

LUCINDA BERRY



The perfect life built on the perfect lie

# MISSING PARTS

**Missing Parts**  
**Lucinda Berry**

# RISE PRESS

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# **PART ONE**

# Chapter One

“Show me one marriage with kids under the age of five that’s happy.” Robin snorted and raised her wine glass to her lips. She drained it like she was at a fraternity party instead of an outside patio surrounded by sprawling ivy before the sun had even gone down. “Just one. I want to see one.”

“Seriously. I don’t know anyone who doesn’t hate their husband right now,” Jen said.

I wasn’t sure we all hated our husbands. We were struggling to maneuver our way through early parenthood and spent most of our time frustrated with each other, but saying we hated them was taking it too far. However, I wasn’t surprised Jen took it to such a negative extreme because she found a way to make things negative no matter what we were talking about. We could be talking about a new formula designed to increase infant brain development and she’d report they’d found a razor blade in one of the containers.

Last month, Robin brought one of her former coworkers to dinner with us. She was six months pregnant with her first child and Jen had spent fifteen minutes terrorizing her with stories of how she’d think about hurting her baby during one of its crying fits. She’d gone on to describe how postpartum hormones wreaked havoc on your brain and created all sorts of vivid imagery like seeing yourself dropping your baby off a ledge or its head getting bashed open on a doorway as you walked through it. You couldn’t tell a pregnant woman she might think about hurting her baby or that she’d see horrible things happening to her baby even if it was true. Everyone knew you should let new mothers hold on to the fairytale of motherhood as long as possible. It was hard enough when the delusion of motherhood bliss got shattered and it wasn’t fair to destroy it before the baby was even out. Robin told me her friend called her the next day sobbing about how she never should’ve gotten pregnant and that she was going to be a terrible mother. It took Robin over an hour to calm her down. I was pretty sure she wouldn’t be coming to another one of our dinners.

I didn’t like Jen very much, but I tolerated her because she was Robin’s friend. Robin didn’t like her very much either. She was simply better at hiding it than I was. She’d met Jen at a park a couple of blocks from her house when our kids were a few months old. The park was always crowded with mothers and kids because the Starbucks around the corner and shaded

playground made it an urban mom's paradise. The two of them met as they bounced their babies in Ergo's strapped to their chests trying to drink their lattes without spilling on the top of their babies' bald heads. They discovered they lived only three blocks from each other which was enough to create a friendship. In Los Angeles, the scope of your world shrank to a two-mile radius after you had kids so you developed relationships with women who had children around the same age as yours and lived close.

Developing relationships based on proximity meant you ended up spending time with women you'd never associate with if you didn't have children. Jen qualified as one of those people for me and she did for Robin too except she'd never admit it. If she did then, she'd feel bad every time she hung out with Jen and the only thing worse than hanging out with other mothers you didn't like was being a mother in isolation.

Robin and Jen belonged to their neighborhood stay-at-home mom's club and Robin was always inviting me to their events. I hated them. I felt out of place because I was the only one who worked full-time. Robin worked, but because she worked from home, she still met the requirements for the club. I only got invited to their events because I'd been friends with Robin forever and she was the president. It was awkward making conversation with them. They'd drone on about breastfeeding and struggling through nap time or complain about how they hadn't found time to shower in three days. I felt like I'd committed a crime because I'd showered and my breasts hadn't been pumped in years. Inevitably, one of them would comment about how nice it must be for me to go to work every day and I'd force a polite smile in return.

Our monthly mom's night out dinners were different from the stay-at-home mom's club events. Three years ago, Robin created a meet-up group for mothers to get together for dinner to talk about things other than their kids. She included me on the list without asking because she knew I'd never have signed up if she hadn't. I'd been surprised to discover I liked our dinners. I wasn't the only one who worked so I didn't feel like such a freak. They also gave me a chance to see Robin and we got to spend the rest of the week gossiping about what everyone else had said or done at dinner.

"Well, I don't hate Jeff," Kristin's soft voice broke in. "He's a really great dad."

"Ugh, of course he's a great dad, but is he a great husband? Doubtful." Jen tipped back her glass. She'd skipped the wine and gone straight to Bourbon. "They don't have a clue. They don't know how to think about

anyone else but themselves. There's like this total inability to put themselves in somebody else's shoes. I mean, I get Mitch doesn't care what I think or how I feel, but what about how the kids feel? He can't ever see how his actions affect the kids. Like maybe they'd like to see their dad for more than five minutes on a Sunday afternoon once he's finished golfing."

"I think Jeff does. He's really sensitive."

I looked at Robin and we shared a knowing look—one that only twenty years of friendship brings. I knew what she was thinking because I was thinking the same thing. Jeff was gay. We all knew it and to some extent Kristin knew it too, although she'd rather die than acknowledge it given her religious beliefs. They were the only two Christians in Los Angeles I'd ever met. You had to be very brave to be open about being a Christian in Los Angeles. People from Los Angeles were the most open minded and liberal individuals in the country unless you were a Republican or a Christian. Admitting either was close to admitting you agreed with Hitler's ideas, but Kristin didn't hide her beliefs from anyone. She'd asked each of us at least twice if we wanted to attend a Bible study at her home. We'd all politely declined.

"Sensitive. Mitch wouldn't even know what that meant." Jen snapped her finger at the server, pointing to her glass and he quickly responded by heading back up to the bar to get her another drink.

Robin and I exchanged another look. It was easy to understand Jen's anger because her husband Mitch was rarely around and when he was he didn't contribute to the household. All he did was sit on the couch watching TV or lock himself in his home office for hours. Jen swore he'd never loaded the dishwasher. He was a successful financial broker at a large firm so he worked constantly, but Jen lived in a huge house at the base of the Hollywood Hills where she had a full-time nanny and a housekeeper so it was hard to feel too sorry for her.

Robin turned to Larissa, who'd barely spoken since we sat down. She'd been staring into the faces of the people around us, but seemed to be looking right through them. "What about you? How are things with you and Adam?"

Larissa blinked and looked up as if it just registered she was at dinner with a lively conversation going on around her. "We're officially having an affair."

"What? No way. How'd that happen? What changed your mind?" The questions flew out of my mouth before I could stop them. When she started



talking to her ex-boyfriend Adam she'd sworn she wasn't going to have an affair with him.

It wasn't like any of us sitting at the table could claim marital purity. Everyone had thought about cheating on their husbands—even Kristin although she was more likely to admit Jeff was gay than her impure thoughts—and at times we'd all crossed lines we never thought we'd cross, but the lines they'd crossed were ones that would result in their spouses' feelings getting hurt. None of them had crossed over into divorce-worthy territory and we all knew an affair qualified. I couldn't say the same for myself, but they didn't know that—not even Robin and I told her everything. As far as they knew, I was one of them and Larissa was the first one of us to go there.

Larissa turned bright red. “We're going to meet in Chicago in three weeks. I told Todd I had a conference for work which I do except I'm only presenting on Friday so I have the rest of the weekend free. Adam agreed to meet me there. He told his wife there's an education summit for the new curriculum agenda he's working on.”

“And she believes him?” Jen asked. “Why would she think he'd have to leave the country to have a meeting? Does he usually have to go to the States for what he does?”

“I think he has before.”

We all stared at her, silently begging her to give us the details, but at the same time knowing we were asking her to admit things she probably hadn't even admitted to herself. I wanted to tell her I understood what she was going through and warn her that she had no idea what was going to happen once she stepped over the line no matter how thought out or prepared her step might be. There was no way to know or predict what would happen afterward. I wished there was a way to let her know that even though she thought she could live with a secret, she didn't know secrets developed a life of their own and became an evil corroding poison that ate away at every other part of your life even the parts of your life you thought would be safe. Nothing went untouched. Instead, I kept quiet.

If any of us deserved to have an affair, it was Larissa. No one blamed her when she first started talking about emailing Adam because her husband, Todd, was a loser. Todd had been a manager at Pizza Palace when she met him shortly after her break up with Adam during her senior year of college. Todd was her rebound. Working at a pizza place wasn't a big deal when you were in your early twenties because sometimes that was where a Bachelor's

degree in philosophy got you after you graduated. However, it was a big deal when you were still a manager at Pizza Palace in your mid-thirties and your successful, career-driven wife had come home on more than one occasion to find you sitting on the couch smoking a bong while the kids were still awake. It made it even harder on Larissa that Todd had never made anything of himself while Adam had gone on to build amazing elementary schools for underprivileged kids in third world countries after college graduation. It was like an extra knife in her heart.

“It’s so weird. I never thought I’d do something like this. Ever. If you would’ve told me ten years ago that I’d be the woman having an affair I would’ve never believed you. I keep thinking—I’m her. I’m that woman. I’m like a walking cliché.”

I nodded my head. I knew what it was like to do things you never thought you’d do. To look in the mirror and not know who you were anymore. In your twenties, you’re so determined to be different from the generations who’ve gone before you. You’re proud of your ideals and sure your marriage won’t change your relationship or the way you feel about each other. You’re convinced you’ll always be in love because your love is different than the failed relationships around you and you’ll make sure never to take your love for granted. Then, when you have kids you’re just as convinced becoming a parent won’t change you like you’ve watched it change those who came before you. You believe you’ll be the one to hold onto your independent free self even after you have children. But the reality was that you have no idea how marriage and parenthood will change you until after they occur. I was still trying to reconcile my ideals with my reality. We all were.

“Maybe you should just tell Todd how unhappy you are,” Kristin said.

Jen snorted and rolled her brown eyes. “Always the moral voice. How many times do you think she’s told Todd she’s unhappy?”

Kristin shrugged and looked down at her empty plate with embarrassment. For once, I agreed with Jen. The truth was that by the time a relationship was over a woman has usually tried everything to save it. We didn’t let go of our fairytale dreams without a fight. I’d been listening to Larissa talk about her problems with Todd for the last two years. They’d spent a year in couple’s therapy, taken trips to re-ignite their passion and remember why they’d fallen in love in the first place, drawn up contracts outlining what each person was going to do to change, and at one point he’d even moved out for a brief period before moving back in. She’d cried,

begged, raged, and pouted but to no avail. Nothing budged. He still saw her as a miserable, nagging, and controlling wife while she still saw him as a lazy, selfish man who was settling for mediocrity.

Robin's cell phone rang and she glanced down at the number. "Shit. It's Trey." She tapped it. "Hello? Really? Ugh, yuck.... Fine.... I guess.... Give me ten minutes. Bye." She tucked her phone into her purse and started clearing up the table, her years of being a server kicking in automatically with the signal that it was time to go. "Emma has an ear infection. She keeps saying it feels like there's a bug in her ear stinging her. That's like the second one this month. Ugh. I don't want to have to spend tonight in the ER."

The reminder of our kids simultaneously turned on all our mom switches and we started tidying up, finding our purses, and Larissa motioned for the server to bring our checks. Subconsciously, we all felt guilty for taking time away from our families when one of them might get sick while we were off gossiping about affairs and drinking wine. In a flurry of lipstick and signatures, we scurried out the door, hugging and pecking cheeks before heading to our cars.

I slid into my seat and put the keys in the ignition. The car purred to life, but I kept it in park. I didn't want to go home. Larissa's confession had reminded me of That Night and I did everything in my power to keep from thinking about That Night. I refused to call it by name even in my thoughts. Calling it by name made it real and I liked to pretend like it never happened.

The first few weeks after That Night were the hardest. I struggled with wanting to tell David about it. What I'd done burned my throat like bile and threatened to explode in a fiery tirade. I couldn't count the number of times the weight of it had become unbearable and I'd been compelled to tell him.

"David, I have something to—"

I must've started the sentence over ten times, but as soon as he turned to give me his full attention and I looked into his innocent blue eyes, I'd remember what I'd promised myself. I'd vowed never to tell or talk to anyone about it. I forced myself to tuck it away into the far corners of my mind, hoping a day would come when it no longer existed. I believed it couldn't hurt forever and the pain would go away eventually. I'd spent forty years creating the life I wanted and thirty seconds didn't have to ruin a lifetime. I wasn't going to let that happen. So, each time That Night rose in my throat, I gritted my teeth and clenched my jaw until the words went away and the secret stayed buried.

## Chapter Two

I was relieved to find David asleep when I got home. He was curled up under our silver comforter with another pillow on top of his head. He always slept like he was trying to smother himself. I tiptoed down the hallway to Rori's room. David had left the door cracked open how she liked it. She never let you shut it the entire way and would burst into tears if the crack of light disappeared. She was sprawled out on her twin bed. Her covers were a tangled mess, and her brown hair was sweaty and covering half of her face while her Dora pajama top was halfway up her chest exposing her chubby belly as if she'd been wrestling in her sleep for the last few hours.

I pulled her pajama top down and brushed her tangled hair out of her chubby face which lost more and more of its baby fat every day. Her eyes were shut, peacefully framed in the same thick black eyelashes that outlined my own brown eyes. The beautiful eyelashes made up for the unruly eyebrows that if she was anything like me she'd grow to hate as a teenager as she fought against the ever-present threat of a uni-brow. I tucked her skinny legs under her blanket and brought her favorite pink puppy that she'd had since birth up to her cheek. She rolled over onto her stomach and nuzzled her cheek against the soft fur so worn that patches were missing on both sides. It was easier to be attached when she looked like me. I remembered when she was born whispering a silent thank-you to a God I didn't believe in that she looked like me.

I wondered how her day went. David hadn't called or texted me to say anything and I used to look at his silence as "no news means good news," but lately I was beginning to think he didn't want to talk to me. We'd fought more in the last month than we'd fought in our entire decade together. We'd always been one of those couples that other couples loved to hate because we got along so well and never raised our voices when we were angry.

"How do you do it?" Robin had asked me countless times over the years. She and Trey got into terrible screaming matches on a regular basis. They

had the kind of fights where you were embarrassed to look your neighbors in the eye the next day.

I'd shrug my shoulders and say, "No idea. We're just lucky, I guess."

I couldn't take credit for our peace. David was the one who kept us grounded. He always had. Unlike me, he hated to get worked up over anything and stayed calm no matter what. I lost it when things didn't go my way or according to plans even though I did my best to hide any form of emotional upset from other people because I hated anyone to see me unraveled.

We'd met during one of the rare moments where I freaked out in public. I'd walked out of my apartment on my way to interview with a prospective employer and discovered the left rear tire on my white Toyota Corolla was flat. It wasn't a big deal at first. I took pride in being self-sufficient and never needing a man which meant I knew how to do things like check my oil and change a tire. I put the wrench on the lug nuts and they didn't move. They refused to budge even when I jumped on the wrench. David happened to be wandering into the parking lot just as I was kicking the tire, swearing, and starting to cry. I hated being late and didn't want to jeopardize my chance at landing the job I wanted.

I heard a laugh behind me.

"Um, you want some help with that?"

I turned around and didn't recognize him from the apartment unit. "I don't need help. I know how to change a tire. The lug nuts are stuck."

He nodded at me, but the corners of his mouth were turned up in a half smirk. "Really? That's weird. Mind if I try?"

I rolled my eyes at him, disgusted about the flat tire, being late, and insulted he didn't think I knew what I was doing. "Go right ahead, Mr. Fix It. Knock yourself out." I stepped aside while he proceeded to do everything I'd just done. He assumed the crouched position next to the tire, gripped the wrench, and attempted to turn it. Nothing. I watched as his forehead lined with exertion as he tried again and again, but the lug nuts still didn't move. Before long, he was standing on the wrench in the same position he'd found me in and trying to press it down with his weight.

"I guess you're right." He shrugged. "This tire isn't going to come off."

"Shocking," I said.

"Do you need a ride?" he asked.

I was already going to be late and if I took the bus, I'd be even later since I had to go all the way downtown. I sized him up and noticed how good looking he was. He looked like he'd just stepped out of an Abercrombie and Fitch ad except he didn't smell like the cologne that violently assaulted you each time you walked within a block of the store. He had blond hair, bleached nearly white in some spots and the muscular arms protruding out from his t-shirt were golden brown which meant he spent lots of time outside. His eyes were a crystalline baby blue that stared right through you even behind the black frames of his glasses. His lips were small and turned into a half smile even in resting position. His jeans were slung low on his hips and worn out on the bottoms from dragging on the ground. He wore a pair of Old Navy flip flops. I didn't know any serial killers who wore Old Navy flip flops.

"Fine," I huffed as if he was the one responsible for making the tire flat and ruining my morning.

He put me at ease as we drove downtown, a task which was almost impossible to do whenever my plans got ruined. I was even smiling and laughing by the time we pulled up in front of the tall office building. He waited for me to finish my interview and then helped me tow my car to the auto mechanic. As it turned out, when I'd gotten new tires a month earlier, the machine they used to put the lug nuts on had malfunctioned and the air pressure got so hot it melted the lug nuts onto my tire. David loved to tell the story of how we met and exaggerated my meltdown a bit more each time he told it because he loved to make people laugh. It was one of the things I'd always loved about him, but his sense of humor faded more and more with each passing day.

He'd become a person I didn't recognize ever since Rori was born and his transformation had grown to new heights since she started getting sick. I wasn't bothered by her recurrent bladder infections because lots of girls got them at her age. Being four meant she was determined to do everything herself. She no longer allowed either of us to help her wipe and I was pretty sure the front-to-back wiping routine we'd drilled into her head before she was even out of diapers was not happening as often as it should. I had a strong feeling wiping amounted to a quick pat or an equally unhygienic game of "let's explore what's down there." It wasn't nearly as disturbing to me as it was to David that she'd had three bladder infections in the last month and spent all of February on an antibiotic.

Our first foray into the realm of spousal screaming matches happened after I'd asked him if he was being sensitive to her bladder infections because he was afraid someone might become suspicious of him molesting her.

"What? What the hell are you saying?" he asked the moment the question had innocently come out of my mouth.

"Look. I didn't mean anything by it. I was just saying.... I mean, I'm just asking if it could be possible you're worried someone might think you're messing with her and that's why you're so upset about it?"

He narrowed his eyes to slits and shook his head. "That's sick. Just sick. I can't even believe you'd bring that up."

"You can't believe I'd bring that up? Really?" I asked.

David was hypersensitive to anything hinting at sexual abuse because he'd spent most of his late teenage years helping his mother through a nasty legal battle after his stepfather had molested his two half-sisters.

"I'm disgusted by you."

He'd never said anything so derogatory to me before. I waited for him to realize what he'd said and apologize, but he jumped up from the couch, took the stairs two at a time to our bedroom, and slammed the door like a fifteen-year-old girl in the throes of PMS. I sat on the couch stunned. He'd never come close to calling me a name. It took me a few moments to gather my composure, but eventually I followed him upstairs and found him lying on our bed watching Sportscenter on the TV hanging on the wall across from the bed. I took a seat on the edge of the bed hesitantly, smoothing out the wrinkles in our silver comforter.

"Listen. I'm sorry if I upset you. I didn't mean anything by it. I thought you might be worried about people thinking that about you and it was why you were so scared. I didn't realize you were really just that worried about her."

He turned his gaze away from the TV and looked me in the eye. "Somebody's got to worry about her."

His words stung. I stood up.

"Fuck you." I spit the words out at him and this time, I was the one to turn around and leave.

I'd spent the night on the couch trying to sleep. We'd never slept apart before. Other couples did it all the time and thought nothing of it. Some even had separate rooms, but we'd always slept together even if we were in an argument. David hated going to bed angry as much as I did. I barely slept

because I kept listening for the sound of him coming downstairs to apologize, but he never came.

It'd been a month since our fight and he still hadn't apologized. Even though we were sleeping in the same bed again pretending as if it had never happened, his words still hung in the air. Before our fight, there'd been times when he'd indirectly implied I didn't worry about Rori as much as he did, but he'd never gone so far as to accuse me of not caring about her like he did. He knew how insecure I was about my skills as a mother.

I'd excelled and been the best at everything I tried right up until the point I started trying to get pregnant. I couldn't even get pregnant right so it wasn't a surprise that becoming a mother didn't come easy either. I was awkward and clumsy from the moment Rori was placed in my arms.

It became apparent right away that David was a better parent than me. It came naturally to him. While I bumbled and stumbled like I had an extra pair of hands and didn't know what to do with them, he changed diapers and bounced her to sleep like he'd been doing it his entire life. Holding and soothing her was like a perfectly choreographed dance for the two of them whereas it was a jerky no-rhythm movement for me which only resulted in increasing the intensity of her wails.

Breastfeeding was a nightmare and never ran smoothly, but I kept at it because it was the best thing for her despite my bloody nipples and her sandpaper tongue. It was the same routine every time. We tried to find a position for her to latch, but could never get it right and she'd grow more and more agitated until she was so worked up she couldn't eat. She ended up drinking more of my breastmilk from bottles given to her by David than she ever did from my breasts. I'd never felt like such a failure and didn't know what to do with it.

My three months of maternity leave were the longest three months I'd ever experienced. Time stood still. The walls of our house grew smaller and smaller every day and there were times I was on the verge of hyperventilating. I hid a brown paper bag behind the medicine cabinet in the bathroom because I was sure I was going to need it and didn't want David or anyone else to see me do it. It was bad enough that my inadequacies as a mother were on display and I didn't want to add to my humiliation by hyperventilating in front of someone.

A few weeks after Rori was born, we decided David was going to be the one to stay home with her. He was convinced she needed to be with one of us



during her early years and he'd offered to quit his teaching job at the college to stay home. We talked about it extensively as if there was a real chance I'd be the one to stay home, but we both knew he was the best fit. It wasn't just because he was better with her than I was. It also made the most sense for us financially. David taught English at a local community college and although he loved it, my salary was more than four times what he made. A year before my maternity leave, I'd become the Chief Operating Officer at the insurance company where I'd worked since college. I was beyond thrilled when it was time for me to go back to work, although I did my best to pretend to be sad about it.

"Oh, I'm going to miss her so much," I cooed, looking at her sleeping in her polka-dotted bassinet with her pink puppy resting against her cheek as I got ready to leave for my first day back at work. "She's just so precious." I hoped I sounded convincing. The truth was that when she wasn't screaming she was sleeping and I could only stand around for so long watching somebody else sleep. It was about as enjoyable as watching grass grow.

"She's going to miss you, too," David said, trying equally hard to sound convincing.

I gave him a quick peck on his lips and then placed a kiss on the top of her head. I grabbed my travel coffee mug and headed out the door. As I closed the door behind me, a huge smile spread across my face. I'd never been so happy to crawl through rush hour traffic. I rolled the windows down and let the cool wind blow against my face, turned the radio up, and sang at the top of my lungs to every song. I could breathe again.

During the first few weeks back at my office, I pretended to be having a hard time being back because it was what I was supposed to do and how I was supposed to feel. I made a point to show my employees pictures of the two of them on my iPhone whenever they came into my office and made sure I announced how hard it was to be away from her at least once a day. The truth was it felt as if the noose that had been tied around my neck had been released. I felt like myself again for the first time since I'd gotten pregnant as I buried myself in the work that had piled up on my desk since I'd been gone. I dived into huge accounts determined to settle them in our favor.

David was thrilled to be staying home with Rori and they easily fell into a routine. He'd always been passionate about photography, but teaching hadn't left him much time to enjoy it. Now he could devote himself to his photography and Rori became his prized subject. He took roll after roll of

film and never tired of taking pictures of her. During Rori's first year, there was rarely a time where you didn't catch him with a diaper bag and a camera slung over his shoulder.

He took her to the park almost every day and enrolled her in all the mommy and me classes in our area. He was almost always the only dad in classes, but it never bothered him. He saw Robin more than I did because they took the kids to the same music and story time classes at the library every Monday and Wednesday afternoon.

People wondered and questioned why he was the one to stay at home and be the primary caretaker while I was the one to go to work. Even though we lived in Los Angeles, people still looked at a dad staying home with a child as being abnormal even though everyone was politically correct enough not to say it. My mother was one of the worst.

"It's got to be so hard for you to go to work every day," she'd say. "I can't imagine leaving you kids alone with your father while I went to work. It would just feel so weird."

But it didn't feel weird to us. It felt right even if other people didn't understand it. Once when I was at the park with Rori by myself another mother was bold enough to ask me, "Don't you feel like he's doing your job?"

I'd come home and cried to David. The woman at the park had said out loud what I knew everyone was thinking. He'd assured me again and again that it didn't matter what other people said about our family. He promised me he was happy in his role and as long as I was happy in my role, then we were doing what worked best for our family.

"Who cares what people think? We're doing what's right for us," he said and we hadn't talked about it again. It wasn't the last time someone made a rude or insensitive comment about it, but we ignored them together. He'd betrayed our agreement during our fight. I was comfortable with strangers thinking I wasn't a good mother, but I wasn't okay with my husband thinking it.

I tucked the blankets up under Rori's chin a final time and tiptoed into the hallway bathroom. I didn't use the master bathroom because I didn't want to take the chance of waking David. He was a sensitive sleeper and if he got woke up after he'd fallen asleep, he had a tough time falling back to sleep. I washed my face and brushed my teeth, hoping I wouldn't wake up with a headache in the morning from the wine. I undressed quietly and headed into

our bedroom. I slipped into my pajamas and crawled into bed next to him. He stirred, opened his eyes to look at me, and then rolled over. I stared at his back wondering how long this phase was going to last.

## Chapter Three

I was in the middle of writing a report when my cell phone rang. I looked down and saw it was David. I toyed with the idea of letting it go straight to voicemail but decided to pick up since I hadn't seen him or Rori since yesterday morning. I'd gone straight to my mom's night out dinner after work and I'd left early this morning before either of them was awake.

"Hey. I—"

"Rori threw up. She ate her breakfast and threw up everywhere."

I could hear the panic in his voice. David's only phobia was throwing up. Nobody liked to throw up, but David got anxious watching people throw up on TV. Rori had only had the stomach flu once, and David's nerves were so bad during it that he ended up making himself sick.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

"How am I doing? I'm good," he said with an edge in his voice.

"I know how you get. I was just making sure you weren't freaking out."

"I'm freaking out, but not because of myself. I'm worried about her. Why is she throwing up now?"

"Hon, she has the stomach flu. Kids get the stomach flu all the time. They're germ magnets. Didn't you tell me she was playing with a kid at the park the other day that ended up leaving with the nanny because he was sick?"

"I did, but he had an asthma attack. Totally different deal."

"Okay." I wasn't sure what he wanted me to do. "Do you want me to come home and help? I can help you."

"No," he snapped.

I sighed. When had all our conversations become so strained and difficult? Things used to run smoothly between us and now our interactions were filled with tension. It was becoming more and more normal for us and it scared me. What if we never got back to how we used to be together? "What's she doing now?"

His voice relaxed a little. "She's sleeping."

“That’s good.”

“Sure. I’m just really worried about her.”

“I know you are.” I quickly added, “I am too.”

“Well, I’ll let you go.”

“Keep me posted.”

“Will do. Love you.”

“You too.”

As soon as I hung up, the phone rang again. This time, it was Robin and I let it go straight to voicemail. I was sure she was calling to gossip about dinner and let me know what happened with Emma. I’d be happy when flu season was over. Our kids were sick from November until March every year. Thankfully, we only had a month left and the runny noses would dry up for good.

I stared at the report I’d been working on since I’d gotten into the office but I couldn’t concentrate. I didn’t like David’s underlying resentment toward me. It hovered below the surface despite the smile he put on his face. He hadn’t raised his voice at me again and he was polite toward me, but I sensed him slipping away and felt powerless to do anything about it. It made me second-guess everything I’d done for our family. I’d always imagined having a child would bring us closer together and instead it was ripping us apart. The worst part was there didn’t seem to be anything I could do about it. I didn’t know how to fix it.

I busied myself with trying to finish the report. Once I finally got myself focused, I quickly tapped it out and moved on to the next one. I was in the middle of the second report when the phone rang. It was David again.

“Meet me at Cedars Sinai! Now!”

“What—I don’t—what’s going on?”

“It’s Rori. I can’t wake her up.”

My head swirled, threatening to roll off my neck. “What do you mean? You can’t wake her up?”

“I. CAN’T. WAKE. HER.UP.”

It didn’t make sense. What was he talking about? He couldn’t wake her up?

“Is she going to be okay?”

“Dammit, Celeste. I have no idea what the fuck is going on. She threw up two more times and then fell asleep. I didn’t really think it was that big of a deal like she was just sleeping because she was sick. She slept for two hours

so I thought maybe I'd try to see if I could get her to drink a sip of water. You know, give her fluids or something. But she wouldn't wake up. Not at all. She didn't even move. She still hasn't moved. Not even when the paramedics got here." His voice was shaking.

"It's going to be okay. I'm sure it is. I'm on my way. I'll meet you there."

I grabbed my purse and ran for the elevator. I didn't bother to talk to anyone or tell them where I was going. I tapped the down button as if the more times I hit it, the quicker it would arrive. My stomach was in my throat. Finally, it arrived and I chewed my fingernails as it brought me to the parking garage. The hospital was only a few miles away. I considered putting my hazards on and blowing through the red lights, but it was too dangerous and we didn't need both of us to end up in the hospital. I arrived at the hospital and pulled into the emergency room drop off. I jumped out of the car not caring if it was in the wrong spot and got towed.

I sprinted through the door and almost ran into a tall homeless man stumbling out the doorway. My eyes searched for David and Rori as I ran to the nurse behind the glass cubicle who checked in people as they entered.

"Please, you've got to help me. My daughter is sick. She came in by ambulance with my husband. Please, I've got to find them. You have to help me."

"Ma'am, slow down—"

"But please, please, help me." My heart was pounding in my chest. My throat was so dry I couldn't swallow.

"Ma'am, I understand. I do. But, I need to know her name. I can't help you unless I know her name," she said.

"It's Aurora. Aurora Reynolds."

The nurse looked down at her computer and began typing. I sent David a text letting him know I was there.

"Found her. She's in 3C." She pointed toward one of the hallways on the left leading out of the waiting room. "Follow it around the corner until you get to the T at the end. Make a right and you'll see the beds."

I held myself back from running down the hallway and worked on assuring myself that David had to be overreacting. Unlike David, Rori was a deep sleeper and could be hard to wake up. She was probably sleeping so deeply because she was sick. Hopefully, she was awake by now.

By the time I reached the corner, I'd calmed my heart and my breathing was starting to return to normal. When I rounded the corner, I ran into a

bustling nurses' station with nurses, doctors, and emergency personnel rushing everywhere. No one was still. Patients were being wheeled in and out. Loud cries and moans were coming from behind one of the blue curtains. I walked up to the desk and interrupted a man in a white coat who was flipping through files.

"Excuse me. I'm looking for my daughter. She's in 3C."

He gestured across from us without looking up. I turned around and took a deep breath before pulling the curtain back. Rori looked so small. Her body only covered half the hospital bed. She was lying on her back still dressed in her Dora pajamas from the night before. Her eyes were closed, but she didn't look like she was sick or in any distress. She looked like she was sleeping and would open her eyes to smile up at us at any moment. David stood next to the bed, running his hand through her dark hair over and over again. The air in the room was still as if none of the frantic energy going on outside the curtain was happening. I moved to stand next to David and put my arm around him. He turned to look at me.

He looked horrible. All the color had gone out of his face. His eyes were wide and his hair was sticking up from running his hands through it like he did every time he got nervous.

"Has she woken up?" I asked.

"Yes. Thank God. When they put the IV in her. They said it was a good sign. She's opened her eyes and mumbled something since then. She's kinda acting like she has a fever even though she doesn't. She hasn't run a temp all morning. I've been checking."

I leaned over next to her and kissed her on the cheek. "Hi, honey. Mommy's here," I said softly. I kissed her again. Her eyes stayed closed. I caressed her arm and noticed her other arm was taped up in a splint like it was broken. The needle from her IV went into her arm and there was white tape wound around it with a flat board underneath it. "Why's her arm like that?"

"I guess they do it to all the little kids. It keeps them from pulling the IV out because they move so much."

"What'd the doctor say?"

"No one has even been in here to see her yet. It's just been nurses. They took a bunch of blood while they were putting her IV in. They're going to run some tests on it. Oh, and if she has to go to the bathroom, we have to have

collect her urine.” He pointed to a sealed plastic specimen container on the small white counter next to her bed.

“Did they say when she’ll see a doctor?”

He shook his head. “This is ridiculous. She needs to see a doctor. Like now. We need to know what the hell is going on.”

I squeezed his shoulder. “I’m sure it’s fine.”

“Fine? She’s laid out in the emergency room. She’s not fine.” He jerked his arm away.

“Kids get sick all the time. I’m sure she has some nasty flu. Everyone who gets sick this year gets really sick. Even adults. I think it has something to do with the flu shot. I swear. I really do.”

He didn’t bother to respond. He just kept staring at her.

“I can’t stand this. I’m going to find someone.”

“David, just—”

He wasn’t listening anyway. He was already on the other side of the curtain. My gaze returned to Rori. She was going to be okay. She had to be. I stared at her chest, watching it move up and down in a rhythmic motion. It wasn’t long before David returned looking dejected.

“They said they’ll send someone in soon.”

We stood next to her bed in silence, listening to the beep and hum of the machines hooked up to her body.

“Should we try to wake her up?” I asked.

“The nurses said we should let her sleep. She’s probably fighting off some infection and her body needs sleep.”

I hadn’t thought about an infection. Maybe she had another bad bladder infection. It wouldn’t explain why she threw up, but maybe it was why she was so tired and having a hard time waking up. It was a few more minutes before a man pushed through the curtain behind me.

“I’m Dr. Yang,” he said.

He was a short man with carefully cropped hair and a white collared shirt half haphazardly tucked into his pants. He stuck out his hand to David first and then me. We eagerly shook hands, anxious to be done with the formality. He took a seat on a stool and propped himself up against the wall.

“What’s going on?” David was clearly annoyed with his casual approach.

“I don’t really know. We’re not sure. We took some blood and there are some abnormalities in—”

“What kind of abnormalities?” David asked.



I placed my hand on his arm. "Give him a second to explain."

"Her white blood cell count is a bit elevated, but it's not completely out of the normal range. Her blood sugar is a 42 which is very low. She's hypoglycemic and really dehydrated. The IV fluids should take care of raising her blood sugar and we should start seeing it come back up. I'm not sure why her blood sugar is so low, though. How many times did you say she threw up?"

"Three. And just since this morning. How could she get so dehydrated in only a few hours?" David asked.

"It's unusual. You typically wouldn't see a child get severely dehydrated so quickly. Usually, you would see a child become this dehydrated after they'd been throwing up for days."

"So, what does that mean?" I asked.

"It could mean a few things."

I waited for him to go on, but he didn't. I was beginning to get annoyed and David had already reached his limit. "Like what?"

"We haven't gotten any urine and it's important that we do because we need to take a look at it and see if there's any kind of infection. It's possible there might be an infection. It will also tell us whether there are ketones in her urine."

"What are ketones?" The only time I'd heard of ketones was when everyone had gone on the Atkins diet in the early 90s. I thought they were a good thing because all the Atkins books described them as being positive, but maybe they weren't.

"Ketones are associated with the proteins in your body and fat. If you have a significant amount of ketones in your urine, then it usually means a person is dehydrated or it can also signal other issues that might be present. In this case, we'd expect to see ketones in the urine because we already know she's dehydrated. We just want to see how high her levels are to make sure nothing else is going on. However, I'm confused by her other results."

"What are the other results?" David and I talked on top of each other.

"Her bicarbonate level is a 7." His forehead lined with concern. Both of us waited for more but he didn't have anything more to give us as if he expected us to somehow know what a bicarbonate level was. I'd never even heard the word and I was certain David hadn't either.

"What's a bicarbonate level?" I asked.

“Whenever we see a child whose dehydrated, we run an electrolyte blood panel to see how dehydrated the child is. One of the electrolytes the blood panel measures is bicarbonate along with sodium, potassium, and chloride. Her electrolytes show severe dehydration, but her bicarbonate level is very low, much lower than we’d expect to see from dehydration alone.”

“So what does that mean?” David asked.

“We don’t know. It’s hard to say. We’re going to have to run some additional tests.”

“But it’s because she has the stomach flu?” I asked.

“It’s being exasperated by her being sick, but we wouldn’t typically see a bicarbonate level this low because of the stomach flu.”

“Then, what’s going on?” I asked at the same time David asked, “What’s wrong with her?”

“Unfortunately, I can’t say. We’re going to have to admit her. We’ve already started her on IV fluids which should help her blood sugar levels come back up and she’s going to have to be monitored closely to see how her bicarbonate level responds. The pediatric doctors are going to be able to answer your questions better than I can. I’ve put in the order for a bed on the pediatric unit and you should be moved up to the fifth floor shortly.”

I looked at David. He was staring at Rori, grinding his jaw back and forth.

“So, you’re sure it’s not the flu?”

David shot me an icy stare. “He already said it isn’t the flu. Something is wrong with her.”

“I’m sorry I don’t have more answers for you, but the emergency room is only the first step. Once she’s been admitted and the results come back from the other tests we’ve taken, we’ll start to have more helpful information. We need to gather more information about what’s going on.”

We thanked him as he left, pulling the curtain back around us. I stared at David waiting for him to say something. I didn’t have to wait long.

“I knew something was wrong with her,” he said without looking up. His gaze was still fixed on Rori, who continued to look like she was taking a nap.

“He didn’t say it was serious. He just said it wasn’t what they’d expect. We don’t know anything yet. He hasn’t given us any real information. I’m sure she’s going to be fine.”

David blew everything out of proportion when it came to Rori. When she was learning to walk, he was convinced we needed to get her a helmet because he was afraid she’d hit her head when she fell and get brain damage.

Once she accidentally ate a vitamin, and he went into a frenzied panic because he was convinced she was going to get iron poisoning. It didn't matter that a representative from poison control assured us one pill was harmless and the pill had probably gotten stuck in her teeth before she swallowed it. It took me forever to calm him down and talk him out of taking her to the emergency room to get her stomach pumped.

“Something's wrong. I can feel it.”

I shook my head maintaining my stance. “Everything is going to be fine. You'll see.”

I wasn't jumping to any unnecessary conclusions. I refused to get alarmed unless the doctors gave us a reason to be alarmed and so far, nobody had given us a legitimate reason to be overly concerned. Dr. Yang hadn't acted like it was a life or death situation. He'd seemed more confused than anything else. He probably couldn't figure it out because he didn't work with children, but I was sure the pediatric doctors would have answers for us after they examined her.

I scrolled through my phone browsing countless medical pages looking for an explanation of the bicarbonate level that made sense while we waited for someone to take us up to the pediatric ward. Everything I read referred to something called the anion gap and other medical jargon I didn't understand. Most of what I found contained chemical formulas. I loved math and was good at it, but I liked math with actual numbers. When you started throwing in letters, you were no longer doing math and I couldn't follow any of it.

Rori didn't open her eyes when they transferred her from the emergency room bed into the hospital bed in her room. I'd never been in a pediatric hospital room and was surprised it didn't look different from other hospital rooms I'd been in. The only noticeable difference was the Mickey Mouse border encircling the room, but other than that it was the same as every other hospital room—a stiff white bed as the focal point and two hard-backed chairs with metal legs next to it. The off-white walls were in need of a new paint job even though we were at one of the most expensive and respected hospitals in Los Angeles. She had her own bathroom with a small toilet and sink. There was even a standing shower. I was glad we had a window even if the only view it provided was the other hospital wing directly across the street. I moved to stand next to David as a nurse in the doorway made her way into the room and began connecting Rori's IV and other wires to the machine next to her hospital bed.

“She’s going to be okay,” I assured him for the tenth time, hoping my words were true.

## Chapter Four

“She’s experiencing metabolic acidosis. The blood draw we took at three still shows her bicarbonate level is at 7–”

David interrupted, “It’s still the same? But, we’ve been here for over six hours and she’s been on an IV the entire time. Shouldn’t it have gone up? The doctor in the ER said IV fluids would help her. Why aren’t they helping?”

“The good news is they’re helping with her dehydration. Her potassium, sodium, and chloride levels are coming back up.”

I was having a hard time focusing on what the attending pediatric physician, Dr. Koven, was explaining because I couldn’t stop staring at her pregnant belly. I guessed she was at least seven months pregnant by how extended she was coupled with the way she waddled when she walked and how she held her hand against her back for support while she stood. I never thought about doctors who worked with sick kids having kids of their own. I couldn’t imagine how she did her job every day and wasn’t plagued with constant fears about her unborn child. Every pregnant woman I knew obsessed about the potential diseases that could affect their children, but we kept them at bay because we didn’t have to see them. How could you combat the fear when you had to see sick kids every day?

“However, we are also concerned about the level of ketones in her blood. Those are elevated too. We would’ve hoped to see those levels come down as well through rehydrating her, but they’re still in the high range.”

David ran his hands through his hair which was sticking up haphazardly because he’d run his hands through it so many times. “I don’t understand what’s going on with her. None of this makes sense.”

“I wish we had more answers to give you, but when we see something unusual like we’re seeing with Rori, it can take a while to narrow down what’s going on. We have to start wide and rule things out as we go and there’s not a quick way to do it. I wish there was.” She was hovering over the

computer screen where the nurses made notations after they'd checked on Rori.

"What sort of things are we looking at? Where are we starting?" I asked.

"Our biggest concern is that she's acidotic. We'll begin by looking at some of the most common reasons we would see a kid become acidotic. We'll be looking at things like diabetes and other endocrine disorders because she's experiencing ketoacidosis, but diabetes is highly unlikely because her sugar levels are quite low whereas with diabetes we would expect them to be high. But, we will definitely be ruling out a diagnosis of diabetes just to be sure. In addition, we'll be looking at whether her kidney and liver functioning are normal. We'll want to make sure all her major body systems are functioning appropriately and there isn't anything going on with her organs. Usually, when children become acidotic, they become acidotic because there's a problem somewhere in their organs or their metabolic functioning."

"How long until you know what's wrong with her?" I asked.

"We're going to have the lab come and do another round of blood draws in about forty-five minutes. Those labs will be sent out to run much more specialized tests. We'll also look at her electrolytes and bicarbonate levels again to see if they're improving. Once the results are back, we'll go from there. Have you gotten a urine sample yet?"

David and I shook our heads. They'd given us a urine cup when we were in the emergency room and a small bowl on the inside of the toilet once we'd gotten to our room on the pediatric ward to catch her urine. Ironically, she'd spent the last few months going to the bathroom constantly, but there hadn't been a drop since we'd arrived at the hospital.

"Do you have any more questions?" Dr. Koven asked.

We shook our heads again even though we had lots of questions but we'd been asking them all day and the only answer we got was "wait and see." Nobody had any answers for us and I'd annoyed the resident we'd seen a few hours ago with my rapid-fire questions. Our session ended with her telling me she often advised parents to stay off the Internet because of all the misinformation and that it tended to scare parents rather than help them.

"She seemed nice," I said as Dr. Koven closed the door behind her.

David was upset with me again. He was loving and doting on Rori, speaking to her in a sweet, soothing voice each time a nurse or doctor began poking and prodding her, talking her through each blood draw even though

she didn't even flinch. But every time I tried to ask him a question, the loving voice disappeared. His body tightened and he worked his jaw as he talked to me. He hadn't touched me since we'd been at the hospital and he flinched every time I touched him.

"I guess." He shrugged.

"How are you feeling?"

"How do you think I'm feeling, Celeste? Our daughter is in the hospital and there's something really wrong with her. How are you feeling?"

"We don't know if there's something seriously wrong with her yet. They haven't told us it's something major."

"Really? She seems pretty sick to me. She hasn't woken up since this morning and she acts like she's in a damn coma. What kid doesn't wake up when they stick a needle in her?"

"I understand you're upset. I—"

"Yes, I'm upset. Of course I'm upset. I've been saying something is wrong with her for weeks. What I don't understand is why you're not upset."

"I refuse to get upset until I know there's something to get upset about. I'm going to be level headed about this thing until I know otherwise." I wanted to remind him that he used to be the one with a level head. Did he even remember how he used to be?

There wasn't anything wrong with what I felt even though he wanted me to feel different. Nobody had given us any real answers. They kept asking us if Rori had gotten into any medication or household chemicals. Dr. Yang had asked us in the emergency room, the nurse who admitted us to the pediatric unit asked, and it was the first question out of Dr. Koven's mouth when she walked into our room. How did we know Rori hadn't accidentally gotten into something when David wasn't looking? It was possible she'd taken something without us knowing and had to sleep it off until it was out of her system, but I didn't dare say that to David because he'd take it personally.

"This *thing*? That's what you're calling all of this? Our daughter is in a hospital bed strapped to machines and only opens her eyes when the doctors open them for her? Whose blood shows all kinds of weird abnormalities and this is just a thing for you?" He shook his head.

"Honey, I know you're upset. I get it. I understand. I just don't think it does us any good to get all worked up. Besides, one of us has to be the calm one. One of us has to be able to think straight. I'm just trying to stay calm."

"I—" He opened his mouth and then quickly shut it again. "Never mind."

“I should go home and get some stuff since we’re going to be here overnight. I thought maybe I could bring her new pajamas and get some stuff for you and me to sleep in too?” I hadn’t meant for it to come out sounding like a question.

“Sure.”

I called Robin to fill her in on the details on the drive to our house. I quickly brought her up to speed.

“God, hon, that’s so awful. How are you?” she asked.

“I’m okay. I mean, it totally sucks. I hate that she’s sick, but I’m not going to get freaked out until I know there’s something to get freaked out about and honestly, I really don’t think there’s going to be something seriously wrong with her. She’s such a healthy kid. I feel bad for David, though. He’s a nervous wreck.”

“I would be too. That’s scary shit.”

Maybe I should’ve been more scared, but I didn’t have the alarmist button that most parents had. Other parents looked at every instance in their child’s life as a major life or death situation as if one wrong move would alter their lives forever, but I never saw things that way. I didn’t walk around in a panicked state like Rori’s life was always teetering on the edge.

This difference was obvious each time I took Rori to the park. I watched as the other mothers hovered around their children waiting to catch them in case they fell while I sat on the side of the sandbox as Rori scampered up and down the equipment by herself. All I could think of as I watched the other parents and kids were the concrete playgrounds with steel equipment my sister and I played on when we were kids. We’d managed to survive and I didn’t think the Teflon floor underneath the equipment would do anything except spring Rori right back up even if she did fall.

Unlike me, David had gotten the alarm button. He’d been so worried about Rori’s head when she was an infant. He acted as if her head would roll off her neck and bounce on the floor like a basketball if you let it go. He was constantly calling out for me to watch her head—keep my hand on it. His fears about her head grew with her as if her skull was made of paper instead of flexible bone. He’d been sure she had a concussion when she took her first slip in the bathtub and hit her head even though she seemed fine to me. She’d cried, but I’d heard her cry louder when she was hungry. He’d insisted on taking her to the pediatrician despite my voice of reason that she was fine and she was.



Robin was as neurotic about brain injuries as David. She'd call me with all her worries and I spent as much time reassuring her everything was all right with Emma as I did David. She freaked out when she put Emma in her wooden cradle for the first time because he was afraid she'd rocked her too hard and given her Shaken Baby Syndrome. I explained cradles were made to rock babies and was sure there wasn't a single case of Shaken Baby Syndrome due to cradle rocking.

"How was your day?" I asked.

"Clearly not nearly as dramatic as yours. Emma did have an ear infection. We took her to the doctor this morning and they put her on antibiotics. She seems fine now."

"What'd you think about what Larissa said last night?"

"That she's about to have sex with someone other than her husband which officially makes it an affair?"

I laughed. "Yeah, what'd you think?"

"Really? Your daughter is in the hospital and you want to gossip about Larissa? You crack me up."

I laughed again, but it was nervous laughter this time. "You know how much I hate it when things get intense with David. I don't know how to handle this new side of him. I keep telling myself I'll get used to it, but it's been four years and I'm not any more used to it now than I was."

I hadn't expected David to become so paranoid and hypervigilant when he became a dad. I figured he'd be a laidback father because he was the most relaxed person I'd ever met. I was the worrier and the obsessive one—the one who got frustrated when things didn't go according to my plans or who willfully exerted my will to make things happen the way I wanted them to. I was the person who couldn't sleep because I was too worked up about something or who got so anxious I got stomach aches and migraines. It'd never been him. He'd always been the voice of reason and calm.

He started to change shortly after we'd found out I was pregnant. He was obsessed with me taking my vitamins, getting enough rest, and not working so hard. He barraged me with questions about how I was feeling all the time, calling multiple times a day while I was at work. At first, I thought it was because he was nervous given my other miscarriages, but his hovering continued into the second and third trimester after the threat of miscarrying dropped dramatically. He read all the parenting and birthing books he could get his hands on. He was more scared of giving birth than I was. I thought his

worrying was cute and figured once the baby was born, he would relax and return to his usual self.

Instead, he became just as hovering over Rori as he'd been of me in my pregnancy. He jumped every time she cried. At night when she would wake up, he would leap out of bed and be leaning over her crib, pulling her into his arms before my feet had hit the floor. His face would become just as contorted with emotion as hers as if her crying physically hurt him. When I listened to my friends talk about how inept their husbands were at caring for their babies, I knew I should feel lucky and fortunate to have him be so wonderful with Rori. But all I could think of when I heard them complain about how their husbands didn't know how to hold the baby right, change the diaper quickly, or put the baby to sleep was how much I longed for the attention he used to give me.

I quickly tired of my conversation with Robin. I'd called her for a distraction, not a reality check. She was probably texting David while we talked asking him how he was holding up. They were closer than they'd ever been since they spent so much time together. It had been weird at first that he spent more time with my best friend than I did, but I'd gotten used to it.

"Will you let me know as soon as you find out anything?" she asked.

"Of course. I'll let you know as soon as I know anything."

"If I can do anything for you guys, bring you coffee, just call me."

"I will. Thanks. Bye."

I tapped End and set my phone on the seat next to me and felt the familiar wave of loneliness wash over me. I missed David and the person he used to be. I hadn't been prepared for our role reversal and didn't like it. We'd always had neatly defined roles that allowed our relationship to run smoothly, but I didn't know how to act in my new role. I wanted the old David back—the guy who didn't get upset about everything and blow insignificant moments into crises.

The worst part of our role reversal was that I couldn't do for him what he'd always done for me despite my best efforts. I attempted to make him laugh about taking himself so seriously, but it only angered him or even worse—disappointed him. I tried to get him to relax using the same tactics and techniques he'd used with me to make me feel better like reminding me to breathe and rubbing my back in circles. None of it worked or made a difference. He rolled his eyes at me when I reminded him to breathe and

swatted my hands away like I was an annoying bug when I tried to rub his back.

I took a deep breath before walking into the house—our Spanish colonial home that we'd worked so hard to renovate and make our own. I stepped onto the restored original wood floors we'd painstakingly done together for months. We'd spent so much time on our knees we developed matching bruises, but the floors had turned out beautiful.

I walked into the living room and found it littered with the remnants of David and Rori's morning. The pillows on the brown sectional were messed up from where they'd laid together during their thirty minutes of the cartoon time David scheduled into each morning. Rori's sippy cup sat on the coffee table next to his coffee mug holding coffee that had long grown cold. I straightened the pillows on the couch, setting them each back in their place. I carried their cups from the coffee table into the kitchen and loaded them into the dishwasher already filled with the dishes left over from breakfast—her hardened bowl of oatmeal and his plate caked with scrambled eggs and syrup from his famous pancakes I was sure he'd shared with her. I looked around at our kitchen. It was the first room we'd remodeled. I picked up the dishrag from the sink and wiped the black marble countertops we'd argued over for two weeks until he'd finally given in to me, "If marble is really that important to you, let's do it."

My favorite part of the kitchen was the island and bar stools we'd chosen to slide underneath. Before Rori was born, we spent endless hours each evening sitting at the island, sipping wine, and talking about our days. We filled the room with our conversation and laughter. I regaled him with stories of my difficult clients and accounts I was working on and he shared about the classes he was teaching and the students he found promising or alternately annoying. I couldn't remember the last time we'd hung out at the island and shared a bottle of wine. Most nights when I managed to make it home in time for dinner, the dinner focused on Rori and trying to get her to eat. She was notoriously picky. If she had her way, she'd only eat goldfish crackers and bananas. As soon as the dinner dishes were cleared, we shifted into the night time routine David had created and been diligent about performing since Rori had been a few months old.

The next two hours were split into neatly timed intervals. First, there was a brief playtime followed by a bath. Next, we put her in her pajamas and brushed her teeth. Afterward, we tucked her in bed, read two books, snuggled

with her for ten minutes, and then it was lights out. The routine ran like a well-oiled machine and he was convinced she wouldn't sleep if we veered from her schedule, but Rori never fell asleep once she was in bed despite the fact that David developed the routine to enhance and promote sleep exactly like all the books instructed. She alternated between calling out to us playfully and sobbing as if her heart was breaking. One evening, I pointed out her bedtime might be too early for her and suggested she might go to sleep easier if she went to bed later and he'd looked at me as if I suggested we serve her glass shards for breakfast. I never brought it up again. It was usually another hour before she was asleep and David was never able to relax until he was sure she was. By then, we were both so tired we collapsed on the couch and binged on Netflix rather than settling down together at the island with a glass of wine for some alone time.

When we did find the time to be alone together, our conversations worked their way back to something Rori had said or done. I liked talking about Rori, but there were times I missed our discussions about other things. I never dared express it to him, but I missed when he used to talk to me about things besides her. I longed for our conversations about sports even though I didn't care who won because I liked how excited he always got about the games. I missed our talks about the books he was reading or thinking about assigning to his students. The only books he'd read in the last four years were parenting books. I didn't pay any attention to the media, but he was the opposite. It used to annoy me how philosophical and passionate he could get about the issues in the media, but now I'd give anything to hear him spout off about how the use of cellphones was going to turn everyone into robots.

I let out a deep sigh and climbed the stairs up to our bedrooms to begin gathering the supplies we'd need to stay overnight in the hospital.

*We should have gotten a cat.*

My conscience was assaulted with what a terrible mother I was for thinking such a thing, but it wasn't the first time I'd regretted having Rori even though I knew it meant I was a bad mother. I'd gotten used to feeling like I wasn't a good mother. During Rori's first year, whenever I'd start to feel like I wasn't acting the right way or feeling the way I was supposed to feel about being a parent, I'd tell myself it was only temporary and was because of my insecurities and inability to do things with her perfectly like David did. I assured myself it was an adjustment period and like any new relationship, it was going to take time to develop. I was sure as time went on

I would start to like my role as a mother and begin to feel as competent about it as David and the other mothers around me. I refused to even acknowledge it might have anything to do with That Night.

But things didn't improve over time. They only grew more pronounced as Rori moved into her second and third year. As I watched David, Robin, and other parents interact with and talk about their children, I could no longer deny something significant was missing in me when it came to being a parent. I didn't want there to be, but the harder I tried to force it to happen, the more I struggled and the more obvious it was. The more I tried to say the right thing, the more I said the wrong thing whereas David always knew exactly what to say.

Robin wasn't any different. I watched her on playdates as she skillfully talked Emma down from temper tantrums when both our kids were going through the terrible twos. She was able to soothe and calm her down. When it was Rori's turn to have a meltdown, she wanted nothing to do with my efforts to comfort her. She shoved me away and screamed louder. Every effort I made resulted in the same end—carrying her to the car over my shoulder kicking and screaming.

David assured me the only reason I couldn't talk Rori off the ledges of a meltdown was because she was a stubborn child and refused to be distracted like so many other kids, but his words held no value. If what he said was true then Rori should've had the same behavior with him as she did with me, but she never did. He could calm her down as well as Robin could calm Emma.

I rubbed my temples, knowing within the hour my head was going to be throbbing. I reminded myself like I always did whenever I was bombarded with thoughts about being a horrible mother that I loved Rori in my own way. Of course, I loved her. I was her mother and mothers were supposed to love their children.

## Chapter Five

When I got back to the hospital, Rori was sitting up in bed with David beside her, his arm wrapped snugly around her. Her face was pale and there were dark circles underneath her eyes. Her skin had a yellowish tint I'd never seen before. She looked up at me when I walked into the room.

"Hi, sweetie," I said, taking a seat next to them at the end of the bed.

"Hi, Mommy." She gave me a weak smile.

"How are you feeling? Do you feel better?"

She shook her head.

"What's wrong? Where does it hurt?"

She shook her head again.

"Sweetie, can you tell Mommy how you're feeling? It'll help us be able to help you. We really want to figure out what's wrong with you."

She looked at me blankly. David jumped in. "She doesn't feel good. I already talked to her about it. I don't think we need to make her talk about it again."

I was sure when she'd woken up he'd had the perfect conversation with her where he articulated in a developmentally appropriate way what was going on and why she was in the hospital. I was equally certain he'd asked the right questions to get a response from her.

"Daddy, I'm tired."

"Honey, do you think you could try to go potty before you go back to sleep? The doctors really need you to try to go potty," David said.

"I don't haffa go," she said her lower lip sticking out, the beginnings of a pout.

"Can you just try?" I stood up and walked to her side of the bed. I took hold of her arm. "Mommy will walk with you. I'll help you try."

"No! I don't haffa go!"

"Celeste, just let her be. I don't think it's a good idea to get her upset."

I wasn't trying to get her upset. The doctors said they needed to look at her urine. So far, she hadn't gone to the bathroom since last night before she

went to bed. In a few hours, it would be twenty-four hours since the last time she'd peed so there wasn't a chance she didn't have to go.

"I just—"

David shot me a look before the sentence was even out of my mouth. It was a look I knew well. His looks said more than his words ever could—let me take care of Rori because you don't know what you're doing. How was I ever going to learn how to take care of her if he didn't give me a chance? I was on the other side of an impenetrable wall.

It wasn't like I never spent any alone time with her because I did. David took Sunday mornings for himself to go running or do something with his friends. During our alone time, she watched the door longingly and looked over her shoulder every few minutes waiting for him to come back. When she was old enough to talk she didn't only stare at the door, she also started asking me when her Daddy was coming home. I knew when I was gone she wasn't questioning David about when I would come home, but she was always waiting for him to return when she was alone with me. I wasn't her favorite and that was okay with me because I knew what she saw in David. I used to be the one he worshiped, and knew what it felt like to be the object of his affection.

It was like nothing else existed when he focused his attention on you. He had a way of staring at you in complete awe as if what you were talking about was the most profound thing he'd ever heard. As much as I heard women complain about men not listening and as many men who'd come before him who were incapable of knowing what it was like to listen to another person, David was the one man who listened better than any woman I knew.

"Don't you have anything to say?" I'd asked numerous times when I was finished saying something.

He'd shake his head. "No, I'm just listening to you. Waiting to see if there's anything else you have to say."

His listening was an unbelievable skill. He made you feel special and cared for like what you had to say was important. The skill had translated well to parenting. His listening skills coupled with his unending patience were enough to earn him a Father of the Year award. I'd yet to meet anyone who was such an empathetic listener or demonstrated the amount of patience he did. It never fazed him that it took Rori twenty minutes to put her shoes on

or how long she dawdled on a walk bending down to pick up every piece of grass or weed in her pathway.

I watched as she snuggled up next to him on his chest and he stroked her hair until her eyes grew heavy and she drifted back into sleep. His touch was soft and comforting. It was the same way he used to hold me when I was upset or felt bad. I didn't crumble very often but when I did he was always there to support me through it. I'd never crumbled like I did when we were trying to get pregnant.

Trying to get pregnant had taken us over three years, and I got upset each time my period came because we'd done everything right. I charted my ovulation with the same amount of diligence and focus I put into all of my projects. I knew which days and what time I was the most fertile and likely to get pregnant. There'd been many instances where I called him from work and told him to come to my office or where we both rushed home from our jobs and had sex immediately before we missed the narrow window of opportunity. After we had sex, I'd lay with my legs up against the wall for at least twenty minutes, barely moving, hoping it was helping the sperm make their way up into my tubes and settle in one of my eggs. Each month we were met with failure, and there was nothing I hated more than failure.

I'd come out of the bathroom and collapse on the bed in tears. Starting a family was important to me and David wanted a child as much as I did. He was basically an only child since he was eighteen when his mother remarried, and he'd always talked about how much he wanted to have a big family. He'd grown up feeling alone and since both of his parents were already gone, it was even more important to him to feel like his family line was still alive and not going to end with him.

He'd curl up next to me on the bed, spooning me from behind and wrapping his strong arms around me. He'd stroke my hair tenderly in the same manner he stroked Rori's.

"Shh.... shh, it's okay, sweetie. It's going to be okay. This just wasn't the right time. The right time will come. It's going to happen. I know it. We just have to be patient."

His words had helped in the beginning when we first started trying, but as the months grew into a year, I started getting impatient and more desperate. We turned to IVF as a last resort. We'd sunk most of our savings into remodeling the house and had only begun to build it back up, but I convinced him we should use it to try to get pregnant. We'd gone to see a fertility



specialist, mixed our insides together in a small Petri dish, and inserted the embryo inside me. We crossed our fingers and waited.

Our high carried us to the first positive pregnancy test, but our excitement was short-lived when I woke in the middle of the night with blood staining our sheets. David carried me into the bathroom as I sobbed. He undressed me and stepped into the shower alongside me, holding me tightly while my sobs reverberated off the tile walls.

“I understand,” he said over and over again.

Within a few short weeks, I was ready to go back to the fertility specialist.

“Maybe we should wait awhile,” he said.

David hadn’t been sleeping well since the miscarriage. He kept waking up in the middle of the night and couldn’t fall back asleep. The bags under his eyes were beginning to look as if they’d always been there.

“I don’t want to wait. There’s no reason to.”

“I just feel like we might want to give ourselves time to process what happened. A miscarriage is a big deal. I know it sounds silly, but I was kinda already attached to the baby.” His eyes filled with tears.

I threw my arms around him, pulling his head against my chest. “Me too. That’s why we have to do this. We were so happy and everything felt perfect. I want that feeling back. We can get it back. We can’t give up, David, please?”

It had taken a few more days of begging, but eventually, I convinced him to try again even though he was hesitant. We went back to the doctor and followed the same routine as the last. Our efforts were met with failure, but I was determined to be strong. We went back for two more rounds before we were successful again.

We were cautious. Unlike before, when we’d celebrated with dinner and cards throughout the week, we barely acknowledged it. Both of us were holding our breath until we passed the twelve-week mark. We didn’t let anyone know I was pregnant. I didn’t even tell Robin. Finally, we reached the twelve-week mark and the tension in the house evaporated. We stopped avoiding the topic and started planning again. I wanted to start decorating the nursery, but David wanted to hold off until we knew what we were having.

At my next doctor appointment, I knew something was wrong by the look on my doctor’s face. Her usual lit up face was blank as she moved the fetal monitor across my abdomen.

“What?” I asked.

“I’m having a difficult time hearing the heartbeat.” She continued to listen, moving the fetal monitor slowly.

I looked up at David. He squeezed my hand tightly. It seemed like hours passed before she spoke again.

“I’m going to have to do an ultrasound. Sometimes it’s difficult to hear the heartbeat when they’re this little. The ultrasound will help me locate it.” She pulled over the ultrasound machine squirting my abdomen with the cold liquid. I held my breath, searching the screen as if I knew how to decode the images. David did the same, peering close to it. I wanted to ask if everything was okay, but I already knew the answer to the question. I braced myself as she turned back to me. “I’m sorry, but there isn’t a heartbeat.”

All the energy got sucked out of the room. The only heartbeat I could hear was my own pounding in my head. The room spun quickly before it stilled again leaving me nauseous.

“What happens now?” David asked.

“I’m going to measure the baby to see how small the baby is. If the baby is small enough, we can give you a few days to see if your body spontaneously miscarries. The other option is to perform a D and C. However, depending on when the baby passed, it might be too large for a D and C or spontaneous miscarriage. If that’s the case, we have to induce labor.”

I was going to have to deliver a dead baby? I couldn’t handle that. There was no way.

“When will we know?” David asked.

“I’m completing the measurements right now.”

Our baby was small enough so I didn’t have to deliver. It’d stopped growing a few weeks before our appointment. We’d been rejoicing about passing the miscarriage mark, but really I’d been carrying around a dead baby for two weeks. I refused to go home and wait to see if I started bleeding. Instead, I chose to have the D and C done that day even though it meant having to sit in the office for three hours until an appointment canceled and we could get squeezed in. David supported my choice and held my hand throughout the entire procedure. I didn’t feel any pain while it was happening but started getting bad cramps on the drive home.

I spent the next four days in bed with the covers pulled over my head, the shades drawn, and a heating pad. Both of us were heartbroken. He tried to be

strong for me and pretend as if it wasn't affecting him, but I heard him crying at night when he thought I'd fallen asleep. I was determined not to give up. The doctors had said we needed to wait six weeks until after the procedure and I was counting them down. I was eager to try again, but David wasn't.

"I can't go through this again. I'm not ready. I can't believe you are."

"I know, but I was thinking I would take the first trimester off from work or at least work from home this time. It could help. I don't want to quit trying. I really want a baby."

David put his arm around me. "I want a baby, too. You know that honey, but we just lost two babies. Do you think it's possible you're not allowing yourself enough time to grieve?"

I didn't want to grieve. I wanted a baby.

"Please, honey? Can you at least take a few days to think about it?"

"I'm not changing my mind. Not right now. It's all we think about and all we talk about. It's completely taken over our lives. Let's just relax and give it some time. Can we be normal for a while again?"

"But I'm not getting any younger. I don't have much time."

I was thirty-seven and being childless at thirty-seven was never part of my plan. We'd gotten married in our late twenties and our plan was to wait three years before we started creating our family so we could solidify our relationship with each other and enjoy being married. We'd have a baby when I was thirty and although David had wanted four children, I'd comprised on having three. We'd have them each spaced evenly two years apart and be done having children by the time I was thirty-six. Instead, we hadn't even had our first one.

David pulled me close to him. "Look, it's not like I'm saying I'm done forever. But honestly, hon, I really need a break. I can't take the emotional rollercoaster of it. I need to get off of it for a while. I'm not saying I won't get back on it again, but I need a break."

"How long?"

"A year."

"A year?" I pulled away from him. "David, I can't wait a year!"

"How about six months?"

I still wasn't convinced.

"We'll just take a six-month vacation from trying to get pregnant. I'll be ready by then and even though you don't agree, I think it'd be really good for you too."

“So, we aren’t going to try at all?” I asked.

“I don’t mean we won’t have sex. Of course, we’ll have sex.” He grinned at me. “It’s not like I’ll start using protection or you’ll go on the pill or anything like that. We’ll just have sex like normal people. We’ll have it when we want to have it because we’re horny and not because we’re trying to make a baby. If we happen to make a baby, that’s great. If not, no worries.”

I’d agreed to the six-month time off period, but I still followed my cycle. It was partly out of habit because I’d been doing it for so long, but also because I hadn’t given up on making it happen. I tried to have sex around the time I was ovulating, but it was tough because David’s sex drive took a nose dive. We’d taken all the fun and spontaneity out of sex when it became focused on getting pregnant. It was a common thing that happened to couples in our situation, but I’d never expected it to happen to us. Our sex life had been great even after having been together for over ten years. We still had sex multiple times a week and both enjoyed it. But during our pregnancy vacation, David took a sex vacation as well.

David was as familiar with my cycles as I was and it wasn’t lost on him that I suddenly wanted to have sex at the same time every month even though he never brought it up. He quit touching me or responding to any of my advances. I missed the way he touched me. The way he would make love to me slowly, savoring each part of my body as if it was the first time he’d experienced it. Much like everything else he did, he was a completely unselfish lover as well. He always took care of my own needs before taking care of his.

Our six-month vacation kept extending and before long we were one of those couples who went months without having sex. It grew strange and awkward when we were close together, and he quit cuddling next to me while we slept. I craved his attention and his touch. It was why when Phil looked at me during the office party as our hands glazed each other at the refreshment table that rather than look away like I would’ve done in the past, I returned his stare. I never should’ve returned the stare. If I’d only looked away. Any other time I would have looked away but not That Night.

## Chapter Six

Our hospital room was small and the nurses needed easy access to Rori all night so only one cot was allowed in the room. David offered me the cot and he pulled the two chairs together so he could rest his head on one and his feet on the other. Rori wasn't getting better despite all the fluids they were pumping into her. She'd only woken up one other time and the nurses and doctors were getting worried because she still hadn't gone to the bathroom. Her stomach was beginning to distend. The last round of blood work showed her electrolytes were back to normal but her bicarbonate level still hadn't moved. It was stuck at seven. In addition, the level of ketones in her blood was increasing rather than decreasing. They didn't need to tell us that it wasn't a good sign.

They were close to ruling out diabetes because her blood and glucose levels were normal. The additional lab tests they'd run also didn't point toward a diabetes diagnosis. The only thing they needed to rule it out with one hundred percent certainty was a measure of the amount of ketones in her urine, but she still wasn't going to the bathroom.

They'd taken another blood draw in the evening, but it had to be sent out to special labs outside the hospital so the results wouldn't be read by the doctors until the morning. We were left with no choice except to try to get some sleep in our uncomfortable and cramped quarters, but it was impossible. Every few hours a nurse came into the room and checked on Rori and took her vital signs. Whenever I finally nodded off, the door opened and was quickly followed by beeping. David popped open his eyes even though I knew he wasn't sleeping either.

"How's she doing?"

"She's hanging in there."

The night was excruciating. The mattress on the cot was so thin I could feel the coils underneath me each time I moved. David's chair screeched along the linoleum constantly because each time he fell asleep, his legs fell

off the chair, pushing its legs across the floor. At six, I gave up on the idea of sleep.

“I’m going to the cafeteria to get coffee. Do you want any?” I whispered to David even though I didn’t need to because no amount of noise woke Rori.

“Sure. Thanks.”

I wound my way through the maze of hallways until I found the cafeteria. To my disappointment, it didn’t open until seven. I couldn’t make it until then without a cup of coffee. I found a vending machine with coffee I knew would taste terrible, but it was better than none at all.

“Thanks,” David said as I handed him his cup with his two sugars and one creamer stirred in. He slid the chair he’d been resting his legs on all night next to him and motioned for me to sit down. “Look, I’m sorry I was so pissed at you yesterday. I’m just scared. Really scared. And I feel so powerless to help her.” His big blue eyes filled with tears.

I took his hand. “It’s okay. I get it.” I rubbed my fingers back and forth across his and felt some of the tension leave his body. “We’re going to get through this. No matter what happens, we’ll make it through it.”

We had to get through it. There wasn’t any other option.

David turned the TV on for the first time since we’d gotten into our room and we watched the early morning news beginning with the traffic reports. I couldn’t remember the last time we’d watched the news together. Neither of us spoke as we stared at the screen. Occasionally, one of us would turn to look at Rori whose color got more yellow with each passing hour. We’d gone through two series of morning shows before Dr. Koven walked into the room. Unlike us, she looked rested. Her face was flushed with the glow of pregnancy and her dark hair was pulled tightly back into a ponytail. She carried a cup of coffee from Starbucks and an iPad cradled in her arms. David rose from his spot to offer his seat.

She smiled wide, exposing perfectly white teeth. “No, it’s okay. Really. I’ll stand. But thank you.”

Rather than sit back down, David continued to stand. As Dr. Koven read the nurses’ notes in Rori’s computer, he began to pace back and forth across the cramped room.

“How are you guys holding up?” she asked.

“We’re doing all right,” I said.

She looked down at Rori and concern passed across her face before she quickly replaced it with ambivalence. “I’m afraid I have some bad news.”

The room rolled and then stilled itself. I held onto my chair with both hands. David looked as if he might throw up on the floor.

“Rori is very sick. We got the test results back from the lab and there are some serious abnormalities. I’ve called in a team of geneticists from UCLA and Children’s Hospital to consult on her case. They should be here within the hour.” She paused, giving her words a moment to sink in. “Unfortunately, Rori isn’t getting better. Her test results revealed she’s experiencing acute kidney failure. It’s why she isn’t going to the bathroom and also why her ketones are so elevated. They’ve reached critical levels. Her entire body is completely acidotic. Our job is to figure out why.”

“What are we supposed to do? How do we treat it? What’s the next step? Is she going to be okay?” David asked.

“It’s important to remember that metabolic acidosis and kidney failure are not a diagnosis. They’re symptoms of an underlying disease. The only way to correct the acidosis and get the kidneys functioning again is to determine the underlying cause. Once we’ve done that, we can begin the appropriate treatment. It’s why we’ve called in a team of geneticists. We’ve ruled out all the common causes and now we have to begin looking at rare and less common diseases. However, kidney failure is very serious and we have to begin treating it immediately even without knowing the cause of it.” Her face was emotionless. I wondered how she kept it that way.

“How do we treat it?” David’s voice was thick with emotion.

“We’re going to have to begin dialysis.”

“A four-year-old can get dialysis?” I’d never heard of such a thing. I thought dialysis was something reserved for the elderly.

“It’s necessary when the kidneys are failing and Rori’s kidneys are failing. The job of the kidneys is to get rid of the waste products in the blood and when they stop working, the waste products begin to build up in the blood causing serious problems. This is what we’re seeing in Rori. Dialysis allows for a machine to artificially remove the waste in her blood and the excess fluid her body is retaining before putting her blood back into her body.”

“So, you take it out and then she gets better? How long does it take to get better?” David had managed to stop pacing and was leaning against the far wall, arms crossed, anxiously rubbing his hands up and down his arms.

“I wish it were that simple. Until we find out the root cause, she’ll have to continue to be on dialysis and I have to tell you that there are instances in

which dialysis doesn't work."

"What happens then? What's the next step?" I asked.

This time, Dr. Koven couldn't hide her emotions. I saw the lump of them rise in her throat and watched as she swallowed them back down. How many times a day did she have to go through this with parents?

"If dialysis doesn't work, we'll begin looking at a kidney transplant. In some cases—"

"A kidney transplant? Are you serious? How is this even possible? Three days ago she was perfectly healthy. She was totally fine. It doesn't make any sense." David was rubbing his arms hard enough to rub them raw. He looked like he might crumple on the floor at any minute. I wanted to reach out and take him into my arms, but I couldn't. I was frozen to my spot. My brain heard the words she was saying, but they didn't register.

"We don't know, but I can assure you she's going to be in the best hands possible. The genetics team works with all types of rare disorders and I'm certain we're going to find an answer. I understand how hard this must be for you to hear."

"But she's going to make it, right? Right?" I asked. My voice sounded hollow like it wasn't my own.

"We can't say. Your daughter is very sick. I have to be honest with you. There's a chance she might not make it through this. Kidney failure can be fatal."

David looked as if someone had punched him in the stomach. I grabbed a chair and pulled it over to him.

"Sit down," I said. I was afraid he might fall over if he didn't. I stood behind him and placed my hands on his shoulders to steady him as he hunched over putting his head in his hands.

Now was the time for me to freak out, but I still felt nothing. Dr. Koven had just told me my daughter was suffering from a medical problem that had the potential to kill her, and I was numb. Maybe I was in shock. People responded to bad news differently all the time. I was sure any minute the emotional impact of the news would hit me. It had to. Until then, my job was to be there for David and Rori.

"What's the plan?" I asked. My brain automatically shifted into project management mode from all my years in operations.

"This morning we're going to begin getting her ready for dialysis. The first step is a very minor surgery where we open her veins up so we can insert



the dialysis needle. Like I said, it's minor so she won't go under or anything. We'll sedate her heavily and numb the area so she doesn't feel it. The procedure only takes a few minutes. Then, once the opening is in place, we'll begin dialysis. I want to begin it as soon as possible. Hopefully, by this afternoon, she'll be going through her first round," Dr. Koven said.

"And the geneticists will be here shortly?" I asked.

"I'll bring them in once they're all here. They'll extensively review all her charts and blood work she's had done. They'll want to examine her as well. They'll take a detailed family history from the two of you. It's important that the two of you try to think of any family members both within your immediate and extended family who may have gotten sick, especially anyone you know who may have died in early childhood."

I felt David's quick intake of breath when she said the word *died*. He'd been right all along. This was serious.

## Chapter Seven

Rori woke up as they wheeled her down the hallway for the surgery to prep her for dialysis.

“Mommy, I want Puppy,” she cried. “Where’s Puppy?”

I wanted to kick myself. How did I forget to grab Puppy? Puppy was the pink stuffed animal she’d slept with since she was a baby. I’d forgotten the most important thing when I’d gone home to get our stuff last night. David never would’ve forgotten it.

“Oh honey, Mommy’s so sorry. I forgot to get her last night. I’ll get her today for you, okay? I promise.”

She started to cry, but without any tears. Her face crinkled up like it always did and her mouth turned down, but the tears that would normally wet her face were absent.

“I want Puppy,” she sobbed. “I want Puppy!”

“Why don’t you get it for her?” David asked.

“But what about her surgery?”

“You heard Dr. Koven, it’s only going to be minor. I think it’s important to get her. It’ll make her feel so much better if Puppy is here when she wakes up.”

Rori looked up at me expectantly. Her eyes matched her yellow skin.

“Sure, I guess I could. But I wanted to be here for her surgery,” I said, turning to look at David. “Why don’t you go? It might do you good to get some fresh air.”

“I suppose I could go if you wanted me to.” He reached down to brush Rori’s hair out of her face. “Rori, honey, Daddy is going to go home and get Puppy. Mommy’s going to stay with you while the doctors get you ready for your medicine. By the time you’re done with the doctors, Daddy will be back and he’ll have Puppy. How does that sound?”

“No! I want Daddy! I want Daddy!” Her voice echoed throughout the hallway reverberating off the walls. I wanted to cover my ears.

“Sweetie, don’t worry. Daddy is going to be back really quickly. I promise it’s going to be okay,” he said.

She reached out to grab his arm, the wires getting tangled from her movements, sobbing. “Daddy, please, don’t leave me. Please.”

We’d reached the room and the nurse was standing in the doorway waiting for us. David turned to face me, shrugging his shoulders. Of course, she wanted David. She always wanted him.

“Okay, I guess I’ll go then.” I forced a smile.

I kissed them both quickly on their cheeks and was gone. I fumed as I drove. She’d cried out for David in front of all the nurses and doctors. They’d all heard it and I knew what they were thinking. They were wondering what little girl wouldn’t want her mom to be with her when she was sick. I imagined they were behind their desks at the nurse’s station gossiping about it. None of them would look at me the same again. Something similar happened a few months ago when Emma and Rori were playing together and Robin still hadn’t forgotten it even though she never brought it up. I was sure they’d look at me the way she had.

It had happened during one of our weekend play dates. Emma and Rori loved to play together. Emma was two months older than Rori so they’d known each other since they were infants. Robin and I had been thrilled to be pregnant at the same time and excited for them to grow up together. Most people who lived in Los Angeles were transplants and we were no different. My family was scattered across the country and all of Robin’s were in the Midwest. Emma and Rori were as comfortable with each other as siblings and recently they’d started pretending they were. When we’d go out to dinner or take them for walks, they would giggle and tell people they were sisters even though they looked nothing alike. They couldn’t have been more opposite. Emma was a perfect combination of Trey and Robin’s genes. She had the blond hair of Robin and the green eyes of Trey. Her pale skin and defined bone structure made her look like an oversized doll. Unlike Emma’s ivory skin, Rori’s olive complexion mirrored mine just like her deep brown eyes. Whereas Emma was small and dainty, Rori was large boned and gangly—a body that would take years to grow into. No one ever believed their stories about being sisters, but people humored them with smiles and questions.

Our families got together all the time. A weekend rarely went by that we didn’t see each other at least once. We were as comfortable at each other’s

houses as we were our own. Robin and I knew how lucky we were that our husbands got along so well since it was rare to find couples where both sides of the dyad liked each other.

We'd been at Robin's hanging out and grilling steaks on the barbecue. The men were hovered over the grill drinking beer and discussing which basketball team they thought was going to end up in the final four. They were already waging their bets. Trey was as big of a sports fanatic as David and the two of them never tired of talking about sports. Robin and I were off to the side, sipping red wine on their new patio furniture while we watched Emma and Rori zoom up and down the concrete slab leading up to Robin's driveway. Emma was on her new Razor scooter while Rori struggled to ride Emma's training wheel bike with the long flowing pink streamers coming out of the handlebars. Rori was clumsy like me and having a tough time coordinating the pedals with any productive movement so it was no surprise when she took a tumble. She crashed down onto the concrete and let out a wail when she saw blood coming out of her knee. She was tough when she got hurt except if blood was involved. She completely lost it if there was even so much of a trickle.

I jumped out of my seat and ran to scoop up Rori's crumpled body. She pushed me away. "Get away from me, Mommy. I want Daddy," she screamed. She wiggled and pulled, frantically struggling to get out of my arms and then she screamed it again, louder this time. "Get away from me, Mommy! I want Daddy!"

I turned to look at Robin, who'd jumped up with me when Rori fell and was standing behind me. She was looking at me curiously with her face wrinkled up. She caught my eye and quickly changed her face to one of sympathy.

"Sometimes they just want their dads," she said, but her voice was forced and awkward.

David came running over, and Rori collapsed into his arms as he wrapped them around her.

"It's okay, sweetie. You're all right," he said.

Within minutes, she was smiling again and skipping off to the grill to be his helper calling after Emma to follow her. She giggled as he picked her up and threw her over his shoulders as if she weighed nothing. Robin and I took our seats again.

*Fucking brat.*

I tried not to think of her that way, but sometimes I couldn't help it. Why did she insist on embarrassing me? Why did she always have to make me look like such an idiot? Robin had started chattering away about the latest sale at the Pottery Barn as if nothing had happened, but something shifted between us that day. She'd wondered the same thing the nurses were asking about me now—what kind of a mother was I?

I'd asked myself the same question on more than one occasion. I didn't understand why I was such a terrible mom. It wasn't like I was one of those women who never wanted kids. The opposite was true. I'd wanted to be a mom from as far back as I could remember, but I'd never counted on having a daughter who was indifferent to me. Nothing had happened how it was supposed to happen.

I wanted to take a long shower before heading back to the hospital. The sterility of the hospital made me feel dirty, but I didn't have time to wash it off. Rori was going to expect Puppy as soon as she was finished. I pushed my ruminations aside and focused on the task at hand.

By the time I got back to the hospital, Rori's preparatory surgery was complete and she was sleeping peacefully back in her hospital room. David was by her side holding her hand. I placed Puppy on her chest.

"How'd it go?" I asked.

"Really well, surprisingly. They numbed her up pretty good and it only lasted like five minutes. She was sleeping again by the time we got back to the room." He handed me a cup of coffee with the familiar Starbucks logo on the side. "The nurses told me there's a Starbucks on the second floor connecting the two sides of the hospital. I figured you'd need this."

I smiled. "Thanks, hon."

Before I had a chance to take a sip, there was a knock on our door. Everyone always knocked before coming in, but it was more of a formality than anything because they were always through the door before we had a chance to invite them in. Dr. Koven came through first followed by two men and one woman. I didn't know what I'd expected the geneticists to look like, but I hadn't expected them to look so young. They looked like they were barely out of college. The two men looked like the kind of people who'd grown up sitting in front of computers all day playing video games. The woman was small and wispy. She looked like she was jumping out of her skin even though she was standing still and her eyes darted around the room taking everything in.

“Let me begin by introducing myself. I’m Dr. Wilcox, the head of pediatric genetics at UCLA.” He stuck out his hand to me and then David. I glanced at his badge and noticed he had an M.D. and a Ph.D. behind his name. I’d never seen so many letters behind one name.

“You have an M.D. and a Ph.D.?” I asked.

“Yep. Did my Ph.D. in molecular biology first. I was actually finishing up my Ph.D. while I was in med school.”

He was the first genius I’d ever met. He’d probably skipped high school and gone straight to college. His long hair was orange and curly and he tucked it behind his ears constantly. He reminded me of Carrot Top except with a mousey face. Unlike Dr. Koven, he wasn’t wearing a white lab coat. He was dressed in regular business casual clothes. I followed his worn khakis down to his black Converse shoes.

The other man was a tall black man who towered over him. He wore a collared shirt buttoned up to his neck. He stuck out his hand next. His hands were soft and nails neatly clipped as if he’d recently gotten a manicure, but he had a firm handshake.

“I’m Dr. Martin. I’m one of the fellows on Dr. Wilcox’s team.” He pointed to the antsy woman who’d taken up a position behind Dr. Wilcox and was devouring her fingernails. “This is Dr. Hettinger. She’s a second-year resident.” The woman barely looked up at us before looking away.

Dr. Koven was busy bringing chairs into the room. It was going to be a long meeting because none of the other doctors or nurses brought anything to sit on when they met with us. The already small room grew smaller. The three of them launched into gathering a detailed family history as if they were writing a novel on our family genealogy rather than trying to figure out what was wrong with Rori. They took out a pencil and paper and began drawing an extensive family tree beginning with both of our great grandparents trickling all the way down to Rori.

It wasn’t as if our family tree was healthy. We’d had our share of disease and illnesses. David’s parents had both died of cancer a few years back. His side was littered with alcoholics and mental illness and he had a cousin who’d committed suicide when he was twenty-two. Nearly half of the women in his family had battled breast cancer and those in the far back lineage hadn’t survived it, but most had in recent years.

My family tree wasn’t as full of illness as David’s, although I had a long history of heart disease which took lots of the men as victims. I couldn’t give

them much information about my father's side because I didn't have it. My parents had divorced when I was six-years-old after my father left my mother for another woman. Even though we had illnesses and disorders, there was nothing in our genes remotely related to kidneys or metabolic disorders.

They drilled us with questions, taking turns being the one to do the asking. Sometimes they asked us the same question twice just in a different way and I felt more like we were being interrogated than undergoing a medical evaluation. It was odd. I couldn't imagine why anyone would lie about their family history. Would any parent cover up something that could help their child?

Dr. Wilcox flipped through his notes. "I see you guys did a series of IVF treatments? Did you have any type of genetic testing done?"

We'd gotten genetic testing before starting our first round of IVF. I wanted to be one hundred percent certain there wasn't anything medically wrong with either of us preventing pregnancy before we sank so much money into IVF. I also wanted to make sure we didn't have any genetic disorders we could potentially pass on to our children.

"Dr. Keene was our fertility specialist. He was the one that completed all the testing," I said.

"Did anything unusual come up on your genetic testing?"

"Not really. I mean each of us had things that were recessive, but neither of us had anything we could give to our children," I said.

"Would you mind if we got those records from Dr. Keene? It would really help us narrow down which tests we want to do with you. I'm not sure if Dr. Koven explained this to you or not, but we'll be drawing blood from both of you today as well as Rori. We're going to do a full genetic panel on both of you and her. If we know the tests you've already had then it will narrow the net we have to throw," Dr. Wilcox said.

David and I nodded. They could look at anything they needed in order to help Rori. Dr. Hettinger handed us a release to sign for Dr. Keene, and we scribbled our names on the designated lines. After our family tree, they'd shifted to gathering the most extensive and painstakingly long history of Rori's development beginning with pregnancy. Nearly three hours had passed by the time we were finished with the evaluation. David and I breathed a sigh of relief when they finally left.

"Oh my God, that was exhausting," he said, slouching down in his chair to lean his head on the back of it.

“Right? Totally crazy. I think we spent half an hour just describing the color and texture of her poop.”

David burst out laughing and it opened up the room, lifting the tension. I could breathe without feeling as if I’d choke on the air. He reached over and grabbed my hand, pulling me close to him, and looking into my eyes.

“I love you, Celeste.”

My heart swelled. I never tired of hearing him say it and never would.

“I love you, too, David.”



## Chapter Eight

The next few days were excruciating. Time stood still. It felt like it did in the early days when David and I would sit by Rori's bassinet watching her sleep. She wasn't responding to dialysis and grew more and more unresponsive each day, slipping further and further away from us. She went through three rounds of dialysis every day and no longer even opened her eyes when they hooked her up to the machine. She'd gone into a ketoacidotic coma. She still cried without any tears and had given up talking. She just moaned. She wasn't eating and her skin had turned from yellow to a murky green.

It was the most time David and I had spent alone together since Rori had been born. We didn't have any distractions besides the text messages and emails coming in from our family and friends. Our phones constantly buzzed with people asking for updates until we finally turned them off because there was nothing new to report and we got tired of tapping out the same response over and over again.

We were still waiting for the blood tests to come back because they'd been sent out to different specialized labs all over the country. Dr. Koven and Dr. Wilcox warned us she might have an autoimmune disorder that was responsible for her organ failure so Rori wasn't allowed to have any visitors. Until they'd ruled it out, they didn't want to take the chance of exposing her already-fragile system to any possible viruses other people might carry if they came to see her. Dr. Koven had given us strict instructions to monitor our health, and if we started to feel sick, then we were supposed to leave the hospital immediately until we felt better. She'd assured us that as hard as it would be to leave Rori, it was better for her health if we didn't expose her. We'd both had a flu shot yesterday to be safe, but also to feel like we were doing something productive.

I still didn't feel anything. It was as if the plug connecting me to my emotions had come undone. I tried to bring myself to feel guilty about my lack of feelings, but I couldn't feel the guilt in my heart in any kind of a real way. Instead of spending time trying to get myself to feel something I

couldn't, I focused on my feelings toward David and doing what I could do to make him feel better. Unlike me, he was an emotional wreck. He wasn't sleeping for more than an hour at a time and it had nothing to do with our uncomfortable hospital conditions. He didn't eat and I was pretty sure he'd lost as much weight as Rori. He was starting to resemble a tweaker with his sunken in face and constant teeth grinding. He consumed coffee by the gallon and all the baristas at the hospital Starbucks had his order memorized.

Since Rori didn't do anything but sleep, we had endless hours to talk to each other. It reminded me of how things used to be and felt wonderful. We finally talked about the underlying issues going on between us and cleared the air about our awful fight.

"Babe, I'm sorry. I'm really sorry I said what I said and I know there's been a rift between us ever since. These early years are so hard. Everybody struggles, but I promise you things are going to get better once we get out of here." It was the third time he'd said it since yesterday, but I liked it more every time he did.

I laid my head on his chest. "I'm sorry too. I don't know what's happening half of the time. I hate fighting with you."

He kissed the top of my head. "I know I'm different."

It was the first time he'd admitted it. It felt good to hear him say it—validation that I wasn't crazy.

"Can you believe I turned into you? God, how do you live this way?" he asked.

I burst out laughing and punched him in his arm. "It's not so bad. You get used to it."

"I always wanted kids. You know that. I just wasn't prepared for this."

"Neither was I. Any of it."

"And certainly not this." He motioned to Rori strapped up to all of her machines in her hospital bed.

"We'll get through this. I promise you."

Later on, while we were in the cafeteria staring at our plates instead of eating, he looked at me like he used to with eyes overflowing with love. "I need to do better at being there for you. We need to spend more time with just the two of us." I beamed. I missed him so much. Was it possible this crisis would be the thing to bring him back to me? "How about once this is all over, we go away for the weekend together?"

“Like without Rori?” We hadn’t left her alone overnight with anyone since she’d been born.

“We’ll leave her with Robin and Trey. She loves them and she’s totally comfortable there. She probably won’t even notice we’re gone.”

I squeezed his hand under the table. I couldn’t imagine getting to have him all to myself for an entire weekend. “Can we lay in bed until noon, please? God, remember when we actually used to do that?”

“We can do whatever you want.”

He took my hand on the walk back up to her room, and I held myself back from skipping down the hallway. My thoughts were racing and already planning ahead to where we could go on our weekend. Robin wouldn’t hesitate to watch Rori. She’d offered on numerous occasions, especially since we’d watched Emma overnight for her and Trey plenty of times. David had always refused her offers saying he’d spend his time worrying about her instead of enjoying himself and I was glad he’d changed his mind. I wondered if he meant we could go away for the entire weekend or if he’d only meant Saturday night. I wanted to rent the small cottage on the beach where we’d spent our tenth anniversary. It was one of the most romantic weekends we’d had waking up each morning to the sound of the ocean and the smell of salt wafting through our windows.

David was bummed we couldn’t have visitors, but I secretly enjoyed it being the two of us. There were also long periods of silence but even those periods were comfortable again. We could sit in silence without feeling as if we had to fill up the space. I didn’t even miss work and I always missed work.

“Are you asleep?” I whispered from my chair shortly after the two a.m. nurse check.

“I wish,” he said. “I feel like I haven’t slept in years.”

“I get jealous.” My voice came out barely audible.

“Huh? I can’t hear you.”

I cleared my throat and tried again. “I get jealous.”

I felt so silly finally saying it out loud. Who got jealous of a four-year-old?

He rolled onto his side and propped himself up on his elbow. “I know.”

“You do?”

“You’ve had me all to yourself for over ten years. Now you have to share me and you don’t share very well.”

I couldn't see his face in the dark, but I didn't need to. I knew he was smiling.

"Does that make me pathetic?" I asked. "I mean, I know I shouldn't. I know it's stupid, but I miss you. I miss when I was the most important person in your life."

The silence stretched out between us. Finally, he spoke again. "You both are important to me. I'll work on giving you more of my attention. I realize all of it goes to her. Come here."

We'd been taking turns sleeping on the cot and tonight was his night. I crawled into the cot with him that was smaller than a twin-sized bed. I curled up next to him so he could spoon me from behind, wrapping his arms around me. He smelled sweaty because he hadn't showered since we'd been at the hospital and it'd been four days, but I didn't mind. It was familiar and comforting.

We fell asleep together, but my last thought before nodding off was that he hadn't said I was the most important person to him. Only one person could hold that coveted spot. When it came down to it, you always had to choose. Rori was supposed to be the most important to me just like she was the most important person to David, but if I had to pick between saving his life or hers, I had to admit I'd choose him. He couldn't say the same about me, but I was going to have to learn how to be okay in second place if I wanted our marriage to work.

I was beginning to know all the nurses as they rotated through shifts and a nurse I didn't recognize came in for morning rounds. He was our first male nurse and so full of energy he practically bounced into the room. He wore scrubs with Disney characters on them like every other nurse on the ward. His were SpongeBob and I wished Rori would open her eyes to see them. She'd just recently been turned on to SpongeBob and thought the show was hilarious. We could never get her to switch shows even though David and I found everything about it annoying.

"The genetics team is going to be here at four," he said, checking her vital signs.

I was surprised they were coming so late because the majority of the face-to-face time with the doctors was in the morning. We had yet to see a doctor after the early afternoon. I didn't know if it was a good sign or a bad one.

I'd expected the entire team of geneticists to be at the meeting and was surprised when Dr. Wilcox walked into the room alone. Dr. Koven wasn't

with him either which I thought was odd. He had a folder tucked underneath his arm.

“How are you guys doing today?” he asked.

Everyone always asked the question, and I still had no idea how to answer it.

“We’re okay,” David said. I liked that he’d started referring to us as a “we” again.

Dr. Wilcox pulled out the stool from underneath the computer table where they made entries about Rori and wheeled it over in front of us. He took a seat. “There’s not an easy way to have this conversation today, so I’m just going to get started.”

David gripped my hand. I squeezed back.

“I’m fairly certain we’ve narrowed down a diagnosis for what’s going on with Aurora. We’ve gotten all the blood tests back from the labs. Both yours and hers. In addition, we’ve examined the ultrasound pictures they completed yesterday and it looks like your daughter is suffering from a very rare genetic condition known as Autosomal Recessive Polycystic Kidney Disease. All of her blood tests were consistent with what we could expect to see in a kid with autosomal recessive PKD. That was why we ordered the ultrasounds yesterday. We wanted to look at her kidneys and her liver. We found numerous cysts on her kidneys and she’s begun to develop cysts on her liver too. Again, this is exactly what we would expect to see in someone with autosomal recessive PKD.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. We finally had a diagnosis. At least we knew what was wrong with her and could start to treat the disorder rather than her symptoms alone. I wondered how long it would be before she started to get better. I was ready to attack the problem as quickly as possible so all of us could start feeling better.

“How did she get it?” David asked.

“It’s a genetic disorder. One that’s inherited from both sets of parents.”

“But I don’t understand.” David looked puzzled.

“Genetic disorders are tricky. Every person carries their own unique blueprint of genes. All of us are carriers for various types of disorders. However, most of the time, they never manifest because only one parent carries the gene. It’s only in those cases where both parents are carriers of the gene that a child will develop the disorder,” Dr. Wilcox said.

“Yes, I get that. I understand what you’re saying. We had genetic testing when we were trying to get pregnant and Dr. Keene explained all that to us, but he told us we didn’t have anything that would create a disorder in any of our children.” David’s head was cocked to the side, eyeing Dr. Wilcox.

“Yes, I know you had the genetic testing. We spoke with Dr. Keene and reviewed all your charts. Maybe you remember Dr. Keene telling you that your wife was a carrier for this? I see a notation in the chart in which he explained to you that Celeste was a carrier for autosomal recessive PKD. Do you remember that conversation?”

I did. Panic seized me.

*Oh my God. This can’t be happening.*

I shook my head pretending as if I didn’t remember the conversation. I wanted to say something to divert the discussion, anything to derail what was about to happen, but I couldn’t find my voice.

“I remember he said something about Celeste being a carrier, but he said it wasn’t possible to pass it on to our children unless I was a carrier and I don’t have the gene.” David still looked lost.

Dr. Wilcox looked David directly in the eye. “Dr. Keene was correct. There is no way to pass the disorder on unless both biological parents carry the gene.”

“I don’t get. It doesn’t make sense. How is that even possible then?”

My chest tightened. I couldn’t breathe. I was going to throw up and have diarrhea all at the same time. I stared at the bathroom door wondering if I should sprint to the toilet, but in addition to not being able to talk, I couldn’t move. I was rooted to my spot as the world swirled around me.

This time, Dr. Wilcox placed his hand gently on David’s knee and repeated, “There is no way to pass this disorder on unless both biological parents carry the gene.” His gaze was unwavering. I turned to David and saw it happening. The reality registered as the blood drained out of his face, rendering him completely white.

As if he was a robot, he repeated in a mechanical voice devoid of all emotion, “Unless both biological parents carry the gene. I don’t carry the gene.”

My thoughts couldn’t translate into language. My brain was on fire. The two of them continued the conversation next to me, but I couldn’t hear them. The sound had been turned off in the room. The walls were breathing—inhaling and exhaling around me.

Dr. Wilcox stood up, startling me back into my body, crashing me into my seat. “I’m sorry. I wish there was a way to make this less difficult, but there isn’t. Don’t say I didn’t warn you. I get off at six if you want to meet me for a beer.”

I wasn’t included in the invitation.

“It’s about to get even more uncomfortable in here.” David still looked as if he was in a trance. He was staring into Dr. Wilcox’s eyes not blinking. “In order to make sure our diagnosis is one hundred percent accurate, we have to do a blood draw on the biological father. Also, given the level of Aurora’s condition and how fast she’s deteriorating, she’s most likely going to need a kidney transplant. Since you and Celeste aren’t compatible kidney donors, we’ll want to run his blood type because there’s a significant chance he’ll be a match, and we like to try to match donors with family members.” Dr. Wilcox shifted his gaze to me for the first time, searching for answers

“Celeste, tell Dr. Wilcox who Aurora’s father is.” David’s voice was one I’d never heard before—ice cold and clipped. He’d never called Rori Aurora, not since the day we wrote it on her birth certificate.

“I-I-I....” I couldn’t say it. I swore I’d never tell.

“Celeste, tell the doctor,” he said through gritted teeth.

“I can’t.” This time, my voice was one I didn’t recognize.

“This is a lot to digest. I’m going to leave and give the two of you some privacy to discuss the situation. I’ll be back in the morning and we can decide how to proceed from here. In the meantime, I’ve ordered another round of dialysis for Aurora to continue throughout the night.”

He got up from his stool and David stood with him. I thought he was going to shake the doctor’s hand, but instead he followed him out the door, clicking it shut behind him without a second glance.

## Chapter Nine

I didn't expect David to stay gone all night, but he did. I kept waiting for him to walk back through the door, but each time the door opened, it was only the night nurse. I couldn't stop texting him.

*I'm so sorry. Please talk to me.*

I gave up after my tenth apology went unanswered. My skin felt tight like it no longer fit my bones. I clawed at it as if there were termites crawling underneath and paced the small room. The resolve I'd worked so hard to build evaporated, and I was pummeled with images from That Night. Phil's face and his lopsided grin—the raw lust emanating from his eyes as if he was possessed by a demon. His smell infiltrated the hospital room as if it was alive. I tried to banish the memories—the way he grabbed my hair as he threw me down on the bed, how he'd ripped my blouse open, and the sounds the buttons made as they scattered on the floor—but I couldn't. They just kept coming and each time they did, David's face contorted across Phil's. I kept seeing how he looked when the news from Dr. Wilcox finally registered. The image was stuck on repeat. It made my stomach lurch, and I ran to the bathroom again and again, heaving into the toilet until there was nothing left except thick green mucus.

Rori woke up twice during the night, crying her dry tears. I soothed her back to sleep each time.

“I miss Daddy,” she whispered the second time.

“Sweetie, I miss him too. He'll be back soon,” I said, quietly into her ear. Even though it was hard to hear her ask for David, I took it as a good sign. She hadn't spoken in two days.

When David didn't answer my texts, I started texting Robin. My brain felt like it would explode and spray pieces of me all over the linoleum floor if I didn't connect with someone.

*Call me.*

*I fucked up. Call me.*

*Seriously. Call me. I need to talk to you.*



She never responded. It meant he'd told her because she'd been texting me incessantly for the last four days even during the night. She was going to have so many questions and I didn't know how I was going to answer them. I wasn't going to be able to answer her questions any more than I was going to be able to answer David's. How could I possibly explain things to him I hadn't allowed myself to utter? I'd spent the last five years banishing every thought relating to That Night. I'd refused to allow myself to think about or imagine what might happen if David ever found out about it. I'd convinced myself he never would and eventually, it had become real to me even when I found out I was pregnant.

I never missed my period unless I was pregnant, but even with its absence that February, I paid it no attention. I told myself it was because things were so stressful at work, but then March came, and my date passed again. I still refused to believe the possibility I might be pregnant. I went to my gynecologist to find out what was wrong.

"Celeste, you're pregnant," he said the moment he entered the room. He hadn't even examined me yet.

"How do you know?"

"We always run a pregnancy test on the urine we take. It's standard procedure." The turkey sandwich I'd eaten at lunch threatened to come up my throat. Dr. Williams furrowed his brow. "Are you okay? I thought you'd be thrilled."

He'd been my doctor when I started trying to get pregnant and was the one who referred us to the fertility specialist. He knew how hard I'd tried and how desperately I wanted to get pregnant. I nodded. I opened my mouth to speak, but vomit spewed out instead of words. He grabbed the garbage can and brought it to me while I heaved until I emptied my stomach. He handed me a small Dixie cup full of water when I finished.

"I'm sorry. I think I have food poisoning. I must've eaten something bad at lunch."

He threw his head back and laughed. "You don't have food poisoning. You're pregnant. You know how they call it morning sickness?"

I nodded.

"I have some bad news for you. There's nothing morning about it. Women who get nauseous from the surge of hormones in early pregnancy tend to feel nauseous all day long. It's not something reserved for the morning."

I managed a weak, half-hearted smile. “I feel pretty awful. I think I’m going to reschedule my appointment.”

“Sure, I completely understand. Tell David I said congratulations. I know he’s going to be so excited.”

My heart raced as I left his office, blindly searching for where I’d parked my car. I couldn’t remember where I’d parked it which only increased the panic surging through my veins. I was pregnant, but this wasn’t how I wanted it to happen. It wasn’t supposed to be this way. I walked circles through the parking lot telling myself the baby could be David’s. We’d had sex around the same time. It was a possibility. Miracle babies happened all the time. I’d read hundreds of stories from women who’d been unable to get pregnant for years and then suddenly conceived without medical help. We could be one of the statistic breakers.

*The baby is David’s. It has to be David’s.*

“Oh my God, that’s amazing!” David had shouted, jumping up and down when I showed him the pregnancy stick with the pink “yes” lit up brightly in the small window—the same window that had been stamped no so many times in the past. I’d been taking pregnancy tests all afternoon. I’d taken four and each one yielded the same result. “I can’t believe it. This is so great. I wonder when it happened. Maybe it was the night we had a picnic in the backyard. Remember that? That was some good loving. I bet that’s what did it.” He pulled me close to him, wrapping his arms around me. “We finally did it. We’re going to have a family.” He took my face in his hands, looking in my eyes. “Hey, what’s wrong? Why aren’t you happy?”

“I’m happy. I am. I just feel like crap. People aren’t joking about pregnancy hormones. They’re making me feel so sick and exhausted.”

“Of course, I understand. Let me run you a bath and I’ll give you a backrub once you’re out. How’s that sound?”

I nodded, forced a smile and hoped it looked genuine. “It sounds great.”

I’d never wanted to hurt him. Ever. I wished there was some way I could tell him about That Night so he’d understand, but there was no way he’d believe me. No one would. I wanted to cry, but my own tears were as dry as Rori’s. By the time morning came, my throat was raw and my eyes burned with exhaustion.

Dr. Wilcox arrived before David and he looked at me differently than he had the day before. He glanced at me, dismissing me without his usual check-

in questions, and focused his attention on Rori, checking her fluids and her stats. She woke up during his examination.

“Rori, this is Dr. Wilcox. He’s one of the doctors whose been helping you,” I said.

“Where’s Daddy?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

I refused to look at Dr. Wilcox as I answered. “He’s at home getting us some more things to use while we’re here.”

“She’s talking?”

“A little. She woke up in the middle of the night and asked for David.” She’d probably sensed his absence even in her comatose state.

“It’s good that she’s talking. It also looks like her levels are up a bit. The dialysis might finally be having some type of an effect.”

“What did you say?” David asked, walking through the door.

I jerked my head up at the sound of his voice. He looked as awful as I was sure I did. His eye sockets were sunk back into his head while his eyes bulged out as if they were marbles about to pop out at any second. His face was gaunt, and I could see every bone moving as he ground his jaw. He was in the same clothes he’d been in yesterday which meant he hadn’t gone to bed or taken a shower. His face was rough with patches of stubble, the closest he’d ever been to a beard.

“Rori’s been doing some talking and the dialysis is beginning to take effect.” Dr. Wilcox said.

David made his way to Rori’s bed without looking at or touching me as he slid by and gave her a big squeeze and a kiss on her cheek before tousling her hair. She threw her arms around his neck and squeezed.

“Daddy.” She clung to him, resting her head against his chest as he sat on the side of her bed. Her small fingers splayed out across his heart as if she was searching for his heartbeat underneath.

“I’m so happy you’re feeling better. I love you so much, sweet pea.”

“Me too.” My voice resonated off the walls and seemed loud in my head. Neither of them looked at me.

“Let’s give her another full round of dialysis today. Every three hours. I’ll let the nurses know. I’m curious to see if we’ll continue to see improvement,” Dr. Wilcox said. “About our conversation yesterday...”

He looked at me for the first time since he’d entered the room. His eyes searched mine, probing for some type of answer or response. I didn’t know

what else to do so I just shook my head. I couldn't tell a stranger the most shameful thing I'd ever done. There was no way.

The air in the room stretched out between us. My heartbeat throbbed in my temple. I kept looking at David like he could speak for me, but there was nothing he could say either.

Finally, Dr. Wilcox spoke, "I don't want to have this conversation in front of Rori, but we need to continue our conversation from yesterday. I'm going to do my rounds and get back with the two of you in a while. If you need anything at all from me before then, have one of the nurses page me."

Just that quickly Dr. Wilcox was gone and the walls closed in on me. I had to say something. "David, I—"

"Don't talk to me. Don't say a word to me right now." He never took his eyes off Rori. She'd already closed her eyes and drifted back to sleep.

We sat in silence for an hour which stretched out into eternity. The only sounds were the relentless beeps of Rori's machines and the flurry of constant activity going on outside our door. I couldn't stand it. I felt as if my brain was going to implode. After another hour of the same tortuous silence, I'd reached my limit.

"I'm going to take a walk. Do you want anything from Starbucks?"

No response.

I made my way down the familiar pathway to Starbucks and ordered my usual—a triple espresso with skim milk. I started my way back to the room, but halfway there, I took a right instead of a left. I couldn't go back yet. I needed air. I stepped outside and felt the wind on my face, gulping it in. The sun was so bright, white spots blurred in front of my eyes and it took a second before they subsided. I walked around the side of the hospital until I came to a patch of grass and took a spot on a bench underneath a big tree surrounded by beautifully colored flowers at the base. I took another huge breath. I pulled out my phone to check my messages and there was still nothing from Robin. I scrolled through my emails which were filled with best wishes and condolences from everyone at work coupled with emails from all of my friends. Everyone was positive, assuring me Rori was going to pull through and be fine, even Jen's email was filled with confidence. It all felt surreal.

I texted Robin again.

*Did you talk to David?*

I could almost hear her thinking, trying to figure out how she wanted to respond to me. A few minutes passed before she responded.

*I hope Rori is doing better.*

Her pain wasn't comparable to David's, but she was going to be hurt and angry about what'd I'd done. We rarely ever fought and there'd only been one other time she'd been angry with me. It was during our sophomore year in college and I'd gone out on a date with a guy she liked. Nothing happened between us, but she was furious. She hadn't talked to me for a week. It was awful. I'd never done anything like it again. If she'd ignored me for a week over that, how long would she ignore me over this? I couldn't get through this without her.

I texted David next.

*I'm sorry.*

I didn't expect to get a response, but was driven to keep letting him know. I meant my apologies with every fiber of my being. I'd never been sorrier for anything I'd ever done, but I'd also never done something so awful. How could I convince David that my intentions had been good? He'd never believe the truth. I couldn't expect him to believe anything I had to say. What was I going to do if I couldn't fix this?

The only texts coming were from my mom.

*When can I come? I want to be there for you.*

She'd been texting the same thing for the last two days. When Rori first got sick, I avoided telling her much like I'd avoided telling everyone until we knew it was something serious. I would've skipped telling her, but she called every few days to talk to Rori so I didn't have a choice.

She was the last person I wanted to see or talk to. I'd spent my life making sure my mom didn't see me hurt or upset. It'd started when I was small and not because of the pride like it'd grown into, but out of necessity because my mom had so much on her plate raising my sister and me alone. I did everything in my power to keep from adding more to it.

Being a single mother was never part of my mom's plans. The only thing she'd ever wanted to be was a wife and mother. My dad had been her high school sweetheart and they'd married when she was only nineteen. She'd followed him to college in Chicago where she'd worked as a bank teller, helping to pay for his tuition while he went to school and earned his law degree. Once he finished, they returned to the small town in Illinois where they'd grown up together and my dad began working in his father's law

office that had been in the family for generations. My older sister Rachel was born during his first year in practice and my mom was beyond thrilled. I followed three years later. Her world revolved around taking care of her family. She was beyond devoted to us and my dad. She catered to his every need as well as ours. Nothing gave her as much pleasure as making us happy. It was all she cared about.

Our life was perfect until I was six. Our home could've been featured in Good Housekeeping with a picture of my mom in the kitchen as she baked cookies with her favorite apron tied around her waist and a big smile on her face. My dad worked hard at establishing his law practice and each year he climbed further and further toward being one of the most successful bankruptcy lawyers in town. In a town as small as the one I spent my early childhood in, he was one of the only lawyers. There was very little competition so he found himself fulfilling all sorts of legal responsibilities outside the scope of his legal training. He became a lawyer of all trades advising people above and beyond their bankruptcy. He counseled people on real estates, trusts, environmental issues and a few times he even represented couples in their divorce proceedings.

To all outside appearances, we had it all. We were the Jones's—the ones others measured their success or failures against. Then, without warning, one day he never came home from work. It wasn't unusual for him to work late, but my mom started to panic when he wasn't home by eleven o' clock and she still hadn't heard from him. By early morning, she was pacing the floor and had called the hospitals and local police trying to find out if he'd been in an accident.

The next three days were torturous. My mother filed a missing person's report and the town rallied around her as they plastered the nearby towns with his picture. They organized search groups at the local Catholic Church and combed the area for him. It was the talk of the town. My mom told me years later that there were those who speculated he might've been abducted by aliens.

My mom received a letter addressed from Madrid, Spain two weeks after he disappeared. It was from my dad and it was the most formal Dear John letter you'd ever read. In a few short lines, he explained to my mom that he'd felt trapped in his life for years. He'd never been outside of the Midwest and felt as if his entire life had been mapped out since he was a child and he'd never been free to be who he wanted to be. He'd met a woman and had left

the country to be with her. He told my mom he didn't love her anymore and couldn't remember the last time he had. He told her to kiss us for him and to take care of us. We never saw our father again. Occasionally throughout the years, he would send us postcards from remote places throughout the world simply signed: Love, Dad.

My mom was devastated. She collapsed with shock and horror. It was the most scandalous affair to hit the town in the last decade. Everyone knew about it. Her humiliation was very public. She curled into a ball in her room and cried for days. I listened to her wails, wishing there was something I could do to ease them and vowing I'd never be the one to make her cry.

The next year was awful. I only remembered bits and pieces because I was so young. My mom lost our house because she couldn't afford to pay the mortgage. My grandparents were as shocked as she was by his abrupt departure and when she lost the house, we moved in with them temporarily. Being surrounded by them only added to her misery because they were a constant reminder of the life she thought she was supposed to have. Her life had been organized and predictable, but after he left, there was nothing but uncharted territory and an ominous future looming in front of her. Eventually, we moved into an apartment on the other side of town, but it was as if my mom carried a scarlet letter on her forehead. The first day of summer vacation after I'd finished first grade and Rachel had completed fourth grade, she packed us into our mini-van and drove as far south as she could get. We ended up in the upper panhandle of Florida.

My mom was never the same. To this day, she'd never formed a relationship with another man. She'd gone on a few dates over the years but rarely saw them more than once. If you brought up the subject of my dad, she still talked about him as vehemently as if it happened a few days ago rather than thirty years.

She put herself back together as best she could for us girls. She worked two jobs to pay for nursing school, but it took twice as long because she had to work and take care of us. By the time she got her nursing degree, Rachel was almost out of high school and I was a freshman. She became self-sufficient not out of a desire to be independent, but because she had no other choice and as much as she tried to pretend to like it, we knew it was an act.

Rachel had been a lot like me before our move to Florida—sweet, well-behaved, popular, and a great student. Even in the year following my dad leaving, she still managed to stay stable, but her entire personality changed

after we moved. It was as if she'd reached her tipping point and it was the thing that put her over the edge. She made my mother's already-hard life even harder. She was angry at everything and directed all her anger at my mom. She went from being an A-student to failing most of her classes and was constantly in trouble for not following the rules or starting fights with other girls. By middle school, she spent her afternoons in detention and didn't listen to what anyone told her to do. She started drinking and doing drugs in high school. She dropped out in tenth grade and despite three stints in rehab, she'd never gotten sober. I hadn't heard from her in over three years. The last time I had was a desperate call to bail her out of jail in Las Vegas, which I'd refused. I'd bailed her out enough times to know it never made any difference.

At seven, I left my childhood behind and took on the role of making life run easily and smoothly for my mother. I didn't want to put one more burden on her heavily-laden shoulders. I was determined to be strong for her because she was determined to be strong for us and I felt like I owed her. I made sure I didn't cause her any more trouble or pain. I became very skilled at shelving my own pain. I didn't ask her for anything even on my birthday. I didn't go to her for help with my problems and became good at figuring things out on my own. When I reached high school and started dating boys, it felt like a betrayal to her so I shied away from those conversations as well. Her heart was going to be forever broken and as I fell in and out of love every other week like teenagers do, I kept it to myself.

I loved my mom, but never wanted to be like her. In third grade, I made a commitment to myself that I was never going to get myself into the situation she got herself into. I was never going to be so dependent on a man that I couldn't take care of myself. I would have my own career no matter what. I worked hard in school and got good grades. Unlike my mom, who didn't hold her first job until she was in her early thirties, I had my first job when I was ten. I had a paper route and by the time I was twelve, my weekends were spent babysitting. I started working at the local Sonic after school and on the weekends when I was fourteen and worked there until I graduated high school. I didn't want my mom to feel responsible for putting me through college so I started saving my money as soon as I started earning it. I couldn't count on getting a scholarship and wanted to make sure I had a way to go. I didn't want my mom to feel any pressure. I got lucky and got a full scholarship to USC.



I'd been hiding my feelings and problems from her for so long it'd become automatic and happened unconsciously, but I wasn't going to be able to hide this problem. My humiliation was going to be as public as hers had been.

## Chapter Ten

When I got back to the room, David was sitting on Rori's bed reading her a book. The ward had a small play area where the kids could play. It was stocked with a Thomas the Train table, a kitchen and art supplies. David must've gone down to the play area while I was having my coffee.

"Hi, Mommy," Rori greeted me with a weak smile. It was the first time I'd seen her smile since she'd been at the hospital. I couldn't bring myself to think about how this would affect her. My heart broke all over again.

"Hi, honey." I took a seat next to her and gave her a tight squeeze. Her body had never been so frail. It was like pulling a pile of bones next to me. I rubbed her back and felt her vertebrae poking through her pink pajamas.

"Daddy's reading me a book," she said.

"I see that. Do you like it?"

She nodded. "He said when I get better he'll take me to the kid's room and I can pick out whatever books I want to read. I want *Pinkalicious*."

Rori was obsessed with everything pink. Last Christmas, my mother had gotten her the book, *Pinkalicious*, and even though she didn't know how to read, you'd swear she did as she flipped through every page never missing a word.

"How about the next time I go home, I bring back *Pinkalicious*?"

Her eyes lit up and she clapped.

I settled in next to her on her right side while David sat on her left and finished reading her *Bernstein Bears*. He was only halfway through the next book when she drifted back to sleep.

"Robin is going to be here in an hour so we can talk," he said.

"What? How did that happen?"

"I got permission."

"From who?"

"Dr. Wilcox," he spoke in a clipped tone.

I knew the moment Robin walked through the door that my suspicions were true—she knew.

“Hi, guys,” she said.

She didn’t give me a hug like she normally would. Her eyes nervously flitted around me, looking everywhere but my eyes. She swept through the room picking up coffee cups and tossing them into the garbage. She brushed off imaginary crumbs from the table stretched over Rori’s bed.

“Text us if she wakes up,” David said and turned on his heels to leave.

I followed him down the familiar hallway and into a room on the right side. I hadn’t expected to have our conversation in an empty hospital room. There was something eerie about it. So sterile and barren. I couldn’t help but wonder if it was empty because a child had just died. Much like our room, it had two chairs and I slid into one. There was no way I was going to sit on the bed just in case a child had died there. David took the other one. He pulled it away from mine, back against the wall underneath the TV as far away from me as he could get. He folded his arms across his chest. His jaw was clenched.

“Who is Rori’s dad?” He glared at me.

“David, can we talk about this?”

“We are. Right now. Who is Rori’s dad?”

“You’re Rori’s dad. You’re her dad. You—”

“Shut the fuck up. I’m not doing this with you. Not now. Not ever. Tell me who her father is.” I’d never seen him look so angry. His entire body was rigid. He looked at me as if I was a vile creature and it took every ounce of energy he had to restrain himself from attacking me and gouging my eyes out.

“Please, please—I just—I just...” The tears that had been frozen began sliding down my cheeks.

“Celeste, answer my question. You can either answer it now or this will get really ugly. Our daughter is dying and her father might be the key to saving her life. I know you might not care about that, but right now, it’s the only thing I care about. I don’t give a shit how he fucked you or where you fucked him. I just want to know what kind of a fucked-up medical history he has so I can save my daughter.”

“It’s not even what you think, David. I swear. It wasn’t even like that. It was only—”

He shot me a scathing look and stood up.

“Please, I want to explain—”

He took a step in the direction of the door.

“Fine. We’ll do this the hard way.”

He was in the doorway about to be gone. He was leaving again. He couldn’t leave me. Not here. Not like this.

“David!”

He stopped. His back still to me. I was shaking uncontrollably.

“Phil. It was Phil.”

I waited for him to turn around. He didn’t even flinch, just stood still as a statue. I wanted to beg him to turn around, look at me, or talk to me, but he never turned around. Didn’t utter a word. He simply walked out the door without looking back. I crumpled in my chair, sobbing uncontrollably.

This couldn’t be happening. I tried to be quiet as I sobbed, but it was impossible. They came from deep within and shook me to my core. I’d done what I’d done to keep my family together and now I was going to lose them. The harder I willed myself to stop crying, the harder the sobs came each wave more intense than the last. Robin appeared in the doorway.

“Hey,” she said, cautiously from her spot. “I’m on my way out.”

My face was drenched with tears and snot. Any other time, she would’ve rushed to my side and thrown her arms around me, told me it was going to be okay, and begged me to tell her the story. Instead, she stood grounded to her post just like David. She looked at me as if I was a stranger she was meeting for the first time.

“Do you know?” I asked the question even though I already knew the answer.

She stared straight through me with no emotion on her face. “He told me last night.”

“Are you mad at me?”

She opened her mouth as if to say something, then quickly shut it again. “I don’t know what I am. I need some time.”

She didn’t wait for me to respond. She left in the same manner David had without even a backward glance. I sat alone wondering what I was going to do.

How had this happened? What about my life? My plan? Things weren’t supposed to go this way. It wasn’t right. I didn’t live my life like some people did by letting things happen to them naturally. I planned for the future, diligently prepared for it, and made things happen the way I wanted them to. I liked things to go a certain way—structure, routine, and predictability. Whereas those things drove some people crazy, they contained me and made

me feel like things were within my control. There was nothing more I hated than feeling like I was out of control.

That Night threatened to intrude on me again. My stomach convulsed and I rushed into the bathroom, kneeling before the toilet. Nothing came up. I was empty. The cold lid felt good against my forehead.

That Night had changed everything. It had created a shift in the universe that set all of this in motion. Now that the memories had been released, they were going to destroy me. It'd already begun. It was just like it'd been in the days following That Night when images pummeled their way into my consciousness and I had to use every amount of willpower I had to banish them into the far recesses of my mind. It was happening again. I felt the way his hand gripped my neck as he flung me onto the bed and the way the cheap hotel bedspread felt against my cheek. I couldn't stay in the bathroom. I had to move.

I walked into the hallway as if I was sleepwalking. Nothing felt real. The nurse's faces wavered in front of my eyes as if they were faraway. The lights were too bright. The voices too loud. There wasn't enough air to breathe and for a minute, I thought I might pass out on the tiles. I steadied myself against the wall before walking back into Rori's room. David had his chair pulled up next to her bed as if he was standing guard. I started to cry again at the sight of them.

"Don't you dare cry," he said through gritted teeth. "Don't you dare."

I couldn't help it. His words only made me cry harder. I collapsed in the chair next to him and tried to stifle my ragged sobs. It sounded like I was choking. David didn't even look at me. The tension was so thick I couldn't breathe.

"I don't know what to do to make this better," I said.

"I want you to leave. I can't be here with you."

"David, what? I can't leave. I'm not going anywhere."

"Yes, you are. I can't be here with you and we both know who Rori would rather have sitting next to her."

I recoiled as if he'd slapped me. I brought my hand up to my face as if he'd left a mark. "That's so mean."

He jumped up from his chair, pointed at the door, and with spit flying out of his mouth, yelled, "Mean! I'm mean? You've got to be kidding me. Get out now. I'm serious. I can't even stand to look at you. I don't want you near me. Ever again."

I stood, my knees wobbly. This was really happening. I reached for him, trying to pull him close to me. He jerked his arm away.

“Don’t touch me, Celeste. I swear to God, don’t touch me.” His face was bright red and his entire body shook.

I put my arms down by my side in defeat and hung my head. “Okay, I’ll go.” I walked over and planted a kiss on Rori’s forehead.

I trudged back down the hallway feeling all the nurses’ eyes boring into my back. I could hear their thoughts—*whore*. I was practically running by the time I reached the doors. I shoved through the glass and the light hit my eyes. The sun shone brightly and birds were chirping. It seemed like a cruel joke.

I sat in my car with my hands shaking and a lump of clay rolling around in my gut. I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t go home. I thought about going to Robins, but I wasn’t welcome there either. I considered going back inside and begging David to listen to me, but decided against it. I couldn’t handle another rejection from him. It felt like my heart was being ripped from my chest. David was a part of me. I couldn’t live without him.

I beat my hands on the steering wheel.

“No! No! No!”

There was no way I’d live through this. I wanted to tear my skin off my body, anything to stop the agony swirling inside me. I was on the verge of hyperventilating. I put the car in drive and almost drove through the parking gate. I slammed on the brakes, flinging myself forward. I rolled the window down, realizing I’d forgotten the hospital keycard they gave all the long-term patients so they didn’t have to pay for parking every day. I buzzed the parking attendant. She opened her window. I couldn’t imagine what I looked like, but today I didn’t care. Nothing mattered. “I need to leave and I forgot my keycard.”

She looked me up and down, taking in my disheveled state. Her eyes filled with pity. “It happens. Rough day?”

I nodded.

“What’s the patient’s name and room number?”

“Rori. Aurora Reynolds. She’s in room 429.”

“Which ward?”

“Pediatrics.”

“Oh.” She looked away. People didn’t like hearing about sick kids even people in the hospital. “I’ll take care of it. Don’t you worry.”

The gate went up and I headed through, anxious to get away from her pitying stare. I kept the windows down, gulping in the air, trying to get it into my lungs. I wanted to put my foot on the pedal and drive as fast as I could, but rush hour was just beginning. Cars were crawling and they'd only move slower as the hour progressed.

I headed north toward Sunset Boulevard inching up the hill on La Cienega. My brain was racing, but the world was moving in slow motion which only made it spin faster. My mind only worked when there was something to hold on to. I could handle anything as long there was a solution. Sometimes it took a while to find it, but I always could. Once I did, my brain latched on to it and held tight. I didn't allow my thoughts to wander left or right. I clutched the solution, but there wasn't a solution to this. None. Without it, my brain spun as if it was on a broken merry-go-round and I could get flung off at any time. I was circling the drain of an empty pit.

Part of me wanted to stop the car, jump out and start running as fast as I could. It took everything I had to keep inching forward. I went east at the light and headed toward Hollywood, a part of town I always avoided. Unlike the images on TV and in the movies, Hollywood was dirty, covered in filth, and littered with broken dreams. It wasn't long before I arrived at the circus life of Hollywood Boulevard. The Boulevard was writhing with people no matter what time of day it was and today wasn't any different. Throngs of tourists crowded the sidewalk, spilling out onto the streets, flashing their smiles and holding up selfie sticks. Every few feet someone offered free tickets or a tour of the city with the slickness of a used car salesman. Bright young hopefuls pushed their way through hoping to get discovered. What they didn't know was that the Boulevard wasn't where you went to make it—it's where you went to die.

I reached the end that culminated on Hollywood and Highland where the dinosaur from Ripley's Believe it or Not museum hung above the street threatening to devour me alive. I felt the panic and hysteria rising again and willed myself not to cry. I needed something, anything to make my head stop swirling and my emotions reeling. I drove a few more blocks and pulled into the parking lot of a liquor store with only half its neon lights blinking.

I needed a drink even though I didn't like to drink anything except a few glasses of wine. I was careful about drinking because I'd seen how it stole Rachel's life. I'd only been drunk a handful of times and only because I'd crossed over the line without knowing it. I liked having a few social drinks

over dinner or at an event, but always stuck to wine even during college. Robin teased me about my inability to handle alcohol and how I stopped drinking whenever I started feeling the effects.

“What’s the point?” she’d always ask.

“I don’t like feeling out of control.”

But today was different. I wanted to get obliterated. I skipped the rows of wine and went straight to the hard stuff. I grabbed the first bottle of vodka I saw, not caring what brand it was. I didn’t know the difference between a good brand and a bad one anyway. I quickly paid and headed back to my car with my bottle in a brown paper bag. I locked myself in, tore open the bag, and pulled the wrapper from around the cap. I was driven by something I’d never felt before.

I gripped the bottleneck and took a huge gulp. It tasted like antiseptic and burned all the way down as if I’d swallowed fire. Radiating heat landed in my stomach and moved throughout the rest of my body in waves. My eyes watered. I took another big pull and another, feeling the sting of the alcohol on the walls of my throat, coating my insides. After the initial shock to my system, dead calm set in as if I’d been shot with Novocain. It was exactly what I needed.

I drove on aimlessly, drinking in the open at red lights, not caring if anyone saw me or I got pulled over. What would it matter if I got a DUI? I deserved to be locked up. I’d committed a crime—an irreparable crime. I needed to be punished because I was a horrible person. There was no more denying it. I was more than just a terrible mother. I was a terrible person too.

The images of David and Phil swerved in front of me again making it difficult to focus on the road. The stoplights were fuzzy and blurring. Suddenly, everything was moving quickly and I was moving too slow to keep up. I was having a tough time staying in my lane. I was going to have to stop driving or I was going to crash. I didn’t want to hurt anyone. I’d already hurt enough people.

I pulled into the parking lot of a shabby, run down motel. It was one of the many dingy pay-by-the-hour motels in Hollywood that were cluttered with homeless people and prostitutes. It was the type of motel I’d never consider staying in, but it was perfect for me now. It was dirty and gross just like my insides.

I opened my door and the cold air shocked me, making my head swim and my stomach thrust violently. I spewed vodka all over my feet, holding



myself up on the door so I wouldn't fall over. It took a few minutes before the contractions stopped. I shuddered and steadied myself as the parking lot moved underneath me. I walked into the office focusing on each step. There was a woman standing next to the desk swaying side to side with her own bottle in a brown bag.

The receptionist barely looked up.

“How long?”

“One night.”

“Forty-two dollars.”

I pulled out bills and tried to focus on counting them. It was impossible. I handed him the money and he plopped a key in my hand. He pointed to the left. “Room 211. Let me know when you leave,” he grunted, flicking his cigarette in the ashtray.

I shuffled down the side of the building avoiding eye contact with the people sprawled around. I had to push my body against the door to get it open and slam it hard to get it shut once I was inside. I steadied myself against the wall. The room was small, cramped, and dirty. It smelled like stale cigarettes and the sweet, musty odor of another chemical I didn't recognize. The bed took up most of the room and the bedspread was old and worn through in places. Various size stains dotted the threadbare design. I shuddered to think what had happened on it. There were cigarette burns on the floor.

It was only ten steps to the bathroom which was the size of a small closet. There wasn't even a bathtub—only a sink with a small shower lined with a rank plastic shower curtain. I stood next to the sink afraid to touch anything. I gripped my bottle, unscrewed the top, and raised it to my lips drinking quickly before my body rejected it. I drank past the feeling of wanting to vomit. I swallowed it back down each time it came up. I needed to get the burning liquid inside me. I devoured the bottled as if I'd been dehydrated for days. My body went slack with a sweet release as my back slid down the wall until I hit the ground.

I lay next to the toilet resting my head on the cracked linoleum. The linoleum spun like a wheel in front of me. If I moved my head to the right or the left, the world fell with it so I stared straight ahead at a spot of brown mold underneath the shower curtain. The pungent odor of unknown smells wafted up my nose making me gag. I let the puke drain from my nose and mouth without lifting my head. I was completely numb and exhausted. I fell asleep with my eyes wide open.

## Chapter Eleven

My phone jolted me awake. I rubbed my eyes, looking around at the muted tiles covered in film before I remembered where I was. My head throbbed and my stomach felt like there was acid eating away at it. I pulled my phone out of my pocket. Eight missed calls from David. My heart started to pound. Was he ready to talk? Did something else happen to Rori? He hadn't left any voice messages to give me a clue. I tapped his number, trying to shake the cotton wool from my head.

He answered on the second ring. "What kind of a sick game are you playing, Celeste?"

I had no idea what he was talking about. What was going on?

"I... uh... what do you mean?" It felt like I had a mouthful of marbles I had to speak around.

"I called Phil."

I waited for him to say something else, but he was silent. He was waiting for me to give him a response but I didn't have one to give. I couldn't believe he'd called Phil. I was horrified. What'd he say to him? How'd Phil respond?

I'd spent so much time and energy pretending like That Night never happened. It'd been difficult working with Phil every week and acting like nothing had changed. He never mentioned it and treated me like he'd always treated me. At first, it'd been easier that he acted so nonchalantly as if we were the same colleagues we'd always been, but he was so convincing I started wondering if I was crazy and had imagined the whole thing. But then I'd catch him looking at me with that look in his eye and all the memories would come flooding back.

"Are you ever going to start telling the truth?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm telling the truth." My words came out slurred.

"Are you drunk?" I heard the shock in his voice. I looked at the time. It was three o'clock in the afternoon. I'd never been drunk at three in the afternoon.

“I.... I-just.... I had a few drinks.”

“Jesus Christ. I really don’t know who you are, but you know what—I don’t even care. I just want to know who Rori’s father is.”

“Phil. It’s Phil. I told you.”

“Funny, that’s not what he said an hour ago.” David’s voice didn’t belong to him. It belonged to someone else. A person I didn’t know or recognize. There wasn’t an ounce of love or softness in his voice. “He had no idea what I was talking about. He told me he’d never had an affair with you. That nothing happened. He was actually very nice about it. Said he wished he could help.”

I threw the phone against the wall. I clamped both hands over my mouth trying to stifle the scream tearing at my throat. My breath was ragged and my chest tight. Sweat soaked through my black t-shirt. Wave after wave of nausea washed over me. I pulled my knees up to my chest, hugging them in place with my arms.

“We didn’t have an affair,” I whimpered to the empty walls.

Of course Phil denied it. What else could he say? Vehement hate shot through my veins. I hated him, but hated myself even more because it was my fault. If only I’d ignored him. That Night wasn’t the first time he’d hit on me or said something suggestive—it was just the first time I’d paid attention. I made it a habit early in my career to ignore any flirting from my male colleagues. Insurance was a man’s world and I’d been working in it since college so I was skilled at keeping my guard up. Being taken seriously as a woman required it. There were lots of women who slept their way to the top, but I’d worked my way there just like every other man in a suit. I never did anything even hinting at flirting. If only I hadn’t been so lonely, but it’d been so long since I’d been touched and his touch had been electric, igniting the parts of me muted from inattention. How could I have been so stupid? I groaned.

I crawled on the ground like a crackhead searching for my bottle. It was almost empty. I picked it up and drained the last few sips. It didn’t even burn this time. I picked up my phone. David had hung up. I tapped his number again. He was still furious.

“I told you the truth. Phil is Rori’s father.”

“God, this is so fuckin sick and twisted. I can’t stand it—”

“I’m so sorry, David. I—”

“Shut the fuck up. I don’t want you to ever tell me you’re sorry again. You’re a fuckin cunt.”

I sat straight up, stunned as if I’d been shot with a Taser gun. David never used words like that. Ever. Sobs ripped through my body, making me shake like I was having a seizure.

“Are you about done crying? I don’t have time for this.”

“What do you want me to do? I’ll do anything. Anything to make this better.”

“The only thing you can do to make this better is to call your boyfriend, whoever he is, and get his ass down to the hospital so this kid has a chance.”

“Don’t call her that.”

“Oh, suddenly, you give a shit about her? Please. You’ve been the worse mother on the planet since she’s been born.”

“Stop it! Just stop it!” My screams reverberated off the walls.

“Guess what? I can say whatever the hell I want to say. We. Are. Done. You’re going to call Phil and get him to take the stupid blood test. Then, you’re never going to see us again. I don’t care if he’s the one who got you knocked up. She’s my daughter and I’m going to do everything I can to save her life. Then, I’m taking her far away from you and all this.”

“I-I-I...”

“The bitch that always has something to say can’t talk herself out of this one.” His words were fists and they pummeled me, but I deserved every hit. “Rori’s life depends on this.”

“Don’t you think I know that?”

“I don’t know what you think anymore. I’m pretty sure I never did. Call me after you’ve talked to Phil.”

Dead air.

I reeled from his verbal assault, trying not to cry again. I felt like an old milk carton whose contents had been emptied and discarded. How was I supposed to talk to Phil about this? It’d taken me two years before I could look at him without That Night being the first thing on my mind. The thought of it made my skin crawl. The feeling of termites underneath my skin was back and I raked my nails up and down my arms.

I couldn’t talk to Phil sober, but my bottle was empty. I needed more. I got up slowly from the bathroom floor, the walls spinning around me. For a minute, I thought I might pass out but I closed my eyes tightly and willed

myself to stay conscious. I took three deep breaths and steadied myself on my feet. I felt as if I'd been awake for years. How could it still be the same day?

I stumbled across the parking lot, trying to remember where I'd parked my car. The sunlight hurt my eyes, making me squint in revulsion. I found it in a spot underneath the vacancy sign. I plugged my phone into the charger and looked up the nearest liquor store. There was one four blocks away. I would walk to the liquor store, get another bottle, drink it, and call Phil. I forced myself to stay focused on the task at hand.

I got the same bottle of vodka I'd bought before—the one with a gray wolf on it. I walked out of the store with another brown bag and took a gulp before I got through the first block. I couldn't help but wonder if this was what it was like to be an alcoholic. Could you become an alcoholic in one day?

I'd never understood alcoholics, but today I understood the power of alcohol. I welcomed the bubble of insulation it put around me. It was like being covered in a warm blanket of nothingness. My thinking was garbled and unclear, but it was a relief because I didn't want to think straight. I had no desire to remember anything about this day or That Night. I didn't want to feel anything except numb.

I paced the small hotel room trying to figure out what to say to him. There was no way I was going to my office. I didn't want anyone to see me this way, especially not my employees. I was going to have to meet him somewhere alone and the thought of it made me guzzle more vodka. I pulled out my phone again, scrolled down my contacts to his name and tapped the call button before I lost my nerve.

He answered on the second ring as if he'd been expecting my call. "Hello, Celeste?"

The sound of his voice sent my stomach into my throat.

"Yes, it's me."

"Hold on a sec."

My heart pounded in my chest and my armpits dripped with sweat. I took another drink, hoping it would help. The warm liquid spread throughout my body again. I paced back and forth across the small room waiting for him to get back on the line. I kept telling myself not to hang up until he was finally back on the line.

"I heard about Rori. So sorry to hear she's sick."

I hated that he said her name. He didn't deserve to say her name.

“I was wondering if I could talk to you about that.” Somehow I sounded clear and coherent. The words were flowing easily out of my mouth in a logical way, even though I didn’t feel like I was the one formulating them. I was talking but had no connection to my voice.

“Um, hon, I’m not really sure we should be talking about that.”

How could he call me hon? How dare he? I clenched my fist and gripped the phone with my other hand to keep myself from throwing it again. I couldn’t go through with this, but David would never talk to me again if I didn’t. I couldn’t live with David not speaking to me.

“We have to.” My voice came out authoritative just like it did at work. I was glad I’d had years of practice.

“And what am I going to get out of this?” His voice changed. He was no longer the CEO of my company—the boss I worked under and who’d mentored me since college. He was the guy from That Night.

“Whatever you want.”

“Hmm... this just got interesting.” I could hear the amusement in his voice. “You know we can’t do this at the office. Where should we meet?”

I was disgusted with myself. I forced the words out of my mouth. “I’m staying at a hotel. We could meet here.”

“You’re at a hotel right now?”

“Yes.”

“What are you doing at a hotel while your daughter is sick?”

Was he really that delusional? Either he was crazy or I was.

“Can you come?”

“As many times as you want.” He laughed the same way he’d laughed That Night. I shuddered in revulsion. “I can clear my schedule and be there in an hour. Where are you?”

I rattled off the address as quick as I could. I tossed my phone on the bed as if it’d burned me. Every wall in the room felt like it was closing in on me. A surge of electricity shot through my body making my hands tingle. There was a loud ringing in my ears. The world swirled around me. I picked my phone back up and texted David.

*I’m talking to Phil in an hour.*

*Let me know when it’s done. Dr. Wilcox is going to need to talk to him. Have him call Dr. Wilcox at 323-810-9756 so they can set things up.*

*How’s Rori?*

*Fine.*

*I'm sorry.*

*Get the ball rolling with Phil. He might be able to save Rori's life.*

I wanted her to live, but didn't want Phil to have any part of saving her. What if they put his organs inside her? He'd be intimately connected with her for the rest of her life. I didn't want him to touch or be near her. He'd infiltrated her life enough. If he were the one to save her, he'd come out looking like a hero. He'd be redeemed of his crime while I'd be forever punished for mine.

I pulled the blinds' string, letting the dirty white plastic down. I didn't want anyone to see in and didn't want to see out. I double-checked the deadbolt making sure I'd locked it behind me. I threw myself on the bed no longer caring what nastiness stained it and started to cry. I didn't think I had any more tears left, but they just kept coming.

I sat up, admonishing myself to get it together. I had to find a way to calm down before Phil arrived. I couldn't let him see me in the state I was in. The only thing that could make the situation worse was having him see me emotionally destroyed. I eyed the room for my bottle, spotting it on the small table next to the TV. If I was going to have to talk to Phil about That Night and tell him he was the father of my child, I was going to be wasted.

## Chapter Twelve

Primal screams shattered the air. It took a second to realize the screaming was coming from me. I came to with startling clarity. For the last week, I'd been flung into black space disconnected from my body, watching myself perform from above as if I wasn't a real person. I'd been watching my life unfold and unravel around me like I was watching a movie, but suddenly I was present. I was in my body again and acutely aware of who I was. I felt alive, whole and energized as if I'd just poked my head above the surface of the water after being submerged. I felt every breath, my heart's staccato drum, and my blood flowing through my veins. My hands were shaking violently, covered in crimson red. My left hand gripped the lamp stand, broken off at the top forming a sharp jagged point.

I looked down at me feet. Phil's chiseled face was unrecognizable. His eyes were wide open, gaping in horror. There were deep gashes running in chaos across his face, showing the meat inside. His eyes were swollen shut and bloody footprints stamped his forehead. His head lay in a pool of blood still widening its width on the tattered brown carpet. The shattered pieces of my vodka bottle lay strewn by his body. I dropped the lamp as I fell to my feet.

*What did I do?*

I didn't want to touch him. I couldn't look at him again. I stared at my hands. They were still shaking and slick with fresh blood sliding off my fingers. My rational mind told me to call 911, but another part of my mind had taken over. I got up from my spot and walked to the bathroom in a daze. I ran my hands under the faucet as the blood flowed in a rustic river from my hands and swirled its way down the sink. There were chunks of glass in my palms. One looked like it was nearly all the way through. I grabbed it with my other hand and pulled it out without flinching. Methodically, I worked my way through the other pieces creating a small pile in the sink. I'd always hated the sight of blood, but I was unaffected by it. My hands didn't belong



to me. I laughed out loud—a maniacal cackle. I looked for towels to wrap my hands with, but the towel racks were empty.

I walked back into the room, the taste of copper in my mouth. There was a sharp stinging pain behind my eyes. I eyed the room, looking for something to wrap them with since they wouldn't stop bleeding. The smell of urine and feces permeated the air. My eyes took in the images in quick snapshots. Phil's motionless body on the floor in front of the door. Red splatters on the wall. Two chairs toppled over. The TV lying on its side next to the stand. The only thing left untouched was the bed. I laughed again. The sound of my laughter still foreign. I grabbed a pillow from the bed and took the case off. I gripped the case with my teeth and ripped it into uneven halves. I used a piece for each hand tying them around my wounds like a boxer.

I stepped toward Phil's body. Ice water shot through my veins as if any minute he might wake up and come at me. I forced myself to crouch down next to him. I couldn't leave without knowing for sure he was dead. I placed my fingers on his neck. His skin was still warm. I felt for a pulse like I'd seen people do in the movies. There was nothing. I grabbed one of his arms and lifted it up to check his pulse on his wrist. Nothing. I let his arm go and it flopped back down to the floor lifeless. I stood.

I grabbed my keys from the table and took off running for my car like I was at the starting line of a race and the gun had just been fired. I slid into the seat. My entire body was shaking now. The tremors had traveled from my hands throughout my whole body. I fumbled with getting the keys into the ignition. I pulled out of the parking lot, nearly hitting a car as I made a quick left. I drove in the direction of our house. My brain ran wildly as if my thoughts were on a treadmill running so fast I didn't have time to discern any particular one. I watched myself as I drove to the house screaming at myself to stop, turn around, call 911, but I couldn't stop. Someone else had taken control of me.

I parked in the driveway and walked into my house, but it felt like I was walking into someone else's life. I was no longer connected to the pictures, the memories, or the details. They belonged to someone else. Someone who wasn't me.

I moved robotically into the master bathroom and stripped myself of my dirty, blood-stained clothes. I left them in a pile on the floor and stepped into the shower, blasting the faucet as hot as it would go. The searing heat scalded my body, but I didn't care. I let it burn me. I scrubbed my skin until it was

raw. I shaved my legs with my pink Gillette razor. There was something calming about performing a ritual I'd been doing since I was eleven-years-old. When I stepped out, I didn't feel any cleaner than before I got in. I was covered in filth I'd never get off. No amount of washing was ever going to cleanse me of my sins.

I fumbled with my dresser drawers as I pulled on fresh clothes, making sure I avoided looking at David's side of the bed. He was never going to forgive me for what I'd done and how I'd destroyed our family. Ever. The man I loved more than any other person hated me. I swallowed the cry in my throat and forced myself to keep moving.

I pulled my travel bag from the closet, throwing a few sets of clothes into it not caring what they were. I punched in the code on the safe-deposit box we kept stored in my closet. The door swung open, revealing the envelopes of cash we saved for trips and buying our cars since we never bought anything on credit. My mom had used an envelope system for purchases since I was a little girl and I'd made it a habit in my own life. I grabbed the envelopes of cash and stuffed them into my bag. I left David and Rori our emergency cash fund.

I'd take nothing with me. I made my way downstairs as if I was a ghost. I hoped they'd forget me quickly. I was a monster and they deserved so much better than what I could give them. I thought about leaving a note but then quickly decided against it. There was nothing left to be said and besides, my words meant nothing. I stepped outside, locking the door behind me and walked away.

# **PART TWO**

## Chapter Thirteen

It'd been nine months since I'd learned how to be lost. I'd spent the first week driving north in the 96' Honda Civic I paid two thousand dollars for at a used car dealership in South Central LA. I'd taken the bus to a dangerous part of the city I usually avoided, but I discovered I'd do all sorts of things I wouldn't normally do when I didn't care if I lived or died. I stepped off the 42 bus line and looked around, hoping to get shot and was disappointed at how peaceful it was despite the bars on every store and rival gangs lining the sides of the street. The owner of the dealership didn't flinch when I paid him cash and gave him a fake name.

I drove through California only stopping to retch on the side of the road. My stomach emptied itself again and again but even with nothing in it, the dry heaves still kept coming, splattering the roadside with yellow foam. I couldn't eat. Sleep was impossible. I was controlled by the propulsion to keep moving. I didn't like stopping for gas and only did it out of necessity. I drove as fast as I could and passed the Oregon state line just as the sun rose. It was hard to understand how the world had gone on moving while my life had stopped.

In the beginning, there was only muted grey all around me. The world had lost all its color. I watched myself like a distant observer as I traveled through one state and into the next.

*There I go through Washington.*

*Look how good I'm driving through the mountains.*

*I'm doing such a nice job not speeding.*

I drove aimlessly through the northern states before heading south. The days melted into the night with nothing separating where one day ended and the other began. I didn't know where I was going. Only that I had to move. I didn't know how many days I went without sleeping. It could've been four. It might've been seven.

Somewhere in Texas, I started hearing an old man calling my name and kept looking in my rearview mirror afraid someone might've jumped in my backseat when I wasn't looking, but nobody was there. At times, I heard the whistling sound of wind entering in one ear and swishing through to the other ear as if my brain was no longer protected by my skull and the sounds from the outside world entered like real entities whispering to me. Images blurred

in front of my eyes and I'd nod off only to be jolted awake by the rumble strips violently shaking my car. I could no longer stay focused enough to drive and was forced to stop even though every part of me wanted to keep going.

I pulled my car into a rest area along Interstate 10. The parking lot was littered with truckers and RV's. A red brick bathroom stood in the center and was covered in graffiti. Human feces were spread on the walls inside. I picked a spot in the furthest corner of the lot away from any of the overhead lights. The darkness enveloped my car. At any other time, I would've been terrified to sleep in such a remote place surrounded by truckers and other predators searching for their next unsuspecting victim, but I wasn't. I sat in the driver's seat staring into the night, hoping someone would attack me. I wanted someone to kill me because I didn't deserve to live. Imagining myself being tortured comforted me and my body began to twitch involuntarily from sleep. I passed out with my head on the steering wheel.

Time had no meaning so it didn't matter when I started losing parts of it. I'd be aware of driving in one state and wake to find myself in another. I didn't know where or who I was. I started telling gas station attendants my name was Sarah. My body no longer felt like mine. Sometimes I couldn't feel my hands but I'd look down and see they were holding the steering wheel, properly guiding it down the interstate.

My mind raced. Never still. The voices in my head grew louder, fighting with each other for dominance and control. They developed three distinct personalities—the old man, the young girl, and the boss—each with their own voice. The old man spoke in a quiet, hushed tone, the young girl in childlike hysterics, and the boss in calculated coldness commenting on my every move. Their banter tormented me and sounded like multiple radios playing different stations in my brain.

I didn't remember when I decided to stop sleeping in my car at rest stops and began taking breaks from the road by crashing in sleazy motels that only took cash—the type of places where no one cared who you were or where you were going. I shaved my head during one of my hotel stays in New Mexico. I had no recollection of buying a shaver, but woke to find my long brown hair curled in a pile next to the edge of the bed. I reached up to feel my head and the jagged stubble of my scalp was evidence of what I'd done. I refused to look in the mirror.

In the red dust and rocks of Utah, the voices in my head started talking about me in third person, having conversations with each other.

*Can you believe she shaved her head?*

*She looks ridiculous with a shaved head.*

*She's really losing it.*

*She's a murderer, what do you expect?*

*She should just kill herself.*

Everything they said about me was true. Wave after wave of despair washed over me. I felt the windy road underneath me but only saw Phil's dark blood and David's hate-filled eyes around me. I imagined driving my car over a bridge or veering off the road to smash into a tree. I couldn't bring myself to do it, but not because I lacked the courage. I was capable of doing anything, but death would be taking the easy way out and I deserved to be punished. What I'd done was attached to me like a malignant tumor.

It was tortuous to want to die yet still be alive. Each week, I felt myself slipping further and further into the abyss of insanity. I had enough awareness to know I was teetering on the edge of madness and was one step away from being gone forever. I was afraid of what I'd do or waking up in a psychiatric hospital with no recollection of who I was. I kept losing more and more chunks of time. The voices in my head were getting louder, often drowning me out completely. The rational part of my brain knew it was time to stop moving.

I had no memory of deciding to go to Minnesota, but found myself driving through the snow with my backseat loaded up with gears and supplies. I got as close to the Canadian border as I could without touching it and passed through a small town called Triton, boasting a population of 942. A wooden sign for a resort advertised vacancy and I made a left following a gravel road to a rustic cabin.

I stepped into the cold, pulling my thick coat around me. The wind bit me as I walked, so cold it made my teeth hurt. I pushed open the door and entered a small room with only a desk and a door behind it. I rang the bell tapping my feet back and forth against each other and shivering. It was a few minutes before a woman opened the door. I glanced at her—skinny with a purple bandanna tied around her head and snapping gum. I looked away before she could make eye contact.

“One room, please,” I said.

“We don't rent single rooms. Only cabins.”

“Okay. Um.... one cabin, then.” I didn’t have to look up to know she was examining me.

“How many of you?”

“Me. Just me.” I looked up to feel the heat of her gaze moving up and down my body. Next, she looked out the small window behind me at my car parked in the driveway like she didn’t trust I was alone.

“How long are you staying?” she asked.

“A month?”

I hadn’t meant for it to come out sounding like a question.

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. I stared at the Christmas tree on her red sweater rather than look her in the eyes. Was it Christmas again? Had I been gone that long?

“It’s 150 per week...600 a month...not many people are here...mostly tourists...” I struggled to keep up with the conversation. I still shivered despite the heat in the room. The conversation made me uncomfortable and I wanted her to hurry up. “Are you paying cash or credit?”

I dug into my pocket, pulling out one of my envelopes and forced myself to focus. I counted out six bills onto the desk. She recounted them and then tucked them into the back pocket of her jeans. She grabbed a key hanging from the rack behind her and handed it to me. “I’ll put you in cabin four. It’s close to the lake. Follow the driveway around to the left and you’ll see it. We don’t have a cleaning crew during the winter so you’ll be responsible for keeping your space clean. There are laundry facilities behind the office. Feel free to use them.”

I gripped the key in my hand.

“Are you okay?”

I nodded. I had to get out of there before she had a chance to ask me any more questions. I opened the door and breathed in the air hungrily. The gravel crunched underneath the car as I followed the path toward the frozen lake. I pulled up in front of cabin four.

Exhaustion pummeled me as I stepped across the cabin floor into a living space painted mustard yellow. I disintegrated into the queen-sized bed, pulled the worn quilt over me, curled into the fetal position and allowed the fatigue to take me hostage. I had no idea how many days and nights I lay like a limp, lifeless doll surrounded in a sea of yellow. Yellow walls. Yellow urine. Perspiration soaked yellow sheets. Nothing solid or secure grounded me to

my existence. My soul was trying to leave its skin. I only survived because my body refused to quit breathing.

I drifted between sleep and wake—sometimes not being able to tell the difference. Flashes of scenes and images from my life danced in front of me. As I shifted in and out of consciousness, my mind slowly became untangled, the clutter decayed and the noises got softer. In the middle of a blizzard, I woke to discover the voices were silent. The radio stations were turned off. I'd been free falling through space and suddenly landed.

I didn't know how to deal with the quiet. The stillness of my mind forced me to get out of bed and start moving around in the strange new world I'd entered. I took the first shower I'd had since leaving California. I turned the water on as cold as it would go, hoping it would shock me into my body enough to stay there. It didn't work. Despite the cold, I couldn't feel it on my skin.

I stepped out of the shower and caught a glimpse of myself in the cabinet mirror above the sink. I no longer recognized who I was. My muscles had eaten away at themselves and left me emaciated. I looked like a chemotherapy patient whose hair had just started to grow back in uneven tufts. My head was too big for my body. My eyes were shoved back two inches and looked haunted. My skin was an ugly gray. I took the towel from around my body and hung it over the mirror so I wouldn't have to look at myself again.

The cabin wasn't as horrid as it seemed during my fevered sleep. The yellow seemed almost pretty as the sunlight from the windows bounced off it. The artwork I'd imagined staring at me from the walls while I slept hadn't been real. Instead of the ghoulish women giving birth and burning trees I'd seen, there were framed pictures of cross-stitched flowers. The designs were intricate and must've taken someone hours to complete.

The cabin was arranged with great care. The living space was the size of a studio. Even though the kitchen was tiny, it held clean dishes in the cupboards neatly stacked and arranged. An old-fashioned round table stood in the middle of the kitchen separating it from the living room. The living room held only a single brown couch with a wooden stand next to it. A handmade quilt was thrown over the back. The fireplace was filled with wood and I wished I knew how to start a fire.

I found an old notebook and pen in one of the nightstand drawers. I took them into the kitchen and sat down at the table to write. Writing was a



supreme effort in concentration, but I forced myself to do it.

*I think I had a psychotic break. My name is Celeste but I call myself Sarah now. I killed Phil. Rori might be dead. David hates me.*

I started writing, trying to organize my chaos. I wrote things down to structure my days and settle my brain. Without it, I just floated disconnected from myself and everything around me. My thoughts jumped quickly from one to another before I could catch up, but writing them out slowed them down. I couldn't date my journal entries because I didn't know what day it was. I had no idea how much time had passed since I'd left California.

I'd traveled to the darkest side of humanity and was trying to find my way back to reality, scared it no longer existed for me. I sat at the kitchen table for hours staring at the light reflecting off the snow. Sometimes I wondered if I'd imagined everything like I was living in a dream and any minute I'd wake up to find David sleeping next to me in bed. I'd shake him awake and tell him what a crazy dream I'd just had. But then a fisherman would come walking down the path toward the lake and remind me where I was and that everything was real.

I plotted my days out step-by-step, listing things to do like take a shower and eat crackers. I still hadn't been outside the cabin and the supplies I'd brought me with that I had no memory of buying were dwindling down to nothing. I didn't want to eat. The feeling of perpetual nausea followed me. All food tasted like sawdust in my mouth and gave me foul-smelling diarrhea, but I had to eat if I was going to stay alive.

I was too afraid to get in my car as if it was responsible for my breakdown so I was left with no choice except to walk into town to get more supplies. It wasn't easy to walk because my body moved like an elderly person. My legs were stiff and landed awkwardly with each step. Ice crunched underneath my feet.

I followed the winding driveway to the main road. I couldn't remember if the town was to the left or right. The thought of going into the front lodge and talking to the woman who rented me the cabin filled me with anxiety. I wasn't ready for that yet. I decided to try going right and if it wasn't the correct way to get to town then I'd try the other direction the next day. I got lucky because it wasn't long before the small town came into sight. I walked on the side of the road until I came to the first business marking the beginnings of Main Street. It was a gas station called Kwik Trip and I

decided to buy food there because I didn't have the energy to keep walking without any kind of direction searching for a grocery store.

Much to my surprise, the gas station had a tiny grocery area in the back lined with shelves of food. I kept my head down and grabbed things as quickly as I could. I loaded my basket with soup, cereal, coffee, peanut butter, bread, and milk. I shuffled through the next aisle tossing in toilet paper, a new notebook and pack of pens. My heart sped up as I laid the items out for the cashier. I refused to make eye contact, staring down at the lottery tickets underneath the glass.

"It's nice out there today, huh?" Her voice was pleasant. I peeked at her—short hair, acne scars, and pink glasses. Her face was round and easily slid into a smile as I stood there unable to respond. I knew the words I should say, but couldn't get them out. Instead, I nodded compulsively. "That's 27.45."

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a wad of bills. I was painfully aware of my awkwardness. I tried to count the money, but my brain wouldn't focus. I kept getting to twenty and having to start over.

"Just hand me that fifty," she said.

A fifty? There it was. I grabbed it and handed it to her. I crumpled up the rest of the bills and shoved them back down in my pocket. I didn't dare look behind me to see if there was anyone else in the store watching my inability to complete one of the most common social interactions.

She bagged my things, handing them to me along with my change. "You need to put something on those ears of yours even if it's nice out there today."

I nodded again and was still nodding as I made my way out the door. I breathed a sigh of relief to be back outside. I'd never been anxious or shy in any social situation, but couldn't even muster a response about the weather. I held back the tears as I trekked my way back to the cabin. My trip exhausted me and I fell back into bed, admonishing myself for not having figured out what day it was.

I awakened to the sound of David calling my name. I opened my eyes, searching wildly for him before remembering where I was. I'd been having the same dream I had most nights. In my dream, I was stumbling in a dark house, trying to find a way out and becoming more and more frantic because the house was a maze filled with doors. I'd run to a door hoping it would open only to find it locked. I'd beat on a door with my fists, screaming to be let out, and then his voice would break into the darkness, calling out for me. I

always turned to look for him, but that was the point where I jolted awake each time. I never got to see his face. Never got to hear what he had to say to me.

I didn't know how I was going to live without David because it wasn't possible to live with your heart outside your body, but I couldn't cry anymore. I'd spent months sobbing while I drove, the incessant and unbearable pain of losing him tearing me apart as if my insides had been savagely ripped out, but my grief was fading into a chronic, dull ache that would never leave me even though the tears had dried up. Emptiness settled over me, covering me with a numbness that grew more familiar each day.

Thoughts of David always led to wondering if Rori was still alive. Had she made it through her illness? By taking Phil's life, had I stolen hers too? Rori was intrinsically linked to Phil and the memories clawed at my throat. Pictures of Phil's body in the hotel room flashed through my mind. It was an image that no matter how good I got at forgetting, I would never erase. I willed myself to shove all of it—the images, the memories, the loss, and the lies—into a tiny room, buried in the recess of my mind. My secrets would be mine to know and mine to bear.

## Chapter Fourteen

I bent to fill their coffee cups with the steaming liquid to warm their insides as I watched the snow fall in thick sheets outside.

“Thank you, sweetie,” Mrs. Anderson said as her fingers glided on her knitting sticks, a ball of yarn in her lap. She’d knitted me the pink hat I wore on my walk to work every day. Her latest project was a blanket for her ninth grandchild due in April.

She and her husband had been our only customers all day because of another blizzard, but I wasn’t surprised they were there. They never missed their Tuesday morning breakfast no matter what the weather was like.

It was hard to believe I’d been working at the Little Crane for almost three months. Getting acclimated to my role as a server had been the hardest transition I’d had in a place of employment which was ironic given the high pressure jobs I was used to. But everything was different now as I moved in a world no longer mine.

I’d had no choice but to reintroduce myself to the outside world because the four walls of my tiny cabin had begun to suffocate me. My exhaustion was replaced with insomnia and without sleep, there were only empty hours to fill. I drifted through the cabin, sifting through the phantoms of my past. The loneliness was all-encompassing and grew unbearable. I lived in a prison of isolation with bars I’d created myself. The shadows on the wall had begun to take on a life of their own and I couldn’t stay inside any longer.

It wasn’t easy so I started slow. I began taking long walks through Triton. It was a small town like I’d read about in stories, but didn’t know existed—one where everyone still went to church on Sunday. It was so small there wasn’t a school. Instead, the kids were bussed to the closet town where three towns came together in order to have enough students to fill a school. The town itself consisted of one main street holding everything it had to offer—a church, a liquor store, a small hardware store, the gas station, a bar, a post office, and tackle shop. The Little Crane was a small café at the end of Main Street right before the street opened up into expansive forests.

Every business doubled for another. The small hardware store also housed DVDs to rent. The Baptist church held services on Sundays and Wednesdays, but also functioned as a meeting place where city council meetings were held. I couldn't imagine what they voted on. The gas station doubled as a grocery store since the nearest town with a real grocery store was over fifteen minutes away. Triton had so few occupants that it didn't have a police department, but I was sure they didn't need it. I doubted many crimes took place and if they did, I had a strong suspicion everyone had a gun in their home since every person I'd met was an avid hunter, even the women. If you wanted to take in a movie, eat at a restaurant or do anything resembling the city, you had to drive two hours to what they referred to as "the city."

It was quiet and simple. The pace was slow. Nobody was in a rush. Everyone took their time as they walked down the street and meandered through the gas station. I liked it. It was comforting and soothing. I'd expected people to be nosy like the small town I grew up in, but they weren't. However, their lack of questions may have been because I looked strange and didn't act right since I'd lost the ability to carry on conversations. The casual social encounters that used to flow so easily for me were gone and replaced with awkward pauses and one-word responses. It wasn't as if I didn't want to talk to people because I did. I just couldn't. I froze when people started conversations with me, stumbling over words and when I did manage to string a few sentences together, the cadence was all wrong as if I was autistic. It kept people from asking me too many questions. Mostly, people talked to me about the weather. It didn't take long for me to discover they were infatuated with weather conditions and never tired of reporting them.

The cabin community I lived in was even more insulated than Triton. It was a small world within an even smaller one. I rarely saw anyone in the other cabins. Most of them were empty except for the occasional couple who arrived for the weekend and were gone as quick as they'd come never stepping outside their doors. The only other people around were the fishermen who came every day. I'd watch them from my front step as I sat sipping coffee cuddled in my thick winter coat I'd somehow had the presence of mind to buy. There were three groups. There were those who came in the early morning before the sun was up carrying their gear out onto the ice. They were all business as they marched onto the lake and set up their spots. They hardly spoke to each other. Then, there were those who came late in the

morning or early afternoon who carried large coolers full of beer and weren't as serious about fishing as they were getting drunk. Lastly, there was the night crew. They came right as the sun was going down and were often some of the same people who fished in the morning.

I'd begun paying my rent every week to the woman, Rosie, who lived on-site. She was as private as I was and never asked me how long I was staying. I assumed she lived alone because I never saw a man on her property, but she had three children who scampered through the place in their snow pants and stocking hats pulled tightly over their ears. They were the quietest children I'd ever met. I wouldn't have known they'd been running around if it weren't for the footprints they left in the snow.

There wasn't any Wi-Fi in my cabin, but it didn't matter because I no longer had devices to connect me to the online world. I hadn't even turned on my TV. It felt like the rest of the world didn't exist and made it easy to pretend there was nothing else out there except the world I lived in now.

I didn't set out to find a job at the Little Crane. It happened by accident after I met the owner during one of my walks. I liked to walk early in the morning before the rest of the world was awake and the town looked as if it'd been abandoned. I rarely saw anyone so I was surprised to find him shoveling salt on the sidewalk as I passed by.

"Be careful, dear. It's really icy today. I don't want you to slip," he called out.

He was more unsteady than I was as he stiffly moved the shovel in and out of the sand bag. His body was frail, slightly hunched over as if the next strong wind might blow him over. He stopped to lean against his shovel, his rapid breath coming in quick puffs of white. It was so cold you could see it. Deep wrinkles carved his face and small wisps of gray hair poked out from underneath his black cap.

"It's cold out here today, eh?"

"Yes, it is."

"How long you in town for?"

I stepped backward, almost losing my footing.

"Whoa, dear, calm down. I been here as long as Triton's been around. I built this town so I know everyone in it and I don't know you." His bright blue eyes twinkled and his lips turned up into an amused smile at my reaction.

I smiled back hesitantly. "I'll, um.... be here for a while."

“How you liking Triton so far?”

“It’s okay.”

“You have family in these parts?”

“No. D-do you?” I looked away, ashamed of my stutter. I’d never had one before.

“I did.” The lines in his face pulled down into a frown. “My wife passed away four months ago.”

“Oh.... oh.... um-um, I’m sorry. Can I shovel?”

I didn’t wait for him to respond. I was supposed to say something, offer some kind of condolence, but the right words to say were locked in my head inaccessible to me. I grabbed the shovel from him, avoiding eye contact and began sprinkling the sand on the ice. Once I’d finished the area in front of us, I grabbed the bag and continued down the sidewalk. When I reached the end of the sidewalk, I carried the shovel and bag back to him feeling embarrassed I’d salted the entire sidewalk rather than try to talk to him about his wife. He was resting against the storefront glass.

“Thank you, dear. That sure was nice of you. You didn’t have to do that,” he said.

I stood holding the shovel awkwardly. “It’s okay.” After a long pause, I added, “you’re welcome.”

“Let me make you a cup of coffee.”

“I.... uh.... I don’t know.... I n-n-need to go.”

How had I turned into such a social degenerate?

“Nonsense.” He pushed open the door and motioned for me to follow.

I thought about walking away, but I’d look even more awkward than I already did so I followed him into the quaint cafe. It was like stepping into a wildlife sanctuary except all the animals were dead. Two huge deer heads were mounted on the left side wall. Every inch of wall space was covered with mounted fish and different birds. Their eyes were all wide open as if any moment they’d jump from their mounts and race along the floor.

The old man pointed to the fish mounted next to the counter. “That’s the largemouth bass I caught with my dad when I was ten.” He beamed with pride. He hung his coat and hat on the hooks behind the counter. The long counter was filled with pies and an old-fashioned cash register on top. A white board displaying the handwritten menu and yesterday’s specials hung on the wall behind the counter. “Sit. I’m gonna grab the coffee.”

I eyed the restaurant, choosing one of the tables in front of the window. There were only five tables in front and eight on the other side of the L-shaped room. I rehearsed what I'd say about his wife over and over again while I waited for him to return.

"How'd your wife die?" I blurted out before he'd even reached the table. It wasn't what I'd rehearsed. I was supposed to tell him I was sorry for his loss. He set a cup of coffee in front of me and slid into the seat across from me.

"Esophagus cancer even though she never smoked a day in her life." His blue eyes filled with tears. "Seems unfair. Real unfair. It took her quickly." His gaze was fixed outside as if he was waiting for her to walk across the street. "She got a sore throat and we figured she had a cold. Nothing to worry about, but it just wouldn't go away. Then, one morning she woke up and she'd lost her voice. Totally gone. It was the worst thing that could've happened to her." He giggled like a school kid. "I forgot you're not from around here. She loved to talk. You couldn't shut her up so she ran to the doctor when she lost her voice. They diagnosed her with laryngitis."

He talked about his wife Lois for the next hour as I listened and drank two more cups of coffee. Her laryngitis didn't go away. She was diagnosed with throat cancer three weeks later and shortly after that her scans revealed she had cancer throughout her lymph nodes. She was dead within two months as it travelled quickly into her brain and overtook her. He'd held her hand as she took her final breath. He was weeping by the end of his tale.

"I just miss her so much. I spent forty-two years with her. Forty-two years, can you believe that? She was the love of my life. I don't know how to live without her." I reached out and put my hand on his. I hadn't touched another person in so long. His skin was leathery and soft underneath my fingertips. "Look at me. Going on and on. I just can't help myself."

"Who are you?" Not the question I wanted to ask. I tried again. "I mean, what's your name? I don't even know your name."

He slapped his hand on the table and threw his head back, roaring with laughter. The tears were gone as quickly as they'd come. "Oh my goodness. Now that's funny. Here I am telling you my whole life story and you don't even know my name. Frank. My name's Frank."

"Sarah."

He stuck his hand out. "Nice to meet you, Sarah." He stood, slowly lifting himself out of the seat. "I've held you up long enough. I'm sure you've got a



job to get to.”

“I don’t have a job.”

“Do you want one?” he asked.

“Huh, really? I... I... I’m not...”

His eyes smiled with his lips. “I could sure use the help. I’m a bit lost without Lois and all my teenagers are back at school. The last one left last week. It’s just me and the cook. Oh, and Meredith, but between you and me, she misses half her shifts. I can’t fire her, though. No way. Lois would roll over in her grave. She’s got two kids and her husband is in Iraq for another year.”

I said yes and agreed to start by the end of the week. I spent the rest of the day talking myself out of it and practicing what I would say to Frank when I told him I’d changed my mind, but I felt differently when I woke up the next morning. I couldn’t live off the money I’d taken with me much longer. It was going to run out no matter how deprived of a lifestyle I lived. Also, I hadn’t been without a job since I was nine-years-old and it might feel nice to do something normal again.

I felt the first tiny sparks of excitement rise in me, but they were quickly distinguished when it occurred to me I didn’t have anything to wear to work. I’d been wearing the same clothes over and over again, but none of them fit anymore because of all the weight I’d lost. My jeans were too big and I had to tie a rope around my waist to hold them up. My t-shirts that had been bright and fresh when I’d packed them were now worn and stained from being worn so much and washed in the sink. I couldn’t walk into my first day at a new job with baggy jeans tied with a rope and a dirty t-shirt.

The thought of driving into the city terrified me. What if the car triggered another breakdown? The darkness was only beginning to leave, but I didn’t have any other choice if I wanted to go to work. I forced myself to get in the car and was pummeled with waves of visceral memories of the throwing up and psychotic driving I’d done—how I’d gripped the steering wheel so tightly my knuckles turned white and my stick arms that were full of deep mangled scratches from the way I raked my nails across them. There were still blood stains on the steering wheel. The smell of insanity lingered in the seats.

I talked myself through the trip, telling myself it wouldn’t take long. The Target sign was my signal and I pulled off the freeway as soon as I spotted it. In my old life, I wouldn’t have dreamed of buying clothes at Target for a job

interview. Target was reserved for toiletries and things for the house, but it didn't matter in my new life. In this life, Target was perfect.

I didn't know my size anymore and was shocked to discover I was a two. I'd never been that skinny even as a teenager. It felt disorienting to look at myself in the mirror. I no longer cared what I looked like which was odd since I'd been obsessed with how I looked since I was thirteen. I'd grown into one of those women who refused to leave the house without make up, but I was no longer that woman. The towel in my bathroom still hung over my mirror but I was forced to look at myself as I stepped into the dressing room with full-sized mirrors on every wall. I'd spent so much time in my life preoccupied with losing weight and wishing I was skinnier, but being rail thin didn't look good on my body. My large bones stretched against my skin made me look even ganglier. The new slenderness made my hip bones stick out and look wider without the usual pounds to round them out. My face was the most unsettling. I reached my hand out to touch the glass, fingering my pointed nose and sunken in cheekbones, staring into my haunted eyes. Pale blue veins created a tangled web across my cheekbones. I looked like I'd returned from a concentration camp.

How was I going to be around people looking the way I did? It was bad enough that I didn't know how to interact with them anymore, but it made it even worse to look so frightening. I was going to need more than clothes that fit.

I found Supercuts behind Target. The woman who cut my hair into a cropped boyish cut tried her best to hide her questions when she looked at me, but I could see them swirling in her eyes. She gave up trying to make small talk with me after a few failed attempts and focused on fixing my hair.

Despite my new clothes and haircut, I still felt intensely self-conscious as I walked into the Little Crane on Friday. My shyness was acute. Frank has happy to see me.

“Hi, dear. Put your coat up and let me show you around.”

He led me into the back, pointing out the freezers before introducing me to a short, bald man stacking dishes and wrapping silverware.

“Ben, this is Sarah. The one I was telling you about.”

Ben turned around and stuck out his hand covered in tattoos all the way up his arm and disappearing underneath his shirt sleeve. “Hey,” he said. His handshake was firm. He barely glanced at me before returning to his task.

“Ben is a man of all trades. He does our dishes and fixes anything that breaks down around here. Don’t know what I’d do without him.”

Ben turned his head and flashed him a gold-toothed smile. “Thanks, man.”

Frank patted him on the back. He ushered me to toward the grill where another man was scampering back and forth between pots on the burners. He motioned for me to come closer and whispered, “Don’t let Ben scare you. He’s a bit rough around the edges. He’s had a hard life, but he’s got a big heart. It just takes him a while to warm up.”

I nodded.

“That’s Michael.” He pointed to the cook. “He’s been with us since he was a teenager. Started out chopping our veggies for Lois and now he knows all our secret recipes. He’s added a few of his own over the years.”

He walked over to him and tapped him on the back. Michael turned around and began signing. I noticed the large hearing aids plugged into both his ears. Frank signed back, pointing and gesturing to me. Michael smiled widely and walked over to me. I expected a handshake and was taken aback when he reached around to give me a tight bear hug. He squeezed while I stood with my arms at my sides. He smelled like grease and French fries.

Frank showed me the workings of the kitchen but assured me my responsibilities wouldn’t include doing much in the kitchen except bringing Michael orders and helping with clean up when Ben wasn’t around. He chattered away as he explained things.

When we got back up to the front of the restaurant, a thin woman was busy counting money into the cash register. She turned around when she heard us. The bags under her eyes were hard to miss, dark circles encasing her blue eyes. Her nose was red like she had a cold or had been crying. Her hair was tied up in a bun and her navy apron was fastened around her waist.

“I’m Meredith. You must be Sarah.” Her voice had an edge to it.

I nodded.

“Meredith’s going to show you the ropes.” He touched her arm. “Go easy on her, okay? Take it slow. You’ve been here a long time, but try to remember what it was like when you first started.”

Meredith rolled her eyes. “Come on.” She moved toward the tables. “I said come on.”

“Oh.... I.... I’m sorry. I d-didn’t realize you—”

She was already moving through the café barking directions at me and I struggled to keep up. Her lips were moving at a different pace than her words as if I was watching a dubbed film. I tried to follow her instructions, but she made me nervous. She wasn't much older than me, but I felt like an incompetent child trying to fill all the condiments on the table the way she did. I fumbled and dropped things, turning bright red as I bent to pick them up time and time again. She barely gave me a chance to finish one task before she moved onto the next.

I was fighting back tears by the time my shift ended.

"Great first day, kiddo." Frank said as I was putting my coat on to leave.

He was lying and we both knew it. I hadn't done anything right. I'd dropped more plates than I'd carried. I mixed up most of the orders Meredith gave me. I didn't work the cash register right and when I did, I gave people back the wrong change. Meredith didn't even try to hide her frustration with me and huffed exaggerated sighs all day. I wanted to tell her I used to supervise over two hundred employees, but the sentence was frozen inside me along with all my other words. I was as mute as Michael was deaf. I wasn't sure if I'd come back. I didn't know if I could handle a repeat performance. I bit my lip to keep from crying in front of Frank. Bursting into tears would be one too many humiliations for the day.

I came back the next day despite my horrible first one and things started to get easier as the days wore on. I took responsibility for the simple tasks while Meredith handled waiting on the customers. I began to relax a little without her watching everything I did. I became skilled at filling all the condiments on the tables. I took great care and focus as I counted out the sugar packets in each tray making sure they lined up perfectly. I scrubbed the tables and chairs after customers finished their meals making sure they sparkled. I bussed their dirty dishes into the back, scraping the food into the trash, and soaking them in hot water to make Ben's job easier. I made sure the coffee was always fresh and the sugar bowls never ran low. I did the same things over and over again, but I liked the vain repetition.

I was surprised to discover The Little Crane was a busy place. I wasn't sure if people came for the food or to see Frank. Everyone knew and loved him as if he was the town's grandfather. He wandered from table to table asking people about their lives, remembering every detail. He spoke of Lois frequently and shed tears without reserve no matter who he was talking to. People hugged and patted him, understanding that he needed to talk about her

and many of them shared their own stories about her. Her presence was still alive in the restaurant even though she was gone. I felt like I knew her.

After a few weeks, Frank began sending me out to wait on customers when Meredith was gone. Unlike Frank, I was shy and uncomfortable with the customers. It was difficult to make eye contact with them and I had to force myself to maintain it by counting to three before I looked away. I stumbled over my words, stammering and stuttering as I learned to take people's orders. I'd turned into a nail biter and gnawed at my nails as if they were a delicacy while I waited for them to make up their minds. It was hard to be still. I fidgeted with my apron or compulsively arranged the silverware on the table. I felt like I'd run a marathon by the time I was done waiting on them.

I returned home from my shifts exhausted. I'd fix myself dinner and then shower before falling into bed. Working had given me my first sense of normalcy and routine, but it had also given me the gift of sleep. When I laid my head on my pillow after work, I slept peacefully through the night like a regular person—someone I never thought I'd be again.

## Chapter Fifteen

They filed in every Friday night at seven o'clock and their meeting began at seven-thirty. They were some of our regulars. It hadn't taken me long to identify the regulars. The Friday night group was our largest group besides the Sunday church group. However, they couldn't have been more different than the Sunday crew. The Sunday churchgoers all looked, dressed, and talked alike as they walked down the street for brunch after Sunday morning worship, but the Friday night individuals were a mismatched bunch.

There were ten of them and I couldn't imagine how they all knew each other since they looked so different. They weren't even the same age. The youngest one looked like he couldn't have been more than nineteen. He dressed in all black complete with matching dark fingernail polish and his eyes nervously flitted about the room whereas the oldest one looked over sixty and dressed in a three piece suit as if he'd come straight from the office. The other men were the same contradictions. One messy and unkempt like he'd just rolled out of bed before he came and another in his forties perfectly manicured and reeking like cologne. There were only two women. Both were overweight, but that was the only similarity they shared. The blond wore long, draping skirts and oversized t-shirts with hair that looked like it hadn't been combed all week. The other was dark haired and covered in tattoos from head-to-toe. She bore the name of someone's initials tattooed across her neck whereas the blond wore a cross around hers.

Each Friday, they greeted each other with hugs, squeezing tightly, and beating each other on the back like they hadn't seen each other in a long time. They pulled two tables together in the back corner of the restaurant. They drank a lot of coffee during their meetings and my job was to make sure their pots stayed full. Sometimes they didn't order food, but Frank didn't mind because they were some of his favorite people.

Frank loved everyone, but he had his favorites. He adored the knitting group ladies who came in every Tuesday at two o'clock for pie and coffee after their weekly meeting where they knitted baby caps for newborns that

they donated to the hospital in the city every month. They were three little old ladies in their eighties who were proud of the fact they'd been living without their husbands for over a decade and were still doing fine on their own. I wasn't sure if the ladies had always been Frank's favorite or if they'd only recently earned the status given that he was a new widower. Either way, he slid into their booth and chatted and laughed with them until they were finished.

It didn't take me long to figure out the Friday night group was having a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. They held hands and recited the Serenity Prayer. Then, they went around after the prayer with the tell-tale sign of saying their name followed by the "I'm an alcoholic" proclamation.

"I don't get it," I said to Frank one Friday night after they'd left and we were washing the coffee pots and mugs together. Ben never worked on Friday nights so I'd started staying late to help Frank clean up. I washed while he dried.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I thought Alcoholics Anonymous was supposed to be anonymous. Doesn't it bother them that they're in a public restaurant talking about being alcoholics?" Frank's gentle and calm disposition gave me the confidence to speak without stumbling over my words. It was a relief to have fluid conversations with someone again.

His shoulders shook with laughter. "Honey, everyone in this town knew they were alcoholics long before they started going to meetings. Heck, I think they have the meetings here so people know they're still sober. You know Gus?"

"Which one is he?"

"He's the skinniest one. Looks so skinny he might fall through his own asshole?"

I laughed, knowing who he was talking about right away—the tall skinny guy who wore the same clothes every week. He was also the quietest. I rarely heard him talk or smile and he didn't join in on the laughter they shared.

"We used to call him Dewey. That was his nickname for the longest time. Know why?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"We called him Dewey because he got so many DUI's. Like five. They finally took away his driver's license but you know what that son of a gun did?" He didn't wait for me to answer. "He started driving his dang tractor!"

Right down main street—if you can imagine that. A big ole’ tractor rolling down the road. Cops didn’t know what to do about it. They even held a town meeting about it to figure out how to handle it, but it wasn’t long before it was taken out of their hands. He drove that tractor straight into a telephone pole on Ninth Avenue on Christmas Eve. Messed it up real bad.”

“Was that what got him sober?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Not sure. He disappeared for a few weeks after that. No one knows where he went or what he did. One day he just showed up at the meeting, said he was done drinking, and he’s never had a drink since.”

“What about Joe?” I asked.

He was the only one whose name I remembered because he was the kind of man every woman couldn’t help but notice. He was strapping and well built, thick in all the right places. He came to the meetings dressed in tattered jeans and shirts spotted with dust and paint, but still looked good despite his work clothes.

Frank’s eyes filled with sadness. “That there is a tragedy.”

I waited for him to go on. I knew if I waited long enough, he would. Frank loved to talk and he didn’t like to leave any story unfinished, but this time he was silent, staring into space like he was watching a private memory.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Joe was our boy. Man, that kid could throw a football. He was the best dang quarterback Triton’s ever seen. Everyone loved to watch him play. The stands used to be packed. They moved him onto varsity when he was in eighth grade. Eighth grade, can you believe that? He was starting every game by ninth. Led us to four state championships and made All-State Quarterback three years in a row. Amazing.” His chest puffed with pride as if we were speaking about his own son.

“That’s pretty impressive.” I had no idea what it meant to be an all-state quarterback, but he had to be good if he’d won high school championships. “What happened to him?”

“He went to Notre Dame on a full scholarship after high school. The Eagles drafted him his senior year. He looked real promising his rookie year.” He was interrupted by the bell jingling at the front door and a family of four walking in. He never got to finish his story about Joe, but I wanted to know how it ended. What tragedy brought him into AA?



I was familiar with AA. Every treatment center Rachel was at instructed her about the importance of going to AA meetings if she wanted to stay sober once she got out, but she never went because most of the time she never made it through treatment sober. She either used while she was there or checked herself out early before her days were up.

I'd been in family therapy meetings with her and my mom while she was in treatment, but those meetings weren't anything like the Friday night AA meetings. The treatment meetings had a drug counselor who led all the meetings and dictated what happened. The Friday night AA meetings didn't seem to have any kind of leader from what I could tell. A different person started the meeting every week and then people took turns sharing in no particular order.

I was intrigued by the people in the meetings. I gravitated toward their table and strained to hear what they shared with each other. I refilled their coffee mugs even though they didn't need it and busied myself cleaning the tables next to them, hoping to catch bits and pieces of the things they talked about. If they noticed my hovering, they didn't say anything. My ears perked up when one of the women began talking about her kids.

"I got to see my kids this weekend. We had so much fun, but I wanted to drink as soon as they left." Her hair was in dire need of a highlight job as her dark roots were longer than her blond ends. She wore long red acrylic nails that she tapped on the table as she talked. "What kind of a mom gets her kids taken away from her? I know that's what everyone thinks when they look at me. I know because I think it too. But you know what's crazy—I know I'm not a good mom. I'm just not. I thought it was because of the alcohol, but I haven't had a drink in 182 days. I'm still as shitty of a mom now as I was then."

My breath caught in my throat and my stomach dropped. How could she admit those things openly? I'd never heard anyone confess they were a bad mother. I thought back to my mom's night out dinners and functions I'd attended with Robin. Everyone always spoke about their kids in a favorable light and competed with each other to prove they loved their kid the most. Even when they mentioned something negative about them, they quickly made a loving remark to prove they were a good mom. I scanned the room, studying the faces of everyone around the table to see how they were judging her, but nobody seemed moved. They all continued to stare at her, nodding their heads, and waiting for her to go on.

“That’s all. I’ll pass,” she said.

“I’ll go next.” The woman next to her spoke up. “I’m Arlene and I’m an alcoholic.”

“Hi, Arlene.” They all responded in unison like a perfectly choreographed choir.

“I know what you mean, Mary. I’m the same way. Don’t beat yourself up. I still have my kids and I look at them wondering what the hell God was thinking when he gave them to me. I should’ve started saving for their therapy fund when they were born.” Everyone around the table burst out laughing. It was a few moments before their laughter died down and she could continue. “But seriously, I just do the best I can. I mean, I figure I’m doing better than my parents. I don’t beat them. I mean, don’t get me wrong, sometimes I’d love to smack them, but I don’t. And they do some messed up shit. Seriously messed up. Like the other day, my youngest got suspended from school for the third time this year and comes home thinking he’s going to sit on the couch all day and play video games—”

“Sarah? Sarah?” I still wasn’t used to being called Sarah. “Table six needs you,” Frank said, motioning to the other side of the room. I was embarrassed he’d caught me eavesdropping. I scurried away to the other table, staring at my feet, and avoiding eye contact.

## Chapter Sixteen

“Hey.” I felt a hand on my back and jumped.

I turned to see Joe standing in front of me with a sheepish grin on his face. “Sorry to scare you.”

I flushed. “You didn’t. It’s fine.”

What was he doing here at noon? He only came in on Friday nights and it was Tuesday. The restaurant was empty besides me and Ben. Frank had gone to the bank and to do a few other errands. Meredith had been out all week. She’d been spending more and more time away as I grew confident waiting on tables. There was something going on in her life. The bags under her eyes were ever present and her face was lined with stress. Whatever it was, she kept it to herself.

“You know, you can come to our meetings if you want.” The grin still hadn’t left his face.

“I... uh.... I’m not sure-uh, what—”

“I’ve noticed you hanging around on Fridays. Some people are scared to join our meetings and I just wanted to let you know you’re more than welcome to pull up a seat.” His eyes were a deep brown with gold specks and framed with long lashes any girl would kill for.

I felt the heat rising in my cheeks. Had it been that obvious?

“I’m not an alcoholic,” I said.

“Really?” He raised his eyebrows, studying my face carefully. I looked away and began busying myself wiping down the counter, chasing away imaginary spots. “How long have you been the new girl in town?”

“I’m not new.”

The space between us was too close. I could feel the heat radiating from his body. I wanted him to go away and leave me alone.

“Oh, I hadn’t seen you around before. Where are you from?”

“Out West.” It was my standard response. “Can I help you with something?”

“I’m here to pick up a pie for my mom. Blueberry. The last name is Ramsey.”

“I’ll be right back.”

I couldn’t get to the back of the restaurant fast enough. My heart was racing. What was wrong with me? I couldn’t handle someone asking a few questions about me? But it was more than that. He’d caught me. He’d noticed me lurking in the shadows driven to find out more about the strange people who shared their secrets with each other in public. A few weeks ago, I’d heard a man talk about choking his wife in a fit of rage while he was drunk. He shared it as casually as if he was describing the kind of car he was going to buy. He went on to tell how he’d made his amends to her by attending anger management classes for the first year of his sobriety. It’d been ten years since he’d had a drink.

I fumbled through the products in the back, suddenly forgetting everything I’d learned in the last few months like it was my first time in the kitchen. I forced myself to take a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves. I found the pie he’d ordered and brought it back up front wishing someone else could help him, but Frank still wasn’t back.

I walked up to the counter and handed him the pie, keeping my eyes down. His eyes bore into me. I fumbled with the cash he handed me, dropping the quarters onto the floor, and bumping my head on the counter as I bent to pick them up. I deposited his coins in his hand.

“Thanks for your help.” His smile was gone, replaced with an expression I couldn’t read.

“You’re welcome,” I said.

He turned to leave and as his hand was on the door, he turned back around to face me. “Just in case you’re interested, we don’t always hold our meetings here. We hold them on Mondays and Wednesdays in the church basement too. They’re at seven-thirty. See you around.”

I didn’t realize I’d been holding my breath until he walked out the door and I let it all out. I was embarrassed to be found out. It was only a matter of time before someone noticed but I was secretly hoping nobody would. I didn’t want to stop listening to them. I was fascinated by how they shared. There was something so comforting and freeing about listening to them. It was unbelievable how open they were with each other. They even laughed at things that were humiliating like when Arlene described taking her clothes off in the middle of her yard, dancing around naked to music that wasn’t

playing, and inviting the mailman into her house to have sex. He'd taken her up on her invitation but she'd passed out when she reached her bedroom. They laughed as if she was a stand-up comedian rather than a stay-at-home mom telling stories about her drunken escapades.

Nobody cared what anybody else said. I'd never met people who were so non-judgmental. Lots of people professed to be open-minded and not judge other people, but it was something people said because it sounded good rather than the truth. But no matter what awful thing people shared during the meeting, they still treated each other the same way after the meeting ended as they did before it began. Their enthusiasm never faltered.

I'd always thought AA was about quitting drinking, but it was much more than that. They were not only united in their goal to stop drinking, but were equally joined in trying to live a better life. Most of the meetings were centered on trying to make sense and create meaning from the mistakes they'd made. They exposed all their shameful secrets. I was in awe of how they were unashamed of themselves and the things they'd done. I couldn't help but wonder what they'd say if I told them I'd killed a man. Would they still laugh? Would they hug me the way they hugged each other?

I didn't want to admit it to Joe, but I longed to go to one of their meetings rather than listen on the sidelines. I wanted to pull up a chair at their table and immerse myself in their group, but I wasn't an alcoholic. I hadn't had a drink since the day in the hotel and was never going to drink again. Not a drop, but my drinking was what plagued me the most about what I'd done to Phil. Would I have done it if I was sober? I'd never imagined I was capable of murder. The only rationalization I had for my actions was that they weren't mine. It was as if another person had committed the crime because I was drunk.

I still didn't know how I'd killed him. For months, I'd wracked my brain trying to fill in the missing holes and gaps, but there was nothing there. I used to lay in bed at night reliving that horrible day and the moments leading up to it. I watched the tape replay itself over and over again, but it returned empty each time. I didn't have any memory of how I'd killed him, but there were pieces of the puzzle I could put together without them by using common sense.

Phil was much larger than me and towered over six feet tall. He worked out for an hour every morning before work and had the strong confident muscles of an athlete. There was no way I could overpower him physically. If

we'd gotten into a fight, I was certain I'd be the one lying on the floor in a pool of blood rather than him. Even if I'd survived the fight, there would've been marks all over my body, but there weren't. My only injuries were the slices in my hands from the broken glass of the bottle and the gash on the inside of my cheek. The only logical conclusion was that I'd attacked him by surprise. My guess was that he'd walked through my hotel door and I'd hit him over the head with my bottle, but I hadn't stopped there. I'd pummeled his face with glass and beaten his body with the lamp. I'd even stomped on him. I still saw his face every night before I fell asleep.

What did the people from AA see before they fell asleep? Were they haunted by the ghosts from their past? How did they let go of the sins they'd committed? The only way for me to find out was to attend their meetings. What would it feel like to sit in one of their meetings and hear all of it? I had to know.

Monday night at seven o'clock, I walked down the wooden stairs to the church basement. I headed straight for the table with coffee and grabbed a cup of the thick black liquid that would make my stomach ache in protest later, but I didn't care. It felt good to have something in my hands. The room was filled with unfamiliar faces. I didn't recognize anyone from the Little Crane. Aluminum chairs were arranged in a circle in the center of the room and I made my way toward them, keeping my head down. I slid into the chair closest to the door in case I had to make a quick exit.

"Hi, I'm Joyce." She was a plump woman with Santa Claus cheeks and a round nose. Her hair was pulled into pigtails hanging loosely at her shoulders even though she had to be in her forties. Her skin was pale, but fresh and clean. "Welcome."

Before I could protest, she pulled me into a hug, smashing me against her large breasts as she wrapped her arms around me. "You stick with me. You know what they say about the men."

"What do they say about the men?" I asked.

She pulled back. "Men want your ass, but the women will save it." She tossed her head back laughing. I smiled.

"What's your name?"

"Sarah."

"How long you been sober?"

"Um.... almost a year, I guess."

"You new in town or just visiting from the city?"

“I’ve been here awhile.”

“Where do you stay?”

It was beginning to feel like an interrogation and I second-guessed my decision to come. “Down by the lake.”

She patted my leg like we were old friends. “I was just as paranoid as you are when I first came. I didn’t want to answer anyone’s questions either. Now, you can’t shut me up. You’ll see. Sobriety changes everything.”

It seemed like hours before the meeting got started, but it finally did. The room was filled with about twenty people. I scanned the room and didn’t see anyone from the Friday night meeting. This group was as mismatched as the Friday night group. The normal social barriers didn’t exist. They acted like one large family despite their differences. An elderly woman with round glasses perched on the tip of her nose brought the meeting to order.

“I’m Dawn and I’m an alcoholic.”

The room hushed immediately.

“Hi, Dawn,” they responded together.

She began reading something called the Preamble. I was still too anxious to pay attention to what was being read. I didn’t know why I was so afraid when I’d been looking forward to coming all day. Someone else read *How It Works* and I tried hard to focus. *How it Works* laid out the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. It was the first time I’d heard them and was surprised that only the first step mentioned alcohol. The rest of the steps were all about God. I didn’t know how I felt about God, but I was pretty sure he hated me. We’d gone to church when I was little but my mom quit bringing us once we moved to Florida.

“Are there any newcomers, guests, or anyone here for the first time?” Dawn asked.

My armpits started to sweat as two people raised their hands. They stated their name followed by the declaration of being an alcoholic which prompted everyone in the room to say hi back to them. It was just like I’d seen it happen in the movies.

Joyce poked my leg. “Go ahead. Introduce yourself. That’s you,” she whispered loud enough for everyone else to hear.

My face flushed with heat. All eyes were on me. I’d wanted to sit in the meeting and be a silent observer. This wasn’t part of my plan. My heart thudded. I looked toward the door, estimating how many steps it would take to make it there. She patted my arm this time.

“I’m Sarah.” My voice was barely a whisper.

“Hi, Sarah. Welcome,” they all chanted in a sing-song voice.

Nobody cared that I didn’t call myself an alcoholic. They moved on to reading announcements and I breathed a sigh of relief that the attention shifted away from me. Announcements were followed by Dawn reading a story out of what she referred to as the “Big Book.” I hadn’t expected so much reading. They didn’t read anything at the Friday night meetings, but maybe this was a different kind of meeting. I hadn’t heard anyone read out loud since I was in elementary school. She closed the blue book, resting it on her lap and folded her hands on top of it.

“I’m so grateful to be here tonight. Two years ago the doctors didn’t think I’d make it. They told my husband I would die if I didn’t quit drinking. See, I’m one of the hopeless alcoholics that they talk about in the big book. I’ve never been able to stop or control my drinking no matter how hard I’ve tried. And believe me, I’ve tried everything imaginable. At one point, my husband dumped every bottle of alcohol we had in the house and wouldn’t give me any money. He was sure if I didn’t have any alcohol or money to buy it that I would have no choice but to be sober. But, like you all know, nobody can make us stop drinking. We find a way and I did. I drank an entire bottle of mouthwash. I woke up in the ER with tubes down my throat.”

To my surprise, everyone laughed even Dawn. I was horrified. How could someone drink mouthwash? The thought of it was repulsive.

“I came into AA kicking and screaming. Really, it was only to save my marriage because after the mouthwash, my husband said he’d leave me if I didn’t get sober. Today, I’m so glad I did. I have a life I never dreamed was possible. I’ve gained my dignity and self-respect back. My children no longer look at me like they’re disgusted with me. My husband and I are more in love than we’ve ever been. I owe it all to the program of Alcoholics Anonymous. I had to do more than just not drink, though. I did what they told me to do—I went to meetings, got a sponsor, and worked the steps. Tonight I’d like to talk about the first step. I’d like to hear your experience, strength, and hope about powerlessness and unmanageability. Thanks.”

Everyone clapped and began raising their hands to volunteer to share. I learned the first step was about admitting powerlessness over alcohol and that it made your life unmanageable. I listened as one-by-one they went around the circle and shared about the devastation alcohol had created in their lives. The stories were tragic and heart-wrenching. They poured their souls onto the



carpet without reserve. I hung on every word. Each tale ended in gratitude toward the AA program and the people in it. They all spoke about how their lives had been transformed and how they'd cleaned up the wreckage of their past. It was inspiring.

Once everyone shared, they all stood with an unspoken understanding that the meeting had ended. I stood along with them. They all joined hands and I placed my clammy hands into those next to me. They recited the Lord's Prayer. As soon as our hands dropped, I grabbed my purse and headed for the door. I didn't want to get cornered by any of them.

As I walked to my car, I thought about what it meant to be an alcoholic. I didn't have what they had. I'd never been physically addicted to alcohol or experienced any kind of withdrawal. I'd always been able to stop. I didn't have the history of setting out to have one drink and ending up on a wild drinking spree. I'd controlled my drinking. I knew every sip I took. They loved the taste of alcohol, but I hated it.

I wasn't like them in so many different ways, yet alcohol had destroyed my life. I didn't think it was possible to be an alcoholic after one bad incident even if it had catastrophic consequences, but if I wasn't an alcoholic, then what was I?

## Chapter Seventeen

I came back for the meeting on Wednesday night. This time I recognized Sue, Arlene, and Gus. Gus gave me his customary grunt. Sue and Arlene hugged me.

“Glad you’re here,” they said.

The meeting on Wednesday was much smaller than the one on Monday. There were only six other people besides myself. The chairs were arranged in a circle much larger than we could fill. They opened with the Serenity Prayer just like they had before. The format was the same. This time, I paid more attention as they read and tried to absorb it all, especially when they read *How it Works*.

“Tonight, the topic I’ve picked is honesty. It’s something I’ve really been struggling with lately. See, ever since I’ve gotten sober, my wife is obsessed with knowing everything I did while I was drinking. I want to tell her everything, but my sponsor says I’d only be doing it to get rid of my guilt. He says I can’t tell her things that would hurt her. But, I’m torn. I really want my marriage to work. I did so much damage when I was drinking. I just want to make it better.”

The man with the ripped jeans and Metallica t-shirt went on to share how he’d slept with prostitutes while he was drinking and he’d had to pay for one of them to get an abortion. He cried openly about his regret and the man sitting next to him put his arm around him, holding him as he fell apart.

I watched everyone’s reactions. He’d just announced he’d gotten a prostitute pregnant, but the women all looked at him with deep compassion. How could they do that? Who were these people? Sue and Arlene were both married. Didn’t it make them angry to hear what this man had done to his wife? I shifted through my emotions, trying to decide how I felt, but couldn’t decide.

Everyone followed his lead and shared their own stories of betrayal and dishonesty. Rather than judge him, they connected in a personal way by relating it to something they’d done in their life. Not everyone had slept with

a prostitute, but their tales were just as awful and painful. One had stolen money from his business and lost his job once he'd been found out. His family had been evicted from their house since they could no longer pay the rent. A woman had slept with her teenage son's best friend while she was drinking and bought him alcohol. Another man talked about how he beat his children but had no recollection of it the next day. I studied them like a scientist to see some crack in their faces, revealing their true feelings, but couldn't find any. Their expressions held no contempt or judgement and looked genuine. No one leaned over to whisper judgement in the ear of the person sitting next to them or exchanged looks barbed with hidden meaning.

Since the meeting was so small, everyone got a chance to speak. They went around the circle and it wasn't long before it was my turn. I shifted in my seat.

"I don't really have anything to say," I said in a soft voice. It wasn't the truth. I had a lot to say, but everything I had to offer was a question. I wanted to understand how they went on with their lives after they'd done such terrible things. How'd they let it go? How'd they speak about it with such ease?

"That's okay. Just say, you pass," the man next to me said.

"I pass."

I didn't run out of the meeting as fast as I had before. Instead, I helped them fold up the chairs and stack them against the walls. A few of them clustered outside of the church smoking cigarettes. Arlene was one of them.

"Hey girl, how are you?" she asked.

"I'm okay," I said even though I wasn't sure I was ever going to be okay again.

"Do you need a ride?" She blew her smoke out slowly.

"No. I'm good. Thanks."

"Well, keep coming back, it gets easier." The two women behind her nodded their heads in eager agreement.

I was nervous on Friday night because I didn't know what to do during their meeting at the Little Crane. I was afraid they'd expect me to sit with them or acknowledge I'd been to their meetings and I didn't want Frank to know I'd been going. I was afraid of the way he'd look at me if he thought I was one of them even though the group was his favorite. As I was bending to pour the second round of coffee, Mary motioned for me to come close.

"Don't worry, we're not going to break your anonymity," she whispered.

“Thanks.”

I longed to sit with them during their meeting and it took all my willpower to stay away from their table. I was developing a strange sort of kinship with them. I’d only been to a few meetings but I knew more intimate details of their lives than I did of people I’d been friends with for twenty years. Their love for each other was genuine and real. It was impossible to not want to be a part of it.

“They’re a nice group of folks, huh?” Frank said after they’d left and we were stacking the chairs on top of the tables getting ready to close.

“They really are.”

“I just wish my son would give ‘em another try.”

“You have a son?” I’d always assumed him and Lois were childless. He never spoke about children or grandchildren and there weren’t any pictures of kids on the walls.

“Yep. Frank Junior. We call him Junior. Haven’t spoken to him in over two years now. He doesn’t even know his mama died.”

I placed my hand on his back. It still felt strange to touch people. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, honey. It’s been a long road. Something I had to accept years ago. He started doing them damn drugs when he was sixteen and they took over his life. Stole from me and his mama. Broke into the restaurant too many times to count. I didn’t have no choice but to call the police on him. I didn’t want to, but I had to. Couldn’t just let him keep robbing me dry.”

His words brought back memories of Rachel. I’d done such a good job putting her out of my life that most people didn’t know I had a sister. I didn’t talk about her and there weren’t any pictures of her in my house—not that I had any pictures to display. We hadn’t had a picture taken together since I was twelve.

Rachel had been my hero and it broke my heart when she got on drugs. She turned on my mom first, but I’d never expected her to turn on me. She’d been my best friend and closest confidante until the night I caught her smoking weed in the closet of the room we shared. I’d told my mom about it when she got home from work and Rachel freaked out on me later.

“How could you tell her, you little rat?”

“Because you’re doing drugs. I don’t want you to die.” I didn’t know anyone who did drugs. The only information I had about them was what’d they’d taught us in our DARE classes at school and every message I’d heard

was that they ended in death. Finding Rachel with drugs was like finding her with a loaded gun.

“It’s weed, you moron. It’s not even real drugs.”

She pulled away from me after that night. It wasn’t long before she was stealing my babysitting money and the cash my mom tucked underneath her mattress for emergencies. She denied taking it even though we knew she had. It felt like such a betrayal and paranoia began to reign in our house as we walked on eggshells around her. My mom kept my babysitting money in an envelope in her dresser to keep it safe and started locking her bedroom door whenever she wasn’t in it.

I had no idea Rachel snuck out of our house at night until I was awakened by the sound of her stumbling through the window, crashing her head on the nightstand next to her bed.

I jumped out of bed, rushing toward her crumpled body on the floor. “Are you okay?”

She looked up at me and I looked down into the face of a stranger. Her eyes bulged maniacally out of her head. She frantically worked her jaw back and forth and her eyes flitted around the room in quick, jerky movements. She jumped up and began pacing the room, mumbling things I didn’t understand under her breath.

“Are you okay? Do you want me to get Mom?” I asked.

“Shit, fuck, no. Just like, you know. Chill. It’s all good. It’s really all good. Fuck. I mean well, no worries. I was just telling him the same thing.” Her speech was rushed and hurried, pressured like she had to spit the words out as fast as she could or something bad would happen if she didn’t.

“I’m going to get Mom. You’re freaking me out.”

She leapt from across the room. “Don’t fuckin say a word!” She grabbed both of my arms, pulling me close to her, her words came out as a hiss. “If you tell her, they’re going to know I’m here. They can’t know I’m here.”

“Who? What—”

She dropped my arms, rushed to our window. “Shh.... be quiet. Did you hear that?” Her voice was a whisper now. She was on her knees, peering out the window. I moved to kneel beside her. I peeked over the window, searching for any sign of people in our yard.

“There’s nobody out there. You’re fine. Let’s just go to bed.” I pulled on her arm.

She jerked it away. “I’m not fine. Never fine. Nothing’s fine. Everything’s fucked up. Do you know? Ohmigod, you know. You know. Shit.”

I was panicked and didn’t know what to do. I stood and she pulled me back down to the floor quickly. “They’re going to see you!”

“You’re totally freaking me out. I’m getting Mom,” I said.

“No!” she screamed and slapped me across the face.

I brought my hand up to my cheek, tears welling in my eyes. I’d never been hit before.

“I gotta go. I can’t stay here.”

She pulled the window back up and hoisted herself out. She didn’t look back as she ran out into the night. I rushed downstairs to alert my mom she was gone. She stayed gone three days that time. It was the beginning of a pattern. Each time she left she stayed gone longer until eventually she didn’t come home at all. My mom never would’ve admitted it, but part of her was relieved she left because it kept her from having to call the police on her for stealing from us. I was devastated. We’d been surviving the changes in our life together and she’d left me to battle them alone.

“He got hooked on that crystal meth. You heard of it?” Frank’s voice brought me back to the present.

“Yeah, my sister was on it too.”

I couldn’t believe I’d told him. I didn’t tell anyone about Rachel. It’d taken years before I told David about her and Robin only found out about her because she’d showed up strung out at our house once when she’d come home with me on spring break. It was easier to pretend she didn’t exist than to admit she was alive and wanted nothing to do with me.

“That shit is the doggone devil.” Frank’s eyes were on fire. “I don’t even know who Junior is anymore or where he is. I only know when I get the call from whatever jailhouse he’s in. Can I tell you a secret?”

I nodded.

“I like when he goes to jail. Sounds terrible, doesn’t it? But at least when he’s locked up, I know he’s safe and not gonna die.”

“My mom says the same thing about my sister.” She was never mad when Rachel called her from jail. Each time she told me how happy she was that

Rachel was in jail because she knew she was okay. “Has he ever gotten clean?”

“A few times, but never more than a couple of months. We refinanced the house to pay for treatment once. Never did much good. He left before his days were up. One time when he got clean, Joe worked with him every day trying to help him stay sober. Picked him up in the morning. Gave him work on his construction crew and took him to meetings every night. He drove him all over the place making sure he got to meetings. Then, one morning I got up and he was gone again. Just left in the middle of the night. No idea what set him off. He was just gone. Didn’t see him for over a year.”

“Where’s he at now?” I asked.

Frank shrugged. “No idea. Last I heard from him was two years ago when he was locked up in Chicago. He might be dead. It’s so hard when he’s missing. There’s no end. You’ve got no idea how to feel. Lois used to say she’d wish he’d die because then at least she could grieve for the son she’d lost.”

His words hit like a ton of bricks in my gut. I spent so much time thinking about David, but never thought about my mom. Everyone she’d loved had disappeared on her. Vanished. What was it like for her to live with a family of ghosts? I’d spent my life trying not to hurt her any more than she’d already been hurt, but I’d done the same thing everyone else had done. It’d never occurred to me someone might think I was dead. David probably wished I was, but what about my mom?

She’d been so devastated when my father left and even though she tried to pretend Rachel’s leaving was different, I heard her crying behind her locked bedroom door. Was she still crying for me? How could I be so selfish?

“Would you want to know if he was dead?”

“Yes. Absolutely. Then, this whole thing would finally be over. It could just be done. No more thinking about it. No more wondering. No more worrying.”

“Wouldn’t you miss him?” I asked.

“Honey, I’ve been missing my boy for over twenty years. He’s been gone.”

I felt the tears rise in my throat and swallowed them back down with force. I couldn’t let Frank see me cry. As soon as we finished cleaning, I hung up my apron and left. I waited until I was past the end of the street and then took off running. I ran all the way home, smashed through the door, and

threw myself on the bed sobbing. I knew who I was. I was a monster. I cried myself to sleep for the thousandth time.



## Chapter Eighteen

When I arrived to the meeting on Monday, the chairs were arranged in rows unlike their usual circle. I took a seat in the back row. I'd barely slept all weekend. My thoughts were running wild about all the people I'd hurt and searching for a way to make it better. I'd thought about calling in sick to my shift yesterday, but couldn't bring myself to do that to Frank. Meredith did it all the time, but he'd grown to count on me showing up for my shifts.

"Hey stranger."

Joe slid into the seat next to me. My heart started pounding in my chest. "Hey."

"I'm glad you came. It's a great speaker tonight," he said.

"A speaker?" I asked.

"Oh yeah, you're new, huh? Sometimes we have a speaker that comes and shares their story. Usually it's somebody we get from out of town because we all know each other's stories here. Christ, we've heard them a million times." He laughed.

"Oh, I didn't know there were those kind of meetings."

"I don't know whose speaking tonight. Dick picked him. Someone from the cities. I guess he's just in town visiting. Might be good. Might be terrible. Who knows. You never know what you're going to get when it comes to speakers." The faint smell of Cool Water wafted up my nose. My first boyfriend used to wear Cool Water. Maybe that was why his presence was so unnerving. "I knew you were one of us. How long you been coming to meetings?"

"I-I'm just.... it's.... uh...."

I was torn. I wasn't one of them, yet I was, but how did I explain that to him? I liked that he referred to me as being one of them. Was I pathetic for feeling proud to be a part of a group of alcoholics?

"Don't worry. You don't need to explain yourself. Just keep coming back," he said.

“Thanks.” I fidgeted with my purse, pretending to look for something important buried inside it so he wouldn’t say anything else to me. It wasn’t long before the meeting started and the speaker took center stage in front of us. He stood behind a wooden podium they’d borrowed from the sanctuary upstairs.

It was a man in his late fifties who looked like he might have been a linebacker at one point, but unlike Joe, all his muscles had turned to fat. He had huge biceps but a round belly protruded over his pants. His hair was long and pulled back into a ponytail flowing down his back. I couldn’t help but wonder if he kept his hair long to hide the fact he was losing it on top. He launched into describing what his life used to be like, what had happened to get him sober, and what his life was like now. I was fascinated.

He talked about hating his father because he’d left him when he was only a year old. He’d walked out on his mother and four siblings. He went on to describe a series of stepfathers who infiltrated his house and each one was more abusive than the last. He started fighting back when he was a teenager and eventually joined the army to escape his house.

His experiences in the army were graphic and awful. He described instances of throwing up and coming to in his own urine. As was my custom, I watched the faces around me to see how people reacted. Everyone was as enthralled as me and most nodded their heads in eager agreement as he described his public humiliations. He laughed at himself, but his tone changed as he neared the end of his drinking, becoming serious as he talked about marrying a woman as soon as he got out of the service and having his first child.

“I missed my son being born because I was passed out on my buddy’s couch after we’d been out drinking all night. I’ll never forget stumbling home totally hungover and walking into an empty house to find a note from Regina that said—at the hospital. See, it wasn’t like she gave birth suddenly. She was over a week past due. I was supposed to be there with her at night in case she went into labor. I told her I was going to go out to get a pack of smokes and I wasn’t lying when I said it. I really wasn’t. I thought I’d go get a pack of smokes and come back, but then I decided it wouldn’t hurt to stop in at the bar real quick. One of my buddies talked me into having a drink and before you know it—well, you know how it goes. I had another and another. Regina went into labor that night and I missed it.” His words hung in the air, thick with emotion. It took him a moment to continue. “After that, I swore I was

done drinking forever. Like we've all done, I really meant it. I was going to be a good dad. There was no way I was going to be like my father. I stayed completely sober for the first two months of my son's life. I tried to pretend like it didn't bother me not to drink, but it was so damn hard. I really wanted a drink. I wasn't prepared for how much a baby would change my life. If you have a kid, you know exactly what I'm talking about."

Half of the room nodded. I found myself nodding too.

"Jake cried all the time and I couldn't handle it. Regina and I started fighting constantly. I was pissed at her because we'd fought for so many years about my drinking and I thought she'd be happy because I was sober, but she was still pissed off at me. I'll admit. I was a total idiot. Completely selfish and self-centered, but I didn't know it. Back then, I thought it was totally justified. What a moron." The regret edged his face in thick lines. "And then one night, I just snapped. We were fighting about who was going to take the trash out and I lost it. Over the fuckin trash. I took off and ended up at the bar. I didn't even think about it. I got drunk and stayed drunk for five years. It wasn't just that I got drunk. I walked out on Regina and Jake. I moved down south and worked on the oil rigs. I never called, wrote, nothing. I did exactly what my dad had done to me and what I swore I'd never do—I walked out on my kid. I was a complete failure as a dad."

His story continued but I was catapulted into my own childhood living room the day my mom received the Dear John letter from my dad. I remembered how the letter fluttered out of her hands like a butterfly and drifted to the floor. She fell to her knees, covering her face with her hands as she sobbed. Rachel and I ran next to her, standing beside her.

"What's wrong, Mommy?" Rachel asked.

"Your dad.... your dad...." She was sobbing so hard she couldn't form words.

"Is he dead?" Rachel asked.

Even at six, I knew it was the word we'd been waiting to hear. Nobody said it out loud, but I read between the lines of their hushed whispers. I knew what the police thought happened and what my mom was referring to every time she said she was afraid something bad happened to him. It had finally occurred. My dad was dead.

Rachel sat sobbing next to her, but my tears were lodged in my throat. What did it mean that my dad was dead? Something about Rachel crying next to her on the floor brought my mom out of her pain for a moment.

“He’s not dead,” Mom said.

Rachel brought her head up, tears streaming down her face. “He’s not? What’s wrong, then? Where is he?”

“He’s.... he’s.... in love with someone else. Your daddy met another woman.” Her voice was low, barely a whisper.

“What? I don’t understand. I don’t get it.” Rachel’s voice was the opposite of my mom’s. Hers was loud, bordering on yelling.

I was frozen to my spot. I couldn’t move. Couldn’t speak.

“He moved away to be with her. He’s going to live with her in Spain,” Mom said.

Where was Spain? I’d never heard of it before. Was it close? Could we visit him there?

“When’s he coming home?” Rachel demanded.

“He’s not.”

Her words came down like lead shattering a bomb inside of me.

“My daddy isn’t coming home?” I’d found my voice.

“No. He’s not. He’s gone.”

“Why isn’t my daddy coming home?” I asked.

“Because he left us!” Rachel cried. She stormed out of the living room and ran down the hallway to our bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

“Why isn’t my daddy coming home?”

It didn’t make any sense. Daddies didn’t leave their families.

“You’re too young to understand. He’s just not.”

My mom followed Rachel to her room, leaving me standing alone reeling. I picked up the letter from the ground, wishing I knew how to read because it held the answer. I stared at the letters swerving in front of me.

My mom had apologized to me many times for how she dealt with my father leaving. She thought I was too young to understand what was going on and wanted to shelter me from the reality of knowing my father rejected our family for a chance to be with another woman. Instead, she told me nothing other than he was gone and wasn’t coming back.

I was left trying to fill in the pieces of the puzzle with my childish mind. I spent hours trying to figure out what I’d done to make him leave. I couldn’t accept he’d simply abandoned us so I began imagining all kinds of scenarios as to why he couldn’t come home. I created stories about him being an undercover superhero and that he’d been called away on a secret mission to save the world or imagined he was a doctor and the woman he was with was

very sick. He was the only doctor who'd figured out the cure and the only place to get it was in Spain so he'd had to take her there.

My mother thought Rachel was old enough to understand more than I was so she told her everything. She spared no details as she ranted and raved about who the women might be and how hurt she was that he could fall in love with someone else after everything they'd been through. My mom's personal disclosures left Rachel feeling more like an abandoned wife than an abandoned daughter.

As I got older, I decided it was my mom's fault he left. She'd been too needy, weak, and dependent on him. I vowed to be the perfect wife when I grew up so my husband wouldn't leave me. I would make sure my life was designed differently so my family stayed intact. Nobody would abandon me again and I'd never leave my family.

I couldn't help but see the parallels between the man's story and my own. I'd sworn never to become like my father. It was a crushing blow to realize I'd done what I swore I'd never do. I didn't realize I was crying until I felt Joe's arm around me. The woman sitting next to me handed me a Kleenex. I wanted to stop crying, but couldn't. The tears streamed down my cheeks. They were warm tears filled with sadness and grief, not the hot sting of bitterness and pain I'd gotten used to.

I tried to pay attention to the rest of the speaker's share as he described how his relationship with his son had been restored. They were now a part of each other's lives and had grown closer than he'd ever imagined, but he'd had to go through a painful period of time while he made amends to his son. He told how he opened himself up to giving his son permission to express all the anger and pain he had toward him during therapy sessions. He detailed how he had to sit in a chair, listening to it all, without trying to fix or minimize it.

"My relationship with my son is the greatest gift of my sobriety. I can't believe it, but I've finally become the father I've always dreamed of being." He beamed. Everyone clapped. "Thank you for listening to me share."

I didn't wait for the closing prayer before I jumped up and bolted to my car. I heard footsteps behind me.

"Hey, Sarah, hold on," Joe said.

I didn't know he knew my name. I stopped, not wanting to turn around. I stood with my back toward him as he came up behind me.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

I shook my head.

“It’s okay. You’re going to be all right. You’ll get through this. Whatever it is.”

I still hadn’t turned around. I shook my head harder this time. I could barely speak through my emotions. “Have you ever done something so horrendous that there’s no way to make it better?”

He was silent for a moment.

“Yes,” he said, softly.

His words made me cry harder. No matter what he’d done, there was no way he’d done anything close to the enormity of what I’d done. He put his hand on my back while I cried, not moving to hold me as if he sensed I’d run away if he got too close. He kept his hand placed on my back while I wept.

“I killed a woman.” His voice cracked.

My head snapped up and I flipped around to face him. “What?”

“I thought you knew. Everyone else does.” His cheeks were flushed.

“I had no idea,” I said.

“Let’s get out of here. You want to go for a walk?” He stuck out his elbow for me not giving me a chance to reply.

We made our way out of the parking lot and down the sidewalk. We didn’t speak as we passed the rows of businesses on Main Street closed for the night. We took a right at the end of the street and headed in the direction of the lake. The stars shone down on us, everything still and at peace except for my heart thudding against my chest.

“Frank didn’t tell you about me?” His words broke the stillness. “He loves to talk. He’s worse than a woman when it comes to gossip.”

“He told me you were a football superstar. Oh, and that you helped try to get his son sober.”

It felt good to have my arm laced with his.

“Yeah, I tried. Poor Junior. He couldn’t ever get honest. He always kept parts about himself and his story hidden. I can’t blame him. I totally get it. It’s really hard to have the level of honesty this program requires if you want to stay sober and sane.”

I was never going to have a problem staying sober. Unlike them, my sobriety was a given, but I worried about my sanity. My foundation was a house of cards built on sand and the slightest wind could send them tumbling again. I was afraid this time I wouldn’t come back from the darkness.

“I’m never drinking again,” I said.

Joe laughed. “That’s what we all say, but you’d be surprised. Staying sober is the hardest thing any of us have to do. It means facing every demon we’ve ran from.”

“Like killing a woman?”

I didn’t want him to forget why we’d gone on our walk.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “You know how they say some people peak in high school? Well, that was me. Frank was right about me being a small town kid who could play football. Those were the best days of my life. I had it all when I graduated from high school—a full scholarship to one of the most elite colleges in the country doing what I loved. But, I’d never been out of Triton except for tournaments. I wasn’t prepared for living outside of this place and being surrounded by other people who were just as successful as I was. I’d been this huge fish in a really small pond and suddenly I was thrust into the ocean. I felt like a minnow who didn’t know how to swim. So, I started drinking.”

“A lot?”

“Not right away. In the beginning, I only drank on the weekends. I had no idea how to meet people and felt like such a redneck. I talked like a redneck, dressed like a redneck, and definitely acted like one. Everyone looked at me like I was some kind of freak. All of my life I’d been the person other people were trying to be like and I didn’t know how to deal with being the odd man out. Thankfully, I had football or I would’ve been completely lost. Everyone on the team was invited to all the parties so I tagged along. All of my insecurities disappeared when I drank. Instead of being ashamed to be a redneck, I was proud of it. In fact, my nickname became Redneck. Did you go to college?”

“I did.”

“Where?”

I didn’t want to lie but couldn’t tell the truth.

“A small liberal arts college out West.” If he sensed I was intentionally being vague, he didn’t say anything about it. “What happened to you in college?”

“I drank my way through and barely made it. It’s true what they say about athletes getting breaks. I should’ve failed, but coach made sure I didn’t. The administration is set up to push athletes through. I don’t even know how I made it through some of the practices. I was so hungover I’d throw up all the time, but it wasn’t unusual for players to barf because the coaches push you

so hard in practice. They assumed I was puking from the workouts, but it was from the alcohol I was dumping into myself every day. Honestly, college is kind of a blur.” His eyes drifted, playing out private memories of those days. “I met a girl in my junior year. Maria. She was a cheerleader. Totally cliché, I know.”

I smiled. “A bit.”

“She was a good girl, though. A really good girl. She was the first one who said anything about my drinking. She was always trying to get me to quit, but I denied it was a problem. I told her it was just part of college life. I got drafted my senior year and she went with me to Philadelphia.” He kicked over a pile of brush blocking our way down the worn path leading to the frozen water’s edge. “That’s when things really got tough. Worse than when I went to college. Everyone expected all these great things from me, but I couldn’t deliver. I was in the NFL and floundering. I’d started every game I ever played and it was a huge blow to my ego when I didn’t start my rookie year. So stupid of me. My drinking got way out of hand. I had more money than I knew what to do with. I blew it on girls, fast cars, and cocaine.”

“You are quite the cliché, aren’t you?”

“Sadly, yes. I fulfilled every stereotype out there. Then, one night, Maria and I were driving home in the brand new Porsche I’d bought a few weeks earlier. We’d been at a party and I was totally wasted. We were fighting about something and I was speeding down the road while she screamed at me to slow down. The last thing I remember is rounding a corner on Bend’s pass and the next thing I remember is waking up in the hospital. I’d rolled my car over the cliff and totaled it. I broke my leg in three places.” He tapped his thigh. “See that—that’s a steel rod where my bone used to be.”

“What happened to Maria?” I knew the answer, but had to hear him say it.

“I killed her. She flew out the windshield and got wrapped around a tree. I’ll never forget what it felt like to wake up and know I’d killed the woman I loved.” His eyes filled with tears. I placed my hand on his back like he’d done to me in the parking lot. “I still see her face. She comes to me in my dreams ...”

We’d reached the edge of the water. My legs felt weak. I looked around, wishing there was somewhere to sit. The trail we’d taken ended at the water and there wasn’t anywhere else to go except back in the direction we’d come. We stood for a moment staring out onto the ice. The moon cast eerie shadows



on the snow. I shivered and rubbed my arms. Joe put his arm around me and squeezed. I stiffened instinctively with his touch. I stood there rigid.

“You need to get a better coat if you’re going to survive winter here.” He dropped his arm and I breathed a sigh of relief. “Let’s get you back to your car before you freeze to death.”

I shoved my hands deep into my pockets, bracing myself for the wind as we headed back toward our cars.

“Is that why you got sober?” I asked.

“Yes, that night was the last drink I’ve ever had. And I never played football again. I couldn’t even if I wanted to. My leg was destroyed. They charged me with vehicular manslaughter and I pleaded guilty. Didn’t even try to fight it. I did five years in the state penitentiary. The reason I came back to Triton was because it was the only place anyone would give me a job and I could have somewhat of a chance at starting over. Nobody else would have anything to do with me. Everyone here stills thinks of me as good ole’ Joey, but really, I’m a murderer.”

I stopped in my tracks. “You’re not a murderer. You made a mistake. You didn’t do it on purpose.”

“I can’t think that way. I have to remember exactly who I am so I never forget what I’m capable of. I don’t give myself excuses. My actions killed another individual. Period. And that’s the definition of murder.”

I jerked my hand away. “I’ve got to go. I’m sorry, I can’t do this. I’m so sorry.”

I turned on my heels and ran, leaving him staring after me.

## Chapter Nineteen

I walked slowly up the driveway, taking in the neatly manicured lawn around me. His trailer sat at the end of the driveway—a doublewide with a wooden front porch. Two small steps led up to it with flower pots sprinkled on each one. I took a deep breath and knocked on the screen door. I heard footsteps and then Joe's face. He opened the door, surprise written on his face.

"Hey."

"Um, hi.... I'm sorry to just show up like this, but I had to."

I'd gotten up early in the morning and called Frank to get Joe's address. As it turned out, he was my neighbor. He lived in the rows of trailer just past the rental cabins. All this time, we'd only been a few hundred feet apart.

"Do you want to come in?" he asked. "I can make us some coffee."

"No, I'm fine. I just wanted to talk to you and apologize. I'm sorry I ran off on you last night."

He shrugged. "Believe me, you don't have to apologize. I totally get it."

"No, it's not that. Really it's not. It wasn't about you," I said.

He threw his head back and laughed. "That's what all the girls say."

I punched him in his arm. "I'm trying to be serious."

"I am too." He grinned.

"You're not making this very easy on me."

He crossed his arms across his chest. "All right, let me hear it."

"I really appreciate you being so honest with me. It's weird to have people share their secrets like it's nothing and your story made me think about some things about myself that I—"

"What? You're an ex-football player who killed your girlfriend too?"

I laughed despite myself. "No. Not quite. It's just that while you were talking it brought up all these memories about the people's lives I've destroyed and I felt like I couldn't breathe. I had to get out of there. I'm sorry. It had nothing to do with you."

"Do you want to talk about it? I'm actually a pretty good listener despite the fact that I talk so damn much." His smile was contagious and I found

myself smiling back.

“I don’t even know how to begin.”

He grabbed his coat, opened the screen door, and stepped outside with me. He took a seat on the step and patted the spot next to him. “Come on, you know what they say—you’re only as sick as your secrets.”

“I actually didn’t know that’s what they said. I’m new to all of this and you guys have a million sayings. It’s hard to keep up with them all.”

They were always quoting one-liners in their meetings and had their own language devoted to them. Things like keep coming back, keep it simple, and turn it over. This was the first time I’d heard the secret one.

“Believe me, before you know it, you’ll be rattling them off like nothing. How long have you been sober?”

It didn’t feel right to lie to him after how honest he’d been with me.

“I don’t think I’m an alcoholic, but I did something horrible when I was drunk.”

“How often do you get drunk?” he asked.

“You’re not going to believe this, but I’ve only been drunk maybe five times in my entire life and the times I got drunk weren’t on purpose. I actually hate being drunk.”

“Really?”

“Yes. You know how you guys are always laughing about what you call normies? I think I’m one of them. I’m the person you make fun of who pushes drinks away whenever they start to feel it. I hate feeling out of control more than anything else in the world.”

His head was cocked to the side, studying me. I couldn’t tell if he believed me or not. Everyone in AA talked about how they lied while they were drinking and denied how much they drank. I didn’t care if he believed me because I was telling the truth. I was releasing some of the poisonous venom I’d been holding in my soul. As painful as the initial poke was, I felt the sweet discharge of its ooze.

“I did a terrible thing a long time ago. I never told anyone. Not my husband. Not my best friend. Nobody. I kept it a secret. I kept it hidden for so long I almost convinced myself it never happened.”

“Funny how we can trick ourselves into believing our own lies, huh?”

I nodded. “After a while, I thought about it less and less. I tried to go on with my life and for the most part I did. Up until last year. Then, it all fell apart.” I struggled to find the words to articulate what happened to me. “It

was awful. Really awful. I was in more pain than I've ever been in. It was the first time I intentionally went out to get drunk. I needed something to take away the pain. I just didn't want to feel anything. So, I did it. I got a bottle and drank myself into oblivion. But sometime during it, I completely lost control."

"Is that how you ended up here? You ran away?"

"Is it obvious?" I asked.

"The only thing obvious is that you're not from here. Everyone knows everyone. I'd remember you if you'd grown up around here. I'd certainly never forget that face." He looked me in the eyes.

Was he flirting with me? He couldn't be flirting with me. I shifted my eyes away from his gaze.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Christ, you act like you're running from the law. Are you a felon?" He burst out laughing.

My lips didn't move. I sat like a statute as still as the lawn ornaments surrounding us.

His laughter stopped abruptly when he noticed I wasn't joining in. "This really is serious, isn't it? Are you running from someone?"

"I can't talk about it. Not yet. I'm not ready."

He put his arm around my shoulder and pulled me close. "It's going to be okay. Whatever it is, it's going to be okay."

I could feel the heat from his fingertips on my shoulders burning into me and his lungs expanding with air. Did he feel it too? As much as I wanted him to, I wanted to be imagining it.

"I have to go to work. I have a shift at one. Frank will have a fit if I'm not there."

"I have to go back to work too. You just happened to catch me on my lunch break." He stood up, extending his hand to help me up from the step. "Hey, I have an idea. Why don't we have dinner tomorrow night? We can talk about things other than our depressing lives."

"Sure." The answer was out of my mouth before I thought twice about it.

"Where can I pick you up?" he asked.

"Why don't I meet you here?"

"Sure. Six? Will that work?"

“Sounds good. See you then.” He moved a step closer to me and for a second I was afraid and excited that he was going to kiss me. Instead, he stuck out his hand. “Deal. Six, it is.”

I shook his hand before leaving. As I walked to work, I replayed his words over in my mind—we’re only as sick as our secrets. I was tired of being sick. It was exhausting. My secrets had destroyed my life. They’d made me into a person I’d never wanted to be. A person I didn’t think I could be.

I’d always been the golden child. I never strayed from what was expected of me. I hated making mistakes and getting into trouble. I’d watch Rachel in horror during her troubles and wonder how she could break the law so casually. During high school, my best friend liked to shoplift make-up and I had to quit hanging out with her because I was afraid I’d get in trouble just for being with her. I did the right thing in every situation. I never made mistakes on purpose. It wasn’t like I never screwed up, I just worked really hard at trying not to and then I made one mistake. I crossed over the line I said I’d never cross and got annihilated.

It wasn’t fair. People cheated on their spouses all the time and got away with it. Lots of people weren’t even bothered by it. They separated love from sex. Robin knew plenty of people who had open marriages, but I couldn’t imagine it. I’d been a serial monogamist since I started dating in high school. I’d never veered until That Night. I was so sick of running from That Night, but I’d go to prison if I stopped. My mind swung like a pendulum. Could I survive in prison?

## Chapter Twenty

It didn't occur to me until I saw Joe walk out dressed in a collared shirt tucked into his pants that we were going on a date. The smell of Cool Water was stronger than it'd ever been. His long hair that usually hung in his face was covered in product, managing his curls tightly. His face was pristine and smooth from a fresh shave.

I was struck with embarrassment. I couldn't have gotten dressed for a date even if I'd wanted to. I rotated the same three pairs of jeans with seven different shirts. The only pairs of shoes I owned were the pair of tennis shoes I wore to work and a pair of boots I did everything else in. They weren't even cute boots. They were the Target brand with thick rubber soles and wide straps.

"Hi," I said sheepishly. "You look really nice."

"So do you."

I stood awkwardly on his front porch waiting to follow his lead wishing I hadn't said yes. I'd thought about backing out all day and now I'd give anything to have followed through. He walked to his Chevy truck and opened the door, motioning for me to get in. I slid in and hooked my seatbelt as he climbed in next to me.

"Do you mind a little country?" he asked.

"That's fine." I'd never been a fan of country music but it seemed appropriate as we rolled along in his truck. I watched as we breezed down Main Street passing by The Little Crane. "Where are we going?"

"You didn't think we were going to the Crane, did you?" he asked.

I felt the heat rise in my cheeks. "Where else would we go?"

"Girl, we're not going to your place of work to eat. I'm getting you out of this town. When was the last time you got out of here?"

"It's been awhile."

I'd only left town twice to go to Target. Once before I started my job and later on when I had a better idea of what I needed. I got everything else I needed at Kwik Trip. I didn't need much.

“You’re in for a treat tonight then. I’m taking you to one of my favorite spots. It’s beautiful.”

The restaurant was perched on the tip of a cliff overlooking Lake Superior. It looked like something on a postcard. I felt foolish as I walked in dressed the way I was, but was surprised to see I wasn’t the only one in jeans. Joe pulled my chair out for me. I stared out the window, biting my lip, and willing myself not to cry. It wasn’t right that I was here. None of this was right.

“Are you upset?” he asked.

“I don’t deserve this. None of this,” I said.

“You don’t deserve dinner? Everyone’s got to eat,” he said.

“But you’re being such a gentlemen.”

“Because I pulled your chair out for you? That’s just what men do. At least where I come from.”

It reminded me of David. I didn’t want to be on a date with Joe. I wanted to be on a date with David. I wanted him to pull my chair out for me, to touch me, and pull me close to him. I wanted him to look at me the way Joe looked at me.

“I’m married.”

“I figured as much.” He took a sip of his water.

“You did? Then why are we here?”

“It’s not like we’re on a date.”

I felt a mixture of relief and disappointment wash over me.

“Why’d you ask me to dinner, then?”

“Because you need a friend.”

I looked away, embarrassed. I felt foolish for thinking we were on a date. Who would feel attracted to me looking the way I looked? I picked up my napkin and began folding it. He reached across the table and put his hand on mine.

“Did I embarrass you? I’m sorry.”

“I’m not embarrassed,” I said, still trying to not make eye contact. My cheeks burned.

“I just want you to know—I’m not that guy.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not the guy who takes advantage of women when they’re vulnerable and you look like you’re one step away from falling apart at any minute.” His brown eyes were soft, the specks of gold dancing in the setting sun. “You

remind me of a baby deer. You have that same scared look in your eyes all the time. You never stay still even when you're sitting. I watch you in meetings and sometimes I wonder if you're remembering to breathe. Your eyes flit around the room constantly no matter where you are and you jump at every little sound."

Was it that obvious? I thought I did a pretty good job at keeping it together. I worked hard at keeping my emotions at bay and my expression blank. I tried to greet each customer when they came in the door and forced myself to make eye contact even when I didn't want to. Whenever I felt my emotions getting away from me, I started working math equations in my head. Adding up the number of salt packets and then dividing them by the number of tables. Anything to keep my mind distracted and from running away on me.

"I can't do this," I whispered.

He raised his eyebrows. "Do what? Have dinner? Make a friend?"

"Yes. All of it. I don't deserve it."

My emotions rose in my throat.

"Why? You think you're the only one that's done something terrible? The only one with pain? What have you done that's so terrible you're beyond redemption?"

"You don't know what I've done."

He smacked the table. "Because you won't tell me. You answer questions in one-word sentences. You're the queen of vague. How's anyone in AA supposed to help you if you don't tell them what's really going on with you?"

"You don't understand." The tears in my eyes threatened to spill down my cheeks.

"Really? I don't understand?" He leaned close to me, peering into my eyes. "I've killed someone and been to prison. I walk around with a scarlet letter branded on my forehead that's never going to be removed. You don't think people look at me and that's the first thing they think about? I'm stuck in a town I hate because I have nowhere else to go. There's a set of parents who cry every night because of what I took away from them, but you're right—I don't get it. I don't understand."

"Stop it. Why are you doing this?"

"I'm sorry. That was over the line. I didn't mean to hurt you." He reached for my hand again. I jerked it away.

I threw my napkin on the table. "Just take me home. I want to go home."



“How much longer are you going to run? Every time I hit a cord with you, you run away. Just stop running.”

“I can’t!”

The restaurant grew silent. Servers in the middle of waiting tables stopped and looked our way. Patrons glanced at us out of the corner of their eyes, pretending like they weren’t staring. The thinly veiled glass I’d erected around me to keep me safe was about to shatter. I jumped up and headed for the door. I didn’t care what people thought. I was sobbing by the time I reached his truck. I couldn’t contain myself. He came up behind me like he’d done two nights ago.

“Don’t touch me!” I yelled.

“Look, I’m sorry. Let’s just go back inside. This isn’t what I wanted to happen. I can be so pushy. It comes from a good place, though. I swear to God it does. I just get carried away trying to help. Come back inside with me.”

I felt his hand on my back. “No, go away. Please, just go away.”

He reached around me to pull me close. I shoved him away.

“Leave me alone. I’m a monster. I’ll destroy you.” He didn’t let go, just pulled me closer. I beat against his chest with my fists, sobbing into his freshly washed shirt. “No. No. No.” I wept. I softened in his arms which only made me cry harder. He held me up for support as I came apart. When I was finished, he lifted my head up, moving the hair matted against my cheeks from tears and snot off my cheeks.

“Please, let me help you,” he said. His eyes were soft and pleading.

A dam burst inside me and my story rushed out in a violent explosion. Once the words started coming, they wouldn’t stop. Before I knew what I was doing I was telling him everything—from the very beginning starting with That Night and ending with Phil’s battered face. I told him how I’d had a nervous breakdown and spent months driving around the country before settling in Triton. The silence when I was finished was audible. Somewhere in the conversation we’d move to sit on the black asphalt of the parking lot next to his truck.

“Holy shit,” he said when he finally spoke.

I was exhausted. Spent. Drained and depleted of everything inside me.

“Holy shit.”

I smiled, surprised a smile could move across my face, but oddly enough, there was something freeing in telling the truth. The weight I’d been carrying

around in my chest was lifted. It was like I'd been wearing a heavy winter coat since That Night with all the pockets stuffed full with rocks. I'd taken each of the rocks out one by one and tossed them in a pile next to us and thrown off the coat. I could feel the wind against my skin again. Now, I was sitting in the parking lot stripped of my clothing, naked. I wanted to cover up, but didn't want to put the coat of blackness back on.

"You have to stop running," he said.

I let out a deep breath. "I know."

It was time to stop. I'd reached the finish line. There was nowhere else to run. No place left to hide. Nothing to do except tell the truth.

"I have to turn myself in."

"You've got to tell them everything. Just like you told me. The cops. David. Everyone. They'll take pity on you. They have to. You weren't in your right mind. They've got to understand all the emotional distress you were under."

I looked up at him. "You know I'm going to go to prison, right?"

He took my hand. This time I didn't pull it away. I coiled my fingers around his. "Yes."

"What's it like?" I asked.

"Honestly, it's awful. I wish I could lie to you and say it wasn't, but it is. The first few weeks are the worst. It's so incredibly disorienting, I don't even know how to describe it. It's terrifying and I'm pretty sure I had panic attacks even though I didn't know that was what I was having at the time. But, it does get easier. You adjust. You find a way to survive in there. It just takes a long time." He squeezed my hand. "I promise to write you long letters."

## Chapter Twenty-One

It took us four days to cross the California state line. Joe insisted on driving with me and I didn't put up a fight because I needed his support. Saying good-bye to Frank had been harder than I thought it'd be. I'd considered making up a story about what I was doing, but decided against it. If I was going to come clean, I wasn't going to start the new chapter of my life built on more lies.

I pulled him aside after my Sunday shift had ended. "I have something to tell you."

His eyes filled with concern. "What is it, dear? You look terrible. Do you want to sit down?"

I shook my head. "I'll be fine. I just feel awful for having to do this to you after everything you've done for me. I... I..."

"You're leaving."

"How'd you know?"

"You've had the look of a wounded bird since I met you. I knew you just needed some time to mend your wings before you took off in the world again. Are you going back to where you came from?"

"Sort of. I did something really awful in my other life and I have to do my best to make it right."

He stretched out his arms. "Come here, you." He threw his arms around me, giving me one of his famous bear hugs before releasing me. He fixed his gaze on me. "You're a good kid—"

"I'm hardly a kid."

"Nonsense. You've got a lot of life left in you to live and you're good people. I don't care what kind of mistakes you've got in your past. We've all made them and everyone deserves a second chance. You take care of what you gotta take care of and don't you be afraid to come back here." He pointed to the Little Crane sign above the front door. "You always got a place here if you need it."

We couldn't leave before going to an AA meeting. I cried for the entire hour. I'd barely spoken more than a few phrases to each of them, but I felt like they were my family. I'd been so touched by them and they didn't even know it. They'd never know how their honest shares had given me the courage to tell my own truth. They didn't know how their stories of redemption had given me hope that there might be a possibility for my own. I'd pay the consequences of my sins just like they'd paid for theirs so I'd no longer have to live in chains.

I cried when I turned my key into Rosie and she gave me a bewildered look, but like always, didn't ask me any questions. It was silly to be crying over a cabin, but I'd grown to feel safe in its cocoon. I'd cried all the way to Minnesota and now it looked like I was going to cry all the way back to California.

Joe and I stopped frequently without acknowledging why we were doing it, but we both knew I was living on borrowed time. He made excuses to stop as often as he could. He stopped at anything remotely resembling a tourist attraction. We searched for the most ridiculous looking billboards and followed them like maps. One of our first stops was the Dinosaur Park in South Dakota which held thirteen broken and cracked dinosaur sculptures, but we walked through the entire garden pretending to be amazed by each one. In Kansas, we followed the signs to the Geographic Center of the United States which ended up being a small pile of rocks with an American flag waving on top of it. We laughed hysterically when we saw it. He put his hand over his heart and recited the pledge of allegiance just like we'd done in grade school.

We made a detour at every major tourist attraction too. Sedona was breathtaking. I'd heard people rave about it, but I'd never been. I'd never seen so many red rocks reaching to the sky. Even the Grand Canyon in all its vastness didn't compare to it.

We stayed in small family hotels like Holiday Inn and The Best Western. It was nothing like the roadside motels and truck stops where I'd crashed on my way to Minnesota. I didn't want to sleep because I didn't want to waste any of my hours. I spent most of the nights staring at the ceiling imagining what prison would be like. California didn't have the death penalty but I was sure they were going to lock me up for life. Once I turned myself in, there was no getting out and I wouldn't be able to post bail while I waited for my

trial. I didn't know anything about the criminal justice system but knew enough to know I was the definition of a flight risk.

I wished there was a way to slow down time. Joe slowed it down as much as he could by driving below the speed limit. We both knew the sooner we got there, the sooner I lost my freedom. We filled the hours on the road with stories from our lives. As we drove I told Joe things I'd never told David. I talked about how devastated I was when my father left and how hard I'd worked as a little girl to be self-sufficient. I shared all of my insecurities about being a mom and how awful I'd been at it. It was easy to talk freely and openly when there wasn't anything left to hide.

I'd never been open with David like I was with Joe because I'd never wanted David to see me as weak. The relationship between showing emotions and being weak had been ingrained since I was eight years old when I'd sat down in my childhood bedroom and wrote a list of rules to live by. My first rule was to be strong and the second followed the first: don't let anyone know they hurt you. I thought I could protect myself from getting hurt if I was strong so I'd grown into a person with armor, but the character I'd created to keep myself safe had almost killed me.

Joe recounted his experience in prison. He described his cellmate in great detail and told how they'd grown to become really close. His cellmate was the one who introduced him to AA and he started attending meetings while he was inside. He'd worked his way through all the twelve steps while he was there, including making amends to Maria's parents by writing them a letter. Her mom had written him back expressing her forgiveness toward him. He kept the letter framed by his bedside to remind him of the pain he was capable of inflicting on others when he drank. He was so moved by emotion as he told the story that we had to pull the truck over on the roadside until he regained his composure.

The conversation stilled as we made our way further south toward Los Angeles. We both knew what would happen when we got there and we'd run out of words to say. The only thing left for me to do was face the consequences for my actions.

All sorts of scenarios ran through my mind. Would I see David in court? Would Robin be there? Would I have a lawyer? How would I get one? I couldn't afford a lawyer and didn't expect David to help me out. What about my mom? Would she rush to my aid or would she leave me behind bars like she'd done to Rachel? Would she practice the same tough love approach

she'd done with her? And what about Rori? What had he told her about my absence? What did she know?

I refused to acknowledge Rori might not be alive despite the fact that she may not have gotten the treatment she needed and passed away. The idea was too horrific to contemplate. If there was a God like they spoke of in AA, I prayed he'd saved her life. She was a victim and didn't deserve to die for my mistakes. Wherever she was, I hoped she was happy and well-adjusted. If she'd lived David would've given her the best care. Robin would've made sure of it. She loved Rori like her own and would've helped David no matter how angry she was at me.

The landmarks grew familiar as the lanes widened and the freeways multiplied. We were coasting down roads I'd spent hours on during rush hour traffic and it was disorienting to be back. Everything looked the same, but it was all different. It was as if I'd been in a foreign country and gotten used to their customs and now the city surrounding me no longer felt like my home.

Time was in slow motion as we drove down Santa Monica Boulevard toward the Hollywood police department, but the desire to run was gone. Somewhere during our trip, I'd realized I'd been running for a lot longer than That Night. I'd been running most of my life and it was time to stop. I was dripping with sweat by the time we found a parking spot and my clothes were soaked, my t-shirt sticking to me even though the air conditioning was on in the truck. My legs felt weak. I wasn't sure I could get out of the car.

Joe stepped out and opened my door for me. He helped me down with his hand and wrapped his arm around me, steadying me for support. I was dizzy and lightheaded since I hadn't been able to eat anything since the day before. Joe had joked about me having my last supper, but I couldn't manage more than a few bites. My stomach felt like it would revolt against anything I put in it.

I stared at the foreboding building in front of us. Two brick buildings fused together. It reminded me of an elementary school except there weren't any windows. There were big beautiful trees in full bloom lining the sidewalk. A tall vertical sign with POLICE written in dark black letters stood in front of the door.

I turned to look at Joe. "Thank you. Thank you for everything you've done for me and bringing me here. You have no idea how much it means to me."

“You might not want to thank me. You’re going to jail because of my help.” He laughed and I couldn’t help but laugh too. “Come on, the sooner we get you in, the sooner you get out.”

I rolled my eyes at his corny joke and let him lead me inside, taking huge gulping breaths of air, trying to get as much into my lungs as possible before it was stripped from me. My heart pounded in my chest and I was glad for Joe’s steadying arm around me. He pushed open the glass doors to reveal a police officer and metal detector in front of us.

“Empty your pockets.” The officer handed us a plastic bin that Joe plopped his keys into.

I walked through first, followed by Joe. He handed him his keys back. I’d never been inside a police department before and hadn’t expected it to be empty. There were chairs lining each side of the small room occupied by a sole man who was busy tapping away on his phone. There was a desk in the center of the room with a woman dressed in plain clothes sitting behind it. There were two sets of doors—one on her right and one on her left.

“What do I do?” I whispered to Joe.

“Just walk up to her and tell her you have to turn yourself in because you have a warrant for your arrest. I’ll stay with you for as long as I can, I promise.”

I took a deep breath and moved forward. She had her head down staring at a stack of papers and barely looked up when she saw me.

“Excuse me,” I said.

She didn’t look up. “What?”

“I have a warrant for my arrest. I’m here to turn myself in.”

*This is really happening.*

She finally looked up. She had a pinched face with barely-there lips that pursed together as she looked at me. “What’s your name?”

“Celeste.”

She rolled her eyes. “I need your last name too. I have to look you up in the system.”

“Reynolds. Celeste Reynolds.”

She typed my name into her computer. I couldn’t see the monitor but she crinkled her forehead at whatever she was reading.

“Wait here a minute.” She got up, scanning me from the top of my head all the way down to my shoes. She moved out from behind her desk and headed through the door on her right.

“Breathe,” Joe said. “One step at a time. That’s how you’re going to get through this. One step at a time.”

He’d been saying the same thing since we left Minnesota.

It seemed like an eternity before she returned.

“Come with me,” she ordered, motioning from the doorway.

I grabbed onto Joe. “Can I at least say good-bye to him?”

“You don’t have to. Bring him with.”

I gripped onto his forearm, wanting to hold on for as long as I could. We followed her down a long hallway passing a series of closed doors. She opened one on the right. It was filled with three chairs and a small table. The cream paint was peeling off the walls and the floor’s linoleum was pulling up in some places. The room smelled of old food.

She motioned to the chairs. “Sit. Someone will be with you shortly.”

She shut the door without a backward glance. Joe took a seat in the chair, but I was too nervous to sit. I paced the small room back and forth feeling my anxiety rise with each step. This was it. There wasn’t any going back now. Not being able to run even if I wanted to made me feel like a caged animal.

Two men walked into the room, but they weren’t dressed like police officers like I’d expected. Both wore ties. Their shirts were tucked neatly into their pants with clean black shoes and cellphones clipped to their belts. One of them held a folder. Their presence made the small room shrink and the walls felt as if they’d collapse on me.

“Take a seat,” the taller one said in a gruff voice.

We did as we were told. Joe grabbed my hand but I couldn’t feel his fingers on my skin. My insides were on fire, but I was freezing. They towered over us, taking us in.

“I’m Officer Dwayne and this is my partner Enrique.” The tall one introduced himself, pointing to the other man on his left. “Is it okay if we record this conversation?”

I nodded.

“You need to speak your answers,” Dwayne said.

“Yes.” My voice was barely audible. “Yes,” I said again. This time raising it to a level where they could hear it.

Enrique pulled out a tape recorder and set it on the table. It was just like every crime movie I’d seen. He pushed a button. “Are you Celeste Reynolds?”

I nodded.



“You need to speak your answers.” His voice was short and clipped, all business.

“Yes.”

“Can you state your name for the record?”

“Celeste Reynolds.”

“Birthdate?”

“March third, nineteen seventy-three.”

“What’s your social security number?”

“649-788-9525.”

Dwayne handed him the folder and Enrique took a seat at the table. He opened the folder and began skimming papers. It took everything I had not to grab the folder and see what they’d written about me.

“Celeste, do you know you’re listed as a missing person?” Enrique asked.

“I guess so. I assumed I probably was.”

“Who are you?” Dwayne directed his questions toward Joe.

“I’m Joe Ramsey. I’m a friend.”

“Are you comfortable with Joe being in the room?” he asked.

I nodded then quickly remembered I had to speak my answers. “Yes. That’s fine. I want him here.”

“I have to ask—are you in any danger?”

“No.”

“What brings you in here today?”

“I wanted to turn myself in.”

“Have you spoken with your relatives and friends?”

“No.”

“Why did you choose to come here rather than return to your family and friends?”

It was an odd question. Were they trying to trap me? Was I supposed to talk about what I’d done before they read me my rights? Joe had given me very specific instructions not to talk to anyone until I had a lawyer present even if the lawyer was someone from the county. I looked toward him for help. He was eyeing the officers suspiciously.

“Before anything gets started, she’d like to have a lawyer,” Joe said.

The officers exchanged glances. Enrique spoke. “Have you committed a crime?”

“I—”

“Don’t answer that!” Joe interrupted.

“Sir, I’m a little confused as to what your role is in this case,” Dwayne said.

“Like I said. I’m her friend and I’m just watching out for her. I know how these things work. She needs a lawyer if she’s going to give you a statement.”

“I’m unclear as to what she’s giving a statement about.” Dwayne looked annoyed. “We’re not out to get her. We’re just trying to help get this thing sorted out and make sure she’s safe.”

“We know police officers sometimes get a bad reputation and make people nervous, but I assure you that we’re only here to help her,” Enrique said.

“She’s doesn’t need help. She needs a lawyer.” Joe folded his hands tightly in his lap.

Enrique and Dwayne were getting irritated and I didn’t want them upset. I wanted them to see me in a favorable light and getting them upset wasn’t a good idea.

“Sir, I’m going to ask you to settle down. You’re going to need to settle down or I’m going to have to ask you to step out of the room until this is taken care of,” Dwayne said.

“I know her rights.” Joe jumped up from his chair.

“Sit. Down. Now.”

Enrique rose from his chair and the two of them formed a barricade in front of him and the door. Joe sat back down. I placed my hand on his knee, hoping it’d keep him there.

“We’re going to start this over from the beginning because I can see we’re not getting off to a good start. Why don’t you tell me why you’re here?” Enrique pointed his question back at me.

I chose my words carefully. “There’s a warrant for my arrest and I wanted to turn myself in.”

Enrique eyed me. “We’re not showing any warrants for your arrest in the system.”

“Maybe the warrant is in another city? Maybe it wasn’t filed here?”

“We have access to the entire criminal database for the United States. When a person has a warrant it goes into the database no matter which state it’s in. If you had a warrant for an arrest, it would show up in our system,” Enrique said.

How was that possible? They had to know it was me. I’d left fingerprints everywhere. I hadn’t hidden anything I’d done. My vomit was all over the

hotel bathroom and David knew I was the last person with Phil. I had no idea what to say or how to respond.

“Maybe this will help us solve the problem. What do you think the warrant is for?” Dwayne asked.

I looked toward Joe. He shrugged his shoulders as bewildered as I was.

“Murder.” The word dropped like a bomb from my mouth.

“Murder?” Dwayne raised his eyebrows.

“Yes. Murder.”

“Can you give us a moment?” Dwayne asked.

“Sure.”

They stepped out of the room.

“What’s going on?” I turned to Joe. “This seems super weird. Are they trying to trap me?”

“I have absolutely no clue what’s going on. None,” he said.

“Why wouldn’t a warrant show up in the system? What does that mean?” I asked.

“Maybe you were never charged? I don’t know. I wish we’d talked to a lawyer before we came. Dammit.” He’d wanted to call his lawyer before we came, but I hadn’t let him.

“What should I do?” I asked.

“I guess just wait to see what they have to say. This is bizarre.”

It wasn’t long before they returned. This time they brought another officer with him who was dressed in police clothes.

“Celeste, this is Officer Ryan. He’s here in case we need to read you your rights,” Dwayne said.

In case they needed to read me my rights? Didn’t they always have to read you your rights before they arrested you?

“Okay,” I said.

“We’re going to need your help in figuring this out. Can you tell us whose murder you think you’re being charged with?” Officer Ryan asked.

Should I answer the question? Was it incriminating myself? Did it matter even if I was? It wasn’t as if I was going to plead not guilty. I was guilty and wanted to be responsible for my actions.

I cleared my throat. “Phil Williams.”

Officer Ryan took his pad out and scribbled on it.

“Is Phil Williams from California?” Dwayne asked.

“Yes, he was from Los Angeles. He lived in Beverly Hills.”

“Do you know his age?”

“He was forty-eight or forty-nine. Something like that.”

“Describe him for me.”

“He was tall, a little over six feet, I think. He had light brown hair with green eyes. A square, angular face.”

“Any distinct markings? Tattoos? Piercings? Birthmarks? Scars?”

“I don’t think so.”

Officer Ryan stepped out of the room. Enrique and Dwayne remained rooted to their spots. I was thankful there wasn’t anything in my stomach because I felt like I might throw up at any minute. The only sound in the room was our breathing and the tick of the clock hanging on the wall. The minutes dragged by. I wanted to crawl out of my skin. Joe looked as uncomfortable as I felt. Finally, Officer Ryan returned. He handed me a piece of paper with a picture printed on the middle. I looked down. It was a picture of a California Driver’s License. I looked at the picture. Phil’s face stared back up at me.

“Is that the Phil Williams you’re referring to?” Officer Ryan asked.

I swallowed the taste of bile rising in my throat.

“Yes. Yes, it is.”

“Ms. Reynolds, Phil Williams isn’t dead. He’s very much alive.”

My head swirled. Blood drained down to my feet. Bright white lights flashed. Their images blurred in front of my eyes. I couldn’t breathe. Then, darkness.

I felt a cold washcloth on my face. I opened my eyes. Florescent lights shown into my eyes, making me squint. Joe’s face peered over me. Officer Ryan kneeled next to me with a cup of water.

“Do you think you can get up?” he asked.

I raised my head slowly, feeling a rush of blood move through it. I sat on the cold floor, with my legs straight out in front of me. Joe supported my back with his hands.

“You fainted,” Officer Ryan said.

I’d never fainted before. I still felt disoriented. What was going on? Nothing made sense. Nothing. Enrique and Dwayne were still in the room with their arms folded across their chests in matching poses.

“But, I... but, I...” I stumbled to find the words, but they weren’t there. The entire world had shifted underneath me. I felt like I needed to hold on or it would spin out of control.

“Let me explain something to you.” Enrique pushed the record button again. “Last year police were called to the Hollywood Palms Motel due to a domestic disturbance. We arrived to find a man severely beaten in one of the rooms. He was identified in the hospital as Phil Williams. We interviewed him once he was out of intensive care, but he refused to provide a statement to the police and dismissed pressing any charges. He wouldn’t comply with our investigation and we couldn’t force him to tell us what happened,” Enrique said.

“We get called to that hotel all the time because lots of criminal activity goes on there. It’s full of pimps, prostitutes, and drug dealers. People are always getting beat up and rarely report those crimes. We didn’t think anything of it when he refused to file a report. Happens all the time. We could’ve filed it anyway, but nobody ever talks in those cases. It would’ve been a waste of our energy and time,” David said.

Phil was alive? But I’d touched him to make sure. I’d felt him and there wasn’t a pulse. How was that possible? A mixture of emotions flooded through me. Fear. Relief. Sadness. Pain. Confusion. Hope. I didn’t know which one to land on. They all flitted through me.

“How’d you know who she was? Why did the lady at the front desk find her in the computer?” Joe asked.

“She’s been reported as a missing person. Her mother, Cheryl Reynolds, filed a missing report on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014,” Enrique said.

“Did you go missing voluntarily?” Dwayne asked.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Did someone force you to leave? Were you kidnapped? Were you in danger?”

“It was a difficult time. My daughter was very sick and my husband and I were fighting. I thought I killed Phil.” I realized my words didn’t make sense, but nothing going on made sense.

“You were the one who attacked Phil?” Dwayne asked.

“Yes, it was me.”

Officer Ryan’s phone buzzed. He picked it up to look at it. He glanced toward Dwayne and Enrique. “I’ve got to take this call. Anything else you need from me?” They shook their heads in unison. Officer Ryan stuck out his hand to me. “Good luck, Ms. Reynolds.”

“Thank you.”

Dwayne and Enrique stepped into the hallway with him, leaving the door open as they huddled together whispering. Dwayne headed down the hallway and Enrique walked back in.

“It sounds like this is a domestic dispute. We try to stay out of domestic disputes unless someone is in danger. I need to ask you again—are you safe?”

“I’m safe.”

“Here’s what we do with missing person cases. By law, I’m required to contact the person who filed the missing person’s report. In this case, I’ll be contacting your mother. I’ll let her know you’re alive and we’ve located you. However, I can’t give her any information about your location or your whereabouts without your consent.”

“Can I call her?”

“Of course you can. You’re free to do whatever you’d like. Going missing isn’t a crime. People do it all the time. I just have to notify her as part of protocol.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a card, handing it to me. “I want you to take my card. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to give me a call. Anytime.”

He stood and it took Joe and me a moment to realize he was waiting for us to stand with him. I rose in slow motion following him out the door, back down the long hallway, and into the waiting room. We pushed through the heavy door, the sun and fresh air greeting us. We stood on the sidewalk, stunned.

I felt dazed like I was in a dream. Phil was alive? I wasn’t going to jail? None of it seemed possible. What did I do now?

Joe started jumping up and down. “Oh my God, this is crazy. You’re free!”

It still wasn’t sinking in. I kept waiting for one of the officers to rush out and grab me, telling me it was all a mistake and Phil was really dead. But no one came behind us. I was free to go. I walked back to the truck slowly trying to absorb what had just happened.

“Damn, I wish I drank. If ever there was a time to drink—this is it.” Joe laughed.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

The call to my mom was easy to make in comparison to the call I was going to have to make to David. My mom started crying as soon as she heard my voice.

“I thought I lost you, too. Where were you? What happened? Where are you now?”

“I’m in LA. I’m staying at a hotel. I just left the police station—”

“The police station? Oh God. I knew someone took you. Are you okay? Are you safe? How’d you get away?”

“I’m okay, Mom.” Her sobs broke in. I waited for them to subside. “I’m sorry, Mom.”

“Sorry? What are you sorry for? I’m just happy to know you’re alive.”

“I never should’ve put you through this. It was so selfish of me.”

Her crying stopped.

“You left on purpose?”

“Yes.”

“I never thought.... I just never imagined....”

She’d thought I was forced to leave. She’d never imagined I would do what my father had done to her. I was the stable one. I was the person she could count on to be predictable, the one she never had to worry about.

“I want to explain all of it to you, but I don’t want to have this conversation on the phone. Do you think you could come here?”

“Of course. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Is Rori okay? Did she make it?” I asked.

“Yes, thank God. She made it. They found a match for her kidney a few weeks after you disappeared. She got lucky. A young girl died in the hospital who was a perfect match. I was there for the surgery. She was such a trooper.” I could hear the pride in her voice.

“How is she?” I asked.

“She’s doing great. She’s our little miracle. Her body accepted the kidney well. She goes in for monthly check-ups with her specialist. I can’t remember

his name. Harrison, I think. She just finished her first year of kindergarten. You won't believe how much she's grown."

She spoke like I could step back into my old life as if nothing had happened, but I wasn't sure it was going to be that easy. I didn't know if I could. I wasn't the same person. I didn't know who I was. Twenty four hours ago, I'd thought I was a murderer.

"Thank you so much for doing this for me," I said to Joe after I hung up the phone.

"Please quit saying that to me. You don't have to keep thanking me." He sipped his coffee. He was on his second pot of the day. "Have you thought any more about what you're going to say to David?"

I shrugged. "I don't even know if he'll talk to me. He might just hang up."

"Whatever he does or doesn't do, at least you know you did what was right. You tried to make it better. You did your part. That's all you can do." His AA speak was so ingrained in him it had become a part of who he was. "Just be honest."

I'd been rehearsing David's phone number all morning, scared I'd forget it or lose the piece of paper I'd written it on. He'd had the same number for years no matter how many times we'd changed our cellphone plans and his was the only number I knew by heart, but I was scared the numbers would fly out of my head so I'd written them down.

"I'm going to take a walk. I want you to have privacy. Unless you want me to stay."

"No, that sounds good. I'll be okay. Just don't go far." I forced a smile.

"Okay. I've got my cell phone with me so just call when you want me to come back." He hugged me and then left.

I stared at the phone on the nightstand next to my bed. I picked it up as if it weighed a hundred pounds. I punched in his numbers slowly. It rang. Rang again. Three more times. I was about to hang up when he answered.

"Hello?"

His voice sounded distant and faraway.

"David?"

"Yes?"

"This is Celeste."

Dead air. I could hear him breathing.

"Please, don't hang up on me."



More dead air.

“I’m okay....”

It wasn’t what I’d planned to say.

“I don’t care if you’re okay.” His voice was stone.

“I’m in Los Angeles.”

“Good for you.”

Everything I wanted to say left my head. I’d been prepared for it, though, so last night Joe and I wrote a script and we’d practiced it this morning. I gripped the paper with shaking hands.

“First, I want to say how sorry I am—”

“I don’t want to hear your apologies. You can hang up now if that’s all you have to say because I don’t give a shit about how sorry you are.”

I gulped. I had to stay focused. I moved past the apology line and onto the next.

“Okay. I’m sor—I mean, never mind. I’d like it if you could give me an opportunity to explain myself. I know I don’t deserve it. Not at all, but I want to tell you the truth about what happened. All of it. Where I’ve been. Everything. I’d like to see you so we can talk. You don’t ever have to see me again afterward if you don’t want to. I know I can’t make anything better. I won’t even try.”

The silence stretched out between us.

“I’ll meet you, but only because you’re Rori’s mother. There are things about her we need to talk about. I want to be clear that I’m doing this for her. Not you.”

“I get it. I understand. I do. When are you free? I can meet you whatever time you’d like. You tell me when and where. I’ll be there.”

“You’re not coming to the house.”

“I wouldn’t expect to.”

“How about five o’clock at Café Aroma in Los Feliz? Do you remember where it is?”

“I do.”

He hung up without saying good-bye.

I called Joe and told him to come back. I filled him in on our conversation.

“At least he agreed to talk to you.”

“It was pretty awful. He still hates me. I’m scared to see him. Do you have to leave?”

His original plan was to help me turn myself in, spend the night in a hotel, and get up early the next morning to drive back to Minnesota. It hadn't included spending additional days with me. He was the owner of a construction company back in Triton and his crew needed him to run things efficiently.

"I can probably swing another day or so before things really start to fall apart. Let me call my people." He stepped outside to contact his crew and make arrangements.

"It's done. I bought myself some more time," he announced as he walked back into the room.

"What do we do now?" I asked. "I don't want to sit here obsessing until five."

"I have an idea. Why don't we go shopping?"

"Shopping?" It was the last thing on my mind.

"Promise you won't take this the wrong way?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Um, okay?"

"I've never seen you wear anything but those jeans and old t-shirts. Don't get me wrong, they're pretty hot." He smiled. "But I've got to admit, they're a bit homely. Plus, they don't fit you. Maybe you want to dress yourself up a bit to see your husband after all this time?"

I had no desire to shop. I didn't care what I looked like, but he was insistent. I refused to go to a mall, but he talked me into going to TJMaxx. It felt weird to think about what I was going to wear. I hadn't given any thought to my appearance in so long I forgot what it felt like. I didn't know what I liked anymore. I passed by the rows of designer clothes that would've normally caught my eye. I couldn't afford them anymore even if I wanted to. My small nest egg of cash was dwindling quickly. Joe trailed behind me until I settled on a pair of dark blue jeans and a loose fitting blouse with floral print. I bought a nice pair of brown sandals to compliment the outfit I'd chosen.

Next, we stopped at Walgreens where I bought foundation and mascara. I couldn't bring myself to buy anything else to paint my face with. Make-up felt like a step too far. I wanted to be transparent.

I took my time getting ready back at the hotel. It felt odd to slip into tight form-fitting clothes. I'd gotten used to my loose fitting clothes that hung on my hips and drooped over my shoulders. I felt tight and constricted in clothes

that fit. The shoes were uncomfortable and squished my toes. It was hard to believe I used to wear heels every day.

I looked at myself in the mirror once I'd finished. My hair was still short, but didn't look as ghastly as it once had. I rubbed the foundation on my cheeks and underneath my eyes, hoping it would help me not look so pale. I was terrified to see David again. Even though it was the right thing to do, it didn't make it any easier. Joe offered to stay behind, but I wanted him with me. His presence was comforting.

Nothing could've prepared me for the wave of emotions that assaulted me when I saw David. I felt like someone punched me in the stomach. His casual manner was gone. He sat upright in his seat, stiff and formal. He'd aged. New wrinkles pulled at the corner of his eyes. His hair had receded further back. I was shocked to see Robin sitting in the chair next to him. She looked like a different person. Her usual blond hair was dyed black and cut to her shoulders. She wore a long flowing sundress and her skin was glowing with a fresh tan. Her face was painted to perfection.

A flash of horror and recognition passed across their faces as we walked up to their table. They stared back and forth between Joe and me, looking us up and down. David's eyes turned to ice. Robin was studying my face carefully with an expression I'd never seen her make. Neither of them stood. Just stared.

Joe stuck out his hand. "I'm Joe. I'm a friend of Celeste's."

Neither of them moved. Joe dropped his arm to his side awkwardly. We slid into our seats across from them. Joe picked up the menu and began skimming it as if it was a casual dinner date. The waitress brought us water.

"Make this quick," David said with acid in his tone.

"I spoke with my mom and I'm glad to hear Rori's doing okay."

I hoped talking about Rori first would soften him.

"She's fine," David said.

"Did you guys order?" Joe asked.

David shot him a seething glare. Robin shifted in her seat uncomfortably.

"I'm fine with iced tea," Robin said.

The tension surrounding our table was so thick, even the waitress looked nervous when she came back to take our order.

"We're fine." David dismissed her. I had a feeling she wouldn't be back again.

"How have you been?" I asked.

David rolled his eyes. "I don't have time for small talk. Get to it."

I swallowed the lump of emotions in my throat and took a sip of my water. "I realize I should've had this conversation with you a long time ago. I should've told you about what happened with Phil. I—"

"I'm going to stop you right there. I don't care about your affair. I don't want to hear your explanation."

"I think it's important. I never got a chance to tell you what happened. It might help what I did make sense."

"I'm telling you again, I don't care."

Robin placed her hand on his back. "Give her a chance."

I looked at her, hoping she could read the gratitude in my eyes. David sat back in his chair, arms crossed against his chest. "The first thing I want you to know is I didn't have an affair."

"Jesus Christ, Celeste, you fucked someone else. I'm not doing this. This was a mistake."

He stood up. Robin scrambled for her purse. They started moving the other chairs out of the way to leave. Joe stood, blocking them.

"We're leaving. I never should've come in the first place. I don't want to hear this," David said through gritted teeth.

"I think you might want to hear what she has to say," Joe said not moving from his position in front of them.

The aisle between our tables was too small for them to move around him. They'd have to go through him or move him if they wanted to leave. The gesture wasn't lost on David.

"Buddy, I don't know who you think you are, but I don't have to do anything." David's face was bright red. He stepped closer to Joe.

"Man, just sit down and hear her out. Give her a chance."

"You can either move out of the way or I'm going to move you." David's chest puffed out. His fists were clenched by his sides. Robin hid behind him.

"I'd think twice about that." Joe stepped closer to him. Their chests were touching. David raised his arm to push Joe out of the way.

"He raped me," I blurted out.

David stopped as if he'd hit an invisible wall.

"What?" Disbelief shone in his eyes.

"Why don't you sit back down?" Joe's voice broke in.

They did as they were told, moving robotically back into their seats. David gripped the table with both hands. Robin's eyes filled with tears. She

put her hand on his back, rubbing circles.

“It was night of the awards banquet for donors. I was in San Diego. Remember that? You couldn’t go because it was during finals week?”

His face was a stone wall revealing nothing, but he had to remember. We had the same banquet every year and we always tried to make a vacation out of it.

“I flirted with him at dinner. It was wrong and I shouldn’t have flirted. I... I don’t know what I was thinking. I stayed for the reception and danced with him, too. I’m so sorry, David. I am.”

I wished he could see inside my heart and know how much I’d give to go back in time to erase what I’d done that night.

“He asked me to go up to his room with him to have a drink and I went. It was stupid. So dumb. I never should’ve gone. Believe me, I regret it every day.”

David’s face was pinched and his eyes were filled with suspicion.

“As soon as we were in his room, I panicked. I realized what would happen if I stayed and I couldn’t do that to you. I didn’t have it in me. All I could think about was you, David. I swear. I knew I’d made a mistake and all I wanted to do was leave and go home to you.” Tears flowed down my cheeks. I looked at him, desperately searching for some hole in his armor. There was none. “I didn’t have a drink. I couldn’t. I told him I’d made a mistake and nothing was going to happen between us, but when I tried to leave he wouldn’t let me. He called me a tease. Then, he.... h-he raped me.”

I’d confessed my secret a second time. It wasn’t any easier to admit to David than it had been to Joe. For a minute, I let myself remember everything I’d worked so hard to forget. The way he’d grabbed my hands so I couldn’t leave and pinned them behind my back. How he’d thrown me on the bed as if I weighed nothing and the weight of his body on top of me as I struggled against him. The tear of my panties as he ripped them off me from underneath the new dress I was wearing.

“I don’t believe you,” David spat. “I don’t believe a word you have to say. Pretty convenient to cry rape.”

“David!” Robin cried.

“What?” David turned to her. “She’s a fuckin liar. Everything about her is a lie.”

“I’m sorry, David. I’m so sorry. It was all my fault.” I reached over the table to grab his hands. He yanked them away, pushing back in his chair.

“Damn right, it’s your fault. Don’t think I feel bad for you for one second.” Venomous hate filled every word.

“David!” Robin cried again.

“I’m done. I’ve heard enough. You can listen to her stories, but I’m not. I’m outta here.” He got up again. Robin looked torn.

“I’ll meet you at the car,” she said.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll catch a cab.”

Just like that he was gone leaving Robin sitting by herself. I crumbled in my chair weeping. Where was his compassion? Joe put his arm around me.

“Shh. Shh. It’s going to be okay,” he said.

Robin stared at us as if she was watching a movie. “It is kind of hard to believe. How could you not tell me?”

“Robin, I swear. I’m telling the truth. I didn’t have an affair. He raped me. You have to understand what this is like.”

Back in college, she’d gone to a party, gotten wasted, and her date assaulted her in one of the bedrooms. The only thing that saved her from getting raped was the fraternity guy who walked into the bedroom as he was wrestling with her on the bed. I’d walked her through the process of reporting him to campus security and the police. Nobody had believed her and nothing happened to the guy who tried to rape her. They’d dismissed her claims and told her it was stupid college fun. They’d lectured her about watching how much she drank at fraternity parties. Her own mother had been the worst. She’d told her that’s what happened to girls who got drunk at parties.

I saw the truth register in her eyes. She knew exactly what I was referring to.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I couldn’t. I didn’t tell anyone. I didn’t want it to have happened. I kept telling myself if I pretended it didn’t happen, then it’d eventually go away. I told myself it wasn’t that bad and hadn’t affected me. I did everything in my power not to think about it. I couldn’t talk about it because talking about it made it real and I didn’t want it to be real.”

“How did you work with him every day?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I have no idea. It was like I had a switch I turned off whenever I was around him.”

“Did you know he was Rori’s dad?”

“No.” I hung my head. “I know it sounds stupid and childish, but I refused to consider the possibility that she could be his. I wanted her to be

David's so badly and she could've been, but it was always there in the back of my head. It was why it was so hard for me to connect with Rori. There was a part of me that knew she could be his. That she was part monster."

It was the first time I'd said it out loud. I'd never been able to fully erase it from my consciousness despite my denial and repression. At the very periphery of my awareness, I knew there was a possibility she'd been conceived in that hideous moment, that his spawn had been planted inside of me, and she carried it. I couldn't love her because she might be part of him and I hated him.

"Wow. I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything."

"Why'd you run? Why didn't you just come clean?" she asked.

"I wasn't running because of that. I was running because I thought I'd killed Phil," I said.

Her eyes grew big. "What are you talking about? Is that why you had blood all over your clothes?"

"Yes. I don't actually know what happened. I was wasted that day—"

"You were wasted?"

"Yes. I know it's hard to believe, but I didn't know what to do. I was so confused and out of my mind. I really was. I got a bottle and went to one of the sleazy hotels in Hollywood. I drank all day long." It felt surreal like I was telling her a story about somebody else. My voice was robotic as I recounted the details. "I had to call Phil because of Rori. So I did and he came to the hotel. I have no idea what happened when he got there. I must've blacked out. All I know is I came to and he was in a bloody mess on the hotel floor. His head was bashed in and he had stab wounds all over him. I checked his pulse. There wasn't one when I felt it, but I guess he was alive. I must've checked wrong or maybe I was so out of it I couldn't tell, I have no idea."

"You know he left Chapman. I wonder if that's why. I guess he went out to the east coast to start a new firm or something."

I breathed a sigh of relief. As glad as I was to find out I wasn't a murderer, there was a part of me that liked the idea of him being dead because he could never hurt me or anyone else again. If he wasn't dead, at least he was as far away from me as possible.

"Did David talk to him?" I asked.

"No, he wouldn't leave Rori's side. He sent me to track him down. I went to your office, but he wasn't there. His secretary told me he was in the

hospital. She never said why.”

I reached across the table to touch her hand. She recoiled as if I’d stabbed her with a knife. “This is a lot to take in. I should get going. I’ll talk to David. He might be more rational once he’s had some time to cool off.”

“I get it. I do. We still have to talk about Rori. We didn’t even get to that part.”

Robin’s eyes had been unwavering but she looked away. “You’ll need to talk to David about that one.”

“Sure. Right. I understand.”

“I’m glad you’re okay,” she said as she got up to leave.



## Chapter Twenty-Three

“I’m proud of you. You did really good today,” Joe said as we sat eating our pizza in the hotel room. It was the first meal I’d eaten since we arrived in California. Food still tasted awful, but I forced myself to swallow.

“Thanks.”

“I liked Robin.”

“Everyone always likes Robin.”

“David looked exactly how I pictured him. Seriously, I think you described him perfectly. What was it like seeing him after all this time?”

Seeing him again hadn’t felt like I thought it would. I’d expected him to be angry and hurt, but I hoped there’d be a small measure of love buried underneath his pain. I thought he’d feel some level of compassion when he found out Phil raped me, but he had to hate me if he didn’t feel anything after what I’d told him. When two people loved each other like we had, there was an intangible energy connecting them, a magnetic force always pulling you toward each other, but gravity had shifted and we no longer orbited in the same realm. Our tie was severed.

“Honestly, it just felt empty. It was like standing on one side of the Grand Canyon while he was on the other.”

“Do you think he’ll talk to you again?” he asked.

“He has to. We have to talk about Rori,” I said.

What was it going to be like to see her? Did she hate me as much as David?

“I don’t think I could do any of this without you.”

He’d become precious to me in such a short time and I was lucky to have him. He’d held my hand through the worst moments of my life. How would I ever repay him for his kindness?

“Somebody did it for me when I needed it the most and it meant the world to me. I feel like it’s the one thing I can do to give back to the people who helped me. I know I’m the most put together guy you’ve ever met, but for a while I was a hot mess.”

I smiled. "I wouldn't exactly call you put together."

I gathered up the leftover pizza and put it back in the carton. I shoved it into the small refrigerator. We'd been dancing around the fact that he was leaving tomorrow all afternoon. I returned to sit next to him on the bed. He threw his arm around me.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

I returned the question. "What are you going to do?"

"Ugh, I don't want to leave you!" He threw himself backward on the bed, throwing a mock fit by kicking his hands and legs on the bed. "I have to leave sometime tomorrow. It's going to take me at least two days to get there even if I drive straight through. The crew is doing fine, but we start a new project next week and I have to be there for it."

As much as I didn't want them to, my eyes filled with tears at the thought of him leaving.

He sat back up. "You know, you could come with me if you want."

I shook my head. I couldn't go back to Triton. My life was here. My mom was arriving soon and I had to see her. There were still so many things to take care of. I was waiting to hear from David or Robin, but my phone hadn't rung all day. What to do about Rori hung in the air. I couldn't make any decisions until I knew what was going to happen with her.

"I guess I'll get a job. Start looking for an apartment."

It seemed so dismal and bleak. I'd expected my reunion to be more climatic, but it just felt sad and hopeless. I'd wanted my truth to bring healing, but instead it had only brought more pain. The first waves of depression threatened to wash over me.

"I don't want to leave you here all by yourself if you still need me. I can call my crew and take another day."

"No, it's okay. I can't expect you to put your life on hold for all of this. I don't think things are going to be resolved any time soon. Besides, my mom will be here in a few days so I won't even have to be alone for that long."

"Fine. Okay. But I'm not going to leave until tomorrow night. I want to be here tomorrow in case David calls."

He suggested we watch a movie, something light and funny to take our minds off things. I agreed and we decided on Bridesmaids. I'd already seen it twice, but it was still funny even though I knew all the lines.

I laid awake long after we'd turned TV off and crawled into our separate beds. I listened to the sounds of him falling asleep across the room, but sleep

evaded me. What was I going to do when he left? He was the only person I'd ever let into my pain-filled center. Would I see him again?

We'd spent all of our nights together sleeping in separate beds, but tonight I crawled over onto his. I lay on top of his comforter and rested my head on his chest. He stirred and opened his eyes. He smiled at me sleepily and wrapped his arms around me. I felt safe in his arms.

I slept on his chest until the morning and woke before he did. I put on the coffee we both would need. I sat in the chair watching him sleep. He looked so peaceful. I couldn't help but wonder if I was ever going to feel peaceful again.

I couldn't hide the tears when it was time to say good-bye. His own eyes were wet.

"I'm good at a lot of things, but you should know good-byes aren't one of them." We'd been standing next to his truck for ten minutes. Neither of us had any idea how to end the journey we'd been on together. He'd been the statue holding me up and without him, I was afraid I'd crumble. I didn't know if I could do this on my own. He kissed the top of my head. "I'm going to miss you, kiddo. I'll probably drive through the night, but I'll call you at one of my stops to check on you."

"What if I'm not here?" I asked.

"Maybe you should add buying a new cell phone to your list of things to do."

I smacked him playfully. "Seriously, though. Will you call back?"

He pulled me into his arms again. "Of course. I'll call back as many times as it takes to reach you." He moved me back, holding me at arm's length. "You're going to be okay. You can do this. You're stronger than you think."

I looked into his soft brown eyes and the way his lips curled and wanted to kiss him. I wanted to pull him close and never let him go. It sent electricity shooting through my body. I pulled away.

"You have to go now. You've got to just turn around and get in your truck and go." I forced the words around the emotions in my throat.

Tears streamed down his cheeks. "Okay." He grabbed me one final time and I breathed in his scent knowing that no matter what happened, I'd never forget him. "I'm going. Good-bye, Celeste. You take care of yourself."

I stood rooted to my spot watching as he drove away, his taillights fading into the night. He'd carried me as far as he could. I was going to have to do the rest on my own no matter how terrified I was. But I realized as I fell

asleep without him that I didn't want to do things on my own anymore. I'd spent my life building walls around me to keep other people out and my emotions inside. It was the sweetest feeling to have let someone inside and now that I'd tasted it, I wasn't sure I could go back to being the self-sufficient put together woman I'd been. I didn't know if I even wanted to.

I woke up early before the sun came up and the day loomed ominously in front of me. I still hadn't heard from David or Robin. I didn't know what I was supposed to do. The only way they had to reach me was through the hotel phone. If I left, there was a possibility I'd miss one of their calls, but what if neither of them ever called? What would I do then?

I didn't know what to do with myself. I couldn't stomach the thought of watching TV again. I'd lived without it for so long I'd grown to prefer it that way. I reached into the nightstand next to my bed and pulled out the blue Gideon Bible. I flipped through the pages aimlessly not reading any of the words. Every story I'd heard in AA described a God that had done the impossible—done things for them that they could've never done themselves. They always said you didn't have to believe any particular God or religion, but the key to having your life restored was turning it over to a higher power.

I got down on my knees. I had nothing to lose. I folded my hands in a position they'd never been in before.

"I don't know who you are. I don't even know if you're there or exist. All I know is I've made a mess of my life. And not just my life. Every life I've touched. I don't want to hurt anymore and I don't want to hurt anyone else. I have no idea what I'm doing. None. But I do know one thing—I can't do this by myself. I need help. Please help me."

I stayed in my position for a few minutes waiting for something to happen, watching to see if a bright light would fill my room or the plan for my life would suddenly be revealed in an instant revelation. Nothing came. Joe always said when you didn't know what to do, then you just did the next thing in front of you so I got up from my spot on the floor and made coffee. I took my first cup into the shower with me.

The phone rang as I was stepping out and I ran to pick it up, dripping water on the carpet.

"Hello?"

"It's me. I talked to Robin. She filled me in on everything you told her."

"Oh, ok."

“Listen, we need to talk about Rori. There are some things we need to get straightened out.”

“I agree.”

“I don’t want to meet at a restaurant again and you can’t come here. I don’t want you in my house,” he said.

“Do you want to come here? I’m staying at Comfort Inn in Santa Monica,” I asked.

“Are you there now?”

“Yes.”

“I’m coming over. See you in twenty minutes.”

Click.

I raced through the room making the bed and picking up the Styrofoam cups scattered all over. I tidied up the small bathroom and smoothed my hair. I put on the same clothes I’d seen them in before because they were the only nice ones I had.

I opened the door twenty minutes later to find David and Robin standing there together. The bags underneath David’s eyes told me he hadn’t been sleeping. Robin gave me a nervous smile. They moved into the room together taking the seats at the table. I perched on the edge of the bed since there were only two chairs. We stared at each other, waiting for someone to speak.

“Where’s your boyfriend?” David broke the silence.

“He’s not my boyfriend. He’s a friend I met in AA. He’s kind of like my sponsor in a way,” I said.

“You go to AA now? Were you a secret alcoholic too?”

His face was inflexible, cold, and unforgiving. I didn’t recognize the man sitting in front of me even though he looked like the man I’d been married to for ten years. His softness was gone and replaced with a hardened exterior and rigid walls. It wasn’t just in his body. His eyes held the distinct look of a veteran who’d been to war and returned a changed man. His innocence was gone.

“No, I’m not an alcoholic, but I started going to meetings in Minnesota while I was there. They helped me have the courage to tell you truth. It’s weird, but AA is a really great support group.”

He snorted. “And you needed so much support. Poor you.”

Robin touched his knee underneath the table. “Let’s try to be civil about this. We all just want the best for Rori.”

“Really? We all want the best for Rori? I’m pretty sure everyone here in this room knows that’s not true.” He glared at me. His hate was so palpable I could almost reach out and touch it.

“David, we talked about this.” She sighed.

“I’m willing to do whatever you think is best, David. I realize I’ve lost my right to have a say in her life.”

I was willing to do things exactly as he wanted to. I wouldn’t rush them. I wouldn’t push or pressure him. I’d take my time rebuilding my relationship with her however he wanted me to do it. He knew what was best for her. He always had.

“That’s really what we want to talk to you about. Your rights.” David’s voice changed from one of hostility to business. His voice was matter of fact as he continued. “I want a divorce and we’d like you sign off on your parental rights for Rori.”

I felt the last shred of hope go out of my body.

“Are you sure you want a divorce, David? Maybe if you had more time to think about things—”

He cut me off. “Don’t even bother. I’m done. All I want from you is your signature on the dotted lines.”

“Ok, um.... well, I... I just-I just...” This wasn’t how it was supposed to end. “What does signing over my parental rights mean?”

“It means you sign a legal document giving up any and all rights to Rori. You don’t get to make any choices in regards to her life.”

“Do I get to see her? Talk to her? Am I still in her life at all?”

David and Robin exchanged glances communicating something I couldn’t understand. It was obvious they’d grown closer than they’d ever been.

“No,” David said flatly. “Once you sign the papers, you can’t ever see or talk to her again.”

I’d agreed to do whatever David wanted—to allow him to call the shots—but I wasn’t sure about this. I’d stay out of her life if that’s what he wanted, but what about what she wanted? There might come a time in her adult life when she had questions that I’d be the only one able to answer. I wanted her to understand why I’d done what I’d done. She deserved an explanation and I was the best person to give it to her.

“I’m not sure.” I chose my words carefully because I didn’t want to set him off. “I don’t expect to just walk back into her life and start making decisions about what’s best for her. I know that’s asking too much, but don’t

you think she might have questions some day? Maybe not right now, but what about when she's a teenager or an adult? She may want to know me. She might want to talk to me."

"That's not going to happen," he said.

"But how do you know? How can you be sure?"

Despite how angry I was with my father, I would've given anything to talk to him even if I didn't want him in my life. I would've wanted an explanation from him.

"I'm sure."

How could he be sure? He couldn't see beyond his own pain and anger. I looked toward Robin. "What do you think? Don't you think we should leave it a bit more flexible and open-ended? What if she wants to talk to me someday?"

Robin refused to meet my eyes. "It's not possible."

"Why? Is it so unrealistic to think there will come a day when she wants to know who I am and why I did what I did? I'm not saying I'll tell her she was conceived by rape, but she's going to want to know why I left."

I didn't want her to grow up the way I had, imagining all kinds of reasons for why I'd gone away. I wanted her to understand why I did what I did.

"She doesn't know you left," Robin said.

How could she not know I was gone? It had been a year.

"Huh? That doesn't make any sense. What does she think happened?"

"Celeste, we told Rori you were dead," David said.

The wind was knocked out of me. Waves of emotions cascaded over me. I searched through like a Rolodex trying to settle on the right one to fit my feelings, but they were coming too fast.

"Why? I don't understand why. Why would you do that to her?" Anger flared inside of me.

"Seriously, really? You think it was better for her to think her mother had just walked out on her and abandoned her without even saying good-bye or so much as a second glance? To know she was about to die and her own mother just said—see you later? Believe me, it's better for her to think you're dead."

It was at that moment I knew one bad decision could destroy a lifetime and ruin every good decision you'd ever made. Returning a smile and a suggestive glance had set a train in motion that sped up relentlessly until it

destroyed everyone in its tracks. I'd come back hoping to receive redemption, but there would be no redemption. No resolution.

Robin jumped in to explain, her eyes frantic and pleading. "We didn't think you were ever going to come back and we didn't want her to know you'd left her. We didn't want her to have to live with that sense of abandonment her whole life. Always wondering how you could leave her when she was dying, where you were, or what you were doing. We thought we were protecting her."

"You agreed to this? You were a part of this?"

It was unbelievable. I couldn't imagine Robin agreeing to tell my daughter I was dead. She knew how important mothers were to their children even bad ones.

"Yes. Believe me, it wasn't a decision we made easily. We talked about it for a long time. We even talked to your mom about it. She said she always wished she'd told you girls your father had died rather than tell you the truth."

My mom had agreed to it to? She'd wanted to tell us our dad was dead? I didn't know what to say. The room swirled around me. For a minute, I thought I might pass out like I'd done in the police station. I focused on my breathing, willed myself to stay present.

"It didn't take long for her to stop asking about you." His words were bullets.

"What did you tell her?" I asked.

"We told her you'd been in a car accident," David said.

"Didn't she wonder why there was never a funeral?"

"She's too young to even know about funerals."

Had it been that easy to erase me? I'd spent every day since I'd left thinking about them. There wasn't a single night where I didn't see one of their faces before I fell asleep or hear them calling for me in my dreams.

"What happened with her? Her illness? The hospital?" The tears caught in my throat. She was just a little girl. She didn't deserve any of this. "I still have a right to know what happened to her."

"Shortly after you disappeared, there was a kidney match in a hospital in San Francisco. She was in pretty bad shape so she was first on the waiting list. It was a successful surgery and she handled it really well. She was back at home within a few weeks. It took her about another full month to recover,



but she bounced back fairly quickly. Now we go in every month to meet with her specialists.” Robin looked like she wanted to jump out of her skin.

“But what about me? When did you tell her I had died? What did you tell her when I disappeared?”

They couldn’t have told her I was dead the minute I disappeared. They wouldn’t have had any idea how long I’d stay gone. What if I’d come back in a few months? What if I hadn’t stayed gone as long as I did? They didn’t know it would be as long as it was. How long had they waited until they told her? I tried to give them the benefit of the doubt. Maybe they’d waited until they felt like they didn’t have any other choice but to tell her I was gone for good.

“Thankfully, when you first left she was out of it. She was in a ketoacidotic coma for almost two weeks. She barely woke up and when she did she wasn’t aware of anything going on around her. We told her you’d stepped out for coffee or to go home and get clothes. She was never awake long enough to wonder and even if she did, she remembers very little about being in the hospital.” Robin’s eyes were pleading for understanding. “For a while after her surgery, I wrote her letters like they were from you and we gave them to her every morning. We told her you were at work, but that you sat with her at night while she slept. After we’d decided to tell her you’d passed away, we told her you’d been hit by a car on your way home from work. David got her in therapy within a few days to process her illness and your death. The therapist agreed with what we’d done.”

What therapist would think it was a good idea to tell a child their mother was dead? It felt like a punishment. An irreversible one. She still wasn’t answering the most important question.

“When did you tell her?”

“She just told you—after we got home from the hospital,” David said.

“But how long had it been since I’d been missing?” I asked.

“About a month,” he said.

I couldn’t contain my anger any longer. “You waited a month? A month? What if I would’ve come back? You didn’t do this for her, David, you did this for yourself. You wanted to punish me!”

“I wanted to make sure you could never hurt either of us again. Call it what you’d like.” He shrugged his shoulders.

Even if I’d had an affair like he thought I did, it didn’t mean I deserved to be erased from life. It didn’t mean I had to be punished eternally. It wasn’t

fair. It was selfish and he wasn't thinking about Rori at all.

"I need some time to think about this," I said.

He laid his hands out on the table as if we were in the middle of a card game and he was showing his hand. "There's nothing to think about. I've been working with a lawyer from the minute I found out I wasn't Rori's biological father. Since the night I left the hospital. I told you then that it was over between us and I meant it. My lawyer has counseled me throughout this entire process. She forced Phil to take a DNA test and provide blood for genetic testing. We needed it to confirm her illness. Big shocker—he's Rori's dad. He signed over his parental rights as soon as the results came back. I've officially adopted Rori as my daughter to make sure he can never lay claim on her life. Not that I'm worried about it. He seemed eager to get things over with as quick as possible and wash his hands of the whole ordeal. Now, I want you to do the same thing. I want a divorce and I want you out of Rori's life. You can either willingly sign your rights over or we can go to court and spend lots of unnecessary money for the same results. There's no judge in the country that's going to give you rights to your child."

Was that true? Had I been so terrible that I didn't deserve a chance to make it better?

"I still need to think about it. It's a big decision," I said.

"Fine." He stood to leave, looking down at Robin who was still in her seat.

"Can I have a minute with her?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Whatever. Take all the time you need. I'm done."

Robin's body relaxed after he left. "You look so different."

I forced a smile.

"You cut all your hair off."

"I did."

"You could've told me about Phil. I would've helped you." Her compassionate expression changed to the look she wore each time she got angry. "But you know what I finally realized yesterday? I was your best friend, at least I was supposed to be, and you never really let me in. I've known you twenty years and I've told you everything, but you've never told me anything."

"That's not true." I shared more of myself with Robin than I shared with anyone. She'd known me since college.

“Really? You didn’t tell me you had a sister until she showed up at your house over spring break and I’d known you two years. Two whole years and I never knew you had a sister. Then, whenever she got in trouble, you never even told me about it until after it happened. Every crisis you went through—you went through by yourself. You only told me about things after they happened. All of your miscarriages. You hid in your house until you could put yourself together again. It was always like, hey I got this. I don’t need you—”

“Robin, it—”

“No, I’m not done. You got raped, Celeste—raped. And you never said a word about it. You know David thinks it’s just a story you made up? He doesn’t think there’s any way someone could go through something like that and not tell anyone about it. But you know what? I believe you because if anyone could—it’s you. There’s not a soul on the planet that you let help you. You control every part of the relationships you’re in. You expect people to love and trust you, but you don’t give them the same in return.”

I’d expected the venom from David, but not from Robin. Not her. I thought she’d understand. I wasn’t prepared for her assault. I’d barely sustained his.

“I don’t understand.”

“Of course you don’t. You’re the most self-centered person I’ve ever met. Ever. You still think all of this is about you. Like you can just disappear from our lives and waltz back in like nothing ever happened. Well, you can’t. It’s not that easy. It’s been a year. An entire year. David might’ve said you were dead because he was pissed, but I actually thought you were. I thought something terrible had happened to you. I had nightmares for months. Months! Do you hear me? I thought someone killed you. I jumped every time the phone rang sure that it was going to be David telling me they found your body. Do you know how horrible that is? Do you know what it’s like to live with that?”

“You know what? Stop yelling at me. I’m tired of being screamed at. Have either of you stopped to think about what it’s been like for me? I was raped, Robin! That man beat the shit out of me, pinned me down on the bed, and raped me. I was terrified. And could I tell anyone? Absolutely not. No one would’ve believed me because I went to his room willingly and everyone loves Phil. Who would believe a word I said? I had to work with him. Every. Single. Day. Do you know how crazy it made me feel? I repressed it for so

long that when it came out, I killed him. Do you know what it's like to find out you're capable of killing someone? I lost my mind. I didn't leave because I was running away from my life. I left because I thought I killed the man who raped me and I lost my mind."

She started to cry, but I couldn't stop. Something deep within had been released and I had no power over it.

"Guess what? Women who get raped don't tell anyone about it all the time. All the time. And you know why? Because of this—this right here. Nobody believes you. This is exactly why I didn't say anything because somehow I'm wrong. You of all people should understand. You didn't get out of bed for weeks and he didn't even rape you. He never even got into your pants. Nobody believed you and you had an actual witness. How do you think I feel?"

Her cries had turned into wails. I wanted to hit her and hug her at the same time.

"I'm sorry. God, I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm just so angry. And confused. This is all happening so fast. I can't wrap my brain around any of it. Maybe I need some time too," she cried.

I pointed toward the door. "I think we all do."

## Chapter Twenty-Four

My mom hadn't stopped smiling since she got off the plane. Every few minutes, she would reach out and touch me to make sure I was still there and she wasn't dreaming. She was sleeping in Joe's bed. I looked at the clock. If things went according to his plans, he should be back in Minnesota by the end of the night. He'd kept his word and called me every night since he'd left. It had only taken him three days this time.

My mom insisted on taking me shopping. She was horrified I'd let myself go the way I had. I obliged and followed her through all her favorite spots at the Beverly Center to appease her. Shopping used to be one of our favorite things to do together. We always went whether I was visiting her or she was visiting me. Today as I strolled among the throngs of people and the shiny storefronts adorned with the latest sales, it all seemed unnecessary. There was nothing I wanted to buy. I used to love to walk through stores, running my fingers along fabric, pulling things out, putting them back, fingering the purses, and spraying perfume. None of it held enjoyment for me and I couldn't remember why I used to find so much pleasure in it.

I followed my mom as she weaved in and out of stores, chattering about the weather in Florida and whose husband had passed away and which ones had cancer. She'd recently moved into a retirement community even though she refused to call it that. She loved it.

"Robin said you helped them decide to tell Rori I was dead," I announced at lunch. I'd been waiting for the right opportunity to bring it up, but there wasn't any easy way to broach the subject.

She nearly choked on her food. She grabbed her water and gulped it down. "I did. I'm sorry, but I did."

"So, you think it's best too? Better for her to think I'm dead?"

She took a deep breath. "Let me explain something I've never told you before. I should've told you girls your father was dead. I told Robin that and I meant it. You can't really grieve when you think the person you love is still out there. The torture is never over. You always wonder and watch, waiting

for them to come home. When someone dies, you go through the grief process once and it's over. It gets easier and easier as you move on. But you girls went through the pain of him leaving time and time again. Each time you got one of his stupid cards. Don't you remember how you used to cry?"

I cried whenever they came and each time I asked my mom when he was coming home. Each time the hope that he might come back rose to life again. For years as a child, I'd kept a bulletin board with all his postcards tacked up on it, creating a map of all the places he'd been and imagining myself there with him. Would it have been easier if I thought he was dead?

"I couldn't tell you he wasn't coming home even though I knew he never was. As long as you knew he was alive, you could hold onto the hope that he might. I think holding onto hope is what killed Rachel. It destroyed her and I played a part in that. I blame myself. You don't know this, but she used to beg me to call your dad whenever she was in treatment or jail. She wanted me to find a way to get a hold of him so he would come help her. I think a part of her hoped if she got sick enough he'd be forced to come back. Some of Rachel's anger toward me was because she had this delusional belief that I knew how to reach him and wasn't allowing him to have contact with you girls because I was angry with him. It couldn't have been further from the truth. I would've given anything to honor her requests. But you know what the sad thing is? Even if I could get a hold of your dad in some way, he wouldn't have come. I don't think he would've come even if one of you was dead."

I'd never heard my mom share so honestly and openly. It was the first time I was hearing about Rachel's struggles. I had no idea she thought my mom was keeping my father away from us. It helped explain some of her anger toward my mom that I never understood.

"I would've saved you so much suffering if I just told you girls he was dead. When Robin came to me and asked what I thought about it, I took it as an opportunity to do things differently. I couldn't save you girls from all the suffering you went through, but I could save Rori. I could give her a chance to have a normal life—something I could never give you."

"I don't know if having a dead mother qualifies as a normal life."

"I'm sure David didn't tell you this, but he's done a beautiful job helping her through your death." She laughed. "That sounds ridiculous, huh?"

I nodded. It was beyond ridiculous.

“But he has. He speaks to her about you like you were the most amazing and perfect mother. He may have lots of strong feelings toward you, but he keeps them from her. To her, you were her mom who loved her more than anything else in the world, but who went to be with God in heaven. Her therapist has been wonderful. They created a memory book of the two of you. It’s adorable. They entitled it, *Mommy and Me*. David reads it to her almost every night.”

“He does?” I couldn’t believe it.

“Yes, he does. He may hate you, but he still loves that girl more than anything else.”

I lay in bed that night trying to imagine what my life would’ve been like if I believed my dad was dead. Would it have made a difference? Would Rachel have made better choices? There was no way to know. I couldn’t say for sure what effect it would have had. It forced me to grow up long before I should’ve, but growing up quickly hadn’t been all negative. I’d learned how to be self-sufficient and independent. Those skills had served me well. I’d grown into a successful woman and maybe I wouldn’t have been that way if my dad hadn’t left, but I couldn’t make decisions about Rori based on my own life. What was best for her?

I would be in for a long legal battle if I refused to sign over my parental rights and there was a chance I wouldn’t win. It would cost lots of money that I didn’t have. The bigger question was what would happen if I won? What role did I want to have in Rori’s life? Would I try to be her mother again? Would it be any different than it’d been before? There was a part of me that didn’t think it would and was afraid of the possibility it’d be worse than it had been before I left. I couldn’t connect with her when I was in denial about who her father was and now that I’d admitted the truth, would it be even more difficult?

It would be so confusing to believe your mother was dead and then find out she was still alive. Adults wouldn’t be able to handle that. How could I expect a child to? But most importantly, she’d know David had lied to her if I came back into her life. I couldn’t begin to imagine how that would affect her. It would change everything for her because David was her world. It would shake her entire foundation and might ruin their relationship forever. I’d be responsible for destroying the sense of safety and security he provided for her and I wasn’t sure I could do that.

“I’ve met someone.” My mom’s voice interrupted the night.

I thought she was asleep. I flicked on the lamp on the nightstand. “What? Oh my God, I can’t believe it. Who is he? Tell me all about it.”

Her eyes shone with new love, the starry-eyed look everyone carries in the beginning of a relationship as if the mere mention of their name sends them into a world of bliss.

“He lives in my building. We met in the courtyard by the pool when we were reading. We were reading the same book—the newest James Patterson. Can you believe we were reading the same book? Anyway, he’s as big of a fan as I am. We started talking about books and he invited me to the book club he goes to every Tuesday night. At first, I said no, but then I changed my mind. We went out to dinner afterward and had the nicest time. He’s the sweetest man. Nothing like your father.”

“Mom, that’s great. I’m so happy for you.”

“It was really tough at first. I kept thinking about your father. I was so scared to let myself have feelings for another man. Your father was my one true love. You know I’ve never been with another man, right?”

“Yes, Mom, I know.”

It was the same story she always told. How my dad was her high school sweetheart and she’d never loved another. I’d heard it hundreds of times over the years.

“It was so weird to think about sharing my life with someone else. Letting someone else take care of me again, but he’s so good to me. He takes out all my trash. He’s fixed the sink in my second bathroom and he’s changed all the lightbulbs. We’ve even started grocery shopping together because we eat most of our dinners together now. It’s so nice to share in dinner conversation with someone else. I can’t believe we have so much in common. We don’t even fight over the TV. He likes the same shows I do. He’s a die-hard Survivor fan just like me and he even likes the Bachelor. Can you believe that? A man who likes the bachelor?”

I had to smile because I doubted he loved the Bachelor. I was fairly certain there wasn’t a straight male who was hooked on the fairytale of the Bachelor, but that’s how it was in the beginning. He must really like her if he was willing to sit through the Bachelor.

“I’ve realized your father never paid all that much attention to me. He was always focused on himself, his plans, and his career. I used to think he was just driven and I wanted to be supportive of him. I was always second place, but I was okay with that. I catered to his every need trying to make him



happy, but you know what? I never thought about my own happiness and he didn't either. Everything we ever did was about him. I came to the conclusion that he wasn't driven. He was selfish and self-centered. He didn't care nearly as much about me or his family as he did himself."

She talked about him as if he was still present in our lives like she'd been having conversations with him all of this time when in reality, she hadn't spoken to the man in over thirty years.

"What's the new guy's name?"

"Bernard." Her eyes lit up when she said his name. "Isn't that such an old fashioned name? It really is, but it fits him perfectly because he's such an old fashioned kind of a man. He doesn't even have an email address. Can you believe that?"

I leaned over to her bed and gave her a big hug. "I'm so happy for you. I love seeing you sparkle like this."

"Oh nonsense, I'm not sparkling." She pushed me away.

"What changed your mind about him?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. Normally, I wouldn't have paid him any attention. You know me. But, I realized maybe it was time to move on. Eventually, life has to go forward again. Once I made the decision, it was easy. It freed me to love again."

It had taken her thirty years to move on. She'd spent over three decades living with the ghost of my father. I started to feel sorry for her like I'd done so many times before, but realized I wasn't any different. I'd been living with the same ghost. I'd lived my life trying to make sure nobody left me again. I became the perfect child and grew into the perfect adult so people would love me and not leave. I created a strong character to present to the world and lived according to strategically developed plans. My plans hadn't been about my own happiness, but rather constructing a world that couldn't be destroyed. I thought by doing so I'd avoid pain and loss, but I hadn't avoided any of it.

Robin was right. Unlike my mother, I allowed myself to grow attached to people, but I controlled every part of the relationship. I set the rules and controlled how close they got to me. Each disclosure of intimacy resulted in me exerting my independence all the more. Everything I'd done with David had been to make sure he'd never leave me. I'd never shared all the parts of myself with him. I left out all my deepest wounds and shameful scars. My mom was the one who should feel sorry for me. She'd been aware of her handicaps and hang ups, but I'd been oblivious to mine. My world had

crumbled around me despite all my efforts. A bomb had detonated and I was left surveying the damage around me—all the broken pieces of shattered lives.

I woke in the morning to the flashing light of the phone signaling I had a voicemail. I punched the button to listen. It was David's voice.

“Celeste, it's been almost a week and we haven't heard from you. Maybe you disappeared again. But here's the deal. I'm moving forward with the divorce and custody like we talked about. I'm meeting with the lawyer this afternoon at three. You can be there or not. I really don't care. It's 819 Wilshire Blvd. Suite 640.”

I'd been avoiding him until I knew what to say. I'd needed time to think about his ultimatum.

“Who was that?” My mom's face was etched with concern.

“David.” The weight of his anger rested on my shoulders and made me feel like I was being pushed into a puddle of thick sludge. “Except I don't know this guy. He's so angry. He seethes with hatred every time I see him.”

“Grief changes people.”

“I thought he'd understand once he found out I'd been raped. I never imagined it wouldn't make a difference to him. He doesn't even care,” I said.

My mom moved over to my bed to sit next to me. She placed her arm around me. “I'm so sorry Phil did that to you.”

“I couldn't tell anyone what happened because I knew no one would believe me. I knew everyone would blame me. And you know what, Mom? I was right. I'm still the villain.”

I didn't want to cry again. I was tired of crying.

“It wasn't your fault, honey.”

Her words were what I'd been waiting to hear. I'd said the word rape but it was only a word without a face. It didn't convey what had happened. How Phil had thrown me down on the bed and pinned me there. I'd screamed and he'd punched me in the face. I'd felt the shock through my entire body. He'd put a pillow over my face when I started screaming and I thought he was going to kill me. I'd gasped for air hungrily when he took it off my face and I'd never made another sound. I kept quiet, burying the screams inside me. I'd heard about people leaving their bodies and I'd never understood it until I traveled out of mine as he flipped me over onto my stomach. I watched from the ceiling as he assaulted me from behind. It hadn't taken any effort or thought. I'd simply left my own body, detached from it completely. I didn't

even feel the pain of his thrusts or the stings of his slaps. I watched as he pulled on my hair, yanking my head back and wondered how my head didn't snap off my neck.

"It was so awful." I fell into her arms. She took me into her embrace like she'd done when I was a little girl and held me tightly as I wept. My sobs grew violent as she rocked me back and forth, repeating how sorry she was. As the tears exhausted themselves, she laid me down on her lap, resting my head on her thighs as she rubbed my hair, petting me like a cat.

"You'll get through this. You're brave. So strong. You always have been."

I'd never been brave. I'd been terrified. My buried fear masqueraded as courage.

"I don't know how to make this better." As strange as it felt to be vulnerable with my mom, it was the most wonderful feeling in the world.

"Sweetie, some things you can't make better."

She was right. The wounds I'd inflicted were too deep. I'd come back looking for a way to move on, but sometimes there was no moving on and you just had to move through.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

I was hurrying to get to the lawyer's office on time to meet David. Traffic had been terrible. I rushed around the corner on Wilshire Boulevard and smacked into two people locked in an embrace. They were kissing passionately as if they were lost lovers who'd been reunited after years apart.

"Oh, excuse me," I said, embarrassed to have caught them in such an intimate moment.

The couple pulled away from their kiss and turned to look at me. I jumped back. My mouth dropped in horror and disbelief. I stared wide-eyed at David and Robin as the rush of realization came crashing in. I saw what I hadn't seen—all the touching, their looks, the knowing glances they exchanged, and never being without the other. They hadn't even tried to hide it. Their relationship had been right under my nose the entire time, but I'd been oblivious. Anger surged through my body.

"How dare you? How fuckin dare you! You've made me feel like I was the biggest piece of trash and you're the ones having an affair! The two of you are having an affair! Fuckin hypocrites!"

I turned on my heels and pounded down the sidewalk. Footsteps echoed behind me.

"Celeste, stop. Just stop," Robin called.

I ignored her and kept walking.

"I can't believe you two. You both stood there looking at me so righteously, so fuckin self-righteous. Meanwhile, you're sleeping with each other!"

"Celeste, please. I'm begging you." She was panting we were both walking so fast. "Let me explain."

"No, I don't want to hear it. David doesn't want to listen to what I have to say and I'm not going to listen to what you have to say."

"We're not having an affair," she said. "Trey and I are separated. I filed for divorce four months ago."

I stopped in my flight. She grabbed my arm, jerking me around to face her. “Trey and I have been at each other’s throats for the past two years. You know that. We’ve talked about it a million times. How many times have I called you bitching about him?”

They had an explosion every few weeks and she was always threatening to leave him. I’d spent hours on the phone listening and assuring her all marriages struggled when the kids were young. I promised her that her marriage would get better when Emma was older and she had to wait it out until then. I’d comforted her about her marriage in the same way she’d comforted me about mine.

“How long has it been going on?” I asked.

“Nothing physical happened between us until after I left Trey. We didn’t even kiss until after I’d served him with the divorce papers,” she said.

She was talking about her first kiss with a new man like she talked to me about every one of her boyfriends, but it was my husband. I put my hands on my hips. “I’m not talking about hooking up. You know exactly what I mean. How long has it been going on?”

“I swear nothing happened until after you were gone. Honestly, I didn’t even know it was happening while it was happening. David is my friend, a good friend. You know how close we’ve gotten since we do so much together with Emma and Rori. We were both devastated when you left. That’s the point when our relationship started to change. Please believe me, Celeste. I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“Tell me all of it. I want to know,” I said.

“God, I don’t know. I’m not sure I should do that—”

“Tell me.”

“He’ll never admit it to you now, Celeste, but he was wrecked when you left. Completely destroyed. And I was too. You were family.” Her eyes filled with tears. “He was lost and Rori was so sick. There were all these decisions to make and he couldn’t think straight. He’d sit in Rori’s room and sob. I had to help him. I practically lived at the hospital with him. Trey tried to be supportive while Rori was in the hospital, but he expected things to go back to normal after she got home, but they didn’t. They couldn’t. David had barely started to function like a normal person and being back in your house wrecked him all over again. He needed me more than ever and by that time, I needed him too. It was like we were in our own little world because no one

else understood what we were going through. He'd lost his wife and I'd lost my best friend."

"Still. It doesn't make it right that you had an affair." My anger was beginning to evaporate.

"We didn't have an affair. You sound like Trey."

"Just because you weren't sleeping together doesn't mean you weren't having an affair. You know that as well as I do."

"But, you make it sound awful and it wasn't. Neither of us wanted to hurt anyone. It was the only good thing that came out of all the pain. We were both drowning in it and we pulled each other out. I think we loved each other so much because of how much we both loved you. Is that weird?"

I shook my head. "Not any weirder than all of this is."

"I'm sorry. This all is so unreal. Our life had finally gotten to feel a bit normal for the first time in a year."

She referred to them as a unit and I flashed back to all the conversations the three of us had had over the last two weeks. David used "we" whenever he spoke. He never referred to himself in the first person because they'd become a unit. They were a "we" which meant there was no more of an us.

"We didn't think you were ever coming home. I can't tell you how many nights we spent imagining different scenarios about what had happened to you—where you'd gone, who you'd gone with. I thought you were dead because of the bloody clothes you left in the bathroom. David was convinced you'd left because you didn't want to face the truth, but I could never get over the blood. He was sure it was your own blood like you'd staged it to make us think someone hurt you, but I made him call the police even though your mom had already filed a missing person's report. The police thought the bloody clothes were disturbing, but they said the same thing as David—that nothing pointed toward foul play. They didn't seem concerned. They kept telling us people left their lives to start new ones all the time."

"I know David doesn't believe me, but I want you to believe me—as awful as everything was, I didn't run because David found out Phil was Rori's dad. I would've found a way to get through it. I left because I thought I killed Phil. You have no idea what it feels like to think you killed someone."

"I believe you." She put her arm around me.

"Thank you," I said.

“And I want you to believe me about David. I never would’ve agreed to a relationship with him if I thought there was any chance you’d ever come home. I was sure I’d never see you again.”

“I believe you.” Besides David, Robin was the most loyal person I knew and didn’t have a malicious bone in her body. “And I’m really sorry I hurt you.”

It was such a sad story. All of it. Every part. I couldn’t deny that their relationship made sense. Something happened when you traveled through the depths of despair with another person. You connected in a way that was devoid of all pretenses and rules. I’d experienced something similar with Joe.

“Do you love him?” I asked.

“Yes, I do. More than I’ve loved anyone before. It’s a different kind of love.”

“Does he love you?”

I had to know.

“Yes. We’re going to get married. I’m sorry.” She looked away.

“Wow. And Trey?”

“He’s started dating again. He gets Emma every other weekend and one day during the week. Things are a lot better between us now that we’ve split up. We’re better friends than before. He’s still not the biggest fan of David and I don’t think he ever will be again. The days of spending our weekends together are definitely over.”

My mom’s words resonated in my head, *some things you can’t make better*. The only way to live my life was forward. I couldn’t go backward. None of us could.

“David’s probably waiting for us. We should go sign the papers,” I said.

David was in the same spot on the sidewalk where we’d left him looking bewildered. Robin reached out and took his hand. He refused to meet my eyes. We walked in silence into the tall building and the space in the elevator was suffocating. Each of us was lost in our own thoughts of what had been, what might have been, and what it was like now. David signed us in at the receptionist’s desk. It looked more like a doctor’s office than a law office. I kept waiting for someone in a white coat to walk out, but instead a young woman with shiny red hair popped her head out of the doorway and motioned for us to follow.

“I’m Bonnie Moran,” she said closing the door behind us. We shook hands. “Glad you could make it in today.”

She laid out the divorce paperwork and parental rights documents across her table. I only half-listened as she launched into a discussion of what it would mean to sign over my parental rights. I would be signing a document agreeing to not contact Rori in any way for the duration of her lifetime. She droned on and on about the legalities of each document, highlighting important parts and explaining certain legal causes. Not only could I not contact them, but they wouldn't contact me. There wouldn't be any pictures or any updates on Rori. They wouldn't be writing me letters or calling me to ask about things. No more David. No more Rori. And no more Robin since she was going to marry my husband. No contact with them meant no contact with her. I was serving a different sentence than the one I'd originally thought I'd be coming home to. I was signing papers that would erase me from their lives forever. It was as if I was dead.

I looked toward David as he leaned into Robin for support. I saw the way they clutched hands together the same way we used to hold onto each other. You could feel the bond between them as if they'd merged into one person instead of two.

"Do you really want this?" I asked him.

He didn't hesitate. "Yes. I think it's the best thing for everyone involved."

I picked up the pen and began initialing in the spots she'd highlighted for me. I wanted to get it over with as fast as I could. I couldn't help but think of the times I'd secretly wondered if Rori would be better off without me. In five minutes, it was over and I was legally dead to my family. David and Robin wanted to meet with the lawyer privately so I stood to leave, shaking Bonnie's hand on the way out. I was walking down the hallway toward the elevator when David called my name.

"Celeste, wait. Just a minute."

I stopped, turning to look at him following me down the hallway. He was alone. It was the first time I'd seen him without Robin by his side. He caught up quickly.

"I just want you to know that I'm glad you're okay." I could see how hard it was for him to say the words by the way his jaw worked and his facial muscles twitched as he spoke.

"Thank you. I'm glad you're okay, too." I wanted to touch him one final time since I'd never see him again, but I didn't dare.

"I'm sorry Phil did that to you. I wish you would've told me. I could've helped you."



I couldn't hide my emotions, they rolled down my face. "I know you would've."

But I hadn't told him and I couldn't go back.

He stuck out his hand to shake mine. I couldn't bring mine up to reach him. I wouldn't end our marriage and life together with a handshake. "Can I give you a hug?"

"Um.... I...."

I threw my arms around him. He smelled different. He stood stiff and rigid while I hugged him, reaching one arm around to pat me on the back formally.

"Good-bye, David," I said, releasing him from the hug. "I really hope you have a good life. You deserve it."

"Good-bye, Celeste." He turned and headed back down the hallway to where Robin was waiting for him in the lawyer's office.

I stepped back into the sunshine feeling as if an enormous pressure had been lifted from my chest. I thought about Rori as I rode the bus back to my hotel. I wondered what she looked like now. The relief of not having to care for her and pretend to have an attachment I didn't feel washed over me. I felt bad for her and wondered about her life, but felt no deep connection to her. It was the same feeling I had when watching a movie about something sad happening to a child or saw a heart-wrenching commercial about starving children in other countries. It made me sad, but not like a mother feels for their child because I'd never felt like her mother. She'd never been my child. I couldn't look at her without thinking about what Phil had done to me even if I hadn't been consciously aware of it at the time. David would take care of her. He always had. She'd been his daughter—never mine.

I stepped onto the bus, reminding myself I wasn't alone. I'd spent all day on my mom's phone scouring the Internet and reading the statistics on getting pregnant from rape. I browsed through chat rooms of survivors. Over half of the women who got pregnant from rape had abortions. If they decided to carry it to term, most of them gave it up for adoption. Stories of women who kept their babies were rare. It comforted me to learn of the countless other women who developed a revulsion toward anything associated with their rape like I'd done with Rori. I wasn't an awful person for not being able to connect with her.

I'd just given her up for adoption like many women in my situation chose to do. I might not have done it at birth, but I was doing it now. I was giving

her the opportunity to have the mother she deserved. One who would love her unconditionally and without reserve. If I'd gone the traditional route for adoption and scoured through potential profiles, I couldn't have found a more perfect father than David. The fact that he'd worked to instill a sense of love from me in Rori despite his own feelings about what I'd done proved what a selfless man he was. There was no one who could love her more than him. She was going to have the chance to have the family I'd never be able to give her.

My mom wasn't back at the hotel when I returned. She was obsessed with finding the perfect gift to bring back to Bernard even though she wasn't planning on leaving anytime soon. She'd promised to stay for as long as it took me to get settled and volunteered to tap into her retirement funds to help pay for a deposit on an apartment.

I didn't need her to stay because there wasn't any reason for me to remain in Los Angeles. There was nothing holding me here. No family. No job. No friends. It wasn't my world and I no longer belonged. I was free to create a new life for myself.

I picked up the piece of paper next to the phone with a number I was beginning to know by heart. I punched in the numbers. Joe answered on the second ring.

"I know you just got home, but will you come get me?"

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**A SNEAK PEEK AT PHANTOM LIMB:**

It was always the same phone call. Always the same desperate pleas.

“Don’t say a word,” she’d beg.

Who would I tell? Had I ever told? I’d been keeping her secrets for years.

I pulled my car into my parking spot and looked up at the third story of our apartment building at the last window on the left. The shades were sealed shut. They’d been that way for days. I stepped out and walked into the entryway, passing Mrs. Jasberson by the mailboxes. She checked her mail at least five times a day so she could interact with someone other than the characters on her TV.

“Hello, Elizabeth,” she called when she spotted me. “How was work today?”

“Great,” I replied without turning around. No need to tell her that, once again, I’d left three hours before the end of my shift.

“You tell that sister of yours she needs to get out in the sun more often.”

I turned around and smiled at her as I waited for the elevator. “I will.”

I waved to her over my shoulder and stepped inside the box as soon as the doors opened. They closed in front of me, and I stared at the numbers as they lit up, anxiously tapping my feet back and forth against each other. The familiar *ding* sounded and then the doors opened to the long hallway.

Stale cigarette smoke greeted me when I opened our door. I took a deep breath before walking down the hallway and into our bedroom. A small lump hid underneath the yellow comforter. I stepped over the scattered piles of clothes as I walked to the window and pulled on the blinds’ string, flooding the room with light and making it more cheerful. I opened the window, letting the fresh air sweep into the room, and took another deep breath to fortify myself for what I had to do next. I sat on a spot on the edge of the bed and peeled back the comforter, revealing Emily’s small body tucked into the fetal position, her arms cradling her head. She was wearing her purple pajamas. Not a good sign. The last time she’d worn them, we’d almost ended up in the emergency room. I’d grown to hate the color purple.

I stroked her brown hair away from her face. “Hi, sweetie. I’m home.”

Her arms reached out for me like a small child reaching for her mother. I lay down beside her and wrapped my arms around her. We’d been through this routine many times. She nestled her head on my chest and began to cry.

“Shh.” I stroked her hair. “It’s going to be all right. We always make it through.”

“I couldn’t even get dressed.” Her tears wet my shirt. “I tried, Bethy. I really tried. I did.”

“I know you did, honey,” I said.

“Don’t you get tired of me?”

She looked up at me and I looked down at my twin’s face—our features the same, even down to the small mole on each of our foreheads, right below the hairline. I shook my head. I always shook my head.

Even though she was the one to come out first, I looked after her. I’d devoted myself to protecting her through the tragedy we’d faced together as kids, through her depressed teenage years, and I was still doing it. She’d spent the first three minutes of her life without me, but that was it.

“Let’s get you showered, all right?”

I didn’t wait for her answer. I stood and pulled her up with me, her stick-thin arms and body leaning against me for support. Her hair was matted against the side of her head.

“Then maybe we can go out and get dinner. Someone at school told me there’s this really great Chinese buffet that opened up downtown a few weeks ago. The teriyaki chicken is supposed to be amazing.”

Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open in fear of going out in public as if I’d suggested she cut off her arm.

“Or we can just order a pizza and watch a movie. I’ve been in the mood to watch a romantic comedy.”

Her face instantly relaxed.

I chattered away about my day and laughed about Mrs. Jaspersen’s gossipy interest in our lives as I moved us into the bathroom. I flicked on the fluorescent lights and ran the bathwater. Emily walked in to join me, hanging her head, her arms wrapped tightly around her stomach. I stopped filling the silence and let out a deep sigh.

“What’d you do?” I asked.

She shrugged and began undressing, her head still hanging low as if she were a puppy who’d been caught peeing on the floor or getting into the garbage. She slid off her pajama pants. Dried blood was smeared all over her legs like crusted trails of rust. There was a lot of it, which meant she’d been cutting herself all day. She undressed slowly, wary of her raw skin. I stared at the jagged edges of her wounds, new and old, as they spliced their way over her pale skin in a tangled web. Three deep gashes scarred the left side of her stomach. We’d ended up in the emergency room that time. It’d taken over thirty staples to stop the bleeding, but they’d done an impressive job with her skin. If you didn’t know otherwise, you might think it was an abdominal

surgery scar. Her name was crudely etched on her upper right thigh. She'd methodically carved the letters into her skin with a razor on our fourteenth birthday. When I saw it, I threatened to cut myself too if she didn't stop hurting herself, but it didn't do any good. She kept cutting, and I could never follow through on my threat. I would hold the razor blade to my flesh but could never slice myself. I didn't have it in me. I didn't say anything about her cutting anymore. There was no need. I understood why she crucified herself.

I held her hand as she stepped into the tub and sank into the warm water. I picked up the washcloth and began washing her back.

"Tell me about your day," she said as her body relaxed.

I filled the bathroom with more stories from my day as I washed her fresh wounds. I told her about the test I'd taken in my Introduction to Psychology class that morning and how surprised I'd been at how easy it was since the reading material had been so dense and difficult to get through. I sprinkled in stories about the nice weather and how good the breeze felt while I walked to my car, hoping it'd motivate her to start leaving the house again. By the time she was ready to get out of the tub, I'd moved on to my telemarketing stories.

"How many times today?" she asked.

I smiled. "Twelve." I kept track of how many times I got hung up on every day. We kept a running tally. So far, my record was thirty-two.

I couldn't convince her to watch a romantic comedy. She insisted on another episode of *Law & Order: SVU*. I didn't understand her obsession with the darkest and most depraved parts of humanity. I couldn't stand the stories of kids kept in cages or sold into prostitution, but she loved them. If I had my choice, we'd never watch the stuff again.

As she cuddled up next to me on our beat-up couch and got ready to solve the latest sex crime with Olivia and the SVU team, I tried to shake the images of her mangled body. It never got easier for me to see the pain she inflicted on herself.

"Haven't we already seen this one?" I asked as a vaguely familiar story about a kidnapped girl found in a trunk unfolded in front of me.

"Yes, but only once and it's one of my favorites." She didn't break her gaze from the TV.

I made it to the second commercial break before I couldn't take any more. "I'm going to make dinner."

I walked into the kitchen and started rummaging through the refrigerator. I didn't like cooking but was willing to do it so I didn't have to watch the show. I didn't know what I did wrong when I cooked. I followed the same recipes as Emily, but my dishes never tasted like hers. She was a great cook, and back when she used to leave the house, she'd make exotic meals for us like Chicken Makhani or Modenese Pork Chops. She still loved to experiment in the kitchen on her good days, but her options were limited when I did all the grocery shopping.

I settled on pasta, something easy that I couldn't screw up, and hoped by the time we finished eating, I could convince her to watch something happy. I daydreamed about my boyfriend, Thomas, while I waited for the water to boil. He'd brought me flowers at work again. He loved to give me flowers when it wasn't a special occasion and never brought roses because he knew I hated them. He'd tucked in another cheesy poem and I'd teased him about it for the rest of our shift. By the time the water came to a boil, I was smiling and humming to myself. He always had that effect on me.

"What are you smiling about?" Emily came up behind me and leaned over the stove to peek into the pot.

"Oh, nothing," I said. It'd been over a year and I still hadn't told her about Thomas. "Just something one of the jocks said in class today. It wasn't remotely related to what the professor was talking about, and he sounded like a complete idiot."

"Why do you always have to be so hard on the jocks?"

I rolled my eyes. In high school, she'd loved their chiseled bodies and hadn't minded their stupidity, but they were only interested in how many points they could score on the field and how many girls they could score with. During our junior year, the football team had a competition where they awarded point values to each girl and then proceeded to see who could earn the most points by sleeping with them. They got extra points if they didn't wear a condom. Emily ended up on their list, but I didn't. I wasn't sure if college jocks were the same as the jocks in high school, but I had no interest in finding out.

"There are plenty of openings in my health class, and it's filled with half of the hockey team if you want to come and meet him yourself."

"Subtle, Bethy. Real subtle." She grabbed the spoon from my hand and moved to stir the sauce simmering next to the pasta. "Let me help you with this so that it's actually edible." She flashed me a wide smile.

We moved through our small kitchen in a perfectly choreographed dance, sliding around each other smoothly and effortlessly like we'd done so many times in the past. I was continually amazed at how quickly her moods changed. She'd already forgotten that less than an hour ago we'd been in the bathroom washing blood off her body.

We skipped setting the table and balanced our dishes on our laps in front of the TV instead. *SVU* was over and Emily switched to *Dateline*. They were doing a documentary on teenage depression and the increased rates of girls cutting themselves.

"No way, Em. I'm not watching this." I reached for the remote, but she pulled her arm away, keeping it out of my reach.

"C'mon, just for a minute. Please?" She batted her long lashes at me.

I gave in to her like I always did. "Ten minutes. That's it. Then we're watching reruns of *Friends*."

The news anchor launched into a detailed discussion about a mother who discovered her twelve-year-old daughter cutting herself and how her daughter lied to cover it up. He interviewed the girl and her friends, trying to understand why she did it.

"Do you remember when I started?" Emily asked when the focus of the show turned back to the mother's horror at finding out her daughter was injuring herself.

"Of course I remember."

I'd never forget the day she'd started to carve herself. It was the day designed to mark our liberation from Mother. We were eight, and our adoption was finally complete. It'd been a long process. We'd been living with the Rooths for nine months, but everything was finally legal. We were officially theirs and they were officially ours. The papers had been signed in black ink and Mother could never get us back. There was nothing left to do except throw a party.

It was supposed to be a happy day, and it might have been if Mother hadn't shown up. We'd only seen her three times since Child Protective Services had taken us away from her, and each visit had resulted in some form of emotional meltdown, especially for Emily. Living with Mother was harder on her than it was on me. I'd given up trying to get Mother to love me, but Emily never gave up hope that she could get Mother to love her. I understood why Emily held on, because she'd always been Mother's favorite.

She was the one who got the sparse hugs and affection when Mother needed to pretend as if she cared.

Our adoption party had been thoughtfully and lovingly designed to look like a birthday party, a valiant effort by our new family to symbolize our birth into a new world. Our therapist, Lisa, who we saw twice a week, had suggested the party. The Rooths had loved the idea and had spared no expense. There were pink balloons floating everywhere and purple streamers hanging from the tall oak trees in the backyard. The Rooths had rented a big bounce house that had a huge princess with her arms wide open as if she were trying to give you a hug before you went inside. We each had a beautifully decorated cake with our names scrawled across the center, and Dalila had let us each pick a flavor. Mine was vanilla and Emily's was chocolate. We'd spent the morning arguing over whose was going to taste better. There was a table stacked with brightly wrapped presents, and we couldn't wait for the party to be over so we could tear into them since we'd never had presents before.

Emily and I stood off to the side, holding hands and watching the activities go on around us, even though we were supposed to be the center of attention. Our new family was still so foreign to us. They flitted about and laughed with each other, effortlessly doling out big hugs. Every few moments, one of them would point in our direction, wave, and flash us a huge smile.

The party had barely gotten started when we heard her impossible-to-miss voice, a high-pitched, Valley Girl squeal, even though she'd never spent a day of her life living in Southern California.

"Hi, Bob! Hi, Dalila. It's so good to see you," she gushed, flashing one of the smiles I'd seen her practice in the mirror. "I can't tell you how glad I am that you're taking such good care of my girls."

We watched as Mother, Bob, and Dalila made their way toward us. Lisa trailed behind the trio, ready to step in if we needed her. Mother squeezed her way into the middle of our new parents and linked her arms through each of theirs.

"Did I tell you I'm going into the military? I'm taking the test on Monday. It's gonna be good for me. Real good. It's not as hard as I thought it'd be. Boot camp is gonna suck, but ya know, I'm kinda tough. I work out. Haven't been working out much lately. I'll get back—"

Bob interrupted her. "Girls, your mom is here to see you."



She wasn't there to see us. I didn't know why she was there, but it had nothing to do with us. Mother grabbed Emily and threw her arms around her in a showy hug. Emily stood with her arms at her sides, looking around Mother at me, apologizing with her eyes.

"How's my precious Emily? My sweet baby girl. You've gotten so big, darling. So big." She raised Emily's arms up in the air dramatically. "Remember when we used to do that when you were little? You're so tall. Must've grown at least a couple inches. Let me look at you."

She stepped back, hands on Emily's shoulders, and sized her up. "Absolutely. Two inches. For sure." She turned to look at Bob, fluttering her dark eyelashes, and said, "She looks so cute. Just like her mama." She tossed her hair back over her shoulder and giggled.

Bob flushed and instinctively put his arm around Dalila. "They're both beautiful."

"When do I get to see them again? You'll probably have to come pick me up since I don't have a car. Jeremy gave me a ride here today. He's waiting outside. Too scared to come in. You know men." She poked Dalila in the side. Dalila laughed nervously. Mother turned back to Emily and squeezed her cheeks in her hands. "I just had to come see my baby."

Emily stepped back and reached out, grabbing my hand and pulling me close to her again.

"Hi, Elizabeth," Mother said without glancing in my direction.

I stared at her, saying nothing, hoping she could read the hate in my eyes. Mother coughed and flipped her hair over her shoulders again. Too much time with us made her uncomfortable, and she'd reached her limit.

"I can't wait for us to go on vacation, girls. I think we're gonna go to Disneyland. I'm getting it all planned now."

She might as well have been promising to take us to the moon. She put her arms around both of us, kissing the top of Emily's head.

"Now, your mama loves you. Don't you forget. I love you."

She skipped off, turning around when she reached the garage to dramatically blow us a kiss good-bye. We never saw her again.

Later on that night, while we were supposed to be sleeping in our separate bedrooms, Emily crept into my bed like she did every night. We had our own rooms as part of the differentiation process that Lisa talked about all the time. It had something to do with separating us and treating us as individuals instead of grouping us together like one person. Lisa had suggested ways for

Bob and Dalila to do it, and sleeping apart was one of them. We hated it. It didn't matter, though, because nothing could separate us. Every night after they tucked each of us into our own beds, Emily would tiptoe through the "Jack and Jill" bathroom connecting our rooms and crawl into bed with me. Each morning the Rooths would find us wrapped up together.

"I hate Mother," Emily whispered as she curled up next to me.

I sat up, shocked. It was the first time she'd said it. I said it all the time, but not her. She didn't hate Mother like I did. She sat up next to me with an odd smile on her face. It was one I'd never seen before and I thought I'd seen them all. She pulled up her pajama leg.

"Lookit." She pointed in the dark.

I leaned closer to her leg, squinting. There were scratches on the side like a cat might've clawed her. "What'd you do that on? Where'd you fall?"

She giggled. "I did it myself. Tonight, before I brushed my teeth. I was in my room and a tack fell off my bulletin board. I just picked it up and did it." She giggled again.

I stared back at her. "Did it hurt?"

She shook her head. "It felt good." She smiled as if she'd just won an award.

"Why'd you do it?"

She shrugged. "I wanted to see if I'd bleed. I tasted it. It tastes funny." A huge smile spread across her face, but her smile quickly turned to a look of concern. "Bethy, don't tell anyone. They'll think I'm a weirdo. Promise you won't tell anyone. Promise, Bethy?"

"Course not," I replied.

And I didn't. And I hadn't. And I wouldn't.

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