



SUSAN WALTER

*OVER
HER DEAD
BODY*

A NOVEL

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SUSAN WALTER

LAKE UNION
PUBLISHING

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Published by Lake Union Publishing, Seattle
www.apub.com

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ISBN-13: 9781542029049

ISBN-10: 154202904X

Cover design by Amanda Kain

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All cruelty springs from weakness.

—Lucius Annaeus Seneca

What you are about to read is going to be a bit of a shock, so let me prepare you. I know what you are expecting, but I have chosen not to give it to you. For that I make no apologies. Your expectations are of your own making, as are all the choices one makes in a lifetime: whether to help or look away, give or take, flee or fight, hoard or sacrifice. With this, my last will and testament, I had an opportunity to be generous. But so did all of you.

This document represents my wishes, with no coercion or undue influence from anyone named herein. It was not written capriciously or with malice. My mind is sound and clear.

I am not available to entertain your objections, so you will have to work them out for yourselves. What you do next is up to you. Please choose wisely.

—LLG

PART 1

BEFORE

ASHLEY & LOUISA

CHAPTER 1

ASHLEY

“Can you do it sexier?” the casting director asked, from his seat behind the long rectangular table separating the dreamers from the dream killers. We were in the partitioned ballroom of a Sheraton in the Valley . . . or maybe it was a Hyatt? *Doesn't matter.*

“Oh. Um . . . sure?”

“Great!”

The assistant restarted the camcorder, then pointed at me: *Action!* I tilted my head, flashed a smile so smoldering it would get me arrested in some countries, then read the copy. “Always happy to see you, eat your leftovers, and warm up the bed on a cold night. Now you can thank your dog for loving you like only a dog can. With Fido’s Feast.” I thought about blowing a kiss, but it was a dog food commercial—I didn’t want to sex it up too much.

“Thank you,” the head dream killer said, and that was it. An hour and a half of waiting for fifteen seconds of humiliation. *All in a good day’s work.*

Walking out I passed a parade of women—mostly former prom queens with shiny hair and straight white teeth—all waiting for their fifteen seconds. The odds of booking a national commercial were worse than winning the Powerball jackpot, yet here we all were—sufferers of the wretched acting “bug,” whose most tragic symptom (besides a wasted life) was being a disappointment to our parents.

I pulled my blazer tight across my chest as I crossed the parking lot to my car. I handed my validation to the guard—*at least they paid for my parking!*—then merged onto the 101 freeway toward home. October nights in LA’s San Fernando Valley are normally cool and dry, but it was strangely humid, and eerie wisps of fog curled over rooftops like cigarette smoke on the set of *Mad Men*. It was almost eight o’clock but there was still traffic. *Oh, LA life*

. . .

I pulled into my driveway and lugged my day bag (hairbrush, makeup, wardrobe change, deodorant, water bottle, snacks) out of the back seat. *Gotta be prepared if an audition pops up!* Brando, my energetic golden-haired

rescue, jumped up to greet me as I unlocked my front door.

“Hey, buddy,” I said as I crouched down to pet him. People often asked me what kind of dog he was. My go-to answer was “a shedding dog” because that’s all I for sure knew about him. If I didn’t vacuum at least twice a week, his hair would be like a carpet on top of our carpet.

“I fed him,” Jordan, my roommate, said, looking up from his seat at the kitchen table.

“Thanks.”

“How was the audition?”

“Slayed it,” I joked as I kicked off my shoes and flopped down on the couch—*his* couch, I should say. All the living room furniture was his. My only contribution to the rustic two-bedroom bungalow we shared was a few nice-smelling hand soaps in the powder room.

“You look beat,” he observed.

“Yeah, I worked a birthday party earlier.” Besides going on pointless auditions, I had a bunch of pointless actual jobs. Most days I was a Hollywood tour guide, but sometimes on the weekends I dipped into my costume trunk to thrill little girls by appearing at their parties as their favorite Disney princess. This morning I had donned my itchy blonde wig to be Cinderella for a dozen screaming five-year-olds. It was kind of humiliating to be seen behind the wheel of my cool-girl MINI Cooper in full princess regalia, but there weren’t that many ways a gal with a theater degree and no real-world skills could make three hundred bucks in an hour—not legal ones anyway.

“Want me to let him out in the yard?” Jordan asked. We had a small fenced-in yard. Brando was only twenty-two pounds; he didn’t need a lot of room to stretch his legs. I could have just let him do his business on the lawn and cleaned it up in the morning like I did when I worked a nighttime tour or stayed out late with friends.

I met my dog’s hopeful gaze. I had no way of knowing that taking him for a walk that night was going to blow up my life, so I gave in to the guilt and got up off the couch.

“No, it’s OK.” I sighed. “I’m getting up.”

I swung my legs off the couch and Brando literally jumped for joy. Dogs are so easy to please—let them out when they’re in, and in when they’re out, and they’ll reward you with sloppy, wet kisses for days.

I went to my room to change. I liked that we lived in a freestanding house

and not a noisy apartment with people coming and going at all hours, but our little bungalow had seen better days. The carpeting was getting stained and frayed around the edges, and we never did get that broken window fixed like we told the landlord we would. But I didn't complain. This place was nicer than anything I could have afforded on my own. Even if I could have made rent, I would have been living in an empty shell—no pots, pans, dishes, cable TV, or set to watch it on. I came to LA with nothing beyond my clothes, my favorite pillow, and my dog-eared copies of Stanislavski and Uta Hagen. I slept on a futon that was used before I bought it off Craigslist seven years ago, and all the stuffing had migrated to the sides, making it more like a lumpy canoe than a bed. It was definitely time for some furniture upgrades, but somehow at the end of the month I barely had enough money left to pay my share of the rent.

“Weather’s weird,” Jordan said as I emerged from my room in a black hoodie and leggings.

“Super weird,” I agreed as I pulled on a baseball hat, completing my ninja dog walker look. I had lived with Jordan since we moved to LA from Wisconsin the summer after we graduated from college—me to pursue acting (pretend career), and him to go to med school (actual career). Except for that one drunken kiss, we’d never dated, but we got along really well—so well that at one point we joked if we were still single at thirty, we should get married. At least I thought we were joking. My thirtieth birthday was coming up, and we had already celebrated his—*Do I dare bring it up?*

I contemplated my current dry spell as I slipped on my sneakers. It had been a long time since I’d invited a guy to spend the night, and not just because of that lumpy futon. And Jordan hadn’t brought a girl home since the yoga teacher he’d thought was “the one” cheated on him at our Halloween party, literally in his own backyard. That was almost a year ago. We were already playing house—bulk buying at Costco, drinking out of the same milk carton, sharing a Netflix account—just in separate bedrooms. We were probably closer than a lot of married couples—except of course for the sex part; that we had never done.

I looked over at my roommate as he typed on his laptop in our tiny kitchen. He was indisputably handsome, with his sepia complexion and eyes like clover honey. And I was pretty sure he’d once been attracted to me, even when we weren’t three margaritas deep. *So what happened? How did we settle into this platonic cohabitation? Does he want things to change? Do I?*

“Bye, Jordan,” I said as I clipped the leash on Brando’s collar. I could feel my hair start to frizz the moment I walked out the door. I missed many things about living in Wisconsin, but stifling humidity and bad hair days were not among them.

“Be safe,” Jordan called after me as I headed out.

I didn’t think there was anything ominous about Jordan’s send-off. People say “be safe” all the time, like, “take care,” or “see you later.”

But I was an actress, not a bank teller. I’ve never been one to play it safe.

CHAPTER 2

LOUISA

“You didn’t have to make me dinner,” my nephew, Nathan, said as I pulled the baked trout out of the oven and gazed down into its dull black thumbtack eye. Some people don’t like the sight of a whole dead fish on their plate, it makes them feel murderous; they prefer the sanitized version—filleted and disguised by lemony gravy. But I didn’t feel bad for my fish friend; he was raised to be on my table. With his trip through my oven, he was fulfilling his potential, which was more than you could say for most people.

“If I didn’t cook for you, who would?” I teased, and my nephew glared at me.

“I’m a perfectly good cook, Aunt Louisa,” he shot back, reminding me that he did not subscribe to stereotypical gender roles. In that respect we were the same. When people found out I was rich, they inevitably asked, “So what does your husband do?” I had the great pleasure of seeing their ears ripen when I told them, “He’s dead, so not much.” After the obligatory “Oh, I’m so sorrys,” eventually came some version of “Well, what *did* he do, then?” Because they assumed it was he who had made us rich. But I was the breadwinner, and he kept the nest. The plan was to let me work until my profession spit me out, then travel the world together, enjoying the spoils of my labor. But his heart attack and my subsequent diagnosis crushed that dream, and now I was out to pasture with nothing to do with my money but look at it on a balance sheet.

“It’s the least I can do, given all you do for me,” I said. We were eating off my timeless Wedgwood-blue china because why have it if you don’t use it? A few of the teacups were scarred by the cruel assault of time, but so was I, and I think we both hid our ailments well.

I enjoyed cooking for more than just myself, but there weren’t many people I could tolerate for the entire time it took to eat a meal. Nathan was the rare exception. Besides being my nephew, he was also a lawyer. I had invited him for supper on the pretense that I had a legal matter to discuss with him. Of course he was too elegant to broach the subject during the meal. So

we chatted about his love life (inexplicably nonexistent), his job (tolerable but not scintillating), my garden (ensnared by ivy), and of course my kids (too busy, always too busy).

“How is my brother?” I asked Nathan because it would be impolite not to. Nathan’s father was my only brother, and among those people I could endure only in limited doses.

“Dad’s fine,” Nathan replied. “Still gets up at dawn every day to oversee his empire.” He chuckled at his own joke. My brother had some sort of wholesaling business; it bored me to tears to talk about it. But it got his four kids through college, and he seemed to like it well enough. As long as I didn’t have to hear about the latest shipment of whatever from wherever, I was perfectly pleased for him to carry on.

I cleared the plates and put the kettle on, and Nathan took that as his cue to inquire why I had called him. “So you mentioned there was something you wanted to talk to me about?” he said as I put out a plate of store-bought shortbreads. I didn’t like to bake, but I did enjoy a bite of something sweet after supper, and I’d never met a cookie I liked more than Lorna Doone.

“I’m going to change my will,” I announced as I sat back down across from him. I had an estate lawyer—I didn’t need Nathan’s help with this. And he looked appropriately confused.

“Change it how?”

“I’ve been thinking about it and have decided that it doesn’t represent my wishes,” I said, evading the question. What I was about to ask him was bound to be received with some resistance; I thought it best to ease into it.

“Are you asking me to do it?” he asked.

“No, you can’t.”

“Why not?” And it was time to drop my first bomb.

“Because I’m leaving everything to you.”

He opened his mouth to object, but I cut him off. “I know what you’re thinking, but I’ve thought about it and I’ve decided it’s the only way.” I was hoping he’d ask, “*Only way to what?*” but he didn’t take the bait.

“Louisa, if you want to see Winnie and Charlie more often, you should just tell them.”

“Why should I have to goad my own children into coming to see me?” I harrumphed. “Both of them live within driving distance; it’s despicable that they never visit.”

“Because they are ambitious, just like their mother.”

“Are you trying to get a rise out of me?” Nathan knew full well my children were not consumed by ambition—that I would have respected. No, they didn’t come see me because they were selfish, and with more than just their time. I’d never told Nathan all they had withheld from me—it was too upsetting—and I was certain they hadn’t told him, either.

“I am touched that you want to make me your beneficiary,” my nephew said, “but I can’t let you do that.”

I knew what he was thinking. If I left my money to my nephew instead of my children, the family would implode. His siblings would revile him. My children even more so. They would sue. Everyone would hate everyone. Which was not only true, but kind of the point.

“Why do children assume they are going to get everything their parents worked for?” I said. “It’s not like they did anything to deserve it. Plus they already had the opportunity to be rich; why not give another family member a go at it?” I despised the notion that being rich was their destiny simply because they were born into it. They were humans with free will, not fish.

“It’s just the way it works,” Nathan replied. “Besides, getting all your money would ruin me,” he added. “I’d become a lazy, rotten slob.”

“Is that what you think happened to me?” I asked.

“Perhaps a little bit rotten,” he said with a sly smile. “But not lazy or a slob.”

Nathan was the only person who dared to tease me about my character, and I loved him all the more for it. Our closeness was as unlikely as it was inevitable. My husband’s dead body had barely grown cold when my kids gallivanted off to their respective colleges in Northern California—Charlie to UC Santa Cruz and Winnie to Stanford. Nathan, less selfishly, had chosen to matriculate at nearby UCLA. When his father determined his childhood room should be repurposed as a home office, my house became Nathan’s refuge for a good night’s sleep and a home-cooked meal—two things my own children had always taken for granted but he appreciated. Nathan and I were the same: ambitious, hardworking, cast aside by those meant to take care of us. Only difference was, he’d made peace with it, whereas I preferred a more biblical eye-for-an-eye approach. I imagine my nephew thought I was petty for wanting to cut my children out of my will, and that, in time, I would come to my senses. But my senses were keen. I knew things he didn’t. And I had made up my mind.

“Was there anything else you wanted to discuss?” he asked as the teakettle

rumbled, and he got up to tend to it.

“I suppose not,” I replied. There was no sense in forcing the matter. If Nathan wasn’t willing to play the role of heir to my great fortune, my grand exit would have zero fireworks, and what’s grand about that? I couldn’t help but feel disappointed. I wanted to do this before I deteriorated into a pitiable old hag. *Who else could I leave my money to?* I’d thought for sure he’d be the one.

I often thought about where I’d gone wrong with my children. Whose fault was it that they turned out to be selfish ingrates, if not mine? I was their mother. If they exhibited poor character, I had no one to blame but myself. I’d made the mistake of buying into the ravings of the foolish early feminists—*You can have it all! Fabulous career! A brood of perfect kids! Family dinner on Friday! Steamy sex on Saturday!* But the notion of having it all is a lie. Your children loathe you for indulging other passions besides them—even ones that keep them in diapers. You try to make it up to them with things—a guitar, a trampoline, a horse, those fancy sneakers they wanted—but those things ruin them. Yes, it was my fault they were rotten. But that didn’t mean I owed them anything. Was I vindictive? Maybe. But better vindictive than a sucker.

So what to do? I couldn’t leave my estate to charity—that was too complicated, not to mention grossly out of character. And I couldn’t think of anything more repugnant than having my name engraved on a building trafficked by oblivious, entitled university students. Plus I needed help, which meant I needed to co-opt a person—preferably a desperate one. Someone who had never known great wealth, who would thrill in the luxuries it would, for the first time, afford them, and fight to hold on to it.

It distressed me that I hadn’t met that person yet.

But as it turned out, I was about to.

CHAPTER 3

ASHLEY

Brando tugged on his leash with the urgency of an actress late for a callback. I knew the feeling all too well: running to auditions was my life. “You can’t book the role if you don’t go to the audition,” my acting coach used to preach. Problem was, I couldn’t book the role when I did go, either. And yet I stubbornly kept trying.

“OK, OK, slow down,” I commanded to big, floppy deaf ears. Brando knew once we turned the corner and started heading up the hill, I would let him off the leash, and he was growing increasingly impatient. Our street wasn’t busy, but there were enough cars and other dogs to make me nervous about letting Brando run free, even at this late hour. But once I turned onto the steep cul-de-sac at the end of our block, I often let him run a bit. The hill was dark and not very inviting. Hardly anybody ever went up there, especially on a foggy night like this.

I smooshed my cap over my frizz as we turned onto the dead-end street, then unclipped the leash. Brando ran ahead with reckless abandon, sniffing and raising his leg on everything in his path. I wondered what it was like to get excited about such simple things—*A new smell! Kibble! A bush that smells like squirrel!* I envied him for not having any ambitions beyond peeing on every tree. *Why can’t I be more like my dog?*

I know plenty of people are content to lead uncomplicated lives, but unfortunately, I’m not one of them. I probably shouldn’t admit it, but I felt jealous every time I heard about a former classmate getting a big casting. *Why them and not me?* I tried to be grateful for the journey. I’d read for tons of big-time casting directors, been on the lots of all the major studios, walked the same halls as some Hollywood legends—Elizabeth Taylor, Lucille Ball, Bette Davis. My experiences made me a fantastic tour guide. Customers loved hearing my imitations of casting directors’ monotone line readings and my stories about bumping into famous actors at the Starbucks on the lot. I knew I was torturing myself chasing a love that didn’t love me back, but I wasn’t ready to let go. It’s hard to leave a dream behind if you don’t have a

new one to move toward.

“C’mere, Brando,” I called to my dog. I let him off the leash to have some freedom, but I still wanted him in my sights. There were no streetlights on this steep, wooded block, and the heavy clouds dispersed the moonlight into a thick, steamy glow. The only other source of light was from the houses—a front porch light, lamplight from an upstairs bedroom, solar torches on a front walk. Some people liked to light up their trees with spotlights in the ground, reminding you that night was the opposite of day, with light shining up instead of down.

As Brando trotted from tree to tree, I peered over fences and through thick iron bars, imagining what kind of people lived in the mansions just beyond. There were castles made of stone, white plantation-style houses with wide black shutters that looked right out of *Gone with the Wind*. There was a snooty English Tudor with pointy turrets and rosebushes for days. Even the smallest of these palatial estates was five times the size of the boxy Colonial I grew up in, and Jordan and I could have fit our rented cottage into any one of these house’s garages. *Who are these people who live in these palaces? Celebrities? CEOs? Crime families?* I knew what they cost—I’d looked them all up on Zillow. They were notable homes, and I was a tour guide—curiosity about their histories was practically a job requirement!

We were nearing the end of the block. The street was a dead end that fanned out into two driveways. The driveway on the right led to an inviting cream-colored Mediterranean with a motor court big enough to accommodate a dozen Range Rovers. A row of towering, evenly spaced palms along the perimeter completed the regal Old Hollywood vibe.

The other driveway was long and narrow and completely enshrouded by thick brush and trees. You couldn’t see the house at the end of it, and if I didn’t know better, I might have thought that driveway went on forever. Old-fashioned lampposts spaced too far apart did little to light the way beyond creating eerie shadows distorted by the uneven ground. A PRIVATE PROPERTY, NO TR_{RESPASSING!} sign was nailed to a fence post spiraled in ivy, completing the unwelcoming facade. It was a scene right out of an old *Scooby-Doo* cartoon, spooky to the point of being almost comical.

I never lingered at this driveway. Its horror-movie vibe unsettled me, and I had no interest in knowing what sort of recluse lived at the end of it. So I was more than a little annoyed when Brando ventured past the first two lampposts like Scooby stumbling into a mystery.

“Brando, come!” I called to his fluffy backside as he trotted down the driveway. But he didn’t stop.

“Brando, come!” I commanded, a little louder this time. But he just kept going. A few seconds later, he had completely disappeared from view.

“Brando!” I shook the leash, hoping the clang of the metal hardware would signal I was serious. But it didn’t work. He didn’t come back.

“Braannnnndo!” I sang, “C’mon boy!”

I waited at the base of the driveway for a long, anxious beat. Ten seconds. Then ten seconds more.

My dog was not coming back.

Which meant I was going to have to go after him.

CHAPTER 4

LOUISA

“There’s something I need to show you,” I told my nephew, after his third cookie. I stood and he followed me into my study. Even if he wasn’t willing to step up as my heir, he could still be useful to me. An opportunity to enact my plan would eventually present itself, and I needed to be ready.

“I have a folder here in my desk,” I said, opening the bottom drawer. “I’ve labeled it ‘Louisa’s Death Folder.’ It contains instructions about what to do when I die.” I extracted the folder and handed it to him. His eyes got wide like an owl’s.

“Louisa, why are you showing me this?”

He looked frightened, so I tried to reassure him. “I should have shown you a long time ago.” Of course there was a reason I was showing him now, but if he wasn’t going to help me, there was no point explaining.

“Is everything . . . all right?”

“No,” I quipped. “I’m old. Don’t pretend you haven’t noticed.” He smiled a little, like he thought I was joking.

“Sometimes I forget,” he said, and once again I was reminded why he was my favorite. Unlike my children, he hadn’t run away when my husband died and things got hard. He stepped up, like family is supposed to.

We returned to the dining room to clear the table. Nathan insisted on cleaning the dishes before he left. I allowed it under the pretense it was his penance for refusing to step up as my heir, but the truth was I welcomed an excuse to sit and close my eyes for a few minutes. The high-back sofa in the parlor was great for encouraging good posture and not much else, but I didn’t want to stray too far from the kitchen while he was tidying it, so it would have to do.

“Thank you for the lovely meal and conversation,” Nathan said as he leaned over to kiss my cheek.

“Oh! Of course,” I said, blinking myself awake. I blotted the corners of my mouth with the back of my hand, then leaned on the arm of the sofa to stand. “I’ll walk you out.”

“I know the way,” he replied. I noticed he had already put on his coat. I chided myself for napping in front of my nephew. He was family, but it was still not very gracious to fall asleep on your dinner guest.

“You must think me an abysmal hostess,” I said, rising to my feet.

“But a fine cook,” he said with a wink.

He kindly waited for me to open the door for him. My brother was a snore, but he had raised at least one well-mannered child. That’s more than I could say for my husband, rest his soul.

“Give my love to your mother and father,” I said, and I knew he would. Unlike my children, he spoke to his parents daily.

“I shall,” he said. “Sleep well.”

I closed the door behind him, then glanced at the antique grandfather clock my husband had bought at Sotheby’s. It wasn’t even nine o’clock yet, but I couldn’t imagine doing anything else besides going to bed. Perhaps it was I, not my brother, who was the insufferable bore. When I was running my business just a few short years ago, I often worked sixteen-hour days: emailing at dawn, then jumping in the car or on a plane to scout new talent or check in on a client. Running a casting agency was relentless, and I did it with vigor and grace. It annoyed me that something as simple as cooking a meal could knock me on my ass now. I had become that person I had always reviled: ornery, self-pitying, and old.

I told myself I would read in bed before going to sleep, even though I knew it was unlikely I’d get through much more than a page. I had left my book in the library, which was at the opposite end of the house. I adored my sprawling English storybook, but its whimsical floor plan was exhausting. I had to go downstairs to go up, left to go right. When the kids were little, they delighted in all the nooks and crannies that inspired endless games of hide-and-go-seek, but the quirky up-and-down, round-and-round floor plan was terribly impractical.

I traversed the living and dining rooms, then swirled down a short crescent-shaped staircase to the library. It was at the back of the house, and all you could see from the crisscrossing farmhouse-style windows were dense plumes of shrubbery and ancient ivy-covered trees. When I bothered to fill my bird feeder, I had a veritable aviary back there: regal blue jays, playful sparrows, chalky-gray doves, even the occasional peacock. I loved my enchanted forest. It was not just the books that made this my favorite room in the house.

My current guilty pleasure, Agatha Christie's *The Unexpected Guest*, was sitting on the arm of a leather reading chair that was so old and worn you could see the imprint of my derriere in the cushion. I had no plans of replacing it: nobody came in this room but me, and I could always throw an afghan over it if someone did. As I tucked the twisty thriller under my arm, the floodlights in the backyard suddenly turned on. I wasn't alarmed. Besides birds, my backyard hosted a menagerie of rodents, some of them sizable enough to tip my trash cans. *One of them must have lumbered by the sensor.* I had security cameras, of course, both inside the house and out; I was a senescent widow living alone in a house with considerable treasures. The monitor was in the pantry; I would check it before heading up to bed, just to be sure my "unexpected guest" was not of the same troublesome ilk as Ms. Christie's.

The floodlights had clicked off by the time I wound my way through the house to the pantry. The cameras had night vision, so I could still see my yard. I'm sure the technology was top of the line twenty years ago when my husband had installed it, but by today's standards the thick black monitor was clunky, and the grainy green images resembled a video game my grown children used to play when they were still innocent and lovable.

I toggled from the interior cameras—foyer, dining room, living room, kitchen; my husband had installed them just about everywhere, because God forbid we had to get out of bed in the night—to the ones in the backyard. There were two of them mounted under the eaves, and their sight lines overlapped. One looked out into the dense thicket beyond the library. The other looked toward the driveway.

At first I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me when I saw the human figure crouched in the copse of willows in my side yard. The image on-screen was shaky and strobed intermittently—it was easy to imagine shapes that weren't really there.

But then the figure moved. The silhouette was slight: *A teenage boy? A woman?* I watched in stunned silence as he, or she, crept along the tree line. It took me a moment to orient myself to the image, but I promptly determined there was someone in my driveway, and that he or she was staking out my house.

In the thirty-some-odd years I had lived in my sprawling storybook, I had never had a prowler. I didn't know what to do. I loathed the idea of summoning the police. By the time they got here, my trespasser would likely

be long gone, and then I'd have to endure a half hour of chitchat with one of them while the other trampled over my geraniums. I didn't think the pesky intruder could get in. All my doors and windows were locked, or at least I thought they were? I had become so forgetful these days: an inevitable consequence of my advanced age and mundane existence.

I decided to call Nathan; he had only just left, he'd come back if I asked him to. I crossed to the foyer table and plucked my phone out of my purse. But as the phone rang on Nathan's end, the battery died. I had forgotten to charge it. Even if I plugged it in, it would be several minutes until it came back to life. Plus the charger was all the way up in my bedroom, and I needed to address this problem now.

I glanced back at the monitor. The figure had jumped from the driveway camera to the one in the side yard: *getting closer*. I still couldn't make out the gender of the person, only that he, or she, was wearing a sports cap of a team whose logo I didn't recognize. *Not just an intruder, but a foreigner, too.*

The figure turned, and I saw the C-curve of a bustline silhouetted against the green-gray sky: definitely a woman. There was something in her hand. *A rope? Yes, it's a rope!* Perhaps I'd seen one too many Hitchcock movies, because the sight of that rope turned my annoyance to alarm. If the perfect crime had come to claim me, I had no intention of succumbing.

I cursed my carelessness in letting my phone battery die. I didn't have a landline—my children had convinced me to get rid of that years ago—or a security alarm that I could pull. But I did have a gun. It was, in fact, right there in the pantry. I had learned to shoot when I was just a girl, and I was still a damn fine shot.

I extracted my antique Smith & Wesson from its hiding place behind a sack of flour in the pantry.

And went to confront my intruder.

CHAPTER 5

ASHLEY

“Brando, come!” I called out in my best stage whisper as I crept through the trees that hugged the uneven gravel drive. I tried to keep my voice low but urgent, but it came out sounding like something between a bark and the hiss of a tire deflating.

I was seven lampposts in when the asymmetrical silhouette of the house came into view. It was utterly medieval looking with its jagged shingles and a roof so steep it seemed almost concave. Moonlight glinted off haphazardly arranged windows—some rectangular, some round or oval—and a pair of mismatched turrets shot up into the sky like rockets ready to take flight. There was a *Romeo and Juliet*-inspired balcony over an enormous dome-like front door made of knotty, dark wood and framed by swirls of ivy. The double-wide chimney was a collage of bumpy, jumbled river rocks and was capped by what looked like a giant mushroom.

“Brando, come here,” I begged as I waded through the thick underbrush. This was not the first time Brando had wandered off to investigate a noise or befriend a fellow canine or rodent of some sort, but it was the first time he’d disappeared out of sight. I knew it was irresponsible to let him off his leash on our nightly walks, but it made me happy to watch his fluffy tail swishing back and forth as he trotted wherever his ears and nose steered him. And he usually came when I called. Even when he didn’t, nothing bad ever happened. I would just go and collect him from whatever new friend or smelly trash can had enticed him away, then wag an admonishing finger at him not to do it again.

Of course there was another reason I let my dog run free. It was the same reason I left my family and a great group of friends to move out west: I liked taking risks. I loved how stepping out of my comfort zone sharpened my senses and made my heart pound all the way up to my ears. I wasn’t reckless—I just had faith that if I followed my instincts, things would work out. Like that time my friends from acting class and I got all dressed up and rode the train downtown to see a concert we didn’t have tickets to. We trusted that if

we were meant to get in, we would. Was it our confidence that compelled the event promoter to approach us with free front-row seats? Or something else? I know it's childish to believe in guardian angels, but at the same time, isn't it presumptuous to think we humans control everything? I didn't know if my guardian angels were watching that night, but if they were, I hoped they had my back.

As I moved through the hazy night air, a twig snapped under my feet. I froze. Sweat was curling the hairs on my neck, and my armpits were damp and sticking to my shirt. I suddenly felt ridiculous. *Why am I tiptoeing around like some two-bit cat burglar?* I had a perfectly acceptable reason for venturing down that driveway that night. Yes, I was trespassing, but it's not like I was trying to sneak in and steal the owner's garden gnomes because she wrote a mean (and completely unwarranted) review of my *Lady Macbeth*. I was just a gal who lost her dog.

I contemplated announcing myself with a "Hello! Anybody home?" But as I stepped into the driveway to call out, floodlights went on, and I lost my nerve.

"Shit!" I cursed as I retreated back into the woods. *What kind of actress tries to hide when the lights come on? Oh right—a failed actress. How fitting.*

I took advantage of the light to scan the yard. I saw Brando almost immediately. He'd found a bird feeder and was scavenging for fallen birdseed and crunching on what looked like a dead dove.

"Brando!" I hushed. "Come here right now!"

He didn't look up. Clearly I was less engaging than his midnight snack. I was too nervous to be annoyed—that would come later, when he barfed up feathers all over my rug.

The lights went out and the yard was once again gobbled up by darkness. I gave my eyes a few seconds to adjust, then crept around the side of the house into the backyard, his leash at the ready. I could carry him if I had to, but we'd be faster on six legs instead of two.

"Brando," I coaxed. "Come on, let's go."

He stuck his snout back in the birdseed. I cursed myself and my piss-poor dog training skills, then tiptoed toward him. The bird feeder was an odd structure—just a little shelf fastened to a utilitarian metal pole. The pole was smooth and black like a stovepipe and topped with what looked like a chimney cap or little birdie parasol. The dish of birdseed that had presumably been set on the platform had fallen on the ground, and Brando was pawing at

it, trying to discover any morsels that may have been hidden underneath.

“Brando! Come!” I reached for him. My outstretched hand was mere inches from his collar when the first shot rang out—a searing pop as jarring as a clap of thunder and a thousand times more urgent.

“Shit, shit, shit!” I dropped to my stomach and pressed my cheek into the hard ground. I remembered the No T_{RESPASSING} sign, and how I’d brazenly ignored it. Adrenaline shot up my spine as I agonized over what to do. *Put my hands up? Call out? Stay still? Run like hell?*

As I lifted my head to get my bearings—

Pop! That sound again, sharp and stinging like the crack of a whip. I couldn’t tell where it was coming from—it felt like it was everywhere and nowhere. This neighborhood was a favorite stomping ground for coyotes and the occasional bobcat. I suddenly realized that if the gunman mistook me for the predator that killed their cat, this could end really badly.

I stretched my neck to glance at the bird feeder. Brando was gone—scared off by the gunshot, no doubt. *Probably a good time for me to scam, too.* Keeping as low to the ground as I could, I dug my fingers into the cold earth and G.I. Joe crawled toward the woods. I had no idea what my trigger-happy host would do if they saw me, and I didn’t want to find out by getting shot.

Once in the safety of the shadowy trees, I slipped between two towering oaks and slowly stood. As I frantically combed the landscape for my dog—*where the hell did he go?*—the darkness was sliced open by headlights bumping up the drive.

Panic hit me like a blast of cold air. As the car closed in on me, I pressed against a tree to duck the glare of its white-hot headlights. I waited for the dust kicked up by the tires to settle, then tucked my chin and ran.

CHAPTER 6

LOUISA

“Aunt Louisa!” Nathan called to me as he jumped out of his fancy German sports car. The revolver was still pointed in the air above my head, and my thumb was stinging from the recoil. It had been a while since I’d fired my gun; I had forgotten how hard it kicked, and how fragile my aging hands had become.

“What are you doing?” my nephew shouted when he saw me standing on my front stoop. “My God, are you all right? What happened?”

“I’m fine,” I said, lowering the gun to dangle beside trembling legs. “I didn’t mean to call you.” That was a lie. I had meant to call him. But now that I had things under control, I didn’t want him to think I couldn’t take care of myself, because I could, just as I had done every day for the last ten years.

“I tried to call you back. When you didn’t answer I got worried. I see for good reason.” He hopped up onto the stoop, then extended a hand to relieve me of my gun. “Do you mind?”

I was certain I had more experience with guns than my nephew, but I didn’t refuse him.

“Where’s the safety?” he asked, turning it over in his hand.

“A single-action revolver doesn’t have a safety,” I said. “It can’t discharge unless you pull the hammer back.” I tried not to sound condescending, but *good heavens, hasn’t he ever seen Bonanza?*

“Let’s go inside,” he soothed, and I let him take my elbow and escort me to the sofa in the parlor. He set the gun on a table out of my reach, then sat down across from me. “You want to tell me what prompted this late-night target practice?”

“I had an intruder,” I said, matter-of-factly. “I saw her on the security monitor.”

“Her?” he asked. I didn’t take offense at the inherent sexism; I had been surprised, too.

“There was no sense in calling the police,” I said, “when I could dispense with her just as efficiently.”

“Please tell me you didn’t shoot anybody.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I admonished. “I shot up in the air to scare her away. She probably ran right past you.”

He thought about this for a moment, as if trying to recall whether he might have seen anything out of the ordinary. He finally nodded and suggested, “Why don’t I make us some tea?”

We had just had tea, but I thought it a good idea. This whole “widowed woman living alone” thing had taken some getting used to, but I had come to embrace my unplanned solitude. My thoughts were more interesting than most conversations, and I certainly didn’t need a dog to walk or a cat to rival my aloofness. But I did enjoy the company of family now and then. I took comfort in the familiarity of a shared memory, an inside joke, unselfconscious laughter. My children’s insistence on denying me such comforts was a key contributor to my perpetual bad mood. Second only to the reason they were denying me, of course.

The kettle rattled and a moment later Nathan appeared with the teapot. I smiled when I saw he’d brought two cups. I had ceased lamenting that Nathan was not my own son, choosing instead to be grateful that I had someone in my life who acted like one.

Nathan set the cups on their saucers. But as he bent over to sit beside me, he froze midcrouch.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“Shh!” he commanded, then stood perfectly still. I heard an owl hoot. I heard the hum of my furnace. I heard my heart beating in the backs of my ears. And then I heard what he heard. A scratching noise, like fingernails on a screen door.

“What is that?” I whispered, and Nathan held up a quieting finger.

The sound stopped. Then started again. Then stopped.

“You think someone’s trying to get in through a window?” I asked.

“Stay here,” he ordered. “And don’t shoot me!”

I would have offered him the gun, but I knew he wouldn’t take it. It was obvious he had never fired one, and the thought of using it likely scared him more than any intruder.

“Nathan, wait!” I called out, then tiptoed over to the fireplace to fetch the cast-iron poker. He nodded appreciation as I handed it to him. The front door

creaked on its aging hinges as he slipped through.

My eyes found the gun. I scooped it off the table with shaking hands, then pointed it at the door. I heard the front stairs groan, the crunch of leaves under stiff leather dress shoes. Then silence.

I watched the second hand of my vintage grandfather clock tick off a full minute. Then a minute more. The gun was heavy in my hand, but I didn't put it down. I didn't pull the hammer back, but my thumb was primed and ready. I was no John Wayne, but if the need arose, I could get off a shot in less than a second, and a second one in half that.

I felt a wave of dizziness and realized I had been holding my breath. I forced a slow exhale. *What is taking him so long?* With my next breath came my long-awaited answer, as Nathan called out, "Put the gun down, I found our intruder!"

Nathan was smiling when he appeared on the stoop, cradling what looked like a blond raccoon.

"What in God's name is that?"

He flipped on the light as he walked through the door carrying an impossibly precious golden-haired dog.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," I sighed. I recalled the rope in the slender woman's hand, which I realized wasn't a rope at all. *What a fuss I had made!*

"I think we know what your intruder was after," Nathan offered, scratching the little dog's chin. His fingers found a silver bone-shaped tag. "Looks like his name is Brando."

I looked into the big brown eyes of my furry visitor. His little dog whiskers were quivering, so I reached out to cup his face. He leaned into my touch. I felt a rush of warmth in my chest. I remembered when my children were babies, how easy it was to love them and for them to love me back. They were so vulnerable, with their tiny bodies and fragile hearts, so I let myself be vulnerable, too: crying like a blubbering fool over first steps, lost teeth, wobbly choir solos at tedious school concerts. But then they grew up, and our love soured. Their affection became conditional upon getting things they wanted: a trip to Europe, a new car, a down payment on a condo by the beach. *Was it the money that had ruined us? Would we have been better off if I had hidden it from them? Or never made it in the first place?*

"There, there," I soothed, and Brando's fluffy tail sprang to life, flipping side to side like a conductor's baton. And suddenly I remembered what it felt like to feel affection with no strings attached.

“There’s a number, shall I call?” Nathan asked as he took out his phone.

“Poor sweet thing,” I said, evading the question. “What kind of irresponsible menace lets their dog run free in the dead of night?”

“Do I need to hide your gun?” Nathan asked as he dialed.

“Maybe,” I said noncommittally.

I knew we had to call the owner-intruder, and that she would come and get her dog. But I didn’t know that this mysterious stranger would give me not a reason to live but rather—at long last—an opportunity to die.

CHAPTER 7

ASHLEY

“Ashley! What happened? Where’s Brando?” Jordan asked as I burst through the front door. He had changed into pale-blue scrub bottoms and a Green Bay Packers T-shirt that was so old and worn you could almost see through it.

“Oh, Jordan, I messed up bad!” I wailed as I wiped tears and snot from my face with the back of my hand. I had known Jordan almost all my life. He’d seen me in my girls’-night best, my morning-after worst, and everything in between. I was beyond feeling self-conscious in front of him.

“Take a breath and tell me what happened,” he said calmly, like a doctor would. Comforting hysterical people was something that had always come naturally to Jordan—he’d been doing it for frightened patients, nervous interns, and at least one über-sensitive actress for the better part of the last decade. He pulled out a chair and I collapsed into it. Shame and embarrassment pressed down on my chest like a wet blanket. Jordan had told me a hundred times not to let Brando off the leash, how it would only take “one rogue squirrel” to lure him in front of a speeding car. But of course I didn’t listen.

“I only took him off the leash for a minute,” I lied. “Just so he could stretch his legs.”

Jordan crouched down in front of me and put a hand on my knee. His reach was long—I’d seen him palm a basketball many a time—and his fingers stretched high up onto my thigh. Under different circumstances I might have read something into the gesture, but at the moment I was all hysteria and oozing phlegm.

“Shhhhh,” he soothed. I was hiccup crying now, so he squeezed my leg to reassure me. “He’s small—he couldn’t have gotten too far. I’ll get changed and we’ll go look for him, OK?”

I nodded. I was too embarrassed to tell him about the gunshots. Letting Brando run free was already stupid and reckless. I didn’t want my sane, sensible roommate to know not only had I lost my dog, but I’d also chased after him, past a No T_{RESPASSING} sign, into the yard of someone determined to

aggressively enforce it.

As Jordan stood up, my phone buzzed in my hoodie pocket. The caller ID said “Unknown Caller.” I glanced at Jordan as I answered it.

“Hello?”

“Is this Brando’s owner?” a smooth male voice asked.

“Yes! Yes it is! Do you have him?”

Jordan raised an optimistic eyebrow.

“We do indeed. And I think he’s eager to be reunited with you.” My heart exploded with joy. Running home that night, I had prayed for a miracle, promising my guardian angels if they brought my dog back to me, I’d never let him out of my sight again.

“Oh! Thank you so much,” I gushed as I jumped to my feet. “And I’m so sorry to have troubled you.”

“We’re the ones who should apologize,” the voice said. “My dear old aunt still thinks this is the Wild, Wild West and that firing a warning shot into the air is a perfectly acceptable way to tell someone they’re too close for comfort. I promise you were never in danger. She would never hurt anyone. She was just frightened.”

I felt my cheeks get hot. I was prowling around the poor old woman’s house in the black of night—of course she was frightened!

“It’s fine, I’m fine,” I stammered. “I’m sorry I scared her.”

“What’s he saying?” Jordan asked. “Who did you scare?” I held up a finger: *one sec!*

The voice rattled off the address, then added, “I would say just follow the sound of gunshots, but I’ve disarmed her.”

I smiled at the joke. “I’ll be there in a few minutes. Thanks for calling. And for finding my dog.”

“Someone found him!” Jordan said as I hung up the phone. I nodded, then bit my lip. I don’t know if it was relief or shame that made me start crying again, but I let loose like a fire hose.

“You’re OK, he’s OK,” Jordan soothed as he pulled me into a hug. We had hugged many times before, at “Goodbye,” or “Welcome home,” or “Happy birthday,” but this one felt different. Maybe it was all the emotion swirling around . . . or the memory of his hand on my leg, strong and warm and holding me steady. It had been a long time since I’d had a hug like that. And I didn’t want to let go.

“Want me to come with you?” he asked as my face sank into the gentle

valley of his pecs. Jordan was a multisport athlete in high school—football in the fall, basketball in the winter, baseball in the spring; I had never been one of those girls who'd been impressed by athletic prowess, but who doesn't love a hometown hero?

My thoughts turned to Brando, all alone in a stranger's house. I released Jordan from the hug, but we were still standing nose to nose. I could have gone up on tippy-toes and kissed him if I'd wanted to. And I kind of wanted to. *Is he feeling what I'm feeling? Does he remember our marriage pact?* I guess my brush with death had emboldened me, because I decided it was time to find out.

"We've been through a lot, you and I," I said.

"Ha!" Jordan said. "A lot of trouble! Remember when you broke the window?"

"I didn't break the window! You broke the window."

"Because your arm was stuck in it," he said. "I had to get you out!" Jordan was everything you could want in a partner: easygoing, reliable, able to stop any kind of bleeding. Whether it was catching the touchdown to win the big game or freeing his hysterical roommate from the jaws of jagged window glass, he always rose to meet the moment.

"Jordan . . .," I said, my courage surging. "Do you remember that pact we made? About turning thirty?"

He looked at me quizzically. "We made a pact?"

I could have stopped right there. Clearly he didn't remember or didn't want to be reminded. I don't know what possessed me to push. Perhaps the relief at getting Brando back made me feel invincible? Or maybe I was just tired of sleeping with a dog instead of a man.

"Well, not a pact, exactly," I clarified. "It's just you've always been there for me. And I like that. And maybe, y'know, it could always be like that? Like we talked about." *Holy crap, did I just say that? As if I hadn't already been reckless enough!*

I saw Jordan's whole body stiffen. *Is he freaking out? Or just confused? I mean, I kinda sorta just proposed marriage. And why not?* Jordan was a catch. Everyone we knew thought we looked great together. Jeannie from my acting class had even told me to hurry up and "lock that shit down" or she was going to make a move. Jordan had been talking me off ledges since I'd moved to Hollywood; I was a little afraid to think where I'd be without him. I wasn't actually going to slash Jeannie's tires when she "accidentally" gave

me the wrong address for the *Stranger Things* audition, but it was Jordan who took the box cutters out of my hand with a gentle reminder to “do unto others.” He was a good influence on me—as my mom would say, “husband material.” I held my breath as I waited for him to tell me if he thought the same about me.

“Brando’s waiting,” he said as he backed away. “I’ll go change.”

I felt like I just got slapped. *Good God, what have I done?* My face prickled with humiliation.

“It’s OK,” I stammered. “I’ll go get him.”

I grabbed my keys off the kitchen counter.

“You sure?”

A lump had formed in my throat. I didn’t trust myself to speak, so I just nodded, waved, then beelined for the door.

“Good luck,” he called after me. But I didn’t answer. Because it was too late for luck. I had already made a fool out of myself, and no amount of luck would undo that.

CHAPTER 8

LOUISA

“She’s here,” Nathan announced, as if I couldn’t see the headlights bouncing up my driveway for myself. Little blond Brando, as I presumed he was called, was curled up next to me on the sofa, and my lap was already covered with dog hair. *How could such a tiny creature shed such a large volume of hair? It’s mathematically impossible.*

“Shall I bring him out?” Nathan asked, indicating the fur ball glued to my leg.

I wanted a look at the woman who had ventured onto my property. “No, she can come in,” I replied. “I want to apologize for scaring her.” It was a lie; I had no intention of apologizing. I had every right to defend myself, and nothing bad had happened to her or her dog.

I heard brakes whine, then a car door closing. My porch steps creaked as she mounted them. Nathan opened the door before she had a chance to ring the bell.

I sized her up through the open door. She was smaller than she had looked on the monitor—five foot five and a trim 112 pounds. After twenty-five years as a casting director, I could tell how much a woman weighed just by looking at her, give or take what she’d had for breakfast. She had an athletic but feminine physique, with slender hips and a perky bottom—if I were still working, I could get her a lululemon commercial with one phone call. She had a well-balanced face, with full lips and a slightly turned-up nose. Her fair skin was dotted with light freckles—*Irish? Scandinavian? Likely some sort of western European mutt.* She had shoulder-length dark chocolate-colored hair that was screaming for hot tools, but it was wavy and well bodied. She had good posture and a slight turnout in her feet: a dead giveaway that she was or had been a dancer. I admired that she wasn’t afraid to come alone. My house was distinctly intimidating, even without gunfire to greet you.

“Hello,” Nathan said to the nymphlike figure. “Brando’s just in the other room with my aunt. Would you like to come in? I think she’d like the opportunity to apologize.” I considered what I would do if a strange man had

invited me into his house in the dead of night. I was bold but not foolish. *Would she dare come in?*

“Oh! That’s kind of you,” she began, “but I don’t want to impose any more than I already have.” At the sound of the woman’s voice, the little dog’s ears perked up, and a moment later he was jumping all over her. She was all smiles as she fell to her knees to greet him, and I detected the hint of dimples in her porcelain cheeks.

“Brando!” she cooed as she ruffled the top of his head. “Don’t you ever wander off like that again!”

She scratched his little dog ears, then clipped a leash around his collar and stood up. “I’m so sorry to have troubled you,” she said. I thought with those words she would be on her way, but she surprised me by adding, “You have a spectacular home. I’ve never seen anything like it. An exotic orchid in a field of daisies.”

And now it was my ears that perked up.

“Thank you,” Nathan said. “But I don’t live here. The house belongs to my aunt, Louisa.”

I stood up at the mention of my name and walked to where she could see me.

“Good evening,” she said politely. “Forgive the intrusion. And my voyeurism. But I am absolutely enchanted by your house.”

Rare orchid? Voyeurism? Enchanted? Who is this Lycra-clad sophisticate standing in my foyer?

“Thank you,” I said. Nathan was looking at me sideways, so I reluctantly made good on my promise. “I realize my actions earlier this evening were a bit extreme,” I said. “I live alone, I hope you can understand?” Not exactly an apology, but Nathan seemed satisfied enough.

“I was sneaking around like a crazed assassin!” she replied. “Your reaction was completely understandable.” Sophisticated and gracious. I was liking her more and more.

“It’s such an extraordinary property,” she added. “I can understand why you would be protective.”

And then I said something that surprised even me: “Would you like a tour?”

Nathan snuck a startled glance at me, but I paid him no mind. I was proud of my house, and I appreciated that she appreciated it. *Why shouldn’t I show it off?*

My visitor didn't hesitate. "Most enthusiastically!"

"I suppose introductions are in order, then," I said. "I'm Louisa Lake George, and this is my nephew, Nathan Lake."

"Pleased to meet you both," she replied. "Ashley Brooks." She bowed her head like I was royalty, and I didn't mind one bit.

"It's nice to meet you, Ashley," Nathan said, and offered his hand. I watched with curiosity as his touch rouged her cheeks. *Good heavens, is she attracted to him? What a beguiling thought.* I noted her well-maintained eyebrows and expertly curled eyelashes and wondered if she thought herself beautiful. I had launched the careers of some of the most sought-after actresses on earth, women so exquisite they made you feel as desirable as an old rag doll. And exactly none of them believed they were beautiful, even while getting \$1 million just to stand next to a bottle of perfume and smile. I had come to think being beautiful was more of a curse than a blessing. The ugly duckling learns to cultivate self-love by looking inward. But a beautiful girl is born to be adored. No one feels it necessary to teach a beautiful girl to love herself, so most of them never learn how. My daughter had exquisite features—sea-green eyes, perfectly tapered heart-shaped face, copper-red hair as captivating as the desert sun. But I never complimented Winnie on her looks. Because once a girl expects compliments, she forgets how to feel complete without them.

"Nathan, why don't you do the honors?" I suggested. "While our tea steeps."

"Of course," Nathan said with a smile that was obviously forced.

"Shall I leave Brando here with you?" the young lady asked, offering me the leash.

"Please do," I replied. I had a once-a-week cleaning woman, but I did not want her to spend her whole day vacuuming dog hair. I was pleased the little dog didn't resist when the leash passed from the young lady's hand to mine.

"Why don't we start in the dining room," Nathan suggested, pointing the way.

"I'll follow you."

She nodded graciously to me, then slipped off her sneakers without being asked. As she fell in behind Nathan, all smiles and nervous enthusiasm, I wondered if maybe, just maybe, the person who would do what Nathan wouldn't had just walked through my front door.

CHAPTER 9

ASHLEY

A rare orchid? Enchanted? Most enthusiastically? Good God, when had I become a character from a Victorian-era romance novel?

I do this inexplicable thing when I'm nervous. It's like I don't trust my own voice, so I become someone else—a character from a book or movie, or someone I've seen on TV. During my day job as a tour guide I often morphed into a glitzy game show host (“Come on down!”) or a wannabe stand-up comic (“How's everybody doing tonight?”). Sometimes on the upper deck of the open-air bus, I became James T. Kirk from the starship *Enterprise* (“This is your captain speaking!”)—anyone who wasn't me. Today I was apparently the titular character from Jane Austen's *Emma*. People assume that actors are naturally outgoing, but many of us choose the profession so that we can disappear. Going into character makes my nervousness go away, because people can't judge me if I'm someone else.

That night I was crazy nervous. Not because I'd lost my dog, or been shot at, or because, after seven years of avoiding it, I was inside the spooky *Scooby-Doo* house. Or even because I'd just thrown myself at a man who wanted nothing more from me than half the rent. No, I was nervous because of *him*.

“My aunt Louisa has lived here for over thirty years,” he said as we started down a hallway wallpapered in red velvet. “But the house was built in the 1950s. It was quite run down when she and my uncle bought it.” He rambled on about the architect, the floor plan, the furnishings. His voice rolled over my skin like hot fudge, warming me in parts that had been cold for a long time. I was not one to swoon over a man just because he was handsome. I saw handsome men every day in my (desired) profession—the LA acting scene was full of them. But this man, with his uneven smile and dimples so deep you could shoot whiskey from them, was otherworldly beautiful. Listening to him talk was like skiing fresh powder—so floaty and exhilarating that it made my skin tingle.

“I presume you live nearby?” he asked as he flipped on the light of a

perfectly petite powder room with a pedestal sink and a toilet you flushed by pulling a chain. His eyes found mine, and for a second I couldn't breathe. My heart was racing, I felt so light I thought I might take flight.

"I do," I replied, in my Jane Austen best. "Just round the corner." He smiled and I felt my cheeks grow hot. *Does he know the effect he's having on me?* If I were a better actress I might have been able to hide it, but once again my talent fell short.

"This is a wonderful neighborhood," he said. I didn't trust myself to speak so I just nodded. I'd had crushes before, on lead singers and movie stars and even a scene partner or two, but what I felt when I first saw Nathan was straight out of a Walt Whitman poem. ("Passing stranger! You do not know how longingly I look upon you . . .") I said his name over and over in my head. *Nathan, Nathan, Naaaaathan*. I had never met a Nathan. It occurred to me that the name would be forever spoiled, as I would always associate it with this impossibly perfect man. I wondered if he went by Nate, if that's what his friends called him, if that's what *I* would one day call him. I had always thought love at first sight was a myth, but that night I became a tried-and-true believer.

As the charged ions wafting off my modern-day Mr. Darcy tickled my skin, I thought about what had prompted me to (practically!) propose to Jordan just a few short minutes ago. I knew "baby fever" was a thing—most of my friends were getting it. Was I having "marriage fever"? Was I so down on myself that I didn't think I deserved a great big love? I didn't know why I'd tried to coerce Jordan into marrying me, just that I was relieved he hadn't said yes.

My dream man led me through an ornate dining room with a garish wrought-iron candelabra chandelier, into a music room with a gleaming mahogany baby grand piano. "Both of Louisa's children played the piano," he said. "We've had many a concert in this room."

"How delightful!" I enthused.

"Honestly, it was awful," he whispered. "Neither of them were very good."

He smiled conspiratorially, and I felt my heartbeat all the way up in my ears. I followed him past bookcases full of sheet music, out a pair of french doors, and into a cozy book-lined library. It was so freakishly old-fashioned with its heavy floral drapery and beveled glass windows, I felt like I had walked into a game of Clue. I half expected to see Colonel Mustard and Mrs. Peacock sitting in the window seat, him in his yellow tuxedo and her in

a funny hat.

We swirled down another hallway, past a “secret” staircase, then stopped at a set of double doors. “And last but not least, Louisa’s study.”

He pushed the doors open to reveal an odd-shaped room with a sloping ceiling and wraparound window seat. In the middle of the far wall was an antique rolltop desk lit by a Tiffany lamp as colorful and dizzying as a kaleidoscope. Above the desk was a collage of framed photos: set stills, red carpet shots, and signed actor headshots from the ’80s and ’90s.

“Oh my God,” I murmured as my eyes landed on a photo of two striking blondes in black dresses and stilettos. “Is that your aunt with Barbra Streisand?”

“Yep. Golden Globes, I think?” Nathan said. “My aunt was a bit of a player back in the day.” *Yeah, obviously.* I’d stolen a few selfies with “that guy from that show” over the years, but never with someone as famous and iconic as *the* Barbra Streisand. I suddenly couldn’t decide which of the two of them was more intriguing: my smoking-hot tour guide, or the famous-adjacent lady of the house.

I thought we were going to go out the way we came in, but Nathan suddenly got a little twinkle in his purty blue eyes. “Want to see the secret passageway to the kitchen?”

I nodded—I would have said yes to anything this man asked me—and he led me to a narrow bookcase against the far wall.

“Push on the Bible,” he said, and I did, and a second later the wall swung open to reveal a steep, narrow staircase. Five short steps later we were in the food pantry, surrounded by canned goods and pickle jars.

“Whoa,” I enthused. “I did not see that coming!”

“This house is full of surprises.”

Nathan winked—*tingles again!*—then led me through the chef’s kitchen with gleaming hardwood floors and cabinets for days, until we arrived back at the parlor, where Louisa and Brando were waiting.

“And here we are, back where we started,” Nathan said. He smiled and I had to grip the floor with my toes to keep from falling over.

“Thank you for letting me tour your marvelous home,” I said to the matron. “Of all the rooms the library is my favorite.”

I could feel Nathan’s eyes on me. *Breathe, Ashley, breathe.*

Louisa smiled. “Mine too.”

“Though I was also quite impressed by your office,” I said. “You and

Barbra look like sisters!” I wasn’t trying to flatter her. With her high cheekbones and robin’s-egg blue eyes, she could have been Ms. Streisand’s silver-haired twin.

“She and I have had some laughs.”

“She’s kind of my idol,” I blurted. “Peabody, Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, Tony—she’s one of only three people who’s won them all! I’ve always dreamed of meeting her, but if I did, I’m sure I would just burst out crying.” *Oh my God, Ashley, shut up! Why couldn’t I ever be a character who keeps quiet?*

“Oh?” my hostess said. So I just kept talking.

“I’m an actress,” I explained. “*Trying to be* an actress. Not that I haven’t worked—of course I have. People always ask ‘What have I seen you in?’ and I never know what to say. Because there hasn’t been that much.” *Ugh*. I sounded like a stammering idiot. *Where’s Emma when I need her?*

“An actress, how wonderful! I was a casting director for twenty-five years,” Louisa said, and my heart took flight like a rocket. Casting directors were like magical creatures to me, all-powerful Demogorgons whose superpower was to turn run-of-the-mill wannabes into sparkling chosen ones.

“That’s incredible!” I said. I had met plenty of casting directors, of course, but always from the wrong side of the conference table.

“I’m retired but I still have my ear to the ground,” she said, and I knew that my life was about to change. It was a hopeful feeling, like that moment when you know the sun is about to peek out from behind a cloud. Being a foolish optimist is a job requirement for an actress. Which, of course, was precisely what Louisa was counting on.

CHAPTER 10

LOUISA

The casting came to me in an instant—as soon as she said the word “actress.” I had of course fantasized about the moment many a time: that look on their faces, the blame game and infighting that would follow. In an instant the family would see who the bad guy really was, and that it wasn’t me.

“It’s been many years since you’ve worked in casting,” my nephew interjected. “The business has changed a lot.”

“What do you know about it—you’re in real estate!” I admonished. “I still keep up with my producer and director friends,” I said, to imply I was still relevant and influential. Truth is, I hadn’t so much as talked to a producer or a director since I’d retired seven years ago. But I still knew how to talk the talk, which, for my purposes that night, was enough.

“I’d be grateful for any advice you might be able to give me,” she gushed. And I pounced on her solicitation.

“It would be my pleasure,” I said. “Join us for tea?” The pot was still sitting there; it would be a shame to let it, and this tantalizing opportunity, go to waste. It’s not every day a struggling actress shows up on your door exactly when you need one.

“That sounds lovely,” my intruder said. *Lovely indeed.*

“I need to get going, Louisa,” Nathan said, leaning over to peck my cheek. I feared his exit would prompt her to change her mind, but it turned out my being a (former) casting director was enough to entice her to stay put.

“Why don’t you pour while I walk my nephew out?” I suggested.

I got up off the couch and met Nathan at the door. “What are you doing?” he hushed.

“Whatever do you mean?”

“You don’t even know this woman.”

“Are you worried she might poison my tea?” I asked. He raised an irritated eyebrow.

“I didn’t know you were looking to make new friends,” he said, because of course I wasn’t; that’s not what this was about.

“I have an instinct about her,” I said. I had several instincts about this bright-eyed stranger, in fact. One, that she was ambitious; her midwestern vowels suggested she had come from far to pursue her dream. Two, that she was struggling to find work as an actress; not much of an insight, they all struggle, and she’d already all but confessed it. And three, that she was madly in love with my nephew; her blush when he gazed at her was so vivid you could have seen it from space. These three things combined all but assured she was—as we said in my day—ripe for the pickin’.

“Don’t lead her on,” he warned.

“You have a good night, too,” I said dismissively.

I closed the door behind him, then padded back to the parlor. Ashley’s go-getting green eyes glimmered as she looked up at me.

“So tell me more about you,” I said. I was pretty adept at reading people, but I wanted to be sure she was the one, and that required a bit of chitchat.

“I moved here from Wisconsin,” she said. “Seven years ago now.” *Well I got that part right.*

“What do your parents think of your decision to pursue acting?” I was curious if her parents supported her dreams unconditionally and indefinitely, as my children had expected me to do for theirs.

“My dad passed two years ago,” she said, then added, “heart attack,” even though I hadn’t asked.

“I’m sorry.” I didn’t tell her that a heart attack had taken my husband at a similarly too-early age, and that I understood how such a loss can recolor a life.

“But he and my mom were cool with it,” she said. “As long as I could support myself.” I thought about my own children, how they’d scoffed at the idea of taking over my agency when I had offered to give it to them. Of course it was my fault they’d declined. Why would they want to work for a living when they already enjoyed the spoils of a successful business without having to lift a finger?

“So you’re pursuing acting without any financial help from your family?” I asked, knowing it was a rude question, even for me. But I had my reasons for wanting to know.

“I never expected my parents to support me after college!” she replied, somewhat pridefully. “I was allowed to live rent-free at home for two weeks after I graduated. After that, I was on my own.”

After raising two children who had all but demanded I subsidize new cars

and homes, her pronouncement was music to my ears.

“And how is your acting career going?” Not well, I hoped.

“I miss a lot of auditions because of my day job.”

“Oh! You have a day job!” *Right again.*

“A few of them, actually.” And that was all I needed to hear. I made a snap decision. It was possible I could persuade this young innocent to be my coconspirator, but I had a much more reliable method at my disposal: I could trick her.

“I may have an acting job for you,” I said, suddenly glad that Nathan wasn’t here so I could get right down to business. “But you’ll have to audition.”

“Oh! Of course I would audition,” she assured me. “What kind of acting job?”

I had to think on my feet here. “A crime procedural,” I said. “Not the most prestigious offering, I know. But it pays well.” *And that part was true.*

“I’m up for anything!”

I tried not to wince at her eagerness. I was eager like that once. In the beginning, it’s all striving and possibility. And then—by your hard work, a stroke of good luck, or confluence of both—you “arrive,” and find yourself standing on the platform with nothing but empty space around you and nowhere to go but down. And you cling to the things you toiled to accumulate because you know they could be ripped away at any time—by a botched performance, an unhappy client, a debilitating illness. A life on top is a life of fear; the people who invested and believed in you now expect you, need you, *depend* on you, to stay on top. But what they don’t know is that staying on top is even more difficult than getting there. And while the perks of success are lovely—big house, luxury car, fancy vacations—once you taste the “good life,” the fear of losing it all becomes your constant companion. I envied my new friend that she was still in the chase. At her age, my quaint hopes and dreams had been long replaced by relentless, stifling fear.

“The auditions were last week,” I improvised, “but I don’t think they found what they were looking for. I’d like to put you on tape, say tomorrow?”

Her face exploded with joy. “I can do tomorrow!” In her deluded optimism, she didn’t even question how an old, retired CD like me might know about an active casting—which of course I didn’t. But we hear what we want to hear, and her hopefulness served me well.

“I can’t believe my good luck,” she marveled. “And here I thought tonight was a disaster!”

“Your trespass was quite unexpected,” I said, recalling how agitated I had been to see her creeping around my backyard. “But that doesn’t mean we should waste it.” I wasn’t superstitious; quite the contrary. I simply recognized that a disturbance is an opportunity. And I was not one to let opportunity pass me by.

I had never aspired to start a casting agency. “Right place at the right time,” my husband used to say when I told the story of how my tooth broke and I landed in my dentist’s waiting room with the president of Warner Bros. on the same day his assistant quit. My husband called it “serendipity” when the head of casting OD’d with five greenlit TV pilots still needing leads and my boss asked me to “help.” People called it a “lucky break” when the \$10,000 unlawful termination settlement came in on the same day the deposit on my new office space was due. But I never used the words “lucky” or “coincidence.” I didn’t believe in fate. Upheaval was a fact of life. You could either be defeated by it or take advantage. Walking into one’s so-called “destiny” was the ability to see disruptions not as obstacles, but as road signs, then follow them where they led.

“I believe everything happens for a reason,” Ashley said brightly. “I guess we have that in common.”

“Yes,” I said simply. There was no point in correcting her that I was not, in fact, a fatalist. Her arrival on my doorstep was fortuitous; opportunity literally knocked, so I let it in, simple as that. I suppose you could say I’d been waiting for her, though I hadn’t known it until she appeared. Whether she arrived at the perfect time, or I decided the time was perfect, didn’t really matter. She was here now, which meant—like her father and my husband—I would get my too-early death.

PART 2

BEFORE

NATHAN & JORDAN

CHAPTER 11

NATHAN

“You didn’t have to make me dinner,” I told my aunt as she pulled two pieces of herb-encrusted baked trout out of the oven. The woman was a pill, but a great cook, probably because she had to be to get anyone to come over. I know that’s an unkind thing to say, but I don’t imagine she would deny it. Being “nice” was not her MO, never was.

“If I didn’t, who would?” I knew that was a dig, but I didn’t take the bait. Louisa was constantly up in my grill about getting a girlfriend. It came from a good place—she didn’t want me to be alone. I couldn’t explain to her why I wasn’t dating, not if I wanted to stay in her good graces.

We made small talk while we ate. Her garlic potatoes were the best I’d ever had, crunchy on the outside, smooth as velvet on the inside—I always had seconds and it was never enough. She asked about my dad (her brother) as she always does. And I felt sorry for her, because he never asked about her.

After dinner came tea and cookies. I was on my third Lorna Doone by the time she finally got down to business. “I’m going to change my will.”

I didn’t know why she was telling me this, so I asked, “Are you asking me to do it?” I was pretty sure she had an estate lawyer, but maybe they’d had a falling-out?

“No, you can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m leaving everything to you.”

I was so caught off-guard by the pronouncement I nearly choked on my cookie. “Sorry,” I said, grabbing a napkin to sweep up the shortbread bits I’d coughed onto the table. “You know I can’t let you do that.”

I knew Louisa was mad at her children, that she felt they’d abandoned her. And I knew why she favored me. I did more for her than all our other family members combined. Charlie and Winnie were so messed up after losing their dad they could barely take care of themselves, so someone had to hold the poor widow’s hand. Louisa was helpless. She’d earned the family money, but

her husband had done everything else—run the house, managed their investments, weeded the garden, changed the light bulbs. When Charles Sr. died, Louisa didn't know where their checkbook was, or what bank to call to get a new one. She needed help, and I guess I needed to be needed. My mother had my father, and I didn't have a girlfriend (as we've established), so helping Louisa was a way to fill the hole that was always waiting to swallow me up. I did everything she asked, from updating her operating system (phone, computer, tablet, repeat) to unclogging her kitchen sink. She called me the son she never had, and that made me feel good, but also bad, because she had a son—he just wanted nothing to do with her.

I should have been thrilled that my wealthy aunt wanted to make me her heir, but I knew what would happen if Louisa left her money to me instead of her children. Our family would become *The Hunger Games*, with everyone out for blood. Charlie and Winnie would accuse me of manipulating, tricking, coercing, even outright stealing. Plus my father would never stand for it; he'd make me give it all “back” to my cousins, even though it was never theirs in the first place.

I was about to gulp down the rest of my tea and bid Louisa good night when she abruptly stood up. “I need to show you something,” she said.

She turned on her heel and disappeared out the door. I put down my cup and followed her into her study. As she pulled a thin file folder out of a drawer, I felt a prickle of nervousness when I saw what was written on the tab.

“I've labeled it ‘Louisa's Death Folder,’” she said, like she anticipated I wouldn't believe my eyes, which I nearly didn't. She thrust it into my hand and gestured for me to open it. Inside was a document entitled “Louisa's Last Wishes” that laid out exactly how she wanted to die: no being kept alive by a machine, no wake, private funeral, and absolutely no one looking at her dead body. To make sure it would all go as planned, she had prepaid for everything: casket, funeral home, plot, the administration of her will by a fancy Beverly Hills lawyer. The lawyer's card and all the receipts were stapled to the folder, and a handwritten letter addressed to her children was paperclipped to the side.

“Louisa,” I said, that nervous prickle spreading across my skin, “why are you showing me this?”

“I should have shown it to you a long time ago,” she said with a dismissive snort, then snatched the folder back. “It will be right here,” she said, filing it

between her automotive service records and copies of her cable bills. Later I would kick myself for not grasping what had spurred all this talk of wills and last wishes, but at the moment I was too in shock.

We returned to the dining room to clear the table together, and then I shooed her out of the kitchen to clean the dishes. As I soaped and rinsed her prissy, antique dinner plates, I tried to process what had just happened. *Why did Louisa just show me her death folder? What was the sudden impetus to change her will? Was she serious about wanting to make me her heir? Or was she just testing me?* I found it contemptible that Charlie and Winnie had turned their backs on their mother, but there was no way I could steal their inheritance out from under them. Just because they'd behaved badly didn't mean I should, too.

I thought about what I would say if she tried to force the issue. If she didn't want her kids to get everything, the most logical solution would be to carve up her fortune—leave some to Winnie and Charlie, some to me and my siblings. But I knew she wouldn't go for that; the goal clearly was not to compromise—it was to punish. I didn't know what Louisa's kids had done to deserve such a harsh punishment, but I intuited—correctly, as it turns out—that not coming to visit was just the tip of the iceberg.

Louisa managed her own finances, but I looked in on them from time to time to make sure the accounts were secure and that her investments were still working for her. So I knew just how much money was at stake here—over \$10 million. Of course Louisa was very much alive, so all this talk of wills and dying wishes was just screaming into the wind. No one was getting rich anytime soon. Or so I thought.

Louisa didn't talk about her illness, so I didn't know how serious it was. She didn't seem to be in pain, but she was so frail now, and never ventured too far from home anymore. I knew she had a nurse who came to the house twice a week because I saw the canceled checks: \$300 to Silvia Hernandez, RN. I was curious about what went on during those nursing visits, but they were none of my business, so I never asked.

I dried the last of the dishes, hung the worn linen dish towel on the oven door, then stepped into the parlor to thank my hostess. My heart broke a little when I saw she had fallen asleep on that crazy uncomfortable high-back sofa. She was ornery, but who wouldn't be in her situation? She used to be a mogul, a jet-setter, on top of the world. And now she was a sick old woman who couldn't even stay awake long enough to say goodbye to her dinner

guest. *Warning sign? Or just a long week?* I would come to regret I didn't bother to find out.

CHAPTER 12

JORDAN

I knew it was trouble when Ashley came back from her dog walk without the dog.

“Ashley! What happened? Where’s Brando?”

“Oh, Jordan, I messed up bad!”

She tumbled into a chair, and I crouched down across from her. “Take a breath and tell me what happened,” I said, even though I knew exactly what had happened. She’d let Brando off the leash to run ahead—because “he needs his fun, too”—and this time he just kept running.

“I only took him off the leash for a minute!”

I had cautioned her not to let her dog run all willy-nilly in the dead of night—or anytime for that matter. We’d already had too many close calls: a near miss with a pickup truck, a headlong bolt across the Boulevard at rush hour, a tête-à-tête with a pit bull twice his size. And those were just the ones I’d witnessed. But I resisted the urge to I-told-you-so.

“I’ll get changed and we’ll go out and look for him, OK?”

I was barely to my feet when her phone rang. “Hello? . . . Yes, yes it is! Do you have him? . . . I’ll be there in a few minutes!”

“Someone found him?”

She nodded, and then came more tears (but the good kind). I’d found that people cried as often in relief (“Your husband’s going to be just fine”) as they did in agony (“I’m sorry but we’ve lost him”). I used to joke that this is why I didn’t go into emergency medicine—too much crying! I was practiced at staying calm and collected when a stranger collapsed into uncontrollable sobs, but it was different when it was Ashley. I felt her pain as sharp and stinging as a broken bone. I guess that’s how I knew I loved her.

I’d seen Ashley through more than a handful of heartbreaks—after her theater company folded, when she didn’t get that big part she was “perfect” for, and, most devastatingly, after her dad died. She always apologized for “crying all over me,” but I didn’t mind it. I liked being close to her, the one to steady her when life threw her a curveball.

“You’re OK, he’s OK,” I said as I pulled her into a hug. We’d shared a lot of hugs over the years, so I had no reason to think this one was any different. Until she brought up the pact.

“Jordan . . . Do you remember that pact we made? About turning thirty?”

No. No, no! I was not ready for this.

“We made a pact?” I said dumbly, hoping she’d buy my feigned confusion. Of course I remembered the pact. I remembered her exact words, in fact (“Let’s be each other’s backup spouse!”) and how she’d laughed when I said, “OK, dear.” I remembered the kiss, too. I remembered having to stop myself from letting it turn into more, because, yeah, I wanted her, but not after three tequila shots and whatever else we’d imbibed. If we were going to do it, I wanted to do it sober.

“Well, not a pact, exactly,” she backtracked. “It’s just you’ve always been there for me. And I like that. And maybe, y’know, it could always be like that? Like we talked about.”

I had experienced all sorts of scary situations in my life—being down by one with five seconds on the clock, making that first incision on a body that wasn’t a cadaver, having to tell a young, hopeful diabetic I couldn’t save his toe, his foot, his leg—but nothing had scared me quite like Ashley telling me she wanted to make good on that pact.

“Brando’s waiting. I’ll go change.”

I didn’t rebuff her because that’s not what I wanted. I rebuffed her because it was *exactly* what I wanted. But not like this. Just as I’d backed off after that kiss because I wanted better for Ashley than drunken sex she might regret, I was ducking her marriage question because I wanted better for her than a forgettable proposal she’d had to make herself. If you’re lucky, you only get one proposal in your lifetime. You shouldn’t have to settle for one that slips out while celebrating something else.

I knew the story of how my parents got engaged. It told itself when I was born four short months after their wedding. My mom always denied that it was a marriage of convenience, but I saw the look in her eyes when her friends told the stories of their mountaintop proposals with velvet boxes and champagne flutes hidden in trees. Her proposal was, “So? What are we going to do about this?” I didn’t want to get engaged under the dull fluorescent light of our 1970s-era kitchen. I wanted my mountaintop, too.

Back in Wisconsin, pretty much all our friends from high school were getting hitched. My Facebook feed was a relentless collage of engagement

rings and wedding announcements. I scrolled through white parties at the Four Seasons and luaus at the lake. Strangers were becoming in-laws, two families were merging into one. The quarterback from our football team just had T-shirts made (S_{HE SAID YES!}) and posted pictures of all our former teammates wearing them at his stag. By midwestern standards, Ashley and I were way behind: old, overdue, borderline damaged goods.

Here in LA, it wasn't uncommon to be single at thirty—or even forty! LA people were opportunists—I don't mean that in a bad way; that's why we came here, for opportunity. But that opportunism carried over to other parts of our lives. It's like we were all holding out to the last possible minute on every front in case something—or someone—better came along.

I bought into that opportunism for a while. I wanted to know why the Beach Boys wished they were all California girls, so I tried to meet as many as I could. But, after seven years on the dating scene, I knew my best opportunity was, and always had been, sleeping in the room next door.

I turned my back on my roommate. I didn't want to see her face. But I also didn't want her to see the panicked expression on mine. We were drunk when we made that pact, but that didn't mean I wasn't ready to make good on it.

“It's OK,” she said. “I'll go get him.”

I could hear the disappointment in Ashley's voice. I didn't mean to hurt her, but I wanted to give us our mountaintop moment.

And now that I knew our drunken promise wasn't a joke, I would.

CHAPTER 13

NATHAN

I was almost to the freeway on-ramp when my phone rang. Then abruptly stopped. I peeked at the caller ID: Louisa. I pressed “Return Call,” and it went straight to voice mail. The traffic light was green, so I pulled over to try again. Once again, voice mail.

I had no one to go home to, just a beer and a ball game, like every night. I knew if I didn’t go check on her, the not knowing why she called would bug me. I wasn’t OCD, but I’ve been known to touch the iron to double-check that I’d turned it off, pat my pockets a few times to double-, triple-, quadruple-check I have my keys, wallet, phone. Plus all her talk of wills and dying had me a little spooked. So when the traffic cleared, I turned around and headed back toward Louisa’s, past a Dunkin’, a burger joint, a gas station, not one but two Starbucks. The Valley was a painfully boring, dull, brown grid, with a puzzling excess of sushi places and nail salons. But once you crossed Ventura Boulevard and started heading up the hill, it was like being transported from the bland palate of Kansas to the emerald forests of Oz. Louisa’s neighborhood was literally an oasis in the desert—a welcome respite from the monotony of the valley floor and the sandy, congested Manhattan Beach enclave I called home.

I turned off my radio as I drove up the steep cul-de-sac that led to Louisa’s house. I had never met Louisa’s neighbors, but if they were as prickly as she was, better not to disturb them. Louisa’s driveway was frightfully unwelcoming, but I’d long since given up trying to convince her to spruce it up. Her whole career had been one of perfectly manicured eyebrows, fingers, and toes, and surgically tailored dresses and pantsuits—perhaps she liked the contrast? Or maybe she just liked the witchy vibe it gave off because she wanted to be left alone.

The woods rustled with agitation as I drove past them toward the house. I always thought I saw something writhing in the undergrowth—the maze of dead leaves and branches was an ideal nesting ground for rats, raccoons, and whatever other pointy-nosed rodents needed a home. But the only wild

animal I saw when I pulled up the drive was Louisa, standing on her front porch with her pistol over her head like she was Annie Oakley on her way to a shoot-out.

“Oh boy,” I muttered as I pulled up and parked. I considered putting my hands up as I walked toward her lest she mistake me for Buffalo Bill.

“Louisa, are you all right? What happened?”

“I had an intruder.”

“Please tell me you didn’t shoot anybody.” I wasn’t one of those guys who was comfortable around guns. I was a lawyer, not a gunslinger; I shot people down with words, not bullets.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she scolded. Her voice was amped, and I could tell she was rattled.

So I suggested: “Why don’t I make us some tea.”

I did not want more tea, and I knew she wouldn’t drink it, either, but it was a way to reassure her that I would stay with her until she calmed down. She tried my patience sometimes, but she was more of a mother to me than my actual mother was these days. I got along with my mom well enough, but I was the oldest of four children, and I guess my turn to be mothered was up. Louisa started calling around the same time my mother stopped. I didn’t complain about being snubbed to the extent that Louisa did, but we both understood that feeling unwanted and unworthy was our unspoken common ground.

Louisa didn’t have an electric kettle, so I boiled the water the old-fashioned way, in a squat black pot on her aging Viking range. I pulled the cups we’d just used off the drying rack (still wet), then dried the outsides with the linen dish towel I’d hung on the oven door just minutes ago.

I chose chamomile for its calming properties, then brought the whole shebang—teapot, tea cozy, china cups and saucers—back into the parlor. I had just set the cups on their saucers when I heard the noise. A determined scratching sound right under our feet.

“Stay here. And don’t shoot me!”

I took the fireplace poker she offered me—Lord knows why; it’s not like I would ever stab anyone—then ventured out into the yard.

People think LA doesn’t have seasons, but the crunchy carpet of leaves beneath my feet was proof that we had fall like everyone else. I stayed close to the house, because that’s what sneaky people do, as I wound my way through the side yard to the back.

I stopped for a minute, to listen. I loved the sounds of the night: frogs croaking, crickets crooning, the distant hoot of a snooty owl. There were close sounds, like the wind stroking the bark of the tree branch by your head. And faraway ones, like a truck braking slow and squeaky on the boulevard below. I lived in a condo. All I ever heard was the flat, mechanical hum of my air conditioner, working overtime to keep my upper unit cool. I much preferred the depth and nuance of the woods, but I had only my bad choices to blame for my bachelorhood and the monotonous soundtrack of my nights.

As I stood in Louisa's side yard, I recalled the scratching sound we'd heard in the parlor. It had been tinny and rough, like nails—or claws—on a screen door. I looked down at the entrance to the crawl space by my feet . . . to see two wide brown eyes peering back at me.

"Well hello there." I set the poker aside and crouched down to meet the quivering gaze of Louisa's furry blond intruder. "Are you stuck?"

A fluffy tail wagged as I removed the screen and coaxed the little fellow into my arms. He was a tumble of fur and gratitude, and I was reminded how helping Louisa often helped me, too.

"Let's get you inside."

The little dog's owner arrived ten minutes later. I knew from her voice on the phone that she'd be pretty, and I wasn't disappointed. Thick brown hair poured out from underneath her trucker hat, and when she smiled her nose crinkled like a tiny accordion.

"Would you like to come in?" I asked her, not just because Louisa had said she wanted to apologize.

"Oh, I don't want to impose."

As soon as she spoke her little dog jumped off the couch and plowed into her like a fastball to a catcher's mitt. She wobbled on impact, and for a second I got scared she might roll right off the porch. I almost reached for her, but she regained her balance before I had the chance.

Initially I was surprised when Louisa asked me to give her a tour. But then it occurred to me that maybe she felt the chemistry that was bouncing between us like a Ping-Pong ball and was hoping I'd score a date. Our unexpected visitor seemed like a nice girl, but I didn't deserve a nice girl, so I let the house—with all its eclectic, zigzagging surprises—be the star.

I showed her the powder room, the dining room, Louisa's prized library, but she really came alive when we walked into the study and her eyes fell upon Louisa's shrine to her career.

“Is that Barbra Streisand?”

“It is,” I confirmed. I was never one to get starstruck—movie stars are just people; I never understood what all the fuss was about. From what Louisa had told me, most of them are crazy—no surprise, since we treat them like unicorns.

No tour would be complete without a trip through the secret passageway to the pantry. Ashley (predictably) gasped with delight as we squeezed through the bookcase-that-was-really-a-door.

“How wonderful,” she said as we emerged in the tiny room off the kitchen Louisa had stocked with every type of dry good known to man.

“This house is full of secrets,” I confided. I didn’t elaborate on any of the deeper, darker mysteries within this fortress in the woods, because I didn’t know them myself yet.

“And here we are back where we started,” I announced as I led her through the kitchen and back to where Louisa was waiting on that high-back couch in the parlor.

“Thank you for letting me tour your marvelous home.”

She confessed to being an actress and I wasn’t surprised. She had all the hallmarks—pretty face, bubbly personality, relentless inquisitiveness—and of course this town was full of them. What did surprise me was my aunt’s reaction: “I was a casting director for twenty-five years, maybe I can help you!”

Help her with what? “The business has changed a lot since you owned an agency,” I reminded her.

“What do you know, you’re in real estate!” I wanted to correct her that I was the firm’s in-house counsel, not some two-bit salesman peddling spacious three-bedrooms with two-car garages. But what was the point? Sure, I wanted to impress Ashley, like any man wants to impress a beautiful woman, but I was not in the market for a girlfriend, nor was I worthy of one.

“Join us for tea!” Louisa suggested. Then gave me that look like “you’re welcome,” because any normal red-blooded man would have been grateful.

“I’m sorry, but I have to go,” I said, even though I didn’t, then made my way to the door. I would have loved to have tea with this adorable actress-slash-dog lover, but I knew better than to try to let Louisa be my wingman.

“What are you doing?” I asked Louisa when she walked me to the door. Befriending a total stranger was so far out of character for my aunt, that prickle of nervousness returned. *Is this what early-onset dementia looks like?*

Or is there an impostor in my midst?

“Are you worried she’s going to poison my tea?” my aunt asked, and I felt relieved on at least one front. *OK, not an impostor.*

“Don’t lead her on,” I implored her. I don’t know why I felt protective of this woman—I had only known her ten minutes.

“You have a good night, too,” she said. But of course the best part was over.

CHAPTER 14

JORDAN

“What do you think is more important, size or clarity?” I asked the jeweler as I gazed down at a gazillion dollars’ worth of diamond rings.

“Size,” the jeweler said. “All day and night.” He winked. I felt a flicker of annoyance at the unsubtle sex joke. I knew it was crazy to propose to a woman I had never had sex with, even though it was pretty much the only thing we hadn’t done. We lived together, ate together, traveled together. I was her ride home from the airport and she was mine. That first year in LA, when we were both too broke to go home for Thanksgiving, we even cooked a turkey together, just the two of us. I made the bird, she made the sides—mashed potatoes and green beans and sweet potato poof. Ashley and I were like family. There wasn’t much I didn’t know about my childhood pal and roommate of seven years, with the glaring exception of how she was in bed.

“Do you have a price range in mind?” he asked.

I had just joined a sports medicine practice and had suffocating student loans, so money was tight. But I knew I would be making a lot more in a matter of months, so I decided not to skimp. I wanted the ring to represent the future, because isn’t that what a proposal is? An invitation to a future together? It’s not like you can just upgrade your fiancée’s engagement ring as you make more money—if things went as planned, she would have it forever. An engagement ring is a declaration, a promise, a statement to the world. I wanted it to be bold and optimistic. Because that’s how I felt about Ashley.

“I’d like to buy her the best one you have,” I said. “But I don’t think I can go much higher than five thousand.”

I hadn’t planned to spend my Sunday afternoon shopping for an engagement ring, but now that I knew that Ashley wanted what I wanted, I was emboldened to make my move. I couldn’t believe she remembered the pact. We were blotto when we said we would be each other’s emergency spouse. I’d thought she was kidding. I’d thought I was kidding, too.

“Have you considered a halo setting?” the jeweler asked. I didn’t know what a halo setting was, so I just shrugged.

“This center stone is not overly large, but the setting camouflages its smaller size.” He pulled a ring from the case. It was not round, but not square. I learned later it was called a cushion cut, I guess because it was the shape of a couch cushion—rectangular but with rounded edges. There were what looked like a hundred tiny diamonds around it, plus more diamonds on the band that forked out to hug the stone on either side. It sparkled like crazy. I peeked at the price tag. It was \$1,000 more than I’d wanted to spend but looked like it should cost twice that much.

I did a quick calculation in my head. The rent at our Valley bungalow hadn’t gone up for three years, and based on the condition of the place, it was unlikely it would anytime soon. I had paid cash for my pickup, so I didn’t have a car payment. I had student debt, but now that I was done with my residency I could start chipping away at it. I pretty much always wore scrubs to work, so didn’t need fancy clothes or shoes. And I wasn’t a foodie; most days lunch was a turkey sandwich I made at home. It was a little irresponsible to spend six grand on a diamond ring, but so was proposing to a woman who I’d never even seen naked.

“Wow,” I said. “It looks like it fell right out of a fairy tale.”

“Do you know her ring size?” the jeweler asked.

I pulled a twist tie out of my jacket pocket. She had a mood ring she sometimes wore on her left ring finger. I didn’t want to risk taking it, but I’d snuck into her room and measured it when she was at work. The twist tie was a little mangled, but when he put it on the sizer it straightened right out.

“She’s a five,” the jeweler said with a grin.

“Is that good?”

“This ring is a five,” he replied. “I don’t have many this small. I think it may be—”

I finished his sentence for him. “Meant to be.”

I thought about how what I wanted in a partner had changed over the years. In my early twenties I fell for women who made me feel off-balance, like I was teetering on the edge of a cliff. I craved the excitement of the chase, and never knowing when—or if—she was going to call me back. But as I approached my thirtieth birthday, I realized I didn’t want to marry someone who made me feel dizzy. I wanted to marry my best friend—because isn’t that what a wife is?

“I think I have to have it,” I said, imagining Ashley’s expression when she saw it.

“You won’t regret it.”

I got a dopamine hit as he rung it up. I hadn’t felt a rush like that since the swish of my three-pointer that clinched the state championship—and that was a long time ago. It was going to be hard to wait for her birthday—patience was never my strong suit. Of course I didn’t know how much was going to change between now and then, and that the people she had just met were going to ruin everything.

CHAPTER 15

NATHAN

I woke up to the text I'd long dreaded was coming: **I need to see you.**

It was a sunny Sunday morning, and I had plans to play eighteen holes with some buddies from law school—a whole day affair, and night, too, if you include the drinking afterward, which was arguably the best part.

I have a golf game, I texted back, even though I knew she wouldn't care.

I only have today. *Nope, didn't care.*

It happened how all dumb shit happens—with too much free time and too much to drink. We had met a few times before—the first time was actually at her wedding, but that's not the most inappropriate part of this story. I was attracted to her—she was all curves with pouty lips and perky calves—but she was marrying someone else, so I resigned myself to just enjoy the view.

Over the years I saw her at various gatherings—a birthday party, a concert in the park, a trip to the zoo with her husband and young son. And then came the ski trip. She and I were the only ones who didn't ski, which made for some long afternoons with nothing else to do but stare out the windows and at each other.

I told myself she made the first move when she slipped a nip of whiskey in my morning coffee. “We're on vacation,” she'd said with a wink as she made me another Irish coffee, minus the coffee. It wasn't the wink that got me—it was the way she rolled her tongue over the rim of the cup when she took a sip, leaving a puffy mustache of whipped cream across her upper lip. I think I said something clueless like, “You want a napkin?” Instead of a yes or no, she leaned in toward me with those cream-covered lips and responded with something absurd like, “You be my napkin.”

I knew I should have walked away right then and there—put on my coat and gone out into the cold and snow. But I didn't have a car. And there was nothing but trees and icicles for miles.

I was too scared to kiss her (she was another man's wife!), so I reached up with a tentative finger, which she claimed with her mouth as soon as I touched it to her lip. Her tongue was lively and determined to ensnare me,

and we were naked with our limbs entangled in a matter of minutes.

After, I felt like a total shit. But that didn't stop me from doing it again. And again. Every day of that damned trip, sometimes twice. As I saw it, once I soiled the sanctity of her marriage, what difference did it make if I did it one time or a thousand?

I thought when we packed up our parkas and I went back to my town and she to hers, that would be the end of it, and we would never speak of it again. But a few months later she started texting. At first they were sexy and playful (**my whipped cream is lonely, wishing for a snow day, I wish every vacation was a ski vacation**). But then they became insistent (**I'm dying here without you, I need a fix, Don't make me wait any longer!**). I didn't encourage her, didn't even respond, and I thought she'd get the hint. We didn't live near one another; I thought the situation would eventually take care of itself. Until I got an alarming text while I was watching college ball on a rainy Saturday afternoon (**I'm at your door, let me in**).

That she'd come without being invited scared the shit out of me, but I couldn't leave her out in the rain. So I buzzed her up.

I quickly planned a speech—you're beautiful, the best lay I've ever had, but we can't—all of which was true. But then she walked into my condo wearing nothing but a raincoat and red lipstick and my tongue was tied.

"How'd you get away?" I'd asked her as she toweled off after a quick shower, and she told me the lie she'd spun about a friend with a new baby who needed a break. "She might need lots of breaks," she'd said, and I got that scared feeling again. Not that I didn't enjoy the sex—it was spectacular. She was fiery and creative and inexhaustible. But she was someone else's forever. Or so I thought.

"I'm going to leave him," she said as she slipped back into her raincoat. "Wait for me."

I told myself it wasn't my fault that her husband couldn't satisfy her. I told myself that she was the one who was cheating, that her husband deserved better than a woman who wanted someone else, that he'd be better off if she left him. And while all of that may have been true, it didn't make what we had done OK. Somehow between Irish coffee and that rainy-day romp, I had become her fatal attraction. And, like the movie, there was no way it would end well.

I called her a week after our rainy-day hookup. "We can't do this again," I insisted. "I won't let you leave him for me."

“Why are you denying what you feel for me?” she’d asked. But the only thing I was denying was that I was a pathetic piece of shit.

“You should go to couples therapy,” I’d said. And her reply was as flattering as it was mortifying.

“You can’t turn a draft horse into a stallion.”

“You and me, it’s not going to happen,” I’d insisted. “I’m sorry if I led you to believe otherwise.”

I’d thought I’d gotten through to her. That it was finally over. But now she was texting again.

I won’t be here when you get here, I texted back, putting on my shoes in case she was already in the building. **So don’t come.**

I stared at my phone for a long, tense beat, waiting for her response. Nothing. *Good God, what if she was in the elevator?*

As I rechecked my golf bag—golf balls, tees, glove, towel, sunscreen, lucky coins—I thought back to my encounter the night before. It felt good to be in the presence of a beautiful woman. And I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t attracted to her lean dancer’s body, the graceful slope of her neck, her eager curiosity. Yes, I had slept with another man’s wife, but it didn’t have to define who I was forever. It was time to move on from this—do better. *Be better.*

My phone buzzed. Not a text; she was calling. I muttered an expletive, then answered it. “I’m walking out the door.”

“I need to see you.”

My cheeks burned, something between terror and rage. “No,” I said. “I’m not doing this.”

“Please, I can’t do this over the phone. I have the day off, let me come.” She was crying. I felt like a shit. So I said the first thing I could think of to shut this down.

“I’m seeing someone.”

I meant it as a lie, to get her to leave me alone. But when the words came out of my mouth they felt so right, so freeing, so inevitable, it was like my desires and my future suddenly merged into one. It was a story that was already written. I just had to walk into it.

“I don’t believe you.” But it didn’t matter. Because I believed me.

“Go back to your marriage,” I said.

And the line went dead.

CHAPTER 16

JORDAN

“Jordan! How nice to hear from you!”

“Everything’s fine, Evelyn,” I said to Ashley’s mother, who no doubt was surprised to get a call from her daughter’s roommate on a random Sunday afternoon. Now that I had the ring, there was just one more thing I had to do, and I decided to do it right then and there in the jeweler’s parking lot.

“I haven’t seen Ashley yet today,” I said, so she would understand that I wasn’t with her daughter and had my own reason for calling. “She’s been working really hard these days,” I added, to imply she was at work, which she probably was. Ashley didn’t get up early on Sundays unless she had to give a tour, appear at a birthday party, or had some sort of acting-related thing.

“Well, she certainly is due for her big break,” the proud momma said, and of course I agreed, even though I didn’t understand anything about being an actor, except that becoming one didn’t seem to follow any logical process or timetable.

“So . . . you’re probably wondering why I’m calling,” I said. I felt a zing of nervousness as I paused to gather my courage. I was about to launch into the spiel I’d been rehearsing all morning, declaring my feelings for her daughter, then asking for her blessing for her hand in marriage, but she cut me off.

“Hang on, Jordan. Billy just walked in. I’ll put you on speaker.”

Billy was Ashley’s big brother. He was one year ahead of me in high school, yet always several spots behind me in the batting order. We’d had a falling-out his senior year, when I told Coach Stevens how some of our teammates had conspired with the batboy and his girlfriend to steal signs during the playoffs. I hadn’t known Billy was one of them, but it wouldn’t have changed anything, I still would have told. His defense—“All the other teams are doing it, too!”—while not untrue, got him benched and earned me a black eye and a shoulder that had only grown colder over the years.

“Billy! It’s Jordan calling from California!” I heard Evelyn say.

“Who?”

“Hey, Billy. It’s me, J. C.” Only parents and nonathletes ever called me by my given name. To my teammates I was, and had always been, J. C.

“Oh, right,” came the chilly reply.

“Sorry, Jordan, I interrupted you. You were saying?”

I hesitated. Ashley was one of three children. If she got engaged to me, she would be the first. I knew most people don’t ask a parent’s permission to propose to their daughter anymore, that it was old fashioned and terribly formal, but with Ashley’s dad gone, the family had gotten really tight. Ashley called her mom every day, even when nothing was doing, and I imagined her two brothers did the same. I should have known one of them would be there; they both still lived in the neighborhood, and Sundays at Evelyn’s were for football and barbecue, no matter the weather. I had been hoping to catch Ashley’s mom alone, but maybe it was a good thing Billy was there. Because I wanted his blessing, too, even though it would be harder to come by.

“Billy, I’m glad you’re there,” I said. “I wanted to talk to you, too.” OK, that was kind of a lie, but there was no harm in making him feel important.

“What about?” I couldn’t tell if there was hostility in his voice or if I was being paranoid. High school was a long time ago, and I never hit him back. One might say the score was even.

“Well, as you know, Ashley and I have been living together for seven years now, y’know, as roommates.” *Ugh, why am I so nervous?* Billy wasn’t a good enough player to have gotten recruited out of high school, but I know he was pissed he couldn’t play in what turned out to be the team’s final game. I’m sure he thought I took that away from him, even though he really took it away from himself.

“We’ve gotten really close over the years,” I continued. I don’t know why I was such a goody-goody in high school. Did I think they’d blame the Black kid if they got caught? As the only one, I was an obvious scapegoat. Or maybe I’m just wired that way, because nothing’s really changed. I’m still the idiot who tackled the meth-head-purse-snatcher in the Vons parking lot, even though it was the system that was to blame and the night the guy spent in jail helped absolutely no one.

“Anyway, I have come to realize she’s the most incredible woman a man could ever hope to meet,” I told them. “And I wanted to ask for your blessing to ask her to marry me.” *There. I said it. It didn’t come out as smoothly as I’d hoped, but at least I didn’t chicken out.*

There was a long beat of silence. It was finally Evelyn who spoke first. “I

. . . we . . . didn't know you and Ashley, um . . . had that kind of relationship."

"We don't. I mean, not yet."

Another long beat of silence. Sweat was running down my back. *Do they think I'm crazy? Desperate? Delusional? Did they mute the phone to ask each other what kind of twenty-first-century man proposes to someone he's not romantically involved with?* I probably would have questioned it myself if I hadn't been so certain Ashley and I could make each other happy. She *already* made me happy. And she had (finally!) tipped her hand that I did the same for her.

I was about to tell her mom and brother how she had stood by me through everything: helped me get ready for my board exams and held my hand when I was waiting for the results. And how I read lines with her whenever she had a big audition and drank tequila with her when she flubbed it. I would tell them how we had grown close in so many ways—one might argue, the most important ways. How we weren't clouded by the drunken haze of sudden attraction. That our feelings for each other were founded on shared history and mutual respect.

But I didn't have to say anything. Because turns out they had already formed an opinion about the prospect of us tying the knot.

"It's about fucking time!" Billy bellowed, and I laughed with relief.

"Billy!"

"Sorry, Mom. I'm just ready for my baby sis to snag herself a stand-up guy. Someone who always does the right thing, sometimes at my expense—"

"I deserve that. And the shiner you laid on me," I joked.

"What are you boys talking about?" I never told my mom about Billy's locker room punch, and I guess Billy hadn't told his, either.

"Just dumb kid stuff, ancient history," Billy said.

"Well, if you want to marry her, it's fine with us," Evelyn said, then added, "And if you bring her back home, we'll be doubly fine."

"One step at a time, Mom," Billy admonished. "He's got to ask her first. When's the big day?"

"I was planning to ask her on her birthday," I told him. But Billy had different ideas.

"That's not for another month!" he said.

"Three weeks," I corrected him.

"It's going to be hard to keep the secret for three whole weeks," Evelyn

teased.

“Did you get a ring yet?” Billy asked.

“I did.”

“So what are you waiting for? Do it now!”

I hadn't considered asking her right away, but Billy's excitement was contagious. I forgot all about that mountaintop. Now that I knew who I wanted to be with for the rest of my life, I wanted the rest of my life to start as soon as possible.

“You'll know when the time is right,” Evelyn said. “We don't mean to push.”

“Maybe I need a push,” I said.

“Haha, yes!” Billy said. “Keep us posted.”

As I hung up the phone, my smile was so wide it hurt my cheeks. I didn't know what Ashley was doing this evening, but I was fired up to make good on that pact.

CHAPTER 17

NATHAN

Of course I remembered her name. Ashley Brooks. She had curtseyed when she'd said it, like a courtier bowing to her queen. It was a charming gesture, boldly theatrical but also adorably humble.

She was easy to track down. She was an actress. Before I left for golf, I typed her name into my browser and in 0.85 seconds I had over a thousand hits—theater and film credits, behind-the-scenes photos, headshots old and new, in color and black and white. I felt a tingle of relief that she was what she'd said she was—unlike the rest of us, who were masquerading as decent people while shameful secrets burned holes in our pockets.

I tried not to feel like a stalker as I scrolled through Ashley's profile, reminding myself that she had put these photos online for all to see. She wanted the world to know her name, recognize her face, and yes—send her a message. I knew this because she had a “contact me” link on her acting website. As I hovered my mouse over the link, I suddenly realized I already had her number. It was on my phone from the night before, when I'd called her to come get her dog.

I felt a rush of nervousness as I opened my phone to view my outgoing calls. *Still there—pew!* The only thing to figure out was what to say. Before the indiscretion, I'd been pretty confident around women. It had been five years since I'd had a serious girlfriend (law school), but that was only because I hadn't been captivated by anyone. Until now.

I saved Ashley's number in my contacts, then left for my golf game. It was a perfect day, with just the hint of a breeze. I felt the sweet buzz of possibility as I pulled out of my garage and onto the freeway. I don't know if Louisa had talked about me after I left (probably not), but if she did, I was pretty sure she wouldn't have said anything bad. Yes, she could be critical, but she liked me. Plus she didn't know the bad stuff—stuff I was determined to put behind me now.

As I pulled up at the golf course (early, as usual), I was so fired up I almost called Ashley right then and there. I wondered if she was a morning person—

aren't all dog people morning people?—and what she might be up to today. *Is she working? Playing tennis? Rollerblading on the beach?* Now that I had spoken it out loud, I felt some urgency to actually be seeing someone. I didn't want to be a prick *and* a liar.

Of course it occurred to me that she might already have a boyfriend. I was getting vibes that the shop was open, but as I knew all too well, those vibes can be misleading, even dangerous. Sexual chemistry is a mysterious beast, but I was pretty sure I knew the good kind from the bad. There's the deep, dark, primal longing that rises up when a woman plies you with whiskey, then paints her lips with whipped cream and implores you to lick them clean. I'm not making excuses—what I did was wrong—just drawing a distinction. What happened between my lover and me was a blinding, visceral urge. What I felt around Ashley was more like curiosity—a nebulous attraction that intrigued and excited me. It was the difference between walking into a bakery and having your senses gently awakened by the sweet smell of something baking . . . versus having forkfuls of decadent chocolate cake fed to you by eager hands. Both are irresistible. One is a gentle tease that lifts your spirits like a cool breeze; the other is quickly devoured and leaves you feeling gross.

I forced myself to wait until after my game to make the call. I'd be more relaxed after spending the day with friends, and I didn't want to seem overeager. *"This is Nathan from last night,"* I'd say. *"I found myself thinking about you and was wondering if you might be interested in grabbing a drink sometime."* Simple and straightforward. How could she say no?

Bolstered by anticipation, I played well that day, which meant I was on the hook for the first round of drinks. It was still early—barely three o'clock—so the guys and I agreed to meet up after showers and fresh shirts for happy hour near the course. The two married men would bring their wives—eighteen holes plus drinks was a long day, and we singletons understood that we had to share. We were allowed to bring dates, too, and I suddenly got an impulse to invite Ashley. Yes, it was only two hours' notice, but it couldn't hurt to ask, right?

I told myself I would play it by ear, feel out if she was busy before extending the invitation. She might not even answer. I hadn't thought about what to do if she didn't pick up. I never left messages anymore; if the person I was calling didn't answer, I either sent a text or tried again later. I didn't like the idea of asking a woman out over voice mail, but I decided it would be weirder to just hang up. If I got her voice mail, I would keep my message

short and breezy and hope for the best.

I threw my clubs in the trunk, climbed into my car, closed the door, and dialed. She answered on the third ring.

“Hello?” *Here we go.*

“Ashley, this is Nathan, from last night?” I don’t know why I said it as a question—I knew full well who I was.

“Nathan, hi!”

“Hi.” *Stay cool, Nathan, stay cool.*

“I just got back from your aunt’s,” she said. And I wondered if I had misheard her.

“Oh?” I said dumbly.

“She’s trying to help me get a job,” she explained. “I probably won’t get it, but it’s nice of her to submit me.” No one had ever used the word “nice” in describing my aunt, but I kept that to myself.

“Oh! Well break a leg, I guess?” *I think that’s what you’re supposed to say?*

“I probably shouldn’t talk about it, it’s bad luck to talk about auditions. We actors are very superstitious.” She laughed and I found myself wanting to laugh, too. If I hadn’t been so nervous, I might have asked more about that audition. It was out of character for Louisa to want to help someone, and as far as I knew she hadn’t worked for years.

“Listen,” I said, “I don’t want to cut in on my aunt’s turf here, but I, um . . . well I really enjoyed meeting you and I was wondering if you might want to meet for a drink sometime, or even tonight?” I regretted the “even tonight” part as soon as I said it. It was aggressive and desperate and borderline disrespectful. But once again she surprised me.

“I’m free tonight.” *She’s free tonight!*

“I have to take some golf buddies to happy hour—”

“I’d love to meet your friends! I can be ready in twenty minutes.”

“Oh. Fantastic!”

And just like that I had a date.

CHAPTER 18

JORDAN

The sky was heavy with dusk, but I felt light as champagne as I drove home from the jeweler with my future in my pocket. There was a woman selling flowers on the off-ramp of our exit. The light was red, so I waved her over and bought a dozen roses. “I’m getting engaged today,” I told the flower lady as I handed her a twenty-dollar bill. “To the love of my life.”

She smiled and nodded as she took my money. I’m sure I sounded like a damn fool, but I didn’t care. I was ready to make this woman my wife, and I wasn’t afraid for the whole world to know it.

I was relieved to discover Ashley wasn’t home when I got there. I hadn’t showered after my morning workout and was smelling a bit ripe. Sunday was leg day, and I had worked up a pretty good sweat. I wanted to be fresh faced for the big ask, so first stop: shower.

As I lathered up, I thought about the best way to ask her. *Flowers, ring, kiss? Ring, kiss, flowers? Or maybe I should start with the kiss?* “Ashley,” I could say, “there’s something I need to do right now.” Then lay it on her. *Or is that too aggressive?*

By the time I was toweling off, I had run a dozen different scenarios through my mind. I decided to go with (1) flowers, to get her attention, (2) kiss, to get her warmed up, then (3) ring, because best for last, right? What would happen after the ring I didn’t dare guess, just hoped for the best.

I tidied the house, then settled in to wait. I couldn’t concentrate on my reading, so I watched some basketball on TV. For a period of time, up until my senior year in high school, I had hoped to play in the NBA. But six foot two isn’t tall enough for a power forward with average talent, so I chose sports medicine instead. Med school was grueling and felt never ending, but at thirty, I was finally a full-fledged doctor with clients ranging from ninety-pound ballerinas with snapping hip syndrome to two-hundred-and-fifty-pound linebackers with torn cartilage and chronic tendinitis. I loved helping athletes of all levels get back to the sports they loved, whether they were college superstars trying to go pro or white-haired tennis players trying to

stay active and out of the morgue.

It was getting late, so I made myself some dinner—stir fry chicken with brown rice. I left out the garlic, because now was not the time for garlic breath, and as much as I wanted a beer, decided against it for the same reason. Besides, I had hoped the alcohol would come later, in the form of a toast to a beautiful future, and for that I had prosecco on ice.

It was seven o'clock when Ashley finally got home. The ring was in the pocket of my hoodie. I put a hand on it as I stood up to make sure it didn't fall out. The flowers were on the table. I had left them wrapped but put the tips in a cup of water so they wouldn't wilt. As I heard her coming up the front walk, I took them out and dried the stems so they wouldn't be wet when I gave them to her.

The seconds felt like hours as I waited for my future wife to walk through the front door. My mouth was so dry I almost drank the flower water. As my pulse raced, I cursed myself for not having that beer.

I finally heard her key in the lock. I recentered the ring in my hoodie pocket, then tucked the flowers behind my back. The door opened. Ashley was smiling and as radiant as I had ever seen her. I felt more sure than ever about what I was about to do.

"Jordan!" she said when she saw me standing in the middle of the room staring at her all awkward and wide eyed. "Are you OK?"

I realized how ridiculous I must have looked, standing at attention like a one-armed marine. There was no turning back now. Not that I wanted to turn back—I was just nervous as hell.

"Ashley," I started, then suddenly went blank. *What had I decided? Flowers, kiss, ring? Or flowers, ring, kiss?* The ring was a bowling ball in my pocket, and I was squeezing those flowers so tight I nearly snapped the stems in half. "I need to ask you something."

I can't remember what I did next—whip out the flowers or fall to one knee. But in a dizzying moment, she was holding that doomed bouquet of roses and I was kneeling in front of her with the ring box open and arm extended like I was feeding a giraffe at the zoo.

"Will you marry me?"

I expected her to be surprised. But the happy kind.

"Is that . . . real?" she asked, peering down at the ring.

"As real as my love for you," I said, knowing it was probably the corniest thing I'd ever said in my whole life. My heart was a jackhammer in my chest.

I flashed to the prosecco chilling in the fridge, how that ring would look on her finger, calling her mom to share the news. I was ready for this to be the happiest day of my life.

“Jordan, I . . .” She started to speak, but her words were cut off by a knock on the door. *Who the hell is that?* She bit her lip. An apologetic grimace flashed across her face.

“Are you . . . expecting someone?” And her answer gutted me like a fish.

“I’m on a date.”

We stood there looking at each other for an impossibly awkward beat. Well, she was standing, I was kneeling. I couldn’t move, even to retract my hand.

Knock, knock, knock.

“I . . . need to get that,” she said. And I must have nodded, because she nodded, too.

She turned her back to me. I closed the ring box and let my hand fall to my side. I didn’t want to stay half kneeling half standing in the middle of our living room, but I had no idea what to do next. *Is she going to send him away? Let him in? Leave with him? What the hell am I supposed to do?*

I heard the sound of the door opening, then closing, then silence. Eardrum-shattering, heartbreaking silence. *Nope, not coming back.*

The ring was like a live grenade in my hand. I almost hurled it at the wall. *What a fucking idiot!* Just last night she tried to tell me she’d been waiting for me. But I pushed her away. Because I wanted to do it my way, be the man. *What a colossal fuckup.* Of course there’d be someone else who wanted her. And I had pushed her right into his arms.

I’d experienced mortifying humiliation before—striking out with the bases loaded in a must-win game, getting chewed out by my chief resident after misdiagnosing a patient—but this was an order of magnitude more disastrous.

I finally found the strength to stand up. Ashley’s purse was on the hall table, which meant she hadn’t gone far—she was probably right outside the front door, telling her date that her roommate was mentally unstable and *could he come back tomorrow?*

I dipped into my room, tossed the ring in a drawer, and threw on my sneakers. My gym bag was on my closet floor. I didn’t even look to see what was in it, just picked it up and slung it over my shoulder. I would work off my pain as I always did—in the weight room. I plucked my keys off the hook, sucked in my shame, then opened the front door.

“Hey,” I said, stepping out onto our porch, where Ashley was standing with a tall white guy with a Ken doll–perfect face. “I’m the roommate.” I was gripping my keys in one hand and my gym bag in the other so I didn’t have a free hand to shake. I can’t remember if I wished them a good night, only that I couldn’t wait to get out of there and punch something really, really hard.

CHAPTER 19

NATHAN

It was her idea to take separate cars. “I don’t want you to go out of your way,” she’d said, which everyone knows is really code for “I need an escape route if I’m not into you.” It was fine—she lived all the way in the Valley, and the timing would have been tight if I’d had to pick her up. After what I’d been through, I should have been heartened to meet a woman who was playing it safe, but I couldn’t help but feel a tiny bit snubbed.

I knew dating again after six months of self-induced purgatory wasn’t going to undo what I’d done, but I decided to treat the moment like a fresh start all the same. By going forward with integrity, I could step into the kind of man I wanted to be: considerate, honest, *not* sleeping with another man’s wife. This was Nathan 2.0—the reboot, with a shiny, new operating system worthy of a shiny, new woman.

I took the fastest shower in the history of showers so I could beat Ashley to the restaurant. Nathan 2.0 didn’t want his date to have to wander around looking for someone who wasn’t there yet; he was a gentleman, and gentlemen didn’t do that. The cozy pub was a favorite of mine because of its “secret garden.” I wasn’t a secretive guy anymore, but it was still a great patio, and in truth not much of a secret to the pub’s regular clientele. I went full prepster in flat-front trousers and a linen button front, because that’s who I am. Yes, I owned faded Levi’s and a handful of ironic vintage tees (Wonder Bread, the Beastie Boys, a Warhol-esque Campbell’s soup can), but I wasn’t a Hollywood hipster, and had no interest in pretending to be something I wasn’t anymore.

I stuffed my nervous hands in my pockets as I waited for her at the front door of the pub, happily opening it for patrons like a giddy doorman. Ashley arrived two minutes before the meeting time with wet hair and a smile.

“Sorry, if you wanted a blow-dry, you should have given me more notice,” she said, and I was instantly glad I’d invited her. I took it as a good sign that she was punctual, because kind people don’t make you wait, and I was ready for a little more kindness in my life.

She was effortlessly chatty, and I loved that she laughed easily and unselfconsciously. As we waited to be seated, she told me that while her “true love” was acting, she worked as a tour guide on the side, and I couldn’t decide if that was cool or a little bit sad. I respected that she had to take a day job to make ends meet, but I saw how people—especially in LA—slipped into “temporary” jobs, then suddenly found themselves turning forty and looking back at a life spent waiting for their “real” life to start. The real estate business was full of people who got their licenses to pad their incomes while they tried to be writers, artists, or actors, then never found a path to get back to what they loved.

I knew having a “first date” in a group of friends was risky—*who knows what they’ll say about me?*—but luckily my friends were on their best behavior. To my relief, they didn’t spend the night telling Ashley about all my misadventures (the time I fell off the booze cruise, set off the hotel fire alarm, got punched in the face by a Girl Scout). Instead they kept the conversation light and contained to subjects (food, pets, home renovations) that would not embarrass me.

Ashley and I were sitting next to each other, but the way the metal chair legs fanned out, I couldn’t sit close enough to touch her hand or put an arm around her, so I didn’t have to fight with myself about whether or not to do that. We were sitting in a circle, so our chairs were turned slightly toward one another’s—enough so I could see her out of the corner of my eye, even when I was looking at someone else. Despite the air between us, I could feel her energy like heat from a campfire—warm and crackling with possibility.

As my buddy Judd told a rambling story about a fishing trip ruined by black flies, I felt Ashley’s eyes on me, so I turned to look at her. The way she smiled at me made my pulse quicken, and I was suddenly hopeful this kind-of date would end like a real one.

“So, Ashley,” Judd’s wife, Reina, finally said, “what do you do?”

I always found “What do you do?” to be a rude question. It was perfectly reasonable to want to know what a person did for a living, but it always felt judgmental to me—a way to ascertain if that person was worth your time. Reina was nice, and she had probably heard that fishing story a hundred times and was eager to change the subject, but it still felt inelegant.

“I’m an actress,” Ashley said. And I knew what was coming next.

“Oh! How exciting,” Reina enthused. “What might have I seen you in?” It was a reasonable question, but also a loaded one. But Ashley took it in stride.

“So far I’ve only just gotten mostly guest-star roles on shows,” Ashley said brightly. “I was ‘Hot Mom’ on *Modern Family*, a bailiff on *Law & Order*, a woman with an inflamed gall bladder on *Grey’s Anatomy*.”

“That sounds like so much fun!” Reina gushed, but I could tell by Ashley’s thin smile that it felt like a dig. Reina was a litigator—she had already established that—and to call someone else’s career “fun” was akin to saying it was trivial.

“Those jobs are super hard to get,” I said, remembering what Ashley had said last night at Louisa’s, how she never knew what to say when people asked, “What have I seen you in?” because “there hadn’t been that much.” I knew her business was hard. My aunt had told me about the hordes of actors who came out for auditions, and how only a lucky few would ever be able to support themselves on their acting.

“Are you constantly going on auditions?” Reina asked, and I felt a rise of irritation. *Why was she grilling her?*

“I had an audition just this morning,” Ashley said. “That Nathan’s aunt got me.”

“Oh! What for?” Reina asked. And I was curious, too. But I didn’t want to put her on the spot.

“It’s bad luck to talk about auditions,” I cut in, parroting what Ashley had told me on the phone when I spontaneously, accidentally asked her on a date. I didn’t bring her here to answer a bunch of obnoxious questions and wanted to give her a graceful way out.

“That’s true,” she said, then rewarded me with that smile again. “Can you excuse me? I have to go to the ladies’.”

I stood as she got up. “I’ll show you where it is,” I offered.

“It’s OK, I see it,” she said, then went up on tippy-toes and planted a warm, lingering kiss on my lips. It caught me completely off guard, and I silently cursed the stinky blue cheese–dipped buffalo wing I’d just eaten. “Be right back.”

Emboldened by that kiss, I paid for our drinks and intercepted her coming out of the bathroom. She was so crazy sexy in her jeans and boots that I couldn’t stop myself from kissing her again. “Want to get out of here?” I asked, and she responded by giving me her address. I followed her most of the way, but as we exited the freeway, my optimism got the best of me (*I don’t have a condom!*), so I made a pit stop quick enough to blame on a wrong turn, because you don’t want to be presumptuous about these things,

but I'd be a fool if I wasn't prepared.

I double-checked the address as I strode up her front walk, then knocked lightly on her front door. I figured she'd be waiting for me right on the other side of it, but after thirty seconds, when she didn't come, I knocked a little harder.

Just as I was starting to panic that I had the wrong house, or she had changed her mind, the door creaked open. But instead of inviting me in, she slipped out to join me on the porch, closing the door behind her.

"Sorry," she said, taking my hand and giving it a squeeze. She looked rattled, and I was suddenly second-guessing my pit stop.

"Is something wrong?"

"It's my roommate," she started, then stopped, and I wondered if she was embarrassed to reveal she had a roommate, or if something had just transpired between them. "I thought we'd be alone."

The solution seemed simple enough. "Do you want to go to my place?"

She took my hand and put it on her bare chest, just above her breast. I could feel her heart, thumping in time with mine. Just as I was about to lean in and kiss her, the door opened. I quickly retracted my hand.

"Hey, I'm the roommate," the roommate said, without stopping to chat or shake hands. "Have a good night."

His taillights lit up and a moment later he was gone. I wanted to jump her bones, but she seemed upset, and I didn't want to push. *What would Nathan 2.0 do?*

"Why don't I call you tomorrow?" I suggested. A strand of hair had fallen in front of her eye. As I reached down to sweep it off her face, she tilted her chin up, and Nathan 2.0 be damned, I couldn't stop myself from stealing that kiss.

"I want to," she said, disentangling herself from my eager hands. "But I can't tonight. I'm so sorry."

If I hadn't been so wild with desire, I might have remembered to ask about that audition Louisa had gotten for her. Because the notion that Louisa had offered to help someone—a stranger, no less—was indisputably strange . . . the third strange thing in a night that included announcing she wanted to change her will and showing me her death folder.

I had an opportunity to be suspicious when I was driving home, but I was too busy singing along with the Beastie Boys and fantasizing about what I would do the next time we saw each other, which I hoped would be

tomorrow, at my place, with no roommate to muck it up.

I had yet another opportunity to feel suspicious the next morning, when I woke up to see a missed call from an unknown number. *When did that come in?* I was too distracted to consider that something might be amiss, so I left the message unplayed while I took a shower. I think I might have even sung (“Cum On Feel the Noize,” probably). I foolishly thought nothing could spoil my good mood, that’s how clueless I was.

I toweled off, threw on some boxers, then picked up my phone. The voice mail had come in at 6:52 a.m. On any other day that might have concerned me, but this morning I felt impervious to bad news. But that invincible feeling vanished as soon as I pressed “Play.”

“Hello,” a voice said. “This is Silvia Hernandez.” *How do I know that name? Oh, right. Louisa’s nurse.*

“I am very sorry to have to tell you this,” Silvia Hernandez said, “but I have some very sad news. Very sad.” I heard her voice catch. She was crying.

And I knew the worst possible thing that could happen to a person had just happened to my aunt.

CHAPTER 20

JORDAN

She was waiting up for me when I got home from the gym. It was nearly midnight. I was rank with sweat, and completely exhausted. But even still, the sight of her sitting on the couch in our living room buoyed my heart.

“You didn’t have to wait up for me,” I said. I thought she might disagree with me, as we obviously had a lot to talk about, but instead she did something completely unexpected: she started to cry.

“I stink so bad right now,” I said, so she knew why I didn’t try to hug her. Not that I thought she wanted me to hug her. I didn’t know what she wanted. Obviously.

“This is my fault,” she blurted. And for a second I dared to hope that she was going to tell me the date was awful, that the man she really wanted was me.

“I totally led you on,” she said, and my hope was crushed like an empty beer can. “I didn’t mean to. I think I mistook the rush of emotion I felt about getting Brando back for something else? It was careless, and I’m sorry. I’ll always love you as a friend. I hope you know that.” With those words—“*as a friend*”—I understood that I was, and had always been, her last resort. Just like our “pact” implied. “*If no better candidate emerges, and I reach the age that none likely will, I’ll take you.*” It was a pathetic impetus for an engagement. And I should have known better.

“How did you meet him?” I asked, because apparently I was a glutton for punishment.

She told me the story of collecting Brando at the “creepy” house at the end of the cul-de-sac, how her heart had “leaped out of her chest” when he answered the door. “I’ve never felt that way before,” she said, I guess to make me feel better, and also worse.

“The whole thing just seems so . . . inevitable, y’know?” I didn’t know, so I shook my head. “Brando chose that house. And Nathan was there, and his aunt was a casting director, and knew of a job that was perfect for me.” I didn’t believe in fate in the way she did, but I knew there was no way to talk

her out of her conclusion that it was all “meant to be.”

“One-stop shopping,” I joked, and she smiled.

“I can’t help but think this is the one,” she said. I thought she was talking about Nathan, until she added, “the big break I’ve been waiting for!” And it occurred to me that the two were connected—this job and this man were her long-awaited destiny.

We’d had versions of the “This is the one!” conversation many times before—after she’d auditioned for a character with her same initials, or for that casting director who was also from Wisconsin, or for that remake of the movie that had made her want to be an actress when she was twelve. This wasn’t the first time she’d found a reason why “this one was different.” But I opted not to remind her.

“Listen, Ashley,” I said. I had made a decision at the gym, and there was no point waiting to tell her. “I’ll always care about you, but I can’t go on like this, being your roommate.” After fifteen rounds with the speed bag, I realized the only way I could move on from this fantasy of finding forever with my childhood friend was to get away from her.

She nodded slowly, like it hadn’t occurred to her that after being dissed I wouldn’t want to stick around. “Do you want me to move out?”

“I was thinking about finding a place closer to work anyway,” I said, which was true; I’d just never had a reason to confess that until now.

“If I get this job, maybe I can take over the rent by myself,” she said brightly. And I felt a little sorry for her.

“You’re putting a lot of stock in this woman.” It’s not that I didn’t believe this woman could help Ashley if she wanted to. I just knew how often people—especially LA people—promised things (*I’ll call you! Let’s do lunch!*), then never delivered. The word people used was “flaky”; but the more accurate word was “rude.”

“I think she really believes in me. And she’s so connected. I mean, she knows everybody. I think she might be the missing piece.”

Of course she had no way of knowing that this casting director was not the missing piece, but rather, the piece that was about to go missing. And you didn’t have to be a doctor to know that where she was going, there was no coming back.

PART 3

AFTER

WINNIE & CHARLIE

CHAPTER 21

WINNIE

I found out my mother was dead in the produce aisle at Whole Foods.

I was examining an organic lemon the size of a baseball when my cousin's call came in. I almost didn't answer—I can't stand people who jabber on their phones in supermarkets, blocking your access to the butter, then getting all self-important when you interrupt to ask them to move—but Nathan didn't call very often, and I was curious what he wanted.

"Hi, Nathan," I said, putting the lemon-ball back on the pile. "Your timing is perfect. You just saved me from buying a three-dollar lemon." I pushed my cart toward a tower of apples with one hand and held my phone to my ear with the other. Talking while shopping was probably the only form of multitasking I had mastered in my adult life, unless you count shooting tequila while drinking beer—that I could do all day and night.

"If it's not a good time, I can call you later," he said.

"It's the perfect time," I said. "I hate to shop alone." OK, that was misleading but not untrue. I hated to shop under any circumstances—alone, in a pack, even online while listening to the Beyoncé channel. Not having a reliable way to pay for things does that to a person.

"Maybe you should step outside," he said. And I stopped browsing.

"Nathan, what's going on?"

I heard him take a deep breath. Then, with lungs full of courage: "I'm really sorry to tell you this, Winnie"—his voice cracked as he said my name—"but your mom has passed."

For a moment I didn't understand. I mean, I knew what "passed" meant—deceased, expired, departed, kicked the bucket—but it didn't seem possible. My mom was a Mack truck. You could litter the road with nails, then ram her from all sides and it wouldn't even slow her down. And now he was saying she had "passed"?

"By 'passed,'" I asked, because I was genuinely unsure, "do you mean . . . dead?" OK, I know it was an uncouth thing to say, but I was sober and in shock—two states in which I found it difficult to think straight.

“Yes, sorry. Perhaps I should have just said that.”

I stood there surrounded by five kinds of apples, trying to process the possibility that what Nathan was saying was true. I knew Mom had health problems—they had hung over our family like putrid smoke for the better part of the last decade—but it’s not like she was on death’s door. We were told her condition was “manageable,” and we’d hired a nurse to do the managing. She couldn’t be dead.

“Winnie? Are you there?”

“I’ll call you back.”

I abandoned my cart and headed for the liquor aisle. It was equal parts lucky and disastrous that I was in a grocery store when Nathan called. Lucky, because I didn’t keep alcohol at home for the obvious reason that I would drink it—likely all in one sitting. Disastrous, because it was Whole Foods and my fix was going to cost me a small fortune. If I were a look-at-the-bright-side person, I might have taken comfort that my pacifier was organic and GMO-free, but finding bright sides was not my forte, which was probably why I liked to drink.

I had a car, but I wasn’t currently allowed to drive it, so I had taken the bus. If what Nathan said was true, money was about to be a nonissue for me, so fuck the bus; I called a cab. Those bottles of merlot were heavy, and I needed to get them open as soon as possible. As I sat in the back of the Prius taxi, I cursed myself for not getting twist-off.

“Turn right here,” I instructed the cabbie, who was about to go the roundabout way. Besides those three months when I went back to help Mom, I had lived in San Jose since I’d graduated from Stanford. Being back in LA had proven too fraught, so returning to the town where I’d gone to college was the next-easiest thing. The earthy-crunchy vibe of Northern California made it easy to rebrand my laziness as “taking time for self-reflection,” and so I took refuge in a culture that lauded rather than demeaned me for my slothfulness.

My phone rang as the cab pulled up to my condo. It was Charlie, my brother. If I were petty, I might have gotten a little thrill that Nathan had called me first. But I wasn’t competitive with Charlie; he had his own problems.

“Hey, Charlie.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, what the fuck?” he said, and I immediately regretted that I had him on speaker. I glanced up at the cabbie. If he’d heard my

brother's expletive-laden greeting, he didn't let on.

"I'm just getting out of a cab—"

"We knew this could happen, we could have prevented it."

"Charlie, I—I need to call you back." It was time to pay, I had to find my house keys, I was already at my multitasking limit.

"If she was getting worse, why didn't anyone warn us? Her condition was supposed to be under control!" The cabbie had run my card and I was trying to figure out the tip. *What is 20 percent of thirty-two dollars? And how could I have graduated from Stanford and not know that?*

"We invited her for Thanksgiving, you know," he said, like having the person who birthed and raised you over for a meal made him some sort of saint.

"Charlie, just let me get inside—"

"We even bought new dishes!" *Isn't it just like the first-born son to not give a shit about anybody's needs but his own?* The phone slid off my lap as I handed the credit card machine back to the cabbie. I gave him a ten-dollar tip, which I knew was more than 20 percent but small compensation for having to listen to my brother.

"I'll call you back in five," I said as I picked my phone up off the floor and shoved it in my purse. *Credit card, keys, wallet, wine*—I made a mental checklist as I got out of the cab. The walk to my front door was only the length of a swimming pool, but I was drowning so bad, it felt like crossing an ocean.

I opened the door to my condo and shed my coat. I had thrown my wine opener away when I vowed to "quit drinking for good this time," but there were plenty of other ways to open a bottle—house key, screwdriver, coat hanger, shoe—one of the more useful things I had learned at Stanford. My key was already out, no need to complicate things. I jammed it into the cork and had the bottle open in a matter of seconds, and wine in my mouth a few seconds after that. Aesthetics weren't important, so I didn't bother with a glass. I just needed to get a buzz on before I called my brother back. I probably didn't need to drink half the bottle, but I was going to finish the whole thing anyway—I figured I might as well get a jump on it.

I sat down on a kitchen stool and let California's most mediocre merlot take me into her warm embrace. It had been two weeks exactly since my last drink—yes, I was counting, but only for sport. I could stop whenever I wanted. I had gone longer than two weeks without a drink many times, and

not just to save money. But these were extraordinary circumstances: my mother had just died. I was having a glass—OK, a bottle—of wine to calm my nerves. Any number of normal people did that; it didn't make us all addicts.

I arranged the six bottles of non-GMO merlot I'd just bought on the counter like soldiers on the front line of battle, then—emboldened by their fortitude—picked up the phone to call my brother.

CHAPTER 22

CHARLIE

“It stinks in here!” Marcela, my wife, said when she walked into the kitchen. “Don’t you smell it?” I didn’t answer. Not because her tone was belligerent and the question rhetorical, but because I had just learned my mother had died and I knew it was my fault.

“Jesus Christ, Charlie, Theo is sitting in a pile of his own shit.”

I knew that, of course. I could see him red faced and straining when I was on the phone with Nathan. But listening to my cousin recount how Mom’s nurse had found her dead body growing stiff in her worn leather armchair made a dirty diaper seem small on the scale of things to get upset about.

“I’ll change him,” Marcela announced as she extracted our eighteen-month-old son out of his high chair, then held him at arm’s length as she carried him out of the room. She had let me go surfing that morning on the condition that I took care of Theo when I got back, so I found myself not only motherless but also on my wife’s bad side. Since having a second kid, our marriage had been reduced to one long, protracted negotiation of who got to do what and when. Neither of us worked what you might call “regular” jobs—she did hair by appointment, and I played in a band and tended bar. Every time I wanted to take a gig or a shift, I had to clear it with her, and if she wanted to take a client outside normal hours, she had to clear it with me. It was a perfect formula for mutual resentment, and we had amassed quite a formidable reservoir.

“Can you at least clean the kitchen while I do this?” she called to me. She had a right to be bitchy; I was “on duty,” whereas she had earned a well-deserved nap.

I stared out into our cluttered galley kitchen. Every surface was covered—blender, toaster, SodaStream, electric kettle, bottles, jars, sippy cups, a bunch of bananas. An inch of old coffee stagnated in the pot. The gas range was encrusted with petrified spills, and the walls were spattered with food. We weren’t slobs. It was just impossible to keep up. Our seven-year-old was in school, but we still had to do morning drop-offs, make lunches, drive to

baseball practices, read bedtime stories, shop for groceries. Before the baby it was manageable. Now we were drowning.

I almost got up to wash the dishes, but then I remembered the dishwasher was full (because I had failed to empty it).

“Why are you just sitting there?” Marcela said, handing me the baby as she went to the sink to attack the mess. “Oh, for God’s sakes! The dishwasher’s full?” She said it like a question, because she was expecting a response—something along the lines of “*Sorry, I’m on it.*” But I offered no such apology. Because my throat had been seized by the iron hand of suffocating guilt. *When was the last time I even spoke with my mom? Last week? Last month?*

“What is wrong with you, Charlie?” my wife asked, and not in a concerned way. I couldn’t bring myself to tell her Mom had died, because I couldn’t face the most horrific part about it—that I was the one who’d killed her.

RING. My phone rang. *Saved by the bell.* It was my sister, Winnie, calling me back.

“I have to take this,” I muttered, then got up to take the call.

“Hey, Win,” I said into the phone as I walked out of the kitchen. “Sorry if I was a dick earlier, I guess I’m a little messed up.” I had called her the instant I’d hung up with our cousin. I didn’t remember what I had said, just that I’d hated myself in that moment and likely, cruelly, taken it out on her.

“Hi, Charlie.” My sister’s voice was quiet, defeated, sad. She wasn’t married or in a relationship, so more than likely was alone. I tried to put my self-loathing aside and be the big brother.

“You OK?”

“Ha!” my sister scoffed. “Define ‘OK.’”

“Not in immediate danger of falling off a cliff or tall building?”

“Don’t joke!” she admonished, and I realized a self-harm joke was in poor taste under the circumstances. I didn’t mean anything by it—I just wanted to make sure she was physically safe. I knew what the next days and weeks would hold, and I needed her to not fall apart, in case I did.

“Nathan said she left instructions what to do if, y’know . . .” I couldn’t get the words out. So Winnie said it for me.

“She died, Charlie. You can say it.” But I couldn’t.

“Apparently she doesn’t want a public funeral,” I told my sister. “Or anyone looking at her dead body.”

“Sounds like Mom.”

I couldn't decide if it was generous of Mom to spare us the burden of summoning her friends, nieces, nephews, and vast array of cousins to say goodbye, or cruel of her to deny us the opportunity to gather and grieve. Unless she did it because she thought no one would grieve. *Wouldn't that be embarrassing.*

"So what next?" Winnie asked.

"I guess we have to go there," I said. "To help Nathan, y'know . . . put her affairs in order?"

"Right."

"How soon can you leave?"

"Whenever."

"OK. I'll call you back. And Win?"

"Yeah?"

"We'll get through this together, OK?"

"Thanks, big brother."

We hung up. My wife was standing in the doorway.

"Get through what together?" she asked. "Charlie, what's happened?" It was a fair question, so I answered it succinctly.

"My mother died."

Her hand flew over her mouth. I wanted to add, "And I was the one who killed her," but she knew that. Because she had stood there and watched me.

"Oh, Charlie."

I folded into my wife's hug. This was our first real tragedy as a married couple. Perhaps, as tragedies do, it would pull us together, put a lid on our nonstop quibbling, at least for a little while. There was of course a potential silver lining to my mom's passing: my mother was loaded. Most of my fights with Marcela were about money, specifically how we never had enough to buy ourselves any time together doing something that didn't include parenting.

But neither of us dared mention that. And, given what was coming, it was a damn good thing we didn't.

CHAPTER 23

WINNIE

My brother and I decided to drive together to put our mom to rest in Los Angeles. Well, I decided, actually. I also decided we would take his car, and that he would do all the driving.

I told him I would take the train to his house in Santa Barbara because I didn't want to leave my car parked outside for days on end. When he said I could just park in his spot in the garage, I made up another lie, about needing new brakes, and one of the parts being on back order. My brother didn't know jack shit about cars, so he didn't question it. I didn't like lying to my only brother, but I'd never told him about having my license suspended and had no intention of telling him now. I had worked hard to assure him that I didn't have a drinking problem; I didn't want a little DUI to put a kink in my narrative.

He was there to pick me up when I arrived at the train station. We hugged and cried a little on the platform. An old lady who mistook us for long-lost lovers winked at me, and I got seriously creeped out.

"Let's go," I said, nudging my brother toward the exit.

He apologized for not being ready and having to pop by the house. I told him it was fine, it's not like we were keeping Mom waiting. I'd had a nip of tequila on the train; I preferred hard alcohol to wine while traveling because I could pass the antiseptic smell off as hand sanitizer, which I also carried and liberally used.

His wife, Marcela, and their son Zander were watching Netflix when we walked into their cool-guy condo by the beach. It wasn't exactly a family home, with its vertical floor plan and walls of glass, but real estate prices in California had skyrocketed in recent years, so he never moved out of the bachelor pad Mummy had subsidized—although that was likely about to change.

Marcela jumped up to hug me. It didn't matter what time of day it was, that woman always looked like you were seeing her through a Snapchat filter—perfect skin, shiny hair, eyes wide and bright like a character from Japanese

anime. “I’m so sorry for your loss, Winnie,” she said. Her perfume or essential oils or whatever magic elixir she was wearing wafted over me like a shower of honeysuckle rainbows, and I felt immediately calmer and grossly inferior.

“Thanks, Marcela,” I said. “Shocker, huh?”

I looked at my brother. Having two kids had aged him, but he was still a babe with his surfer blond curls and California tan. I wondered what strangers thought of the two of them when they went out into the wild all Instagram perfect, if they quietly hated them like I worked hard not to.

“I still can’t get my head around it,” she said. “Charlie’s really broken up.” I wasn’t a big fan of talking about my feelings, especially feelings that made me want to puke, so I changed the subject.

“Zander is such a little man now!” I said, checking out my nephew. He was still watching TV but turned to look at the sound of his name. I tried to remember when I’d last seen my nephew. *Christmas?* No, they’d gone to Marcela’s mom’s house for Christmas. *The Christmas before that?* I’d once fantasized about being the “fun auntie”; you know, the one who drops in unannounced, arms laden with presents, swearing like a sailor and spewing all sorts of inappropriate stories. But I rarely even showed up for announced visits, and those had become shamefully few and far between. I loved my brother, but he was different around his wife: jumpy, irritable, guarded. I don’t think he was embarrassed by me, but then again, I was in denial about a lot of things, so who knows?

“Honey, come say hi to your aunt Winnie,” Marcela commanded, and the boy reluctantly got up and gave me a hug. Of course I’d been there the day he was born, back when I thought I’d be invited for every birthday and family holiday. But when the invitations never came, I took the hint and sent a card. I dared to imagine he kept them in a shoebox under his bed and looked at them from time to time, but of course I never asked.

“Normally he’d be at baseball practice,” Marcela felt compelled to explain, as if I might judge her for letting a perfectly fit seven-year-old boy watch TV after school. Appearances mattered to her. Obviously. She was a hairdresser.

“OK, ready!” my brother announced as he emerged from the bedroom with a duffel and a suit bag.

“You’re bringing a suit?” I asked. I hadn’t packed the female equivalent and suddenly got nervous.

“Just in case.” He shrugged. I felt a little better when I realized I could

always borrow something from Mom; her closet was like the designers-only section at Bloomingdale's, and she didn't need any of those clothes where she was going.

"I hope you don't mind I'm not coming," Marcela said. "Charlie said she didn't want a service, and I didn't see the point of going just to . . . y'know . . ."

"Go and collect our money?" I offered. That was the only point of this trip—someone might as well say it.

"The boys are such a handful these days," she said, ducking my crude remark.

"Hopefully we won't be gone more than a few days," Charlie told his wife.

"We'll be fine," she said kindly. And I had no doubt they would be. My sister-in-law was as competent as she was beautiful. And now about to be rich, too. I wasn't so cynical to think she married my brother just for the money, though I always suspected it was part of his appeal. As for why he married her right out of college, at the tender age of twenty-two, that was an easy one. Dad had just died, and Mom had never been much of a mother figure; with the only parent who ever gave a shit gone, of course he tied his wagon to a woman who would steer it for him. Mom never liked her much—probably because they were too much alike. Of course that didn't stop her from throwing them a lavish wedding and buying T-bills for their babies. God forbid she be perceived as anything less than a magnanimous matriarch.

There were hugs and kisses all around, and then we were off.

"Marcela looks good," I said as we backed out of the driveway. "You're a lucky bastard," I added, because now was not the time to shit on his marriage. Maybe it wasn't fair to blame Marcela for the chill that settled over our relationship, but Charlie and I had been thick as thieves before he married her. We'd spoken or texted almost daily. Ever since we were kids, Charlie was my first "happy birthday" and I was his. I didn't blame him for putting his wife and kids first, but it would have been nice to have been a close second.

"We've had our struggles," my brother confessed. "Y'know, financially."

"Well, all that's going to change now," I said. And his response was refreshingly blunt.

"I'm counting on it."

CHAPTER 24

CHARLIE

I had forgotten how depressing my mother's house was. I suddenly wondered if it had come to resemble her, or the other way around.

As Winnie and I turned onto the narrow driveway, choked by trees and brambles and every kind of wickedness, the memories came flooding back. I tried to stop them, but they pummeled my skin like stinging rain. Finding my dad dead in his bed. Calling 9-1-1 but not being able to get the words out. Huddling with Winnie while we waited for paramedics, and then for Mom to come home. She was in Milan. It was a long wait.

Then came my mom's long battle with depression. Calling her to find out she had been in bed all day, and the day before that. Except it wasn't depression. She was ill. And it was curable. But only if her children would step up.

I wanted to help her. I sincerely did. But things were complicated. I was recently married with a brand-new baby. It was my body, but not my life. Not anymore. I was a father now. I had new responsibilities, new allegiances, new priorities. If Mom was trying to buy my loyalty by throwing me a lavish wedding, it backfired—because the wedding came with a bride, and she came with demands. In a cruel twist of irony, Mom's extreme generosity made it impossible for me to be generous in return. She was disappointed in me, and so in my cowardice I avoided her. Over the years the space between us grew and grew until it became a perilous ravine with edges too jagged to bridge.

Nathan was waiting for us as we pulled up to the house. He looked defeated with his rumpled suit and unkempt hair and shoulders slumping like a tired old tree.

"Nathan, we can't thank you enough for being here for her," I said as I hugged him.

"I'm so sorry," he said. And his eyes welled with tears.

"We're sorry, too," Winnie said. "We know how horrible it is to walk in on what you walked in on." Yes, Winnie did know. She was the one who found our dad white faced with his tongue hanging out. She was just seventeen.

Mom told me her drinking that next year was normal for a senior in high school and had nothing to do with what had happened that day. But Mom had always had her head in the sand when it came to us.

“I didn’t make it to the house while she was . . . y’know . . . still here,” Nathan said. “Her nurse took care of things. I was all the way down in Manhattan Beach; you know what the traffic is like Monday morning.” He said it like an apology, so I tried to reassure him.

“There was no need for you to come,” I said. “It was perfectly appropriate for her nurse to handle things.”

Nathan’s chin trembled. Winnie put a hand on his shoulder.

“Why don’t we go inside and cry it out,” Winnie said, and he nodded.

We pulled our suitcases into the foyer, then followed Nathan into the dining room. He had made a pot of tea—Earl Grey, Mom’s favorite—which we drank from her Wedgwood blue china cups. He had also set out a tray of Lorna Doones—the only cookie my mother ever kept in the house.

“Your mom kept a file with instructions as to how she wanted all this to be handled,” Nathan said as he slid a folder toward us. I hesitated, so Winnie snapped it up.

“She wrote us a letter,” Winnie said, picking a note written on her monogrammed stationery out of the folder. And I suddenly got nervous. Because I knew how she felt about us, about *me*—and I knew whatever was in that letter was going to sting like a face full of hot sand.

“Go ahead,” I said glumly.

“To my children, family, and friends,” Winnie read aloud, “Simon Redding on Canon Drive is my attorney and will contact you if your presence is requested at the reading of my will, of which he is in possession.” She paused, like she was put off by Mom’s opening sentence. “Courteous of her to get right down to business,” she snarked.

“Do you know this Simon Redding?” I asked Nathan, and he shook his head.

“I had nothing to do with her will,” my cousin said. I thought I sensed a hint of defensiveness in his voice, like “*So don’t blame me,*” but I dismissed it as paranoia, which I fell into easily these days.

“I don’t wish to be remembered as a shriveled old raisin,” Winnie continued. “If you ever cared about me, you’ll respect my wish for a closed casket and quick funeral.”

“I’ve already been in touch with the funeral home,” Nathan said. “They

said they can lay her to rest tomorrow morning.” I nodded my approval. I was eager to get home. The sooner we got this over with, the better. I looked at Winnie to signal her to keep reading.

“Don’t be sad for me, there were many beautiful moments,” Winnie read, then put down the letter.

“That’s it?” I asked.

“Well, she signed her initials.” Winnie held up the letter. “I love that she told us how to feel, that’s handy,” she added.

“So this Simon guy has her will?” I asked, and Nathan nodded. “And you haven’t seen it?” Nathan shook his head no, and my stress level ticked up a notch.

“So . . . do we have to call him?” Winnie asked, looking at Nathan.

“I already emailed,” Nathan said, “while you were driving down. He can do the reading right after the funeral if we want.”

“That’s an action-packed morning,” my sister joked. But I wasn’t in a joking mood.

“Is it strange that she hired someone to read her will?” I asked. “I mean, is that even necessary?”

“She probably thought a neutral third party was best,” Nathan replied. “To, y’know, avoid any misunderstandings.”

“How perfectly detached of her,” Winnie said.

“What kind of misunderstandings?” I pressed.

“Leave poor Nathan alone,” my sister chided. “We’re grateful to you for being here,” she told him. “I’m sure she took care of you in her will, but if she didn’t, we will.”

She looked at me for confirmation.

“Yes, of course.”

“Thank you for saying that,” he said, then forced a smile.

I had an uneasy feeling. There was something my cousin wasn’t telling us. And knowing my mother, whatever it was, it was going to be a bitch.

CHAPTER 25

WINNIE

“Where did she die?” I asked Nathan as we (finally!) switched from tea in the dining room to whiskey in the parlor. I had always hated this room, with its high-back sofas and heavy velvet drapes, but it was cozier than the dining room, and the whiskey made it bearable.

“The library,” Nathan said. “Silvia said she passed peacefully in her favorite chair.” I was grateful that it wasn’t me who had found her. We did the dead-body thing with my dad—a second round of it might have put me over the edge.

You would think after our dad died, Mom would have started acting like an actual parent, but she went the other way. Instead of being more present, she all but disappeared. I was a senior in high school, wrestling with college apps, AP Calculus, and crippling grief. Charlie was at UC Santa Cruz, trying to navigate a full course load and the possessive girlfriend who went on to become his possessive wife. Dad had been a wonderful, caring father—he’d helped us with our homework, taught us how to drive, picked us up from parties when we couldn’t drive ourselves. But unfortunately his most impactful legacy was the behavior he’d modeled for Charlie: how to capitulate to a controlling woman. Because it was clear that Charlie had fallen headlong into the exact same trap.

“I saw her two nights ago,” Nathan said. “She made me dinner. Fish—”

“With the head still on,” I guessed, and he smiled beneath shiny eyes.

“She fell asleep while I was doing the dishes. Right there where you’re sitting.”

“That’s quite a feat,” I said. This couch was the pinnacle of uncomfortable; you’d have to really be wiped. Or—as it turns out—deathly ill.

“She’s never fallen asleep like that before,” Nathan said. “It wasn’t like her.” And I knew he felt he’d missed something, a clue that death was knocking on her door. And maybe he had. In a way, we all knew this was coming. Mom was on borrowed time, staying alive by a dedicated caregiver, modern technology, and sheer will.

When Mom got too sick to take care of herself, I tried to be her nursemaid. I hadn't figured out how to put that Stanford degree to good use yet, so welcomed a reason to delay becoming a self-sufficient adult. Charlie had a wife and kid—I didn't even have a houseplant, so dropping everything to be with her essentially meant dropping nothing. So I moved back home. I thought it would be good for our relationship, a way for Mom and me to finally bond, but it turned out to be an exercise in self-flagellation. Because taking Mom to her appointments, picking up her meds, holding her hand on her dark days wasn't enough for her. She wanted more from me—something I couldn't give, even if I'd wanted to. And once she asked for it, she couldn't take it back. Things got uncomfortable. Her request permeated the air like poison gas. I couldn't tell her I wanted to step up but that I had a disease, too, because that would have required admitting it, which I wasn't ready to do. So I went back to Northern California to look for a job and a life. I figured if I couldn't help her, I should at least try to help myself.

Mom and I interviewed a half dozen nurses before we found Silvia. I knew from the vigorous way she shook my hand that she was the right woman for the job. She was older than I was but younger than Mom—probably about fifty when we hired her—and had already raised five children. I remember thinking her gaggle of kids must have whipped her into shape.

“Should we do some sort of autopsy?” Charlie asked. “Just to know?”

“Know what?” I asked. “That the terminal condition we all knew she had slowly and methodically choked the life out of her? I don't think there is any question about that.”

“So we trust Silvia?” my brother asked.

“To not kill Mom and put herself out of a job?” I said. “Yeah, I do.”

“Did she say anything else?” Charlie asked, then tried to explain his persistent line of questioning. “I'm sorry, but it just feels so sudden.”

“I actually haven't spoken with Silvia,” Nathan said. “We texted. She handled everything, y'know, with the body.” His voice caught in his throat. Of the three of us, he was probably the closest one to my mom. And not just because of his proximity to her house. I glared at Charlie. He got the message.

“Sorry, you've done enough already,” Charlie said kindly. “We'll call Silvia once the dust settles.” Charlie looked at me and I nodded. I knew her better, I would do it. Not that I thought she bore any responsibility for this. Mom had a serious underlying condition. But I still wanted to talk to her. I

didn't want gory details, but it would be rude not to call her and thank her for all her years of service.

"I'm sorry I let this happen right under my nose," Nathan said. "I feel absolutely awful."

"You weren't her babysitter," I told my cousin. "No one expected you to be at her beck and call." I glanced at Charlie. He was pale as milk. I knew he felt awful, too, but it wasn't fair of us to let Nathan feel responsible—we were her damn kids. Just because he lived nearby didn't make him her keeper.

"We should let you get home," Charlie said to Nathan. "We have a big day tomorrow."

We gave our good night hugs, and Charlie and I retired to our rooms. I always loved this house, with its funky sloped ceilings and moody wallpaper. It was like living in an episode of *The Munsters*. I was Marilyn, the "plain" one—perfectly normal to the outside world but a freak in the circus of former models and beauty queens that were ever present in our home. I can't blame my mother for her career choice, but she had to know that seeing her obsess over impossibly gorgeous women day in and day out would obliterate any hope of me ever feeling worthwhile. That's not why I didn't offer to save her life, but it certainly contributed to why I physically couldn't.

The door to my room was closed. I don't know why that made me uneasy—there were no more dead bodies to find. I cursed my nervousness, then opened the door with a twist of the antique brass knob.

Moonlight streamed in through lacy curtains, pooling on the varnished rosewood dresser tops, making them shine like caramel-covered ice rinks. The dense ruby carpeting had crisscrossing vacuum cleaner lines, and the bed was made and pillows fluffed. I expected the room to smell like old pond water, given that it had likely been sitting empty since my visit last summer, but I was greeted by a lemony Lysol scent. I suddenly felt the urge to laugh. Because of course Mom had kept my room in pristine condition. Everything she touched was perfect. Except for me.

I flopped down on the bed and closed my eyes. Lying there, I felt the gentle sway of just the right amount of whiskey in my veins. Too much and I spin, not enough and I self-destruct. I was pretty good at pacing myself these days, but I had a fifth in my suitcase in case I needed a booster. As I rode the gentle rocking of my whiskey life raft, I remembered the day we found out I'd gotten into Stanford. Mom was so proud of me. She'd even made a cake

—red velvet with cream cheese frosting. She never made cakes, not even on our birthdays—those were store bought and served on paper plates. But I'd finally done something worthy of dirtying up the kitchen. Of course I never did deliver on that homemade cake. Because even with my fancy degree, I was still a flop—all I'd done since graduating six years ago was bounce around as a freelance SAT tutor and textbook editor. *Hardly the success story Mother had hoped for.*

I opened my eyes and stared up at my ceiling. Right over my head was a solitary dime-size glow-in-the-dark star. My ceiling had once been covered in them. It had taken Mom a whole week to notice them, and of course she made me take them down immediately. Except for one. My first rebellion.

As I gazed up at my own personal North Star, I wondered: *If she left me this house, would I live here?* I couldn't imagine Charlie wanting it, though it was arguably more a family home than a house for a singleton. *But maybe being here would help me finally get back to myself?* Northern California was cool, with its rugged cliffs and rolling hills, but Los Angeles was my home. I loved the splendor of Beverly Hills, the grit of Hollywood, the patchwork predictability of the Valley. Plus all my true friends were here—the ones who had known me long enough to know I wasn't broken, just a work in progress.

I closed my eyes and waited for sleep. The hum of my whiskey buzz was growing faint. The bottle was on my nightstand, just an arm's length away. But I resisted the urge to reach for it. Perhaps, with no one to remind me of all the ways I had failed, I could finally, for the first time in my adult life, not feel like a failure.

The systematic decimation of my confidence started when I was in the fifth grade. In what began a long tradition of controlling my brother and me with money, Mom decided we should get an allowance. Every Sunday she would put out two jars of marbles: one for me, one for Charlie. Charlie's marbles were the color of a bright blue sky. Mine were black. Each marble represented twenty-five cents. We both got twenty marbles—or the equivalent of five dollars. Those were *our* marbles, Mom said. Every single one of them. As long as we didn't do anything between that Sunday and the next to warrant her taking them away.

It's well known by psychologists and anyone with a beating heart that the pain of losing something you're told is already yours is far greater than the pain of not getting something you wish for in the abstract. Those marbles were dangled in front of us like raw meat outside the cage of a hungry lion.

We were ravenous for them. But every time we failed to be perfect—forgot to make our beds, got a poor grade on a test, ate candy before dinner, or after dinner, or at all—Mom would ceremoniously remove a marble from the jar. It was the worst kind of torture. I lived in constant fear of playing a wrong note, misspelling a word, getting fat, getting a pimple. As we got older and those marbles became dollars instead of quarters, the fear only grew. Who knows? Maybe those marbles were how I got into Stanford? Or maybe they were the reason I was such a mess now.

Mom's death was the end of something. Which meant it was also the beginning of something else. I felt a stirring in my belly. I couldn't be sure, but I thought it might be hope? As I lay there in the darkness, I imagined hope as a baby bird, teetering at the edge of her nest, looking out at the expansive earth below. Maybe, with the tether of the inferiority complex Mom had wrapped around my neck finally lifted, I could let that little bird fly now?

If not, there was always whiskey.

CHAPTER 26

CHARLIE

“How did she look?” Marcela asked as soon as she picked up the phone. I could hear the baby crying in the background, as he often did when we put him down for his morning nap. He was an early riser—up at dawn, then impossibly tired by 9:00 a.m. It was a dreadful schedule, but my wife insisted on letting him “tell us what he needs,” rather than force any sort of sane routine on him.

“I didn’t see her,” I said as I struggled to tie my tie. I hadn’t worn one since my wedding, and had barely known how to tie it back then. “She didn’t want a viewing.”

“She wanted you to remember her looking hearty and vibrant,” my wife said. “Not pale and defeated. It’s for the best.”

I felt a knot swell in my throat. “Yeah,” I choked out. Things may have been strained between my mother and me, but no one should have to die alone.

“Charlie,” my wife said sternly, “I forbid you to feel in any way responsible for this. What she asked you to do was madness!”

“I don’t feel responsible,” I lied. Because to admit that my mother’s premature death was my fault would have implicated Marcela, too, and I wasn’t in the mood to fight. “I just would have liked to say goodbye,” I added, to explain my tears.

“She pushed you away,” Marcela reminded me. “It was her choice to vilify you for your perfectly sane decision.”

I couldn’t decide if it was disrespectful or fitting that Mom’s life was going to be so quickly and efficiently buttoned up: whisked off to the funeral home at dawn, burial next day at ten, will reading at eleven, no wake, no service, no fanfare. It reminded me of one of her garden parties, which were always too scheduled to be any fun. I remember her printed itineraries: Bar opens at 5:30, passed hors d’oeuvres from 5:45 ’til 6:30, guests take their seats at 6:45, speeches at 6:50 . . . She left nothing to chance. I half wondered if she had called the funeral home to come get her body herself: *“I’m not feeling*

well, it's looking like I'll be dead by tomorrow," I imagined her saying, "so if you don't hear from me, send someone first thing in the morning—we don't want my stench wafting through the house. Come through the garden, I'll leave the back door open."

"If she had any regard for your feelings, she would have understood that your priority is to your family," Marcela insisted, then clarified, "to your children." And it was a fair point. I knew my mother was angry with me. If dying while estranged was her final punishment, perhaps I should have been grateful she hadn't done anything more horrific. Which of course she had. But I didn't know that yet.

"I wish you were here," I sighed. It was perfectly reasonable for Marcela to want to stay behind, but if there ever was a time to ask her to be unreasonable, this was probably it. But I hadn't, so was forced to navigate this shit show by myself.

"Me too," she said. "But a graveyard is no place for children," she reminded me. My wife was unshakably decisive. Just like my mother had been. *Had I known that when I married her? Is that why I married her? Because, after growing up being told what to do, think, and feel, subconsciously I craved it?*

I finally got my tie tied. It was pissing down rain, but the burial would be quick. The funeral director said he could only give us five minutes for remarks—he had squeezed my mom in between two other services. If I had more to say than "Goodbye, farewell, thanks for the memories," I would have to do it on my own time. Which was fine, because what I wanted to say to my dear, departed mom was probably best done in private anyway.

I never said it out loud, but I often wondered why my mother even had kids. We always felt like a nuisance to her. My childhood was a constant chorus of "Be quiet, your mother's on the phone; Don't hug me, you'll muss my hair; How should I know what's for dinner/when the movie starts/what we're doing for your birthday—ask your father." We never got an "I love you" or an "Attaboy"; good behavior was rewarded with marble money. And she never apologized with words or hugs, only things. When Mom couldn't come see me in the school play, she bought me a guitar. When she couldn't come to my guitar recital, she bought me a ski vacation. When she couldn't come on the ski vacation, she bought me a car. My friends all told me how lucky I was—and in many ways I suppose I was. I had everything a kid could want. Except a mother.

Mom had chosen a plot at the top of the hill, so she could look down on everyone, obviously. My father had been cremated, so she was all alone, which if not what she wanted was certainly what she deserved. When we arrived at the grave site, her coffin was hovering above the grave on some sort of platform attached to a pulley system. None of us had thought to bring flowers, so we just stood there like statues while a poor chap in rain gear turned the crank that plunged my mom into eternal darkness. I was grateful for the rain because it camouflaged my sloppy crying face, and I could tuck my sobs under the roar of pounding water.

In retrospect I don't know why I was crying. My mother was a miserable old lady with nothing more to give, and who only wanted to take. The only possible explanation was that I was crying for myself—not for what I had lost, but what I suspected I was about to.

CHAPTER 27

WINNIE

Mom was buried at 10:00 a.m. on a Tuesday. Mistress of all domains, our mother had prearranged everything, including the weather—freezing, pounding, suffocating rain that assured her burial would have a backdrop of maximum drama. Her coffin was basic black, closed, and in the ground in five minutes flat. No pomp. No service. Like her approach to raising children, she just wanted to get it over with.

We went straight from the graveyard to the will reading. As my mother’s fancy Beverly Hills “neutral third party” later explained, no one who was named in the will, or was a close relation to parties named therein, could be the keeper of it. So he had been chosen to do the honors. Neutral Third Party’s law firm was predictably stodgy, and the parking offensively expensive—but God willing Mother provided for that when she summoned us here. Charlie wore his suit. I wore a hoodie and Converse high-tops—not to be rebellious, but because they were in the back seat of Charlie’s car and dry. If Mom had wanted us to look nice for her will reading, she should have ordered better weather.

Charlie and I entered the conference room to find Nathan and his parents—my uncle Roy and his wife, Aunt Rita—already there. Roy was our mother’s brother and possibly the most boring human being I had ever met. At family gatherings we would all wait to see where he sat and then race to find chairs as far away from him as possible to avoid having the meal ruined by his mind-numbing questions: *How’s school? Are you working on any interesting projects? I did a (sublimely inane) project for school once . . .* If there was a correlation between being tedious and virtuous, then my uncle Roy had to be the most morally upstanding man on the planet.

“Hi, Uncle Roy,” I said as he took my hands in his and gave them a squeeze. It was an oddly formal gesture that made me feel immediately self-conscious. Was it the hoodie that repelled him? Or the smell of last night’s whiskey emanating from my pores that made him want to keep me at literal arm’s length?

“Winifred,” he said, using my repugnant given name. I have reached the undeniable conclusion that my problems started at birth, upon being named Winifred, after the martyred patron saint of virgins. *Virgins? Really?* Besides representing an unrealistic standard of discipline and piousness, virgins are a total killjoy. Imagine if we all aspired to be virgins—the entire human species would go extinct. Nobody likes virgins, except old men with their hands down their pants, whose number one fantasy is to make them all not virgins. *And I was supposed to be their poster child? Screw that.*

“Nice to see you, Uncle Roy,” I said politely, squeezing his hands a little too hard, hoping to draw a whiff of a grimace. But he, in his infinite insensitivity, remained as inanimate as stone.

“This is a sad day for all of us.” Wasn’t it just like Uncle Roy to say something so obvious it made it impossible to offer an intelligent reply?

“Mmmmm,” I said, because what else was there to say?

“Shall we get started?” Neutral Third Party said, from the head of the conference table. I imagined he was on a flat fee, given that Mom was not available to pay overtime, so had every incentive to get down to business.

I waited for Uncle Roy to sit, then snagged the seat on the opposite end of the oblong, football-shaped table. My brother raised an eyebrow at me and I just shrugged. Nathan sat down in the seat across from his father, between me and Neutral Third Party, forcing my brother to take the seat next to Uncle Roy.

“Sorry,” I mouthed, and he just shook his head.

“So?” I whispered to Nathan, “Is she going to stick it to us?” I knew my mother complained about us to him. I thought maybe he might know something, and I wanted to be emotionally prepared.

“No idea,” he replied. “She did her will without my input.” That was the second time he’d said that. *He knows something.*

“Any idea how long we’ll be sitting here?” I pressed, suddenly worried the lowball of tequila I’d shot would not be sufficient to protect me from the pain on the other side of that dreaded piece of paper.

“None whatsoever,” he said glumly.

“Thank you all for being so punctual,” our master of ceremonies said. “I think we can begin.” His eyes floated toward the door, where a birdlike woman in a tweed suit was standing. She must have just walked in—I hadn’t seen her earlier. She looked to be a little older than me—*late twenties maybe?*—and wore an expression of sheer terror.

“There’s plenty of room here at the table,” the lawyer said to the woman. “Here. Come take my seat.” He popped up and swiveled the chair toward her, willing her to come and sit in it. I figured she was some sort of paralegal or associate, since she wasn’t a relative and I didn’t know my mother to have any cute, young friends.

“Thank you,” she said. She smiled at me as she passed, and I returned the kindness.

“Who do you suppose that is?” I whispered to Nathan, but he didn’t answer.

“Hi, Nathan,” the woman said as she sat down beside him. And I was immediately intrigued.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, just loud enough for me to hear. And her answer was even more intriguing: “I have no idea.”

CHAPTER 28

CHARLIE

My mother sold her business for \$4 million. I know that because she tried to give the agency to me when she realized she was too sick to continue running it.

“Are you really in a position to turn down four million dollars?” she’d asked, in a tone that made me feel like a big fat loser. I wasn’t, but I had a jealous new wife, and I didn’t want the trouble that came from being around hot actresses all day. Plus I didn’t know anything about casting or running a business and had dreams of my own that had nothing to do with either of those things. So yeah, it was—as they say in the movie business—a hard pass.

In addition to the \$4 million Mom got from selling the business, she got another \$3 million when Dad died. I don’t know why my father had such a big life insurance policy when my mom was the breadwinner, but he did. And she got it. So that’s \$7 million in her coffers.

And then there was the house. I knew its Hansel and Gretel vibe wasn’t for everyone, but the land alone was worth at least \$2 million. She had antiques and jewelry and closets full of designer shoes, clothes, and furs. She had a vintage Jaguar, a sizable stock portfolio, and an IRA. All in all, I guessed her total net worth was somewhere between \$10 and \$12 million—depending on the salability of that kooky old house.

Worst-case scenario, I figured I would walk out of that will reading with \$3–\$4 million, or a third of her estate. I would have said half, but besides Winnie, there was my mom’s brother, Uncle Roy, and his gaggle of kids. If she included Nathan, which she likely would, she would have to include all of them. So I prepared myself to have to share my share.

“Good morning, everyone,” my mother’s lawyer said. “I’m Simon Redding.” He went around the table and made eye contact with all of us one at a time, including the chick in the tweed suit, who I assumed worked for him.

“I am sorry to be meeting you all under such tragic circumstances,” he

continued. “Before we begin, I just wanted to offer my condolences for your loss. May Louisa’s memory be a blessing.”

We all bowed our heads. I heard Aunt Rita snifle. No one else made a peep.

“If you are in this room, you are named in the will. Before I share Louisa’s last wishes with you, I want to state for the record that I have verified that this document is authentic, and that the directives herein are legally binding.”

We all nodded. *Got it. Now get on with it.*

“I have been instructed by the deceased to start by reading the following preamble,” Lawyer Simon said.

He cleared his throat. “What you are about to read is going to be a bit of a shock, so let me prepare you,” he read. She wouldn’t be my mother if she didn’t have a few surprises up her sleeve. She was also prone to hyperbole, so I wasn’t too worried about being “shocked,” at least not yet.

“I know what you are expecting,” he continued, “but I have chosen not to give it to you. For that I make no apologies. Your expectations are of your own making, as are all the choices one makes in a lifetime; whether to help or look away, give or take, flee or fight, hoard or sacrifice.”

He paused. He seemed nervous. And I suddenly got nervous, too.

“With this, my last will and testament, I had an opportunity to be generous,” he read, then looked up at us. “But so did all of you.”

My heart thumped in my ears. My nervousness turned to terror. *Good God, what has she done?*

He continued. “This document represents my wishes, with no coercion or undue influence from anyone named herein. It was not written capriciously or with malice. My mind is sound and clear.” His eyes met mine, like the next bit was meant for me. “I am not available to entertain your objections, so you will have to work them out for yourselves. What you do next is up to you. Please choose wisely.”

The room was so quiet you could hear our breakfasts digesting. And they were not going down smoothly.

He cleared his throat. “On to the will, then,” he said, flipping the page.

I looked at Winnie. She raised an inquisitive eyebrow, like she found this amusing. But this wasn’t funny to me. I had a family. A mortgage. Kids to put through college. I needed that money. I couldn’t afford for this to take a weird turn.

“To my children, Charles Anthony George Junior and Winifred Elizabeth

George, I leave the contents of their childhood rooms.”

My hands and feet went numb. *The contents of our rooms? What fresh hell is that?* My leg bounced under the table. She probably just wanted to fuck with us, I reasoned, make us think that’s all we were getting.

“To my brother, Roy Bingham Lake, and each of his children, Nathan, Sophia, Lily, and Henry, I leave fifty thousand dollars each, for a total of two hundred fifty thousand dollars to Roy Lake and family.”

OK, phew. I had figured Nathan’s family would get something. *Surely everything else is coming to us now.*

“The rest of my assets,” the lawyer read, “including, but not limited to, my stocks, bonds, IRA, the balance of my husband’s life insurance policy, proceeds from the sale of my business, my home and all its contents besides what I have already bequeathed to my children, I leave to Miss Ashley Brooks.”

Stunned silence.

Nobody moved or breathed.

I remember my thoughts being something along the lines of—

WHAT. THE. ACTUAL. FUCK?

I looked at Winnie. She was as baffled as I was.

I was about to ask, “Who the hell is Ashley Brooks?” but, as it turns out, she was sitting right across from me. I know that because Nathan said, quite loudly, to that young woman in the tweed suit, “Ashley, what just happened?”

And she just shrugged.

“Thank you all for coming, and once again my sincere condolences for your loss,” my mother’s lawyer said as he set her train wreck of a will down on the table and bid us adieu with a nod of his puppet head.

I looked up at Winnie. She was staring at the wall like a shell-shocked somnambule. Ashley Brooks, the woman in the tweed suit who had just stolen my inheritance, was on her feet and beelining for the door.

So I pushed back my chair and went after her.

CHAPTER 29

WINNIE

“I’m so sorry,” my aunt Rita said, taking the seat just vacated by my mother’s spritely heiress. My mom had done some whack-a-doodle shit over the years, but with this, her final act, she had outdone even herself. “You must be so disappointed.”

I was many things in that moment—flabbergasted, bewildered, stupefied, dumbstruck. But disappointed? Not so much.

“My mother had her reasons for doing what she did,” I said, once I found my voice. “Whatever they were, I respect them.”

“That’s very evolved of you,” Aunt Rita said, in a tone that suggested she didn’t believe me. So I clarified.

“I never expected to get the money.”

“You didn’t?”

“I gave it a fifty-fifty chance.”

“I know things were strained between you,” she said. And I corrected her.

“She hated my guts. Charlie’s, too. But she was also wildly unpredictable. I daresay she took pride in that.”

“Unpredictable how?” Aunt Rita asked. Since we hadn’t had a service, I never got to eulogize my mom. Now seemed like as good a time as any, so I ponied up.

“She would forget my birthday,” I told her, “then two months later buy me a horse.” The look on my aunt’s face suggested she had never heard this story.

“Like, a real live horse?”

“Yes. But I never wanted a horse. I didn’t even know how to ride. So it just sat there in some stable up the 5 freeway. Eventually she sold it. We never spoke of it again.”

Aunt Rita studied me as she considered that. She seemed to be enthralled by my tale of woe, so I offered another one.

“She once flew in from Paris just to see my piano recital, only to go back the very same night.”

“The same night?”

“Yes. I think she was home for about three hours. There wasn’t time for her chauffeur to go home, so she sat him in the back row. I could see his funny hat out of the corner of my eye the entire time.”

“Sweet that she made the effort,” Aunt Rita offered. So I corrected her.

“Oh, she only flew in because she’d invited Faye Dunaway and didn’t want her to have to sit by herself.”

Aunt Rita considered that. “And how did you feel about that?”

“I had to play ‘La campanella’—I felt nervous as all hell!” I knew she wanted me to say something substantive, like I was flattered she’d invited Faye to my recital or pissed she didn’t stay longer, but “La campanella” is a beast, and I’d dreaded that recital for weeks.

The memories were flooding back now, so I blurted out another one. “Then there was the time she came back from Russia with a sixteen-year-old girl who she said was going to be my new sister.”

Aunt Rita’s eyes got big like golf balls. “She adopted a Russian girl?”

“Her name was Olga, of course. She was six feet tall with long dark hair and eyes as blue as a tropical sky. I think Charlie was in love with her.”

“Oh my goodness.”

“My dad put the kibosh on it. He thought it might traumatize Charlie and me. Unfortunately the trauma had already been inflicted by the mere arrival of the poor girl.”

“Yes, I can imagine.”

“Dad did his best to keep Mother’s impulses in check, but after he died, she went full crazytown. Obviously.”

Rustling up these memories was starting to make me feel light-headed. I looked around for a bottle of water, but Neutral Third Party hadn’t thought to put any out.

“What about Charlie?” she asked.

“What about him?”

“Do you think he’ll try to dispute this?”

I thought about what Charlie might do. “Not on his own accord,” I answered honestly. “But that wife of his can be quite the bully.” Charlie was the textbook definition of pussy whipped. I would have felt sorry for him if I wasn’t so consumed with feeling sorry for myself.

I wondered if Aunt Rita had an agenda with all her questions. *Does she want us to protest the will? Was she hoping for a bigger cut? Was she*

projecting when she asked if I was disappointed? I would have been perfectly pleased to keep talking to her, but her next question crossed the line.

“Why was your mom so mad at you?”

She could have asked me anything else—if I’d felt neglected as a child (yes), if I regretted staying in San Jose after college (no), if I felt like a stupid twat face that I hadn’t seen this giant snub coming (duh!), but the question of why my mom had disowned me was off-limits.

“Excuse me, I need to talk to Charlie,” I said. Because the story of how my mother came to hate Charlie and me was not one I was willing to tell.

CHAPTER 30

CHARLIE

“Hey,” I called after the woman who’d just stolen my inheritance. “Hey!”

By the time I caught up with her, she was already at the elevator, waiting for it to save her from my wrath.

“Who are you?” I demanded. She didn’t answer or even turn to look at me. “Hey! I asked you a question!”

“Leave her alone,” a male voice called out from behind me. I looked over to see my cousin Nathan jogging toward us.

Ding. The elevator arrived. The woman slipped in without so much as acknowledging me. I tried to follow, but Nathan grabbed me.

“Let go of my arm!”

“I know you’re upset,” Nathan said. “But don’t take it out on her.”

“In case you weren’t paying attention, that woman just got ten million dollars of my money,” I said, then corrected myself. “*Our* money. And you’re going to just let her walk away?”

“This was your mom’s doing. Lashing out at Ashley is not going to do any of us any good here.”

“Wait a minute,” I said, suddenly remembering how he’d called her by name in the room, too. “Do you know her?”

“Yes, no . . . Not really.”

“What does that mean?” I pressed. “Either you know her or you don’t.”

He hesitated, then confessed, “I went on a date with her.”

I felt like the floor had just fallen out from under me. I had to grab the wall for balance. *What the hell kind of conspiracy is this?*

“What’s shakin’, boys?” Winnie asked as she joined us in the vestibule. “And who was that woman who just put us in the poorhouse?”

“I’ll talk to her,” Nathan said. “We’ll work something out.”

“Oh! You know her?” Winnie asked.

“She’s his girlfriend,” I said, knowing my tone was accusatory and not caring one bit.

“It’s not like that,” Nathan insisted. “I only just met her. We went on one

date.”

“Well! Your timing is excellent,” Winnie quipped.

“This isn’t funny, Winnie,” I shot back. “You heard what the lawyer said. That will be legally binding!”

“I’ll talk to her. Let’s just let the situation breathe for a day or two,” Nathan said, like being cut out of your inheritance was no big deal.

“I don’t have a day or two,” I snapped back. “I have kids. I took off work to come here—my wife and I both did. If I don’t get that money, I’m fucked.”

“Calm down, Charlie,” Winnie said. “Nathan said he’ll talk to her. It’s not like Mom gave her fortune to some rando she met in the street, which—let’s be honest—would have been even more catastrophic and completely in character.”

“How does Mom even know her?” I asked, still not grasping how Nathan’s girlfriend could have swooped in to steal our money. “Did you introduce them?”

“No!” Nathan insisted. “They’re neighbors. Your mom and I met her at the same time. She’s an actress; they just hit it off, I guess.”

“She pushed us aside in favor of an actress?” Winnie said, oozing fake surprise. “Well, that’s the first time she’s ever done that!” Her sarcasm was on point. My sister and I spent the entirety of our childhoods competing with actresses for our mom’s attention; it was downright predictable that her final act would be to choose one over us.

Winnie pressed the button for the elevator. The doors dinged open, and she stepped inside. “Are you coming?”

“I need to talk to the lawyer,” Nathan said. “I’ll meet you guys at the house.” If I’d thought Nathan had strong-armed my mother into leaving her money to his new flame, I might have been angry at him. But no one manipulated my mother. Nathan was the sheep to her wolf, as we all were.

Winnie and I rode down to the garage in silence. I could smell the alcohol seeping out of her pores. I knew she traveled with a flask and took nips of whiskey, or whatever hard alcohol she could get her hands on, when she thought no one was looking—she’d been doing it for years. I’d tried to call her on it in the past and it never ended well. So I avoided discussing it . . . and avoided her, to a large extent. A devoted brother might have forced the issue, and maybe someday I would. But I was too chickenshit to confront her, and now we had more pressing disasters to tackle than her long-gestating

drinking problem.

We got in my car and drove to the exit. When it was time to pay the thirty dollars to park, she handed me her credit card.

“It’s fine,” I said, waving it away.

“Just take it.”

We exited the garage into the over-the-top opulence of downtown Beverly Hills. The sky was as dark as my mood. Rain fell like sheets, walling us off both metaphorically and literally from the sleek storefronts and unattainable luxuries beckoning from inside. Driving in, I had felt like a kid in a candy store, salivating over the crisp white shirts from Barneys, pens from Montblanc, and Prada for the Mrs.—not that we needed those things; it was just fun to imagine spoiling ourselves a little after so many years of struggle. But now the sight of it all made me want to gouge my eyes out. I know it sounds like I was an entitled little shit, but I had mouths to feed, and a wife who married me expecting I would provide for them. Mom had raised me to believe that giving up was for losers, so I tried to put those guitar lessons to good use by starting a band—an “occupation” that cost me more than I earned doing it. The credit cards my mom had cosigned for were maxed out, and we were literally living on the edge. I may have been irresponsible, but Mom had enabled me, instructing me to pursue an “enviable” life. When I told her my version of an enviable life didn’t include running a casting agency, she told me I was a fool but didn’t force the issue. For her to cut me off like this was a complete and utter betrayal. She had left me tumbling toward the hard earth without a parachute. I was terrified. But I was also pissed.

“How are you not livid?” I asked my sister, who was maddeningly jocular.

“Oh, for God’s sakes, Charlie, quit the self-righteous bullshit. It was Mom’s money. If she didn’t want to give it to us, there’s no rule she had to.”

“So you’re fine with Nathan’s girlfriend getting everything?”

“We let her die.”

“I have a wife and kids; it wasn’t just about me.”

“Fine. *I* let her die.”

“Stop!” I shouted. “None of us let her die. She pushed us away. It didn’t have to be like this.”

Winnie didn’t respond. I glanced over at her. She was crying. And suddenly I felt like a first-class prick.

“Sorry,” I apologized. “This is such a fucking piece-of-shit day.”

She waved off my apology. There were wet wipes in the center divider. I opened it and handed her one.

“I don’t have Kleenex,” I said. “There’s alcohol in them, so don’t use it to wipe your eyes.”

She took the wipe from my outstretched hand and blew her nose into it.

“I know I’m too emotional,” I said. “I just . . . I can’t believe she did this.”

“Let’s just see how it plays out,” my sister offered.

Like always, Winnie was the calm and reasonable one—Beauty to my Beast. Maybe Nathan was right and Ashley Brooks would do the right thing. Or at least take pity on us and throw us a bone. Hopefully a few million of them. I suddenly felt grateful Nathan had stopped me from saying anything I couldn’t take back.

I tried to imagine what I would do if I were in Ashley’s shoes. *Would I share the money with the family? Or keep it for myself like the dead woman wanted?* I wondered what Mom had told her about us. *Did she tell her we were awful and selfish and not worthy?* Whatever this woman thought she knew, it wasn’t the whole story. Nobody knew that but Winnie and me. Maybe the solution was to sit her down and tell her. Not just about that terrible day that our mother asked us to save her life. But the shameful reasons we’d both had to say no.

PART 4

AFTER

NATHAN, ASHLEY, WINNIE & CHARLIE

CHAPTER 31

NATHAN

I slumped down on my bed and listened to the message again.

“Hello,” the voice said. “This is Silvia Hernandez. I am very sorry to have to tell you this, but I have some very sad news. Very sad. *Tu tía está muerta*. Your aunt is dead.” Just moments before I was basking in the memory of last night’s hot date with Ashley; now I was a crumpled heap crying into my pillow.

I took a few minutes to pull myself together, then called Winnie and Charlie to tell them their mom had passed. Both son and daughter were predictably shocked and behaved accordingly. Charlie blasted me with expletives, and Winnie hung up on me—both reasonable reactions under the circumstances.

I canceled my morning meetings, then got dressed to go to Louisa’s. Thanks to Nurse Silvia and the expedient crew from the morgue, Louisa wouldn’t be there anymore—Silvia had offered to “arrange for pickup,” and I’d gratefully let her oversee the extraction. But I still thought I should peek in on things, given that the house had been vacated so suddenly and unexpectedly.

I left a message for Ashley while I was driving (“Hey, it’s Nathan, call me when you can.”). I didn’t know how long Winnie and Charlie planned to stay in LA, but we had a lot to sort out, so I had to tell Ashley it might be a while before I called her for a second date. Plus she had a relationship with Louisa, too, and it would be unkind if I didn’t tell her why the woman who’d offered to help her get a job wasn’t calling.

I pulled into Louisa’s driveway and parked behind the garage. Louisa had given me a key—there was no reason to feel sneaky—but I had never been in the house when its owner wasn’t there, so it felt strange letting myself in. Turns out strange was the order of the day, and things were only going to get stranger.

I decided to do a quick tour of the house to make sure nothing needed attention—that Louisa hadn’t inadvertently left the oven on or a pot boiling

on the stove. It was unlikely she'd left a cake in the oven, but I had several hours to kill before Winnie and Charlie arrived, so no harm in checking.

I started in the kitchen. As expected, nothing was cooking or baking or brewing. I put my hand over the stove burners and they were predictably cold. I peeked in the refrigerator. My heart broke a little when I saw the leftovers from our dinner (fish head and a few green beans) wrapped in plastic on a low shelf. Louisa wasn't a Depression-era baby like my grandmother who saved everything, but I knew her to be practical. Plus—as I sadly knew all too well—cooking for one is no fun, so leftovers weren't to be wasted. I didn't want the place to smell like rotten fish, so I wrapped up that fish head and plunked it in the trash, then set the bag by the door and washed the plate and set it to dry.

I peeked into the pantry to find it tidy and well stocked: pasta, lentils, beans, pickled things. Some of it we could donate to a food pantry. But a lot of it would wind up in the garbage. Her pickled parsnips and radishes were prime candidates for the trash heap; I didn't know anyone who liked those—they were so sour they could curdle milk from across the room. But unlike the leftovers, those could wait. I got a heavy feeling in my chest when I realized there would be a lot of things to get rid of, and that maybe the job of disposing of the remnants of Louisa's life would be best left to someone else.

I made my way through the dining room, then stepped into the study. I had seen those framed photos above Louisa's desk a thousand times, but now that she was gone, seeing her all dressed up and brimming with glamour made me feel emotional. It was almost like she'd had two different lives. The one before she'd gotten sick was all power lunches and stilettos. Her ice-blonde hair was bouncy and full, and her blue eyes shone with determination and optimism. Healthy Louisa had been a go-getter, a rule breaker, a pioneer, and radiated confidence with every cell in her body. And then the illness that was too embarrassing to name struck, and all that was taken from her. Her winning smile shriveled into a tight grimace. Her hair thinned and dulled. And her confidence turned to bitter resentment. If I were closer to my cousins, I might have pressed them to tell me her diagnosis. But the closest I ever got was “an excretory system issue,” and I understood why she was private about it. I was wrong, of course. Her embarrassment had nothing to do with the body part affected, as I was about to find out.

I walked toward the filing cabinet and opened the heavy drawer. It was stuffed with bank statements and financial documents, which would have to

be shredded. I made a mental note to bring some boxes from work. I scanned the little plastic tabs until I found the one I needed: “Louisa’s Death Folder”—which was clearly labeled right where she’d filed it. As I plucked it out and tucked it under my arm, I tried not to think about why she had shown it to me just two short days before. *Coincidence? Or a cry for help?* I pushed the thought out of my mind, turned off the light, and continued my rounds.

I walked through the parlor, the dining room, the formal living room. I don’t know what I was looking for. Louisa wasn’t one to leave dirty dishes lying around, and there were no shoes to trip on or pillows to fluff. Perhaps it was my way of paying my respects. Louisa loved her kooky old house, and appreciating it was appreciating her.

I saved the library for last, probably because I wanted to put it off as long as possible. I knew her body had been removed, but I was still nervous about walking in there. Some people believe that the spiritual body rises up from the physical body at death and can linger. I didn’t know I was one of those people until I was standing at the threshold of that room and felt afraid to go in. From the doorway, I saw Louisa’s book on the arm of her favorite chair, and what looked like a half-drunk cup of tea on the side table. I told myself by not touching it I was preserving the scene in case questions emerged, but my reticence had nothing to do with that. Did I believe in ghosts? Or was the presence I was feeling of an entirely different nature? Because I definitely felt like someone was watching me.

Which, of course, someone was.

CHAPTER 32

ASHLEY

“Grauman’s Chinese Theatre has been a fixture in Hollywood for almost one hundred years,” I said into the mic of my open-air tour bus as we drove by the iconic landmark. I stood on the upper deck, under a cloudless blue sky that invigorated me with its infiniteness. I was in full game show host mode, extolling the wonders of La-La Land for the four hours it took to wind across panoramic Mulholland Drive, drop down into the glitz of the Sunset Strip, then roll in to where dreams were born and broken there in the heart of Hollywood.

“And right behind Grauman’s is the Dolby Theatre, where the Academy Awards are held!” Twenty sets of eyes grew wide as we pulled over at Hollywood and Highland so our “fans” (that’s what we called our customers) could imagine red carpets and tuxedos and fancy updos to show off necks adorned with jewels.

“You have one hour to explore. There’s a food court up top, and plenty of shopping: everything from souvenir shops to Louis Vuitton! Have fun, and I’ll see you back here at . . .” I glanced at my watch. “Let’s say two o’clock.” I gave them an extra fifteen minutes, because today was the first day of the rest of my life and I was feeling generous.

These afternoon tours were normally exhausting. Being in the sun all day was punishing enough without self-loathing thoughts like, *Real actors are working. I should be auditioning. I’m wasting my life.* But today I was buoyant. The sun felt as bright as my future, and self-defeating thoughts were replaced by hopeful ones: *I’m going to get a casting. I’m going to have a boyfriend. My life is finally going to make sense.*

As my “fans” filed out onto sidewalks trampled by generations of famous feet, I checked my phone. I was hoping Louisa had called with good news so that I could finally kiss this silly job goodbye. But instead of a message from Louisa, there was one from Nathan. Which, while not the missed call I had hoped to see, was a nice consolation prize.

“If you want to walk around, I can stay,” I told Jerry, our driver. One of us

always stayed with the bus. Where there were tourists, there were thieves, and we didn't want one of them casing our double-decker during our stop.

"You sure?" Jerry asked, and I nodded. Normally I got out and stretched my legs during our breaks. I had seen these sights a hundred times, but I still liked to breathe in the history, let my hopeful feet glide over the star-studded Walk of Fame. There were literally thousands of sparkly pink stars embedded in the sidewalk, bearing the names of some of my favorite actors—Reese Witherspoon, Drew Barrymore, Angela Bassett, and of course my dog's namesake, Marlon Brando. I didn't dare fantasize that I'd ever have my own star, but I did allow myself to dream I might someday work with some of the actors who did.

"Thanks," Jerry said as he got up out of his chair. "Want me to bring you something to eat?"

"Nah, I'm good."

Besides the Hollywood tour, I also did one we called the "Stargazer," where we drove around gazing at all the fancy homes owned (or once owned) by celebrities—Jennifer Lopez, Tom Cruise, Woody Harrelson, Marilyn Monroe. Some were gaudy (Will Smith's), some were architecturally significant (Courteney Cox's), and some were just plain weird. (Tom Brady's was a castle with a moat; Neil Patrick Harris's had a hidden "magic man cave.") I was basically a walking encyclopedia of who's *where* in Hollywood. I also knew a lot of interesting trivia—which house cost the most, who owned it first, how big the pool was, if it had a gym, a pond, a helipad, a bowling alley. I used to joke that I did the Hollywood tour to remind me I was a nobody, and the Stargazer tour to remind me I was broke. I looked forward to the day when this job was a distant memory and that joke was actually funny.

I waited until Jerry got off the bus, then settled into a seat and dialed Nathan's number. He answered on the first ring.

"Hey," he said. I thought he sounded a little down, but then again I was in tour guide hyperdrive—anyone would have seemed subdued by comparison.

"Sorry I didn't pick up earlier," I said. "I'm giving a tour."

"Oh. Do you need to call me back?" OK, something was definitely wrong. And of course I knew it was about "us." I braced myself for him to tell me he was over it and to please delete his number from my phone.

"No, we're on a lunch break," I said, bringing my energy down to meet his. Meeting people where they are is something we practiced in acting class.

Going high energy when your scene partner's energy is low can often shut them down, and Nathan was already borderline catatonic; I didn't want to drive him under a rock.

"I have some difficult news," he said. And I knew what was coming. *An old girlfriend just called . . . He liked me but it wasn't going to happen . . . It wasn't me, it was him . . .*

"What is it?" I asked as my stomach erupted with butterflies.

"Louisa died this morning."

It took me a few seconds to process what he'd said. Because people you meet on Saturday aren't supposed to die on Monday.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry," I mustered as the realization that I wasn't going to get that job hit me like a blow to the ribs. It was disgusting that my first impulse was to make this about me. *Good God, what kind of monster had I become?* I used to cry about how cutthroat everyone in Hollywood is; now I was a regular Sweeney Todd myself.

"Thanks. Anyway, I just wanted you to know that's, um, why she wasn't calling."

"That's so kind of you," I said. "But obviously not the most important thing here." *Obviously.*

There was a long pause. And then came the knockout blow.

"Listen, things are going to be a bit tense for a while," he said. "I hope you understand?"

I didn't understand. But I was an actress. "Yes, of course."

"I really enjoyed our date, but I need to take a step back right now, until the smoke clears." And then I understood.

"Right," I said, my heart breaking into a million pieces. "Well, thanks for letting me know. And sorry for your loss."

I hung up the phone. I was super glad Jerry wasn't there, because I totally lost it. Big, ugly, barking sobs exploded from my chest. Any normal person probably would have appreciated his candor—*of course he needs space!*—and that he'd taken the time to call during such a fraught day. But I was an actress, and I didn't do "normal." We'd only had one date, but he was the best thing in my life right now—OK, the *only* thing in my life, now that Louisa was gone and my "big break" along with her—and I wasn't ready for the one thing I was excited about to be so cruelly taken away. Maybe he'd call "when the smoke cleared," but who knew when that would be, if ever?

My disappointment turned to dread when I realized there was another layer

to this tragedy. I had just thoroughly and irreversibly repelled my roommate. I didn't regret saying no to Jordan—I couldn't accept his proposal when I was attracted to someone else—but driving him to move “closer to work” meant that if I wanted to stay put, I was going to have to start making more money, like, immediately. Instead of quitting my job, I would have to take on more shifts. *So much for kissing these day tours goodbye so I can audition.* In less than twelve hours, things had gone from hopeful to hopeless on every single front.

Movie people refer to that moment in the script when the main character hits rock bottom as the act two crisis. Romeo is dead. Jaws just ate the captain and first mate, and the killer shark is circling your sinking boat. In the last forty-eight hours, I'd lost a potential boyfriend, a dream casting, and the roommate who had supported me both emotionally and financially for the last seven years. If this wasn't my personal act two crisis, I didn't know what was. The only question was whether the hero in my narrative was going to rise up and kill that shark, or succumb to defeat like poor jilted Juliet.

CHAPTER 33

NATHAN

There was nothing more to do at Louisa's house, so I went to work for a few hours.

Winnie and Charlie weren't due to arrive until dinnertime, so I caught up on emails, then opened Louisa's "Death Folder" and got to work making the arrangements for her funeral. They were holding 10:00 a.m. for the burial, so I confirmed it, then emailed Louisa's estate lawyer, whose contact info was also in the folder.

Dear Mr. Redding, I wrote. **This is Nathan Lake, nephew of Louisa Lake George. I am writing to tell you the sad news that Louisa passed away early this morning. Her children are on their way into town, and we would like to schedule the will reading at your earliest convenience.**

I hit "Send" and my phone rang almost immediately.

"This is Nathan."

"Nathan, Simon Redding. So sorry for your loss," the lawyer said.

"Thank you."

"I am in possession of your aunt Louisa's will and can administer it tomorrow if you like."

"That would be appreciated."

"Let's tentatively set it for eleven o'clock," he said. "I'll contact the other parties named in the will—there are only a handful. If there's a problem, I'll let you know."

By "a handful," I figured he meant my siblings and parents, so I just said, "That's fine."

"There is one thing I feel compelled to mention," he said.

"What's that?"

"I saw your aunt just yesterday."

And this surprised me. "Oh?"

"She had me make some changes. Some of them were quite substantial."

"Like what?" My chest filled with dread. *Shit. She did it. She made me her heir.*

“I’m not at liberty to say, but you’ll find out tomorrow. Just thought I should mention it.”

I found it obnoxious that he would flaunt “substantial” changes but not tell me what they were. But I supposed I already knew—she’d all but told me herself—so I just said, “OK.”

“I thought she looked remarkably well,” the lawyer added, for some unknown reason.

“Yes, well, I guess things can turn quickly,” I said, because *what the hell else could I say?*

“Quite a coincidence that she would pass right after changing her will, don’t you think?” His tone was suspicious. Accusatory, even. *Like maybe I murdered her?*

“What are you suggesting?”

“I’m an estate lawyer, not a detective,” he said dismissively. “I just thought you should know I’d been to see her.” *Well maybe you murdered her, then.*

“Thank you. See you tomorrow.” And I hung up.

Redding’s “substantial changes” warning was swirling in my head when I greeted Winnie and Charlie that night. I didn’t want to say anything (because I didn’t know anything). Plus they had been traveling all day and looked exhausted. So I shared the schedule (and some tears) and then went home.

As I climbed into bed that night, I thought about what Louisa’s death meant to me personally. Her house was my home away from home. I know that sounds like I was snubbing my parents; I wasn’t. It’s just they had three other, younger, kids to make a fuss over, and to fuss over them. Louisa only had me. I would miss our visits, and not just because of her cooking. I took care of her, but in some ways she also took care of me. Because what was my life if nobody needed me?

There was a time I had been close with Charlie and Winnie. We weren’t far apart in age. Charlie and I were on the opposite sides of thirty—I was twenty-nine, he was thirty-one. Louisa was away a lot when he and Winnie were little, so their dad had brought them down to hang out at our house. We lived in Huntington Beach, which (true to its name) was a beach town, and when our cousins came down we were in the water from sunup ’til sundown. Charlie and I punched at the surf as “Wave Man and Wave Boy” (I was “Boy,” since he was two years older) while Winnie, or Li’l Win, as we called her—which she loved (not)—built sandcastles and worked on her sunburn.

When we got too old for fighting waves, we got boogie boards and

basically competed for who could get more sand in their balls. I never felt sorry for my cousins for not having their mom around, because they had us. We were a unit. We had each other's backs. Like a family should.

But then their dad died, and they didn't come to our house anymore, and we drifted apart. Charles Sr. had been the glue, the one who organized the get-togethers, created the WhatsApp group chat and populated it with memories and birthday greetings. When he died, our closeness died with him. My cousins retreated into lives that didn't include me—or their mother, apparently. Those years when we were an extended family were the best years of my life. My own brother is ten years younger than I am—I barely know him—but Charlie was the brother I always wanted. Until life crept in and he wasn't.

I thought about how tragedies have the power to bring people together. Maybe this tragedy was our chance to be a family again, revive our long-lost connection to each other? Louisa's money could be the catalyst to new traditions. Because I would share it. It wasn't what she wanted, but it was what *I* wanted. *How could I not once again be beloved if I give my cousins what their own mother would not?*

I had a vision for our future—there would be beach barbecues, Christmas dinners, camping trips with the boys, all funded by my generosity. Except it was not to be. Because Louisa had ruined everything.

Because wasn't that just like her.

CHAPTER 34

ASHLEY

“Hi, Mom, it’s me,” I said, making no attempt to take the quiver out of my voice as I drove along congested Sunset Boulevard on the worst day ever. I had always tried to paint a rosy picture of my LA life when I called my mom, but today I couldn’t do it.

“Honey, what’s wrong?”

“Oh, Mom,” I wailed. “Everything!”

I knew it was narcissistic to make Louisa’s death about me, but I couldn’t help but see her sudden passing as, if not a sign my career was over, at least a metaphor for the dead end that was my life. I didn’t get a four-year college degree to put on a dumb polo shirt every day like a glorified golf caddy and extol the wonders of the world that didn’t want me.

“Honey, what’s going on?”

“Nothing’s going on,” I cried. “That’s the problem!”

“Are you driving?”

“Yes. I just got off work.”

“Maybe you should pull over.” *Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.*

“OK.”

I pulled into a loading zone, then blew my nose in a napkin I found in the cup holder.

“You OK, honey?”

“No! Today was the worst day ever.”

“You mean because of Jordan?” And that caught me off guard.

“How do you know about Jordan?”

“He called me. To ask my permission.” And suddenly I felt even worse. Because I knew my mom adored him and would have been thrilled for me to marry a wholesome doctor. Now I had let them both down.

“I can’t marry him,” I said, trying not to sound defensive. “I don’t have those kind of feelings for him.” I didn’t add that I’d just met someone I did have “those feelings” for, because that someone had just dissed me and I was already struggling to keep it together.

“Well, you can’t force it,” she said. “Jordan deserves someone who is head over heels for him. If that’s not you, then you were right to let him go.”

“I can’t let someone go who was never mine to begin with!” OK, I was definitely getting defensive now. Because of course he could have been mine, if I had said yes.

“Ashley, honey,” Mom said, in that voice she used when I did something stupid, like dented the car or forgot to report my credit card stolen, “maybe it’s time we talk about you coming home.”

And there it was. My number one cheerleader and the one person in my life who had always believed in me, telling me it was time to throw in the towel.

My heart broke wide open, like it had been impaled by a sword. I muted the phone so she wouldn’t hear me sobbing. Because of course she was right. I’d had seven years to make something of myself—*seven whole years!*—and all I had to show for it was a few lousy day player credits and a wrinkle between my brows.

“Ashley? Are you still there?”

I forced myself to stop crying, then unmuted the phone. “I’m here,” I squeaked.

“I know you’re upset,” my mom said. “We can talk about it later. I just want you to know that you always have a home here in Wisconsin. Your brothers and I would be thrilled to have you back. We love you.”

And she hung up. A second later the phone rang again. I thought for a second it was Mom calling me back to tell me my old room was ready or to give me a list of moving companies, but the caller ID said “Unknown Caller.” There really wasn’t any worse news I could get, so I kept the car in park and answered.

“Hello?”

“Is this Ashley Brooks?” a woman asked.

“Yes.”

“Please hold for Simon Redding.” *Who?*

I heard a few seconds of hold music—“*The Blue Danube*” waltz, I think? And then a man picked up the line.

“Ashley Brooks?”

“Yes.”

“This is Simon Redding. I’m the trust attorney for Louisa Lake George.” His voice was polished marble, with a highbrow British accent, like you hear

on *The Crown*. “I presume you know Ms. George has passed?”

“Yes, I just heard.”

“Sorry for your loss,” he said, not sounding the least bit sorry. “The reason I’m calling is because you’re named in Ms. George’s will.” *Say what?*

“I’m sorry, but I think there must be a mistake; I only just met her,” I said, because *why on earth would Louisa name me in her will?*

He ignored my comment. “The family has requested the reading be tomorrow. Are you available at eleven o’clock?”

“No, I can’t make it at eleven,” I said. I had to work the day shift—again. I would have loved to blow it off, but with my entire life in shambles, I couldn’t risk adding “getting fired” to my list of catastrophes.

“Is there a better time for you?”

“Not really. I have to work all day.” And his response was as rude as it was intriguing.

“Not after tomorrow you won’t.”

And so, to continue my trend of self-destructive behavior, I blew off work to be there. Maybe subconsciously I wanted to go back to Wisconsin and was trying to force the issue. Because without a day job or a dream job, I would have no other choice.

As I drove to Beverly Hills the next morning in the pissing-down rain, I tried to imagine how I came to be named in Louisa’s will. Despite the lawyer’s cryptic comment, I didn’t for a second think she had left me anything significant. My best guess was that she had bequeathed me some memorabilia—probably that photo of her with Barbra Streisand, since I’d shamelessly coveted it. As for how I wound up in her will two days after meeting her, I rationalized that she was just one of those people who, when they decide to do something, do it right away. My dad was like that. Whenever my mom said, “We really should (clean the gutters, pay off the mortgage, trim that beard),” he’d do it immediately. He wasn’t a list guy. He was a pick-up-the-phone-and-take-care-of-it-now guy. I figured Louisa was, too. I imagined Louisa calling or emailing her lawyer right after we met to do this one quick thing before she forgot. That was the only scenario that made sense—certainly more sense than what actually happened.

I tried to look respectable in my tweed suit (OK, my *only* suit) with my hair in a high bun. I knew Nathan was going to be there, so I put on lipstick and a tiny dab of perfume to try to expedite the clearing of that smoke. As I fought back nervous anticipation about seeing him again, I couldn’t help but

wonder: *If I hadn't met Nathan, would I have said yes to Jordan? Did my guardian angels put him in my path so I would let Jordan go? Or did the devil conjure him to keep me unhappy forever?* One thing was for certain: Mom was right. Jordan deserved someone who was head over heels for him, and that wasn't me. Jordan was a great guy, but in my heart I knew his appeal was that he was stable, predictable, someone who could keep me safe. As I've said, and for better and for worse, I've never been one to play it safe. I wanted the exhilaration that comes from taking great big risks both in life and in love, even if that meant being the only one of my friends who turned thirty broke and alone.

The drive from the Valley to Beverly Hills took about forty minutes. I didn't want to park underground because the lawyer's building was super fancy and I knew it would be rudely expensive. So I drove around the block, hoping to find a meter within walking distance. After two full loops it was clear I was not going to get lucky. Plus it was raining like a monsoon and I didn't have a raincoat (no one in LA did), so I sucked it up and parked in the garage, even though I knew it was going to cost me two hours' pay in a week when I was already down a shift. My skirt had somehow gotten spun around as I was driving, so I readjusted it in the vestibule, then rode the elevator to the fourth floor, which Springer, Cohen, Keele, Dail, and Redding shared with another law firm with an even longer name.

"Are you here for the Louisa Lake George reading?" a receptionist asked me. I nodded and she pointed me toward a conference room. I had expected it to be overflowing with adoring friends and family, so was surprised to see only six people there: Nathan, Louisa's lawyer, and four other people who I presumed were family members.

"Here, take my seat," the lawyer said as he vacated the chair next to Nathan. I knew he was the lawyer because I recognized his snooty accent. He wore pretentious Oliver Peoples Gregory Peck eyeglasses (all the rage) and a slim-fitting Armani suit to complete his I'm-better-than-you vibe.

Nathan was looking incredibly handsome in his dark suit, which of course made me want to cry. Luckily, we were at a will reading, and I wasn't the only one with shiny eyes. As I approached, he stood and pulled out my chair, and for a moment we were nose to nose.

"Hi, Nathan," I said simply, respecting the circumstances with a solemn nod.

"What are you doing here?" He didn't say it in a mean way, and I saw no

reason not to answer him honestly.

“I have no idea.”

“Good morning, everyone,” the lawyer said. “If you are in this room, you are named in Louisa’s will. I want to state for the record that I have verified that this document is authentic, and that the directives herein are legally binding.”

The curly-haired guy across the table (*her son, perhaps?*) was staring at me, so I kept my head held high and my eyes glued to the lawyer like I’d been invited, which of course I had been.

“To my children, Charles Anthony George Junior and Winifred Elizabeth George,” the lawyer read, “I leave the contents of their childhood rooms.”

I snuck a glance at the curly-haired guy. He was looking at the woman on the other side of Nathan, an unconventionally beautiful ginger redhead with a heart-shaped face and mermaid-green eyes (*his sister?*), who just shrugged and shook her head.

“To my brother, Roy Bingham Lake, and each of his children, Nathan, Sophia, Lily, and Henry, I leave fifty thousand dollars each, for a total of two hundred fifty thousand dollars to Roy Lake and family.”

OK, that seems kind of normal . . .

“The rest of my assets,” the lawyer read, “including, but not limited to, my stocks, bonds, IRA, the balance of my husband’s life insurance policy, proceeds from the sale of my business, my home and all its contents besides what I have already bequeathed to my children, I leave to Miss Ashley Brooks.”

I don’t remember exactly what went through my mind in that moment, but I think it was something like—

WHAT. THE. ACTUAL. FUCK?

“Ashley, what just happened?” someone asked. I think it was Nathan. Or maybe I imagined it. Because that’s exactly what I was wondering.

Five sets of eyes locked in on me like Jedi fighter jets on the Death Star. As evidenced by my acting career, I was never one who thrived in the spotlight. So I pushed back my chair and got the hell out of there.

CHAPTER 35

WINNIE

Charlie and I drove home from the will reading in silence. I was upset, but not about being cut out of the will. I know it sounds crazy, but I didn't want Mom's money.

I had a degree in economics from Stanford. If I wanted to be fabulously wealthy, I could have hit up any number of my classmates for a highfalutin job with shitloads of stock options and made my own fortune. *So why hadn't I?* On some level, I think knowing I could be Real Housewife rich without having to lift a finger had crippled me. Why get a job if I didn't have to work? Why start a business when Mom just wanted to give me one? What was the point of jumping into the rat race when the trophy was already mine?

Strangely, I hadn't known my assumption that I would someday inherit millions had paralyzed me until I found out it was wrong. It was suddenly so obvious. Now that Mom was gone, I had a *raison d'être*, an imperative to do something with my life. I felt motivated. I felt free. Unlike Mom, whose goal was nothing less than world domination, I'd only ever had modest aspirations. Start a flower shop. Teach high school English. Run a food truck. But pursuing a vocation as mundane as selling flowers would have irked the great Louisa George. She expected world domination. So rather than risk disappointing her, I didn't even try.

But now I could do whatever I wanted, without the stink of Mom's disappointment trailing behind me. *What a relief!* That's not to say I didn't grieve her. Mom may have been a gun-slinging Cruella de Vil, but she was *my* gun-slinging Cruella de Vil, and I loved her like a prisoner with Stockholm syndrome loves her captor. I was bone crushingly sad driving home from Beverly Hills that day, but not about the money. On the contrary, on that front I was downright relieved.

As we pulled onto the steep cul-de-sac where I'd learned to ride a bike (and what road rash is), I thought about what it meant to no longer have parents. There was no longer anyone who always knew my whereabouts. No one to tell when I was leaving town, no one to call when I got home. There

was no one to ask for advice (*Should I get the travel insurance/anesthesia with my root canal/cheese on my Whopper?*). People who don't have parents—even shitty ones—don't have anyone to corroborate their earliest memories, call them on their bullshit, care, or even notice, if they are royally screwing up their lives. Before I had someone to blame for my missteps. Now the buck stopped with me.

Gravel growled under Charlie's tires as we turned into Mom's distinctly uninviting driveway. The corners of Charlie's mouth sloped down toward his chin like a sad circus clown, and I suddenly felt the urge to hug him. I couldn't blame him for being angry. He had people who depended on him and would be pissed to high heaven that he wasn't getting any money. Unlike me, he not only had assumed he would get it, he had been counting on it. I remember his telling comment after his fancy-pants wedding in which Mom had spent God knows how much to marry him off like the Duke of San Fernando Valley: "It's not really a gift," he'd said. "It's a loan against my inheritance." With entitled thoughts like that, it was no wonder he felt gobsmacked.

Charlie parked in front of the garage, then unlocked the door with the key Nathan had given him. I followed him inside and looked around—*really* looked around. Mom had renovated every square inch of this house herself. She'd chosen the paint colors, the furniture, the window coverings, the wainscotting. She'd put the iron hat rack by the door, the lead glass candy dish in the phone nook, the milled soap in the powder room. This house reflected her taste, her work ethic, her whims, her sense of humor. It didn't just remind me of her—it *was* her. While I bore no sour grapes about the money going to someone else, I was crushed that we weren't getting the house. Because losing it meant losing all that was left of her. And despite our differences, it hurt to have to completely let her go.

"You want something to eat?" Charlie asked, and I suddenly wondered what that Ashley woman planned to do with all Mom's stuff. It was hers now—the will explicitly said "my home and all its contents." *If I made myself a sandwich, would that be stealing from her? Should I leave a twenty on the mantel? At what point would Charlie and I be considered trespassing or, God forbid, squatting?*

"I'm OK," I said, sucking up my inner turmoil. I could walk to the Boulevard from here—it was only a half mile. I didn't need to eat food belonging to the woman my mother had chosen over me.

“We can’t just leave like this,” Charlie said. “We need a lawyer. I mean our *own* lawyer. One that’s not sleeping with Mom’s heir.” Even in death, Mom had found a way to manipulate us. I genuinely liked Nathan, and would have loved to try to resurrect the closeness we once all shared. But thanks to Mom and the bomb she’d detonated upon her departure, our cousin was morphing into enemy number one. And it suddenly occurred to me that maybe this was by design? Because of course Mom would burn it all down on her way out the door. If she couldn’t enjoy family harmony, no one could. It wasn’t enough to sour her relationship with her kids—she had to blow up the whole damn family.

“Let’s talk about it later,” I said, suddenly exhausted. “Right now I need a nap.” What I really needed was a drink. Luckily my bottle and my bed were in the same place.

As I made my way upstairs, I inhaled the pungent memories of my childhood home. Admittedly, many of the memories embedded in the walls I’d scribbled on and furniture I’d hid behind were bad, but that didn’t mean I wanted to forget them. They were my story, the damage I had to undo. Without adversity there is no triumphant comeback, and I relished the idea of taking a well-deserved victory lap someday.

As I approached my room, I saw the door was closed. I didn’t remember closing it, but I didn’t remember a lot of things I’d done on this trip, thanks to the whiskey and the whirlwind of emotions it helped suppress. I reminded myself, *No pets, no parents, nothing to find dead*, then put my hand on the knob and opened the door.

Of course no one was there. And once again I found myself alone with nothing to do but drink.

CHAPTER 36

CHARLIE

I couldn't put it off anymore. I had to call my wife.

Winnie had gone upstairs to take a nap, but I didn't want to risk being overheard spewing lies, so I went outside to make the call.

The grass was soaked from the morning downpour, and mud oozed up over the soles of my shoes as I made my way through the misty rain into the garden. There was a little bench under the eaves by the bird feeder. I ran a hand along the top of it to make sure it was dry, then sat my sorry ass down and dialed.

"Charlie, how *are* you?" my wife asked when she picked up the phone. The house was quiet—no baby crying or TV blaring. As usual she had things under control.

"Hey, babe," I said. "I'm OK. Is Zander at practice?"

"Yes, Alice is going to bring him home so I don't have to wake the baby." She was so calm and organized when I was gone, able to manage everything, mobilize neighbors and friends to help out. She once remarked how things were "so much easier" when I went away for a gig or a boys' trip because she knew she was responsible for everything and could "plan properly." I used to wonder if she just said things were fine to be generous, so I wouldn't feel guilty about leaving her. But the calm in her voice, and the absence of chaos in the background, suggested that she said it simply because it was true.

"Thanks for holding down the fort," I said.

"Easy peasy," she replied. I'm sure her intent was to make me feel better, but her carefree tone smarted like a bee sting. She clearly didn't need me around the house. What she needed from me—the only damn thing she needed from me—was to do what any self-respecting husband and father did: bring home the bacon. And on that account I had just failed.

"So? How did it go?" she asked. There was no nervousness in her voice. No concern. Her tone indicated that she expected good news. So that's what I decided to give her.

"Well, my mom's in the ground," I started. She would be relieved to hear

that part was over, that I wasn't tasked with calling funeral homes and shopping for caskets. "She'd arranged everything, y'know, before."

I felt emotion rise up my throat. My mother was dead. As disgusted as I was at how she had left things, it still hurt to lose her, like a doctor cutting off a diseased limb.

"Well thank God for that," Marcela said.

"It's going to take a few more days to sort through the will," I said. "The administration of the details is a little bit complicated." I had rehearsed how to say this, and it came out like a bad actor might read a script.

"But she left it all to you and Winnie?" she asked, and I suddenly got scared. I hadn't expected her questions to be so direct. But I still didn't have to lie, not exactly.

"No, some other family members were named," I said. "My uncle Roy and his kids." OK, that was true. But the next question was not so easy to answer with a half-truth.

"But you and Win got the bulk of it." She said this not as a question but as a presumed fact. Because I had instilled her with the expectation that my mother was loaded and my sister and I were her beloved beneficiaries.

"Of course." And there was the Stupid Lie. I should never have told her that, but what else could I say? *No, we're still penniless?* Marcela had detested my mother when she was alive. I didn't want her to hate her in death, too. Yes, my mom was difficult, demanding, critical, and controlling, but I still wanted to protect her memory. Telling my wife that we had been cut out of the will would have crushed her, and our marriage along with it.

"Do you need me to come?" she asked. I imagined her glee in thinking we were set for life. Of course she was willing to rush to my side—to show herself as the dutiful wife, worthy of the fortune that had just been bequeathed to her.

"No, thanks," I said. "I just need a few more days to tie up some loose ends."

"I know this is hard, Charlie," she said, in the most sympathetic tone she could muster. "But things are going to be better now. In your dark moments, think about that."

As I thought about the relief my wife must have been feeling—we could finally get out of debt, stop working crazy hours, get a new house with a proper kitchen and a yard—shame reached up and seized me like quicksand. I shouldn't have lied to my wife. I had no idea if Ashley Brooks would do right

by us, or if we were screwed.

I knew I'd just made a big mistake. What I didn't know was that my mistake would be murderous.

CHAPTER 37

NATHAN

Charlie was slumped on the living room sofa when I got to the house, palms pressed in his eye sockets like he was trying to keep his head from exploding.

“What the fuck are we going to do?” he asked when he saw me. I had hung back at the lawyer’s office to get a copy of the will, which was just as devastating on the second read as it had been on the first. “Do you really think this Ashley person will give the money back?”

I wanted to reassure him, but I honestly had no idea what Ashley would do. I barely knew her! And her ability to snag Louisa’s fortune less than forty-eight hours after meeting her was troubling to say the least. Not that I thought she’d manipulated her or anything. Louisa was the manipulator here. Or so I was convinced.

“I’ll talk to her,” I promised my cousin, though I had no idea what I would say. I wanted to be the princely new boyfriend, but thanks to this crap stunt Louisa had pulled, I was going to have to be the mediator, the negotiator, the peacemaker, the jerk. We have a saying in the legal profession: you know you’ve achieved a fair and equitable deal if, upon agreeing to it, both parties are a little disappointed. Having my cousins and the woman I’d hoped might be my girlfriend resent me forever was my inevitable fate now. *So much for bringing the family together.*

“You know why she hated us, right?” Winnie said, appearing in the doorway. I didn’t, so I just shrugged. “Well, perhaps it’s time?”

“Don’t,” Charlie warned.

“If he’s going to help us, he has a right to know.”

I got a little quiver of nervousness. “Know what?” I asked. Whatever had caused the rift between Louisa and her kids had been a tightly held secret. I didn’t think my father even knew what it was.

“Easiest just to show you.”

I followed Winnie out of the living room and through the kitchen to the padlocked door behind the pantry: the maid’s quarters. A lot of older homes had these little bedrooms off the kitchen—holdovers from the days when

live-in housekeepers were all the rage. I'd never been in that little bedroom; I had always assumed Louisa just used it for storage.

"You ready?"

I nodded. My pulse was pounding with anticipation as Winnie reached into the cookie jar and extracted a small key. She waved it in front of me like Harry Potter with his magic wand, then inserted it in the padlock and popped it off.

"And . . . voilà!"

"Oh my God," I muttered as the door swung open and the family secret was revealed. "What is that?"

In the middle of the room, next to a brown leather La-Z-Boy, was a large white square box that looked like an industrial-size copy machine, complete with a colorful keypad and touch screen. Except, unlike its Office Depot counterpart, it had coils of clear medical tubing coming out of the front of it, the kind that might, say, deliver oxygen or an IV drip.

"Mom was in kidney failure," Winnie announced matter-of-factly, in a tone you might use to announce a contest winner. (*And the winner is . . . end-stage renal disease!*) "It's a home dialysis machine."

"Like, total failure?"

"She had to chain herself to that behemoth for three hours twice a week."

I flashed to those canceled checks to Silvia Hernandez—two per week. And it suddenly clicked. "That's why she needed Silvia," I said, and Winnie nodded.

"They started going after our dad died," Charlie said as he appeared behind Winnie. "We all thought it was just grief. Who knows, maybe it was related; she wasn't exactly taking good care of herself. Doesn't matter, there was nothing they could have done to reverse it once it started. Her condition was not curable. Except—"

"By a kidney transplant," Winnie finished his sentence for him.

"Of course, at her age, she was too old to make the donor list," Charlie added.

"So guess who she asked to give her one?" Winnie asked, her eyebrows arching toward the sky.

I looked at Winnie. Then at Charlie. And I got a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"No, she didn't," I said.

"Oh yes, she did."

“But, I mean, how did she even know you’d be a match?”

“She didn’t,” Charlie said. “But if we weren’t matches, we could have traded with someone on the list who was. She gets theirs and someone else gets mine.”

“Or mine,” Winnie said. “She only needed one of us to do it.”

“That’s a big ask.”

“Ha!” Charlie scoffed, like it was the understatement of the year. Which it arguably was.

“We both said no,” Winnie clarified. “Obviously.”

“So now you know why she hated us,” Charlie said. And the full picture suddenly snapped into focus.

“I tried to be her caregiver in the beginning,” Winnie said. “But every time I brought her in here, she would start bitching about how she wouldn’t have to keep doing this if Charlie and I weren’t so selfish and spoiled, blah, blah, blah—it was like getting pounded with icy snowballs in a never-ending winter. So I quit.”

“I don’t blame you,” I said. And I didn’t. I wasn’t sure what I would do if one of my parents asked me for one of my vital organs. Not that they would. *I mean, I don’t think they would?* I suddenly had a whole new perspective on the demise of the relationship between Louisa and her kids. They didn’t really abandon their mother; their mother had driven them away.

“It was impossible to be around her after that,” Charlie said.

“I can imagine.” A person only needs one kidney, and it’s not unheard of for people to donate to someone they love. But there was not a lot of love between Louisa and her children. And I suspected the “ask” was more like a threat, because why ask nicely when you have \$10 million to withhold if they say no?

I thought about all the chores I had done for Louisa over the years—cleaning her garage, getting her tires rotated, hauling her broken furniture to Goodwill—and I suddenly realized that I’d had it easy.

CHAPTER 38

WINNIE

The lock on the door was Mom's idea. She said she installed it because the equipment was expensive and she wanted to make sure it didn't get stolen. But anyone capable of stealing a five-hundred-pound dialysis machine would certainly have the wherewithal to cut off a ten-dollar lock from Home Depot. She wanted that machine locked away for the same reason she made us swear not to tell anyone about it: she was embarrassed.

I tried to tell her there was nothing shameful about being sick, but she wouldn't hear it. I understood why Mom was so tight lipped about her condition. She was a woman in a man's world, in an industry where if you showed weakness, they showed you the door. She couldn't be vulnerable, because then all the men who said "a woman's place is in the kitchen" would be right. And so she took great pains to hide her illness, and let her resentment leak out on everyone else.

Her tough-as-nails work ethic mirrored her parenting style. There was no complaining in our house growing up. I was not allowed to cry over bad grades, skinned knees, lost friendships, boys who betrayed me. I got no "atta girls" and very few hugs. If Mom had to be tough, we had to be tougher. I imagine she thought she was doing us a favor, but those bumps, bruises, and broken hearts still stung, so I did what I had to do to soothe myself.

I hadn't been in Mom's treatment room since the day I hired Silvia to replace me, a decision that probably saved my life. I did the job for three months—any more and my liver would be as pickled as those radishes in her cupboard. I was too afraid to tell Mom I couldn't handle her nonstop shaming, so I made up something about having a job interview that I had to go back for. "The interview process might take several weeks," I'd told her, "so we better find someone to help you while I'm gone." That made-up job interview turned into a made-up job, and Silvia's temporary hire turned into a permanent one, as I suspected she knew it would once she saw how eager I was to pass the baton.

"We should call Silvia," I said as Charlie, Nathan, and I huddled in the

doorway of Mom's maid's-room-turned-chamber-of-horrors. "If for no other reason than to thank her for all her years of service."

"She sounded pretty broken up in her message," Nathan said. "I imagine she and your mom got pretty close over the years."

"I'm sure Mom was nicer to her than she was to us," Charlie said. And I almost laughed.

"What, you don't think she hit her up for a kidney?"

"Well, she stuck around," Charlie said, by way of an answer.

"What did she say when she called you?" I asked my cousin. "Do you still have the message?"

Nathan nodded and took out his phone. "It's kind of upsetting," he warned. "You sure you want to hear it?"

"I think we hit the pinnacle of upsetting already," Charlie said. "Bring it on."

Nathan put the phone on the console table and pressed "Play."

"Hello. This is Silvia Hernandez," the voice on the recording said. I flashed back to the first time I'd spoken to Silvia. I'd known from the confident way she'd answered the phone ("Hello, Silvia speaking!") that she was someone who could handle Mom's particular brand of belligerence. That she had five kids had sealed the deal, because I knew she needed the money and wouldn't quit too capriciously. Which seemed an important quality in my mother's caregiver.

"I am very sorry to have to tell you this," the voice continued, "but I have some very sad news. Very sad."

She kept talking, something in Spanish . . . then something about calling the funeral home, but I couldn't hear her. Because my internal panic siren was drowning her out.

"Win? You OK?" Nathan asked. I opened my mouth to speak, but couldn't make words.

"Win, what is it?" Charlie echoed.

I looked at my brother and told him something too strange not to be true. "You're not going to believe this," I said, barely believing it myself, "but that's not Silvia."

And both my brother and my cousin looked at me like I was crazy.

"What are you talking about?" Charlie said. "She said, *This is Silvia Hernandez*—"

"I know what she said!" I snapped back. "But I'm telling you that's not

her. Silvia is older, her voice is raspy, her accent is way heavier.”

“If that’s not Silvia—” Nathan started.

And Charlie finished his thought. “Then who the fuck left that message?”

CHAPTER 39

NATHAN

“Play it again,” Winnie said, closing her eyes, then motioning for me to replay the message.

“I am very sorry to have to tell you this,” the voice said, “but I have some very sad news. Very sad.”

And as it turns out, the third time really is the charm. Because as I listened to the symmetrical cadence of words evenly spaced, the warm honey undertones, the musical lilt at the end of each sentence that third time, I knew who was on the other end of that message. What I felt was not shock, or outrage, or even fear. What I felt was disappointment: searing, aching, soul-crushing disappointment.

I was a successful professional. I made good money, lived in a nice condo in a cool neighborhood. I may not have been Ryan Gosling, but I had a full head of hair, a strong chin, a decent bod that I worked hard to keep from puffing out in the wrong places. I worked on my inner life, too; I practiced mindfulness meditations daily and yoga twice a week. With all the work I was doing to be a better me, why was I only able to attract women who were batshit crazy?

As the firstborn son of a late-blooming businessman, I never had much growing up. Whereas my (ten years younger) little brother got to go to sleepaway camp, Disneyland, Hawaii for his tenth birthday, my ten-year-old self was lucky to score a nosebleed seat to a Dodgers game. I had no sour grapes about being the kid who was born before Mom and Dad had money; it's just how it was. But even though I wasn't mad that I never got to play club baseball or go on ski trips to Aspen, maybe subconsciously I felt less than Charlie, Winnie, and my brother and sisters because I never got what they'd gotten. My childhood had groomed me to think I didn't deserve the best of anything. Like attracts like. Losers attract losers. If I wasn't a fuckup, why did I keep falling under the spell of fucked-up women?

“Nathan, are you OK?”

I didn't want to tell them . . . didn't want them to know what I really was.

Until I knew for sure myself.

“Sorry, yes. I’m just trying to figure out how someone . . . *why* someone . . . I mean, who would do that?” I stammered.

I flashed back to that horrible morning when the message came in. I had never met Silvia Hernandez. I didn’t know if she was young or old, joyful or morose, had a lisp, a stutter, or any other distinguishing vocal characteristics. I detected an accent but had no idea if it was supposed to sound Mexican, Central American, Puerto Rican, or right off the boat from Spain. She was a complete unknown entity to me. Which of course was why I was chosen.

“You said you never actually spoke with her,” Charlie reconfirmed.

“That’s right,” I said, recalling how I’d stared out my window right after hearing (not) Silvia’s shocking “news.” Cars were whizzing down the busy street beneath my third-floor condo; people were going to work, kids were going to school. I’d felt a rush of anger: *A woman just died! Would it kill you to stop for a few fucking minutes!*

“She left a message, and I left her one back,” I said.

“But she never called you again after that?” Charlie asked.

“No. We texted.”

“Can we see the texts?”

I opened the text chain.

“Her first text after my message was ‘Sorry, not getting service here,’” I said. I hadn’t questioned the validity of her assertion, then or now; it was true, the cell service on Louisa’s street was spotty. If she wasn’t on her Wi-Fi, it’s totally possible that she couldn’t make a call.

“Then what?” Winnie asked.

“Then I texted that I could be there in an hour,” I said. “It was rush hour traffic,” I added, so they wouldn’t think I was blowing it off.

“And then?”

I looked down at my phone. “Then she texted, ‘I called the funeral home, they are already on their way. Should I have them wait for you?’” I had rationalized that it was perfectly logical that Silvia would know which funeral home to call—she was her nurse, after all, and saw her more regularly than Winnie, Charlie, and me put together. Plus I was too grateful to question Silvia’s eagerness to take care of everything. I had never seen a dead body and was perfectly happy not to break my streak.

“And you said not to wait for you?”

“She responded like two seconds later, ‘They are here. OK to take her

now?”

“And you said yes.”

“It didn’t make sense for them to have to wait for me—it’s not like there was anything I could do to help the situation.” I tried not to sound defensive, but I could feel my face getting hot.

“No, of course,” Winnie assured me. “Go on.”

“Then she wrote, ‘She passed in the library, in her favorite chair.’”

I remembered how I’d gotten a chill, just as I had one now, as I pictured Louisa cozying into that chair with a book and a cup of tea, for the last time. I remembered thinking it was a relatively dignified way to go, and that Louisa would be happy about that.

“Her last text was, ‘I am very sorry for your loss, Mr. Nathan, I loved her, too,’” I read.

“And then nothing?” Winnie asked.

I shook my head. “That’s it.”

“Why don’t we try texting that number now?” Winnie asked. I wasn’t sure that was a good idea, but I just said “OK” and gave her my phone.

“What should I say?”

“How about ‘Who the fuck are you and what the hell happened to our mother?’” Charlie offered.

“I don’t want to scare them,” Winnie said. “We want them to engage.”

As Winnie’s thumbs hovered over my keyboard, I thought back to Louisa’s dinner announcement that she wanted to change her will (*“Needed to” change? “Was going to” change?*), then finding her asleep on the sofa after I did the dishes. Yes, she was tired, but she didn’t seem on the verge of death. But it could be like that sometimes. A classmate of mine from UCLA died of an aneurysm in a yoga class. One minute she was in downward dog, the next minute a blood vessel burst in her brain and she was unrevivable. She was only twenty. Another guy, a young dad I knew from the golf club, died in the pool during his morning laps. His heart just stopped. Electrical failure, they said. All that to say, Louisa’s sudden death had felt credible to me. Because I knew that even people in the pinnacle of health could die without warning.

“How about this?” Winnie said. “Hi, Nathan again. We want to pay you severance for your service to Louisa, can you please call me?”

“That’s good,” Charlie said. “Maybe they’ll call because they want the money.” So Winnie pressed “Send” and handed me back my phone.

“Let us know if they text back.”

I nodded, even though I knew fake Silvia would never text back, risk blowing her cover. I knew who she was, of course. The terrifying unknown was, *Why had she done it?*

Looking back, I marvel at how easy it would have been for me to catch the perpetrator of this crazy scheme in the act. If I had just told (not really) Silvia to wait until I'd gotten there, if I had called the funeral parlor myself to arrange for the pickup, if I had insisted (fake) Silvia call me instead of doing this all by text, the whole charade would have unraveled. But instead of exposing the ruse, I fell headlong into the trap that was set for me.

My father was a tournament poker player. He tried to teach me how to play. The rules were easy: three of a kind beats two pair, full house beats a flush, high cards are better than low. Calculating the odds of having a winning hand was also fairly simple. Subtract the cards in play (on the table and in players' hands) from the total in the deck (fifty-two); everything is a ratio. But good players don't play the cards, my dad told me. They play the people. The winner is not the person whose cards come up. It's the person who correctly reads his opponents, knows what their betting patterns are, when they have the cards and when they're bluffing. As good as I was at counting cards and math, I was a miserable poker player. Someone clearly knew that, because I'd been played to a T.

If I hadn't been so squeamish about seeing Louisa's dead body, I might have been suspicious about how efficiently (not) Silvia had wrapped things up. Perhaps I had committed so firmly to acting with integrity, it didn't occur to me to question anyone else's. Or maybe I was just a dumb fuck. Whatever the case, my choice not to scrutinize the situation was a catastrophic error in judgment. But catastrophic errors in judgment were not out of character for me. One might say I was an expert at making them and had once again flexed that well-developed muscle.

Of course, there was another reason I hadn't questioned the authenticity of the message: the idea that someone would impersonate Louisa's nurse for any reason, including, but not limited to, relaying news of her death, was absolute lunacy. Only a psychopath would do that, and it felt completely out of the realm of possibility.

It was a tough pill to swallow that not only was there a psychopath on the other end of that message, but I'd also just gone on a date with her.

CHAPTER 40

ASHLEY

I peeled off my tweed suit and crawled into bed. There was no point getting out because (a) it was rainy and miserable outside; (b) I'd just been fired from my job for not showing up today; and (c) apparently I was rich now and didn't need said job. I guess that's what you would call a classic case of good news, bad news. Given that I didn't exactly relish being a tour guide, the good should have canceled out the bad. So why was I so depressed?

Perhaps it was a good sign for my humanity that I felt terrible. A woman was dead. That in and of itself was grounds for sadness. I didn't know Louisa very well, but she was someone's mother, someone's sister, someone's aunt (my would-be boyfriend's, to be precise). Granted, it wasn't very nice of her to deprive her offspring of their inheritance, but it wasn't my fault that she'd snubbed them. I flashed to how the son had shouted at me in the elevator vestibule. *Maybe her kids are monsters and don't deserve the money?*

But even if Louisa had a good reason for sticking it to her kids, *why should I be the one to get her money?* Just because she'd left it to me didn't mean that I could keep it. I mean, what would my mom say when she found out I'd accepted another family's inheritance? She'd never stand for it. So in reality, my good news wasn't really good news at all.

And then of course there was the fact that my life was a black hole. No career. No day job. No boyfriend. No roommate. Not even a last-resort marriage pact. I literally had nothing and no one. I probably would have stayed in bed all day if it wasn't for Brando, who reminded me there was still one being on this earth who cared whether I lived or died by doing his pee-pee dance at my bedroom door.

"OK, I'm getting up," I said, and he literally jumped for joy. I was chilled, so I put a pot of coffee on so it would be ready when we got back, then grabbed his leash and clipped it on his collar.

"You ready?"

He barked—"You bet!"—and I opened the door and stepped out into the afternoon drizzle. Brando pulled to the left, but we were going right today

—away from Louisa’s house. Which I guessed was my house now, at least until the lawsuit hit and I was forced to give it back. I didn’t have any misconceptions that Louisa’s children would go down without a fight. *And what kind of person would I be if I tried to fight back?* Not that I was a pushover. Hollywood was a society of social climbers and backstabbers, and I’d learned how to spar with the best of them. It’s not like the lowly gatekeeper has any way to confirm if Matt Damon personally invited you to that audition or premiere, so why not just say it? And we all lied on our résumés. None of us really know how to ride a horse/speak French/play the violin—we learn when we get cast! So yeah, I knew how to get what I wanted. But this fight felt a little too fraught, even for me.

As Brando pulled me down the sidewalk, I thought about my perilous future. My mom had said I could (*should?*) go back home, but then what? There were no jobs for a failed actress–slash–tour guide–slash–Saturday Cinderella in Wisconsin. And all my friends were married and in normal-people jobs; it would be humiliating to have to face them now. I had been so confident, so envied when I left. “Don’t forget us when you’re a big star!” they all said. “Invite us to your premieres, send autographed pictures, say ‘hi’ to Tom Holland for us!” “I will!” I’d promised. “And I’ll be sure to give Michael B. Jordan a kiss from you, too!” I’d stupidly joked. But turns out *I* was the stupid joke.

“OK, Brando, we gotta turn around now,” I said, gently tugging on my dog’s leash. He had his nose in a flower bed and was sniffing up a storm. “C’mon,” I said as I tugged again. My pant legs were getting wet beneath my thigh-length windbreaker, and I was jonesing for coffee, which I imagined was ready now. He finally relented and we turned back toward home. I was so in my head I didn’t see Nathan standing in my driveway until Brando barked to announce his presence.

“Oh!” I said, surprised but not unhappy to see him. “What are you doing here?” I asked dumbly. I knew exactly what he was doing there—he’d been sent by the family to talk some sense into me, because *why else would he be here?*

“Can we talk?”

“Of course,” I said. “Come on in.”

The coffee was ready, so I offered him a cup, then led him to the living room sofa, where we sat knees to knees.

“It’s good to see you, Ashley,” he said. And I wanted to believe him. But I

also knew he wanted something from me (e.g., my cooperation), so I didn't get too excited.

"I have no intention of keeping the money," I said, before he could ask. "I could never do that to you or the family."

He smiled and nodded. And for a second I thought maybe things would be OK between us.

"That's not why I'm here."

"OK," I said, bracing myself for the worst, because things were trending down so it was only fitting he would have more bad news.

"The person who called to tell me Louisa had passed, well, we're not sure she was who she said she was."

I shook my head dumbly. "What does that mean?"

"We found out that Louisa had passed in a voice mail left by her nurse. But when I played the message for Winnie, she didn't recognize the voice. So we called the nurse. She had no idea Louisa had died. Winnie was right; it wasn't her. Which means the person who called us . . ."

His voice trailed off, like he was expecting me to finish the sentence for him. So I asked: "What about the person who called you?"

"She was an impostor."

My brain was spinning. My throat felt dry as hay. "Did you speak with this . . ." I stumbled on the word. "Impostor?"

"No. She just left a message on my voice mail."

"Can I hear it?"

"Sure."

He took out his phone and hit play. "This is Silvia Hernandez . . ." And of course I recognized the voice immediately.

Because it was mine.

CHAPTER 41

NATHAN

I watched her face as I played the message. “*Tu tía está muerta*. Your aunt is dead.” Panic spread up her neck like a bad rash. If she didn’t want me to know it was her, then she wasn’t a very good actress.

“Nathan,” she said. “You’re not going to believe this . . .”

My heart was pounding in my ears. *Is she actually going to admit it?*

“But that’s me.”

Her confession was like a dam breaking—shock, disappointment, rage, terror rolled over me like a torrent of icy water. For the life of me, I couldn’t think of a single reason why a person in the sane universe would do something so inexplicable and diabolical; so I had to ask, “Why? Why would you do that?”

“I didn’t know,” she insisted. “She tricked me!”

“Tricked you how?”

“It was a script,” she said. “I thought Silvia Hernandez was a character in a TV show.” She explained how Louisa had given her a half dozen roles to read, how she’d played them with different accents, how it was all supposed to be an audition for some “crime procedural” that Louisa had offered to submit her for.

And I wanted to believe her. But it still didn’t make sense. Why would Louisa trick an actress to impersonate her nurse? Why would she want to obscure how she died? If Silvia hadn’t called the morgue, who did?

“What about the texts?” I asked.

“What texts?”

I took out my phone and showed her the text chain I’d just read to Winnie and Charlie. She shook her head. “I didn’t write those.”

I got a prickly feeling up the back of my neck as a hypothesis popped into my brain. It was positively insane. Which meant I had to do something equally insane to see if it was right.

CHAPTER 42

WINNIE

You would think exhuming a body would be difficult—that there would be police and lawyers and reams of paperwork involved, and that you’d need to have a good reason, like evidence of a crime or valid, verifiable religious grounds. But as it turns out, all it takes to dig up a grave is a shady funeral director and a thousand bucks. Given how cheap and easy it is, it’s a wonder people don’t do it more often.

Charlie and I waited in Mom’s parlor for Nathan to pick us up. We could have dug our mother up during the day, under the guise that we had found a plot we liked better, or had environmental remorse and wanted to save the earth and have her cremated. But instead we went full spooky and scheduled it for that night at midnight, after the groundskeepers had gone home and only the grave robbers and ghosts were about—*because why miss an opportunity to make something ghastly even ghastlier?* I was buzzing pretty good on my four-finger pour of Jack Daniel’s as Nathan’s car purred up the drive. If digging up a body in the dead of night wasn’t an occasion to get wasted, then what was?

“You ready?” Charlie asked as Nathan’s car pulled up, and I nodded, even though it was a stupid question. No, I wasn’t ready to peer into the casket of my dead mother—that’s what the damn whiskey was for.

We all three had agreed that we needed to find out why someone who wasn’t Silvia would pretend that she was, but there was a little bit of friction as to how to go about that. Charlie wanted to call the police “immediately,” but Nathan begged us to hold off until we’d seen the body for ourselves. “It was irresponsible of me to have let them take her before I got there,” he’d said. “We need to know what we’re dealing with before we report it to the police.”

I didn’t blame Nathan for letting (fake) Silvia preside over the transport of Mom’s corpse. Having done the dead-body thing, I was fully supportive of someone choosing to forgo it. Plus, as I’d learned the hard way, removing a dead body from your house is as quick and easy as getting rid of an old

refrigerator. When my father died, the nice men from the mortuary came and left inside twenty minutes. I remember those twenty minutes vividly, how Charlie and I had huddled in the hallway outside Mom and Dad's bedroom, terrified to get too close and risk catching a whiff of Dad's budding death rot. Mom was fourteen hours away in Milan when Dad passed, but it didn't matter; we would have endeavored to be rid of our dead dad before she got there if she had been fourteen minutes away in Beverly Hills, so eager were we to get it over with.

As to why someone had impersonated Silvia to deliver the news, well, that was a head-scratcher. I would have preferred to let the police figure out who it was and why they did it, but Nathan was determined to start the investigation without them, and we were determined to tag along. We didn't assume that the woman who had just inherited all Mom's money had murdered her, but we didn't assume she hadn't. And given that Nathan was dating her, well, let's just say we thought it best to chaperone the excursion. We had no idea what to expect when we cracked open that coffin. *Had she been strangled? Beheaded? Shot in the face? Buried alive?* If there were clues as to whodunit, Charlie and I wanted to see them before they disappeared. It's not that we didn't trust Nathan—it's that we suddenly found it impossible to trust anybody.

"Hi, Nathan," I said as I climbed in beside him. It was warm in the car, but I still felt chilled. People think it doesn't get cold in Southern California, but late-October nights can be quite frigid, and this one was hats and gloves worthy.

We drove in silence for the fifteen minutes it took to traverse the Valley. Forest Lawn cemetery was right behind the Warner Bros. lot. I figured Mom had chosen it because it would make haunting her old stomping grounds quick and easy—*no commuting required!* The gate to the graveyard was open, so we drove straight through. At first I thought it strange that there was no one standing guard, but then I realized the well-being of the residents had long since been compromised, *so why bother with security?*

I fought back a wave of nausea as we bounced along the access road that snaked between the grave sites. The combination of whiskey and weirdness was making me dizzy, and I had to keep my eyes glued to the dashboard to keep the contents of my stomach where they belonged. Nathan's fancy halogen headlights cut a slim, oblong path through the black night, giving the outing an eerie *Blair Witch Project* vibe, complete with creepy backstory,

bumbling investigators, and vengeful dead witch ripe for resurrection.

“We have to walk from here,” Nathan said as he slowed and parked in a turnabout. The day’s rain had given way to a cloudless night, and the moon was rose colored and nearly full. Nathan handed me a flashlight, which I shined on the ground to light my steps. Nathan somehow knew where he was going, so I fell in behind him as he led us across the squeaky, wet grass. We were high up on a hill, and city lights winked at us from below: “*We know what you’re doing, you naughty girl,*” they said. And I forced myself to look away.

I tried to count the headstones as we trudged between them—*fifteen, sixteen, seventeen*. The car had been completely gobbled up by darkness, and without Hansel or Gretel to leave a trail of bread crumbs, it was the only thing I could think of to help us find our way back. I tried to walk between the graves, not on them, but the beam from my flashlight was weak, and I couldn’t see the dull granite gravestones until I was practically on top of them.

We rounded a small grove of trees—*twenty-one, twenty-two*—and Nathan suddenly stopped.

“There,” he said, pointing.

I looked up. I couldn’t see their faces, but I could see their lanterns—three of them, glowing like a tiny constellation of stars—about a dozen grave lengths ahead. As we approached I saw the three torchbearers. All men. Two were young, maybe in their late teens, and the third was balding and stout. Nathan greeted the portly one with a nod.

“Good evening.”

“Good evening.”

The chubby ringleader gave the signal to the two teens, and they started digging. The boys worked in tandem, like two sides of a kayak paddle rising and falling on opposite sides of a boat. Mom had only been buried this morning, so the ground was still soft and loose. Their shovels made rhythmic thumping sounds as they tore into it, and I let myself slip into a memory of practicing piano to my metronome: 123, 223, 323, 423 . . .

I glanced over at Charlie. He was either lost in thought or hypnotized by the shovels’ rhythmic cadence. The boys had jumped into the hole and were digging themselves down into the abyss. Down, down, down they sank, their sharp spades slicing through the spongy earth like spoons through dense chocolate cake. I could only see the tops of their heads now, bobbing up and

down like buoys in a dark sea. Dirt sprayed out behind them like an angry wake, forming a mound that swelled in all directions, like bread dough when it rises. Finally, one of the shovels thumped against something hard. One of the boys kept digging, while the other scrambled out of the hole and grabbed a pair of nylon straps. I peered into the hole to watch as he worked the straps under the human-size wooden box, one strap at one end, one at the other. The boys worked together to cinch and secure the straps, then helped each other out of the hole. I marveled at their speed and coordination. It seemed we were not the first weirdos to exhume a loved one in the middle of the night, and I didn't know whether to feel relieved or mortified.

The straps were attached to a winch, which one of them operated while the other steadied the load to keep it from swinging. As Winch Boy turned the crank, the coffin floated out of the hole like a moonrise, slow and steady against the black sky. Once aboveground, two sets of hands reached over and swung the box away from its crumbly trough, then eased it onto the earth by our feet. Stout Man offered a crowbar to one of the boys, who jammed it under the lid, then jumped on it to break the seal.

With a hollow pop that sounded like a jar of spaghetti sauce opening, the crowbar pierced the seal. The coffin lid shuddered as the boys stepped back and hung their heads. The stillness was terrifying. I half expected Mom's bony fingers to slither out from under the lid, then throw it open to reveal her undead head. *Would she be scowling? Or happy to see us?*

When Mom did not pop out of her coffin on her own, our corpulent host took a step toward it.

"Shall I?" he asked.

He was looking at me, so I looked at Charlie, who bit his lip and nodded.

"Go ahead," Nathan said, hunching forward for a better view.

The portly man bent over and lifted the lid.

I steeled myself, then took a tentative step closer.

I'd been scared to look at her, scared to be forever haunted by the image of her chalky dead face.

But when I peered inside, I didn't see the ghastly visage of my dear departed mother. I saw something that scared me a whole lot worse.

PART 5

BEFORE

LOUISA & ASHLEY

CHAPTER 43

LOUISA

“Are you sure you want to do this?” my lawyer asked over the phone. I’m sure he wasn’t thrilled to get an urgent text from me at 8:00 a.m. on a Sunday morning, but my struggling actress friend would be over soon for her “audition,” and I wanted to get this squared away before she arrived.

“Read that last part back to me,” I said. “The section about disinheriting my presumed heirs.”

He cleared his throat and read: “I have intentionally omitted all of my heirs and persons who are not specifically mentioned herein, and specifically disinherit each and every such person whomsoever claiming to be, or who may lawfully be determined to be, my heirs at law; to any person who is determined to be lawfully entitled to any part of my estate, I hereby give and bequeath to such person the sum of ten dollars and no more, in lieu of any other share and interest in my estate.”

“And that protects my chosen heir from anyone coming after her?” I asked.

“Yes. It sets their maximum reward at ten dollars.”

“So not worth the trouble.”

“I wouldn’t think so.”

“OK, prepare it for signing.”

“Are you absolutely sure about this, Louisa?” he asked again, and I rolled my eyes through the phone.

My greatest asset was that people underestimated me. Just because I called Nathan to come fix my computer didn’t mean I didn’t know how to do it myself. I was old and sick, but I wasn’t helpless. It just served me to sometimes let people think that I was.

Besides knowing how to swing a hammer and snake my kitchen sink, I had a vast repertoire of esoteric knowledge. I was very well read. I’m not talking the classics—Hemingway, Shakespeare, Austen, Dickens—though I’d read those, too. No, I was talking about more relevant, useful fare: namely, movie scripts.

In my job as a casting director, I read upward of twenty scripts per week—

horror, drama, thriller, true crime, biopic, heist, rom-coms. Before Hollywood became overrun by superheroes, Hollywood screenwriters wrote about clever mortals who outwitted their adversaries without superpowers and a cape. They robbed banks (*The Bank Job*, *The Town*, *Ocean's Eleven*, *Twelve*, and *Thirteen*), stole identities (*Sneakers*, *Can You Ever Forgive Me?*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*), and swindled unsuspecting rich people (*Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*), bad people (*The Usual Suspects*), and family members (*Knives Out*). Most of the stories were made up, but some of the best ones were true (*Catch Me if You Can*, *Argo*, *Goodfellas*). I admired the cunning of my on-screen counterparts. And I was ready to produce my own twisty caper that would rival the best of them.

I had a compelling premise: woman betrayed by her children uses her wits to exact her revenge. I was a fascinating protagonist—physically fragile but with a brilliant mind and nerves of steel. My antagonists were indisputably vile—selfish, entitled do-nothings who stole the best years of their mother's life, then abandoned her in her hour of need. And the setting was divine—spooky old house with a secret history no one knew but the owner herself.

The particulars of my situation were unique, but there was no need to reinvent the genre. My ingenious con would invoke some tried-and-true tricks but also take advantage of the technology at hand. With the help of a Google number, I could make anonymous texts right from my laptop, no additional hardware needed. As for how I would watch my hapless victims tear each other apart, I had a full complement of cameras—in all the downstairs rooms and outside. They weren't miked, of course, but I was a seasoned casting director—my subjects' body language would tell me everything I needed to know.

"I am absolutely sure," I said, for the third time. Getting the technology working was important, but it wasn't the only thing I had to work out. Just as important as the *how* was the *who*. Technology is predictable. People are not. And it is not always easy to get them to do what you want them to do. I couldn't do this by myself; I needed a coconspirator. Yes, mine was unwitting, but she'd walked right into it. I didn't feel bad for tricking her, because if watching their presumed inheritance go to a stranger didn't compel my selfish children to finally give me that damn kidney, she'd get her reward: all \$10 million of it. If I had to throw her a few pennies to fend off a lawsuit, I would; I had enough to make her go away if my children came around. Which of course was the hope.

I gave my plan a fifty-fifty chance of success. Of course I was rooting against this sad little actress remaining my benefactor. I was tired of my medical purgatory. I wanted to see the great pyramids of Egypt, the northern lights in Finnish Lapland, *Der Rosenkavalier* in Vienna while I still had teeth and could wipe my own behind. I hadn't hustled my whole life to slow rot in a chair. So this was my last-ditch effort. I'd done something similar when they were children, with jars of marbles. Telling them "*You're not getting your allowance unless . . .*" was a lot less effective than "*These marbles represent your allowance. I'm taking them away if you don't . . .*" It worked particularly well with Winnie: she got into Stanford because of those marbles. So perhaps a hearty dose of negative reinforcement was once again the ticket. If not, at least I'd get a good show. Not quite *Der Rosenkavalier*, but high drama nonetheless.

"OK," my lawyer said, somewhat glumly, as if he had a vested interest in me being a pushover. "I'll draft these changes and send them over for your review next week."

"No," I said. "I need it done today. Come to the house. How's one o'clock? I'll prepare lunch."

There was a long pause. I knew what was coming.

"Is everything OK, Louisa?"

And I smiled to myself. "Never better." Because my coconspirator was on her way over to give the performance that could change her life, and pretend-end mine.

CHAPTER 44

ASHLEY

“Can you do it sadder?” Louisa asked, from her perch on the high-back sofa in her parlor. I’d been at her house all morning, recording takes for this mysterious “crime procedural” she’d offered to submit me for, stupidly letting myself believe—*yet again!*—that I had a chance of booking it.

“Yes, of course,” I said. Conjuring sadness was not a problem for me. I could just think about how long it had been since I’d had a boyfriend (forever), my financial situation (dire), my inability to make something of myself after seven years of trying (pathetic). If that didn’t get me there, I could conjure the all-too-fresh memory of making a jackass of myself by proposing marriage to Jordan. *What kind of idiot proposes marriage to a man she’s not even in love with? I mean, how desperate can a girl get?* Of course he (literally!) turned his back on me—I was a big fat loser on every front. I had a lot to cry about these days. On the bright side, at least Louisa was giving me an opportunity to—as we actors say—“use it.”

“OK, let me know when you’re ready.”

I closed my eyes and let the sad thoughts roll in. *I’m a failure. I’m a disappointment. I wasted the best years of my life.*

I glanced down at the script. We had already done it twice; I probably didn’t need it anymore, but casting directors don’t care if you look at your pages during auditions—they trust you can memorize lines. They want to know if you can get there emotionally, make you believe the pain behind the words is real—quite doable if, like me, you’re in pain.

I took a deep breath and looked into the lens. “I’m ready.”

Louisa started the camcorder, then pointed at me: *Go!*

“Hello, this is Silvia Hernandez,” I read. Louisa hadn’t specifically told me to do an accent, but some of the dialogue was in Spanish, so I decided to lean into it. Louisa had encouraged me to play, show off whatever accents I had mastered. I had already broken up with my boyfriend as a haughty Brit, and said goodbye to a lover as a heartbreaker from Down Under. Being able to do accents—like being able to sing and dance—indicated that an actor had

serious training, Louisa had said, and would separate me from all the other gals who were counting on pretty faces and hot bodies to get them noticed. So I took her at her word, dusted off my accents, and did my best to impress.

“I am very sorry to have to tell you this,” I read, “but I have some very sad news. Very sad.” I conjured my most agonizing memories—how I wasn’t there when my dad died. How I’d made him worry up until his last breath. How my mom still worried. Shame and sadness poured into my chest, my lungs, my belly. *I’m sorry I let you down, Daddy. Sorry I abandoned Mom.* Tears caught in my throat and I choked on them. “*Tu tía está muerta,*” I said, in my best Spanish. “Your aunt is dead. Please tell her children. And do not worry, I know her wishes and will make the arrangements.”

Louisa gave me the thumbs-up and clicked off the camera. “That was wonderful,” she said. “Absolutely wonderful.”

I wiped my eyes and thanked her. “Any other parts you want me to read?” I asked. I had been there for over two hours and already read for a half dozen roles, but I loved acting—I could do it all day.

“I think we got it,” Louisa said. “I’ll submit it right away.”

“Thank you,” I said, then got up to go.

“Oh, wait,” she said as soon as I’d stood up. “I need you to sign this.” She slid a contract toward me—some sort of confidentiality agreement making me promise I wouldn’t reveal the details of the script to anyone, or post anything about it on social media, they could sue me if I did, blah blah blah. I had done these before.

“Here you go,” I said, after I’d signed and dated the NDA. I wanted to ask more questions about the job—*Who are the producers? What network is it for? Am I auditioning to be a series regular? A recurring? A guest star?*—but I didn’t want to seem ungrateful. I wasn’t exactly in a position to be picky—if it paid the bills for a few months, then my answer would be yes. As long as I could keep my clothes on and didn’t have to kiss too many weirdos.

“Thank you for the opportunity,” I said, then began gathering my things. I had brought several wardrobe choices and my full makeup kit, but wound up doing the whole thing in a plain black T-shirt with my hair in a simple ponytail. I had offered to change my look between takes, but she’d said it wasn’t necessary, that my “talent” would pave the way. After seven years of being told it’s all about “the look,” I found that notion refreshing, though not entirely credible.

“You’re very talented,” Louisa said, and I almost cried.

“That’s kind of you, thank you.” I hated when people said I was talented. At this point I would have much preferred they told me that I sucked, that I should give it up, go back to school, find a new career. *Someone please just give me a reason to walk away already!*

“You don’t believe me.”

“It’s not that,” I said. I chose my next words carefully. I wanted to be honest, but she had just spent her whole morning putting me on tape, and I didn’t want to whine to the one person who was trying to help me. “It’s just that I haven’t had much success. And I don’t know why that is.” My dad always used to say “the cream rises to the top.” *If I really am “very talented,” then why am I still sludge at the bottom of the glass?*

“Because you are in the most competitive profession on the planet!” she shot back. “It’s not the most talented who break through. It’s the most connected.”

“Not always,” I objected. I knew plenty of stories of actors who broke through on sheer talent. Sarah Jessica Parker famously grew up on food stamps. Two-time Academy Award–winner Hilary Swank was so down and out she once lived in her car. I’m not saying I had Hilary-level talent, but I objected to the idea that talent didn’t matter.

“What do you think the A-list is?” Louisa asked. *What everyone aspires to be*, I thought, but didn’t say out loud.

“The most talented actors?” I said, because—*obviously*.

“Wrong!” she said sharply. “The A-list is a club. With a tightly guarded entrance and dues most people can’t afford.”

I wasn’t sure I believed that, but I played along. “So how do you get into the club?”

“You have to know someone on the inside. Befriend them, impress them, give them a reason to want you to succeed.”

“But . . . don’t you need talent for that?” I asked. *I mean, you can’t impress if you’re terrible.*

“You need *some* talent,” she replied. “But you don’t need the *most* talent. You just need enough to not embarrass them for advocating for you.”

I knew I wasn’t the most talented, but I wasn’t an embarrassment! “So what am I doing wrong?”

“What you’re doing wrong,” she said, “is not making the right friends. You need friends who can open doors, not friends who are banging on them right alongside you.” I thought about the old, tired cliché—it’s not *what* you know,

it's *who* you know. I had always rejected it, mostly because it was gross and disheartening.

"I don't have those kind of friends," I said. I had never been one to befriend someone for their connections; I didn't even know how to do that.

"I do," she said. "And based on what you showed me today, I would have no problem advocating for you," she said. "You're more than worthy of a seat at the table."

I remembered those photos above her desk, pictures of her with some of the biggest stars of her time—Sharon Stone, Viola Davis, Faye Dunaway, Sidney Poitier. So I had to ask, "So . . . you'll introduce me?"

She popped the memory card out of the camcorder and pinched it between her finger and thumb. Then, with a wink and a smile, she spoke the words I'd been waiting my whole life to hear: "Consider it done."

CHAPTER 45

LOUISA

No, I wasn't going to introduce her to anyone. Not because she wasn't worthy. I'd meant it when I'd said she was talented. Her audition was good. She took direction. She showed versatility. She got there. She'd impressed me, and I'm not easy to impress.

I wasn't going to introduce her to anyone because I didn't know anyone. I wasn't in the club anymore. I'd had my membership stripped from me when I got sick. Hollywood hates weakness. It doesn't care if your cat died, your kid died, you have the flu, strep throat, food poisoning, the plague. *The show must go on!* There are no sick days. If you don't show up for work, the town replaces you. Immediately. The line of people who want your job is long and hungry. There are always viable candidates. *Always.*

So no, I would not make introductions for my pie-eyed ingenue. I liked her well enough, but she was going to have to figure it out on her own. No one held my hand when I was trying to get a foothold. Hollywood was a boys' club, and if you were a woman and you wanted in, you had to do whatever the boys wanted. As a casting director I'd heard all the stories—the one about the actress who was molested by her costar, had to give the producer a blow job, had to get naked in her audition. I once walked into a meeting with a director who closed the door and dropped his pants during my interview. Why? Because he could. Did I run or cry or tell anyone? No. There was no one to tell. They were all in on it. We sucked it up. We did what it took to get and keep our jobs.

Things were supposedly better now. Abusive men were getting outed, fired, even arrested. Ashley's generation would never know the abuse that women of my generation endured. She would never have to meet a director in his hotel room, open her blouse, or let a producer reach up her skirt to show her appreciation for giving her a foothold. *Well, lucky her!* Yes, having her audition for a nonexistent job was not very nice, but it was nothing compared to what had been done to me. Our business is ruthless; if she wanted an easy ride, she should have picked a different career.

I sat down at my desk and plugged the memory card from the camcorder into my laptop. It didn't matter what Ashley looked like because I didn't need the video—just the audio—so there was no need for her to get all gussied up. I wasn't being kind sparing her the effort; changing her makeup between takes would have taken time, and I had a lot to do.

Ashley didn't sound anything like Silvia Hernandez, who was in her fifties with a heavy smoker's rasp, but Nathan had never spoken to her; he would never know. As for all the other "parts" I'd had her read, those were just interference, so she wouldn't connect the dots when she learned of my passing. The NDA I'd had her sign served the dual purpose of making sure she wouldn't talk and getting her legal name for the will. Maybe my safeguards were overkill—she was plenty gullible, and I hadn't had her speak any incriminating details like my name or how I'd died. But I wasn't going to leave anything to chance. The devil's in the details. And I didn't become a rich bitch by being lazy.

I wasn't the best casting director in Hollywood in my day, far from it. I was successful because I worked the hardest. I took every job, no matter how small. If the production couldn't pay me, I took a producer position—partial ownership of the production in exchange for waiving my upfront fee. My male counterparts never did that, never had to—no one would dare ask a man to work for free. But my willingness to punt my payday turned out to be a stroke of genius—the very thing that turned me from a working stiff into a player. Sometimes I got burned; productions folded, I never got paid. But I didn't care about those. Because the shows that did get made more than made up for the ones that didn't. My 5 percent of that movie or pilot that became a big hit translated into big money—millions of dollars over the years. My willingness to make unconventional deals was the difference between getting by and getting rich. While other casting directors were fighting for table scraps, I was quietly building a library of titles that became the backbone of my business.

I deleted all the superfluous takes about broken promises and wistful farewells and cued up the one I needed. After twenty-five years in casting, I knew when I got it without having to play it back. The actors knew it, too. They often emerged from the great takes with no memory of doing them, so lost were they in their performance. That was the enigma of acting. You need to be completely present—hear, feel, taste, see everything the character does. But you also need to lose yourself so completely in the role that you

disappear. It's a paradox of the most intriguing kind, and why—even after twenty-five years—working with actors still thrilled me.

I closed my eyes as I listened. “This is Silvia Hernandez . . . I am very sorry to have to tell you this . . . Your aunt is dead.” Her performance was so good I got a little verklempt. I regretted I couldn't let Nathan in on my ruse—the news of my death would surely cause him some distress, and I could have used his help. But his loyalties were clearly divided, so he would just have to suffer along with the rest of them.

Part one of my plan (the setup) was nearly complete. All that was left was to leave the message on Nathan's voice mail. I would do that early tomorrow, while he was still sleeping, so that he would hear it when he woke up.

Part two of my plan (the payoff) was considerably more involved. I would have to work fast to get all the logistics in place. Ashley had nailed her “audition.” But her role in my grand production was not over yet. The best castings usually lean into an actor's intrinsic qualities—Jim Carrey as the zany loudmouth, Bruce Dern as the ornery stoic. Ashley's wide-eyed naïveté was perfect for the role I'd cast her in. Unfortunately, she saw the role differently than I did, and had talents that escaped even a veteran casting director like me.

CHAPTER 46

ASHLEY

I was so excited when I left Louisa's I nearly skipped all the way home. Not just because I'd killed the audition—I'd killed auditions before. I was excited by what my new casting director friend had said when I'd asked if she would make introductions for me. *Consider it done.*

Yes, there were stories about actors who had broken through on talent alone—stories I told myself to keep me going year after year. But I always knew that for every Sarah Jessica Parker, there were a thousand actors who got their shot because of who they knew. And now, not only did I know a big-time casting director with connections up the wazoo, she had invited me into “the club.” I knew in my bones that my life was about to change, that my patience had finally paid off, that I was about to get into the game I had so far only watched as a spectator.

I didn't want to jinx my good news by shouting it from the rooftops (“*I'm going to get a casting!*”), but I was dying to tell the one person who had endured my every up and down: Jordan. I thought sharing good news would be a good way to break the ice after my horrific blunder from the night before, when I'd ugly cried all over him and then proposed freaking marriage! Of course that marriage pact was a joke. We were hammered, and having a backup spouse was the stuff of silly rom-coms, not real life. I was ready to have a good laugh about it, go back to being roommates, friends, *not* getting married—now or ever. “*Sorry for falling apart on you last night,*” I would say. “*I don't know what came over me!*”

As I turned onto my street, I couldn't help but wonder: What *had* come over me? As an actor, part of the process of preparing for a role is understanding what makes a character tick. We don't just read plays and watch movies, we also study psychology. In Psych 101, we learned that irrational behavior is usually driven by fear. My career was uncertain. My finances were dire. I'd lost my father. Jordan had a great job and could take care of me. Was I afraid I would never be able to make it on my own? Was I hearing the terrifying tick of my biological clock? Was I drawn to Jordan

after that scary episode (losing my dog, getting shot at!) because he made me feel safe? Because now that I had confidence in my future, the thought of marrying him felt absurd.

Jordan wasn't home when I got there. I thought about texting him, but good news and apologies were best given in person, so I decided to wait. It was Sunday afternoon. Any other Sunday I would have probably felt sorry for myself that everybody either had something to do, or someone to do nothing with, but I was in the club now ("*Consider it done!*"); it was only a matter of time before my phone was ringing off the hook. As I sat down on my bed, Brando hopped up beside me and stuck his snout in my armpit, trying to force a snuggle. "Things are looking up," I said as I smoothed back his ears. His little tail thumped on the bed, and my heart swelled with gratitude for his unconditional love. For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in success and in failure, my dog had always been there for me. So I decided to reward him. "You want to go for a run?" I asked. And his tail thumped harder.

Rather than jog on busy sidewalks, I decided to take Brando up the hill to run on the fire road at the top of Mulholland Drive. It was closed to cars, and on a breezy Sunday like this, hikers and bikers from all over the city would be up there to get their workout on. On a clear day, you could see the whole world from the top of that hill, and—given that my whole world was about to change—I was eager to take it all in.

I drove up the steep paved road until it turned to dirt, then parked between two brand-new BMW SUVs. There were regular reminders of how so many people were doing better than me in my upwardly mobile Valley neighborhood, and it had been a constant battle to not let them get me down. I didn't dare fantasize what kind of car I would get once my career took off, but it was the first time in a long time seeing my aging MINI Cooper parked between two luxury cars didn't bum me out.

I put Brando on the leash, then launched into a slow jog. Once I got off the main road and into the trails, I would let him off—there were no driveways for him to wander down or bird feeders to pillage way up here. As I jogged, I turned my fortuitous encounter with Louisa over in my mind. I had thought my angels had betrayed me when they lured Brando down that creepy driveway. But of course they had an agenda. She was a casting director—a *casting director!*—who knew of a role that needed to be filled. *There's no way that's a coincidence!*

I always thought I would break through because I worked harder than everyone else. When you get called for an audition, they never give you a whole script, just the scene they want you to read. Sometimes it isn't even the whole scene, just a scene fragment. They call these partial scripts "sides." The term dates back to Shakespeare, when scripts were all handwritten and actors only got their "side" of a scene (because it was too much work to write out everybody's part). But I always wanted more than just my "side." I wanted to know the context, so I could build the moment, shape the character. So whenever I got an audition, I would call my friend who worked in the mail room at CAA, one of Hollywood's top talent agencies, and ask him to get me a copy of the full script . . . and any other scripts that were casting and might have a part for me, so I would be ready for any audition that might come my way. In the beginning I read a dozen scripts per week. But then my savings ran out, and I had to get a "real" job. And it got harder and harder to keep my edge.

I don't know if I was stubborn or stupid, but I kept going. I cut out inspirational quotes and taped them above my bed—"I have not failed, I've just found ten thousand ways that don't work." (Thomas Edison); "You can win a lot in life just by being the last one to give up." (James Clear); "Failure is success in progress." (Albert Einstein). No matter how many setbacks I suffered, the dream wouldn't die. Maybe I was lucky to meet Louisa seven years into my quest to become an actor. Or maybe, after picking myself up after countless falls, I'd finally earned it.

I passed through a gate and the dirt road narrowed. It was a steep climb to the top, and I told myself I wouldn't slow down. I wanted to feel the burn in my legs and my lungs, let my brain turn off every other thought besides making it up that hill. Just because I'd gotten a break didn't mean I could let up. If anything, it only made me want to work harder.

I ran straight up for six grueling minutes. The trail finally flattened out onto a big dirt stage with views in every direction. Tears tumbled down my face as I took it all in. I could see the ocean, the crisscrossing grid of the valley floor, the steady stream of traffic on the 405 freeway. From way up there, I could feel how I was a member of this huge ecosystem, with a million moving parts. Some were moving up, some were moving down. Some, like me, had been moving in circles—the bottom of the pyramid so there could be a top.

A bike whizzed by me and shook me out of my trance. There were trails in

every direction. Of course, I picked the one that went up. Because, for the first time since moving to LA to pursue my dream, I was certain that was the direction I was headed.

CHAPTER 47

LOUISA

My house was built in the 1950s at the height of the Cold War. The threat of earthquakes was a constant in Southern California, so it was rare for homes to have basements. But mine had something better, an accoutrement designed to protect you and your loved ones from a disaster even more frightening than an earthquake: namely, nuclear war.

My bomb shelter was pretty plush as far as bomb shelters go, with an eat-in kitchen (green linoleum with stainless-steel countertops), a proper bedroom (full-size four-poster bed), a full bathroom (same green linoleum and stainless), and a small but pleasant sitting area (tan L-shaped couch and utilitarian coffee table). With its exposed cinder block walls and space-age wall sconces, I could have easily marketed it as an industrial-chic guest house and rented it for two grand a week—if it weren't fifteen feet underground and unequivocally illegal, that is.

Like all good secret bunkers, its existence was largely unknown. The entrance was at the edge of the garden outside my study, ten steps beyond the bird feeder at the edge of the woods. My husband had built a small toolshed to cover the trapdoor, which was hidden under a plain four-by-four rubber mat with magnets on the bottom so it would automatically snap back to cover the door once you closed it behind you. The stairs leading down to the hideaway were narrow but not steep, but I still took them slowly, holding on to the rails on both sides as I descended.

There were no windows, of course—it was underground. But air came in and out through a cylindrical chimney-type vent disguised as a bird feeder. The technology was similar to an igloo. In the winter months, when the outside air was cooler, the warmer, lighter inside air would rise and flow out. A battery-operated pump was necessary to control airflow in warmer weather, or when the shelter was at full occupancy (three or more people), but it was almost November, and I was only one person, so I didn't trouble myself to figure that out.

The batteries that powered the lights, apartment-size refrigerator, and

electric range (no gas!) were charged by solar panels on the roof of my garage. It was important for a doomsday shelter to survive off the grid, so I tolerated the ugly blue-gray panels that my husband had installed to replace the aging generator. The shelter had a literal wall of batteries, each one the size of a loaf of bread. In addition to solar panels, my husband had installed a stationary bicycle so that one's legs could provide energy on the days the sun could not. The batteries were old now but could still hold a charge for several days. I was only planning to be down there until midweek, so even if it rained nonstop, I would be spared the burden of cycling for my supper.

I hadn't been down to my shelter for several years, so I was pleased to find it tidy and intact. The structure was not airtight, but miraculously no dust, rats, or mold had infiltrated. The furniture—while dated—had hardly been sat or slept on, so was in fine shape. My husband had filled the small bookcase in the bedroom with how-to books (simple knitting, easy automotive repair, pipe bombs for dummies) because he thought it was cute. I would have preferred the company of Dickinson or Rilke during Armageddon, but I understood the practicality of learning to be self-sufficient in the event of a catastrophe, so embraced my unconventional library.

We didn't have any food down there anymore save a few expired emergency rations (amorphous, freeze-dried God knows what), but I didn't eat much. I could bring down what I needed in one trip: tea, milk, bread, butter, and jam, plus potatoes, carrots, and lentils for soup, and some smoked meat for sandwiches. Oh, and a box of Lorna Doones. I'd bought one special just for the stay. The shelter didn't have a television, but my husband had had the foresight to run the wiring for our closed-circuit security system down here, which, once plugged into the monitor from my pantry, would be all the entertainment that I needed.

I checked for the essentials—toilet paper, soap, towels, boxed water—and found they were in ample supply. I checked and rechecked all the lights and was delighted to see they were all in working order. The flashlights, however, needed new batteries, and I hoped I had a box in the house. I had already gone shopping and didn't want to have to do another trip. The next few days would be eventful and I needed my rest.

I thought back to the one and only time I'd slept down here. It was my husband's idea. The kids were little and he thought it would be fun to have a date (literally!) right under their noses. So we hired an overnight babysitter, put on our coats like we were off to someplace nice, then drove to the end of

the block, parked, walked back, and crept into the shed. We thought we were so tricky when we rolled back that rubber mat and slipped through the trapdoor. I won't tell you what we did down there, only that it sated my penchant for mischief, which was ever present back then.

Satisfied that my refuge was ready for my upcoming stay, I turned off the lights and headed back up the stairs. Silvia would be over soon, and once she came, I would be rendered useless for the rest of the afternoon. Her visits were tedious, but such was my life now—I was through complaining about it. Complaining was tiresome. Revenge was much more my style.

CHAPTER 48

ASHLEY

I was giving Brando a bath in the kitchen sink after our run when the phone rang. The caller ID said “Unknown Caller,” and I almost didn’t answer it. I wasn’t in the mood to be reminded I didn’t own a home (yet!) by someone offering me a great interest rate to refinance it. Plus Brando was covered with soap and itching to shake-spray it all over the room. But I had just had an audition, and if this was the good news I was waiting for, I didn’t want to miss it. So I wiped off my sudsy hands and picked up my phone.

“Hello?”

“Ashley?” a voice I couldn’t quite place said. “This is Nathan, from last night.” *Wait—WUT?* I was so used to feeling unworthy of attention of any kind, I assumed he was calling for some mundane reason: to tell me I’d left my hat in Louisa’s parlor (*had I worn a hat?*) or invite me to join the neighborhood watch. But I still got nervous-excited, because that’s what I do.

“Nathan, hi!” I said, turning off the water with my elbow and giving Brando a stern look to stay still. He was dripping wet and undoubtedly on the verge of doing that thing wet dogs do to make everyone else wet, too.

“Hi,” my hot crush said. There was a beat of silence, so of course I ran off my mouth to fill it.

“I just got back from your aunt’s!” OK, not *just*. I’d been back for two hours. But I didn’t think he would care that I went for a run, and I didn’t want to conjure an image of me covered with dirt and sweat.

“She’s trying to help me get a job,” I explained. “I probably won’t get it, but it’s nice of her to offer.” He didn’t need to know any of that. *Why can’t I stop talking?*

“Oh! Well, break a leg!”

“I probably shouldn’t talk about it,” I blathered on. “It’s bad luck to talk about auditions. We actors are very superstitious.” *Great. Now he thinks I’m a crazy actress who won’t walk under ladders and holds my breath over train tracks. Which I am. But he doesn’t need to know that.*

“Listen,” he said, (mercifully) taking control of the conversation. “I don’t

want to cut in on my aunt's turf here, but I, um . . ." *You um . . . what?* My heart was pounding in my ears. Brando quivered, and I squeezed his middle with a firm hand to make sure he didn't take that moment to douse me like a furry sprinkler. "Well, I really enjoyed meeting you and I was wondering if maybe you might want to meet for a drink sometime, or even tonight?"

"I'm free tonight!" I blurted. *Good God, could I be any less hard to get?*

"I have to take some golf buddies to happy hour," Nathan said, and I got scared he was about to change his mind.

"I can be ready in twenty minutes!" I lied. I had dirt rings around my ankles and was elbow-deep in dog hair. *In what world could I be ready in twenty minutes?* Thank goodness he didn't call my bluff.

It's funny how when one part of your life clicks into place, the other parts often follow. I'd heard it called many things: "manifesting," "the secret," "the law of attraction." I had always been intrigued by the idea that you get what you believe you deserve—that positive thoughts bring positive outcomes. My attitude had definitely shifted since that audition and Louisa's encouragement ("*Consider it done.*"). Yet, despite my newfound optimism, I still couldn't believe the man I was attracted to might actually be attracted to me, too, even as he was asking me out on a date.

I thought back to how weird I had acted when Nathan had given me that tour. *Did he like weirdos? Or could he see through my nervousness to the adorably dorky gal underneath?* We definitely had "chemistry," whatever that was. In acting, creating chemistry with another actor was all about listening. We practiced studying our scene partners' faces when they talked, holding their gaze, hanging on their every word. One acting coach made us switch the order of our lines so that the other actor had to pay attention to know what to say next. Improv was another way we practiced listening, because when you're making it up as you go along, you can't tune the other person out. So yeah, in acting, chemistry is all about listening. Which is strange, because in real life, when I have chemistry with a guy, I'm too busy tripping over my own tongue to let him get a word in.

"The place is in West LA, near the golf course," he said.

"And where are you?"

"Manhattan Beach."

Manhattan Beach was on the other side of the world from Encino, and not on the way to West LA. So I told him I would meet him at the bar, because God forbid I let a man pick me up. I told myself I was being liberated . . .

generous, even. But the truth is I was just insecure. I still didn't believe I was desirable enough for a man to go out of his way for me, and I didn't dare test my hypothesis. So I offered to drive myself before he could suggest it.

We set the meeting time for five. To get there on time I would have to leave by four thirty, which meant I had a little over an hour to finish bathing my dog and scrub myself clean. As I contemplated what to wear—*Jeans and sneakers? Leggings and boots?*—Brando finally lost his patience and unleashed a swirling spindrift of soapy water all over everything: the walls, the cabinets, the fridge, me.

“Brando!” I shouted, and then burst out laughing. I wasn't upset. Because, after years of struggle, things were finally all falling into place, and I'd be damned if I didn't enjoy it.

CHAPTER 49

LOUISA

Silvia, my nurse, arrived as she always does at 6:00 p.m. on the dot.

“Good evening, Miss Louisa,” she said as she handed me a bouquet of yellow peonies. She often brought flowers. It used to irritate me. I didn’t like being treated like I was sick; her arrival was reminder enough. “You don’t need to bring me flowers,” I’d said. But she just kept bringing them, so now I just said thank you.

“Hello, Silvia,” I said as I let her in the front door. She had a key but always rang the bell first. She was nothing if not courteous.

“How are you feeling today?” she asked.

“Like a bag of rocks.”

“Well, you look radiant.” She rolled her *r* to show off her spicy Spanish accent. She was from Argentina, with pale skin and carrot-red hair—not the typical coloring of someone with that accent. It was a good thing she hadn’t tried to be an actress—she would have been impossible to cast.

“Shall we get started?” she asked, and without waiting for an answer she breezed by me into the kitchen. After three years of visiting me twice a week, she knew where to find a vase for those flowers, and I heard the cupboard open and close and the sound of running water.

“I got it,” I said as I joined her in the kitchen and put the peonies in the vase.

“Let’s get some of those rocks out.” *That twirly r again.* She was a sturdy woman, short and squat with a voice like a bulldozer. I thought it incongruous that a person who devoted her life to healing would be a smoker, but her rasp was undeniable, as were the yellow rims around her front teeth. We all have our coping mechanisms, I suppose, and being my nurse was probably no picnic.

She followed me into the treatment room and took out her notebook. I stepped on the scale all nerves and prerace jitters like a jockey before the Kentucky Derby. My weight was up four pounds since her visit last Thursday, and she shook her head and tsk-tsk’d me.

“Too many tea parties,” she admonished, then winked to telegraph it was going to be OK. It was expected that my weight would be up, but four pounds was a lot for me.

I sat in my chair and she plugged me in like a Christmas tree, then took out her knitting. We would sit in silence for the next two hours, alone in our heads but physically together. I guess some people liked to talk or listen to music during their treatments, but I preferred to use the time as a meditation. I couldn't turn the pages of a book with the serpent in my arm, but it was just as well. I had sorted through many a predicament in this chair, including my current one. After my children turned me down, I vowed to do whatever it took to get my chance at freedom. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine how it would all play out. What would my children do when they found out they weren't getting my money? And more interestingly, what would they do when I came back from the dead? Would they grovel for forgiveness? Turn their back on me forever? Or finally give me the one thing I ever asked for so I could live the rest of my days in dignity?

I considered myself a reliable judge of character. I had a pretty good inkling what they would all do. Except for one of them. Unfortunately for me.

CHAPTER 50

ASHLEY

I hadn't planned to kiss him in front of all his friends at that noisy bar. I was just so grateful for how he'd tried to protect me from that awful woman and her battery of questions, and I didn't know how else to show it.

When I told people I was an actress (which I hated to do), their first question was inevitably some version of "What have I seen you in?" Which was just another way of asking, "*Are you a real actress? Or a wannabe?*" We would never be so rude to grill people in other professions. "*Oh, you're a doctor? What surgeries have you done? You're a lawyer? What cases have you argued? You're a chef? What recipes do you know?*" Yet we actors get it every damn day.

I was confident my fortunes were about to change, but I didn't want to have to explain what was taking so long. So I excused myself to go to the bathroom. As I made my way across the crowded bar, I thought back to my very first booking. It was only for a student short film (about a star tennis player who quits her sport to take care of a sick friend), but it was paid (a hundred dollars a day!) and I was the lead. I'd auditioned for it in the director's apartment—a crummy little studio on the edge of the USC campus. He didn't have a costumer, so I wore all my own clothes. The makeup and hair person had never done anyone's makeup and hair but her own, so I wound up doing that, too. I learned on my next job that makeup and hair were two separate jobs (under the jurisdiction of two separate unions), and that I shouldn't have been responsible for finding and bringing my own props—sunglasses, backpack, tennis racket, trophies (borrowed from Jordan)—a prop master was supposed to do that. The whole thing was kind of sketchy, and I never did get those props back (*sorry, Jordan!*), but I didn't care. As I saw it, every day I got paid to act was a good day, whether the film got finished or not (it didn't).

My next booking came right away—a guest-star spot on a well-known sitcom. I had a makeup artist *and* a hairstylist, and the props were all provided and stored on a five-ton truck parked outside the stage. My dressing

room (I had a dressing room!) was in a truck called a honey wagon. I think the name was supposed to be ironic, because those dressing rooms are basically just oversize porta-potties and smell nothing like honey, but it was just as sweet to me.

I found out about auditions from a guy in my acting class (back when I could still afford acting classes), and he sometimes even gave me a ride. He taught me how to talk my way in: “*I think my audition was supposed to be tomorrow, but I’m working tomorrow so my manager said to just come now?*” As he explained, if you’re there and they like your look, they’ll let you read. If they don’t like your look, you’re not getting the job anyway, so what difference does it make?

I snuck into a lot of auditions like that. I told myself I wasn’t lying, I was acting! (*And isn’t that my job?*) My friend and I also “acted” as each other’s managers. He gave my name and number as his, and I gave his name and number as mine. We so rarely got calls for each other, it didn’t matter. And when they came in, it was another chance to flex our acting chops!

I went on lots of auditions but hardly ever booked. I didn’t care. Not at first. I loved the game, the chase, the feeling of possibility. But then disappointment set in, and it became a grind—sitting in traffic, waiting my turn, hearing “no” over and over and over again. Eventually my actor friend quit the business to become a veterinarian, and I had to find my own auditions. That’s pretty much when they ground to a halt.

I dried my hands and steeled myself to rejoin the conversation. I was no Meryl Streep, but I was a good enough actress to pretend the buffalo wings were delicious and that I’d forgotten all about the inquisition I’d just endured. But I didn’t have to go back to the table. Because when I stepped out of the bathroom, Nathan was standing at the door waiting for me.

“Hey,” I said. And then right there in front of the ladies’ room and two drunk women staggering to get past us, he slipped a hand around my waist and pulled me into him, and we kissed like we didn’t care that the whole waitstaff was watching.

“You wanna get out of here?”

The rest of the evening was a blur. I remember Nathan’s hand on the small of my back as he guided me out of the restaurant, eager but not aggressive. I remember holding hands as he walked me to my car. I remember watching him punch my address into his phone, feeling nervous because I hadn’t done this for a long time and also excited because . . . well, I hadn’t done this for a

looonnnng time.

I remember feeling relieved to get home before Nathan arrived so I could pee and brush my teeth. Then the rush of shame when I saw Jordan with that huge bouquet of flowers. I remember thinking red roses were an odd choice for an offering of friendship, and that maybe that was all they had? But then I took them from him, and he fell to one knee, and the trickle of shame became a tidal wave as I realized I had betrayed him in the worst possible way.

After sending Nathan away, I remember the minutes feeling like hours as I waited for Jordan to come home, because even though I didn't want to marry him, he was still my best friend. And when you hurt your best friend, even by accident, you have to do anything and everything to try to make things right.

Lying in bed that night, feeling equal parts elated and horrified, I reminded myself that things happen for a reason. But, as I was about to find out, not always for the reason that we think.

CHAPTER 51

LOUISA

My alarm was set for 6:00 a.m., but I woke up two minutes before it went off. I had an uncanny ability to do that, always have. I only had four days until the real Silvia Hernandez would reappear and let the cat out of the bag, so there was not a minute to waste.

I got out of bed and went through my checklist. The will was revised and notarized. Fake Silvia's message was edited and ready. The funeral home was on notice. My plot was chosen and paid for. The cellar was stocked with food and clean sheets and towels. I'd even tidied the house for my upcoming visitors, because I had pride and wanted them to know that even though they'd abandoned me, I still kept it all together.

I felt remarkably perky for a dead woman. Must have been the thrill of my long-gestating project finally going into production. There's no better feeling than seeing the thing you've been working on for weeks or months (or in this case, years!) finally taking flight. It's what I missed most about my job: the satisfaction of watching your hard work finally pay off. It always gave me a natural high, even better than the champagne we kept on hand to toast our successes.

I made my bed, then showered and dressed and put the kettle on for tea. I would have one last cup before I settled into my bunker to watch the show. The tea was not just for pleasure—it was also a prop. I drank about half the cup, then set it by my chair in the study, next to my book and my favorite afghan, as if I'd died in that chair. Because that's what fake Silvia (played over texts by me) was going to text Nathan, and I wanted it to be credible.

It was almost seven now. I had to time this just right. I couldn't risk Nathan being awake when I phoned, but I also didn't want it to be so early that he could beat traffic and catch me in the act of not dying. If I didn't do it today, because of my treatment schedule, I'd have to delay it for a whole week. So I waited until a few minutes before seven, then dialed his number. *And voilà!* It went straight to voice mail.

"This is Nathan Lake. I'm sorry I missed your call, but if you leave me a

message, I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

People often asked me if I used to be an actress. I was certainly pretty enough. And I knew what it took (ingenuity, tenacity, hard-earned connections), and I had all those things in spades. But I also had mouths to feed. An actor's life is grueling. It requires sacrifice and late nights and long days running to auditions. Actors just starting out either have to take a low-paying day job or have a trust fund. My husband was a cabinetmaker. We couldn't have raised a family in LA on what he was making. One of us needed a real job. And while I might have eventually broken through (and I believe I would have), without a way to support my family, I never got the chance to try.

So instead of acting, I devoted my life to discovering actors. I scoured the town to pluck young talent out of obscurity, then put my reputation on the line to turn them into stars. I can't tell you how many of my discoveries grew into household names, but there were more than you could count on one hand. And once they got what they wanted, they never called again. Never said thank you. Never asked what they could do for me. Just like my children.

While these discoveries of mine were buying their directors and agents new cars, I got nothing. Except the opportunity to do likewise for the other ingrates in my life. I gave and gave. And then I got sick. And no one gave back.

So at the sound of the beep, I played fake Silvia's message. *I am very sorry . . . Tu tía está muerta. Your aunt is dead.* I had been pushed aside long enough. This was my show, and it was my turn to be the star. I was going to go through with this if it was the last thing I did. Which it turns out it was. Because sometimes the ending is not what's in the script, and the characters have secrets even the writer doesn't know.

PART 6

AFTER

ASHLEY, JORDAN, WINNIE, CHARLIE, MARCELA &
NATHAN

CHAPTER 52

ASHLEY

What a bitch!

No, seriously. *What a fucking bitch!*

She knew what that audition meant to me (everything!), and that I'd do anything to book the job, including dusting off all those accents I'd painstakingly learned and practiced in the shower. And then she used me like a bird uses a windshield—to relieve herself and leave her mark covered with shit.

I was and will always be grateful to the brave, self-starting women who paved the way for my generation—women like Angelina Jolie, who when asked if she wanted to be a Bond girl famously responded, “No, I want to be Bond” (and went on to star in her own action movies). And Amy Pascal, who swashbuckled her way up the ladder of Columbia Pictures so she could turn Ms. Jolie into said action hero. All women in Hollywood owed a huge debt of gratitude to those trailblazers who had endured prejudice, cruelty, and countless untold abuses to prove that not only did women belong in the top jobs, but they could do them better.

But while some successful women brought other women along with them, others were even worse than the men. I'd heard dozens of stories of powerful women who wore their battle scars like badges of honor. “I never got a helping hand,” they would say. “Why should I offer a helping hand to you?” The monsters were everywhere, at every level. I was not a naive Midwestern farm girl when I came here—I was the calf being led to the slaughter. I just hadn't known it until now.

I loved acting, but the dog-eat-dog culture was killing me. This incident had pushed me over the edge. I was in freefall, tumbling into the inferno, with nothing to hold on to, and no one to catch me. I was (almost) thirty now; starting a new career felt as out of reach as landing on Mars. I had no marketable skills and zero real-world job experience. *Who in their right mind would hire me? I wouldn't even hire me!* I couldn't afford to go back to school, and I couldn't ask my mom for help—my parents had already paid

for me to get a (useless) degree. I had no savings and no job. So what were my options? Accountants need degrees in accounting, teachers need degrees in education. I had a theater degree. My most impressive skill was being able to recite all the lines from *Macbeth* in a Scottish brogue—hardly applicable to any kind of serious job.

Of course, Louisa had done more than decimate my ego and sour my career aspirations; she had also humiliated me in front of the one guy in a million whom I liked and liked me back. We would never have a second date now. To Nathan I would always be the dumbass who let his aunt roll all over her—or worse, if he didn't believe my denials, a coconspirator never to be trusted.

And then there was the matter of what she'd done to poor Winnie and Charlie, humiliating them like they were naughty children begging for a spanking. I had no doubt they were the victims here, and that this cruel trick was the capstone of a lifetime of abuses. As my dad used to say, people show you who they are. If this woman was willing to deceive and use someone after knowing them for five minutes, what abuses had she inflicted on the people she'd known her whole life?

As I lay in my bed staring up into the darkness, I agonized over how I had let myself become a pawn in this crazy woman's con. I should have known better. Louisa's sick scheme was right out of a movie script, and somebody who has read as many as I had should have sniffed it out sooner.

I glanced at the clock. It was nearly midnight. I was too enraged to sleep. I had been perfectly cast as the sucker, but that was not the role I wanted.

So I got up to rewrite my part.

CHAPTER 53

JORDAN

I'm normally in bed by eleven, but I wasn't tired, so I decided to stay up and start getting organized. I'd accumulated a lot of junk in the seven years Ashley and I had lived in our Valley bungalow, and if I was going to move out, I had to get rid of some of it.

I flipped on the TV to keep me company. *Moneyball* was streaming on Netflix. I'd seen it so many times I practically knew all the lines by heart. I put the volume on low, then opened the double-wide hall closet to survey the jumble of old tennis rackets, sneakers, and sports memorabilia on "my" side. Some of the stuff I had accumulated since moving here, but most of it I had lugged all the way from Wisconsin, and it was probably time to let it go. I liked my fifteen-year-old Wilson Pro Staff racket, but if I was going to get back into tennis, it was probably time for an upgrade. And did I really need a foam roller in every color?

I made a pile to throw away, a pile to keep, and a pile for charity. The trash pile grew quickly (*why did I keep all those running shoes worn too thin for running?*), as did the charity pile (*maybe somebody would enjoy learning tennis on my old racket?*). I tried to get rid of as much as I could. Knowing Ashley and I were going our separate ways made me feel a lot less nostalgic about keeping all those scribbled-on yearbooks and dumb foam fingers from my high school glory days.

I was just about to stop for the night when I spotted a box of baseballs at the back of the closet. Of all my sports memorabilia, those balls were probably the only things that meant anything to me—first home run, first strikeout, first save, one hundredth hit. I had exactly twenty-one such "milestones"—one for every year I'd been on earth when I quit the sport. It's kind of ridiculous that I'd lugged all those balls to LA with me—that box was heavy! But, as much as I knew I should part with them, I was still attached, so into the "keep" pile they went.

I looked up at the TV. Billy Beane had just hurled a keg of Gatorade against the locker room wall. A moment later, Ashley's door opened and she

poked her head out.

“Shoot, sorry, did I wake you?” I asked, hopping over that box of baseballs to grab the remote and mute the TV.

“No,” she said, stepping into the living room, Brando on her heels. “I couldn’t sleep.” She bit down on her lower lip, but not before I saw it quivering.

“What’s going on, Ash?”

“You promise not to say I told you so?”

“Have I ever said I told you so?”

“No, but this time I deserve it.”

Brando jumped up into her lap as she slumped down into a chair. She was fighting back tears. I hated to see her upset, but I resisted the urge to get up and hug her.

“Remember that audition I told you about?” she asked, and I nodded. *How could I forget?* She had told me about it in the same breath that she’d announced she was gaga for another man. So yeah, I remembered.

“What about it?” I was ready for her to say what she always said—that she didn’t get the job—so what she did say threw me for a loop.

“It was fake.”

The statement was so absurd I thought I’d misheard. “What do you mean, ‘fake’?”

Her voice shook with anger as she told me about how the old woman had tricked her into disguising her voice, then promised to make introductions that would change her life. “She called it a club,” Ashley said. “She told me I was in it now. But it was all a lie.”

“What kind of person would do that?” I asked, even though the answer was obvious.

“A cruel-ass bitch.” She balled her fingers into an angry fist. “I feel like such an idiot,” she said through clenched teeth, and I felt myself get angry, too. Ashley was a dreamer, but that didn’t give people the right to take advantage of her. And just because she didn’t want to marry me didn’t mean I didn’t still care.

I looked up at the TV. Billy Beane was on a tear. It was the turning point in the movie, where Beane transforms his losing team into the winningest one in baseball history, and himself from zero to hero.

“I’m so mad I want to punch something,” she said. And of course I knew how she felt.

Anger is a powerful drug. It spurs people to do things they never thought possible—return the kickoff for a ninety-yard touchdown, throw the runner out at home, hit that half-court shot at the buzzer. Every great comeback in sports starts with a stinging loss. That’s what makes it a comeback. I could feel a hero’s moment in the making here. But not everyone is meant to be a hero. And you can’t have winners without losers; they always—by definition—come as a pair.

“Where is she now?” I asked. Brando’s ears flicked up, like he was curious, too.

“That’s the most despicable part of this whole story,” she said.

“More despicable than a fake audition?”

“Oh yeah,” she said. And I turned off the movie.

CHAPTER 54

WINNIE

“Where the fuck is she?” Charlie said, peering into Mom’s casket, which was inexplicably empty. It was so cold I could see my breath, and my fingers were getting numb inside my jean jacket pockets. I hadn’t brought clothes for a spontaneous archaeological dig, certainly not one in the dead of night—*my bad*.

Nathan was looking at the unoccupied coffin and nodding knowingly. So I had to ask: “Why are you nodding?”

“Because it makes perfect sense” was his nonsensical reply.

“What makes sense?” Charlie asked. “That we buried an empty casket? Is that even legal?”

Charlie glared at the portly man who had taken \$5,000 of Mom’s money to put the empty velvet-lined vessel into the ground, then \$1,000 of ours to dig it back up.

“We’ll bury anything,” he said simply. “Bodies, body parts, belongings, clothes, shoes, spirits—”

“Hold on,” Charlie interrupted. “Spirits?”

“I buried three spirits this month alone: one belonging to a serviceman who never returned from combat, another of a woman who disappeared on a cruise, poor thing, and—perhaps most tragically—the nebulous spirit of a baby who died before he—or she—was conceived.”

“How can you bury a baby who doesn’t even exist yet?” Charlie asked, which I thought was a very fair question.

“Technically we buried the idea of the baby,” Weeble-Wobble answered. “The parents had been trying for years and wanted to put the painful ordeal behind them. So we buried it. It was quite a moving ceremony.”

“So you knew my mother’s casket was empty?” I asked. Not that it mattered—this wasn’t about him—but I was curious if we could have avoided this late-night creepfest by having asked one simple question: namely, “Is she in there?”

“Of course I knew it was empty!” he said proudly. “I’m not an idiot!” He

practically spat the word “idiot” right at Charlie and me. We hadn’t thought to ask if Mom was actually in her coffin when they lowered it into the ground—*how idiotic can you get?*

“You guys,” Nathan interrupted. “I think we need to get back to the bigger question here.”

“Yeah, like where the fuck is our mom?” Charlie said.

“Good God,” I said as the ramifications of Mom not being in her grave hit me like a rear-end collision. “Do you think she’s . . . I mean, is it possible she’s still . . . ?” I couldn’t get the word out. I had barely processed that she was dead; I wasn’t ready for her resurrection.

“Still alive?” Nathan said. And I just stared at him with a mouth open so wide you could have stuck a pair of socks in it.

“I don’t *think* she’s still alive,” he said, eyes all dark and beady like a werewolf. “I’m sure of it.”

The panic attack started as a thousand tiny prickles on my arms and legs. A moment later I was in an elevator shaft, falling five floors a second. I flailed my arms for something to grab on to—a tree branch, a gravestone, a family member, my sanity. Hell, I’d have even accepted a hand from the spirit of the resident unborn baby, so desperate was I for something to hold on to.

“Win?” I heard a male voice say. “Winnie?”

The voice was close by and far away, both at the same time. My vision became a pinhole. I was aware of cold, wet earth seeping into my pants, and it occurred to me I must be on the ground, but I had no idea how I’d gotten there.

“Let’s get her out of here,” I heard my brother say, and a moment later I felt hands under my armpits lifting me onto spaghetti legs.

I don’t know how I got to the car, but I remember the chirp of car doors unlocking and the sensation of smooth leather under my butt. If I could have used my mouth to form words, I would have begged for whiskey, vodka, tequila, anything malted, fermented, distilled—hell, even microbrewed—that could obliterate the torrent of fear and sadness that was cascading down on me like buckets of icy cold water.

But instead of forming words, my lips wilted open like a dying fish, and the world’s most pathetic sound came out—something between a sheep’s bleat and a sob.

I gasped for air as decades of rage and shame tore at my lungs like a furious eagle clawing at its prey. I’d thought I was finally free from the

wrecking ball of a woman who had crushed me into a useless pile of rubble. I couldn't go back to being the field mouse in her talons. Not after I had finally glimpsed my chance at freedom.

I left my body to escape the pain and gazed down at myself from the infinite starlit sky.

From my perch high up in black space, I could see everything and nothing. And that's when I realized I was an addict.

CHAPTER 55

CHARLIE

It was after two by the time I got Winnie out of her dirty, damp clothes and safely in her bed. I had thought about rifling through Mom's medicine cabinet to find a sedative, but I didn't know how much booze my sister had drunk, and I didn't want an actual death on my hands.

"Is she going to be all right?" Nathan asked as I closed her bedroom door. It had taken both of us to get her upstairs, but I had undressed her by myself—it didn't take two of us to pull down her pants, and I figured the person she used to take baths with should be the one to do it.

"Yes," I said. "We've been here before. I'll keep an eye on her."

"This is surreal," Nathan muttered, and for a moment we just stood there, staring at our feet.

"How did you know?" I asked, remembering what he'd said in the graveyard about this making "perfect sense." *What on earth is "sensical" about burying an empty coffin?*

"I didn't," Nathan said. "That's why I dragged you out there."

"But you suspected," I pressed. Nathan was silent for a long beat, like he was grappling with how much to tell me. "C'mon, Nathan. We just snuck into a graveyard in the middle of the night; I think we're beyond being cagey with each other."

"It happened too fast," he said. "I mean, your mom tells me on Saturday night that she's going to change her will, and then two days later she's dead? That can't be a coincidence."

Wait. What? "Change her will, how?"

"Cut you and Winnie out."

I felt a rush of anger. "Jesus, Nathan. Why didn't you tell me?"

"What did you want me to say?" he asked. "Hey, just a heads-up, if you want your inheritance, you'd better be nicer to your mom?"

"If she was talking about cutting us out of her will, we had a right to know!" I didn't mean to shout, but I was pissed. *Why was I just hearing about this now?*

“Well maybe you should have asked her yourself,” Nathan clapped back. “I was the one who checked on her, dined with her, balanced her checkbook, unclogged her kitchen sink. If you wanted to make sure her money was coming your way, maybe you should have been there for her.”

And there it was: the ugly truth. My chest flooded with shame. Because of course he was right. After her crazy ask, and my inability to say yes, I’d retreated into my own little life. I couldn’t face her—couldn’t face my own guilt and selfishness.

“I’m sorry,” Nathan said, pressing his fingertips into his forehead. “I’m tired.”

“No, I’m sorry,” I said. “You didn’t owe me anything.” And then something else occurred to me: “And neither did she.”

He looked up at me. His eyes were sunken and rimmed with red. And I felt bad, because I knew these last two days must have been hell for him, too.

“Go home and get some rest,” I said.

He nodded, but didn’t go. When he finally spoke, his voice was haggard and sad. “She was hurt,” he said, then corrected himself. “*Is* hurt. That’s why she’s doing this. To hurt you back.”

I could have said more, told him how Mom had hurt us, too. How asking us for something we couldn’t give her made an already difficult relationship damn near impossible. But telling him everything meant confessing to something even more shameful, and I wasn’t ready to do that. So I just nodded and told him, “It was generous of you to help out.”

“What’s our next move?” my cousin asked, even though the answer was obvious.

“We need to call the police.”

“And tell them what?”

“Everything.”

Nathan left with a promise to come back in the morning so he, Winnie, and I could go to the station all together. I got a sick feeling in my stomach when I thought about telling our sordid story—how my mother had come to hate her own children, how she’d left her money to a random stranger, how somebody had called Nathan pretending to be her nurse, how we went to the graveyard to dig up her coffin and what we saw when we did. I lay awake for the next four hours trying to understand how we had gotten here. *If my mother is still alive, where is she? How would we find her? Does she even want to be found?* There was no question we would have to look for her; she

couldn't stay undead forever . . . *could she?*

After an agonizing, sleepless night, dawn finally crept in like a silent friend. At half past seven, I picked up my phone to call my wife. I hadn't spoken to her since telling her the Stupid Lie, and I imagined she was wondering when we were going to get our windfall.

"Charlie, there you are!" she said as she picked up on the first ring. I couldn't tell if she was relieved to hear from me or annoyed I'd waited so long to call.

"Sorry I didn't call last night," I apologized. "Things were a bit . . ." *Nightmarish? Ghoulish? Insane?* "Hectic."

"I was worried about you. When are you coming home?"

"There's been a development," I said cautiously.

"What sort of development? Not trouble with the will, I hope?"

"Nothing like that," I assured her. I was deeply regretting my Stupid Lie. I had told my wife we had inherited millions of dollars. *How the hell am I going to walk that back?*

"So what, then?" she asked.

"There's a possibility . . .," I started, then said a silent prayer for courage, "that my mother is not actually dead."

The line went silent. I tried to imagine what was going through my wife's head. Some might have found it wonderful news that a loved one who had been thought dead might still be alive. But Marcela had never much liked Mom, and of course there was the money.

"Marcela? Are you there?"

"I'm here."

"There's a lot we still don't know—"

"Well, what *do* you know?"

"Her casket was empty."

"And you found this out, how?"

"We dug it up."

"I see."

"We don't know where she is, but we're pretty sure she's alive."

"So she just wants you to *think* she's dead?"

"So it seems."

"So she's coming back, then?"

"Most likely. Though we have no idea when, or where to look for her."

There was a tense beat of silence. And then: "I'm coming down."

Click. The line went dead. It was only a ninety-minute drive from Santa Barbara to LA. Marcela could get the kids packed and ready in an hour. Which meant another stressful element of this whole fucked-up equation would be upon me before lunch.

I thought about what Nathan said. He was right. I should have taken better care of Mom. She was sick and needed me. I had my reason for not saving my mom's life. And she was on her way down with our two kids.

CHAPTER 56

MARCELA

“Wake up, sweetheart. We’re going to LA,” I said to my seven-year-old as I smoothed his hair off his perfect little face. I had already packed the suitcases and loaded them into the car. I didn’t know what the hell was going on with Charlie’s deranged family, but with new-house money on the line, I’d be a damn fool if I didn’t get my ass down there and find out.

“To see Gran-gran?” Zander asked, and I had to think about how to answer that.

“Well, to stay in her house, for sure,” I offered. We hadn’t told our son that Gran-gran had died yet; we were hoping to make the news go down easier with a trip to Disneyland that Gran-gran paid for from heaven.

“She’s not going to be there?” he pressed as I handed him a clean shirt and pants.

“It’s a surprise,” I said. “Now get dressed while I make us breakfast.”

I changed Theo’s diaper, then buckled him in his high chair with a handful of Cheerios so I could make pancakes for his big brother. As I dropped two frozen breakfast sausages into a pan of sizzling oil, I shuddered to think how fucked up a person would have to be to want to carve up her children and mine them for spare parts. *I mean, seriously: What kind of batshit-crazy bitch would ask her own son to give her a kidney? And then fake her own death to punish him for refusing!*

“Zander!” I called out. “Breakfast is ready!”

As my son dug into his pancakes, I picked up my phone and texted: **I’m coming to LA.**

Charlie and I had been married for eight years, but my seven-year itch started long before we hit that ominous milestone. I’m a little embarrassed to admit that I met my true love at our wedding. I hadn’t anticipated ever acting on it—it just happened. Over and over and over again.

Please don’t, the text reply said.

Yes, Louisa was generous with me and Charlie. We never asked her to throw us a lavish wedding; she did it to satisfy her own ego. I would have

been happy with a simple ceremony on the beach in bare feet and braids in my hair. But Louisa insisted on inviting a full complement of family and friends. I largely ignored most of the guests—they were of no interest to me. Except for one.

Already packed, I texted back. The phone rang two seconds later.

“Finish up and clear your dish to the dishwasher,” I instructed my seven-year-old as I left the room to take the call.

“Hi,” I said into the phone as I stepped into the living room. From my perch on the arm of the couch I could still see Theo. I wanted privacy but I had to keep an eye out, so hushed whispers in the next room would have to do.

“Things are really tense here,” the voice on the other end of the phone said.

“So I gather.” Zander stood up and threw his half-eaten pancake in the trash. All I had to do was wipe down the table and we could be on our way.

“So Charlie told you?” the voice said.

“That my mother-in-law is a lunatic? I think I knew that.” I muted the mic and called out to Zander: “Go put on your shoes, baby doll.”

“If you’re coming for me, it’s not going to happen,” the voice said. He didn’t want me to come because he knew he couldn’t resist me. There was no sense in pretending.

“We have no idea what’s going to happen,” I said. “I think the events of the last twenty-four hours have taught us that.”

“Marcela, please,” he pleaded, “the situation is complicated enough.”

I understood why he was pushing me away. He felt sorry for Charlie. They were cousins, he had loyalty. It was sweet, actually. But it was pointless to deny what we felt for each other. It wasn’t going away. And if my mother-in-law could just stay dead, we could finally move into our inevitable future together. Charlie would get his half of the money, and I would divorce him and get half of that. Overnight millionairess. *Bing-bam-boom!*

“I’ll see you in two hours,” I said, then hung up the phone.

“Ready!” Zander said as he appeared in the living room with his Nikes on.

“Be a good boy and get in the car.” I wiped down the kitchen and plucked Theo from his high chair. As I snapped my eighteen-month-old into his car seat, my body burned with frustration. I had just rounded the last turn of this grueling marathon of a marriage, only to be shoved back to the starting line. I didn’t want to go back now—*couldn’t* go back.

“Why are you crying, Momma?” I hadn’t realized tears were running down

my face. I quickly wiped them away and kissed my son's hair.

“Just missing Daddy,” I said, even though being married to his father made me cry every damn day.

CHAPTER 57

NATHAN

Shit, shit, shit! Why does Marcela have to come?

I hadn't been in the same room as Charlie and his wife since the ski trip, which was a drunken blur for all of us. The fling was meant to be a one-off, a way to pass the time. *Charlie and the rest of the fam are having their fun on the slopes*, we'd told ourselves and each other. *Why can't we have some fun, too?* I never would have indulged if I'd thought she would develop feelings for me. And now, on a day when things were already impossibly tense, I was going to have to deal with her, too? *Shit, shit, shit!*

I'd promised Charlie I would come "first thing" so we could call the police all together. I hadn't told them the voice on my voice mail was Ashley's because I didn't want them to think I was in on it. Not that there was anything to be "in" on. Ashley hadn't done anything except fall into a trap. But still, I figured it would be best to reveal Ashley as fake Silvia in the presence of a police chaperone. Because surely Charlie and Winnie would want to know when I had figured it out and would be pissed that I hadn't told them immediately.

After telling the whole sordid tale to the police, I would have to do something equally fraught—go to Ashley's to tell her that no, she was not imminently getting \$10 million, and yes, we were a family of psychopaths. If, after hearing the truth about us, she didn't punch me in the face, that would be a miracle. I didn't believe in miracles, so I wore a dark blue shirt in anticipation of my nose exploding when she slammed her fist into it. Under normal circumstances I would have texted her to set a time to stop by. I also would have brought flowers, or coffee, or fresh-baked scones from the bakery down the street. Nathan 2.0 was a gentleman. Of course, after what Louisa had just done to this poor woman, there was no point in launching Nathan 2.0—he was dead on arrival. So no text, no flowers, no scones.

As I slugged back a cup of coffee, I grappled with whether it was time to tell Charlie the truth about having slept with his wife—not just *how* it happened, but *why*. Because I understood now. Up until recently, I'd blamed

the altitude, the whiskey, the weather, everything and everyone but myself. *I was trapped*, I'd told myself. *She got me drunk and threw herself at me*. But I was beginning to think the truth was much more repugnant. Marcela wasn't just any married woman, she was *my cousin's wife*—my cousin with the charmed existence, who got his house and car paid for without having to work a day in his life. There was a reason I hadn't skied on that ski trip: I didn't know how. When I was a kid, my parents couldn't afford lift tickets and private lessons with a fancy instructor from France. While Charlie was off skiing in Chamonix, I was in my backyard playing handball by myself. While my cousin was enjoying a tropical honeymoon (Barbados, I think?), I was slogging through law school, amassing thousands of dollars of student debt. I'm not proud that I'd let his wife seduce me, but I'd be lying if I said I couldn't understand why Louisa wanted revenge against her spoiled son. Because on some level, perhaps I'd wanted it, too.

I walked out of the condo I'd financed with no help, got in the fancy European sedan I'd leased because I couldn't afford to buy one, and pulled onto busy Manhattan Beach Boulevard. A light rain was falling, which would add another thirty minutes to my already-hellish commute. I was used to morning traffic, because, like all working stiffs, I didn't have a sugar momma or a vanity career like playing in a band. I knew it wasn't my cousin's fault that he'd won the birth lottery, but that didn't make me any less envious. I had a million excuses why I'd done what I'd done. But excuses—even valid ones—didn't make me any less of a jerk.

Maybe Louisa was a crazy-ass bitch to pull a prank that made us all question our sanity and self-worth. Or maybe she'd given us all exactly what we deserved.

CHAPTER 58

WINNIE

It wasn't the first time I'd woken up in my bra and underwear not knowing who had taken my clothes off and put me to bed, but—for the first time in my ten-year addiction—I understood it was a symptom of a much bigger problem.

I wasn't hungover—it took a lot more than half a glass of Jack to ring my bell. But though I'd slept as soundly as a hibernating grizzly, I didn't feel Irish Spring fresh, either. I had mastered the art of waking up just miserable enough to justify starting the day with a hair of the dog. Unfortunately, I'd drained my bottle before that trip to the graveyard, so I forced myself to get out of bed without one.

It was nearly ten o'clock, but the sky was still dull gray. It would have been nice to have some sunshine to coax the darkness out of my blackened heart, but a cleansing rain would have to do.

I got up and showered, then went down to the kitchen to forage for something to wipe the blur out of my vision. My head was pounding, and my throat was as dry as a burlap sack. I would have given a limb (or at least a digit?) for a stinging shot of tequila, but French roast with an ibuprofen chaser was a reasonable placeholder, and I was grateful to find a steaming pot and a full bottle of Advil waiting for me on the counter.

"Thanks for making coffee," I said to my brother as he poked his head into the kitchen to check on me. "And for the strip-down." I raised my cup in a symbolic toast.

"You OK?" he asked kindly.

"Well, I'm upright," I offered.

"You gave me a bit of a scare," he said.

"Graveyards are scary," I replied. This exchange had the potential to devolve into a Hallmark moment, so I quickly changed gears. "We going zombie hunting today?" Now that we knew Mom was alive and destined to continue fucking with our collective well-being, I figured we should try to find her before she popped out from under a rock like a demonic jack-in-the-

box and scared us all half to death.

“I think we’ll let the police do that,” my brother said.

“So we’re calling them?”

“I promised Nathan we’d wait until he got here, but yeah. I don’t think we can put it off any longer.” And then I remembered: Nathan had asked us to hold off calling the police, just in case we peered into Mom’s coffin to see that his new girlfriend had slashed her face off. Which arguably might have been preferable.

“You tell Marcela?” I asked. I wondered what his wife made of this whole debacle; I imagined she was rather frantic.

“She’s on her way.”

“Great,” I said. I didn’t mean to sound sarcastic, but it didn’t matter; my brother knew I was not his wife’s number one fan—there was no reason to try to hide it. Of course I didn’t know that Charlie had lied to her, and that her real motivation for coming had nothing to do with finding Mom. Which in retrospect was probably a good thing, given that I was out of whiskey and the anticipation of high drama might have sent me into a tailspin.

I sipped my coffee, then made a face. If French roast was the new Bloody Mary, it was going to need some sprucing up. “Is there any sugar?”

“Look in the pantry.”

I put my cup down and walked into the pantry. The “secret door” was open a crack—it didn’t close all the way anymore; we must have worn out the hinges during our countless games of hide-and-go-seek. My favorite trick was to tuck under Mom’s desk, then, when I heard Charlie coming, creep into the pantry, then run back to Mom’s study and scare my brother from behind. I still tease him about how he would scream like six-year-old Drew Barrymore in *E.T.*, poor guy.

I didn’t want my coffee to get cold—it was dull enough piping hot—so I quickly scanned the pantry shelves. Mom didn’t bake, but she must have kept some sugar lying around somewhere. My eyes combed over jars of pickled things, two kinds of rice, three kinds of jam, every kind of bean. The pantry was jam-packed, but no damn sugar. I was about to go back into the kitchen when I was struck by something odd. Not something I saw, but rather, something I didn’t see.

And I got chills all over. Because I knew where Mom was.

CHAPTER 59

CHARLIE

“I got Theo, go ahead and take Zander inside,” I told my wife as I leaned over and unclipped our eighteen-month-old from his car seat. He looked a little scared, and even though it had only been two days (*Jesus, has it only been two days?*), I had a rush of panic that he didn’t remember me.

“Hey, Theo,” I said as I picked him up. “It’s me, Daddy!”

And then he smiled, and everything was right in the world.

Rain was pitter-pattering all around us, so I put a palm over my son’s head as I shut the car door with my hip, then ran with him into the house. My mother’s house was not remotely childproof with its jagged edges and haphazard up-and-downs, and Theo was walking now, so I sat him on the parlor table to pull off my sweatshirt, which was damp from the rain.

“Daddy’s all wet!” I said brightly as I tossed the sweatshirt on a chair, then squeezed his diaper. “Oop! And so is Theo! Let’s get you changed.” As I grabbed the diaper bag and started up the stairs to my bedroom, I thought about how much our lives had changed since we’d had Theo. He wasn’t planned, and when we got the news that Marcela was pregnant with kid number two, my emotions were mixed. Zander had (finally!) started school, and we had a predictable rhythm to our lives—up at seven, school by eight, T-ball from three to four, games on Saturday, sleep in on Sunday. It was manageable. We didn’t have help, but Marcela and I took turns and each had much-needed “me” time. But a second kid on a different and constantly changing schedule meant we would both be on duty all the time. If one was shuttling, the other would have to stay with the baby—there would be no more disappearing into the bar or the band. But, despite the strain Theo’s arrival put on our schedules, I couldn’t imagine our lives without him. He was our Buddha baby—gentle and smiley with wide, curious eyes. Yes, he had turned our lives upside down, but what was so great about right side up?

I set Theo on the bed (in the middle so he wouldn’t roll off!) and pulled off his pants. His diaper had leaked a little, but we always kept a spare outfit in the diaper bag. That bag was like a small apartment, it had everything—

clothes, snacks, toys, books, baby shampoo, changing pad, socks, sippy cups, and of course, diapers. The spare clothes were on the bottom, so I had to empty the whole bag to get to them. They make diaper bags with lots of perfectly placed pockets, but my wife preferred fashion over function, so good thing I had the whole bed.

“I got this,” my wife said curtly as she walked in and saw the mess. “Go be with your sister.”

I attributed my wife’s testiness to the long drive. OK, and having just been told the millions of dollars she’d thought she was imminently getting wasn’t coming. I knew I shouldn’t have told her we got the money. But I thought, after the initial sting, she would accept that things were going back to normal and my lie would simply fade away. But turns out my wife had her own powder keg of secrets, and my Stupid Lie had lit the fuse.

I jogged down the stairs. I had drunk a cup of coffee already, but it had been a long night and I was ready for another. When I stepped into the kitchen, I saw Winnie’s cup on the counter by the pot, but there was no sign of her.

“Win?”

“In here,” she called out from inside the pantry.

“What are you doing in there?”

“I need you to help me reach something,” she said, waving me inside.

“You still looking for the sugar?” I asked as I joined her in the little storeroom.

“Nope. But I did find something else,” she said, pointing to the empty shelf in front of her.

“Where?”

“Right in front of you.”

“There’s nothing in front of me.”

She raised a knowing eyebrow at me.

And a lightning bolt shot up my spine. Because I knew that the something we were looking for—or, rather, the *someone* we were looking for—was literally right under our noses.

CHAPTER 60

MARCELA

“What are you guys doing?” I asked when I walked through the swinging door to the kitchen and saw my husband and sister-in-law huddled in the food pantry. Winnie was a nutjob, and when Charlie was around her, he acted nutty, too. It made me crazy that they did juvenile shit like dress up as bacon and eggs for Halloween and give each other gag gifts like puzzles with their faces on them and slippers that looked like bread loaves. And don’t get me started on their backyard karaoke battles, which were so loud and annoying the neighbors would often call the police. The woman was out of control, and I hated how she made my husband act like a dumb junior high schooler.

“Come in here,” Charlie whispered. I shook my head no. I hadn’t driven two hours to play silly parlor (pantry?) games. I was there for one reason, and it wasn’t to play “clown car” in my undead mother-in-law’s food closet.

“I’m not coming in there,” I said.

“Just for a second,” Charlie pleaded.

“Oh, for God’s sakes,” I said, stepping into the claustrophobic cupboard. Charlie was looking at me with wide eyes. It was kind of freaking me out. “What?”

“We think we know where Mom is.”

“Where?” And he pointed straight down. And for a second I thought he meant hell, because, after what she had put us through, that’s certainly where she belonged.

I shook my head. “What are you pointing to?”

“Under the house,” Charlie whispered. “In the bomb shelter.”

Charlie had told me his mom’s house had a bomb shelter, but I had never seen it. Frankly I found the whole idea of a hermetically sealed room underground morbid and insane. If a bomb went off in my town, I’d rather my skin fall off than be trapped in a cave with my husband and his family.

“How do you know?”

He pointed to the empty shelf. “The monitor is gone,” Charlie said.

“We think she took it so she could spy on us,” Winnie added.

“On the closed-circuit security system,” Charlie clarified. And then I remembered that this house of horrors not only had a wretched soul, it also had eyes, in just about every room.

“You think she’s watching us now?”

“That’s why we’re in the pantry,” Charlie said. “No camera.” My skin was crawling like it was covered with maggots.

“How long do you think she intends to stay down there?”

“Until we bring her back from the dead,” my unhinged sister-in-law said.

“And when do you intend to do that?” I asked.

Winnie and Charlie looked at each other. Neither said a word, but I knew what they were thinking.

“What, now?” I said, and they both nodded. “Jesus Christ,” I muttered, and then we all filed out of the pantry. Theo was sleeping upstairs, and Zander was playing on the iPad in the parlor.

“Where are you going?” my son asked, momentarily looking up from his game.

“Just checking something out in the yard,” I said. “Stay here, we’ll be right back.”

I slipped on my boots, then descended the front porch steps into the misty morning air. I followed on my husband’s heels as he crossed through the side yard, past the bird feeder, and into the back garden.

Charlie stopped at the entrance to the toolshed at the edge of the woods and looked at his sister. “Why do I feel nervous about this?”

“She wants us to find her,” Winnie said. “That’s what this whole thing was about.”

She was right, of course. My mother-in-law was a first-class narcissist. If she had truly wanted to disappear, she would have gone full Sylvia Plath and put her head in the oven. She faked her own death because she wanted her family to come looking for her. She wanted to know, *needed* to know, that her kids cared about more than just her money. Which, maybe they did, or maybe they just wanted to prove to the woman who had demeaned them their whole lives that they were smarter than she was.

Rain was spitting down from the sky, burrowing into my hair and clothes. “We’re getting all wet, Charlie,” I said, to hurry him up. He nodded, took a deep breath, then opened the door to the shed.

It was dark in there, and it took my eyes a few seconds to adjust. From over Winnie’s shoulder, I could see the jagged edges of rakes in several

different sizes jutting out from the walls. I saw a shovel, some pruning shears, a stack of empty flowerpots. A rusty wheelbarrow sat in the corner next to two ninety-six-pound bags of cement. It seemed an unremarkable little toolshed, like any other you might get at Home Depot. Until Charlie leaned down to roll back the rubber mat and its unique feature was revealed.

The door on the floor was rectangular, about four feet long and three feet wide. There was a thick rope handle on one end that sat in a little cutout made to accommodate it. Charlie extracted the rope from its nook, then pulled.

The door wafted open on simple metal hinges. Charlie looked a little queasy as he stared down into the abyss, and for a second I thought he might faint.

“I’ll go,” Winnie said. And Charlie shook off her offer.

“No, it’s OK.”

“Then let’s both go.”

Charlie looked at me, all drama and trepidation, like he was doing something dangerous. And I guess he was. I smiled at him for what I knew would be the last time, then watched him as he descended into the darkness. His coheir bid me adieu with a nod, then followed her brother down the stairs.

It’s not that I didn’t love my husband. He had given me two beautiful children, and I would always be grateful to him for that. But I belonged with someone else. It sounds cliché, but I knew Nathan was “the one” the moment I saw him, when I was literally in the process of marrying someone else. I had just said “I do” and kissed my new husband when our eyes met and a bomb went off in my heart. The gods had tricked me into marrying my true love’s cousin, which—as long as Charlie was alive—would always make me forbidden fruit.

I had tried to forget Nathan, but he kept popping up at things—Thanksgiving at his parents’ house, a trip to San Diego, Charlie’s thirtieth birthday beach luau in Malibu. By the time the ski trip rolled around, I’d had enough waiting. I moved into my destiny.

I knew it was right from the moment his sugar lips touched mine. Our bodies fit together like tongue and groove. We were two lost pieces of a perfect puzzle. I understood why he was pushing me away—he had no choice. The family would never forgive him if he stole me away from Charlie. And of course there was the money. As Charlie’s wife I was destined to get a sizable share, but only if I stayed married to him until the old bat

kicked the bucket. I understood why Nathan wanted to wait. Just like I knew he would understand why I had to seize the chance to put that wait to an end.

With both Winnie and Charlie gone, I would get everything. Winnie didn't have kids, so I would be the only surviving heir. I could finally walk into the life I deserved with the man who deserved me.

I couldn't lift those hundred-pound bags of cement, but that's what the wheelbarrow was for. It was like it had been placed there just for this moment and for me. All I had to do was stand them up and tip them in, then tilt the wheelbarrow down so they could slide out.

I grabbed the trapdoor handle with both hands.

And with one swift tug, I closed it.

CHAPTER 61

NATHAN

Rain battered my windshield as I turned into Louisa's driveway. My heart sank when I saw Marcela's Jeep parked in front of the garage. *How the hell did she beat me here?* I didn't think she would try to corner me and stick her hands down my pants, but I also hadn't thought she would show up at my apartment wearing nothing but red lipstick and a raincoat, so I braced myself for whatever bad behavior was coming my way—not knowing it would be orders of magnitude worse than anything I could have imagined.

I parked my car next to hers, then shielded my face against the rain as I jogged to the front door and let myself in.

"Hello?" I called out, shaking the wet off my hands and hair.

"Hello, Nathan."

I looked up to see Marcela on the second-story landing. I did not want to be alone with her, so I immediately asked, "Where is everybody?"

"Theo is sleeping," she said as she started down the stairs. "And Zander's in the matrix." She pantomimed playing on an iPad, then laughed at her own joke.

"What about Charlie and Winnie?" I said, and she just shrugged. She was standing on the bottom stair now, boobs on full display in a tight, low-cut V-neck sweater with a push-up bra underneath. She was barefoot with toenails painted bright pink, and her Lycra leggings were shiny and low cut to reveal a tanned midriff and belly button pierced with a sparkly red ruby.

"I thought they were with you," she said, and I shook my head.

"No, they asked me to come here."

I took out my phone and group texted: **Where r u guys?** And in less than a second—

Ding. A phone pinged in the kitchen.

"Wait, are they here?" I asked, turning my back on her before she could answer. I got to the kitchen to find Winnie's phone next to a nearly full pot of coffee, which smelled fresh and was still steaming hot.

"They left a while ago," Marcela said, moving in close to me. "We're all

alone.” I took a step back away from her.

“How long ago?”

“I don’t know, I was upstairs with the boys,” she said. A strand of hair fell in front of her eye, and she swirled it around her finger, then tucked it behind her ear. I knew she was trying to flirt with me, but the gesture made me sick.

“I really need to talk to them.” I tried to move past her, but she was blocking my way. “Marcela, please, let me pass.”

“You don’t have to pretend you don’t want me,” Marcela said, reaching for my belt buckle with both hands. “There’s no one here to see.”

I grabbed her wrists and stiff-armed her away from me. But she took the gesture not as a rebuke, but as an invitation.

“Oh, you want to play rough, do you?”

She pressed forward into me, going up on tippy-toes to try to bite my chin.

“Marcela! Stop it! What’s gotten into you?”

“You have,” she purred. “Don’t you remember? As I recall you quite liked it.”

“I’m going to find Charlie,” I said, pushing her aside. *Where the hell are my cousins?*

I stepped around her, then walked out onto the porch and dialed Charlie’s number. It went straight to voice mail. *WTF?*

“I told you they left,” Marcela said, appearing in the doorway. I felt a surge of irritation. They had said they would wait for me before going to the police. Now I was going to have to tell my humiliating account of how Louisa had played me like a fiddle on my own.

“Look, I’m sorry I led you on,” I said. “What I did was wrong. But we have to move past it.”

“No, we don’t,” she said. “We can move into it. We’re free now.”

She stepped out onto the porch and reached for me with an eager manicured hand. I backed away.

“What do you mean, ‘free’?”

“They’re with their mother now. Where they belong.” She said it so calmly, so matter-of-factly, that for a second I thought I was the crazy one.

“Marcela, you’re confusing me,” I said. “I don’t know what that means.”

“It means we can be together now, like we talked about.” We had never talked about being together, not once, not ever. Our rendezvous were never about talking.

“But we don’t know where their mother is,” I backtracked. “That’s why

I'm here. To help figure that out."

"Well, you're not going to find her, or either of her children," she said curtly. "I need to check on the boys. When you're ready to thank me, I'll be upstairs."

She turned to go. I grabbed her arm.

"Marcela, what have you done?" My heart was beating in my ears. She looked down at my hand squeezing her wrist, so I eased my grip but didn't let go.

"Don't you get it? We get everything now. It's going to be just like we always fantasized about." Her voice was calm and soothing, like a kindergarten teacher talking to a five-year-old.

"I'm calling the police." And she smiled like she wanted to laugh.

"To tell them what? That you snuck into a graveyard to steal your aunt's dead body?"

"What? No one stole her body!"

"So you say." She popped her wrist from my grasp and went inside. The rain had slowed to a gentle patter, and I got a chill as I realized I'd just landed in the eye of the storm.

CHAPTER 62

JORDAN

It was nearly 1:00 a.m. by the time I'd gone to bed, and I woke up tired. Ashley's story about how that awful old woman had tricked her into recording that message was infuriating, and I don't sleep well when I'm mad. I've heard stories about people faking their own deaths for insurance money, or to avoid prosecution for a crime, but to terrorize their own children? *What a psychopath!*

I didn't have any morning appointments, but I still woke up at seven, so I went for a quick run to clear my brain fog—just a few miles around the neighborhood. It was raining, but only lightly, and the game of avoiding puddles helped distract me from my inner turmoil. I didn't want to abandon Ashley, but more than that, I didn't want to stick around to watch her hook up with someone else. I would always care about her, but maybe there was a reason we'd never gotten together. I mean, if we were meant to be, wouldn't seven years have been enough time to figure that out?

I toweled off in the front hall, then knelt by the closet to finish my sorting. Brando trotted over toward me and sniffed the box of baseballs that were currently in the keep pile.

"I know, I know, I should just get rid of them," I said as I scratched his ears. "What can I say? I'm sentimental." He cocked his head like he understood.

"Who are you talking to?" Ashley said as she came out of her room dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, then padded to the kitchen to make her morning coffee.

"I'm going to miss this little guy," I said, by way of an answer.

"You're moving to Santa Monica, not Siberia," she joked. If she was freaked out by the mess, she didn't show it, but she was an actress, so I never presumed to know how she felt. It suddenly occurred to me that maybe I was dodging a bullet by not marrying someone who was a master at pretending. I don't love to talk about my feelings, but actions speak louder than words. Of course acting on your feelings is not always a great strategy (see: my ill-fated

proposal), but at least you always know where you stand with me.

I saw Ashley eyeing my piles, so I reassured her. “Don’t worry, I’m going to clean all this up.”

“Do you need help?” she offered.

“Nah, I’m good.”

Then, to make good on my promise, I picked up a bag of old ski gear (battered helmet, stinky neck gaiters, broken goggles) and started for the front door. I didn’t think to be careful about the dog because he had never bolted before. But it was apparently a week of many firsts, because as soon as I opened the door, he shot through it like a rock from a slingshot.

“Brando!” I shouted.

Ashley jumped up from the kitchen table. “Oh my God, Brando!”

“Sorry!” I put the bag down and took off after him. His furry tail was a blur as he careened down the sidewalk. He was fast for a little guy, and if I hadn’t been dressed for running, there was no way I could have kept him in my sights.

“Brando, come!” I shouted, but he was like a horse running for the barn. He banked right, onto the steep cul-de-sac at the end of my block, so I turned on the jets and followed him around the corner.

Raindrops were blurring my vision as I combed the street for a glimpse of his furry backside. He must have ducked into someone’s yard, because he was nowhere to be seen. Just as I was about to backtrack toward home, Ashley pulled up beside me in her MINI Cooper.

“I know where he is,” she said. “Get in.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said as I climbed into the passenger seat. “I’ve never seen him do that—I didn’t think to be careful.”

“Don’t apologize,” Ashley said. “This was completely out of character; I don’t know what’s gotten into him.”

We reached the end of the block, and Ashley turned into a rocky driveway enshrouded with trees and tangled brush. Loose gravel popped beneath our tires as we wound past stuffy old lampposts that dotted the perimeter like cast-iron sentries.

“Is this that casting director’s house?” I guessed. I remembered her describing it as “creepy,” and this certainly fit the bill.

“Yep.”

We rounded a gentle curve, and the house appeared like an apparition in the mist, all jagged edges and cartoonish turrets. I squinted through the fog,

and there, to my great relief, was Brando, feasting on birdseed that had fallen from the bird feeder.

“I can’t believe he dragged us all the way here for a few crumbs of birdseed,” I muttered, not grasping that dogs sometimes just know things, like when someone is in trouble, or that death is in the air.

“Maybe I should start adding birdseed to his kibble,” Ashley joked as she pulled over and turned off the ignition.

I unclipped my seat belt. “I’ll get him.”

Cool rain was spitting down from the dull, gray sky as I stepped out onto the drive. I was so focused on Brando I almost didn’t see the man coming down the front porch stairs. I tried not to act jealous when I recognized him.

“Hey,” I said, with a little wave.

“Hey,” the man who stole Ashley’s heart said as our eyes met.

“Just going to collect the dog.” I pointed, and the man nodded. Nathan, I remembered. *His name is Nathan.* I didn’t know if I should hate him for stealing Ashley away from me or be grateful to him for saving me from a doomed marriage. Because of course people can’t be stolen. And wasn’t it better to find out she didn’t want to be my wife before walking down the aisle with her?

“Whatcha doin’?” I asked Brando as I bent over to scoop him up. He answered with a bark, and I shook a finger at him. “You scared us.”

I didn’t have a leash, so I carried him like a football back toward where Ashley was standing with her hookup. I tried to read their body language. His hands were jammed in his pockets, she was keeping her distance. *But maybe that’s just because of me?*

“I can take Brando home if you want to hang out,” I offered, because it seemed like the generous thing to do.

But before she could answer, I heard something that stopped me in my tracks: a muffled pop that sounded like a giant twig breaking. Brando’s ears perked up like he’d heard it, too.

“Did you hear that?” I asked.

“Hear what?” Ashley asked.

“That popping sound.”

Pop! Pop! Pop! There it was again. Like popcorn popping beneath our feet. Brando jumped out of my arms and started howling like a wolf.

I looked at Ashley. Her eyes bulged with terror. Because she’d heard that sound the first time she came here and knew what it was.

CHAPTER 63

WINNIE

I was not supposed to know about the fallout shelter.

I discovered it by accident. I was little, about eight or nine, when my parents got an overnight babysitter to go on a “special outing.” I didn’t understand that special outings for parents with young kids were about sex. Even as an adult I have trouble believing my parents actually “did it,” even though I know full well how I came to be.

My parents bid us good night, and I went up to my room to play in my pillow fort. I had built it up against the window because I could use the windowsill as a platform for my roof. I was adjusting the pile of books holding my blanket-roof in place when I saw Dad’s car roll out of the driveway. I remember seeing his brake lights blinking on and off as the car disappeared into the darkness as they always did when he navigated that narrow drive in the dark. I watched him go, then went to get more books (the blanket was slipping!). As I spread the Black Stallion series across my windowsill, something weird happened. My parents came back. Not in the car, but on foot. *Did something happen to their car?*

At first I didn’t know the tiny slivers of light bouncing up the driveway were flashlights. But then they passed right under my window, and I saw my mom’s laughing face in a beam of light reflecting off the ground. I could tell from the way they huddled together that this mission was supposed to be a secret, so I proudly did my part in keeping it. Well, for a few days, at least.

My brother and I were playing Egyptian war in my pillow fort when I finally told Charlie how I’d seen Mom and Dad sneak into the toolshed and then sat in the library for hours (until the babysitter found me and made me go to bed), waiting in vain for them to come out.

Being the firstborn and foolhardier child, Charlie was determined to solve the mystery. I tagged along that brisk Sunday morning as he ventured into the shed to discover what magic had lured them there. After pressing on walls and pulling on rakes and spades and shovels, he finally thought to look under the rubber mat. I had just read *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, so

when we saw that door in the floor, I thought we had found the real live passage to Narnia. I was gravely disappointed to discover that the cold concrete staircase led to a boring little apartment, with no toys, candy, or magical creatures inside. We knew from the way Mom and Dad had snuck in that we weren't supposed to know about their secret hideaway, so we made a pinkie promise never to speak of it again. The whole idea that our house had a bomb shelter gave me the heebie-jeebies, and I was all too happy to forget it existed.

As I followed Charlie down the claustrophobic stairway, just as I'd done nearly two decades earlier, I marveled at how seeing that empty shelf had poked open my memory bank. I flashed to my nine-year-old self, sitting on the pantry counter, thinking we were just like the Jetsons with their space-age TV-phones. Sometimes Charlie and I used our closed-circuit TV system to play astronaut and comms director. "This is Major Tom to ground control," Charlie would say into his walkie-talkie from RadioShack. And I would find him on one of the cameras and guide his spaceship back to earth: "This is your comms director, come on in." But those were silly children's games. The stakes of today's outing were way higher than any fake earth landing, and I cursed myself that I was embarking on it sober.

As Charlie stepped into the cinder block living room, I paused on the stairs to take it in—the L-shaped couch, the midcentury modern pillar lamps, the shiny silver countertops.

"Mom?" Charlie called out. "Are you here?"

No answer. My heart was a metronome beating presto, loud and fast in the backs of my ears.

"Maybe in the bedroom?" I suggested.

But Charlie was frozen in his tracks. "Why isn't she answering?"

"I don't know, maybe because she hates us?" The anticipation was killing me, so I pushed past him and crossed through the living room, past the cold metal bookcase to the bedroom door. Of course it was closed, but I swallowed my trepidation and turned the knob. And immediately regretted it. "Oh God."

The expression on my dad's face when he died was peaceful. He'd looked a little pale when I'd gazed upon his motionless body from the doorway, but not grotesque. Except for the tiny swath of tongue that lilted out onto his violet-blue lower lip, he'd looked pretty normal. His head was on the pillow, his eyes were closed, his hands were palms up by his sides. He was, quite

appropriately, in what yogis call Savasana, or corpse pose. By all appearances he had died quite peacefully.

The expression on Mom's dead face was something entirely different. It was not my dad's *Sleeping Beauty*—it was Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. Mom's eyes and mouth were open as wide as manholes, and her desperate fingers were clawing at her throat like ice axes stabbing at a frozen waterfall. I knew from my AP chemistry class that—unlike carbon *monoxide* poisoning, which can be achieved by sucking on a tailpipe—death by carbon *dioxide* can be quite painful. What I didn't know was that, barring a miracle, Charlie and I were doomed to discover whether death by CO₂ would be painful for us, too.

“No, no, no, no,” Charlie wailed, then choked on a sob as he fell to his knees. It was his crying, not the sight of Mom, that made me cry, because his grief was the only thing that felt real to me in that surreal moment. I don't know how long we huddled in the doorway like that—him on his knees, and me steadying myself against the doorjamb—but I suddenly felt the weight of the earth bearing down on us.

“Get up, Charlie,” I said, yanking on his shirt. “We have to get out of here.”

He was still keening, so I pulled him up by his armpits and pushed him toward the stairs like a human tugboat.

“That's it,” I soothed as I pushed. “Keep walking.”

I was behind him, so I couldn't see the reason he was shaking his head, that it wasn't from disbelief and sadness.

“We're going to get out of here and call the police,” I said, pretending to be calm. And maybe on some level I did feel calm, because I knew the gargoyle that had lived on my shoulder my whole life had been permanently muzzled, and the steady stream of vitriol she spewed had finally been tamped.

“We can't,” he stammered.

“Yes, we can.”

“No, we can't,” Charlie cried. “The door is closed!”

I craned my neck to look. I had deliberately, without a doubt, and with great fanfare, left the door to our underground hell open. Growing up with a mother who always had a script that was more important than I was had made me come to revile closed doors. A closed door telegraphed *you're a nuisance, go away, leave me alone*. So now I always left them open. *Always*. And so,

like Charlie, I was shocked to see not rain and sky, but a cruel, dull slab blocking our way out.

I forced myself not to panic. “There’s a lever, one sec,” I said as I scooted past him and pulled on the mechanism. But it didn’t open.

I raised my hands over my head and pushed on the door. It still didn’t budge.

“Shit!”

“Let me try.”

My brother squeezed in next to me. He tugged on the lever, pushed on the door, and I pushed along with him, and it was entirely, exhaustingly, maddeningly futile.

“What the fuck?”

I suddenly flashed to Schrödinger’s cat, the famous thought experiment we’d studied in my sophomore philosophy class. Stuck down here, in this hermetically sealed box, to the outside world, we were both alive and dead. Alive because we were, at least for the moment, still breathing and our hearts still beating. Dead, because in a matter of minutes, the toxic gas that had killed Mom was going to kill us, too.

CHAPTER 64

CHARLIE

At first I thought everything was going to be fine. Being trapped in a five-hundred-square-foot box with a dead body made me a little anxious, but my wife knew we were down there; I figured it was only a matter of time before she came to look for us. But when five minutes turned into ten turned into twenty, the frightful reality emerged: that door hadn't closed by accident, my wife wasn't coming to save us, and I had no one to blame for my sister's and my imminent death but myself and my Stupid Lie.

When it became clear we couldn't go out the same way we came in, Winnie and I split up to search the bunker for another way out. Our hermetically sealed hideaway was fifteen feet underground, which meant there were no fire exits, no back doors, no windows. There was a vent, but I could barely fit my arm in there, never mind my whole body. I couldn't even send up a smoke signal, because, as we were about to find out the hard way, that vent had a baseball stuck in it—a complication that was neither inconsequential nor surmountable. This place was as secure as a bank vault. Which was great if there were hostile armies overhead, but catastrophic if the hostile party who had lured you in intended for you to never come out.

Mom had set the closed-circuit TV monitor—the only apparent connection to the outside world—on the kitchen counter. I wasn't a tech guy, but I ascertained it was getting a live feed through the cable that ran into the bunker through a rigid copper pipe. There was no ethernet cable, no router, no Wi-Fi, and no cell service down there. And even if there were, it wouldn't have mattered; my cell phone was on my bedside table two stories above my head.

I stared at the monitor to see what was happening inside Mom's house. The rooms were arranged in a four-by-four grid. I could see the living room, dining room, library, and study in one grid, and the kitchen, music room, parlor, and front hall in the other. There were also two four-by-four grids of the outside: four cameras in the back, showing various angles of the garden, woods, and toolshed, and four in the front showing the driveway, side yard,

and front porch.

“There’s no way out of here,” Winnie said as she emerged from the bedroom.

“I know,” I said glumly. “That’s kind of the whole point of this place.”

“Why hasn’t Marcela come to check on us?”

I didn’t know how to answer that, so I just shook my head like I had no idea. But Winnie knew me too well.

“What’s going on, Charlie?” And I owed it to her to tell her the ugly truth.

“I told her we got the money.”

She looked at me blankly. “And?”

“She thinks with all of us dead, she’s going to be rich.” And her confusion turned to disbelief.

“Are you saying . . .” She stopped. Because she couldn’t bring herself to say it.

So I said it for her. “That she locked us down here? Yes.”

Winnie shook her head. “No way, no fucking way.”

“I told you we were having problems—”

“A lot of married couples have problems—they don’t try to murder each other!”

“A lot of married couples don’t think their husband and his sister just got ten million dollars.”

“She wouldn’t do that,” Winnie insisted. “She’s your wife, the mother of your kids.” All that was true, but there was another layer to this that Winnie didn’t know. So I told her.

“She’s having an affair,” I said. I had known my wife was cheating on me ever since she came back from the house of an “overwhelmed new-mom friend” freshly showered and with a botched cover story. My wife hadn’t bothered to notice that I was Facebook friends with that “overwhelmed” new mom and knew not only was she not overwhelmed, she had spent the day at Disneyland.

“OK, sorry, and that sucks, but it still doesn’t mean she would try to kill us.” I didn’t want to believe it, either, but that door was closed, and we hadn’t closed it.

“With the three of us dead,” I reasoned, “she gets her money and a new man. Someone better than me.” I felt like a total dick that I’d let myself believe I could ride my mother’s money to some picture-perfect life—playing in a band, surfing every morning, married to the hottest girl in town. *What*

had I done to deserve any of that? One might argue that being left to rot alongside the mother who only loved me as conditionally as I'd loved her was a fitting end for both Mom and me.

"I'm so sorry, Win." I could accept my tragic fate, but there was no accepting that I was dragging my sister down with me.

"Oh, Charlie," my sister said, pulling me into a hug I didn't deserve. "Before you go thinking you're the only sorry-ass piece of shit here, I have a confession, too."

I knew what her confession was, but I wanted her to say it. And, ten years into her addiction, with death's gnarled hand reaching out to grab her, she finally did.

"I don't imagine it's going to be news to you," she said, "but I'm an alcoholic."

And there it was—her big secret, which had been hiding in plain sight for the better part of a decade.

"Not news," I said gently. "But I'm proud of you for owning it."

"That's why I couldn't be Mom's donor," she said. "My organs were marinating in eighty-proof sauce."

I knew how much courage it had taken for her to say that, so I decided to show a little courage, too.

"I did the tests," I confessed. And her eyes got wide with surprise.

"And?"

"Ninety-eight percent match."

"Oh, shit."

"But Marcela . . ." I didn't want to tell her how we'd fought for three days, that she'd accused Mom of being a monster, and me of being a weak-ass momma's boy. It was just too humiliating. But Winnie was way ahead of me.

"She wouldn't let you."

And I nodded. Because of course my wife wouldn't want to prolong my mother's life when her impending death was her main reason for marrying me.

I thought back to the day Mom had summoned Winnie and me to inform us that she needed a kidney, two years into her incurable illness. It was right before her birthday. "I don't want you to buy me anything this year," she'd said. "You can give me something you already have."

I'll never forget how Winnie and I huddled in the driveway that night, afraid to talk inside the house because we knew the walls had eyes. "There's

no way I'm letting you do this," I'd told my sister. "You're way too young." And she'd responded in kind. "You have a new baby, it's too risky," she'd said. Neither of us let on that we knew the other had a different insurmountable impediment to doing the surgery: a drinking problem, a wife problem. And so we never talked about it. I don't know if not talking about Mom's impossible ask made it difficult to talk about anything else, but our relationship definitely chilled after that.

"Remember the time we got drunk on champagne at Mom's Academy Awards party?" Winnie asked, and I smiled a little.

"You threw up in the fountain."

"You'd think I'd have learned my lesson." And I thought about the woman I married.

"I guess we both sought out companions who would bring us pain," I said. "Because, after growing up with Mom, that's what we thought we deserved."

"What a legacy," Winnie said. "*Inspired all who loved her to self-destruct.* Too bad we can't put it on her tombstone."

Winnie sighed and leaned back in her chair. And right behind her head, something moved on the monitor. I leaned in for a better look.

"Someone's here!" I pointed to the driveway camera, where a car had just appeared.

"It's Nathan!"

"Did you ever tell him about this place?" I asked, knowing it was unlikely but still daring to hope.

"We pinkie promised," she reminded me. And my heart swelled with love.

"We are not going to die here today," I said. My sister and I had been to hell and back together—I refused to accept that our journey was going to end like this.

"From your lips," she said, looking up toward God. We had never been churchgoing people, but I think my sister and I both believed, if not in an all-powerful God, at least in the existence of karma. Our mother dying while trying to torment us certainly seemed to corroborate the notion.

We watched as Nathan jogged up the front steps and disappeared into the house. I toggled to the interior grid showing the parlor and front hall. He was standing just inside the doorway now. A moment later, Marcela appeared on the stairs. They exchanged a few words. Then Nathan took out his phone, typed something, and headed for the kitchen.

"Go to the kitchen camera!"

I toggled to the next screen to see Nathan picking up Winnie's phone off the counter.

"That's my phone!" Winnie said. "He must have texted me and heard it go off!"

Marcela appeared in the kitchen. Nathan was looking at her while waving Winnie's phone.

"Why is he waving my phone?" Winnie asked. "Do you think he's asking her where we are?" She sounded hopeful. And I wanted to be hopeful, too. But that door hadn't closed by itself.

Marcela moved in close to him. And then she reached for him. Not for his hand to reassure or comfort. For his belt buckle.

"What the fuck?" Winnie said, then looked at me. And I didn't have to offer an explanation, because what was happening was painfully obvious.

"Oh my God. Charlie, I'm so sorry."

In retrospect I'm not sure what was more shocking: that my wife was sleeping with my cousin, or that I hadn't realized it until just now.

I should have known something was off after that Mammoth trip. She hadn't wanted to go—"Why would I want to go on a ski vacation when I don't even ski?" she'd whined. "There will be nothing for me to do there!" But I told her it was family, we weren't blowing it off, and that she would have to, I think the words I used were, "suck it up." Winnie had gone to great lengths to plan that trip, and we hadn't done one since we were teenagers. My sister hoped, as I did, that it would revive the connection between our families—and apparently it had, but in the worst way possible.

Marcela had sulked the entire six-hour drive from Santa Barbara to the Sierras. She wanted to make it "crystal clear" that just because she wasn't skiing didn't mean there would be a hot meal on the table for the rest of us at the end of the day. She hated the cold, she'd said. She loathed my "drunk-ass" sister, she'd said. My uncle Roy was "the most boring person on the planet," she'd said.

As soon as we got to the ski house she went straight to our room and didn't come out. I made excuses for her: she didn't feel well, she was carsick, she needed to rest. But the next evening, after spending the whole day in the condo with Nathan, she was a changed woman. Her cheeks were rosy as she danced around the kitchen making peppermint hot chocolate for us when we came in from the cold. Anyone with half a brain could have figured out what had happened. But we believe what we want to believe, and I didn't want to

believe that.

As I watched them tussle—Marcela groping at Nathan, Nathan pushing her away—my rage gave way to sadness. “She’s always been a woman who takes what she wants,” I conceded. “And I’ve known for a while what she wants isn’t me.” It was a relief to finally say it out loud.

Winnie grabbed my hand and squeezed it, and I suddenly wondered if she’d suspected, too. *Is that why my sister and I had fallen out of touch? Because it was easier to not talk at all than be together and not talk about that?*

“Things will be better now,” Winnie said, and I knew she meant between us. And I felt a bud of happiness poke through my sorrow. As I turned my head to meet my sister’s consoling gaze, the room suddenly started to spin. I thought it was a panic attack, because things wouldn’t be better if we couldn’t get out of here. But turns out carbon dioxide poisoning can also make you dizzy, right before it kills you.

“They’re going outside,” I heard a voice say, and I looked at Winnie, because it must have been her, there was no one else there. “Charlie, are you OK?”

The room banked like a Tilt-A-Whirl, and a second later I could feel cool, hard linoleum pressing up against my cheek.

“Charlie!”

She bent over me, and I looked up into the sweet face of my childhood best friend: the comms director to my astronaut, the hide to my seek. Then, right behind her head, I saw the glint of metal. At first I didn’t know what that shiny silver object holstered to the underside of the kitchen counter was. And then I remembered this was my mom’s secret hideaway. And there was one thing she never left home without.

“Gun,” I said, raising one hand to point.

And that’s the last thing I remember.

CHAPTER 65

MARCELA

“We’re leaving,” I told my son. “Pack your things.”

“I never unpacked,” Zander said, looking up from his iPad.

“Right.” I peeked at my watch. We had only been here an hour—and a productive hour at that. “Then go put your things in the car.”

“Aren’t we going to see Gran-gran?”

“Not today.”

I shooed him out of the room, and he obediently grabbed his suitcase and marched down the stairs. Theo was sleeping and I hated to wake him, but the sooner we got out of here the better. Nathan obviously wasn’t ready to celebrate our pending union, but he would come around once the \$10 million landed in my bank account. What we had was inevitable, no need to chase it. I couldn’t fault him for needing some time to get his bearings. And I suppose it would be prudent to wait a few weeks to come out publicly as a couple so as not to raise any eyebrows. Not that anyone would miss the miserable old troll and her sad-sack son and alcoholic daughter. In time Nathan would realize, as I had already, that they were all better off dead.

As for my children, Theo would never remember his real father, and I had no doubt Zander would come to love Nathan like the (not-deadbeat) dad he never had. His (new!) house wouldn’t be filled with the sounds of Mommy and Daddy fighting all day every day, and what kid didn’t want his own room? I wouldn’t have done what I’d done if I hadn’t been certain we’d all be better off. And it was so incredibly easy—one might say the gods had willed it.

I threw the two dresses I’d hung in the closet back in my suitcase and zipped it up. I was not a sentimental person, but I took a moment to say goodbye to Charlie’s old room, which was filled with trinkets from his charmed childhood—participation trophies from various sports leagues (soccer, hockey, tennis, baseball), bobbleheads from Dodgers games, a fancy electric guitar that he’d probably never learned to play. I felt a swell of satisfaction as I thought about our children—*my* children—finally getting to

do everything their dad had. Zander could get a hitting coach and join a premier Little League club; Theo could get a bilingual nanny and become fluent in two languages. A glorious life awaited us, all thanks to my courage to reach for that brass ring when fate put it within my grasp.

I lifted Theo out of the Pack 'n Play and tucked his sleeping head under my chin. Mercifully, he didn't wake up, and I took that as an omen of good things to come. I grabbed my suitcase with my free hand, then crossed into the hall. As I started down the stairs of Louisa's stuffy old crib for the last time, I felt relief that I'd never have to look at that garish lattice wallpaper, smell the musty stink of those heavy velvet drapes, cook in that fussy old kitchen ever again. My suitcase was heavy—and Theo was almost thirty pounds now!—but the thought of our bright future made me feel Wonder Woman strong, and I got to the bottom of the stairs without breaking a sweat.

Zander was waiting by the car. I waved to him from the front porch—*coming!*—then started down the stairs.

At first I thought the sharp pop was my imagination. I often conjured the sweet sound of Zander's bat connecting with a fastball when I fantasized about his future—*oh, the home runs he would hit!* But then I heard it again.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

I paused on the front porch steps. Nathan was standing with a man and a woman in the side yard. Their little dog was barking and jumping up and down.

"Brando, stop it," the skinny dark-haired woman standing next to Nathan said, but the dog just kept on barking.

Theo stirred, then opened his eyes. A moment later he was shrieking, and three sets of eyes were upon me.

"Sorry," the skinny woman said, then bent down to reprimand the dog. "Brando, stop it!"

"Where are Winnie and Charlie?" Nathan called to me, and I shifted my gaze to meet his. This was my last chance to abort the plan. I could have played the clueless, overwrought wife—"You mean they didn't come out of the bomb shelter yet?" I could have pretended I didn't know how those bags of cement wound up on the trapdoor—I may have felt like Wonder Woman a few moments ago, but I certainly didn't look like her. I could have helped them push those bags off the door, then cried with relief to see my husband come out alive. But I was on the final lap of the marathon I'd been running for eight years. I was not going to quit now.

“I told you, I don’t know,” I said, then continued down the front porch steps. Theo’s shrieks had subsided to a dull whine, and I covered his head with my hand and snugged him to my chest. The presence of a dog barking and running in circles was unsettling, but he was an oversize lapdog, not a bloodhound. If he had the ability to sniff out my husband and his sister, I was pretty sure he would have done it by now.

I was almost to my car when the dog stopped barking. I thought I was home free. But it wasn’t the dog who I should have been worried about. Because somebody else had been spying on us and was about to ruin everything.

CHAPTER 66

NATHAN

“Where are Charlie and Winnie?” I called out to Marcela, who was walking toward her car.

“I don’t know,” she shouted without looking at me, and I knew it was a lie. She had done something, she’d all but confessed it. I was ready to call the police to force the issue when a little voice spoke out.

“They went in the shed.” I looked at Zander to see him pointing toward the far side of the garden.

“The toolshed?” I asked. Zander nodded, and I took off running.

The wooden door to the shed was secured by a metal latch. I flipped it open, stepped inside, and surveyed the cluttered interior. Rakes, hoes, shovels, and gardening shears hung on the walls. I saw an overturned wheelbarrow, some empty pots, two full bags of powdered cement. But no Winnie and Charlie.

“The kid must be confused,” Ashley’s roommate said, stepping in behind me. And for a second I thought he was right. This place could barely hold the two of us; there was no way Charlie and Winnie could be in here, too.

I was about to run back to ask Zander about what he’d seen when—

Bang! A firecracker went off between my ears. White powder plumed into the air like a mushroom cloud, as if one of those sacks of cement had been hit by lightning.

“What the fuck?” I murmured. As I stood there like a deer in a snowstorm, Ashley charged into the shed and pointed at the ground.

“Down there!” she shouted.

“Down where?”

“Under the bags!” She pointed at the sacks of cement. A moment later, the roommate was gripping one of them with both hands.

“Help me move this!”

I scrambled over to where he was standing and grabbed the bag.

“One, two, three!” he shouted, and we both pulled while Ashley pushed. Chalky white powder dusted our arms and shoes as we dragged the heavy

sack of cement toward the door.

“The other one,” he commanded. “One, two, three!” We pulled the second bag toward the entrance of the shed, and suddenly we were staring at a rubber mat with a hole the size of a bullet in it.

“Is that a . . . bullet hole?” the roommate asked. But before I could answer, Ashley fell to her knees and yanked back the mat, revealing the rectangular outline of what looked like a door.

“Root cellar?” I guessed. Cellars were rare in Los Angeles, given how earthquake prone the city was. *But what else could it be?*

“How do you open it?” Ashley asked, pawing at the edges. I crouched down beside her. Powdered cement flew up into my eyes as I broomed the surface with frantic hands.

“Got it!” I shouted as my fingers found the rope handle, snugged inside its carved-out pocket. “Stand back!”

I leaned on my heels and pulled the rope. The door flew open. The roommate caught me as I stumbled backward into him. As I scrambled to my feet, I heard a voice that sent a waterfall of relief cascading down my spine.

“Nathan?”

“Winnie!”

She was still holding the gun as she stumbled up the stairs. Her face was a torrent of tears and grief. “Oh, Nathan!”

“Win, are you OK?”

“Charlie’s not breathing,” she blurted between her sobs.

“Call 9-1-1,” the roommate ordered Ashley. Then, to Winnie: “Let me by, I’m a doctor.”

I eased Winnie out of the way so Ashley’s doctor roommate could get by.

“My mom’s down there, too,” Winnie said.

“Oh my God, Louisa!” I gasped. “Is she all right?” My cousin bit her lip and shook her head.

“Oh, Win,” I said, then held her tight.

“Nathan! I need your help!” the roommate bellowed from below.

I squeezed Winnie’s shoulder, then descended the narrow staircase into the root cellar. Which of course wasn’t a root cellar at all.

“Holy shit.”

I would learn the history of the place later—how it had been designed by the original owner in the late fifties, then scrubbed from the blueprints when the county declared underground bomb shelters in LA illegal. The only

people who knew about the structure were the handful of us and perhaps the odd neighbor or history buff.

“Over here!” Ashley’s doctor roommate shouted, and I rounded the kitchen counter to see Charlie lying flat on his back on the kitchen floor.

“Oh my God, Charlie!”

“We have to get him out of here,” the roommate said. “Grab his feet.”

We had Charlie up the stairs and onto the cold, damp earth in a matter of seconds. Winnie squeezed my hand as the good doctor thumped on Charlie’s chest until—miraculously!—he gagged and sputtered back to life.

“You’re going to be OK,” the doctor soothed, and Winnie fell to her knees and cradled her brother’s curly blond head in her hands.

Winnie saw me staring and reached up and grabbed my hand. “This is not your fault,” she said. My face burned with shame.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, even though I didn’t deserve forgiveness.

“You’re not the bad guy here,” Winnie assured me. “It’s obvious now.”

Sometime later, when Charlie was out of the hospital and beginning his life as a single dad, he would invite me over to watch a ball game, have a barbecue, toss a Frisbee in the backyard. On one of those nights, over a beer and under a starlit sky, he would come to confess that he knew he had married a gold-digging sorceress and insist he didn’t blame me for falling under her spell. And his genuine warmth and enthusiasm for his boys to know their uncle Nathan convinced me that he was telling the truth—or at least that he forgave me. And we would both shake our heads at the irony of how the stunt Louisa had pulled to destroy our family turned out to be the very thing that brought us back together.

I had always thought Charlie and Winnie had avoided me because they were ashamed of how they’d treated their mother. But now I know they pulled away not because they had behaved badly, but because their mother had. They knew how I’d depended on Louisa for comfort and company during those lonely undergrad years and wanted to protect her image in my eyes. What I thought was cowardice was in fact generosity; they didn’t want me to know how they had suffered as children or why a chill had settled over their relationship, so they disappeared.

I was sad when I learned Louisa had died. But I was happy to think she was in a better place; because we were, too.

CHAPTER 67

ASHLEY

Charlie was taken to the hospital for observation, so that left Nathan, Winnie, Jordan, and me to tell the whole sordid tale to the police.

The detective asked us to start at the beginning, so I told him about the fake audition, being sure to specify that I didn't know it was fake. Yes, I'd read the words "Your aunt is dead," but I'd also read other parts ("I never want to see you again," "You killed my brother," "I'm sorry but it's over between us!"). "Louisa buried it," I explained, "so I wouldn't know that it was about her."

We sat in Louisa's living room—which was technically *my* living room now—at least for the time being. The detective asked why Louisa would cut her own children out of her will, so Winnie showed him the little room behind the kitchen and the machine she'd used to clean her blood. "She was sick and hated us because we wouldn't help her," Winnie explained. I wasn't aware of Louisa's illness, or the request she'd made of her children, but knowing about it sooner wouldn't have changed anything. If anything it only made me feel less guilty for what I'd done. Because if she was that sick, she was probably going to die soon anyway.

Nathan and Winnie admitted that, upon discovering the recording was a fake, they had gone to the graveyard to see if Louisa was actually in her coffin. "We realized when we saw the empty casket that a crime had been committed," Nathan explained, like the lawyer he was, "but it was one in the morning, and not exactly an emergency."

Winnie chimed in that they were unclear what the crime even was—*Murder? Body theft? Impersonating a dead person?* "We had no idea what we were dealing with," she said. "You can't report a crime if you don't know what it is!"

As for Marcela, once Nathan revealed that she had all but confessed to trying to off her husband and sister-in-law, they dispatched a unit to pick her up. Charlie would be given custody of the boys, and Winnie would support his single parenting as he supported her in her recovery.

The detective seemed confused as to why Charlie's wife would want to kill him, and Nathan dropped the bomb that he'd been sleeping with her. He would never explain how he came to be involved with his cousin's wife, and I would never ask, but suffice to say it made me less enthusiastic about the prospect of a second date.

The coroner later confirmed that Louisa had died from "asphyxia due to exhaustion of oxygen," or "air hunger," and her grisly final expression indicated it was not very pleasant for her. As Jordan put it, her lungs were literally screaming for oxygen. I felt terrible that she had suffered—I didn't know it was painful for some people! But one might argue what she endured was in line with the abominations she had inflicted on others.

Winnie started to cry when she realized that if Jordan and I hadn't come along when we did, she and Charlie would have suffered a similar fate. As for why Charlie passed out and Winnie didn't, Jordan explained that different people have different reactions to low-oxygen environments, and while Winnie's tolerance was higher, they both would have succumbed eventually. I never would have done it if I'd known Winnie and Charlie would go down there, but in the end, my insider intel is what saved them, so I took some consolation in that. I gave them the house and the lion's share of the money (no court order required!) to make it up to them. They insisted I take a cut for my troubles, and we ultimately agreed on a cool million, which was a helluva payday for an acting job that, in the end, required very little acting.

When the policeman found the baseball in the air vent, the possibility that Louisa's suffocation was not an accident chilled the room like a blast of cold air. I got a bit of a lucky break that Zander played the sport because if this turned into a homicide investigation, Marcela would be the obvious suspect. Even though of course I put it there.

The movie script Louisa and I had both read—her at the end of her career, and me at the beginning of mine—was called *Over Her Dead Body*. It was about—you guessed it!—a woman who fakes her own death, then hides in her basement while her family tears itself apart. It was in "preproduction" when my friend at CAA sent it to me, back when I was reading everything I could get my hands on in the hopes of ferreting out a casting. I had hoped to read for the "Winnie" role. In the original she was of course not called Winnie ("Scarlett," I think?) and was quite vile, nothing like the warm, quick-witted redhead in Louisa's adaptation. The studio wound up going belly-up, as studios do, and the town quickly forgot all about that script. I did,

too. Until I heard my voice on Nathan's phone. And the particulars of that "tense psychological thriller about a woman betrayed by her greedy children" came flooding back. There was no question Louisa had read it, too; a quick peek on IMDb confirmed that she had been the casting director on it.

The event that puts a story in motion is called the inciting incident. The shark devours a swimmer, Romeo and Juliet meet and fall in love. Once Nathan played that recording for me, I knew I'd been cast as the bumbling innocent who "incites" the plot, doomed to be irrelevant after act one. But I didn't want to be a bit player; I wanted to be the lead. Plus I didn't like how the original ended—with the scorned old woman getting revenge on her undeserving children. So I did something I'd learned in acting class: I improvised. And I daresay the new direction was a vast improvement on the original.

Louisa was a terrible protagonist—dishonest, abusive, and not remotely sympathetic. It was without a doubt the worst casting she had ever made. No one was going to root for her. And she certainly didn't deserve a triumphant ending.

I, on the other hand, was a wonderfully sympathetic character—a bit of a vigilante, perhaps, but justified in my actions. Besides having a clear "motivation" (as we actors call it), I got justice for two tortured souls and, in the end, helped to heal a fractured family. That's a pretty good arc!

So how, you may ask, did I know about the bomb shelter? We call the details that make a character specific and relatable her "backstory." I could never have made a surprise turn from victim to victor if my backstory hadn't included a seven-year stint as a tour guide. While I aspired to be an actress, poking around LA's most unique homes and landmarks had been my true full-time job all those years. And you don't spend the better part of a decade touring LA's landmarks and not know where the super weird ones are . . . especially the one that's in your own backyard.

The *Scooby-Doo*-scary house up the street had intrigued me from the moment I moved into that otherwise unremarkable neighborhood. It took a little digging, but eventually I unearthed the history of that kooky old storybook . . . and found the seventy-year-old photos of what lay underneath. The plans were not public record, but we tour guides had friends in the permit office who were all too happy to help when we called. There was a reason I had avoided that bizarro property on my walks, and it wasn't because of the gnarled old trees.

Once I knew what movie we were in, I knew where Louisa was hiding and what I could do to make sure she never came out. I recognized that “bird feeder” as an air vent in disguise the minute I laid eyes on it. As for how I knew a baseball was the perfect size to seal it off, on that front I kind of got lucky. I figured my angels wouldn’t have put a whole box of them in the middle of my living room floor for me to trip over if I wasn’t meant to take one. And wouldn’t you know, it fit like a key in a lock.

Brando barks like a banshee when I leave the house, and I didn’t want to wake Jordan, so I took him with me when I slipped out in the dead of night with that baseball in my gloved hand. I’ll always wonder why he ran back there the next morning. *Had he sensed I was drunk with rage and had done something dangerous? Or was he just being a dog obsessed with a ball?* As for Jordan, I don’t know why I’d vented to him. Maybe I’d needed him to agree that Louisa was a vile old troll to spur me to go through with it, because I knew if Jordan doesn’t like someone, they must be bad. I stopped short of telling him about the bomb shelter because, if there was a murder investigation, I didn’t want him to have to say I knew about it.

The police eventually determined that the baseball was “at least a decade old” and had “probably been in there for years.” They had ample eyewitness testimony to charge Marcela with two counts of attempted murder, so were content to rule Louisa’s death an accident—she had gone down there willingly, after all, and unlike Winnie and Charlie, had an unobstructed exit if she’d wanted to leave. While the coroner was able to determine she had only been dead a few hours, they had no way to calculate how long the door had been closed and her oxygen cut off, which was a lucky break for someone who, until that day, hadn’t gotten very many.

We often say that life imitates art, but sometimes, art also infiltrates life. People watch a movie about a dramatic comeback (*Rocky*) or unlikely hero (*Erin Brockovich*) and become inspired to pursue their dream or fight for a cause. No, I didn’t do the script as written, or even play the part that was offered to me. But in the end I think all will agree that the good guys won, and the true villain got what she deserved. As for whether I deserved to be punished for taking matters into my own hands? Well, that was for my angels to decide.

CHAPTER 68

JORDAN

“What do you have there?” the detective said to one of his investigators, who was standing at the threshold of the dead woman’s living room. I didn’t have to stay for the whole interrogation, but I didn’t want to abandon Ashley, so I stuck around. Hearing the story of what that old woman had done made my face burn with rage all over again. Besides the psychological pain she’d inflicted on Ashley this past weekend and her kids over a lifetime, faking your own death is a crime, and an insult to doctors and the hardworking end-of-life professionals who devote their lives to giving the deceased a dignified passing.

“It was in the vent,” the investigator said as he held up a clear evidence bag with a baseball in it. “Completely blocked the airflow in and out.”

Those standard nine-inch MLB-regulation balls are ubiquitous. Half the neighborhood kids probably had ones just like it. I figured it had gotten lodged in there during someone’s backyard batting practice. I once hit a line drive that got stuck in the *O* in “OUTS” on our scoreboard; it’s still there to this day. Yes, there was a big box of them on my living room floor, but I didn’t see any reason to mention it. At least not yet.

“Could it have gotten in there by accident?” the detective asked.

And the investigator shook his head. “The vent has a little roof over it.”

“Prints?”

“Nope.”

Ashley was sitting next to me. As my backyard batting practice theory went up in smoke, I forced myself not to look at her. I didn’t want to see her fingers threaded together to keep her hands from shaking, or the pink stain that was spreading across her ears and neck.

The fact that Ashley was named in the will made her an obvious suspect, but—as she’d already explained—she hadn’t known she was Louisa’s heir until the will reading. And by that point she’d thought Louisa was already dead. Yes, she’d impersonated Louisa’s nurse, but she’d thought it was an audition. And Louisa had long since disappeared when she’d found out that it

wasn't. Plus Louisa was the one who wrote the copy and left the recording on Nathan's voice mail, so it was clear who the mastermind was, and that it wasn't Ashley.

"How old do you think that ball is?" the detective asked, peering into the evidence bag.

"Old," his investigator replied. "We'll send it to forensics, but I betcha ten years at least."

The detective let us go with a promise to follow up in a day or two. Ashley and I drove home in silence. The rain had slowed to a gentle drizzle. When we got to the house, Brando jumped out of the car and trotted up the front walk with his nose in the air like a show pony who had just won the blue ribbon. *And why not?* He certainly deserved one. His timely disobedience had saved two lives. I shuddered to think how much worse this would have been if he had been a good boy.

"What a surreal morning," Ashley said as I opened the front door for her, then followed her and Brando into the house.

"Horrible," I agreed, not elaborating on what I thought was the most horrifying part.

"Crazy how there was a baseball in there," Ashley said, as if there weren't an open box of them right by her feet.

"Sounds like they think it might've been in there for a long time," I said.

"Well, it did look old."

"Is that what you think?" I asked. And she kind of shrugged.

"It makes sense, I guess."

I peered down into the open box of old baseballs. Twenty-one of them, to be exact. It would take all of ten seconds to count them.

"Louisa was a terrible human being," I offered, in case Ashley had something more she wanted to tell me.

"Well, she won't hurt anybody now."

When I became a doctor, I took an oath to "do no harm." It seemed a simple promise, but then again, there's nothing simple about caring for humans. We murder healthy cells to kill cancerous ones; cut off damaged limbs to preempt infection; steal blood, marrow, organs from one human to save another. It's easy to say "the ends don't justify the means," except when they do.

"One might argue she got what was coming to her," I said. "Given that she was already supposed to be dead." And Ashley just nodded and looked at the

floor.

We stood there in silence for what felt like eternity. It was so quiet I could hear my heartbeat. Brando had his head down, but his eyes were on me, like he knew the next move was mine.

“I guess I should clean this stuff up,” I said, surveying my mess. The baseballs were still in the keep pile, along with a few jackets and a pair of ski boots.

“That’s a lot of baseballs,” Ashley said, eyeing the box. I wasn’t sure she was testing me until she added, “How many have you got there?” And there was my opening, so big you could push a body through it.

I thought back to a college basketball player I treated when I was a resident. He had been in a car accident and was paralyzed from the waist down. When he asked me, “Will I ever play again?” I was honest with him. “Your spinal cord was severed. There’s no way.” But he just shook his head. “Don’t tell me that shit,” he hissed. “That’s not for me.” He didn’t want to hear the facts, see the X-ray of his vertebrae looking like alphabet soup. Because if he didn’t look at it, he reasoned, there was still a chance what I was saying wasn’t true.

There were so many knowable unknowns. Had Ashley known about the bunker? If so, how? And how would she have known Louisa was in there, or where the vent was, or that a baseball was the perfect size to seal it up? Neither Nathan nor I had known why that bag of cement had exploded, yet she had known to look underneath it. Lucky guess? Or something else?

“I have no idea how many baseballs are in there,” I said, sliding the box into the trash pile with my foot. “Doesn’t matter, I’m getting rid of them.” And then I bent over and closed the lid.

I don’t know if I did it for her, or for me. I didn’t want to marry her, not anymore, but she was my best friend, and I wanted to hold on to that. So I tossed out that box, and my unanswered questions along with it. Yes, I’d taken an oath to do no harm, but I also believed people should get what they deserve.

EPILOGUE

THREE WEEKS LATER

EPILOGUE

ASHLEY

I woke up on my birthday to see three missed calls from my mother. It's two hours later in Wisconsin, but the first one was at 6:00 a.m.—*her* time! Which was 4:00 a.m. for me. It seemed she was really eager to wish me a happy thirtieth birthday, so I called her back before getting out of bed.

“Happy birthday!” she said when she picked up on the first ring.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Billy and Dylan are here, too. I'll put you on speaker.”

“Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to yoooouuuu!” my mom and brothers sang. It was awful, but also sweet, and I had to laugh.

“Thank you, you guys are the best.”

“What are you doing today?” my brother Billy asked.

“Hopefully closing the deal with the writer on my first movie!” I said with the enthusiasm of a woman who had finally gotten her long-awaited big break.

I had saved all the scripts my insider at CAA had sent me over the years, including the one Louisa had cast me in without my knowing. It was as good as I remembered. The characters were well-drawn, and the themes of loyalty, succession, and revenge were still ultra-relevant. No one had picked it up since it fell out of production all those years ago, and it was available! So I contacted the writer to ask if she would option it to me. She was thrilled to accept a modest fee to do some “development,” and I loved her ideas about how to engineer a plum role for me. We couldn't do the version that had just been played out in real life, of course—I was a risk-taker but not an idiot! So we went back to her original, reshaped the Scarlett/Winnie role for me (*why not make the daughter the surprise vigilante?*), and added a few more twists and turns. As she put it, there were a lot of ways to skin this cat, and she was as excited to discover them as I was to star in my very first movie.

“OK, I need my coffee now,” I told my mom and siblings. “I'll talk to you guys later.” We said our goodbyes, and I got out of bed. I still had a love-hate relationship with Hollywood, but with \$1 million to invest in my career, I

wasn't going to give up just yet. Producing my own movie meant no more sitting around waiting for the phone to ring. I was in charge of my destiny now. I vowed to surround myself with the most talented, hard-working, honorable people, and with their help, make all our dreams come true.

Eager to start my day, I pulled on some jeans and a tank top and opened my bedroom door. Then gasped at what I saw.

“Oh my God!”

My living room ceiling was covered with balloons in every color of the rainbow—fire-engine red, powder blue, forest green, sunshine yellow. There were dozens of them, with swirls of ribbon dangling down like candy-colored vines.

Brando trotted up beside me. “Toto, we are definitely not in Kansas anymore,” I joked, and he wagged his tail in agreement.

“Happy birthday,” Jordan said as he emerged from the kitchen. Winnie appeared a second later, carrying a blueberry muffin with a candle in it and singing at the top of her lungs. Jordan joined in, and I endured my second round of “Happy birthday to youuuuu!” Winnie and Jordan were seeing quite a lot of each other these days—this wasn't the first time Louisa's daughter was in my kitchen when I got up in the morning. But she made great coffee, and Jordan was happy, so I didn't mind one bit.

“At least the place won't feel empty now,” Jordan joked. And I stuck out my tongue at him. Jordan had found a place near his office in Santa Monica and was scheduled to move out at the end of the month. I imagined I would eventually get a new roommate, but I was a millionaire now: there was no urgency. With Jordan gone, maybe I would negotiate with the landlord to fix a few things—the broken window, the aging carpet. Not being financially strapped was empowering. It's a lot easier to ask for something if you're in a position to walk away if they say no.

I blew out my candle and hugged Jordan and his new girlfriend. There was a time seeing Jordan so cozy with someone who wasn't me might have made me jealous, but not anymore. I would always love my childhood friend, but clinging to him because I was afraid to be alone was selfish. Winnie was a much better fit for him. They were equals in intelligence. Where he was stoic, she was soulful and sensitive, which had seemed a mismatch at first but was starting to feel more meant to be. He was the healer to her bird with a broken wing. I knew Jordan well enough to know he was happiest while helping others. And I imagined, after growing up with a mother like Louisa, Winnie

appreciated Jordan's kindness and was worthy of it.

"Thanks for the balloons," I said. "That was really nice of you guys."

"It was actually Nathan's doing. He brought them over," Winnie said, scooping a bright-blue envelope off the counter and handing it to me. "Along with this."

I hadn't spoken to Nathan since the incident, but that didn't mean I hadn't thought about him; he was my first love-at-first-sight, if you believe in such things, which unfortunately I did. Some of my thoughts were filled with outrage: *What kind of man sleeps with his cousin's wife?* But some of them made me want to cry. In thirty years (*I'm thirty now!*) I had never met someone who captivated my imagination so urgently and completely. When Nathan looked at me, I felt a rush of excitement, like I was on a roller coaster right before the big drop. It made me sad to think I might never see him again. Yes, he had done something despicable; but then again, who was I to judge?

"Thanks, Winnie," I said, taking the card from her. Even just seeing my name written on the envelope in Nathan's uneven script made my heart skip a beat. *If he wanted to see me, would I say yes? Could we start again? What if, like Jordan and Winnie, we were two imperfect people who could be perfect together?*

"So what are you going to do for your big three-oh?" Jordan asked, and I just shrugged. Every birthday since moving to Los Angeles seven summers ago, I'd wished for the same thing. Eyes closed, heat from my birthday candles tickling my eyelashes, I would wish for my big break. Now that I'd gotten it, I just wanted to get to work.

We call the first act of a movie the "setup": the trap is set, the hero gets ensnared. When I found out Louisa had tricked me, I thought my angels had led me astray. But then I remembered every hero's journey starts with a call to action—a run-in with a villain who needs to be vanquished, the discovery of a wrong that needs to be set right. I got played. But I'm not mad; I'm grateful. Because now I'm a player.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing mysteries is beguiling business. *Are the clues too obvious? Too buried? What should I reveal? What should I tease?* This one was a twisty one, and I cannot overstate how grateful I am to my brave beta readers, who ventured into my early drafts and gave it to me straight.

Thank you, Debra Lewin and Miranda Parker Lewin, for once again being the very first. Revisions were made, and Avital Ornovitz, Wanda Frodis, Tyler Weltman, and Aimee Simtob generously took the baton and ran the next lap. The sprint to the finish line was fueled by the high-octane help of Diane Driscoll, whose eleventh-hour insights gave me the final *aha!* Ken Pisani may not have perfect eyesight or middle splits, but he sure is good at finding the perfect word when it counts the most. (Thanks, Ken!) And author Gary Goldstein proved himself the world's best bench coach. His straightforward reassurance ("you know what to do") became my mantra, and I am so grateful to him for saying it in a way that made me believe it.

I always thought writing books would turn me into a lonely, old shrew, but the friends I have made on Goodreads, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter have saved me from that fate—at least the lonely part. To all the brilliant book bloggers, BookTokers, Goodreaders, and Bookstagrammers who light up my feed every day: Thank you for sharing your passion for reading and for broadcasting how books give you joy. You are not only a vital part of the modern-day book-o-system ("book" + "ecosystem"—yes, I made it up) but also a big part of what makes it fun.

I had technical help with this one from my go-to medical expert, Dr. Martin Bennett, who regaled me with gruesome ways to murder someone, many of which I filed away for later use. (No, that's not a threat.) Thanks also to Dr. Judy Melinek, who told me everything I need to know about dead bodies, so I don't have to look at them myself. I am indebted to Victoria Sainsbury-Carter for keeping me sane, except for when it was more useful to be insane, and Andy Cohen, my personal guardian angel, for pretending not to notice said insanity.

Shaping a manuscript from first draft to finished product takes vision, creativity, and wizardly command of the English language; Lake Union's

Chris Werner is that rare editor who has it all, and I feel hella lucky I get to work with him. Thank you to Gabe, Haley, Kellie, Jen, and all the dedicated professionals at Lake Union Publishing; I am humbled by your excellence and relentless attention to detail. This book was elevated by the contributions of my crackerjack developmental editor, Jenna L. Free, who endured countless episodes of “*What if I tried this?*” with just the right balance of thoughtfulness and good humor.

As with any intensely personal creative endeavor, writing books requires conjuring feelings, not all of them pleasant. My joyful, courageous, can-do agent, Laura Dail, is the lifeline that steadies me in my self-induced storm, and I am immeasurably grateful for her wisdom and support. Thank you to Katie Gisondi and all the book lovers at the Laura Dail Agency; you are the best partners a writer could ask for, and I feel extremely lucky to be on your team.

This book is dedicated to my husband, Uri, and our two daughters, Sophie and Taya, who graciously decline to remind me that making up characters and killing them is a ridiculous vocation, and not really a valid excuse for not making dinner. Thanks, guys—I love you, and sorry for all the freezer food.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Walter was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts. After being given every opportunity to become a concert violinist but failing, Susan attended Harvard University. She hoped to be a newscaster, but the local TV station had different ideas and hired her to write and produce promos instead. Seeking sunshine and a change of scenery, she moved to Los Angeles to work in film and television production. Upon realizing writers were having all the fun, Susan transitioned to screenwriting, then directing. She made her directorial debut with the film *All I Wish*, starring Sharon Stone, which she also wrote, and her fiction debut with the bestseller *Good as Dead*. For more information, visit www.susanwalterwriter.com.