, but even the sound of her own blood rushing through her body was almost too much to bear. The cat woke up when Heather shifted around and came to sit on her lap.

“You know, we have to put her back outside today,” Kiki said.

“I know.”

“But you can keep feeding her and I’m sure she’ll keep coming back. The rest of them seem to.”

“I just hope she’s okay out there,” Heather said, scratching between the cat’s ears. “Maybe I’ll buy her some flea and tick medicine too, just so she’s not so itchy all the time.”

Kiki grimaced. “She has fleas and ticks?”

“Well, not right now,” Heather said. “It’s too cold out, all the ticks are hibernating and I didn’t notice any fleas on her, but when it starts getting warmer, she’ll definitely have them. Plus, she probably has worms.”

“Worms!” Kiki sat up and then brought a hand to her head and sucked air through her teeth. “Oof, man, moved too fast there.”

“It’s okay,” Heather said. “All stray cats carry around parasites, but if I start giving her medicine, she could get rid of some of them.”

“Yeesh,” Kiki said, getting up as the coffee maker beeped. “I had no idea those cats were so... well.. gross. Maybe I shouldn’t have started feeding them after all. Then again, it was never my intention to bring any of them into the house. That was *your* idea.”

“And I take full responsibility,” Heather said. She got her phone out and checked the weather. “The good news is that the snow that was forecasted today isn’t actually coming, so she should be just fine outside.” Kiki came over and handed her a steaming mug. “What time do you want to go pick up your car?”

“Whenever,” she said. “I don’t have to be at work for another hour and a half I think.”

“Alright, so... we can sit for a while and have our coffee?”

“Yup,” Kiki said. “And thank God, because I need a minute before I go out into the world and have to act like a person. Don’t ever let me order an entire pitcher of margaritas again.”

“Deal.”

They were quiet for a second, and Heather could tell Kiki was looking at her, even though she didn’t glance her way. She had a feeling she knew what Kiki was building up the courage to say, and she halfway hoped that if she didn’t make eye contact with her friend, Kiki would end up not saying anything at all.

“So listen,” Kiki said after a while.

No dice.

“I wanted to make sure you were good after last night. I know that letter must’ve been shocking and you might not

want to talk about it, but would it be okay if I just said one thing? I was thinking about it all night, and—well—can I be honest?”

Heather blew some hair out of her face and nodded, still not looking back at Kiki. “Go ahead.”

“Okay, well... Here’s the thing. I think you’re being kind of stupid.”

Heather balked. “You what?”

“I think you’re being stupid,” she said again, so there was no confusion. “Because here you are sleeping on my couch, freaking out because you lost your job, and out of the blue you get a letter that says your super wealthy parents have left you an inheritance and you’re not even going to go see what it’s all about? Heather, this is the kind of thing people like us *dream* about. We hope that one day we’ll win the lottery or a long-lost relative will show up and hand us thousands of dollars. But it doesn’t actually happen in real life. Besides, in your case.”

“But Kiki, you don’t understand.”

“Of course I don’t,” Kiki said. “How could I? I wasn’t raised by parents like yours, and I left home by choice, not because my parents made me leave. But even still, just because I don’t understand all the ins and outs of what you’re going through or what you’ve been through, there are some things that I do understand. And I do know this—that kind of money could change your life.”

“We don’t even know how much it is,” she said.

Kiki gave her a look. “We know it’s a lot.”

“Maybe,” she said. “But maybe not. It’s possible that my parents have been really financially irresponsible over the last twenty years, and maybe they didn’t have much of anything left over to leave me.”

“They clearly had enough to hang onto a *vacation house*,” Kiki said. “I looked it up, and Saugatuck is right on the lake, and it looks like a gorgeous little town. A house on the lake alone is going to be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. I

just can't accept the fact that you're not going to take some of that money and use it to create the kind of life you've always wanted. Or heck, you could donate all of it if that's what you want to do."

Heather drew back. She hadn't considered the possibility of donating it. "Huh," she said. "Now that's a thought."

Kiki groaned. "Oh, my God, of course, that's what gets your attention." She put her hand on Heather's arm. "But whatever, I'll take what I can get. All I'm saying is that there is likely a lot of money sitting in a bank account right now with *your name on it*. You could use some of it to go back to school or to find a nicer apartment with a landlord who isn't out to get you. There are so many possibilities, and I would be a really bad friend if I just sat back and let you throw every single one of them away."

Heather sighed and looked over her shoulder at the garbage bin in the kitchen. "Literally and metaphorically..."

Kiki laughed. "Right... So about that." She got up and went into the kitchen and opened the junk drawer. She took out a couple of food-stained pieces of paper and laid them out flat on the kitchen table. "Last night, when you were taking a shower, I dug around in the trash and found these. I thought there was a chance you might change your mind, and I didn't want you to lose the address or the letter. Don't be mad at me though, because you seem like you're changing your mind a little bit... aren't you?"

"I don't know," Heather said. "Maybe..."

"And you know... There's something else this money might allow you to do," Kiki said. She brought the little slip of paper with the address of the vacation home on it and handed it to her friend. "I know you've never wanted to even think about doing it in the past, because you never thought there was any reason to, but maybe there's a world in which you actually consider... you know... looking for her."

The words hung in the air between them for a good thirty seconds or longer before Heather found a way to respond.

Looking for her.

“No, Kiki,” she said, feeling a lump start to form in her throat. “I can’t.”

“Why not?” Kiki asked. “I know you’ve said before that you didn’t want to go looking for her because you wouldn’t have anything to offer her, but now you might! What if she’s struggling too? What if she needs money or something?”

“Don’t say that,” Heather said. “I can’t start asking myself questions like that, otherwise I’ll go insane. I spent a long time asking myself ‘what ifs’ and it got me nowhere.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “It got you nowhere back when you were still struggling, but think about it this way... if you were to take the money your mom has left you, then the answers to those questions wouldn’t have to be as scary. It wouldn’t be as hard to find her, and when you did find her, you could be there for her in a way you weren’t able to twenty years ago.”

“What would it matter?” Heather asked. “We have no reason to think she would want to even see me! She might not even know I exist.”

“But there’s a chance she does!” Kiki said. “And maybe she’s been wondering about you all these years. We don’t have any of the answers to any of these questions, and I know that’s terrifying, but this might be your only chance to find out what happened to her. Don’t you want to know what happened to your daughter?” She paused, sitting down now and staring directly into Heather’s eyes. “To Jade?”

That was the first time anyone had said her daughter’s name out loud to her in decades. Kiki was one of only a few human beings on this planet who knew that Heather had given birth to a daughter twenty years ago, and she was the only one who knew what name Heather gave the little girl.

Truth be told, Heather was honestly a little surprised that Kiki remembered her daughter’s name. Of course, Heather herself would never forget it. She’d named her baby girl Jade because she came out of the womb with these stunning light green eyes that nearly toppled Heather over, they were so

striking. She would never forget her child's face, or the way her laugh sounded, or the way she smelled.

She'd pushed those memories down for a long, long time because they'd simply been too painful to hold at the front of her mind, but the second Kiki said Jade's name out loud, it was like she'd opened the floodgates. Heather fought back tears as she recalled the night her daughter was born, and how she felt when they placed her little bundle of joy into her arms. She looked down at her lap where the stray cat was now curled up, and it was like she could almost feel the weight of her child again. She hiccuped when she tried to draw in a breath. She hadn't allowed any of these thoughts or feelings to get hold of her for a really long time, and now that she'd given them an inch, they were going to take a mile, and then some.

"Kiki, I just don't know," she said, shaking her head and crying openly now. "It's been so many years and there's a really good chance that by looking for Jade, I would be blowing up her entire life. What if she was adopted by a nice couple who never told her they weren't her biological parents? I gave her up when she was less than a week old, so whoever took her in has probably been raising her since she was an infant. Even if they did tell her she was adopted, that would mean they also told her that I left her at a police station... I mean, what kind of mother does that?"

"A good mother does that," Kiki said. "A mother who wants to do the right thing. Heather, you were so young, and you didn't have the resources to take care of her, so you made the hardest decision any parent has to make—to give her up so that she could have the best life possible. What you did, you did out of love. She'll understand that."

Heather shook her head. "It's just—it's too much all at once. I've barely even processed the fact that my parents are dead, and now you want me to go looking for Jade. I can't. I need—I need to take this one step at a time."

Kiki nodded. "Yes. Yes, of course. No, that makes perfect sense. I didn't mean to push you into doing anything you weren't ready to do... I was just worried because I don't know how inheritance works. Is there, like, a deadline? If you don't

claim this money after a certain amount of time, will it go to someone else?"

"I don't know."

"So then isn't that reason enough to go see what this Annalease woman has to say?" Kiki asked. "You don't have to decide right away what you're going to do with the money, or if you're even going to take it at all, but at least you could ask her questions about the inheritance... figure out what all this is about."

Heather reached up, wiped some tears from her cheeks, and sniffled. "I guess that's not the worst idea in the world..."

"And forget I said anything about Jade," she added. "That was—that was really inappropriate. I never should've brought her up. I just had a thought and I said it out loud because you know sometimes I can be a real dummy before I've had enough coffee in the morning. That's all that was."

"Yeah, I get it. It's okay. Consider it forgotten.." Although she knew deep down she wouldn't be able to forget so easily. She'd spent such a long time packing those memories away and locking them inside the darkest corners of her mind, and they weren't just going to go away again all on their own. It was going to take some time.

"You know, this town isn't too far away," Kiki said, typing the address into her phone. "We can get there in under three hours..."

Heather raised a brow. "What are you saying?"

"Well... tomorrow is my day off..."

"You want to come with me?"

"Why not?" Kiki said. "It could be fun, plus I can't remember the last time I went on a road trip. We could get up early and be in Saugatuck before lunchtime. We'll hear what this Annalease woman has to say, and be back before sunset."

Heather sighed and sat back on the couch, giving herself a second or two to think about this. "Alright," she said after a short while. "That's fine. We can go."

“For real?” Kiki grinned. “You’re up for it?”

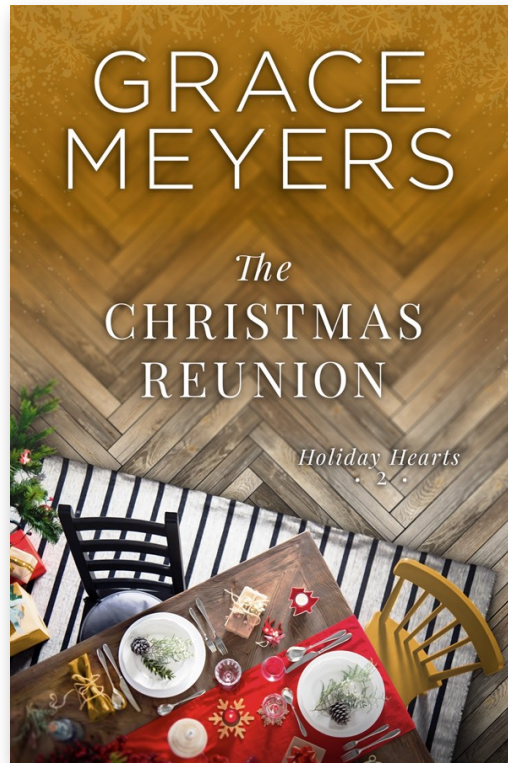
“Not really,” Heather admitted. “But you made some pretty compelling arguments and... well, at the end of the day, you’re right about the money. It would be stupid to let it sit in a bank account instead of using it for something good.”

Kiki clapped her hands together. “Yes! Exactly. You’re making the right decision, Heather. I just know it.”

She laughed under her breath. “Only time will tell.”

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