

**She's here to take care of you.
Whether you like it or not.**



THE SILENT SISTER

ANGELA HENRY

THE SILENT SISTER
ANGELA HENRY

ALSO BY ANGELA HENRY

The Perfect Affair

Her Pretty Lies

The Family Lies

Nobody Heard a Thing

Kendra Clayton Series

The Company You Keep

Tangled Roots

Diva's Last Curtain Call

Schooled in Lies

Sly, Slick & Wicked

Doing it to Death

Xavier Knight Series

Knight's Fall

Knight's Shade

Maya Sinclair Thriller

The Paris Secret

Middle-Grade as Angie Kelly

Labyrinth Society: The Versailles Vendetta

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To my amazing readers, whose support means the world to me.

PROLOGUE

TAYLOR

Everything was too bright. Too Loud. The police cruiser's lights bathed the backseat in flashing blues and reds. The crackling disembodied voices coming from the officers, combined with the voices of the other officers on the scene and members of the media shouting questions, were like a million insects buzzing in my ears. The harsh smell of disinfectant didn't quite mask the pungent smell of urine and vomit. The handcuffs were too tight and cut into my thin wrists.

The officer hadn't been gentle and my shoulders ached from where my arms had been yanked up behind my back, and my left cheek was sore from being pressed into the carpet as I was being cuffed. Dizziness made me lie my head back against the seat as sweat trickled down my back. I needed to get out because I was trapped... again. For a week I'd desperately wanted out of that house. But not like this. Because I still wasn't free, and wondered if I ever would be.

Once I was at the station, I was searched, fingerprinted, photographed and my bloody clothes were taken into evidence. I was given a clean pair of bright orange jailhouse scrubs, socks, and matching canvas slip-on shoes to wear. They brought me into an interrogation room and an older black woman stood up as I entered. I immediately recognized her as the detective who came to my house asking questions about the day my husband died. What had her name been? Her lanyard identified her as Detective Laurel King. King gestured for one of the officers to uncuff me. After which I sat down at the table and rubbed my sore wrists. King sat opposite me.

"This is a mistake. I shouldn't be here." I didn't recognize my own voice. It was high-pitched and breathy.

Instead of responding, she read me my Miranda rights. "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law..."

As I listened to her in disbelief, there were questions flashing in my head like blinking neon signs. How did this happen? Why was I under arrest? I was the victim here. Wasn't I?

ONE

TAYLOR

Two Weeks Earlier

He was staring at me. Waiting. But I wasn't exactly sure what Lloyd Rivers, my husband's best friend and the executor of his estate, was expecting me to say or exactly how I was supposed to respond to what I'd just been told. He couldn't quite meet my eyes, and I wondered just how bad I looked. My hair had been cropped close to treat the lacerations on my scalp and I'd lost a lot of weight. I was currently in a rehabilitation center still recovering from the accident that killed my husband Troy two months ago.

"Hey. Did you..." He had reached out to touch my arm when I failed to respond right away. The venomous look I shot him froze his hand in midair, and he let out a sigh before dropping it back into his lap.

"I heard you." I didn't mean to sound so irritated. I'd gotten no sleep the night before and I was in pain. I was always in pain. I'd lost my husband, but physical pain had come to join my emotional pain, becoming my two new unwanted besties. "Sorry. This is all such a... shock."

"I understand how hard this must be for you, Mrs. Bellows."

"Ms. Ambrose," I said quietly, through gritted teeth as I glanced down at my phone lying on top of the sheet covering me, relieved to see I only had another twelve minutes before the nurse brought my pain meds.

"Excuse me?" His face wore a mask of confusion, but he knew exactly what he was doing.

I ignored him because I'd just been informed that my recently deceased husband had been broke. I knew Troy loved spending money. However, according to Lloyd, he'd been spending money as fast as he earned it. All his credit cards were maxed out, his banks accounts were overdrawn and our home, which had been his before we married, was mortgaged to the hilt. In other words, there was nothing left for me to live on. He'd even let his life insurance lapse and taken money out of his 401K and hadn't paid it back. What was worse was, I had thirty days to vacate the house as Lloyd had to sell the house to cover Troy's debts, which were extensive.

"I know how hard this has to be for you. But arrangements will need to be made and as much as you don't want to talk about this, we have to."

“I doubt you have any idea how I feel.” I felt like I’d been punched in the face. How could I not have known Troy was in this much debt? Had I known and just couldn’t remember because of my head injury?

“You’re right. I don’t. But imagine how much worse you’d feel being dragged down by debt that’s not yours.”

My head was ringing and I willed the tears not to come, but they instantly filled my eyes. Lloyd at least had the decency to look away.

“How do I know you’re not lying to me?”

He looked at me like I was the stupidest person on the planet and let out a frustrated sigh. “I have absolutely no reason to lie to you, Taylor. Troy designated me as his Transfer on Death beneficiary after his divorce. Because of that I was able to bypass probate to sell the house, which only covers half his debt. If I can sell the rest of his things, his classic cars and memorabilia, that should take care of the rest. And I’m sorry, but that means you can’t hold on to any of his stuff. It will all need to be auctioned off.” He wouldn’t look at me and was eyeing the door to my room, anxious to be gone.

His use of my first name made me tense up. It was too intimate coming from the man who made a point of calling me by the wrong name the entire time I’d known him, I liked it better when he called me Mrs. Bellows. Suddenly, something else occurred to me.

“Who bought our house, and don’t say you can’t tell me because I can easily look it up in the newspaper?”

He looked at me for just a second before saying a name that instantly caused my blood pressure to spike. “Cheri bought it.”

“Cheri? As in Troy’s ex-wife and your cousin, Cheri? You’re kidding, right?”

“She helped design that house when they were married and she always loved it. You should be happy she had the money to buy it at the asking price because no one else did.”

“No one else offered or you wouldn’t accept any other offer but hers?”

“Look, I know you think I don’t like you, when in reality I don’t know you well enough to dislike you. Believe me, I tried to get Troy to rein in his spending. But since he married you, he barely responded to my phone calls and texts. I’m not the one who left you without a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of. So, stop trying to make me out to be the bad guy when I’m the only one...”

“You need to leave.” I cut him off because I couldn’t stand to hear the sound of his voice for another second. “I’ll be out of the house in thirty days. Until then I would appreciate not having to see you or your cousin. Please tell her not to step foot in my house a minute before thirty days is up.”

“Technically, it’s her house now and she can do whatever she...”

“I said what I said,” I snapped, instantly shutting him up as his eyes widened. He’d never heard me raise my voice before, and I realized that it had been long overdue. “If she shows up, it won’t be pretty. I have thirty days.”

He rose from his chair by my bed, buttoning up his suit jacket, and gave me a curt nod, then paused before heading out the door. “I’m sorry about the funeral. I did what I thought was best.”

He was gone before I could unload on him further about missing my own husband’s funeral. I’d been in a coma. They initially didn’t think I would make it, and by the time I woke up, my husband was already buried. I never got a chance to say goodbye.

I had fractured my pelvis and while my doctors claimed my hairline fracture was healed, I still could barely walk. Yet I had to clear all of my things out of the house before Cheri moved in? What then? I had no one who could help me by going to get my things. My mom was dead, I was an only child, and the last best friend I had was in college. Nessa had been gone so long, her memory had gotten fuzzy around the edges, which was a good thing as her loss all those years ago had been like a physical wound.

I was happy to see the nurse finally arrive with my pain meds, which I gratefully took along with the small paper cup of water that was provided. Once the nurse was gone, I leaned back, adjusting the bed so it lowered a couple of inches, and stared out the window. My room had a view of the gazebo next to the pond at the back of the property. Eventually, as the pain began to subside, my eyes started to flutter and I soon disappeared into dreams where I was still a happily married woman.

TWO

TAYLOR

Before the Accident

“How long do I have to keep this on?” My eyes were covered with one of my own sleep masks as my husband guided me down the hall with one hand firmly on my lower back and the other holding my left hand.

“Here we are, Miss Impatient.”

“That’s Mrs. Impatient to you.” He laughed and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek as we came to a sudden stop. I felt Troy reach past me and heard the sound of a door opening.

Once he guided me through the door, I instantly tugged the mask off and gasped. We were in his office. Only it wasn’t his office anymore.

“Where’s all your stuff?” I looked around the room to see that every trace of him had been removed.

His glass-topped desk with multiple computer monitors was replaced with a beautiful mahogany desk with a purple high-backed brocade chair. The walls that had been covered with framed jerseys and his awards were gone, replaced with bookshelves filled with books that I recognized as my own from my own personal library that had been boxed up in storage for years. The large rectangular picture window behind the desk, which Troy had covered with vertical blinds, was now replaced with a large triple paneled bay window with floral stained-glass images inside the panels. The carpeting that covered the floor was gone and the hardwood beneath polished to a high shine. At the center of the room, the floor was covered with a beautiful floral area rug, with flowers matching those in the stained-glass. Even the basic light fixture that had hung from the ceiling was gone, replaced by an art deco chandelier.

“Not mine anymore.” He grinned at me. I was speechless as a lump formed in my throat. “Well?” He took a step closer to me, suddenly looking uncertain.

“I love it.” I could barely get the words out. “When... When did you do all of this?” I wiped my streaming eyes with the back of my hand as I wandered into the room taking in all the details.

“I hired a decorator right before the wedding and told her she had six weeks to get it done, while we were away on our honeymoon. I hope you

don't mind, but I had to get into your storage unit to get most of this stuff. Do you love it?"

"Of course I do." I turned and reached up to wrap my arms around his neck, which wasn't easy. My husband was 6' 3" and even being 5' 7" I had to stand on my very tippy-toes to put my arms around his neck, at which point he picked me up so my legs could wrap around his waist.

We stayed that way for a while before I gave him a kiss on the neck and he put me down.

"So, do you think you could make some magic happen in this room?"

He looked around the room, admiring the work that he had commissioned. And there it was. I was meant to write in this room. Or rather, start writing again in this room. I couldn't blame him because I had told him on more than one occasion that I wanted to get back to my writing career. I suspected it was one of the reasons why he told me I could give up my editing clients. He wanted me to be able to focus on writing again full time.

Hanging on the wall on the right side of the room, over a cabinet that held a coffee bar and small fridge, was the framed poster of the cover of my one and only novel, *Lottie Mae*, a YA coming-of-age novel about a teenager growing up on a farm in 1920s rural Ohio who lived a hard life and thought all of her problems would be solved if she could just make it to New York City and become a dancer at the famed Cotton Club.

It was my debut novel and an instant *New York Times* bestseller. I was on talk shows, NPR, and featured in magazines like *Elle* and *Cosmo*. The book became a favorite of indie booksellers and book clubs across the country. It had even been optioned for a film. I wasn't prepared for the attention or success. The pressure from my editor and agent to follow up with another bestseller was immense. I buckled under the pressure. Three years past the deadline for my second book, I parted ways with my agent and was quietly dropped by my publisher. My readers had moved on too.

In the midst of all this, my mom's kidney disease got worse and she refused my kidney no matter how hard I begged. I finally had an excuse for why I wasn't producing more books. I became her full-time caretaker and watched her disappear little by little over the next three years. I was able to use the six-figure advance that I got for *Lottie Mae* to travel and try and make some new memories with her. When the dialysis stopped working, we spent her last few months together, just the two of us, in the little house that

I grew up in. It had been four years since my mom had died, and I was still just as lost as the day she took her final breath.

Troy noticed my expression and instantly put an arm around my shoulder, pulling me to his side. “No pressure, honey. Seriously. I just thought it would be nice for you to have your own space.”

“And where is all your stuff?” I needed to change the subject quickly.

“Cleared out on the storage in the room above the garage. I’ve got everything set up over there for the podcast. That way I won’t disturb you, and you won’t disturb me.”

My husband had a very successful sports podcast and YouTube channel called *Talking to Troy*. After a successful career in the NFL as a quarterback for the Columbus Captains, he went on to interview other athletes. The channel had grown to a million followers in the six years since he’d started it.

Before I could say anything else, a chirping sound emanated from his pocket and he pulled his cell phone out, glanced at it and swore under his breath.

“Everything okay?”

“Uh... yeah, it’s just Lloyd. He keeps calling and texting and I haven’t responded. I probably should get back to him because he’s not going to stop. How about we go to that new Mexican place downtown for dinner later?”

“Sounds good and thanks again, babe. I love my new office. You’re going to have a hard time getting me out of here.” He lowered his head for a kiss, and I watched him leave the room with the same frown.

There was no love lost between me and Troy’s best friend and lawyer, Lloyd Rivers. So, I was more than happy to see him walk out of the room to return his call. I also felt a little guilty that I was the reason he hadn’t been returning Lloyd’s calls and texts. But not guilty enough to encourage him to reconnect with his friend. I sat behind the beautiful mahogany desk and heard Troy’s angry voice from the hall. He was whispering and I could barely make out what he was saying from where I was sitting. I got up and stood at the office door and listened.

“I already told you I sent that payment last week. It’s not my fault if you can’t find a record of it.” His voice was a low angry hiss, and I took a step closer, pressing myself against the wall by the open office door. “You know what? I think I’ll just take my business elsewhere. How about that?”

He said something else I didn't catch. What was he talking about? Did he owe Lloyd money? I was so busy wondering what that conversation had been about that I almost missed his heavy footfalls in the hallway until it was almost too late. He was headed back down the hall. I sprinted across the room, sitting back down behind the desk just as Troy appeared in the doorway.

"And don't worry." He gestured to my empty desk. "I've ordered you a new laptop, and it should be here tomorrow."

"Thanks, babe." He'd turned to go when I stopped him. "How's Lloyd doing?"

"What?" He was genuinely confused.

"Lloyd? Weren't you just on the phone with him?"

"Uh... yeah. He's good. We're just trying to find a time to grab lunch when our schedules aren't so busy."

"Well, make sure you tell him your wife says hi."

He let out a loud laugh and gave me such a big grin I would have never known he'd been angry less than a minute ago. "I'll do that." He looked at his watch and then disappeared from the doorway.

Should I have asked him about what I'd overheard? Maybe. But I probably shouldn't have been eavesdropping in the first place. Besides, I had a bigger problem on my hands as I now had no excuse not to work on another book.

THREE

VALERIE

Valerie sat down in the living room after having given Mrs. Gilman her breakfast, untied her shoelaces and took off her tennis shoes. It didn't matter that these shoes had cost a fortune and were supposed to give her feet much needed support. Her feet were still killing her. She massaged the sole of her right foot for a few minutes before grabbing the remote and flipping on the TV. Mrs. Gilman had her own TV in her bedroom, and Valerie made sure to put on *Wheel of Fortune* so she could do her favorite thing, which was to yell at the TV and berate the contestants when they couldn't solve the puzzles. As far as jobs went, being the private nurse of an elderly woman wasn't a bad gig. Mrs. Gilman's four kids didn't want to deal with her, and they had the financial means to hire a full-time caregiver. All she had to do was make sure the old woman got her meds and was fed and bathed every day. At least one of her kids came to visit once a week, staying for no more than an hour. They could have cared less how she was doing but did not want anyone accusing them of abandoning her.

When Valerie had been in nursing school, she had imagined that she would have had a much more exciting nursing career, possibly as a surgical or emergency room nurse. She quickly found out that she wasn't cut out for that type of nursing. She wasn't capable of the quick-thinking needed for those jobs as there was no margin for error and decisions had to be made in a split second. So, she settled into being a private care nurse and that suited her just fine and paid decently. Currently, Mrs. Gilman was her only client. But if everything worked out for her as she'd planned, she'd be leaving this job, and changing shitty adult diapers, for good.

A day later, Valerie sat parked in front of Troy Bellows' impressive two-story redbrick home with a multi gable roof, the front of which was hidden by high hedges. Unlike many other houses in that neighborhood, it did not have a gated driveway. Most of the homes in the neighborhood were a mix of newer properties and older homes that had been built back in the forties. This was not a gated community. Because if it had been, she surely wouldn't have been able to get inside driving her hunter green Ford Focus that had seen better days.

Valerie's palms were sweaty, and she had to rub them on her jeans before putting her hand over her stomach to still the butterflies. She'd been sitting in her car for the better part of an hour and was surprised no one in the neighborhood had called the police on her because she clearly did not live around here. Most of the driveways held Mercedes, Lexus, BMWs and other high-end cars. She wondered if the neighbors who had noticed her thought she might be delivering DoorDash or something. In any event no one bothered her. However, she couldn't sit in her car forever. She opened her purse to check that the two photos she'd brought with her were still there and then let out a nervous breath.

She hoped Troy's widow was at home, and would at least listen to what she had to say. This was the second time she'd tried to see her. The first time being when she'd been a patient at the Rose Hill rehab center following her accident. She just missed her as she'd only just checked herself out that morning. Valerie wanted to let her get settled in at least, before she turned up on her doorstep unannounced. Would she believe what Valerie had to tell her?

"Get out of the car, Valerie," she whispered aloud to herself, realizing she needed to do what she came to do. She got out of the car after checking her reflection and her visor mirror one last time, smoothing down her sleek purple bob that matched her Paisley print top. Mrs. Gilman told her she looked like a clown. It was a good thing Valerie didn't care what anyone thought. Purple looked good on her and made her brown skin glow. She slowly made her way up the driveway to the front entrance and paused a minute before walking up the four steps to the door.

The Bellows' door was made of ornate wood and treated glass. All she could see was her own reflection as she rang the doorbell. Nobody answered. She switched from ringing the doorbell to knocking on the door, and then it creaked open slightly. She pushed it open another few inches and peered inside the foyer. What she saw on the floor made her rush inside.

FOUR

TAYLOR

I had to sell my wedding set along with all the other jewelry Troy had bought me. I only got half of what it was all worth, but it was enough money to pay rent on a small studio apartment for a few months until I could figure out what to do. Now, I just had to find that apartment. I was back at the house, having left rehab against my doctor's orders, and was surrounded by packing boxes and numerous floral arrangements of mostly dead flowers that lined the foyer from Troy's friends and acquaintances. Lloyd must have brought them in.

I gathered all the cards from the arrangements to send out thank-you notes once I was settled in a new place. A beautiful silk floral arrangement of red roses and pink peonies in a lead crystal vase had a note addressed specifically to me: *Taylor, I am so very sorry. Call me anytime. I'm here for you. Cheri.* Cheri? In what universe was I on friendly terms with my husband's ex? Yet something was tap dancing on the edge of my memory, but quickly evaporated like mist when the doorbell rang. It was our mail carrier, Wes.

He took in my thin frame, shorn hair, and the walker, and instantly turned red and looked down at his feet.

"Hey, Wes."

"I... uh... just wanted you to know how sorry I am about Mr. Bellows. He was a great guy. My dad and I used to go to all the Captains' home games when he was quarterback. We were his biggest fans and I'm so sorry for your loss." He looked close to tears.

"Thank you." It was all I could manage, but he seemed to understand and gave me a nod before hurrying down the driveway.

I was only able to work for an hour or so at a time before the pain forced me to stop. My cuts and bruises had healed, but I was still in pain. Lloyd had sent people over to help me pack. I suspected he sent them to make sure I wasn't taking any of Troy's stuff with me, and I sent them away. I knew it was stupid and petty because I really needed the help. But I was still angry and the pain I was in only heightened my fury over Troy's secrets. How could I not have known he was in so much debt?

My phone rang. It was Lloyd. He'd heeded my warning about not showing up at the house, but he'd been calling and I hadn't answered or returned his calls. I groaned and started not to answer but knew he'd just keep calling.

"Hello."

"There's been a change in plans."

"What change in plans?" His tone had me leaning forward in my seat.

"You need to be out by the end of the week."

"What? Why?"

"Cheri's planning to use the house as a rental property and already has a renter signed to a lease. They're moving in next week and the auction house I hired to assess Troy's personal property need to get in there to appraise everything this weekend."

"You asshole! How could you!"

"Look," Lloyd sputtered. "I'm sorry but my hands are..."

I hung up on him, then turned and angrily swept everything that had been sitting on the dining room table onto the floor before dizziness hit me hard, and I passed out.

When I came to, I was lying on the couch in the living room. I heard someone across the hall in the kitchen. Still confused, I called out.

"Troy? Is that you?"

Footsteps rapidly approached the living room, and I fully expected to see my big handsome husband. But it wasn't Troy, and it never would be again. Instead, it was someone I had never seen before. A curvy, brown-skinned woman with a sleek purple bob that fell to her jawline. Her face was round with deep dimples. She wore jeans and a long flowy paisley print top that was open revealing a purple camisole beneath and Birkenstock sandals. She smelled like vanilla, musk, and honeysuckle. It smelled familiar, but I couldn't recall where I'd smelled it before.

"I see you're awake. Good. How are you feeling? I brought you this." She held out an ice pack.

I looked from the ice pack in her outstretched hand to her smiling face. "Who are you and how did you get into my house? I'm not giving interviews."

I'd had to deal with numerous requests for interviews from the media. Everyone wanted to hear about football legend Troy Bellows' final hours.

Not one of them seemed to care how I was doing. They were just vultures circling over the carcass of my dead husband.

The woman's forehead creased in confusion before her face relaxed. She set the goblet of water down on the coffee table and sat down at the end of the couch.

"I am so sorry, Taylor. I didn't mean to overstep. The front door was opened a crack and when no one answered after I rang the doorbell, I came in here and found you on the floor. How are you feeling? Because you have a nasty bump on your head, and I need to make sure you don't have a concussion."

"Answer me. Who the hell are you? And what the hell are you doing in my house?"

"Of course." She instantly stood up and took a step forward, holding out her hand. "I'm Valerie. Valerie Gaines. Do you really not know who I am?"

"Am I supposed to know who you are?"

She let out a sigh and rolled her eyes before sitting back down. "I had a feeling Lloyd hadn't told you that I was looking for you. I was hoping to meet you at the funeral. I even went to see you at the rehab center, but they said you'd checked out. I'm Troy's sister." I stared at her so long that a look of panic popped up on her face.

"Sister?" Had Troy ever mentioned having a sister?

As far as I remembered, Troy had been an only child. It was something that we had bonded over. Memory loss was something that I was also struggling with since the accident. My memories were slowly coming back, but there were still some of them that had yet to return, like what happened directly before the accident that changed my life forever.

She got up from the couch and went out into the hall to search for something in her purse. When she came back, she held a photo out to me, and I reluctantly took it. It was a much younger Troy, probably in his twenties, with his arm around a teenaged girl who I instantly recognized as a younger version of the woman in front of me.

"We didn't have the same mother. I had no idea he was my brother until I was fourteen and he was twenty-six. Our father had an affair with my mother while he was still married to Troy's mom."

"So, you were a..." I let my voice trail off.

"An outside baby? Yeah." She nodded and gave me a wry smile.

I was silent for a long minute and then finally asked, “How did Troy find out about you?”

“Our father told him not long before he died. And as far as I know, Troy’s mom never found out about me. My mom refused to ask Troy Sr. for a dime. He would show up every year to take me out to dinner, and then shopping for my birthday. Then one day Troy showed up at the house demanding to meet me and to let me know that our father had died. He kept showing up for me in all the ways that our dad never did.”

“Then why have I never heard about you?” After a final look, I handed the photo back to her. She took it and sat back down on the end of the couch.

I wasn’t about to tell her that I was suffering from memory loss and that he very well may have told me he had a sister and that I just don’t remember. I already felt vulnerable enough.

“Look, I’m just trying to understand.”

“No! I get it. You don’t know me from a hole in the wall, and I just show up and tell you that your recently deceased husband has a sister he never talked about, apparently.” She wouldn’t meet my gaze and looked down at her lap. It was obvious she was hurt, and it seemed genuine enough. But I still needed to be sure.

“I get the impression you know why he may not have discussed it with me. Can you please tell me what that reason is?”

She finally looked up from her lap, and I could see tears in her eyes. “It’s all my fault. Things were good between us for so long. We couldn’t spend a ton of time together with his football schedule, practices, training camp and everything else that went along with being a star quarterback. He always carved out some time for me. Then I went and ruined it.”

“How? What happened?”

“He got married. That’s what happened. I think a part of me thought I would have him all to myself forever. But there were all kinds of people competing for his attention back then. Groupies, fans, the media. Everybody wanted a piece of Troy Bellows, and then he met her.” She wiped away a tear at the corner of her eye. I reached out and grabbed the box of tissues that were sitting on the living room table and held the box out to her. She gave me a grateful smile and took a tissue, then wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

“You mean Cheri, right?”

“Yeah, I mean Cheri. I really wanted to like that woman. When I first met her, she was really sweet and nice to me. We even went shopping together a few times and she helped me pick out a gown that looked amazing on me at my senior prom.”

“And?”

“And, as soon as he put that engagement ring on her finger, she did a complete 180. Suddenly, I was the jealous little sister, and she started telling lies about me to Troy.”

“What kind of lies?”

Valerie let out a sigh before responding. “For starters, she told him I was being rude and disrespectful to her whenever he wasn’t around, and that I was having wild parties in their condo when I house-sat for them. None of that shit was true.”

“What did he do?”

“Nothing. He believed her, despite the fact she was actively driving a wedge between us. She could do no wrong in his eyes.”

“I’m still trying to figure out what could’ve happened that would’ve made him never mention he had a sister.”

“I did nothing but tell him the truth. But it forced him to choose between the two of us and he chose her.”

“You told him the truth about what?”

Something behind her eyes closed. “I don’t want to get into all that right now. Let’s just say he tried to fix things between us, but I was too hurt and stopped returning his phone calls and texts. After a few years of that, he just stopped trying. Now he’s dead and I’ll never get a chance to make things right.” She buried her face into the tissue and sobbed.

I let her cry for a few minutes, surprised that her tears hadn’t moved me to shed my own. I thought I knew my husband, but I still couldn’t wrap my head around the fact that he never once mentioned he had a younger sister. *Had* he mentioned that he had a younger sister? Had I just forgotten?

“Are you moving?” Valerie had pulled herself together and shoved the soggy tissue into her jeans pocket.

“Unfortunately, and before you ask, this isn’t my choice.”

Valerie’s lips thinned before she frowned and shook her head. “Let me guess. That bitch got you too, didn’t she?”

I thought long and hard about confiding in her. I was lonely and desperate, so I explained what was going on as her mouth fell open in

shock.

“Lloyd sold the house to... Cheri?”

“Well, she *is* his cousin.”

To my surprise, Valerie gave me a quizzical look and was about to say something when her phone rang. She instantly got up to retrieve it from her purse in the hallway. Her muffled one-sided conversation lasted for about a minute before she came back into the living room, purse in hand.

“Listen, I would really love to stay and continue this conversation. But I need to leave. Would you mind me coming back tomorrow to help you pack? We can talk some more about Troy?”

“Yeah, sure. If that’s what you want.”

“It is and I’ll see you tomorrow.” And then she was gone.

Despite what she’d said, I still couldn’t understand why Troy hadn’t mentioned his sister. I had no idea who this woman really was. For the next hour I searched online from my phone for Valerie Gaines. I did online directory searches, LinkedIn, and every social media site I could think of. I found several Valerie Gaines, but they were either the wrong age or race. Either this woman was lying or she was one of the rare people who had no digital footprint.

FIVE

DETECTIVE KING

Detective Laurel King stared at the crying woman sitting in front of her and arranged her face into some semblance of sympathy. It had been a month, and the police were still no closer to finding the woman's mother. Personally Detective King thought, at this point it wasn't a matter of tracking her mother down so much as retrieving her remains. Stacy Graham's mother, Betty Russell, had disappeared on her way home from the grocery store. Her car had been found crashed into a tree in a wooded area three blocks from her house. But no trace of Mrs. Russell, aside from some blood on her steering wheel, had ever been found.

In Detective King's opinion the older woman had crashed her car, received a concussion when her head hit the steering wheel, and wandered off into the woods and died of exposure. It was only a matter of time before they found her body. As much as she wanted to get closure for the Graham family, she had a lot on her plate case-wise, including the details surrounding the death of football great Troy Bellows. She'd just left for a much-needed vacation to visit extended family in Jamaica when the accident happened, and had been gone a month. When she returned, she'd been immediately assigned another case, with Troy Bellows already two months in the ground.

The lead on the Bellows case, her colleague Jack Mason, was sidelined by a massive heart attack and wouldn't be back at work for the foreseeable future, leaving her to close the case. Mason had a rep for rushing to close all his cases, resulting in things slipping through the cracks, which she realized he'd done with the Bellows case when she'd looked at the video footage from the parking lot the day of the Bellows' accident.

"Why wasn't this in Mason's report?" she whispered to herself.

"What are you mumbling about?" Brent Larson peered at her over his coffee mug. Larson was her ex-partner, who was back from medical leave and on permanent desk duty. Thankfully, they hadn't assigned her anyone new.

King got up and set her laptop on Larson's desk, then pressed play on the video.

“Who the hell is that?” Larson nodded towards the screen showing Troy Bellows and his wife, Taylor, arriving at the Weatherly Park Overlook’s parking lot, then being approached by a third party, an angry third party.

“That’s what I’d like to know. Nothing about this other person was in Mason’s report.”

“Anything else on the rest of the footage?”

“Rest of what footage? This is all Weatherly Park sent over.” She got up and went back to her desk.

“That’s all they have or that’s all they sent? There’s a difference.” He grabbed the receiver of his desk phone.

“Who are you calling?”

“Weatherly Park to make sure there’s nothing else. I’ll let you know what I find out.”

It may end up amounting to nothing, but King needed answers for her own peace of mind before she signed off on the case. Unfortunately, by the time she was able to calm Ms. Graham down and walk her out to her car with assurances that the search for her mother was still ongoing, it was too late to go see Troy Bellows’ widow. So, she made a point of clearing her schedule for the next morning because she had questions and the only person who could provide them with answers was the only person who’d been with Troy Bellows at the time of his death. His wife.

SIX

TAYLOR

Valerie arrived early the next day with coffee and cinnamon rolls. When she saw the less than thrilled look on my face as I let her into the house, she instantly sat the coffee and bakery box down on the table in the foyer.

“What’s wrong? Are you feeling okay?” The concern in her voice sounded genuine enough. She reached out to touch my shoulder, but I leaned back out of her reach.

“Well... It’s just that I spent over an hour looking you up online and I couldn’t find you.”

She instantly deflated like I’d stuck a pin in her. Sighing, she dug into her purse and pulled out a black leather wallet, removed two cards and handed them to me. One was her driver’s license identifying her as Valerie Gaines, aged thirty-eight, 5’6”, and 160 pounds, with an address in Weatherly on a street I’d never heard of. The picture showed her with a different hairstyle and color, dark brown and shoulder-length. But it was definitely her. The second was a work ID badge showing she was an RN with Caring Hands Home Health Care. I handed the cards back to her, feeling like a fool.

“Sorry.”

“I get it, Taylor,” she said, cutting me off. “I’d be skeptical too. Let’s go eat our breakfast and you can ask me anything you want.”

I followed her into the dining room. She set the food out as I grabbed some plates from the boxes on the kitchen island. Once we were sitting at the table, I didn’t hold back. “Why can’t I find you online anywhere?”

“I had to disappear.”

“Why? What happened?”

“My ex happened. He was a womanizing drunk and beat the shit out of me when I confronted him about his drinking one night. Not one of my better ideas to confront an angry drunk alone, but I was fed up and wanted him out of my life. When he got done with me, I was in the hospital for a week.”

“Oh my God.” My hands flew to my mouth. “Please tell me he’s in prison.”

“He is and that’s why you can’t find me online anymore. He kept calling me from prison and threatening to kill me when he gets out. I deleted all my socials and hired a company to scrub my personal information off the internet so he can’t track me down.”

We were silent as I digested all this new information.

“What else would you like to know?” The anxious look on Valerie’s face made me feel bad and I relented.

“I’m good.”

“Really? Because I understand if you have more questions.”

“No. Really. It’s fine. I’m sorry I doubted you.”

She gave me a relieved smile, her shoulders visibly relaxing, and we started eating. I hadn’t had much of an appetite lately and was avoiding caffeine because it made me feel wired. But I demolished two of the cinnamon rolls, the sugar giving me a much-needed energy boost after another sleepless night.

“Now that’s what I love to see. Do you know how hard it is to find someone with a sweet tooth like me? My daughter is the exact opposite. She loves anything salty and would rather have salt and vinegar chips and Takis than cookies.” She was polishing off her own cinnamon roll, licking the icing from her fingers and eyeing the last one in the box.

“Here.” I shoved the box towards her. “Have it. I didn’t realize you had a daughter. How old is she?”

“Summer is nine going on twenty-nine.” She took out her phone and pulled up a picture and held it out to me. It was of a pretty, little, brown-skinned girl with a riot of curly dark hair and a snaggle-toothed grin.

“She’s gorgeous, Valerie. But what about your ex? He never hit...” I began before she stopped me.

“Oh, no. The guy who attacked me isn’t Summer’s dad. I was actually married to Summer’s daddy. He left me for another woman which wrecked my self-esteem and made me susceptible to the likes of that loser. He saw me coming a mile away.”

“How’d you even meet this guy?”

“At the divorce party my friends insisted on throwing me at a club over in Dayton. He was line dancing right next to me and bought me a drink afterwards. I ended up at his place that night. It should have just been a one-night stand, but he said all the right things, and it got serious. I wasn’t in a good place when I met him, and I lived to regret it.”

“You kept your daughter safe, though,” I pointed out.

She let out a bitter laugh. “If he would have laid so much as a finger on my baby, I’d be the one in prison right now and he’d be doing the Cha Cha slide in hell.”

We both laughed and I realized how desperately I needed not just the sugar rush but someone to talk to and laugh with. Not that I felt like I had a right to laugh.

Valerie must’ve seen the smile literally melt off my face and instantly reached out and squeezed my hand.

“Hey, don’t do that.”

“What?” I gently pulled my hand from hers, uncomfortable by the sudden personal contact.

“I know that look. For about ten seconds you allowed yourself to be happy and now you’re feeling guilty, am I right?”

“Was it that obvious?”

“Troy wouldn’t want us to grieve him forever. It’s okay to laugh. It doesn’t mean that you don’t miss him. We’ll be grieving him for the rest of our lives, but that doesn’t mean we stop living.” She got up from the table and cleared away the empty plates and tossed the empty cinnamon roll box into the trash while I sat and watched her. Then she turned and gave me the once-over and shook her head.

“What?” I self-consciously ran my fingers through my nearly bald head. I hadn’t had the strength to put on anything other than loose fitting pajamas, but I did at least have a sports bra on underneath and tennis shoes on my feet.

“Are you going to stay in your pajamas all day? Have you even had a shower?”

I instantly sniffed my pits and while they didn’t smell, I was hardly what you would call fresh as a daisy. The pain in my hips and legs meant I didn’t have the strength to stand in the shower, yet I couldn’t get in and out of the bathtub either. I’d been using the adult cleansing wipes the hospital sent me home with and figured, since I would not be engaging with the public anytime soon, that would be fine until I got my strength back. I’d honestly thought Valerie wouldn’t come back. Yet here she was, eyeing me like I was a dirty stray dog she found on the street.

“Hey, there’s a medical supply store a few blocks from here that has just what you need. I’ll be right back.” She left before I could ask her what she

was talking about.

I had resumed packing when the doorbell rang. Figuring it was Valerie coming back from wherever she'd gone, I painstakingly made my way to the door on my walker. But when I opened the door, it wasn't Valerie standing there. Instead, it was an older black woman who looked to be in her late fifties with salt and pepper hair pulled back into a severe bun at the back of her head. She wore no makeup and a slightly wrinkled, tan-colored pantsuit with black flats and a navy-blue blouse.

"Taylor Ambrose?" Her voice was low and slightly husky, and before I could ask who exactly she was, she pulled out a badge and held it up for me to look at.

She was with the police. Why would someone from the police department be here looking for me? I had made a statement to the police already and told them everything I could remember, which wasn't a lot. I couldn't recall everything about my last day with my husband. I remembered him walking off ahead of me, down the trail that we had been hiking to the overlook with the view of the city below. The next thing I remember was lying fifteen feet down a steep drop on the other side of that overlook, and looking to my right to see Troy lying broken and bleeding beside me.

The railing at the overlook had given way and we had fallen. I must've landed on top of Troy and his body had broken my fall. I remember screaming when they told me what had happened after I finally emerged from my coma in the hospital. The doctors had assured me that Troy had died instantly of a broken neck, and that my landing on top of him wouldn't have hurt him because he was already dead. And my guilt and my grief wouldn't let me accept that. In my mind I had killed my husband when I landed on top of him, and it had all been deemed a tragic accident. Now this woman was on my doorstep flashing a badge in my face.

"Are you Taylor Ambrose?" she asked again when I continued to stare blankly at her.

"I'm Taylor."

"I'm Detective Laurel King with the Weatherly police department. Is this a good time? Can I come in?"

"Depends." I realized I didn't have to talk to this woman if I didn't want to. "What do you want with me, Detective?"

“I just need to clear up a few loose ends about you and your husband’s accident before I can sign off on the case.”

“I don’t remember talking to you before.” Now I was really confused.

“I was on another case and I’m sorry for your loss, but there are a few details that I need to go over with you. This isn’t anything personal. I’m just being thorough and doing my job. Can I come in?”

I stepped aside. She took in the boxes everywhere and the general dishevelment of the house. I was happy she didn’t ask me if I was moving at least.

“We can talk here in the living room.” I gestured towards the only neat and clean space in the house currently. Is there anything I can get you? I’m afraid all I have is bottled water.”

“No. I’m fine, thanks.” She settled herself on the couch and I sat in a chair on the other side of the coffee table. “I was going over your statement about what happened on the day of your and your husband’s accident. I was wondering why you didn’t mention the confrontation you and your husband had in the parking lot?”

“Confrontation? I don’t know what you’re talking about?”

Detective King pulled her cell phone out of the pocket inside her suit jacket, tapped the screen a couple of times, and then scrolled before getting up to hand me her phone across the table. I took it and froze. On the screen was a video that must’ve been taken from the parking lot of the Weatherly Park Overlook. It showed me and Troy with our backs to the camera. But a white woman in hiking gear with long blonde hair pulled into a ponytail, and a very angry look on her face, was gesticulating wildly as Troy held up his hands, backing away from her. I was looking from her to my husband in confusion. I didn’t remember this at all. Whenever I thought back on that day, this scene with whoever this woman was wasn’t amongst my fragmented memories.

“Do you know who that woman is or why she was so angry at your husband?”

“No. Sorry. I don’t remember much about that day. Why is this important?”

Detective King merely stared at me with an unreadable expression on her face. Clearly, I had not given her the answer she had been looking for.

“It’s important because two people ended up falling over the side of the Weatherly Park Overlook and we need to know exactly how and why. I’d

have thought you'd want answers about what happened to you and your husband as well, Ms. Ambrose."

I glared at her before letting out a weary sigh. "Of course I want to know what happened? Are you saying you think this woman had something to do with our accident?"

"That's what I'm trying to determine. We have not been able to identify the woman in this video and no one your husband knows recognizes her either. She was awfully angry about something and maybe finding her will be another piece of the missing puzzle."

"What about the railing? Was it determined it was rusted before we fell?"

"That's just it, Ms. Ambrose. The Overlook *was closed* that day. There were signs up. But as you can see in the CCTV video, the signs are gone. Someone removed them. However, they were there up until an hour before you and your husband arrived."

"Was this mystery person caught on video removing these signs? Was it that woman from the parking lot?"

"There was a power fluctuation which caused a loss in video signal during the timeframe where the signs were removed."

"Of course the park would tell you that. They don't want a lawsuit."

"Are you planning to sue them?"

I ignored her question. "Detective, what do you think happened to us that day? Because it sounds like you think some kind of foul play was involved, which I didn't hear from the other detective I spoke to. What was his name?"

"That was Detective Mason and he's currently out on medical leave. My apologies if you weren't made aware of that."

"I'm sorry to hear that. But I still don't understand what information I can give you that I haven't already."

"Ms. Ambrose, I'll be frank with you. Most widows who've lost their husbands the way you did go to great lengths to get answers. Yet we've heard nothing from you since you emerged from your coma. No status requests from the police station or the park, because I checked. Why is that?" She stared at me. Waiting.

I had nothing to tell her because I didn't know the answer to that question myself.

Instead, I stood up. “Detective, I am very tired, and I have a lot of work to do. I promise if I remember anything that might be relevant to what happened to us that day, I will give you a call.” I knew she didn’t get whatever answers she’d come for. That was just too bad. I was almost to the door when I realized she wasn’t following me. I knew if I asked if she had another question, she’d come up with something, but it was time for her to go. My annoyance must have shown on my face because she finally joined me at the door and gave me a thin smile.

“Thank you for speaking to me, Ms. Ambrose. Please be aware that I may need to speak with you again. Hopefully, next time will be under better circumstances when you’ve settled into wherever you’re going.” She gestured towards the empty boxes in the hallway. “Please keep the police department updated on your new address.”

Seconds later, she disappeared out the front door and I watched her walk down the driveway. I was at the dining room table when Valerie returned holding a stainless-steel stool, with adjustable legs and a curved seat.

“Who was that woman who just left? Are you okay?”

If there’s anything I’ve learned about Valerie in the short time that I’ve known her, it’s that she was extremely intuitive, not that it would take much to figure out my visitor had upset me by the look on my face.

“Just a police detective with a few lingering questions about the accident. What’s that?” I know she knew I was changing the subject, but I didn’t want to talk about this with her.

“This, my dear, is a shower stool. Which way is your bathroom, because you are in desperate need of a shower and now you can sit down and take one.”

I wasn’t about to argue with someone who’d just told me I was funky. Ten minutes later, I was sitting on the stool in my shower with steaming hot water streaming over my body as I scrubbed myself with a loofah and my favorite lemon and honey body wash. I scrubbed everywhere. It felt like not only just a layer of dirt and hospital grime sliding down the drain in a perfumed flood, but also some of my anger, guilt, worry, and anxiety was being sloughed off and heading down the drain. I had seriously underestimated the value of hot, soapy water. I showered until the water turned cold and I had no choice but to get out.

Valerie had set out bath towels, and I dried myself off and headed back to the master suite where a bra, some panties, a pair of burgundy leggings,

and a matching pullover with a hoodie was waiting for me. I put on lotion and got dressed. I felt so much better and one small step closer to feeling like myself again. There wasn't much I could do about my hair. It had grown out enough that it had started to curl. So I just ran some leave-in conditioner through it while it was still damp.

I headed back to the dining room when I saw a sight that made me freeze in my tracks. Valerie was in the middle of picking up all the things I had swept onto the floor the day before from the dining room table. She had all the papers gathered in a neat stack and was flipping through them.

"What are you doing?" She jumped before turning to give me a sheepish look.

"Sorry. But I noticed these were your care plans from the rehab center and that you have prescriptions that need to be refilled."

"I appreciate you helping me, but I really don't feel comfortable with you looking through my things."

Valerie didn't seem the least bit fazed or embarrassed. "I get it. Have you been doing anything recommended in these care plans? The recommended exercises? The follow-up appointments?"

I hadn't done a single thing of the care plans. I'd barely even looked at them. Admitting that made me feel stupid, so I just shrugged instead and made my way past her to sink down onto a dining room chair.

"You shouldn't be picking up my mess. I can clean all of this up. Please just leave all the stuff on the floor and I'll get it." I held my hand out for her to hand me the stack of papers she'd been flipping through. She hesitated just a moment before handing them to me.

As she did, a small piece of paper fluttered from between the stack of full-sized papers to the floor. I instantly recognized it and almost dove on top of it to keep her from seeing it. But I wasn't quick enough. She snatched it from the floor before I had a chance to reach it. Her eyes went wide with shock.

"What in the world is this, Taylor?"

I didn't even have to look at it to know what she was talking about. After coming home from the rehab center, I began reading through the care plans only to find a note amongst the instructions. It read: *It should have been you.*

"Is this why you checked out of rehab against doctor's orders?"

"How did you know that?"

She gave me a look of pity that made me want to scream as she put a hand on my shoulder and crouched down in front of me. “Taylor, you told me, remember? It was yesterday when we were talking in the living room.”

I did not remember telling her that, but I wasn’t about to call her a liar either.

“It’s okay if you don’t remember. You’re doing so well having experienced what you have. It’s only a matter of time before it all comes back to you.”

Much to my horror I started crying. Valerie stood up and got me a tissue from the living room, then picked up the rest of the things I had swept onto the floor, to give me time to pull myself together.

“Can I assume that you didn’t tell that detective about this note?”

“If I called the police every time I got a nasty note from one of my husband’s fans wishing I’d died in his place, they wouldn’t have time to investigate real crimes.”

“How many of these notes have you gotten?”

“Too many to count and none that I’ve taken seriously.” It wasn’t the truth, but I didn’t want her to worry. “You should’ve seen what happened after we got married. Lots of disgruntled emails and DMs from disappointed female fans, upset they weren’t the new Mrs. Troy Bellows. It just comes with the territory. People just like to vent. So many people don’t have much else going on in their lives, and created some kind of weird parasocial relationship with Troy. So, what kind of nursing do you do?” I didn’t want to talk about the notes anymore. She got the hint and gave me a tentative smile.

“I’m a general home health RN. That’s how I was able to dead lift you off the floor and into the living room, then onto the couch.”

I must’ve flushed with embarrassment because Valerie threw her head back and laughed. “Don’t tell me you’re more embarrassed about that than me telling you that you smelled.” We both started laughing. “By the way, you smell human again. Those wipes do a good job in the absence of a real shower or a bath, but everybody needs some hot soapy water on their body on a regular basis.”

“Damn. Are you always this blunt?”

“Only when I need to be. Trust me, it was just as much for my benefit that you be clean as it was for you. Despite what you say, I can tell you need a lot of help, and you only have a few more days to get it all done.

Although, I'm still going to bug you about getting a lawyer to look into all of this. I never liked Lloyd and I sure as hell don't trust him."

"I didn't realize you knew him that well."

"I don't. I do know his type, though, and I will never understand what my brother saw in that man. But Troy would be anybody's friend. Even after he became rich and famous, he didn't always make good choices when it came to the people he surrounded himself with, because if he did, he never would've married Miss Ohio."

I chuckled. Troy's ex, Cheri, was a former Miss Ohio. She handed me a box and then carried three more into my bedroom as I trailed her like a snail with the box she gave me balanced on top of my walker.

"Why don't you get started packing up your bedroom and I'll get started upstairs. What's up here that needs to be boxed up?"

"My office is down the hallway on the left. If you could start boxing up the books in there, I would really appreciate it. I haven't managed to make it to the second floor since I got home from the hospital."

"Say no more." She disappeared up the stairs and I headed into the bedroom, feeling an urgency to get this over with that I hadn't felt before Detective King's visit.

An hour later I had my entire vanity packed, including all of my jewelry and accessories. I was dreading packing the clothes, shoes, and purses Troy had bought me. I'd never been into designer labels and didn't need expensive clothes, but Troy insisted and got oddly irritated when I protested. So I accepted everything he gave me with a smile on my face and wore them to galas and fundraisers, and even the ESPY awards. Most of the time, though, they stayed in their boxes and garment bags in my closet. Balancing on my walker, I looked around my walk-in closet and realized I could sell all of this, too, when I had the time.

Against my better judgment, I made my way over to the other side of the room where Troy's walk-in closet was. Filled with everything from athleisure to custom-made suits and Italian loafers, and at least four tuxedos. There was a sweatshirt lying on top of the dresser where he kept his underwear and workout clothes. I picked it up and buried my face in it, inhaling the scent of Dior Sauvage that he loved to wear. He had a collection of about one hundred bottles of cologne. But the Dior was his favorite because it was my favorite. I could never smell it on anyone without thinking about him. I willed away the tears that suddenly filled my

eyes. I grabbed the bottle of cologne and the sweatshirt to pack up with my things.

I found his jewelry box in the top dresser drawer and took the garnet cufflinks he'd worn with his wedding tux, as well as the vintage Omega watch I gave him as a wedding gift. I still remember the big smile on his face when he opened the box. I could remember that day so clearly, but so many other memories of my husband eluded me. I remembered certain items of his clothing but not everything that was in his closet. I didn't know if it was because they were things he had before we got married, or if I just couldn't remember them. My doctor told me my memories would probably eventually come back, but there was no timeline on when that would happen. Even though the swelling in my brain was now gone, there were still so many gaping holes in my memory.

I continued to go through Troy's dresser drawers one by one, hoping whatever I found in each of them would jog my memory. I kept coming back to what Detective King had told me. Who was that woman in the parking lot? I didn't believe for a single second that Troy had been cheating on me. He had his fair share of groupies, many of whom were bold and disrespectful enough to flirt with him in front of me, and he shut every single one of them down by introducing me to them and putting his arm protectively around me. Most of them got the hint and left, but there were still some who just didn't care and carried on until he called security to have them removed, or we just simply got up and left.

He brought me up in every interview he'd given since we'd gotten serious. This thought triggered a memory that had me sitting down on the bench in the center of the closet to rest my legs and catch my breath. I'd remembered one interview Troy had been conducting on his podcast with a female tennis player, an attractive, recently retired, and very single tennis player who purposely brought me up.

"When is that bestselling wife of yours going to write another book?" is exactly how she'd put it.

At which point Troy had said, without hesitation, "She's actually working on something right now. We're hoping it'll be out next year." That comment sparked one of the most intense arguments we'd ever had. The memory of it took my breath away.

"Why did you tell her that? You know I'm nowhere close to finishing my next book. Now people are going to be expecting a new book from me

next year. No pressure there, huh?”

“Then you’ve been lying to me. You’ve been locking yourself in your office for hours. If you’re not up there writing, then what the hell are you doing?” He’s snapped back at me with more venom than I’d known he was capable of.

“Why is me writing another book so damned important to you?”

“I cannot stand to see you wasting your talent. What else are you going to do, Taylor? You don’t want kids. So, what else are you going to do?”

Shocked, I just stared at him as tears filled my eyes. Troy and I had come to a mutual decision that we did not want children. I was only thirty-four and even though I could still conceive, there was nothing my life was lacking that having a child would fulfill. We’d had some very serious, and what I thought were honest, conversations about children. Troy assured me that ship had sailed for him. He had a big and full enough life and didn’t need kids at this late stage of his life. He had no interest in being a forty-six-year-old first-time father.

Troy saw the tears in my eyes and reached out to touch me, but I shoved his hand away, grabbed my car keys from the hall table and took off. I went for a long drive and stopped at one of my favorite cafés. I nursed a matcha latte for over an hour, ignoring Troy’s phone calls and texts apologizing. When I finally went back home over two hours later, there was a candlelit dinner set at the dining table. Troy pulled out one of the dining room chairs for me just as soon as I glanced into the dining room. I hated when we argued, probably because we rarely did. Without a word, I went over to the dining table and sat on the chair, and he instantly sank to his knees and buried his head in my lap. We stayed that way for a long time.

“Don’t cry. I’m sorry.”

Troy’s head instantly lifted and I could see no tears in his eyes. “I thought you knew I don’t do tears. I’m a man and men stay strong for their families. My dad taught me that.” He stood up and kissed me on the cheek before sitting down on the opposite side of the table.

I couldn’t believe I had forgotten about that argument. My cheeks were wet with tears as I thought about how important writing another book had been to my husband, and now he would never see my name on another book cover ever. But who was I fooling? Whether he survived the accident or not, he was still never going to see my name on another novel ever. I’ve been trying for eight years. Unbeknownst to anyone except my former

editor and agent, I completed another novel that my editor panned as a sorely lacking follow-up not up to the standard of *Lottie Mae*. I remember shredding each page one by one and deleting the file. Not long after that I was dropped by my publisher and parted ways with my literary agent.

I pushed that memory aside and quickly got back up and continued searching through Troy's dresser drawers, scared of what I might find that would bring another unwanted memory flooding back. Instead, all I found were several unopened bottles of vitamin supplements and a bottle of prescription meds, something called diazepam. My late husband suffered from insomnia and vertigo and took daily meds for both, but I didn't recognize this medication. Next were T-shirts, briefs, socks, workout clothes and a deep bottom drawer full of about fifty bottles of cologne that had never been opened, probably sent to him by brands wanting him to endorse them. I was rooting around the cologne drawer wondering what to do with all this stuff when I came across a small metal box at the back of the drawer.

I picked it up and pulled off the lid just to find a bunch of junky knickknacks. One diamond hoop earring missing its earring back, a heart-shaped locket on a thin gold chain, a pair of earbuds, a turquoise hair clip, a bunch of hair scrunchies, a tube of Chanel lipstick in the shade Rouge Allure Velvet, and a pair of black cat-eyed Gucci sunglasses. I looked at each item and didn't recognize any of it. None of this stuff was mine. Was it? And why would Troy have this in his drawer and, from the looks of it, hidden in the back?

"You've been holding out on me, sis." Valerie's voice startled me so bad I dropped the little box of trinkets and they scattered in all directions on the closet floor.

"You scared the shit out of me." My hands were clamped over my heart, trying to keep it from beating out of my chest.

"I am so sorry. I didn't mean to scare you." She quickly picked up all the trinkets, putting them back into the box and then handing it to me. "Check to make sure it's all there and I didn't miss anything."

"Thanks. But I'm not sure I would know if everything was in there because I just opened this box a couple of minutes ago. I have no idea what all this stuff is."

"Where did you find it?"

"In that bottom drawer. It was hidden in the back."

Valerie took the lid off the box, and I could tell she was seeing all this stuff for the first time too. “None of this stuff is yours?”

“Not that I remember.”

Valerie noticed the open drawer full of brand-new cologne still in their boxes, and let out a low whistle. “This must be a couple of thousand dollars’ worth of cologne. What are you going to do with all this?”

“I have no idea.”

“I volunteer at a charity clothes closet for people getting back on their feet who need professional clothes for interviews and jobs. I bet a lot of those guys would love to have a bottle of this cologne.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea. Just don’t tell them where it came from, got it?”

“Can I ask you a question?”

I figured I knew exactly what she was going to ask, and to be honest they were questions that needed asking, ones I didn’t really have a whole lot of answers for. “Go for it.”

“What the hell are you going to do after you leave here? I mean, in your current state. Do you even have health coverage anymore? I’m assuming you were under Troy’s health insurance, right?”

I nodded slowly. There were so many questions and things that needed to be looked into, and I just hadn’t had the strength to do any of it. “I’ve been told by the billing department at the hospital that I have about thirty days left to get new health insurance so there won’t be any lapse in my cover. I went to the website she told me to go to, but it just felt so overwhelming that I never filled out the online form.”

“What about his pension? He was retired. Was he receiving a pension from the NFL and wouldn’t you as his widow be the recipient of that?”

“No. He wasn’t scheduled to receive his pension from the NFL until he turned fifty-five. And I’m not sure how much of his retirement annuity is left. According to Lloyd, he’d borrowed pretty heavily from it and hadn’t paid it back.”

I buried my face in my hands. I honestly didn’t know what the hell I was going to do once I left this house. I hadn’t even found an apartment yet. The taking it one day at a time motto I had adopted since leaving the hospital wasn’t cutting it. There were serious decisions that needed to be made, and I needed to pull my head out of my ass and handle my business. My hands were gently pulled away from my face, and I looked up to see

Valerie kneeling in front of me. She grabbed both my hands and squeezed them.

“You’re not alone. Troy was my brother and I’m going to help you in any way that I can. So I’ll stop asking you questions. But you need to seriously rethink selling some of this stuff before that auction house get in here to assess everything. And I’m not talking about big things like his cars or his championship rings, but small stuff they won’t know about.”

“Like what?”

“Some of his jewelry. Did he have anything in a safe? Money, coins, anything else of value?”

We did have a safe in the house. The big question was, could I remember where it was and, more importantly, what the combination was? I thought long and hard for several minutes and then it came to me.

“Follow me.” I slowly made my way out into the bedroom where a large landscape painting of the Ohio river that I hated hung above our bed. I tugged hard on the right side of it, and it swung out revealing a combination safe behind it.

“Wow. Fancy.” Valerie looked impressed.

“Don’t be too impressed. Because I can’t remember the combination.”

“Just relax. As a matter of fact, it’s lunchtime and I’m hungry. Why don’t you take a nap while I raid your refrigerator and rustle us up something to eat.”

She didn’t have to ask me twice. I was exhausted both mentally and physically. I merely nodded as I sank down to the edge of the bed and watched Valerie leave the room.

When I finally woke up groggy and confused, I looked over at the clock on the bedside table and saw that it was almost 3 o’clock. Why hadn’t Valerie woken me up?

“Valerie!” There was no answer. I slowly swung my legs over the side of the bed, instantly feeling dizzy. Took me five minutes before I could pull myself up by my walker.

I headed out into the hallway and saw that the house was empty. No Valerie in the dining room or the kitchen. I called up the steps again and got no answer. I went back to the kitchen to find a note taped to the refrigerator that I hadn’t noticed before.

T.

Sorry I had to go. Your lunch is in the fridge. I'll call to check up with you later and I'll see you in the morning. Get some rest and be ready to work.

PS: Did you remember the combination to the safe?

V.

I looked in the refrigerator and saw a plate with a thick tuna sandwich on it and a container of pasta salad. I knew none of that stuff had been in my refrigerator and realized she must've gone out and bought it. As I sat eating in the dining room, I wondered how much money I had in my purse so I could reimburse her in the morning. I didn't like owing people. And sister-in-law or not, I felt my indebtedness to Valerie ticking up past what I was comfortable with. Suddenly, the thought of her question made the forkful of pasta salad stop halfway to my mouth. Had I even known what the combination to the safe was? I couldn't think of anything I owned that was valuable enough to be locked up in a safe.

What was my husband keeping in there? Or had this just been something that came with the house and I was going to be disappointed if we got it open and found it was empty? In the meantime, Valerie was right. I needed to be looking around the house for things I could take and sell quickly. I doubted I'd be able to find a seller for these things before I left, but that didn't mean I couldn't pack them up and sell them later. I finished the last of my food. Grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and did something I probably shouldn't have given my limited mobility. I headed out to Troy's office above our six-car garage.

SEVEN

DETECTIVE KING

Detective King stood in Captain Margo Talbot's office, forcing her expression to remain neutral. The only thing that hinted at her serious annoyance was the tightening of her lips. She'd been told over a week ago to drop the Troy Bellows investigation. It had been ruled a tragic accident, and no amount of convincing would make her boss see there was something that just wasn't adding up about the case.

"Am I very clear, Detective? You are to sign off on the Bellows' case because if I have to do it, it's not going to be very good for you."

"Yes, ma'am." There was a sarcastic edge to her voice that made Captain Talbot's right eyebrow raise. "I'll sign off on the report and have it on your desk by Friday," she added quickly.

King was less than two years away from being able to retire from this hellhole and had every intention of doing what she was told. Yet she couldn't quite put a finger on why the Bellows' case was bothering her so much. It's not like she'd been a fan of Troy Bellows. She hated football, preferring baseball and tennis.

King had read *Lottie Mae* after it had hit the *New York Times* bestsellers list. She wasn't into historical fiction, but it was rare to see black authors on that list, and she'd wanted to see what all the hype was about. Although the book was well written and researched, King thought it was depressing as hell. Lottie Mae's journey culminates in her arriving at her destination only to succumb to the vices of the Big Apple, realizing too late that she'd already had everything she needed back home. One book critic said it was *The Wizard of Oz* if Dorothy got trapped in the underbelly of Oz and the Scarecrow, the Cowardly Lion, and the Tin Man were a pimp, a thief, and a drug addict. However, even the critic couldn't deny Taylor Ambrose was a very talented writer.

King remembered seeing her on one of the morning talk shows right after *Lottie Mae* hit the NYT bestsellers list. She remembered how impressed she'd been with Taylor Ambrose. How charming and enthusiastic she'd been. Not to mention well dressed, polished, and poised. King had been shocked when she had arrived at the Bellows' mansion and met his widow. The Taylor Ambrose of today was nothing like the vibrant woman

she'd been eight years ago. Granted, she'd been through a very traumatic experience. But it was more than that.

She'd lost her spark. King wasn't judging her for that. She was hardly the same woman she'd been back then either. Even as recently as eight years ago, she'd still been determined to change the world and protect people. Now she was just marking days on her calendar until she could draw a pension and put her career at the Weatherly police department behind her and move on to something else. Not that she had any idea what that would be. But working a job that made her jaded, bitter, and disappointed in humanity on a daily basis was no way to live.

King also knew she had very little to go on to prove to the chief that they needed to dig deeper, and still couldn't figure out why she cared so much. She hadn't been able to track down the woman in the parking lot who'd confronted Bellows that day, but she had gotten a call that morning about an anomaly in Taylor Ambrose's medical report and headed out the door to the coroner's office.

"You got that report for me, Ed?" Edward Reynolds was a new county coroner and had only been working for a department for less than two years. He was very thorough and more importantly, he owed her a favor for talking a judge into giving his adult daughter community service instead of jail time when she got caught shoplifting. And it was time to collect.

"Got it right here." He handed her a file folder. She opened it, not sure why because she knew she wouldn't be able to make head or tail of what the hell she was reading.

"And?"

"And, this is the one and only time I'm doing this. I shouldn't be looking at medical reports of a living person. I only do dead people." His face instantly turned bright red when he realized what he'd just said, and King stifled a laugh.

"Got it. I promise. After this, we're officially even. So, what did you find?"

"Her injuries are pretty standard for having taken a fifteen-foot fall onto a rock ledge, including the lacerations to her scalp, all except the one to her hairline." His eyes were bright with excitement, and it took everything in King's power not to reach inside his mouth to pull the words out.

"Well, what is it?" He pointed to a paragraph, and King pulled a pair of readers out of her pocket. "Paint flecks in the wound? What does this

mean?”

“It means someone hit this woman on the head with something prior to her fall.”

“Could the paint have come from the railing that gave way? Maybe she hit her head on it.”

“There was no paint on the railing and if there were, I’m pretty sure it wouldn’t have been metallic pink.”

“Thanks, Reynolds. Consider us even.” King turned to walk away when he stopped her.

“Wait. There was something else.” He tried to show her something in the file folder, but she held up her hand.

“Just tell me.”

He gave her a sheepish grin. “She had high levels of an anxiety drug called diazepam in her system.”

“So she took medication for anxiety. What’s the problem?”

“Well, like I said, the levels were higher than the normal dosage.”

“How much higher?”

“Three times the normal dosage.”

What in the world had happened to Taylor Ambrose that she needed such a high dosage of an anxiety drug? Was it because her writing career was over?

“What would the side effects of taking such a high dose be?”

“At those levels it causes dementia-like symptoms.”

King thanked Reynolds and left not sure what the hell to make of this new information.

EIGHT

TAYLOR

Once I made it out to the garage, I was surprised I couldn't get in. The side door to the garage was locked. Painfully, I made my way up the side stairs to the entrance to Troy's office above the garage. I stood at the door thinking for a long minute, but I couldn't remember the code. I punched in our house number, our wedding date, Troy's birthday. None of them worked. I had two more tries before it locked me out completely. I punched in my birthday and the indicator light instantly turned green, letting me know the door was unlocked.

I took a deep breath before pushing the door open. The room was dark, but I immediately caught a faint whiff of Troy's cologne as I fumbled around on the wall to my left. I found the lights switch and flipped it on, flooding the room with light and showing it to have been undisturbed since the last time Troy had been in here, which had been the morning of our accident. An early riser, Troy spent two hours in this office that morning editing his last interview. He could've paid someone to do it for him, but he insisted on doing everything himself. I once asked him if he'd always been a control freak and although he chuckled, I could tell I'd annoyed him but couldn't understand why.

"I wouldn't say I'm a control freak. I'm just a perfectionist. If you grew up with a father like mine, you'd have learned that anything less than perfection wasn't tolerated." His expression was grim as he stared off into space obviously remembering something unpleasant.

"It's okay, honey. I was just joking." I hadn't been joking. My husband *had* been a control freak and, apparently, had a complicated relationship with his father as well.

"I know." He'd pulled me into a hug, but I got the distinct impression he had been offended.

I walked over to the desk where Troy conducted his interviews and saw that his favorite Capitals coffee mug was still sitting where he'd left it, and had accumulated an island of greenish mold floating on the top. I grabbed it and took it to the small kitchenette on the far side of the room and dumped it, rinsed it out, and then set it on the counter so I could take it with me when I left. I didn't come up here very often when he was alive but wasn't

surprised that it was neat as a pin with not so much as a crumb on the hardwood floor although everything now had a light covering of dust on it.

When I opened the curtains, dust motes floated through the air. If Troy were alive, he'd be appalled. The room was filled with an expensive computer, microphones, lighting kit and everything needed to conduct a podcast. The opposite side of where Troy sat to conduct his interviews was a large leather chair his guests sat in that he jokingly called the hot seat. I went behind his desk, sat in his chair and pulled open the drawer to my right to see if there was anything else in here that I wanted to keep other than his coffee mug. I was pretty sure the auction house would be auctioning off all the podcasting equipment, not that I had any need for any of it. I decided once I'd gone through the drawers to see if anything important was in them, I'd go back to the house.

In another drawer I found neatly arranged pens, pencils, sticky notes, paperclips, scissors, and several packs of breath mints. Also inside the drawer was a pile of notebooks on top of which sat a black flip phone. Seeing it made my heart sink. Not long before we got married, Troy interviewed an up-and-coming, rookie running back on his podcast. After the interview he brought the guy back to the house for a catered lunch with him and his agent. I joined them and during lunch I remembered hearing two different sets of ringtones coming from the guy's pocket. Both Troy and the guy's agent looked at him and burst out laughing. The guy gave both of them a sheepish look but ignored both the ringing phones and proceeded with lunch. Later, I asked Troy what that had been about and he said that a lot of players, even the married ones, had two cell phones. One was a regular phone that they used to communicate with their wives and families. The other was called the side phone for all their side chicks and groupies. He seemed to think it was funny, but when he noticed the look on my face, he instantly stopped laughing.

"What's wrong?" He was genuinely confused.

"Where is your side phone, Troy?" The ice that dripped from my words made him flinch and he cleared his throat.

"I... I won't lie. I'm not a perfect man, Taylor. I did have one until I met Cheri. She found it and broke up with me. When I managed to win her back, I never had one again. Too much complication and I needed to keep my head on straight for the game. I don't know how these young guys do it, juggling all these women, making all these babies, racking up a bunch of

child support and not to mention betraying the woman that you stood before God, family, and friends and promised to forsake all others for.”

But what else could he have said in that moment? Because now I was looking at potential proof that he wasn’t the man I thought he was. Could Detective King be right? Was Troy cheating on me with that woman from the park? I knew retired Troy Bellows, who loved to barbecue on Saturdays in the summer. Used a riding mower to cut our grass and stopped and bought from every little kid in the neighborhood who had a lemonade stand or showed up on our doorstep selling fundraiser candy. Was that who he really was, or had it been a mask? I grabbed the cell phone, flipped it open and was relieved that it was dead. Then I noticed what had been lying under the flip phone. A large rubber-banded stack of bills. No wonder I’d had no idea of how much debt he was in. He’d hidden all the demand for payment notices in this desk as well as several unused credit cards still in their envelopes that had yet to be activated. There was no way I was leaving all this behind for the appraisers to find. I searched the other drawers and found two more stacks of bills.

“Damn you, Troy,” I said aloud as I gathered it all up, feeling stupid as I fought tears. As I sat there in the quiet lifeless room that had once been filled by my husband’s laugh and big personality, I suddenly remembered the combination to the safe.

Once I got back to the house, I took my pain meds. I probably should’ve waited until they kicked in, but I was too excited. So I forced myself up on still aching legs and pulled back the painting and punched in my birthday, the same code as the keypad to Troy’s office. I was rewarded by a soft click. I grabbed the handle and pulled it open. I don’t know what I was expecting to see there but was a little disappointed to only find a small box that looked like it held a ring. I grabbed it and pulled it out, then opened it to see Troy’s first Super Bowl championship ring. Troy had all of his championship rings in a safe deposit box at the bank. He displayed replicas of the rings in his office along with his trophies and jerseys.

I looked at the ring in confusion and something Troy told me not long after we’d first met came back to me. He told me that the very first Super Bowl ring he received, the letter S was left off Bellows. He said the team made sure he got a corrected version of the ring. He kept the one with the misspelled name, knowing that one day, if he had the career that he was planning on having, this ring’s value would skyrocket. It must be worth a

fortune now, and the fact that my birthday was the combination to the safe could only mean that he had meant for me to find it. This ring was mine. Tears filled my eyes, and I clutched the tiny box to my chest. This meant enough to my husband for him to keep it separate from all of his other rings. Did Lloyd know about it? If he didn't, I planned to keep it that way. I put the ring in my jewelry box.

True to her word, Valerie arrived by eight the next morning with coffee and chocolate donuts. This time, I drank the coffee as well as eating two of the donuts. I was dressed and ready by the time she arrived and was pleased to see her looking at me approvingly.

"Hey," I told her as she headed back upstairs to pack more of my office. "What did you mean when you said I was holding out on you the other day? We got sidetracked and you never told me what you meant."

"Well, I know I've probably been living under a rock, but I swear I didn't know you were a bestselling author."

"How do you know that?"

"I'm the one that's packing up your office, remember? I saw the framed book poster up there. And not just any bestseller. You're a *New York Times* bestselling author."

I was suddenly self-conscious and took another sip of my coffee. "That was a million years ago. I'm not that girl anymore."

"What do you mean? From the looks of it up there, it seems like you're working on a new book."

"Nope. I was just doing it to make the husband happy. For some reason it was very important to him that I write another book."

"Another book as in you've never written another book after that one?"

"Exactly."

"Why is that, if you don't mind me asking?"

"My mom got sick not long after my debut hit it big and I dropped everything to be her caretaker in her final years. After that I was just blocked and writing just didn't hold the same meaning and excitement for me anymore." I was surprised I told her all of that. I wasn't even sure I told Troy exactly why I'd stopped writing. Maybe if I had, he wouldn't have pressed me so hard about writing another book.

"Well, you definitely shouldn't do anything that your heart isn't in. Why do you think it was important to my brother that you write another book?"

“I honestly don’t know. There is one reason I could think of, but it doesn’t make my late husband look very good.”

“What?” Her eyes narrowed, and I instantly regretted bringing up.

“Never mind. It’s nothing.”

“No. You brought it up. Now out with it.”

I told her what I’d overheard Lloyd telling Troy about needing to surround himself with winners and as a formerly famous author whose fifteen minutes were up a long time ago, I wasn’t cutting it.

“I know you’re not about to tell me that Troy agreed with this ignorant ass, are you?”

“Not at all. As a matter of fact, he didn’t speak to Lloyd again for months after that. Like I said. I have no idea what Troy was thinking.”

“If I know my brother, and I think I did, football was what he was talented at and he used that to create a life that he loved. And I know having to retire and realize that his body and his abilities just weren’t the same anymore probably killed him. But writing is something that you could do probably right up to your dying day. He just didn’t want to see you wasting your talent.”

“It needs to be something I want too. And I’m not sure if I ever want to write another book again. The level of attention that book got was overwhelming for me as a debut novelist. And I don’t really know if I want that level of fame again. I think I might like to write another book again one day. On my own terms and in my own time.”

“That sounds reasonable to me.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Yeah, sure. What do you want to know?”

“Why did you get that weird look on your face when I said something about Lloyd and Cheri being cousins?”

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Because they’re not cousins. They’re not related by blood.”

I distinctly remembered Troy introducing me to Lloyd and telling me later that he was his ex-wife’s cousin. “Then why would Troy tell me that?”

“They’re cousins the way a lot of us are cousins. Their mothers were best friends since college, and they both got pregnant at the same time. So Lloyd’s mom became an auntie to Cheri and Cheri’s mom became an auntie to Lloyd.”

“Oh, I guess that makes sense.”

Valerie's face fell and I knew there was more to the story. I didn't press when I could tell it was something she didn't want to talk about. As she helped me sort through the clothes in my closet, delegating them into keep, donate, and sell piles, she became uncharacteristically quiet. Finally, she threw one of my blouses into the donation pile and stood up and let out a sigh.

"Alright, I may as well tell you this and get it out of the way because I know you're wondering." I didn't have to ask her what she meant. I knew she was about to tell me why and how she and Troy became estranged.

"Troy and Cheri were living in a condo while this house was being built, and I used to come and stay with them every couple of months. Like I said, she didn't really like me so I only came when I knew Troy would be here. But one weekend I showed up and had my weeks wrong, and Troy was at an away game. I was stuck there for the weekend because the other girl I'd given a ride to didn't have another way back and couldn't leave until Sunday." She paused, and I nodded for her to continue.

"They had two bathrooms in the condo. I always used the guest bathroom. Cheri had some friends over and one of them was in the guest bathroom. I went back to Troy and Cheri's bathroom, but when I sat down, I realized there was no toilet paper. I looked under the sink where I thought there might be another roll, and reached for the toilet paper. Then I saw something in the trash can under the sink."

"What was it?"

"It was a pregnancy test. A positive pregnancy test."

"I'm guessing this was the baby they lost?"

"Yeah. It was that baby. The only problem was, she didn't tell Troy she was pregnant until a month later. She acted like she'd just found out when she was already at least a month or more along. There's only one reason she would lie about that." She gave me a meaningful look.

My hands flew to my mouth. "She cheated on Troy?"

"By my calculations Troy was in training camp when she got pregnant."

"Then who..." The look on Valerie's face instantly shut me up and that's when I realized it.

"Lloyd? That was Lloyd's baby she was pregnant with?" To say I was shocked was an understatement. How could they betray Troy like that? My heart broke for my husband. I may not have liked Lloyd, but I expected

better from him, and for some odd reason I was angrier at him for his betrayal of his best friend than I was at Cheri, his wife.

“I made the mistake of trying to convince my brother, who was over the moon that he was going to be a father, that his so-called best friend and his wife had made a baby behind his back.”

“Oh my God. How did he handle that?”

Valerie hung her head and let out a sigh. “He didn’t believe me even for a little bit. He couldn’t wrap his head around the fact that his best friend and his wife had stabbed him in the back. Then when she lost the baby, he blamed me, saying it was all the stress I caused her with my lies. And that was a wrap. We never spoke again.”

“Valerie, damn. I am so sorry.”

“Like I said. Once they were divorced, he did try and reach out, but I was still hurt and angry. You wanted to know why he never told you he had a sister. Well, that would be because after one of his texts asking me to meet him for dinner so we could talk, I finally texted him back. I asked if he believed me now. He said it didn’t matter anymore, which to me meant no. I replied and said, since it was so easy for him to believe everyone but me, I no longer had a brother.”

Valerie started to cry, and I went over and put my arms around her. She allowed me to comfort her for a couple of minutes before she pulled away, wiped the tears from her eyes and gave me a watery smile.

“I don’t know why I’m crying. There’s nothing I can do about it now.”

“Is that why you’re helping me?”

“I’m helping you because I want to, and because you need it.”

I gave her a grateful smile. “We’ve got our work cut out for us because we’ve got two days before the auctioneers show up here and auction off everything.”

“Then it’s time we get back to work.” She headed upstairs to finish packing my office and I grabbed more boxes to pack up the bathroom.

Valerie didn’t come back the next day because she had to drive her daughter, Summer, to Cleveland to spend the month of July with her dad. So I did what I could without her. Working for an hour and resting for half an hour. Valerie left me the number of an upscale consignment shop that made house calls to the more affluent neighborhoods. They showed up and left with all my expensive gowns, purses, and shoes, paying directly to my Cash app. I was told many of my designer bags were in demand by their

clients. So I expected to have some cash in my account fairly quickly. I still didn't know where I would go the day after tomorrow when my five days were up. I spent one of my rest times calling places only to be told that I would not only need the first and last month's rent, but proof of income as well. Aside from the royalties that were still trickling in for *Lottie Mae*, I had no other income.

Feeling anxious, I panicked that I might be living in the Mercedes SUV I'd bought with some of my earnings from *Lottie Mae*. It had been my mom's dream car and since I was her caretaker, I wanted to drive her to and from her dialysis appointments in style. I called and made reservations at a local Super Eight motel. I at least had the money to stay there for a week. Everything of mine in the master bedroom and en suite bathroom was packed and I managed to make my way up to the second floor for the first time since I'd gotten home, to see what Valerie had accomplished in the office. I was stunned to see she had managed to pack up all of my books which were in boxes stacked up by the door. Everything that had been on my desk, including my desktop computer, was also packed. The only thing that was still hanging on the wall was the framed poster of *Lottie Mae's* book cover. The cover depicted a young and pretty African American teenager of about seventeen, dressed in 1920s clothing, a white collared blue gingham dress and a straw hat with a red ribbon around the brim, looking like a country bumpkin and carrying a battered suitcase and her favorite stuffed dog Lucky under her arm. She had a hopeful look on her face as she stood in the middle of Grand Central Station in New York City.

I hated that cover. My former publisher had leaned into *The Wizard of Oz* comparisons a little too hard. They'd not given me any say in the cover beyond Lottie Mae's physical description. I quickly looked away as I did every time I saw the cover because I felt Lottie Mae's judging eyes on me, silently asking why I hadn't given her any book siblings. I wondered why Valerie hadn't removed this from the wall and stacked it against the boxes. But then I remembered the damn thing was practically bolted to the wall. I quickly left the office and got on my cell phone to call a moving company to see if they could come and move all these things to my storage unit. I was frustrated and annoyed with myself when I found out no one would be able to come until Monday.

Now what the hell was I going to do? Things only got worse as the day went on, when the electricity suddenly went out. Thankfully, the breaker

boxes were in the laundry room. I went in there and flipped all the switches, but nothing worked. I called the electric company and was told that the electricity had been shut off and that nobody should be living in the house as a new account was in the process of being made for the new owners. I hung up and called Lloyd.

“What the hell, Lloyd? I still have twenty-four hours before I have to be out of here. How am I supposed to pack the rest of my stuff in the flipping dark?”

“Look, I warned you that the house had been sold.”

“You told me I had five days and my five days are up at eight tomorrow morning. Again, how am I supposed to pack the rest of my stuff in the dark?”

“I sent people over there to help you, and you kicked them out. If you aren’t finished packing, that’s your problem.”

“If I can’t see to pack and I’m still here tomorrow, that’ll be your problem.”

“I’ll see what I can do about the electricity.”

It suddenly occurred to me to ask him why he hadn’t told me about Valerie. “And why didn’t you tell me about Valerie?” When he didn’t respond, I realized he’d already hung up on me. It took everything in me not to throw my cell phone across the room.

Instead, I looked at my phone and saw I had a forty percent charge left on it and wondered how I was going to charge it without electricity. I heard mail coming through the slot in the foyer and waited a few minutes before I went to get it. When I looked at the mail in the basket underneath the mail slot, I froze. Sitting on top was another folded slip of paper, much like the one that had been included in the care plans the rehab center sent me home with. I plucked the note out. Like the other note, it wasn’t in an envelope. It was just a folded slip of white paper with a typed message on the inside. This note read: *It should have been you. When I get done with you, you’ll wish it had been.*

NINE

TAYLOR

I hadn't been lying when I'd told Valerie about all the other threatening messages and emails I'd received, not just after the accident but ever since I got with Troy. I remember complaining to him about them and him showing me a thick file folder full of messages and notes just like the ones I'd been receiving.

"When you're a public figure, people think they own you. I've been getting them for so long they don't even faze me anymore. Don't tell me you weren't getting them as a famous author."

"None that I can remember."

"Lucky you. When we didn't make it to the playoffs my last season, some guy sent me a dead rat in the mail."

I just stared at him, incredulous that he was being so nonchalant. "And you've never been worried about anyone making good on any of these threats?" I was also stung that he had taken the threats against me so lightly. But in the face of what he had been receiving for decades, I could understand it, even though I didn't like it.

"If I sat around worried about every single note and threat I received, I'd never leave this house, Taylor. I do have a pretty good security system, and I'd never let anything happen to you. Please believe that." He'd pulled me into a tight embrace, and I tried and mostly succeeded in putting the nasty DMs and emails out of my mind.

He was right. No one ever approached me, and no one ever tried to harm me. I was glad Valerie wasn't here because if she'd seen this note, she would definitely be pressuring me to call the detective to tell her about it. I tore the note up and shoved it into my pocket. I still had several more hours before nightfall and the house got too dark for me to do any work. I had some candles, but they were packed away in a box out in the garage. I just had to hope that Lloyd was able to get something worked out to turn the electricity back on temporarily.

Two hours later, there was a knock at the door. It was a delivery man delivering exactly six battery-operated camping lanterns with a note that read: *This is the best I could do. L.*

"Asshole!" I said aloud through gritted teeth.

I hadn't used my cell phone since I'd talked to him, so I still had a forty percent charge. There was a place I could charge my phone, my car. I made my way back out to the garage. Since I couldn't take my walker up the steps, I sat it by the outside of the garage door before slowly making my way back up the side steps letting myself in through Troy's office, glad I hadn't locked the door after I'd last been in here. I entered the garage through a door in the office. Sweaty and out of breath, I rested on the top step that led down into the garage for ten minutes before slowly making my way down the rest of the steps. Bracing myself against my car, I made my way over to the garage door and manually lifted it with the chain.

My upper body strength was much better than my lower body, but my hands were slick with sweat. I only managed to get the door two thirds of the way up before wrapping it around a bolt sticking out of the wall to anchor it in place. Then I grabbed my walker and leaned against it to catch my breath. Now that there was even more light coming into the garage, I noticed a large grey metal cart along the wall nearest to my car that I hadn't remembered being there before. Gripping the sides of my walker, I slowly made my way over to the cart. I'd found it at Goodwill to move my stuff into my dorm room every year I'd been in college. What was it doing here when the last place I'd seen it had been in my storage unit? Then I remembered Troy had gotten into my storage unit to grab my stuff to decorate my office. He must have brought more stuff from my unit than the decorator had been able to use. On top of the cart was a box with a lid. I opened it and let out a gasp of delight that instantly lifted my sour mood. It was the corkboard I'd had hanging on the wall of my dorm room, and in the center was a photo I hadn't seen in years.

I pulled it off the board and shoved it into my pocket as I went through the rest of the box finding the stuffed bear I'd had on my bed, my tea kettle, a plastic box with decorative pens, pencils, paper clips, and highlighter tabs, a pair of plastic shower shoes and my shower bucket. The box even smelled like the perfume I'd worn in college, Warm Vanilla Sugar from Bath & Body. There was an empty bottle of it in the bottom of the box. Each item I found filled me with so much joy and nostalgia. But the real treasure was in my pocket, and I couldn't wait to look at it.

I put the lid back on the box and used my walker to get to my car and hoist myself up into the driver's seat, remembering the last time I'd tried to drive shortly after arriving home from rehab. It hadn't gone well. I started

the SUV and plugged my phone into the car charger. I turned on the radio while my phone charged and pulled the photo out of my pocket. It was of me and my college best friend, Nessa James. I drank in every inch of that picture. It had been taken sophomore year when we'd become roommates. We were posing in front of our dorm, Prince Hall, wearing jeans shorts and our maroon and gray Ridgely University T-shirts on the first day of fall semester, smiling like we didn't have a care in the world. Because we didn't. At least not at first, but it didn't take long for the pressure and stress to set in.

"Just breathe," Nessa told me after I'd gotten a C on an essay in our Literature and Culture class. We'd both been in the Honors English program. She'd rubbed my back as I'd sobbed on her shoulder. "It's going to be okay."

"That's easy for you to say," I said, my words muffled against her shoulder. "You got an A on your essay."

"So what? It's not the end of the world."

"Yes, it is," I'd insisted. "I'm going to lose my scholarship. I'll have to leave and my mom will be so mad. I don't belong here."

She'd gently pushed me away and forced me to look at her. "Stop it. I mean it, Tay. They wouldn't have let you in if you didn't belong here. You have an entire semester to bring your average back up. It's just one essay. One essay." Her voice was so melodic and soothing, it instantly made me feel better.

Nessa had always been so sweet and so kind. She was always the voice of reason. Until she wasn't. I laid my head back against the headrest and fell asleep wondering how different my life would be if Nessa was still in it, and if she'd have liked Troy when I sometimes didn't.

TEN

TAYLOR

Before the Accident

“Are you sure you haven’t seen my other sandal?”

“You mean other than on your feet yesterday when you were last wearing them?”

“You don’t have to be a smart ass. I just asked you a question.” I glared at Troy, not so much because he wasn’t being very helpful, but I was running late and had really wanted to wear my new sandals again.

“And I said I’d help you look for them. When was the last time you remember seeing them?”

“In the shoe basket in my closet. I put all my shoes in there and now I only have one sandal.”

“Did you look behind the basket?”

It took everything in me not to bite his head off completely because of course I’d looked behind the basket. I didn’t have time for this because I was participating in a panel discussion on historical fiction at Waverley University and I was already nervous. It was my first author event in a few years. I grabbed a different pair of sandals. Still as cute as the sandals I’d been looking for, but not nearly as comfortable. I’d just have to look for it later. Once I was dressed and ready, I walked past the kitchen where Troy was sitting at the kitchen island talking on the phone and eating a sandwich. My heart sank.

“I’ll be over in a few,” he said to whoever he was talking to before hanging up.

“You’re not coming?”

“Taylor,” he gave me a concerned look, “we’ve been over this. You know what happens if I show up. This is your gig, and you don’t need me there taking attention away from you. Besides, I’m going golfing.”

Technically, it made sense because I couldn’t seem to go anywhere with my husband without someone wanting to take a selfie with him or get an autograph. Ten years after he’d retired, he was still as popular as ever. Still, it would have been nice to see his smiling face in the crowd and be able to focus on him to ease my nerves.

“With whom?”

“Chalmers from next door. I told you last night. Don’t you remember?”

I didn't remember, but I didn't like the look of alarm on Troy's face and changed the subject. "Tim? I thought you didn't like him?"

"I don't. But he owns several businesses in town, and I can never have too many sponsors for the podcast."

"Well, I guess I'll see you later then."

"How long will you be there? I can swing by afterwards and we can go out to dinner. How about that?"

"Sounds good." I walked over and gave him a quick peck on the cheek before leaving. Troy called out to me before I headed out the door.

"I'm proud of you, babe. It will be good for you. Your readers need to know that you're still here after all this time."

I couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or encouraging, but it stung all the same. When I got home from the panel discussion after a romantic dinner with Troy, my missing sandal was on the floor behind the basket where I had already looked before I left. When I picked it up, smoke suddenly filled the air, thick, white and acrid, and I started coughing and choking.

ELEVEN

TAYLOR

I woke up with a start to find the garage was filled not with smoke but exhaust fumes. I was lying on the garage floor and the garage door was closed. My walker was nowhere to be seen. I was starting to feel dizzy as I army crawled across the floor as fast as I could, towards the chain that opened the garage door. It was too late as I felt myself slipping away.

The next thing I knew I was being violently shaken by my shoulders. My eyes flew open, and I looked up into Valerie's concerned face. She was kneeling next to me on the floor. The garage door was up.

"Taylor? Thank God. Are you okay?"

Where were the fumes I'd been coughing and choking on that made me pass out? I was lying on the cold garage floor, and it was now dark outside. I tried to sit up, but Valerie gently pushed me back down, and then pulled out her cell phone.

"Don't try to talk, I'm going to call the squad."

"No!" I pushed myself up into a semi upright position. "Don't do that. I'm fine."

"What if you re-injured..."

"Valerie, please! I said I'm fine. Now can you please help me up so we can get back to the house?"

She did as I asked and helped me into a standing position. My legs were stiff, and I was in pain from my lower back, down my thighs, settling around my knees. I managed to put one foot in front of the other while she had one arm around my waist, and I had one arm around her neck. I caught a brief glimpse of the hard set of her face and knew she wasn't happy, but I didn't care. The last thing I needed was to be admitted to the hospital. I didn't feel any worse than I did any other day. Once we were back inside, she settled me on the couch and disappeared back outside, coming in a few minutes later with what looked like a doctor's bag.

"What's that?"

"I won't call the squad, but you're going to let me check you out to make sure everything's okay, and I'm not taking no for an answer."

She probed my limbs, checked my heartbeat and my lymph nodes, shined a light inside my mouth and in my eyes to see if my pupils were

dilated. Last, she took my blood pressure, which was a little high but not dangerously so.

“Will I live, doctor?”

Instead of answering, she laughed and then gave me a serious look, like the one my mom would give me when I’d screwed up. “Alright. I’m all ears. What happened in the garage?”

“I... I’m not quite sure.” I was being honest. What *had* happened in the garage?

“What’s the last thing you remember?” Valerie sat on the coffee table and handed me a bottle of water.

“The electricity went out, and I went to the garage to charge my phone in my car, and I fell asleep. When I woke up, I was on the floor and the garage door was closed. The garage was filled with exhaust fumes, and I passed out before I could get to the garage door. How did you find me?”

Valerie stared at me, her expression unreadable. “I got here about half an hour ago and you weren’t in the house. The only way I knew you were out there was because I looked out the kitchen window and saw the garage door was open. There was music playing on your radio, but no exhaust fumes and you were passed out on the floor.”

“What?” There was no way I imagined what had happened to me. “I know what happened and that garage door was closed. I was on the floor, and the garage was filled with exhaust fumes.”

“And I know what I saw,” she said quietly, looking at me with such concern it made me want to scream. “Are you sure you weren’t dreaming, Taylor? I swear there were no exhaust fumes. You were just lying there unconscious on the garage floor.”

“Valerie, I...” But she wasn’t interested in what I had to say and pressed on.

“And if the garage was filled with fumes, why didn’t you call for help?” She held out my phone, and I slowly reached out to take it. “It was still on the charger.”

I didn’t have an answer for her. Instead, tears filled my eyes, and my lips started to quiver. Valerie grabbed my hand and gave it a squeeze.

“You suffered head trauma, Taylor, and the brain is a very complicated and complex organ. I know you probably feel fine, but your brain is still healing, and it can play all kinds of tricks on you. I think I should take you

to the ER to get you checked out because you may have hit your head when you fell out of the car.”

“No! I’m fine and I didn’t fall out of the car.” Technically, I had fallen out of the car, at least from what I could remember, but I was tired of everybody thinking they knew what was going on with me when they didn’t.

The silence that ensued was very uncomfortable, before Valerie finally changed the subject. “What happened to the electricity?”

“It got turned off to switch the account over to the new owner’s name. I tried to get Lloyd to see if he could get it turned back on. Instead, all his sorry ass did was send some camping lanterns. How did you get in the house?”

“The front door was open.”

I groaned inwardly. What was happening to me? I could have sworn I’d shut the front door the night before.

Valerie sighed and stood up. “Well, you can be mad at me all you want, but I’m not going to leave you here all by yourself tonight in the dark. Which way is your guest bedroom?”

“I appreciate that. And I’m sorry about earlier. I didn’t mean to be such a bitch, especially when you’re the only one who’s been helping me these last few days. I just don’t have time. So, if you could stay until the morning and then help me get my things to my storage unit, and then drop me off at my hotel, I would really appreciate it.”

“No worries. I can’t even imagine what you’re going through and I’m sorry to be so pushy. It’s the nurse in me. I can’t help it.”

An hour later the house was quiet as a tomb and hot as an oven. Since there was no electricity, there was no air conditioning. I was sweltering but determined not to disturb Valerie to get me a fan from the utility closet. The house was so quiet I could hear her soft snores all the way down the hall. I slept in the recliner in our bedroom, having realized from falling asleep in my car that it was a much more comfortable position for sleeping than lying in bed. I don’t know how long after I finally drifted off to sleep that I heard the noise. At first, I wasn’t sure I’d heard anything until I heard it again, glass breaking. My whole body stiffened in alarm. Someone was breaking in, and our alarm system was wired to the house electricity, and it was off.

Movement was coming from the kitchen. I silently slid out of the recliner and onto the floor, feeling around in my pajama pocket for my cell

phone. I crawled across the floor and then slid under the bed. I started to dial 911 when I remembered Valerie asleep and snoring in the guest bedroom down the hall. I had to warn her. But if they heard her cell phone ringing, they might make a beeline straight for the guest bedroom. Instead, I dialed 911.

“Nine one one. What’s your emergency?”

“Someone’s breaking into my house.”

“What is your name and address, ma’am?”

“Taylor Ambrose. 1311 Terracotta Place. Please hurry,” I whispered as loud as I dared.

“Are you alone in the house, Taylor?”

Before I could reply, a strong hand gripped my ankle, and I was violently dragged out from underneath the bed. I shrieked, rolled over and kicked out, or at least tried to, with my stiff free leg. I grabbed ahold of one of the bed’s legs. But the intruder yanked harder, pulling my hands from the leg and ripping two of my fingernails in the process.

“I’ve already called the police! Get the hell out of my house!” Now that I was out from under the bed, I could see the intruder in a shaft of moonlight coming in through the bedroom window. From the height and build, I could tell it was a man who was dressed in all black with a ski mask over his face. He let go of my ankle, grabbed the front of my pajama top and jerked me up to my knees and leaned down until our faces were half an inch apart. I could see the pores on his nose. His breath was hot and foul.

“Bitch, where’s my money?”

“Wh... what money?” I currently only had a twenty-dollar bill in my purse.

He shook me like a rag doll making my head snap back and forth, then he got right in my face again. He was breathing heavily and reeked of alcohol. Before he could say anything else, the distant sound of sirens filled the air, and he froze. I took the opportunity to ball my fist up and punch him straight in the balls as hard as I could. He shrieked.

“Bitch!” He shoved me to the floor and staggered out of the room. I lay there panting, too afraid to move as the sirens got louder. Then I heard a loud thump followed by a thud, like something had hit the floor. Painfully, I braced against the side of the bed and pulled myself up, lurching towards the bedroom door after the intruder. I felt my way along the wall and down the hallway into the foyer.

“In here,” came Valerie’s voice from the direction of the kitchen.

I followed her voice to find her standing over a prone figure on the kitchen floor with a golf club in her hand, just as the police arrived at the front door. As I looked at the person on the floor, I was more than a little shocked and confused. This wasn’t the man who had attacked me. This guy was lying face down and wore faded jeans and a black T-shirt. This man was also brown-skinned. From what little I had seen of my attacker, he’d looked white or at the very least light-skinned. Had I imagined seeing a man dressed in all black? It was dark in my room. And where were the alcohol fumes that had rolled off him in waves? This guy smelled strongly of cigarettes. Pounding on the front door snapped me back to reality, but before I could react, Valerie grabbed my arm.

“I need you to do me a favor, Taylor. It’s very important.” Her voice was a low, harsh whisper.

“What?” I was anxious to get to the front door to let the police in.

“You have to tell the cops you hit this guy.” The guy in question had started to regain consciousness and groaned in pain. She shoved the golf club into my hand.

“Please do not tell them I’m here. I’ll explain when they leave. I promise.” She didn’t wait for my reply and sprinted out the kitchen door, which was wide open and led out into the backyard.

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask her where the hell she was going when the sound of pounding and shouting at the front door got so loud it made me flinch and I finally went to let the officers in.

It was two hours before the police left, having taken the man lying on my kitchen floor away by ambulance and gathered all of the evidence they needed. There really wasn’t much to gather. They dusted the kitchen door for fingerprints and took pictures of both the inside of the kitchen and my bedroom. Crime scene tape crisscrossed the kitchen doorway, inside and out. But they left without boarding up the broken window. Valerie was away the entire time they were there. Where had she gone and why?

After they left, I was cutting a piece out of one of the unused packing boxes to fit the inside of the broken pane in the back door when she finally tapped on the kitchen door and I let her in. She instantly pulled down the police tape and had barely crossed the threshold into the kitchen when I lit into her.

“Where the hell did you go? And why did I have to tell the police I hit that guy?”

“Because I don’t want the media finding out that Troy Bellows had a secret half-sister. It’s none of anybody’s business and I don’t want my mom’s character dragged through the mud. She got married for the first time ten years ago to a wonderful man and they are living their best lives down in Florida. I don’t want her life ruined because of a foolish mistake she made with a married man more than three decades ago.”

I wasn’t about to argue with her because I’d been equally protective of my own mother. “I get it.” I sat down at the kitchen island, and she sat down on the opposite side.

“You do?”

“Absolutely. No more explanation needed. But this will be all over the news tomorrow and I can already see the headlines in the paper: Troy Bellows’ disabled widow living in a home with no electricity is attacked by an intruder.”

“Well, I could tell you that’s not going to happen, but we both know it will. My question is, are they going to follow you to the hotel you booked where you’ll be trapped until a bigger headline pops up?”

I groaned and laid my head down on my folded arms. I hadn’t thought about them following me. “Just when I thought my life couldn’t get any worse.” I finally looked up to see Valerie giving me an intense stare.

“What is it? Don’t tell me something else is wrong.”

“Nothing. I was thinking that it would probably be best if you come to stay with me at my mom’s house.” I wasn’t expecting that, and my surprise must have registered on my face. “I mean, it’s purely up to you. But it would be a lot better than a hotel.

“Look, Summer is going to be with her daddy for a month. Her room is yours for free at least for a month. Surely by then, the money from your clothing consignments should start rolling in and it’ll give you more time to look for your own place.”

I’m not sure why this made me want to cry and I quickly blinked away the tears that had filled my eyes. I thought I didn’t have a friend in the world. Was I wrong? Because Valerie was too good to be true. “And what if they follow me to your place and figure out who you are?”

“That won’t be a problem if we leave right now. The only one out there is a cop. I looked out the window a minute ago and he’s on his phone

playing games.”

“What about all my stuff and my car?”

“No problem. We pack as many of your boxes as we can into your SUV. I’ll drive it to my place and come back here in the morning in an Uber to get my car and some more of your things. How about that?”

“I hate to put you through all this trouble, Valerie. If I could drive, you wouldn’t have to make all these trips. I think I can do it...”

Valerie held up her hands before I finished talking. “You just don’t have enough strength and coordination in your legs right now to be trying to operate a vehicle. You’ll get there, but you’re just not there yet.”

“My storage unit is open twenty-four seven. We can make a stop to put my stuff there before we get to your house.”

“Great idea.” She walked over to the window that looked out on the front lawn and peeked out. “Looks like the coast is clear. That news van is gone. If we’re going to do this, we need to do it now because I guarantee you, the media will be back first thing in the morning.”

“What about the cop out front?”

“Would you believe that idiot is asleep?”

We both laughed and then got to work. Luckily, the six-car garage was located at the back of the house and you couldn’t see it from where the cop was parked. Valerie used the dolly to load my suitcases and boxes of personal items into my SUV, leaving my boxes of books and office stuff behind. While Valerie was busy, I took Troy’s ring out of its ring box, wrapped it in packing tape, pulled the rubber cap off the end of one of the legs on my walker and shoved it inside, replacing the cap just as Valerie came back in.

When the police officers who showed up asked me what had happened, I told them the idiot who broke in was looking for valuables. At least that’s what I assumed he’d been looking for, and the most valuable thing in the house was Troy’s original first Super Bowl ring. I wasn’t about to mention the ring in a statement to the police. I needed to sell it. I was feeling mildly guilty that I wasn’t going to hold on to it for sentimental reasons, but I hadn’t known Troy when he was playing pro ball. That ring didn’t mean anything to me personally. Then I thought about the burner phone I took from Troy’s desk drawer. As soon as I got to Valerie’s, I was going to charge it and find out what the hell was on the phone and why it was hidden in my husband’s desk drawer.

An hour later, around 4:30 in the morning, Valerie, with me riding shotgun in my own car, slowly rolled down the driveway with the lights out, right past the police car with a young cop in it who was now awake again and back to playing games on his phone and I could see his head bent low, the illumination from his phone screen lighting up the inside of the cruiser. Minutes later, we were down the street and turning the corner. I don't know why I felt so excited to be sneaking off in the middle of the night like a thief, but it felt good. I no longer felt like I was in a fishbowl. Valerie burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"You look just like I used to when I would sneak out of the house to go to parties after my mom fell asleep. Realizing I'd gotten away with it was the best feeling in the world until I got home in the morning and she was waiting in my room."

"I was way too much of a good girl to ever try anything like that. Besides, I was a big nerd, and no one was inviting me to any parties, so there was no place to sneak out to."

"Seriously?" She was looking at me like she didn't believe me, but it was true.

"The most fun I ever had back then was being able to stay out until eleven to go to movies with my equally nerdy friends, and then maybe get pizza afterwards."

"Well, my shenanigans must run in the family because according to Troy, he was doing a lot of stuff back in high school he had no business doing. Girls, weed, drinking. Everyone thinks he was such a straight arrow, but he told me stories that would shock people."

That got my attention. Troy's public persona was a small-town boy who made it to the big leagues, and lived a charmed life thereafter. I was starting to realize my husband might have had a side I didn't know about, and probably wouldn't like if I did."

"You're not talking about anything criminal, are you?"

The streets of Weatherly were fairly empty at 4:30 in the morning save the occasional homeless person sleeping on a bench near the bus station, a stray dog, and the occasional car.

"Criminal? No. My big brother wasn't into anything criminal beyond smoking a little weed every once in a while before Ohio made it legal.

According to him, he was doing his fair share of sneaking out, partying, and from what I gathered, there were a lot of girls.”

And there it was again. The fact that Troy had not been a saint. He’d already told me he cheated on Cheri earlier in their relationship and she broke up with him. Could leopards really change their spots? I struggled to think about any behavior I’d noticed that would lead me to believe Troy had cheated on me. Except for the phone, I couldn’t think of a single instance. Then again, my memories were coming back to me tiny piece by tiny piece. Maybe those memories just hadn’t made their way back to me yet.

“Why’d you get so quiet all of a sudden?”

“Just thinking.” I knew Valerie meant well, but I wasn’t obligated to share every single thought that I’d been having lately with someone who was still a virtual stranger. “Make a left at this light and the storage place should be about two blocks down on your right.”

Two minutes later, we arrived at the storage facility, and I gave Valerie my security code so she could unlock the gate. My unit was in row seven at the end. Valerie got out and helped me out of the passenger side. I handed her my key to unlock the padlock and roll up the door. I was exhausted and had been anxious to get here and get the stuff unloaded so I can get back to Valerie’s and maybe get some sleep. It never occurred to me that opening that door would be like opening a time capsule. A lot of my mom’s stuff was also stored in this unit.

The kitchen table where she used to braid my hair, a China cabinet she had inherited from her mom that was now coated in a thick layer of greasy dust. A cedar chest, her favorite wild and colorful abstract paintings that hung on our walls growing up that I’d thought were weird as a kid but loved as an adult, and bag after bag of fabric and yarn because she was a knitter and a sewer.

The unit smelled musty. I hadn’t been here in years. Underneath the musty smell was the smell of my mom’s perfume. She had worn White Diamonds by Elizabeth Taylor for as long as I could remember. Tears instantly welled up in my eyes. If only she were here right now. She would know what to do. She had a very big, strong personality that I had not inherited from her. I also knew she’d be pissed that I was holding on to her stuff. She’d been adamant that she’d wanted me to sell everything. I’d donated her clothes, but everything else was in this unit.

“I’m not my things, Taylor,” she’d told me. “Promise me you’ll sell it all and use the proceeds to live a life you’ll love.”

I’d broken that promise. “Sorry, Mom,” I whispered under my breath. “I’m not ready yet.”

“You good, Taylor?” Valerie sat the box she was holding down and came over to me, putting a hand on my shoulder. I wiped my streaming eyes with the back of my hand and merely nodded. I didn’t have time for this.

Once we’d unloaded the boxes, we were on our way.

TWELVE

DETECTIVE KING

It was 9 o'clock in the morning when Detective Laurel King arrived at the Bellows' house, furious no one had called and told her about the break-in. She'd found out about it when she got up and turned on the 7 o'clock morning news after she'd gotten out of the shower. A reporter standing in front of the Bellows' house was reporting on a break-in and the perpetrator being caught at the scene and on his way to the hospital. She knew the captain had probably instructed them not to tell her. She still hadn't signed off on the Bellows' case and now this added another layer of complication.

When King arrived at the Bellows' house, the news crew were gone, and a lone cruiser was parked out front. She parked behind it, got out and walked to the driver side window in time to see the young officer inside shoving his phone back into his pocket. She rapped on the window so loudly he jumped and then his eyes went wide as he lowered the window. King knew she had that effect on some of the uniformed officers. She had a reputation of being a stone-cold bitch that she was quite proud of. She *was* a stone-cold bitch. But at least she was a stone-cold bitch who got shit done. She was happy when the young officer saw her RBF, resting bitch face. He quickly got out of the cruiser.

"I need a report on everything that happened here last night. And don't leave anything out."

"Well, the written report..."

"I've already read the written report, officer..." She snapped as she looked at his name tag, which read Daniel Willis. "Willis, I need to know everything *you* know and everything you saw."

"Well, ma'am, I arrived after the perp had been transported to the hospital. I'm not actually the one who interviewed the homeowner, but I did get a statement from the woman who lives in the house next door." Willis gestured behind him to a large, white adobe style stucco house barely visible over the high hedges that separated the two properties. "She claimed to have been letting her dog out and heard a scream coming from inside the Bellows' house after midnight." They both turned to look at the Bellows' house. King could detect no movement inside.

"Apparently, the electricity in the house is out."

“There’s no electricity?” King hadn’t remembered that detail in the report she’d read. But she’d rushed through it as she hurried to get dressed and out the door.

“Yeah, I guess that’s how the guy who broke in was able to break the glass on the door without tripping the alarm. Mrs. Bellows was using lanterns for lighting.”

“And you were here all night? You never left?”

“I got called away to assist on a DV call about an hour ago, hour and a half ago tops. I’d just gotten back when you pulled up.”

Just then another police cruiser arrived, and King knew it was to relieve Officer Willis who looked like he wanted to be anywhere but there talking to her. The relief in his eyes was palpable.

“Thank you, Officer Willis. Please call me if you remember anything else.”

He nodded and then quickly got back into his cruiser, honking his horn at the cruiser that had arrived to relieve him and pulling off so the new officer could pull into his spot in front of the house.

King made her way up the long driveway to the front door and pressed the doorbell, then waited. Nothing. She mentally kicked herself when she realized she hadn’t heard the doorbell ring because the electricity was off. Why in the world would the electricity be off? She walked around to the back of the house and noticed the crime scene tape on the ground in front of the door. One of the panes in the back door leading into the kitchen had a sheet of cardboard wedged inside the opening. She knocked multiple times, listening closely for any movement inside the house. Again, nothing. Next, she pulled out her cell phone and called the phone number the station had on file for Taylor Ambrose. It rang and rang before finally going to voicemail with a generic female voice asking her to leave a message.

Frustrated, King pushed against the cardboard square until it fell inside the house. She covered her hand with her sleeve to avoid any jagged glass shards still in the windowpane’s frame and stuck her hand inside, unlocked the door and let herself in. Another piece of crime scene tape was lying on the floor just inside the door. She stood looking around the darkened kitchen before opening the window blinds and letting in some much-needed light. Then she walked slowly through the house calling out for Taylor Ambrose.

“Ms. Ambrose. Are you here?”

There was no answer because there was no one in the house. Taylor was gone and it looked like she'd left in a hurry. After going through the entire house, King went back out through the kitchen door, and down a path to the six-car garage that she knew housed the late Troy Bellows' car collection as well as where he recorded his podcast. However, instead of going up the side steps to the office, she peered through a side window into the garage. Each of his classic cars had their own garage, but the garage she was looking into was empty. She knew Taylor Ambrose drove a white Mercedes SUV. When King had been perusing her socials, she had gone back several years and saw Taylor posing with the car celebrating *Lottie Mae* hitting the *New York Times* bestsellers list. King wondered how Ambrose was currently able to drive when she could barely walk. King walked back to her car when a voice made her turn. An attractive, middle-aged white woman with long dark hair wearing running attire stood behind her.

"Can I help you, ma'am?"

"I'm not sure. I asked the officer in the cruiser on the street, and he told me to talk to you because he couldn't leave his post."

"What is it that I can help you with this morning?"

"Probably easier if I show you. My name is Marissa Chalmers, by the way. I live next door with my husband, Tim."

Before King could reply, Ms. Chalmers turned and headed next door to a pink stucco mansion that looked like it belonged in Miami. King followed her up the driveway and past a silver Lexus parked directly in front of the house, to a large garage. The garage door was open and one whole side of the garage had boxes lined up against the wall; there had to have been at least fifty of them.

"When I got up for my run this morning, I saw all of these boxes just sitting on the curb around the corner. So, I stopped to check it out and I recognized this stuff. It all belongs to my next-door neighbor, Taylor. By the time I realized whose stuff this was, a bunch of the boxes had already been taken by people."

"And why are you so sure these boxes belong to Ms. Ambrose?"

"Here, look at this." King watched as she opened the closest box to her, revealing books that had been thrown haphazardly into the box, which had caused some of the dust jackets to rip.

From what King could see, most of the books ran the gamut from classics by Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Octavia Butler to current

popular fiction. Marissa Chalmers plucked a hardback copy of *The Bluest Eye* from the box and opened the cover to reveal an embossed stamp on the first blank page inside that read: FROM THE LIBRARY OF TAYLOR AMBROSE.

"I checked and they're all filled with books. I woke my husband, Tim, up and made him help me get all these boxes off the street until we found out what was going on. I heard her home got broken into last night?"

"That's right? Did you see or hear anything last night?"

"Sorry, no. We were in bed. I sleep like the dead and Tim wears earplugs because I snore. Is Taylor okay? Because I can't imagine she would've just set all of her books on the curb like that, and why around the block and not in front of her house?"

King had been wondering about that herself, as well as trying to figure out how Taylor Ambrose, in the physical state she was in, could have lifted all these boxes by herself, let alone move them. Was using that walker just an act? "So, you're a friend of Ms. Ambrose, then?"

"More like friendly acquaintances."

"Then how do you know she wouldn't want all the stuff set on the curb?"

"Because there was a cookout at their house last year. She gave me a house tour and showed me her office. She had bookshelves covering every wall filled with books. They were her treasures." She gestured towards the boxes lining her garage wall and King noticed for the first time that the majority of the boxes were labeled books/office.

It took everything in her not to curse when she realized Officer Willis had most likely been out on his DV call when these boxes got dumped on the curb.

"Thank you for showing me this, Mrs. Chalmers. I'm trying to locate Ms. Ambrose as we speak to check on her. If you see or hear from her, could you please give me a call?"

"Oh, absolutely."

King handed the woman her card, then returned to her car to head to the hospital to talk to the idiot who had broken into the Bellows' home. Before she could pull away from the curb, a black van with a white logo identifying it as Anderson's Auction House pulled into the driveway and parked in front of the house. Right behind the van was a chocolate brown Range Rover. A well-dressed middle-aged black man got out of the Range Rover and started to walk up to the house.

“Excuse me, sir?” The man turned and looked her up and down and was seconds away from giving her a dismissive wave when she pulled out her badge and his eyes narrowed.

“Can I help you, officer?”

She ignored his condescending tone and reassessed his attractiveness. When he got out of the Range Rover, she’d thought he was quite handsome, but up close his beady eyes, sharp featured face, and shitty attitude landed him squarely in the mildly attractive category. She didn’t even bother correcting him because she knew what he said was designed to make her feel less than.

“This house is a crime scene, Mr.?”

“Rivers. Lloyd Rivers. I was Troy Bellows’ attorney and what do you mean the house is a crime scene? Is Taylor okay?” His well-crafted mask of superiority slipped just a bit when he’d asked about his deceased client’s wife, and King wondered what the story was there.

“Actually, Mr. Rivers, I was about to ask you that. We can’t seem to locate Ms. Ambrose. She’s not in the house and her car is gone and many of her belongings were sitting out on the curb around the corner this morning. You wouldn’t happen to know where she is, would you?”

“Sorry, but I can’t help you. Taylor and I don’t exactly keep in touch. How long will it take before the house is released? It’s been sold and the auctioneers only have two days to assess and auction off the remainder of the estate before the new owner takes possession.”

King knew the house would most likely be cleared in twenty-four hours. But since she had a hard time believing he didn’t know where Taylor Ambrose was, she didn’t mind stretching the truth.

“Could be two days. Could be two weeks. Just check in at the police station every day and they’ll let you know.” She was rewarded when his face contorted in anger, and he swore softly under his breath.

“And if you hear from Ms. Ambrose, please let her know that I need to talk to her.” She reached out and slid her card into the front pocket of his suit jacket, and walked away.

She glanced over at the Chalmers’ house as she headed to her car and saw Marissa Chalmers staring down at her from a second-story window.

The intruder’s name was Marvin Sellers, an army vet who had been on the streets for five years. His right wrist was handcuffed to the bed rail. He was sitting partially propped up on the hospital bed with the left side of his

head heavily bandaged along with the top part of his skull. He was still in hospital and not in the county jail because he had scalp laceration and a concussion. Taylor Ambrose sure knew how to pack a punch for a woman in her condition.

“Mr. Sellers?”

“I didn’t do it,” he said, his voice low and gravelly. A smoker’s voice. He was twitchy and agitated, like he would shoot up off into the ceiling if anyone said boo to him. According to the doctor treating him, he tested negative for any substances.

“Didn’t do what, Mr. Sellers?”

“I didn’t do whatever it is you’re here to accuse me of. And why am I handcuffed to this damned bed?”

“Because you were caught breaking into Troy Bellows’ home last night and you got clocked in the head with a golf club by the scared owner of the house.”

“That’s a damn lie! I never broke into anybody’s house. I was invited.”

“Invited? By whom?”

“I don’t know what her name was. She just told me she had a bunch of stuff she was getting rid of, clothes and food and stuff and said come around after twelve and the back door would be open. She said I could just walk in and help myself to whatever it was that I needed. Because I need a lot and ain’t no one else helping me.”

“Then why did you break into the house if the door was supposed to be open?”

“I didn’t break in. That damned door was wide open. So, I walked right on in. Next thing I know I’m waking up here handcuffed to a hospital bed with a Godzilla-sized headache.”

“And I’m supposed to believe that?”

“I don’t give a damn what you believe. It’s the truth. If you look in my pants pocket, you’ll see her address on a piece of paper. That ain’t my handwriting.”

King made a mental note to contact the evidence room to see if they had the note he was referring to since his clothes had been taken into evidence.

“And how did you meet Ms. Ambrose?”

“Who?”

“The woman’s house you were found in.”

“I met her a few days ago when she was coming out of that little grocery store over on Ball Street. She was trying to get outta her car with her walker and fell. I went over and helped her up and into her car, and put her walker in her backseat. Then she asked me if I could drive her home because she didn’t think she’d make it home. So, I did. I drove her all the way to her fancy neighborhood, and she gave me the bus fare to get back to town.”

“You never went inside the house?”

“No. She was so happy that I’d helped her. She told me she had some stuff for me if I wanted it. But I had to come back after twelve.”

“What time of day did this happen?”

“Must have been around nine in the morning. Maybe 9:30.”

“And she said to come back after twelve noon or midnight?”

Marvin Sellers looked momentarily confused before shrugging and wincing, touching his head. “Twelve noon but I was with my lady until late and didn’t have time to get over there earlier. When I got there, the door was open. It was mostly dark inside except for that lantern sitting on the counter, and there were some boxes of stuff sitting on the kitchen floor. I figured they were for me and went inside, and then like I said, I don’t remember nothing after that.”

King didn’t know what to believe. The only thing she did know was that no matter what Taylor Ambrose told this man, he had no business walking into her house uninvited despite what she had promised him. She thanked Mr. Sellers and left. King was pretty good at judging people’s characters, and she believed Marvin Sellers. She just needed to track down Taylor Ambrose to corroborate the man’s story. But where had she gone and why?

THIRTEEN

TAYLOR

It was almost 12:30 in the afternoon before I finally dragged myself out of Valerie's daughter Summer's twin bed. I couldn't remember how long it had been since I'd slept in a twin bed. Probably since I was in college at least. But I could hardly complain because it was one of the best night's sleeps I'd had in weeks. After leaving my storage unit, Valerie dropped me off at her home. I wasn't sure what I had been expecting, a condo, perhaps a town house. Valerie lived out in the county on the outskirts of Weatherly in a small, brick one-story house that sat back from the road. The nearest neighbor was half a mile down the road in either direction with a cornfield directly across the street. I was so exhausted I stretched across Summer's bed with every intention of just closing my eyes for a few minutes. But when Valerie nudged me awake, I realized I'd been asleep for hours. I sat up, immediately looking around confused, not knowing where I was before I yawned and stretched.

"I am so sorry. I did not mean to sleep that long."

"Might I remind you that you are still healing? You need to be getting more sleep. I got us some lunch and after you eat, you probably need to go back to sleep."

"Oh, I almost forgot. You had a prescription refill that needed to be picked up. I went ahead and got it for you and it's a good thing I did because they were about to put this medicine back and you would've had to reorder it."

"Yeah. I've been blowing off appointments, and I know that's not good. I have another one at the end of the month that I definitely plan on going to. So, thanks for picking up my meds." She handed me the paper sack containing my pain meds. I opened the bottle, and I took two because my lower back, hips, and everything down to my ankles were aching badly. Valerie was staring at me in concern, and in that moment, I realized I really needed to start taking better care of myself.

"What did you tell that officer parked in front of the house when you went back to get the other boxes? Did he ask who you were and what you were doing?"

“Girl, that man wasn’t even there anymore. I just did what I had to do and got out of there before he came back.”

“I guess it’s a good thing we left, huh? So much for protection.” We both laughed and got busy eating the chicken Caesar salad Valerie brought, followed by chocolate chunk cookies. “Hey, you never said where you disappeared to when the police were questioning me.”

“I stood outside and pretended to be one of your neighbors wanting to know what was going on. They asked me if I saw anything and I told them no.”

We continued eating in silence and didn’t speak again until we were eating the cookies, which were a little dry but still good.

“Why do I get the feeling there’s something you want to say?”

Valerie had been looking at me strangely ever since she got home and we started eating lunch. She would periodically put her fork down and fold her hands like she wanted to say something but then thought better of it and started eating again.

“Sorry, my mom always said, everything I’m feeling shows up on my face without me having to say a word. Look, Taylor, I can’t even begin to imagine how overwhelmed you must be right now. But I still think it’s a big mistake believing Lloyd Rivers about Troy’s finances.”

I thought back on the one time I’d brought up financial matters with Troy. After we’d gotten married, I’d compiled a folder with all of my information, banking details, debts, and a living will. In short, everything he’d need to have in case I got sick or died. I still remember the look on his face when I’d presented it to him.

“What’s this?” He’d frowned as he flipped through the file, then gave me a confused look.

“In case I get sick or die, here’s all my financial information and details so you won’t have to go searching for it or have to make a medical decision for me without knowing my wishes. Don’t you have one?”

“In case you get sick or die? That’s morbid, babe. I don’t even want to think about that because you’re going to live forever.” He shoved the folder back into my hands and gave me a big kiss on the forehead before heading into the bathroom to take a shower.

“I’ll leave it in my office desk drawer,” I’d called out after him, feeling irritated. He didn’t reply nor did he ever give me a folder with his info in it. I couldn’t explain why but I believed Lloyd.

“Your brother didn’t leave me completely broke.”

Valerie’s head jerked back in surprise. “Really? What do you mean?”

I slid off the stool I was sitting on at the kitchen counter and grabbed my walker. “Help me with this.” I laid the walker on its side and for a split second wondered if it was a good idea to tell Valerie what I’d found in the safe. But I desperately needed someone to confide in, and she was the only one helping me.

“What do you need me to do?”

“Pull the bottom off of the left leg on my walker.”

Valerie gave me a quizzical look before she got up from her own stool and bent down to do as I’d instructed. Pulling off the rubber cap from the left leg of my walker, revealed a ball of packing tape sticking out of the bottom.

“What in the world?”

“Pull it out and hand it to me.”

She did as I asked, struggling just a bit to pull the large wad of packing tape out of the walker’s hollow leg. She briefly glanced at it in confusion before handing it to me. It took a little longer than I’d wanted to pull the tape off the ring, feeling a little alarmed that my stiff fingers weren’t up to the task. But I eventually pulled all of the tape off and held it out to Valerie.

“Is this what I think it is?”

“Well, if you’re thinking it’s your brother’s very first Super Bowl ring. The one with the typo. Then, yes, it is what you think it is. I finally remembered the combination to the safe and this was the only thing in there.”

“You know this thing has to be worth some money, right?”

“I’m thinking at least one hundred grand or more. Once I can find a buyer for it, I’m going to sell it and use the money to get my own place, and I wanted to give you some money too. It’s only fair since you’re his sister.”

Valerie held up her hands and took a step back. “Hold up. I hope you don’t think I’m helping you because I wanted something from my brother’s estate, do you? Because if I wanted that, I would’ve reconciled with him a long time ago. I never wanted him to be anything other than my brother, so please don’t think...”

“No! I want to do this. You’re his sister, and you deserve something too.”

“Why don’t we just take a breath and we can discuss this further once you find out how much this is even worth? If I do accept something, it won’t be for me. It’ll be for Summer and her future, a college fund.”

“Can I meet her when she gets back.” There was only one other picture of Summer that I’d seen so far. It was of her and her father, and sat on her bedside table.

“Of course I’m going to let my baby meet her auntie Taylor.”

A sense of excitement filled me for the first time in a long time, realizing that I may have lost my husband, but I’d gained a sister-in-law and a niece.

I was heading back to lie down again after lunch when Valerie stopped me. “Did you mean to leave this behind? I found it stuffed in a bag on the floor of your closet when I checked the house to make sure no boxes were left behind. She handed me a black Saks Fifth Avenue shopping bag. I didn’t immediately recognize it but took it anyway and reached inside to pull out a black evening gown. I stared at it as a memory started forming, faded and blurry around the edges at first before it flared to life in full color.

“You okay, Taylor?”

“Yeah,” was all I could say before stuffing the dress back into the bag.

FOURTEEN

TAYLOR

Before the Accident

The ride home from the Sportsman Association's charity gala was silent. Troy and I had had a disagreement over my dress. I'd put on a black halter neck dress with an opening from the back of my neck to my lower back, and a slit up the left side. Simple and elegant. But when Troy saw me in the dress, his eyes didn't light up with admiration the way they usually did when I wore something sexy. I had worn this dress before and knew it was one of his favorites. So, when he gave me the once-over with a tight-lipped smile, my heart sank.

"What's wrong? I thought you liked this dress."

"I do just not for tonight," he said absently as he tied his bow tie.

"Why? What's wrong with it?"

"There's nothing wrong with it, and you look amazing in it. But this is an older crowd. I'll probably be the youngest guy there and you'll definitely be the youngest wife. Do you have something a little more conservative?"

"So, you want me to change. Is that what you're saying?" I still didn't understand exactly what his point was, and was irritated because I'd been looking forward to wearing this dress. It had taken me all afternoon to get ready for this event and now I was having to change my clothes at the last minute.

"Would you mind? You know I wouldn't normally ask." He didn't wait for my answer and walked past me into my walk-in closet and started perusing my dresses, finally deciding on what he felt was appropriate and pulling it out, then handing it to me.

He'd picked a navy silk jersey dress with cap sleeves, a square neckline and a long, pleated skirt. I bought the dress years ago for a black-tie book event. I hated it. But it had been on sale at the time, and my mom talked me into getting it after convincing me I looked like a starlet from the fifties. Instead, I'd felt like I was in my fifties when I wore it and never wore it again. Troy was giving a speech that night and the limo that he insisted we take would be there in twenty minutes. It took everything in me not to snatch the dress out of his hand. I unbuttoned the black dress and let it fall to my feet like a silky black puddle as he helped me into the blue dress.

I was so annoyed I didn't even bother changing the gold jewelry I was planning on wearing with the black dress. Everything from my hairstyle, to my makeup, and my shoes had been carefully picked for the black dress. Now I didn't have time to adjust for the navy dress, which I would've worn with silver accessories and navy pumps. If Troy noticed my look wasn't quite as pulled together as it would've been in the black dress, he didn't let on.

I was uncomfortable in the navy dress and felt even more uncomfortable when we arrived and saw that not only was Troy not the youngest man at the event, but I was also definitely not the youngest wife. One older sportscaster who had to be in his seventies was there with his twenty-something-year-old girlfriend who I'd first thought was his daughter. To say she was dressed for the male gaze would've been an understatement. She was stunning in a strapless pink gown that hugged every curve and had thigh-high slits up both sides. I looked at her and then at Troy, who gave me a sheepish look and shrugged. I could've been wrong, but it almost felt like he was enjoying how uncomfortable I was.

If the ugly dress wasn't bad enough, my husband pretty much abandoned me while he mingled and greeted old friends. I was left with the other wives I didn't know and had very little in common with. An hour into the evening after a banquet dinner of dry, baked chicken and undercooked vegetables, I set out in search of my husband who had given an amazing speech, and found him talking to a group of older men. He looked back at me and smiled while I hovered nearby, hesitating to join them. Instead of introducing me, he made his excuses while the men looked at me curiously.

"Aren't you going to introduce me?" I asked as he guided me away from the group by the elbow.

"Oh, I'm sorry, babe. I'm just still amped after the speech. Are you having fun?"

"Well, you certainly are. And that was an amazing speech by the way. I told you you didn't have anything to be nervous about. You did a great job."

"Thank you." He leaned down to kiss me on the cheek, and I turned to catch his lips and was hurt when he gently extricated himself.

"Sorry. I really need to talk to Mr. Porter. I know you're ready to leave and I won't be long."

The only thing that kept the evening from being a complete flop was running into my next-door neighbors, Tim and Marissa Chalmers. Tim was

too busy schmoozing to pay me any attention, but Marissa walked up to me with a glass of champagne and a sympathetic expression. She looked amazing in an emerald-green slip dress that hugged her curves. Of all our neighbors, Marissa was one of the friendliest, and I occasionally had coffee with her. I didn't care much for her husband, but Marissa was always warm and friendly.

"Are we having fun yet?" She handed me the champagne flute. I took it and drained half of it in one gulp.

"Ask me again after I've had about four more of these."

"I don't know why I let Tim drag me to these dinners, but at least your husband's speech was good. Everyone seemed to enjoy it, which is more than I can say for most of the speakers at these things."

"He'll be happy to hear that. He was really nervous about speaking tonight."

"We're having a pool party next weekend. You guys should come."

The horror on my face wasn't lost on her, and she threw her head back and laughed. My face burned with embarrassment at the rumor I'd heard about the Chalmers from Wes, our mail carrier. Wes was a nice guy, but he gossiped.

"Whatever you've heard about us, Taylor, it's not true. We aren't swingers. I promise. The only sausages being hidden will be in brioche buns. So just think about it, okay?" She gave me a big smile before disappearing into the crowd to join her husband.

The ride home was uncomfortable, with Troy looking over at me every five minutes or so while I fought tears.

"How long are you not going to talk to me?"

"You want me to talk. Fine. How's this? If this is the way you're going to treat me every time we're out at one of these events, then don't bother asking me to come with you. I could've been doing a million other things instead of getting dressed up to be ignored."

"I'm sorry. I was just... nervous."

"I get you were nervous before your speech, but what the hell was wrong with you afterwards, when you were ignoring me? You didn't introduce me to a single person. Why?"

He let out a sigh and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Taylor. I was... avoiding someone."

"Who?"

“Tim Chalmers.”

“Tim? Why?”

“Because he’s been after me for a while to invest in his new car dealership. He asked me when I was stupid enough to go golfing with him and I said I’d think about it, and he keeps hounding me.” He reached out to touch my arm, but I pulled away.

“Nothing you just said made it okay to treat me like that. If you’re having a problem, you should be running to me, not away from me.”

He opened his mouth. But to say what, I had no idea because the limousine pulled up at our front steps. I quickly got out and went into the house. I stripped out of the ugly dress and the rest of my clothes, then ran a hot bath. I was happy Troy didn’t try to engage with me any further that evening because he already knew by now that once I was this mad, there was no use trying to talk to me. After the bath I changed into pajamas, popped a melatonin gummy, and went to bed. Troy was gone when I woke up the next morning. When I went down to breakfast, there was a box of cranberry muffins from my favorite bakery, along with a long, red velvet box and a note that read: *I am so sorry about last night. I hate when we fight. I’m just sorry you don’t know how much I love you.* Inside was a diamond tennis bracelet. It became my favorite piece of jewelry besides my engagement ring, at least it was until I lost it.

FIFTEEN

DETECTIVE KING

Laurel King strode into the coroner's office with the beginnings of a tension headache starting to form in her temples. Reynolds had left a message that he needed to see her right away, and she assumed he was calling her there to give her information about Troy Bellows. She'd asked him to give Troy's autopsy report a thorough going-over one last time to make sure that there wasn't anything that could point to something other than accidental death. But when she arrived, he wasn't there. Instead, his assistant, a young woman by the name Maggie, was waiting for her.

"Where is he?" She couldn't keep the irritation out of her voice. She'd made the trip all the way out here and he didn't have the decency to be there waiting for her with whatever information he had insisted she come for in person.

"He's in a meeting, but he instructed me to show you our latest arrival."

Maggie headed to the back row of metal shelving with a dozen stainless-steel refrigerated drawers that held corpses. She hesitated before Maggie turned and saw she wasn't following her and gave her an amused look. King quickly fell in line behind her. She hated the morgue. And truth be told, she was more annoyed that she had to come here than she was about Reynolds not being here to meet her. Maggie stopped in front of one of the refrigerated drawers and opened the door, pulling out the tray inside. She pulled back the sheet to reveal a nude white man who looked to be in his mid to late thirties. There was a stab wound in his right side about an inch wide in length.

"Who the hell is this?"

"He came in last night. His name is Jesse Cummings, and according to his records he was in and out of rehab for almost a decade. He was found bleeding out in an alley four blocks from Troy Bellows' house. And he had this on him." Stacey grabbed what looked like the contents of this poor guy's pockets in a plastic bag which was lying between his feet. Inside was a watch, a set of keys, a slip of paper with smudged writing, and a set of army dog tags. King did a double take as she picked up the piece of paper. What the hell? Although the ink was smudged, she could just make out an address. It was the Bellows' address.

“He was found with a single stab wound and was pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital. He also has this.” Maggie lifted up his right hand to show King that his knuckles were cut. A sudden thought occurred to King.

“Could he have gotten this injury to his hand by punching out a glass window?”

“It’s possible. Although not very smart.”

“And what was he stabbed with? Has that been determined?”

“The blade was thin and serrated. My guess would be a steak knife.”

“Thanks, Maggie. And tell your boss I need to talk to him as soon as he gets out of his meeting.”

“Will do.”

When King got back at the station, she made a beeline for Captain Talbot’s office. She laid out everything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours and made a request to keep digging into the case based on the new evidence. She was convinced that whatever had happened to Taylor Ambrose in the last forty-eight hours was directly connected to the accident that injured her and killed her husband. To her great surprise and relief, Talbot agreed, albeit reluctantly.

“I need to be kept in the loop on everything you find, King. I mean it. No lone wolf shit. You need to be working with your team, got it?”

“Yes, ma’am.” King left Talbot’s office knowing the captain was right, but she wondered as she walked back to the squad room how the hell she was suddenly expected to become a team player.

“Got something for you, partner.” Larson handed her a report when she got back to her desk.

“What’s this?”

“Guy came in an hour ago claiming to be the Bellows’ mail carrier and that he had important info about Taylor Ambrose.”

King’s eyes skimmed over the lengthy report by Wes Peters. According to Mr. Peters the rumor going around the neighborhood was that Taylor Ambrose was having an affair.

SIXTEEN

TAYLOR

I spent the next two days in bed, in pain so bad that I couldn't even get out of bed. The only thing that helped were my pain meds, but I could only take so many of them and they wore off about an hour before I could take more. Valerie was helping me in and out of the bed to use the bathroom. She brought the shower stool with her, so thankfully I could take a shower, but this was the last thing I wanted; I didn't want Valerie to be sorry she'd invited me here. I still had the better part of a month to find my own place. I even had money in my Cash App from two of the gowns that the consignment shop was selling for me. But I was disappointed they hadn't sold for nearly the price I'd paid for them. While I wasn't broke, I was hardly flush with cash. I needed to find a buyer, preferably a collector, that would pay top dollar for Troy's Super Bowl ring.

"I talked to a collector this morning about the ring." Valerie and I were eating a pizza, or rather she was eating. I'd picked a few pieces of pepperoni off and then quickly took a bite when Valerie gave me a concerned look.

"And what did they say?"

"Well, I did not tell them that we had Troy's ring. I just told them that I had a Super Bowl ring from a prominent player and wanted to know the value."

"And?"

"He said the value could be anywhere from \$50,000 to \$100,000 and possibly more depending on whose ring it had been. Top players' rings are the most valuable. He also wanted to know if I had the ring box because that would add to the value. Do you have the box?"

I vaguely remember tossing the box into one of my packed boxes after I hid the ring in the leg of my walker. But I had no idea which box it was in.

"I think so. I'm pretty sure it's in one of the boxes we took to my mom's storage unit."

"I'll have to go get it as soon as we find someone to appraise it."

"Sounds like a plan." I grimaced and set my slice of pizza down.

"Is it still bad? When was the last time you took your pain meds?"

“About three hours ago. I’ve been trying to wait as long as I can before taking the pain meds because I don’t want to get addicted. It seems like the pain is getting worse and I don’t understand because I’ve been told my pelvis has healed.”

“When is your next doctor’s appointment? Can you get in any earlier?”

“I tried. I called yesterday when you were at work. But since I’d canceled so many times, they can’t get me in any earlier than my next appointment. I explained what was going on and the nurse had the doctor call in another prescription for a higher dose.”

“I’m going to run you a hot bath with some Epsom salt. I want you to soak and when you get out, it won’t hurt to have your next dose of pain meds a little early.”

I wasn’t about to argue with her and twenty minutes later I was soaking in a hot bath that surprisingly did make me feel a lot better. As I soaked in the tub, Valerie brought me a cup of turmeric tea, touting its anti-inflammatory properties. I politely took a sip while she watched, but when she left, I set the teacup on the floor next to the bathtub. I didn’t expect her to know how I took my tea, but it was so loaded with sugar it was almost undrinkable. I had to laugh because I was pretty sure the sugar was probably canceling out any of the anti-inflammatory properties of the turmeric, but I couldn’t fault Valerie for trying to help.

I was so relaxed in the bathtub that I drifted off to sleep, only to be awakened by the sound of raised voices. I strained to listen through the closed bathroom door, but the voices were muffled and I couldn’t hear everything. I could only make out every few words. I was pretty sure it was Valerie talking.

“I... don’t talk... to me... no...!” Then silence.

“Valerie! Is everything okay out there?” No response. I was just about to call out to her again when the bathroom door flew open and Valerie appeared with a tight smile on her face.

“Sorry about that.” She sat down on the toilet seat next to the bathtub. “Just my weekly phone argument with my ex. He wants to get Summer’s hair braided. He said his girlfriend’s niece who does hair will do it, but I don’t want a stranger messing with my baby’s head. I know my daughter and she’s very tender-headed. She’s not quite ready for braids just yet. I have a sneaking suspicion he’s going to let this girl do her hair anyway.”

“Oh, so you were on the phone. I thought somebody was out there with you.”

“No. I was on the phone. I’m sorry I was so loud, but that man drives me crazy. Now, how does spaghetti and meatballs sound for dinner?”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Great. Now let’s get you out of this tub so we can cook dinner. You can cut up the vegetables for the salad while I work on the sauce.”

Valerie helped me out of the bath, but even after I was settled in Summer’s room and getting dressed, I couldn’t shake the feeling I’d been lied to. But what possible reason could Valerie have for lying to me about something so stupid?

SEVENTEEN

DETECTIVE KING

When King returned to the Bellows' house, she noticed the white van for Anderson's Auction House was gone. Instead of going inside the house, she parked on the street out front and walked up the driveway and around to the back of the house, instantly noticing that the crime scene tape was now back up over the back door.

One of the other things she noticed was that, unlike the front door, this back door had no camera. She looked around on the ground for any droplets of blood on the path that ran the length of the house as she followed it, but it dead ended at a fence. She examined the fence but noticed no signs of it having been climbed over. No scratched paint, blood smears or anything. Did that mean Jesse Cummings hadn't been stabbed inside the house?

She turned around and noticed that the house next door to the Bellows' had a camera that overlooked their backyard. She hurried back down the driveway and walked next door to the two-story pink stucco mansion. She walked up the winding driveway and rang the doorbell. Seconds later, a balding middle-aged white man wearing dirt soiled trousers and a white T-shirt with sweat stains under the armpits came to the door.

"May I help you?" His eyes widened in surprise when she flashed her badge.

"I'm sorry to bother you, sir. I met your wife yesterday."

"Have you come to get the boxes she found?"

"No. I'm actually here to ask if the cameras on the side of your house were recording that night?"

"They were, but I have not checked the camera feed. Can I assume you'd like to see it?"

"That would be very helpful, Mr. Chalmers."

"Come on in, then. And please remove your shoes."

King quickly slipped out of her low-heeled pumps and left them by the front door before following Timothy Chalmers through the foyer, with framed photos on the walls of what King assumed must be family members, including his wife, into a brightly lit kitchen with every modern appliance imaginable.

"I'm having an espresso. Would you like one?"

“No, thank you.” King noticed he looked slightly disappointed and had a feeling he wanted to show off his fancy espresso machine sitting on the counter next to a refrigerator that probably cost more than King’s car.

“Did you know Troy Bellows?”

“Not really. We don’t have much in common. My wife, Marissa, was friendly with his wife, Taylor. I know she participated in one of my wife’s book club meetings because they were reading the book she wrote, and she came here to the meeting. She seemed nice enough.” He stared at her for a beat longer than she was comfortable with.

“Well, if I could see that footage, I’ll be on my way.”

“Sorry. Of course.” He went over to the counter opposite to where his espresso machine was. His cell phone was sitting on a wireless charger. He picked it up, then tapped a few buttons, scrolled a few times before staring at the screen in alarm. “Oh dear. I guess this is what you’re wanting to see?” He handed her the phone.

The footage showed exactly what King suspected. There had been two intruders. But at the tail end of the footage, four minutes later, a third figure emerged from the house, a blurred image of a woman in a blue robe with a black bonnet on her head and her face turned away from the camera. The footage cut off two seconds after the woman emerged from the house. King stared at the distorted image. Was that Taylor Ambrose?

“I’m going to need a copy of that footage, Mr. Chalmers.”

EIGHTEEN

VALERIE

Valerie sat across from the one man she had hoped like hell she would never have to see again. But here he was invading her life once again. He hadn't changed much since the last time she'd seen him, which was when she'd sat in the courtroom and watched him being sentenced to five years in prison for identity theft. He was still as handsome as ever, even more so since he'd bulked up in prison. He was also bald now and no longer sported the long dreads he'd had when she first met him. He also looked older and more worn. But his eyes were still just as shifty, darting around the room scoping out all the exits in case he had to make a quick escape. There was nothing for him to fear sitting in the diner except for maybe her. But old habits die hard and the rough life he lived that led him to prison was etched into his psyche like a tattoo.

"I'm here. Now what do you want, Jared?"

"Don't be like that, Lori. Haven't you missed me?"

"The fact I never visited you in prison should answer that question. So I'm going to ask you again. What do you want?"

He sat back against the cracked leather booth they were in and fixed her with an insincere smile that didn't reach his hard eyes. "I want in on whatever scheme you're pulling now. I'm broke, so I need you to cut me in because I know you're up to something. You always are."

He wasn't lying because Valerie's whole existence was built on lies. That's how they'd met. She'd been taking care of an elderly gentleman and slowly and quietly robbing him blind. And why not? He wasn't going to be needing any of his possessions after he died. His kids only wanted his money. He had plenty of valuables just lying around the house for the taking, and that's what Valerie did. Jared had been hired to take care of the lawn. Cutting grass, trimming hedges, and shoveling snow in the wintertime. He was charming and handsome and made Valerie think he was truly interested in her. But he'd seen her sticking small items from around the house, a gold lighter, a Montblanc pen, diamond cufflinks, into her pockets, and he wanted in. Even if he had to act like he loved her, and marry her in the process. Inevitably, the marriage was short-lived and ended less than two years later when he was caught using a stolen identity to buy a

Dodge Charger and was sentenced to five years in prison. Valerie assumed she would never see him again, even though she never filed for divorce. Obviously, she'd been wrong.

"How long have you been out? And where are you living now?"

"That information is on a need-to-know basis, and you don't need to know."

"Meaning you've got some other stupid woman on the hook, right? Someone who was probably putting money on your books and willing to house you when your sorry ass got out. Did you make her the same promises you made me?"

"Why do you care if I've got another woman? You don't want me anymore and to be honest I never really wanted you to begin with, but I need some money and these minimum wage gigs ain't cuttin' it. Have you forgotten you should've been in jail right along with me? I bet the cops would be really interested to know what I know about you."

Valerie merely stared at him as her mind raced with thoughts on how to get rid of him. She wasn't worried what a convicted felon might tell the police about her. He had zero proof she'd been in on his identity theft scheme, but she couldn't have him back in her life for any reason. Jared Miller was a parasite, and he'd bleed her dry if she let him. This was absolutely the worst timing in the world for him to have tracked her down. And just how had he tracked her down? She thought she'd covered her tracks pretty well and Jared just wasn't that bright.

"How did you find me?"

"Well, if it makes you feel better, it wasn't easy. Since you're no longer living in Columbus. But I've got my ways. Did you honestly think you got away from me?"

Yes. She'd wanted to say. She absolutely thought she'd seen the last of Jared Miller. Actually, hope was too weak of a word. She prayed she'd never see him again. As well as being a horrible, cheating asshole, he'd been a drinker, and abusive. He'd only hit her one time after which she filled a long sock with \$50 worth of pennies and got busy on his ass. He never touched her again, but the threat was always there, lingering under the surface like lava bubbling inside a volcano. Deadly and unpredictable.

"Are you gonna let me in on whatever you got going, or do I have to talk to the cops?"

“Fine.” She knew she had no choice and sighed in resignation. “I got ahold of some sports memorabilia I need to sell. And I need someone to find me a buyer. If you can do that and this stuff is worth what I think it is, then I’ll give you twenty percent.”

“Try forty.”

“Thirty, and that’s my last offer. Because it’s more than what you’ve got right now.” She could see the greedy gears turning in his head before he finally swore under his breath.

“Okay, thirty percent and don’t you dare try to stiff me.”

“So, can I assume you know somebody who wants to buy this stuff?”

“First off, whose memorabilia is it? Because if he was a bench warmer, no one’s gonna give a damn about his shit.”

“Troy Bellows.”

“T Bellows? Are you shittin’ me? You got ahold of T Bellows memorabilia?”

“Isn’t that what I just said?”

“And how the hell did you get ahold of that shit?” He was looking at her with such incredulity, surprise, and even a bit of grudging respect, that Valerie hated to admit how happy that made her. There had always been a part of her that had hoped things would work out with him even though her head told her he wasn’t to be trusted.

“Like you just said, I have my ways. Now give me your number and don’t you dare call me again unless you have a buyer.”

“A buyer for what exactly? What of his do you have?”

“Among other things, his very first Super Bowl ring. The one with his name spelled wrong on it.”

Jared let out a low whistle and continued to look impressed. But as good as he looked, combined with the way he was looking at her now, was a dangerous thing. She quickly slid out of her side of the booth and slung her purse over her shoulder.

“I meant what I said, Jared. Don’t call me unless you’ve got a serious buyer.”

Valerie stopped by the grocery on her way home to get dinner for herself and Taylor. She was amazed how much food that woman could put away. Before she got home, she stopped at a gas station restroom to change back into her nursing uniform of pale blue scrubs. She had planned to keep her job taking care of Mrs. Gilman until she no longer needed it, when the

old lady up and died. Right in the middle of screaming at a *Wheel of Fortune* contestant for getting a puzzle wrong, her heart gave out, and she was dead before her head had hit the pillow. It happened the day before she and Taylor had come to the house and she'd been getting up every morning pretending she still had a job. She needed her plan to work out so she wouldn't have to do any more private nursing jobs. She'd packed up as many memorabilia as she'd been able to get her hands on back at Taylor's house. But there was another reason why she infiltrated Taylor's life, and she wasn't about to let anyone, especially her ex-husband, stand in her way.

Taylor was asleep when Valerie arrived at home, something she'd been doing a lot since she moved in. It wasn't surprising since Valerie had been putting sedatives in her food. She did not want Taylor leaving the house. As she was putting groceries away in the kitchen and listening to her houseguest's soft snores, a loud creak sounded from above her. She barely blinked as she'd been hearing these noises for as long as they'd been in the house. It was an old house, and she knew the attic was probably infested with something she didn't really want to know about. She wasn't planning on being there that long, at least she hoped she wouldn't. That was all up to Taylor.

She stopped at Taylor's storage unit on her way home to retrieve something she'd found at Taylor's house and hid in her unit as an insurance policy in case things went left with Jared. She glanced at her purse where the item was hidden, hoping she wouldn't have to use it but feeling more secure knowing she had it. She heard a stirring from the living room. Taylor sat up and yawned and Valerie promptly pasted a phony smile on her face.

NINETEEN

TAYLOR

I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being watched. I vaguely wondered if Valerie's house was haunted. A few times I could have sworn I'd heard footsteps coming from the attic late at night but just figured I'd been dreaming. Normally, I would enjoy the silence and solitude, but this house was starting to creep me out. There were noises I couldn't explain and when I mentioned them to Valerie, she refused to take me seriously.

"It's probably just squirrels or raccoons in the attic."

"You don't know for sure? How long have you lived here?"

"I moved in after my divorce. The rent was cheap because it's so far outside of town and it needed a bit of fixing up. I kept telling myself that as soon as I could afford better, I would move. But Summer and I like it out here."

"I thought you said this was your mom's house." She looked at me like I was insane.

"Well, I'm sure it was somebody's mom's house. Just not mine. My mom isn't the type who enjoys peace and quiet. She loves to entertain and travel. She would never appreciate a house like this."

I was confused. Had I imagined that conversation? Valerie walked into the living room and turned on the TV. She clearly didn't want to talk about the house anymore. So I changed the subject.

"What about your stepfather?"

"What about him?" Even though she was smiling, her tone was clipped.

"Do you like him?"

"I don't need to like him. My mom loves him and that's all that matters."

She wouldn't look at me when she said this, and I got the impression there was a story there she didn't want to tell. It wasn't my place to pry. Lord only knew I had plenty of stories in my past that I had no intention of telling anyone.

"Have you always wanted to be a writer?"

Her question caught me off guard. It was only the second time she had brought up my writing since she'd found out I was an author.

“Not really. I got a scholarship to Ridgely University for Honors English. I knew I wanted to be some kind of a writer, but I was leaning more towards journalism than being a novelist.”

That was the truth. I’d realized fairly quickly that journalism wasn’t for me. I enjoyed making up my own stories instead of chasing down leads and researching real stories, but being an author had its own challenges, and I’d still be writing now if it weren’t for two things. *Lottie Mae* coming in hot and becoming a big hit right out of the gate put all kinds of pressure on me to replicate that success. And my mom dying and taking any little bit of inspiration and creativity I had with her.

“What are your plans moving forward since you don’t seem interested in writing another novel?”

“I’m still trying to decide what my second act is going to be. Trying to decide if I have another book in me and, if so, what would it be about. I think once I’m fully healed, I want to do some traveling to get my head together.”

“Yeah, traveling would be nice. I’d love to take Summer to Tokyo. Visit Disney and Studio Ghibli and all the anime shops. She loves that stuff. I’d love to visit the temples and hot springs.”

“Then why don’t you?” I was surprised she wanted to take her daughter to Tokyo. I hadn’t seen a single thing in her room that pointed to her being an anime fan.

“Because my asshole ex refuses to let me take her out of the country. We have a very strict custody agreement. I don’t want to rock the boat and lose custody of her altogether.”

“Is that another reason why you wanted me to say that I knocked that guy out with the golf club?”

“Yeah. What I told you that night was true. I don’t want people knowing I’m Troy’s sister for my mom’s sake. But that was the other reason. All I would need is Keith to see my name in the paper connected with any kind of violence and he would’ve taken it to the judge and try to get full custody of my baby. The sad thing is he doesn’t even really want her full time. He just doesn’t want to pay child support, and he would do it to hurt me. Then I’d worry about her constantly being around a bunch of women I don’t know because he can’t be faithful to anybody.”

“I am so sorry you have to deal with that, Valerie.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure, what?”

“What kind of a husband was my brother? Was he good to you? I know being married to an ex-athlete, all kinds of hoes must have been throwing themselves at him and sliding into his DMs. That couldn’t have been easy. I know Cheri struggled with it. Not that I cared because I couldn’t stand her.”

I thought for a moment before answering because I honestly did not know what to say. I loved my husband, but being with him definitely had its challenges, and all of the memories that were coming back to me told me that most of our struggles had nothing to do with any outside influences. Troy was a complicated man capable of acts of love and compassion, but he was also controlling with a surprisingly fragile ego.

“You don’t have to answer if it’s too personal.”

“It’s not that. From what I remember of your brother, we had a good marriage. He was good to me, and I loved him. But he was human just like anybody else and we both had quirks that drove each other crazy.” Valerie laughed.

“What?”

“You’re being diplomatic.”

“I’m being serious.”

“I know you are. But I know my brother had his issues. He was a good man for the most part, but he had been given special privileges since he was a high school quarterback. It only got worse once he got older and entered the NFL and became a standout. He could be a bit entitled and arrogant at times, but not like some of those jerks he played with. I like to think he matured and had grown up since he was married to Cheri.”

“I still can’t believe she cheated on him with Lloyd. He was always so tight-lipped about not wanting children and blamed it on his age. I guess now I know why, huh?”

“It’s a shame, too, because he would’ve made an amazing dad.” I’d said it for Valerie’s sake. But did I really believe it?

Later, I was full after an evening of watching reruns of *Girlfriends* with Valerie while we ate cookies and ice cream. Her sweet tooth was no joke. She helped me back to Summer’s room and took great pains to tuck me in like I was a child.

“I guess I’m not in danger of falling out of the bed,” I joked as she pulled the sheets nearly up to my chin.

“Can’t have you falling out of bed and hurting yourself. Not that you get anything if you try to sue me.”

“Like I’d actually sue you over anything like that.”

“Never say never.”

“Hey.” I grabbed her hand. “I love this polish. Can you do my nails?” I continued to admire Valerie’s metallic pink nail polish. She wore her nails short, but they were always polished.

“These are actually press-on nails. The elderly woman I take care of doesn’t mind me wearing nail polish. Sometimes I have clients who want my nails natural so press-ons just make sense. But sure, I can do your nails.”

Once she was gone, I laid there staring at the ceiling and the shadows from the tree branches swaying outside. Instantly, my eyes started to flutter and close. I’m not sure exactly what woke me, but my heartbeat was hammering fast and that’s when I looked across the bedroom into the farthest dark corner where I knew a rocking chair was and was startled to see someone sitting there. It was Valerie. I knew she was worried about me but watching me sleep in the middle of the night was just plain creepy.

“Valerie? What are you doing in here? It’s after one a.m.” Instead of replying, she held a finger to her lips.

“Shhhh.”

“Suit yourself. I’m going back to sleep.” Within seconds of closing my eyes, I was asleep again.

I dragged myself out of bed the next morning around nine only to find myself alone in the house. Valerie had left a note letting me know there were blueberry muffins, fruit, and yogurt if I wanted something for breakfast, leftover spaghetti for lunch, and that she’d be back later that evening. When I took the box of muffins from the top of the refrigerator, there was only half a muffin left and only a small portion of what had been an almost full pot of spaghetti. Weird.

I grabbed the muffin half and a container of strawberry yogurt and sat in the living room, watching TV. When I was done, I decided to explore the house. Not that there was much to see. Besides the living room, kitchen and a small dining area, bathroom, and Summer’s bedroom, the only other room I hadn’t seen was Valerie’s bedroom. She kept her door closed at all times. I figured it couldn’t hurt to take a peek.

Once I was standing outside her door with my hand on the doorknob, it suddenly felt wrong. I had no right to invade her privacy. Yet I still had so many questions about her. I'd gone over our conversation back at my house a million times and still remembered her telling me this was her mom's house. I turned the knob only to find the door was locked. I parked myself back in front of the TV for the rest of the day until Valerie came home from work with groceries. I got up to help her put them away.

"Well, I see you found the food." The laughter in her voice confused me. She was holding the empty muffin box.

"What food? You left me half a muffin and maybe a cup of spaghetti."

"Are you serious? There were six muffins in this box and half a pot of spaghetti last night. I can't believe you ate all of it. Although I am glad you have an appetite now. You need to gain some weight."

"I swear when I woke up this morning, there was half a muffin left and hardly any spaghetti. Are you sure you didn't take it for your lunch?"

"It's fine, Taylor. We've more groceries home. How about a nice steak for dinner?"

I was angry because I could tell she truly thought I'd eaten all the food. Had I eaten all the food? This felt like what happened in the garage all over again. There were so many things I could say that probably weren't going to be very nice. Instead, I just nodded.

"Yeah, steak sounds good. I like mine medium well. How was your day?"

"Same old same old. Mrs. Gilman was grouchy as usual. Her daughter came to visit and she's always in an even worse mood after she leaves. What did you do all day?"

I could tell she wanted to say besides eating half a dozen muffins and an entire pot of spaghetti. So, I told her the truth. "Not a damn thing. I've been parked on this couch all day."

"Good, you need to be resting. Why don't you go back and chill on the couch while I cook dinner. It shouldn't be too long."

After our dinner of steak, baked potatoes, and salad, I was already yawning.

"I think it's time someone went to bed. Don't you?"

"Definitely." I could barely keep my eyes open. "That sounds like an excellent idea."

Once I was in bed, Valerie stood in the doorway and bid me good night before I stopped her.

“Hey, why were you watching me sleep last night?”

Valerie looked startled before giving me a tight half smile. “Oh, that? You were having a nightmare. I heard you scream and came in to sit with you. Sorry if I woke you. I used to do that when my daughter was a kid and had nightmares.”

“A kid? Last time I looked nine was still considered a kid.” I laughed, but she rolled her eyes.

“I meant a little kid, smart ass.”

That night I did not wake up once. As I drifted off to sleep that night, I wondered why I couldn’t remember whatever nightmare Valerie had claimed I’d had the night before.

I couldn’t find my cell phone at breakfast the next morning. It wasn’t like I was attached to it the way most people were. It annoyed my mother to no end that she often couldn’t get ahold of me because either my cell phone was turned off or charging somewhere.

“Do you think it’s back at the house?” Valerie asked as we went through all of my things I’d brought with me, and still no cell phone. Valerie even called my number, not that it would’ve mattered because my phone was usually on silent.

“When did you last remember having it?”

I thought for a moment and then put my hand over my face and groaned. “The last time I remember using it was back at the house. I’ve been so tired and I hadn’t needed it since I got here three days ago. Are you sure you haven’t seen it lying around?”

Valerie started looking around on the kitchen countertops and underneath piles of paper there. I started looking on the floor before heading back to Summer’s room, and I cursed myself for not being able to get down on the floor to look under the bed. I didn’t know why I was even bothering because the last time I remembered using my phone was back at the house. Even if someone back at the house found my phone, how would they even know how to get in touch with me to let me know it was there? For all I knew Lloyd had found it and pitched it in the trash because that’s exactly what he would do. And then another thought came to me. Dammit. I hope I hadn’t accidentally packed it in one of the boxes that went to the storage unit.

“I can stop there on my way home from work to check,” Valerie offered. I hated asking her to do it because she was already doing so much, but I needed my phone. How else was I going to look for an apartment if I didn’t have a phone?

“I hate to ask you to do it, but that would be awesome. All my boxes should be upfront.”

“I know. That’s where I stacked the rest of your stuff I went back to the house to get.”

“Oh yeah. I forgot about that.”

“Now, is there anything you need before I take off for work? There’s food in the fridge and I should be back this afternoon.”

“No. I’m good. Have a great day.” Then another thought occurred to me, and I stopped her before she could get out the door. “Hey, did you ever hear from any of those other dealers about Troy’s ring?”

“No, just the one who asked if we had the box. None of the others have returned my calls. I’ll call them again today if I have time.”

Valerie left and I made another feeble attempt to look for my phone before resigning myself to the fact it wasn’t in the house. I was annoyed because I could’ve spent the whole day looking for a new place to live and calling other sports memorabilia dealers about Troy’s ring. Come to think of it, where was Troy’s ring? I remember showing it to Valerie but couldn’t recall what happened to it after that. I pushed down the panic that was starting to take hold of me because it wasn’t helping anything. Instead, I took several deep breaths and concentrated hard. I remembered putting the ring, wrapped up in its packing tape, in the drawer of Summer’s little bedside table.

I painfully dragged myself up using my walker and headed back to the bedroom. Sat down on the bed and checked the drawer. Relief instantly flooded my body as I saw the wad of tape right where I’d left it. In my attempt to get up, I knocked against the side table, knocking over the picture of Summer and her father that was sitting next to her clock. There was no way I’d be able to bend down to pick it up. So I painfully reached out my foot, put it on top of the picture, and slid it over to me. I could just bend down and reach it with my right hand. I realized the back of the frame had come off and the picture of the handsome black man posing with Summer was crooked inside the frame. I was in the process of taking the

picture out to straighten it when I noticed something that stopped me in my tracks.

The picture inside the frame wasn't an actual photo. It was too thin and flimsy. That's when I grasped what I was actually looking at. It was the kind of picture that came with a frame when you bought it. A placeholder image. Stock photography that was inside thousands of other frames just like this. This picture sitting on the bedside table, who Valerie had told me was her daughter, wasn't a family photo at all. I looked around at the rest of the room and it finally occurred to me what had been bothering me about this room all along. Everything looked new.

I made my way over to Summer's desk where she had crayons and pads of paper. The crayons were brand new and had never been used and when I flipped through the pads of construction paper and notepads, they were all empty. I walked over to the closet that had been filled with clothes for a young girl and flipped through all the clothes on the rack only to see Goodwill tags attached to most of them. The jumble of shoes that were at the bottom of the closet in a pile in a corner were various sizes from a child's size 5 to an adult woman's size 8.

I guess they could've been Valerie's shoes, but somehow I didn't think so. It felt too wrong. I went out to the hallway slowly, making my way to Valerie's bedroom, and hesitated for only a second before turning the knob. When I opened the bedroom door, my mouth fell open in shock. The room was completely empty. No bed. No dresser. Not even curtains in the windows. I backed away from the door slowly, whirling around and yelping to find someone behind me. It was Valerie.

"Valerie?" My eyes went from the empty bedroom back to her. "I... I don't... understand? What's going on?"

A smile lit up her face, and she took a step closer to me. I only realized she had something in her hand when she stabbed me in the side of the neck with it.

"I know you don't, sweetie. But don't worry, you will." She yanked the needle out of my neck and was still smiling when everything went black.

TWENTY

DETECTIVE KING

Jesse Cummings's seven months pregnant fiancée, Amber Healy, sat across from King and ugly cried. King would rather crawl naked on her hands and knees through hot coals on her way to an autopsy than give death notifications. Amber had just identified Cummings's body and had become so distraught that King feared she might go into labor on the spot. After taking her out to the lobby and getting her a bottle of water, she seemed a little calmer. At least she was until King told her the circumstances of his death, and the water works started up again in earnest. But one thing King noticed was that Cummings's fiancée hadn't immediately gone into all the reasons why the police were wrong and that her fiancé hadn't broken into someone's house. Then again, she also knew this wasn't Cummings's first rodeo. He had drug convictions and burglaries on his rap sheet.

King waited patiently while Amber slowly regained her composure. She handed her a tissue that she gratefully took and then loudly blew her nose. Amber was one of those pregnant women who just carried the baby in her belly and hadn't gained weight all over. If you had approached her from behind, you probably wouldn't know she was pregnant at all. Her driver's license said she was twenty-seven, but sitting there with no makeup, her hair pulled back from her face with white headband and dressed in a hot pink sweatsuit with matching Nikes, she looked all of sixteen.

"He told me he was done with all of that." She blew her nose again and gave King a weak smile.

"Done with all of what?" Although King knew exactly what she meant.

"Stealing for drug money. After he got out this last time, he promised me he was done, and he was going to get a job. He learned car repair and maintenance in prison and had a handful of clients. That's how he got the job he was supposed to start on Monday at Dillard's Auto Mall, as a mechanic in their service department."

"Dillard's, huh? That's a pretty high-end dealership. How'd he get that job?"

"He said a friend of a friend recommended him. Someone who owed him a favor."

“Any idea why he would’ve targeted Troy Bellows’ house if he had a good job already lined up?”

“No.” She shrugged and looked genuinely perplexed.

“Do you know if he knew Troy Bellows?”

Amber let out a bitter laugh. “How the hell would he have known Troy Bellows? In all the time we’ve been together he never said a single word to me about knowing that man.”

King thanked her and handed the still crying young woman her card as was customary, asking her to call if she remembered anything else.

“Detective, who stabbed him?”

That, King thought, was an excellent question. The bigger one being what had he been after in the Bellows’ home and why did he have Taylor Ambrose’s picture and address on him? Who had sent him there and why? And were the answers to those questions the reason why no one could find Taylor Ambrose?

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out, Miss Healy. So, if you remember anything else, please let me know. Is there anyone you’d like me to call to come be with you?”

“No. It was just me and Jesse. I’ll be fine.”

King watched her get up and walk towards the entrance and couldn’t help but think she was probably better off without him. Then Amber stopped and looked back at King.

“Thanks for not assuming I’m a cheating hoe.” She blew her nose and gave King a small smile.

“Excuse me?”

“It’s what everyone thinks when they find out my fiancé just got out a few months ago and I’m seven months pregnant.”

King had wondered, but it was none of her business how people lived unless they were breaking the law. “It’s none of my business, Miss Healy.”

“It isn’t. But just in case you were wondering. Jesse served his time in California, and they allow overnight family visits.”

King nodded and watched her leave.

King was headed down the hall to the restroom when she heard someone call her name. It was a clerk from booking. One of the people she regularly saw but couldn’t remember her name.

“Yes?”

“Ma’am, a Timothy Chalmers was picked up on a DUI about four this morning and when we were booking him in, he had this.” She handed King a plastic evidence bag holding a gold Rolex. “In light of the break-in at the Bellows’ house, I thought it might be important.”

King looked from the watch to the young woman in confusion.

“Look at the back.”

King flipped the watch over and when she read the engraved name on the back, her eyes widened in surprise.

Timothy Chalmers hadn’t had a good night. He sat across the table from King wearing a wrinkled tan suit without a tie. His eyes were alert but bloodshot, and alcohol fumes were coming off him in waves. King slid the evidence bag with the Rolex in it across the table at him. His eyes widened slightly before he looked at her and shrugged.

“Why do you have Troy Bellows’ Rolex, Mr. Chalmers?”

“Well, if you’re thinking it’s because I stole it from him, you’d be sadly mistaken.”

“I don’t know what to think, that’s why I’m asking.”

Chalmers leaned back in his seat, running a hand over his face and looking up at the ceiling. He let out a big sigh that almost singed King’s face and would’ve ignited the room if she’d lit a match.

“I guess it’s no big deal telling you this now, seeing as how he’s dead, but he owed me money and gave me the Rolex as payment.”

“How much money are we talking?”

“Thirty grand plus interest.”

“Any idea what he needed the money for?”

“To get caught up on his mortgage payments. I told him he should sell that house. Not sure why he needed such a big house for just the two of them.”

“You and your wife live in a house just as big and it’s just the two of you. What’s the difference?”

Chalmers chuckled and shook his head. “The difference is that *we* can afford our house. Now, do I need a lawyer?”

“Why would you need a lawyer?”

“Exactly.”

King stood up and held the door open for Timothy Chalmers, surprised he was still able to walk upright with the amount of alcohol he must’ve

consumed. “You’re free to go. You can get the rest of your things at the counter down the hall. We’ll be in touch if we have any more questions.”

Marissa Chalmers was coming through the front doors as King passed through the lobby. If she was concerned about having to pick her husband from jail, she didn’t look it. King could tell this wasn’t her first rodeo.

“Detective? Good morning.”

“A good morning for some but not for others I’m guessing.”

Marissa Chalmers blushed. “I could think of better ways to be spending my morning.”

“How long has he had a problem?”

“Since before we were married. But he hasn’t had a drink in almost two years.”

That piqued King’s curiosity. “Any idea why he fell off the wagon?”

“We’ve been having a few... problems in our marriage. Nothing we can’t overcome.”

“Your husband told me that Troy Bellows borrowed money from him. Do you know anything about that?”

“Troy owed everyone money, and worked overtime to keep it from Taylor. He was still trying to maintain the lifestyle he’d been living when he was playing pro ball. He did not have the income anymore.”

“Any chance Taylor could’ve found out?”

Marissa looked taken aback. “What are you getting at?”

“We’re still looking into their accident. If it was an accident.”

Marissa Chalmers’ eyebrows shot up, and she gave King a hard look. “Detective, I may not have known Taylor Ambrose as well as I would’ve liked, but there’s one thing I know beyond the shadow of a doubt.”

“What’s that?”

“That woman loved her husband. She wouldn’t have done a thing to hurt him.”

“So, she wasn’t having an affair?”

Marissa Chalmers let out a disgusted snort and rolled her eyes. “Let me guess. You’ve been talking to our big-mouthed mailman, Wes. People think women gossip, but all the biggest gossips I know are men, including my husband.”

“Is this rumor true? To your knowledge was Taylor Ambrose having an affair?”

“Tim told me he was having coffee on the balcony off our bedroom and witnessed an argument between Taylor and Troy on their patio, over a phone.”

“A phone?”

“Yes, Tim said it looked like a burner phone. Troy was grilling Taylor about where it had come from.”

“And what was Ms. Ambrose’s response?”

Marissa Chalmers shrugged. “Tim never heard her answer because they noticed him sitting out on the balcony and went back into the house.”

“Well, what made your husband think Taylor was having an affair?”

“Because he said there were only two reasons why anyone had a second phone, for work, or for an affair, and believe me he would know.” She gave King a pointed look.

“How?” King knew what she was getting at but wanted to hear it from her.

“I’m his second wife. He had a phone like that which he used to call me with when he was still married to the former Mrs. Chalmers.”

“Were you okay with that?”

“I’m not proud of it. It is what it is. But I wouldn’t blame Taylor if she was cheating on Troy.”

“And why is that?”

“Troy was a bit... controlling. Nice enough guy and certainly charming. But I got the impression he wanted all of the attention all the time.”

“How so?”

“I told you she gave me a tour of her office, right?”

King nodded.

“It was me and a couple of other women from the neighborhood. Troy was with us and he barely let Taylor talk. Afterwards insisted we come out to the garage so he could show off his podcasting space. I felt bad for Taylor. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

And with that, King watched Marissa head off down the hall and greet her husband, enfolding him in her arms as he buried his face in her hair. As they walked past King towards the front doors, Marissa mumbled something that King just barely caught and wondered if she’d heard her correctly. She could have sworn she’d heard her say, “You need to get it together. You wanted this, remember?”

TWENTY-ONE

TAYLOR

My dreams were jumbled, fragmented flashes of memory: Troy's gorgeous smile. Us laughing together and kissing. My mom at my college graduation. Signing copies of *Lottie Mae* during my one and only book tour. Eating pizza with Nessa in the dorm's TV lounge while watching *The Voice*. The sensation of falling, being in freefall and unable to stop. It felt so real I instantly jerked awake.

I was sitting on a chair. The room was dark, the only light filtering through the single window. Even in the darkness everything was fuzzy and unfocused for several minutes before the events of earlier came flooding back into my head. I strained to hear if I was alone in the house but heard nothing. My neck and shoulders hurt. While I was unconscious, my head had fallen forward while my arms, which were tied behind my back, put a strain on my shoulders, which were aching. The side of my neck throbbed where Valerie had stabbed me with the syringe. Had that really happened? The fact I was tied to a chair pretty much answered my question.

I tried to move my legs but quickly realized they were also tied to each chair leg, strapped at the ankle. I wriggled uselessly, trying to free myself, but it was no use. I was too weak. Even if I hadn't been, I was secured tightly to the chair. Why was this happening to me? First, the accident and Troy's death, and now this. This had to be some kind of nightmare I couldn't wake up from. So I closed my eyes again, only for them to fly open at the sound of the door opening. Instantly, the room was flooded with light from the hallway followed by the bedroom light being flipped on. I was frozen in fear, too scared to turn around.

"Good. You're awake. You were out so long I was scared I gave you too much sedative and sent you to the upper room." Valerie laughed at her own joke as she dragged another chair in from the kitchen and set it in front of me.

"Why? Why are you doing this to me? Is this to get back at Troy for choosing Cheri over you? Are you punishing me for that since he's dead?"

"Girl, please. You haven't figured out by now that I'm not Troy's sister? You were right to be suspicious of me. I used your memory loss from the

accident to spin you a tale, knowing you wouldn't know whether I was telling the truth or not. You must really be slow."

"But... what about... that photo?"

I gaped at her while she stared at me with her arms crossed, and for the first time I really looked at her and realized the purple bob she had when I met her had been a wig. Her real hair was pixie cut, not a whole lot longer than mine.

"Photoshop. I took two old pictures of both of us and spliced them together. And, bam. Instant family photo."

"Why? Is this about money? I don't have any money to give you, Val..." I hesitated not knowing what to call her. If everything else had been lies, then her name was most likely not Valerie Gaines.

"My name is actually Valerie. Although my last name isn't Gaines."

"Why are you doing this? Why go to all this trouble?"

"You'll find out about that soon enough."

"Was anything you told me besides your first name real?"

"Everything I told you was real except it wasn't my story, it was yours."

"Mine? What are you talking about?" I tried once again to wriggle free.

"I noticed the look in your eyes when I told you I was an outside baby, the product of an affair between Troy's father and my mother?" I couldn't meet her eyes, and she continued. "I'm not the outside baby. You are, Taylor. Taylor Ambrose. The illegitimate daughter of Randall Braithwaite, the late millionaire real estate developer, a product of a four-month-long fling with a woman thirty years his junior. A woman who owned a small diner in downtown Weatherly. *Your* mother. Randall was actually in love with your mom. The problem was that his wife found out and showed up at the diner with a check for a quarter of a million and told your mom to stay away from her husband."

"Shut up." It came out as a whisper, but she ignored me and kept right on talking.

"She was pregnant with you and Randall's wife told your mom she was welcome to that money as long as she stayed the hell away from her husband. Once she'd cashed that check, she was giving up any and all rights to child support or any claim on Randall being your father. And your mom cashed that check. Isn't that right?"

Tears filled my eyes. But they weren't tears of sadness or shame. They were tears of anger and frustration and I pushed my feet against the floor as

hard as I could, rocked back on the legs of the chair, then rocked forward launching myself at whoever the hell this woman was with the last bit of strength I had.

“Don’t you dare talk about my mother! You keep her name out of your lying mouth!”

I had managed to knock Valerie off balance, sending us both crashing to the floor. However, unlike me who was still firmly tied to the chair, Valerie was on her feet in an instant, dragging me upright and angrily slapping my face hard.

“Try that again and I will leave your ass here tied to that chair and no one, and I mean no one, will ever find you.” She left the room, turning off the lights and leaving me in darkness, and in pain from my crash on the floor.

“Come back here!” I shrieked. “What do you want from me? Why are you doing this to me?” The only response I got was the sound of the TV volume being raised so high I could barely hear myself think straight.

I screamed until my throat was sore and I was exhausted. I eventually fell asleep only to be rudely awakened the next morning when Valerie came in with a tray of food.

“I’m going to untie you. If you try anything, I will slit your throat with this knife.” I recognized the knife from the knife set I had at home.

She did not need to worry about me trying to get away. Pain was the price I paid for launching myself at her last night. No matter how good it had felt, it hadn’t been worth it. So, I merely nodded and refused to meet her gaze while she used the knife to cut my wrists and ankles free. I rubbed my sore wrists and rolled my shoulders, trying to get the circulation going again.

“Here, take these.” She handed me a small paper cup of water and two pills. I didn’t recognize these pills. They certainly weren’t my pain meds, which were round and white. These pills were oval-shaped and cream-colored.

“What are these?”

“Prednisone. It’s a steroid.”

“And why would I take that? Where are my pain meds?”

“If you take the prednisone, you won’t need the pain meds.”

“If that’s the case, why wouldn’t my doctor have prescribed me these?”

“Your doctor probably would have if you had taken your ass to your appointments. If you had, you would’ve found out that it is not your pelvis that’s causing you all the pain you’re in.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your daddy. Randall Braithwaite? He had RA and he must’ve passed it down to his baby girl.”

“RA? What is that? What are you talking about?”

“Rheumatoid arthritis. It’s an autoimmune disease where your immune system attacks your healthy joints and muscles. It’s chronic and unfortunately for you, there’s no cure.”

Was she telling the truth or was this a cruel joke? Making me think I had some incurable disease just to torture me sounded right up her alley. “I... don’t... believe a thing that comes out of your mouth.”

“Doesn’t matter whether you believe me or not. Haven’t you noticed since I showed up how much worse your pain and stiffness has been? You’re in one hell of an autoimmune flare-up right now.”

“Flare-up?”

“Flare-ups are when your symptoms go from zero to one hundred, increased pain, swelling, fatigue, and inflammation. Your flare-up is especially bad courtesy of me and all that sugary, high carb food I’ve been feeding you that you’ve been slurping up. Sugar and dairy are really bad for autoimmune disorders. Didn’t you tell me your doctor said your pelvis was healed and you couldn’t figure out why you were still in so much pain?”

“How the hell do you know what my doctors don’t?”

“Are you listening to me? The doctors do know what’s wrong with you. You just haven’t been going to your appointments, and you’ve been ignoring their phone calls. I tried calling your doctor pretending to be you, but they refused to give me any info over the phone. So I found one of your medical bills and used the information to set up an account with your health network’s online patient portal on your computer when I was packing your office. I was able to pull up your test results of the bloodwork they ran on you not long before you checked yourself out of rehab against your doctor’s orders. You have rheumatoid arthritis, and they needed you to come in to discuss treatment options. One thing I’m not lying about is being an RN. I really am a nurse. And I’ve treated lots of people with RA. Bad flare-ups are treated with steroids.” She once again held out the pills and paper cup, but I firmly shook my head.

“I’m not taking those.”

“Suit yourself. I couldn’t care less one way or the other, but I don’t want you dying on me, so make sure you eat your breakfast. Because, if I come back and that food is still on that tray, I’ll have to feed you myself and I promise you won’t like that.”

I looked down at the tray that she had set on the floor to see a paper plate with scrambled eggs, two strips of bacon, and a slice of buttered toast along with a bottle of water. Once she left the room, I slid off the chair and army crawled to the tray and began to devour the food. When I was done, I rolled over onto my back because my whole body was on fire.

Once the pain had subsided to a dull roar, I rolled onto my stomach and painfully crawled back to the chair. My eyes traveled around the room, realizing I wasn’t in Valerie’s empty room as I had originally thought. I was back in the room that had been her fictional daughter Summer’s. Except everything that had been in the room, except for the narrow twin bed, was gone.

When I got to the bed, I braced my palms against the bed frame and painfully tried to pull myself up onto the mattress. On my first attempt I fell flat on my face, knocking the breath out of me. I lay there for several long minutes gathering my strength and resolve before trying again. This time, I succeeded in hoisting myself onto the bed, with my lower body hanging off the side. Again, I rested for several long minutes. Then I reached out and grabbed the other side of the mattress that was against the wall. Since my arms were marginally stronger than my legs, I was able to pull my whole body onto the bed. Exhausted and still in pain, I closed my eyes.

TWENTY-TWO

TAYLOR

Before the Accident

Troy and I were at an impasse.

“I’m not crazy.” I glared at my husband.

“No one called you crazy, Taylor. I just think you could benefit from therapy.” Troy sighed and ran a hand over his face. It reminded me of something my mom used to do when I was working her last nerve.

It was the middle of the night, and we were in the kitchen. I hadn’t been able to sleep and had gotten up to make myself some chamomile tea. I was sitting at the kitchen island drinking my tea when a tap came at the back door. I looked over to see a face staring back at me wearing a hockey mask. I screamed so loud I could’ve woken the dead. Troy came rushing from our bedroom to find me collapsed on the floor screaming in terror. He’d searched, but there’d been no one there. Now he was looking at me like I was crazy.

“Suggesting I see a therapist? How the hell else am I supposed to take that?”

“I’m just worried about you. I’m your husband. I’m allowed to be worried about you. Weren’t you in therapy after your mom died? I could have sworn you told me that.”

I hadn’t exactly been in therapy. I’d been in a virtual grief support group after my mom died, back when my grief had me spiraling and out of control. We met online once a week. It helped talking to other people going through a loss. But once I started feeling better, I stopped attending.

“I don’t need therapy. I told you I was fine. I’m already on anxiety meds. Next, you’ll be thinking I should be committed.” I got up from the dinner table and tossed my napkin on top of my half-finished plate of shrimp linguine; a meal I’d been looking forward to and had now completely lost my appetite for.

“You’re constantly losing things. You’re forgetting things. You’re not sleeping. Now you’re hallucinating phantom masked men at the door.”

How was I supposed to respond to that when everything he said was true? At least once a week I was losing or misplacing things and Troy would end up having to help me find them. Sometimes they were in places I swore I had checked multiple times, and were easily found. But there were

other things I still hadn't been able to locate. I had gotten to the point where I stopped telling Troy when something of mine was missing, and if I didn't find it, it just stayed lost and I would buy a replacement. I even started waiting until he was out of the house to look for things, but there were other things happening that were harder to explain. Like cooking dinner and forgetting to turn off the stove. I wasn't sleeping and was anxious and overwhelmed. I was falling apart and couldn't understand why. The thing that almost sent me over the edge was finding out Troy had been keeping a journal documenting everything I had been experiencing.

I found it in the duffel bag he used when he went to work out. We had more than enough room for a home gym, but Troy told me the only way to ensure he would continue to work out was to actually leave the house. The duffel bag had been sitting on the bench in our foyer, and when I brushed past it on my way to the kitchen, it fell on the floor. I hastily stuffed everything back in the bag, prepared to set it back on top of the bench, when I noticed a black leather-bound notebook. I'd never gone through Troy's things before, he never gave me a reason to, but I was curious about the notebook and casually flipped through it.

There were several pages filled with dates written neatly in ink documenting a list of things that were happening: March 1st, lost her umbrella; March 15th, forgot her doctor's appointment; April 10th, lost her favorite coffee mug; April 23rd, left the gas on the stove on after making a pot of soup. The list went on with each week having at least two to three incidents documented, with the last entry being two days prior, accidentally took her anxiety meds twice and got sick. My heart started racing and a cold, hard pit formed in my stomach. Why was he keeping this journal? I heard him about to come downstairs and hastily tossed the journal back in his bag, then headed into the kitchen to make myself a cup of tea. I reached up into the cabinet and saw my favorite mug, a black mug with white letters that said *Genius at Work*, and remembered how it had gone missing for a week before I found it in the bottom drawer of the desk in my office. I absolutely did not remember putting it there or even drinking out of it that week.

Troy and I barely spoke for days after his suggestion I talk to a therapist. We politely navigated around each other, having silent dinners at the dining table, and he was already gone when I got up in the morning. I knew he was just trying to help me, at least I thought he was, but it was

making my anxiety even worse, knowing he was documenting my behavior. After almost a week of awkward silence between me and my husband, he suggested we go for a hike up to the Weatherly Park Overlook.

TWENTY-THREE

TAYLOR

A hard nudge to the mattress jolted me awake. Bleary-eyed I looked up into Valerie's sneering face. She pulled the chair I had been tied to over to the side of the bed and sat down. I painfully and slowly pushed myself up into a sitting position, pushing myself back until I was against the wall and as far away from her as possible. She laughed.

"You have to be the most hardheaded person I have ever met in my life. I see you didn't take the prednisone."

I just glared at her.

"You have to be in a hell of a lot of pain right now because you haven't had your pain meds in over twenty-four hours and you refuse to take the prednisone."

"You lied to me about who you are, wormed your way into my life, and now you're holding me captive in this house. Why the hell would I believe those pills are anything other than poison?"

"I have no intention of killing you, Taylor. You haven't suffered nearly enough."

"Suffered for what? What the hell have I done to you to make you do all this to me?"

She stared at me while indecision flitted across her face. "Okay, I'll tell you something about me that's true. I had a sister who passed away when she was in college. We were very close, and I miss her every day." She got up and headed towards the door before I stopped her.

"Why are you telling me that? What does that have to do with why you're holding me captive in this room, and why you pretended to be Troy's sister?"

"Well, let me ask you something. Do you know anyone who died when they were in college?" She didn't wait for my response and walked out the door as cold tendrils of realization crept up my spine.

I sat in the same spot for hours after Valerie left. At least I thought it was hours as I'd lost all sense of time. I just knew that it was now dark. I could hear the TV on in the living room. Later, I was still staring off into space when I heard footsteps coming down the hall, then stop outside the door. I tensed, expecting Valerie to open the door. Instead, a soft click came

from the doorknob. She'd unlocked the door. Her footsteps retreated to the living room. I stared at the door in confusion. Was this some kind of trap? I sat there for a long time before deciding she'd unlocked the door for a reason and the only one I could think of was that she wanted me to come out of the bedroom.

I slowly scooted to the edge of the bed, closer to the chair my captor had vacated. I was beyond stiff from sitting in one position for so long and had to rest for a couple of minutes. Bracing my hands against the seat of the chair, I pushed and tentatively stood on shaking legs as pain shot up my knees, through my thighs, and up into my hips. But I had to get out of that room. I rocked forward onto my toes, launching myself towards the door, and falling painfully against it. The volume of the TV on the other side of the door didn't waiver, but I was right, the door was unlocked.

Bracing myself against the door jamb, I turned the knob and slowly pulled the door open a crack. The hallway was dark, but I could see the glow of the TV and the sound of laughter and splashing. Valerie must've been watching a movie or TV show. Leaning against the wall for support, I made my way down the darkened hall until I got to the entrance of the living room, and froze. Valerie was sitting on the couch, but what she was watching on the flatscreen was not a TV show or a movie. It took me a minute or so to realize she was watching a home movie. On the TV was a middle-aged black woman and a young, smiling black girl of about twelve with her hair in French braids. They were in an inground pool splashing, laughing, and chasing each other. I stared in confusion. I knew that girl. We'd met freshman year at Ridgely University and become inseparable until she died our senior year, mere months before graduation.

"Nessa." It came out a whisper. Barely audible. But I quickly realized I'd been heard when Valerie instantly reached over and flipped on the lamp sitting on the table by the end of the couch, then stood up to face me.

"Yeah, that's right. Nessa. My baby sister. The one whose manuscript you stole and got famous off of."

TWENTY-FOUR

NESSA

2014

“Is he looking this way?” Nessa James could barely eat her lunch as she felt eyes on her from behind. She hoped against hope that it was the person she thought it was.

“He’s looking this way, but I’m not sure if he’s looking at you or the line for the salad bar.” Nessa’s best friend, Taylor Ambrose, was only five minutes into her burger and sweet potato fries, and Nessa could already tell she wanted to leave.

They were having lunch at the Briggs Hall dining room where they usually ate. Nessa had been looking forward to their senior year. But they were only a month into the semester, and everything had changed. And by everything, she meant herself.

Nessa had come back to campus a different person than when she was at the end of their junior year. She’d gone to the dermatologist who put her on a skin care system that cleared up her acne. She’d also gotten rid of her thick glasses and started wearing soft contact lenses. She got hair extensions, and her hair was now glossy and straight and fell past her shoulders in soft waves. And she’d lost the 25 pounds that she hadn’t been able to shake since freshman year.

Her sister had also taken her shopping for some more stylish, figure-flattering clothes. Now, when she looked in the mirror, the pimply-faced dork in baggy clothes was gone. She saw someone stylish, pretty even. Her confidence still wasn’t what it should be. But it was a whole lot better. She was feeling so good about herself. The only problem was her best friend. Nessa could tell Taylor wanted the old her back. The chick that trailed behind her like a disheveled shadow. It wasn’t like Taylor was Miss Popularity herself, but she was pretty and smart. While neither of them had dated the entire time they’d been in college, Taylor could’ve easily had a boyfriend if she truly wanted. But now Nessa had caught the eye of the most popular guy on campus, Kelton Wallace, star of the Ridgely University basketball team. A nearly seven-foot-tall bronze God with a faux-hawk, multiple piercings and a smile that could melt the panties off a nun. He’d been giving her the eye ever since the semester started. She was

excited. Taylor wasn't. She thought most athletes were of limited intelligence, which Nessa thought was pretty condescending.

It had never occurred to her that Taylor might be jealous, but considering how she was acting lately, Nessa thought she might be. Lori had told her she shouldn't trust Taylor. She'd never even met Nessa's best friend but had immediately disliked her when Nessa talked about her, and refused to meet her. Lori had always been like that. She wanted Nessa all to herself and tried very hard to talk her out of going to college fifty miles away.

"What do you have this afternoon? I was gonna go into town and get a manicure. Wanna come?"

"Since when do you have money for a manicure? I thought you were broke."

"Lori gave me a gift card for my birthday, and I haven't used it yet."

"And you're not using it for books? Did you see how many books we need for Honors thesis?"

"OMG. Do you ever think about anything other than classwork?"

"And when did you start thinking about anything *other* than classwork?"

Before Nessa could respond someone brushed past her, purposefully nudging her. Both she and Taylor looked up to see Kelton staring down at her. Nessa practically vibrated with excitement, but somehow managed not to totally embarrass herself. She smiled sweetly up at Kelton, who saw it as an invitation to pull up a chair and have a seat.

"How are you two beautiful ladies doing today?"

Taylor opened her mouth to say something that Nessa knew would be smart ass and instantly cut her friend off. "We're fine," said Nessa, not quite knowing what else to say.

"Well, I can see that." Nessa and Kelton grinned at each other until Nessa shyly looked away.

"I didn't mean to interrupt your lunch. I just wanted to know if you knew I was having a party, and thought I'd stop by and personally invite you both."

"I have a quiz I have to study for and I'm pretty sure Nessa does too, right?"

Taylor was giving her a hard look. Nessa would've kicked her if she thought Kelton wouldn't feel it when the table vibrated. What was wrong

with her?

“I’ll be there. Where is it?”

“The rec room over in Clyde Hall. Friday night at nine until whenever. I’ll probably have to move it up to my room since the rec room closes at midnight.”

“I think I can spare a few minutes to stop by during breaks between studying.” Nessa could almost feel Taylor rolling her eyes.

“You have made my day, beautiful lady. I’m looking forward to seeing you. You both have a nice day.”

They watched him go and at least Taylor had the good grace to let him get out of earshot before she turned on her friend.

“Do you honestly think it’s a good idea to get involved with someone like him, Nessa? You know what kind of a reputation he has.”

“You act like I want to marry the guy. I just want to have some fun, Taylor. We’re graduating next spring, and we’ve never been invited to a party. Don’t you want to have a little fun just for once?”

“We’ve had four years to mingle with the likes of Kelton Wallace and his crew. Doesn’t it bother you that he wasn’t interested until you came back from summer break looking like a million bucks?”

Instead of being insulted, Nessa sat up straighter in her chair. “A million bucks, huh? You barely said a word when you saw me after summer break. Do you really think I look that good?”

Taylor couldn’t help but crack a smile. “I couldn’t believe it when I saw you. You look amazing and I am so sorry for not saying anything. I’m just scared, that’s all.”

“Scared? Girl, what are you scared about?”

“That you won’t want to hang out anymore. I’m still nerdy old Taylor. Still stuck in my dweeb cocoon. I see the way people look at you now. I’m just scared you won’t want to be my friend anymore and that I’m dragging you down.”

“You could never drag me down. Hey, why don’t we order pizza tonight and I can read you the first couple of chapters of the new story I’m working on.”

“Yeah, that would be great.” Taylor smiled at Nessa, suddenly interested in her food again. And Nessa felt relieved that nothing between her and her best friend had changed.

TWENTY-FIVE

TAYLOR

I stared at her in disbelief not sure I'd heard correctly. She was Nessa's *sister*? What kind of game was this woman playing? I struggled to remember if I'd ever seen a picture of Nessa's sister. What had her name even been? Lori! That was it. Nessa had an older sister named Lori. But there was no reason for me to believe a con woman who had done nothing but lie to me from day one.

"So now you're pretending to be someone else I loved's sister? You're sick!"

"And you're a thief." The words hissed out between her clenched teeth as she glared at me. I took a step back.

"You... said... you didn't lie about Valerie being your real name. Nessa's sister's name is Lori."

"Put v a in front of that. My name is spelled V a l o r i, not e r i. Nessa was the only one who called me Lori. And just in case you're wondering why I never wanted to meet you, it's because of what Nessa told me about you. I never trusted you. Turns out I was right not to after what you did to her."

"What could she have possibly told you about me that made you not trust a woman you'd never met?"

Valerie continued to glare at me and then looked away. "She called you her... best friend." Her voice so full of indignation mere seconds ago, was flat and hollow. "She'd been *my* best friend since she'd been born. Then she went off to college and left me behind and made *you* her best friend. A chick who stole from her."

"I never stole anything..." I managed to get out before Valerie grabbed me by the front of my shirt and shoved me up against the nearest wall. She got right in my face.

"You thieving bitch! Don't you dare stand there and lie to me. *Lottie Mae* was Nessa's book. You stole it after she was gone, changed the title, and then years later got a book deal for it."

"That's not true! Why in the world would you think that?"

"Because she read the first few chapters of a book she was working on to me, and was almost finished with it. The title was *Lettie*. I didn't think

anything of it until you came out with a similarly titled book, and the chapters were almost identical. I couldn't find her original manuscript when I searched her things from her dorm. Plus, you haven't written another book since. Now, why would that be, Miss Bestselling Author?"

"You couldn't find it because it wasn't hers. I would never steal anyone else's work. I don't have to. I'm a damned good writer. And me not having written another book isn't because I stole the one I got published."

"You're lying."

"I'm not the liar here. I'm not the one passing myself off as Troy's sister. If you think I stole from your sister, then why haven't you gone to the media? Why haven't you sued me?"

"Because I don't have proof. I don't have my sister's manuscript. Instead, I decided to exact my own form of revenge and make sure I took everything from you the way you took from my sister. She might still be here if you hadn't done what you did."

It was on the tip of my tongue to deny her crazy accusations once again, until what she'd said finally hit me. She wanted to take everything from me.

"What have you done, Valerie?" She smiled and let me go, retreating to lean against the wall opposite me and crossing her arms.

"After *Lottie Mae* came out, I read it and realized it was my sister's book. I became an expert on Taylor Ambrose. There's not an inch of your life that I don't know about. I studied you like I was working on a PhD in sorry ass bitches."

"I didn't steal..."

"Shut up! I'm still talking." She pushed herself off the wall menacingly with clenched fists, but stopped short of actually touching me.

I did as I was told and shut up after instantly realizing how much damage she could do to me, and there would be little I could do to fight back. If I was going to get out of this situation, it was going to have to be strategically.

"I started with your mom. I know she owned a little diner on Cress Street. I went in there one day and saw her talking to an old man and recognized him as Randall Braithwaite, the millionaire. I was trying to find out more information about you from her, but I ended up finding out information about her. One of the servers was watching them and I overheard her telling a coworker the boss's boyfriend was back, and she could tell by looking at him that he must be your father." She paused for a

moment to gauge my reaction, but I wouldn't give her the satisfaction of losing it again like I did the last time she'd mentioned my mother.

"I'm listening. Go on."

"I would go back regularly, until one day I saw a help-wanted sign, and I applied. That was around the time your mom's kidney disease had worsened and she stopped working. I used that time to get to know your daddy. He would still come in the evenings when there was hardly anyone there and we would get to talking. He told me all about the illegitimate daughter he had outside of his marriage and how his biggest regret was not acknowledging her and being a father to her. He was a nice enough old man. Kind of arrogant and a lousy tipper but genuinely regretful about all the poor decisions he'd made."

I stared at her refusing to say a word.

"Anyway, he was thinking about making a new will and leaving everything to you to make up for not being there for you. Both his artist wife and son were dead by then and he had no other heirs. Since your mom wasn't around, he asked for my advice and I gave it to him. I tried to talk him out of it since you didn't even want to meet him and give him a chance to get to know him, but he wouldn't listen. He was desperate to create some kind of connection with you, one he'd never had with his son. Of course I couldn't have that, so I waited. I'm good at waiting. It only took a couple of years. But it paid off in the end. Just not for you.

"What do you mean?"

"Once he became senile and bedridden, I got a job as a maid at his estate. I made sure I was the one cleaning his room on the days his lawyer came to visit. I was in his room the day he signed his new will. I was a witness. But I used a fake ID to get that job and signed with that fake name, invalidating his new will which reinstated his old will leaving everything to charity. How does it feel knowing I'm the reason you're not an heiress?" Her shit-eating smirk made me want to vomit.

"You say you studied me. But if you really knew me at all, you'd know I never wanted that man's money." I hated how shrill and insistent my voice sounded. But it didn't make what I'd just said any less truthful.

My mom told me who my father was when I was sixteen and asked if I wanted to meet him because she still maintained a friendship with him. I told her no. I had no desire to meet a man who viewed me as a mistake. Him not marrying my mom wasn't the point. What had *I* done? The

mistakes of two adults who should've known better robbed me of a father growing up and there was nothing Randall Braithwaite could have done to fix that after thirty years.

"I don't believe that for a second and I'd have still done it even if I did believe it."

"And I'm going to guess that it didn't make you feel as good as you thought it would, huh?"

"No. It did not," she said, shocking me. "But I thought of another way, a way that would cause you to lose everything."

Before I could remind her that I had nothing left to lose, the living room was suddenly bathed in bright light. We both froze, our gazes swinging towards the front picture window. A car was in the driveway. I did not hesitate and pushed myself off the wall in the direction of the front door.

"Help! Help me!" That was all I could manage before Valerie clamped one hand over my mouth and her other arm around my shoulders as she dragged me backwards down the hall to the bedroom and quickly shoved me onto the floor. I screamed again before she pulled one of the socks from her foot and shoved it into my mouth, causing me to retch. She pulled a zip tie from her back pocket, flipped me over and secured my arms behind my back and quickly left the room, closing the door behind her. I had to force myself to calm down because if I vomited, I'd probably choke. Having someone's sweaty sock in my mouth made me gag in revulsion and I used my tongue to push the sock to the front and out of my mouth. I spit it out and rolled onto my back.

The sound of muffled voices and laughter followed by the front door shutting and then dead silence was like a punch in the gut. Whoever had been in that car was gone. Tears of frustration filled my eyes and ran down the sides of my face. I had to get out of here. But how? Then I spotted the pills Valerie had brought me earlier. Was she telling the truth? Would they get rid of my pain, because if there was one thing I knew for sure, I wouldn't be able to escape in my current condition. After what seemed like an eternity, the bedroom door flew open and Valerie walked in, eyeing me lying on the floor like I was a dead bug.

"Who was that at the door?"

"They had the wrong address. They were looking for the neighbor's house down the road."

She had a knife in her hand as she walked towards me and I flinched, but she just cut the zip tie off of my wrists.

However, after all of her righteous indignation, she seemed deflated somehow. The anger she'd laid into me earlier seemed to be gone and she was sullen and distracted. I expected her to threaten me with more violence if I screamed again. But she didn't say another word to me and left the room locking the door behind her. Then twenty minutes later she was back with a turkey and cheese sandwich on a paper plate, a bag of potato chips, an apple, and another bottle of water. She wouldn't even look at me when she sat it on the bed next to me.

"Will that prednisone really help me feel better?" That seemed to perk her up a little bit, but not much.

She glanced at the cup of water and the pills still lying on the floor where she had set them earlier. She walked over and retrieved them and then handed me the pills. "Only one way to find out." Then she left again, and I didn't see her again for the rest of the night.

It took me at least an hour after I had eaten the sandwich and chips to get up enough courage to take the pills. Afterwards, I lay down on the bed and closed my eyes, wondering if I would die in my sleep because I had just knowingly taken poison.

TWENTY-SIX

DETECTIVE KING

So far, the BOLO on Taylor Ambrose and her car had turned up sightings all over Weatherly and beyond, but none of them were credible. It was like she'd just vanished into thin air. Willis, the young officer who had been stationed outside of the Bellows' home after the break-in hadn't seen her leave. One of her neighbors across the street had doorbell camera footage of her car leaving the property while Willis could still be seen sitting in his cruiser, head bent over his phone.

The windows of Ambrose's SUV were tinted, and she couldn't verify with one hundred percent certainty that Ambrose was the one driving, but when King sped up the footage, she saw that Ambrose's SUV actually came back to the house at 7:04 a.m. and was there for approximately thirty-seven minutes before leaving again. Willis's cruiser was gone, meaning he'd been on the DV call. Why had Ambrose come back?

King was happy she had at least one piece of good news. She'd finally been contacted by a woman named Ashlyn Connolly, the woman who had been arguing with Troy Bellows right before the accident that killed him. She left a message at the station, which King did not get until a full day later because she'd been chasing down leads after the break-in at the Bellows' house and hadn't been at the station. She could've kicked herself because she'd been purposefully ignoring any calls she got from dispatch because she was too laser-focused on finding Taylor Ambrose. She hoped like hell Ms. Connolly would be able to shed some light on Troy Bellows' last moments.

King called the number that had been left for her. Ashlyn Connolly answered on the third ring.

"I was wondering if anyone was ever going to get back to me," she said after King identified herself.

"Sorry about that and thanks for getting back to me, Ms. Connolly."

"I assume you want to talk to me about the late and not so great Troy Bellows, right?" She sounded impatient and annoyed.

King was instantly taken aback by that statement. Everyone she'd talked to about Troy Bellows, mainly fans of his, never described him as anything

short of a saint. So she couldn't wait to hear what this woman had to tell her.

"Right. We have video footage of the parking lot at Weatherly Park Overlook and from the looks of it there was some kind of confrontation between you and Troy Bellows. Can you tell me what that was about?" said King.

"They were arriving as I was leaving. I was there to get some footage of the Overlook for my YouTube channel. But when I got there, a park worker told me the Overlook was closed and wouldn't be open again until the next morning."

"And that's what made you so angry that you yelled at Troy Bellows and his wife?"

Ashlyn Connolly rolled her eyes. "I was pissed because I hadn't seen any signs that it was closed. I was halfway up the path when this guy in a park uniform just kind of came out of nowhere and told me it was closed.

"But that still doesn't explain the confrontation with the Bellows."

"Okay. Fine. I saw that Bellows guy pull in, and he and his wife got out. She was crying, and I got a bad feeling. I asked if she was okay and Troy Bellows told me to mind my own effing business. And I lost it! I gave that idiot a piece of my mind. Then I saw the look on his wife's face and realized I was just making things worse for her because God only knows what he was going to do to her once I left."

"Why did you feel like she was in danger?"

"Because he was like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Angry until he spotted me, then the anger disappeared from his face, replaced by a big, charming smile. It was like watching someone take one mask off and put on another. I had an ex-boyfriend like that once and you better believe I got the hell away from him as fast as I could."

"Is there anything else you can tell me about the interaction? Was there anyone else there that witnessed what happened?"

"Not that I saw. I threw my gear back into my jeep and took off. I didn't even realize what had happened to them until a friend of mine contacted me. I wasn't able to get back to them until I was on my way home from Vietnam. They'd seen the footage that had been played on the news, asking if anyone knew who the woman in the parking lot was. And thanks for that by the way, because now everyone is blowing up my phone thinking I know what happened to that guy. I feel horrible because I forgot to tell them that

the Overlook was closed. I just figured the park worker would see them and tell them.”

“I’ll make a statement to the media letting them know that we’ve tracked you down and that you willingly co-operated with us.”

“Well, maybe wait a day or so.”

“Why?” asked King in confusion.

“It’s just that now that everyone knows who I am, I’ve been getting a hell of a lot of views and new subscribers to my channel, and a girl’s gotta eat.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

TAYLOR

I felt better the next morning, but the clarity of my situation hit me harder and faster than it otherwise would have, which was not good. The next thing I noticed was that my pain was gone. I tentatively moved my limbs to find them still stiff, but the pain that had lit my joints and muscles on fire had subsided to mild achiness. I'd forgotten what it was like to be pain free. Even with my pain meds I felt mostly numb, like the pain was hiding, lurking just beneath the surface. This felt different. Better.

Then I noticed another change. The desk that had been in the room previously was now back and sitting on top of it was a laptop, but it was the window behind the desk that caught my attention. I got up and walked over to it and pulled up the blinds. There were bars on the window from the outside. "Shit."

I pulled the blinds back down and turned my attention to the desk and soon realized I was looking at my laptop and some of the contents from my office desk back at the house. There was also a desk chair with wheels and another chair next to the desk. I was so engrossed at what I was looking at I hadn't heard the door open. I didn't realize I wasn't alone until a voice startled me and I whirled around.

"I see you're alive and well. How do you feel?"

"Better."

"What's that?" She walked into the room with her right hand cupped around her right ear like she hadn't heard me. "What did you say?"

I glared at her before sighing and repeating myself. "I said I feel better."

"Glad to hear it. Because you're going to need all your strength for what comes next."

"Which is?" My eyes never left hers and she grinned.

"Let's play a game." Valerie looked at the desktop. "Let's see if you can figure out what you have to do to get out of this house."

"What do you want, Valerie?" My composure broke and I knocked over the desk chair. "Why have you brought me here? I told you I didn't..."

Quick as a flash, Valerie grabbed me by the back of my neck and slammed me down hard onto the chair.

“You claim you didn’t steal my sister’s book, huh? Then why hasn’t your ass written another book in eight years?”

I didn’t answer her because I knew no matter what I said, she wouldn’t believe me. Instead, I buried my face in my hands and cried.

“Don’t you dare cry!” She pried my hands away from my tear-streaked face. I angrily pushed her away.

“I’ll cry if I want to,” I spat at her. “My tears belong to me.”

To my surprise, she was shocked. I braced myself for a blow that never came. Instead, she stabbed a finger at the laptop screen smudging it.

“Now’s your chance to prove you did not steal my sister’s book.”

“How?” But I already knew and couldn’t meet her gaze.

“By writing another one.” She turned the chair around to face the laptop, shoving it up to the desk. “How about a sequel to *Lottie Mae*? How about that?”

Even after everything that had happened since meeting Valerie, it never once occurred to me she was mentally ill, but I could see it so clearly now. Her crazy-eyed expressions, her volatile mood swings. She hid it pretty well when I met her, but now it was all I could see, and I was trapped here with a mentally unstable woman who thought I’d done something I hadn’t.

I just sat there, shoulders slumped, silent and staring at the laptop’s blank screen, wondering how the hell I could get out of this situation. Valerie reached past me and pressed the ON button and my laptop flared to life.

“Don’t get any ideas thinking you can use the internet to email someone for help. There’s no Wi-Fi connection here. All you’re going to be able to do on that laptop is type.”

“I write historical fiction. I’ll need to do research on the time period.”

She let out a mirthless laugh. “Nice try. Tell me what you need, and I’ll get it from the public library.”

“Fine.” My shoulders slumped and I looked at the floor.

“I’ll come back in a couple of hours, and I better see some words on that page. Maybe if I like what you’ve written, I’ll bring you some more prednisone. How about that?” She left, slamming the door behind her so hard it made me wince.

It wasn’t lost on me that once again I was being tasked with writing a sequel to *Lottie Mae*. Only now I had no choice. What would happen if I

wrote the book? Would Valerie be satisfied? Would she let me go or was she planning on killing me whether I wrote the book or not?

Then there was Nessa. I would never have done anything to hurt her. But she had hurt me. Badly.

TWENTY-EIGHT

NESSA

2014

Nessa hurriedly packed a bag, in a rush to be gone before Taylor got back from class. She was spending the weekend with Kelton in his room since his roommate was at his grandfather's funeral and wouldn't be back until Monday afternoon. This was going to be the weekend that *it* finally happened. She'd even used money from her job at the library to buy herself a green silk teddy for the occasion. Green was Kelton's favorite color. She rooted around her backpack for the printout of the paper she'd written for his history class. Taylor would go ballistic if she knew Nessa was writing Kelton's papers. He never asked her to do it. She'd offered when she went to his room one day not long after they started dating to find him practically in tears because he was in danger of being put on academic probation. If that happened, he would lose his scholarship and not be able to play that season.

"No, baby. I can't ask you to do that," he'd told her. "You've got your own work to do. It's my own stupid fault for not hitting the books like I should have."

"You don't have to ask me. I'm volunteering. Now show me your syllabus and let's figure out how you can get these grades up." She still remembered the grateful smile of relief he'd given her.

Nessa almost made a clean getaway when Taylor walked into their dorm room and tossed her heavy backpack onto the chair in front of her desk.

"You're ready to go eat? And please say yes because I'm starving. I've been in the library all afternoon and could really use something hot, greasy, and fattening."

Nessa didn't say anything and that's when Taylor noticed her overnight bag.

"Where are you going? Is everything okay?"

"Promise me you won't freak out."

"Freak out about what? What's going on? Where are you going?"

When Nessa did not respond, Taylor had her answer. "You have got to be kidding me. You're hanging with Kelton this weekend? We need to work on our group presentation for Literary Theory. It's due next Tuesday. Did you forget?"

She had forgotten and a moment of sheer panic gripped her. She was tired of studying, tired of worrying about her GPA, and tired of Taylor. When they first met, they were two peas in a pod and had everything in common, but Nessa wanted different things now, mainly Kelton Wallace. For the first time, Nessa realized she'd outgrown her friend.

"Where is your brain these days, Nessa? I thought you told me you weren't seeing him."

"I'm not sure if you've noticed," her voice came out soft and low, "but you are not my mother. I don't answer to you or anyone. Kelton is my man now. Why wouldn't I want to spend time alone with him? It sure beats spending time with your miserable ass."

Nessa instantly regretted what she'd just said, but it was long overdue. She was tired of Taylor acting like she knew what was best for her. No one was going to keep her from Kelton. She was his girl now and he made her feel amazing.

"Well, go then, but don't come crying on my shoulder when he does to you what he does to all his girlfriends. Chews them up and spits them out." Taylor's eyes filled with tears and Nessa looked away from the hurt she was causing her.

But she was hurting too. If she and Taylor had really been as close as sisters, then why wasn't she happy for her? Why couldn't she see how Kelton made her feel?

"You don't have to worry about that. Why would I cry on your shoulder about any man when you have no experience with men or relationships? And it's not because you're not pretty and smart. Of all the things, Tay, it's because you always have an attitude and you're allergic to fun."

Nessa grabbed her backpack, slung it over her shoulder, and walked out of the room slamming the door shut behind her with tears in her eyes. This was most likely the end of their friendship. Lori had been right. She should've never trusted Taylor.

TWENTY-NINE

TAYLOR

I finally typed out a title: *Lottie Mae: The Journey Home* by Taylor Ambrose. That was as far as I got. I knew I needed to come up with something before Valerie got back. What would she do if she came in here and found me not working? Truth be told, I wanted that prednisone. There was no way I'd be able to find my way out of this nightmare if I could barely walk. Every once in a while, I would pause to listen and could hear Valerie moving around in the house between the kitchen and the living room, once even pausing to listen outside the locked bedroom door.

I knew I was overthinking this and she probably would've been happy with anything as long as I was writing, but I couldn't work under these circumstances. Who would be able to work under these circumstances? I finally let out a frustrated sigh and began typing. I had decided to set this book several years after the first book. What would Lottie Mae's life look like after nearly a decade of dwelling in the underbelly of the Big Apple? I picked up one of the notepads and pens next to the laptop and thought about the ending of the first book that had my heroine spiraling into drug addiction.

It was weird thinking about the heroine of my one and only novel after all this time. It was like seeing an old friend I hadn't seen in years and realizing how much we'd both changed. Not so much Lottie as she was frozen right where I'd left her, but I wasn't the same person I was when I'd started writing that book. Now here we were again, me and Lottie Mae. How would she pull herself out of the pit I'd left her in? Then I remembered all the obstacles I put in her path that she overcame. If nothing else, Lottie had been a survivor who'd endured many hardships on her way to New York. Once I remembered that, I flexed my fingers, grabbed a pencil, and started writing a paragraph detailing the main thrust of the story.

It's 1931 and Lottie Mae is now clean and sober, and a mother of a young daughter named Gracie. She's supporting them both through prostitution. One of her regular johns is a low-

level thug named Dicey who runs multiple speakeasies laundering money for the mob, and drags Lottie into his schemes because he knows how desperately she wants out. He dangles the promise of helping her get back home to Ohio over her head. But with each risky thing she does for him, he keeps moving the bar and she realizes he's never going to keep his promise. A chance encounter on the streets of New York with an old acquaintance from home gives Lottie much-needed hope. But hope is a dangerous thing when the concrete jungle doesn't want to let her go.

I was stretching my legs when the bedroom door opened abruptly and Valerie walked in with a tray of food. A cheeseburger, a wilted side salad, a bottle of water, and a single pill.

She walked over to where I was sitting, looked at the words on the screen and then at me giving me a brief nod of approval and setting the tray next to me on the desk before turning on her heel to leave. Not sure why I wanted to know, I stopped her before she left and asked a question.

"Why do you have prednisone? Are you getting it from your job? Won't they notice it's missing?"

"All you need to be worrying about is writing this book. I'll come back later and read what you've written and decide if it's good enough. If it's not, I'm going to delete that shit and you're going to start all over again. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Now get up."

"Why?" Apprehension caused my stomach to knot up.

"If you want to go to the bathroom, then get the hell up."

I did as I was told and she took me down the hall to the bathroom where she watched from the hallway as I did my business before taking me back to my prison.

Once I was back in the room, I ignored the salad and took a bite of the cold cheeseburger, the congealed cheese getting stuck on the roof of my dry mouth. I washed it down with some water and the prednisone. I only managed to eat half the cheeseburger, then laid my head down on the desk and started to cry. Nobody knew where I was. I realized in that instance how completely alone I was. It was my fault for cutting myself off from people. I was isolated and wasn't exactly sure how it happened. But that wasn't true. I'd been regaining so many of my memories lately, happy memories which I'd welcomed back like long-lost friends, and other memories I wished would have stayed hidden. One of them was the fact that Troy didn't seem to want me to have any friends.

THIRTY

TAYLOR

Before the Accident

“Where are you going?” Troy stood in the entrance to my walk-in closet as I was checking myself out in the mirror. I was wearing a new floral sundress and was putting on a pair of sandals when my husband arrived.

“I met another author during my panel discussion a couple of weeks ago. She writes historical fiction too. We’re meeting for lunch today.”

Troy just stared at me impassively, making me feel self-conscious. I knew from experience that when he failed to compliment me on what I was wearing, it meant he hated my outfit. I had other similar dresses that he seemed to like just fine.

“Really? What’s her name?”

“Charlotte Purcell. She writes romances set in World War II.”

“Oh, so she doesn’t write serious fiction then?”

“What’s that supposed to mean? We’re both authors and we both write historical fiction. Just because she writes romances doesn’t mean her work isn’t serious fiction.”

“I know that, babe. I didn’t mean anything by it. I assumed, because you never mentioned this woman to me, let alone that you were going to be spending time with her, that you must not think much of her writing yourself. Otherwise, why not mention her to me?”

Why hadn’t I mentioned Charlotte to Troy? Maybe it was because he acted just like this whenever I wanted to spend time with anyone other than him. Not that I had anyone else to hang out with. I literally had no friends. I’d been looking forward to this lunch with Charlotte, but Troy’s attitude made me anxious and agitated. Suddenly, I wasn’t looking forward to it as much as I had been. Should I have lied?

“Not at all. I’d actually forgotten about the lunch until she sent me a reminder last night asking if I still wanted to go.”

“Okay. No need to be snippy. I was just wondering where you were going. That’s all. My afternoon interview canceled and I thought maybe we could go for a drive and stop at that new restaurant in Yellow Springs for dinner. No biggie. You go and have fun with your friend.” He left and I was torn.

I stood in the closet feeling indecisive for twenty minutes before I grabbed my purse and decided to go anyway. I was distracted during lunch with Charlotte. It had been nice enough and it was nice to talk to somebody about books and writing for a change, but I noticed when Charlotte and I parted ways, she never mentioned getting together again and I knew I had blown my chance at making a new friend. When I got home, Troy didn't ask me anything about how lunch had gone. He wouldn't speak to me for the rest of the day.

THIRTY-ONE

TAYLOR

I was staring at a blank page on the laptop when a shadow fell over the keyboard, startling me so badly I almost wet my pants. I hadn't heard Valerie come in. She picked up the notepad I'd written the plot outline on and sat down in the chair next to the desk to read it. After a few minutes, she tossed the notepad back onto the desk and gave me an accusatory stare.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you make Lottie Mae a prostitute?"

I stared at her in disbelief. Had she read the book? "Well, at the end of the first book she was a drug addict, remember? How do you think she was paying for those drugs without a job? Plus, she's a mother now and she has to support them somehow."

"Is she going to stay a prostitute?"

"No. But this is her journey to reclaim her life and make her way back home. So, there's some character development that has to take place before that happens."

"You don't have to talk to me like I'm an idiot. I just wanted to know what the plan was."

"I'm sorry." I wasn't sorry, but I knew I had to act like I was since she was in control. "I never meant to make you feel that way, I'm just trying to explain my thought process."

"How long is she going to stay a prostitute?"

Had she not heard what I said about character development? "I haven't decided that yet. This is very much early stages. Would you like to read what I've written so far?"

She was silent for a long time as she considered my question, and it suddenly occurred to me that she hadn't read my book. Anyone who read *Lottie Mae* would know that it did not have a happy ending. It was not a happy book. How could she not have known that when she claimed I'd stolen the book from her sister?

"Just keep writing. I'll get a better sense of how I feel about it after you've written a couple of chapters. It'll be in your best interest to grab my attention on the very first page because I meant what I said about erasing it

if I don't like it. If I have to do that, you can forget about having any more prednisone until you fix it."

I was relieved when she got up and left. I hunted and pecked out another page as night fell. Valerie came back later and refused to speak or look at me when she brought my dinner, a fried chicken thigh and some green beans. Instead of the usual bottle of water, she gave me a bottle of Diet Coke.

"Hey," I called out before she left the room. She turned and stared at me. "Have you eaten? Can you at least keep me company while I eat?" I was surprised to see that she looked torn and indecisive before her expression turned hard.

"Nice try. But we aren't friends and never will be. Stop trying to get inside my head."

She left, leaving me staring after her in frustration.

I finally called it quits around midnight. My eyes were starting to cross, and my wrists and shoulders ached. Valerie had come in one last time to take me to the bathroom and allowed me to not only relieve myself but to also take a quick, five-minute shower with the door open as she watched from the hallway. My leg pain had diminished enough to have been able to stand for the entire five minutes. But I was praying I wouldn't fall as I wasn't sure Valerie would help me up. For all I knew, she'd let me lie naked in the tub all night.

Once I was finished bathing and wrapped in a towel, Valerie picked my dirty clothes up from the bathroom floor and gave me a T-shirt to sleep in.

"I'll wash these and give them back to you in the morning," she said as she escorted me back to the room and locked the door behind me.

I crawled into bed and pulled the sheet over me. I was almost asleep when I heard it. The same creepy creaking noises coming from the attic that I'd been noticing since I'd arrived here. I'd even mentioned it to Valerie. She'd said it was an old house and maybe a squirrel had gotten into the attic. But squirrels scampered on tiny paws. What I was hearing now were footsteps. Was Valerie in the attic? I paused to listen and could hear her snoring coming from the living room because that's where she slept every night. So, if she was in the living room, who the hell was in the attic? Then another thought came to me. If I could somehow get into the attic, would I be able to get out of the house?

My mom and I had lived in a house with a similar layout when I was a kid and some of the closets had ceiling access to our small attic. I waited until the house was quiet and dozed off in the process. When I finally woke up, I crept out of bed over to the laptop and saw it was after one in the morning. The house was dead quiet, and I couldn't even hear Valerie snoring. I slowly opened the closet door and flipped on the light. This was the first time I'd been mobile enough to explore the closet and was surprised to see six boxes stacked up all the way at the back of the closet. I recognized them as my boxes because of my handwriting marking the boxes. I heard more creaking overhead.

Taking deep breaths, I tried to still my shaking hands as I looked up to see the same panel in the ceiling I'd had in my closet growing up that led up to the attic. Was someone up there? If it wasn't a squirrel, could it be a raccoon? The last thing I needed was to get into the attic only to be attacked by a raccoon with rabies. But if I could get into the attic at night, I'd probably be able to use one of the attic windows to get out of the house. Then what? How far down would I have to climb and how would I even manage it in my current condition? If I could safely get to the ground, where would I go when this property was so far away from any neighbors? What had Valerie done with my car and where were the keys?

I had no answers to any of these questions, but at the very least I could get up there and see what I was dealing with. As quietly as I could, I dragged two boxes over, so they were underneath the panel in the ceiling. Now the problem was getting up on them because my legs muscles were still weak. I used the closet rack to hold on to, testing its sturdiness before I put my foot up on a box and leveraged myself up. It took a couple of tries. But I finally made it to the top of the second box and had to throw my hands out and brace myself against the sides of the closet wall before I fell. It took several deep, calming breaths before I was relaxed enough to press up against the panel. It budged just an inch, so I pressed upwards again, opening it another few inches, wide enough to slide it over and put my head through the opening.

The first thing I noticed was the musty smell of dust and dampness. It took everything in me not to sneeze. Next was the moonlight streaming in through one of the attic windows on my right. When I looked in the direction of the window to see if it would be big enough to get out of, I realized the moonlight wasn't just illuminating the room. It had also fallen

on a figure that was sitting on the attic floor. And it wasn't a squirrel or a raccoon. It was someone with long, straggly white hair, who slowly turned to look at me with a pale wrinkled face, wild eyes, and a toothless grin. I gasped as I lost my footing and fell hard off the boxes and onto the closet floor.

I woke up on the closet floor, expecting Valerie to be standing over me when I opened my eyes. But the house was quiet. I couldn't even hear her snoring. As the memory of what I'd seen in the attic came rushing back, I instantly sat up and looked up to see the panel in the ceiling was now firmly shut. Who was that woman? Was that a woman or a man? Had I really seen someone in the attic or was this the garage all over again? I stilled my heavy breathing to listen but couldn't hear any movement in the attic.

Why hadn't Valerie heard me fall? The answer to that came when car lights illuminated the only window in the room. I was sore but managed to use the boxes still under the panel to pull myself to my feet, turned out the light, and left the closet quietly, closing the door behind me. I got into bed and pretended to be asleep when the door opened. I was curled onto my side facing away from the door. It felt like Valerie was standing in the doorway watching me for the longest time before she finally left. Where had she been?

I hadn't heard anything from the attic since I'd stuck my head up there hours ago. But when sunlight streamed through the window blind, I crept towards the closet door and slowly turned the knob with shaking hands and flipped the light switch on, only to find everything exactly the way I'd left it with my two boxes from home still stacked under the ceiling panel, which was still closed. I kept looking up at the panel like it was going to fly open as I began going through my boxes. I spotted something pink through a gap on top of the box, that had partially opened from where I'd been standing on it.

I pulled the rest of the tape off. Opening the box, I saw it was my robe. I couldn't remember packing it but then again I couldn't remember a lot of things. I pulled the robe out and something clattered to the closet floor. It was a phone. But not my phone. It was the burner phone I'd found in Troy's desk drawer in the garage. I quickly picked it up and stuffed it down the front of my pants, convinced that Valerie had heard the noise and would be charging through the door any minute. But she never came, and I hid the burner phone under the mattress.

I didn't see Valerie again until late that afternoon when my bladder was bursting, though I'd already had to relieve myself once in the small trash can in the corner. When she showed up, I could tell something was wrong. She looked sick. She grabbed the trash can, having realized what I'd been forced to do by the acrid smell of piss in the room. She took the trash can out and then escorted me to the bathroom. When I came out, she could barely look at me. She looked exhausted with dark circles under her eyes, and I wondered if the prednisone she'd been giving me was for her.

"Are you alright? You look like..."

Before I could even finish what I was going to say, she grabbed me and shoved me up against the wall opposite the bathroom. "I told you to stop trying to get into my head. I know you don't give a damn about me. Now shut up and stop asking questions that are none of your business."

Stunned by her outburst, although I'm not sure why, I allowed her to drag me half limping, half walking back into the bedroom. It wasn't until she was gone that I realized I was starving. I tried to get back to work, but I was in so much pain and so hungry, I just couldn't and I stretched out on the bed and fell back asleep. When I woke up, there was a bag of food sitting on my chair, which thankfully included another prednisone.

I only managed to write another page that day and, by afternoon, was ready to climb the walls. I pulled out the burner phone from under the mattress. It looked like an old-school flip phone with a screen, but it was dead with no way to charge it. Even if I had the charger from my phone, it wouldn't fit the port at the bottom of this phone. I tore through the rest of my boxes to find they contained things from my kitchen that should have gone to Goodwill, including the contents of the junk drawer, the catchall drawer for junky knickknacks we had no specific place for. And there it was, a multi-port charger I'd used once on vacation with Troy, which had disappeared when we got home.

I had no memory of putting it in the drawer. But here it was, the right cable for the burner phone port. I quickly plugged it into the outlet that was behind the bed, turned the volume down, and tucked it back under the mattress, hoping and praying it wouldn't make any noise while Valerie was within earshot.

THIRTY-TWO

VALERIE

Valerie felt like a fool and that was not a feeling she enjoyed. She knew she never should've let Jared back into her life. After meeting him at the diner and throwing him a bone with Troy Bellows' sports memorabilia, he still kept contacting her. Against her better judgment she left the house late one night to hook up with him, telling herself she was just scratching an itch, and it was only sex.

Now, all those old feelings were back, and she was feeling fragile and used again. Valerie was great when it had come to protecting Nessa, but not so much when it came to protecting herself. Jared had sworn he was living with a cousin, that he'd been staying there since he'd been released from prison. But she'd discreetly followed him after their impromptu hook-up, straight to an apartment complex where she watched him let himself into an apartment. She then saw him through the partially open curtains of the front window embracing a white woman who was definitely not a relative.

Now she'd barely been able to get out of bed for two days having fallen right back into the same pit she'd crawled out of when she realized what a loser he really was. The fact he'd been able to worm his way back into her life and her pants so easily made her extremely angry and disgusted with herself. He'd sworn he had a buyer for the ring. Once it was sold, there would be no need for a 70/30 split since he thought they were back together. They weren't.

He was never going to see her again, let alone get his hands on that ring.

As much as she wanted to rot in bed all day, her houseguest needed food and most likely the bathroom. Emptying piss from that trash can had felt like she was working for old Mrs. Gilman again. For the first time Valerie wondered what would happen when Taylor finished the book? What would she do with her then? She knew she couldn't keep supplying her with prednisone. The prednisone was Mrs. Gilman's prescription for a bladder condition. Valerie offered to dispose of all her meds for her family after she died, but instead kept it all. It was coming in handy, but it wouldn't last forever.

She had been planning this for so long but only up to getting Taylor here and forcing her to write another book to prove she was a fraud. She

hadn't thought beyond, to what would happen next. It was only a matter of time before someone realized she was gone without a trace. Would it be that police detective who came to the house, her late husband's asshole best friend, or the media? But those were questions for another day. Valerie swung her legs over the side of the couch, got up, and propelled herself down the hall and into the bathroom. And then she heard it. The creek in the attic. She'd be so happy to leave this place and whatever ghosts were haunting it, but maybe it wasn't the house that was haunted. Maybe it was her.

THIRTY-THREE

NESSA

2014

Of all the ways Nessa could've been spending her time, for instance with her man, spending time with her big sister Lori was not top of her list. She loved Lori and loved the way she looked out for her, but Lori never left protection mode and was constantly grilling her about her life and her friends, none of whom she liked. She never could understand why her sister didn't like Taylor when she'd never met her, but now Nessa's own feelings for Taylor had changed. They hadn't spoken in weeks, and maybe, just maybe, Lori had been right. There was no way she could introduce Kelton to her because she knew her sister would present her with a laundry list of complaints about him after only meeting him once.

When she was younger, she used to love how protective Lori was. Now that she was about to graduate from college, the thought of her showing up just made her tired and anxious. If she found out she was flunking the Honors English program and why, she'd park herself permanently in Nessa's life and never leave.

Nessa even suspected her mom couldn't stand Lori either. She was hard to deal with and always in attack mode. Now she was here in Vanessa's room wanting to hear about how things were going. What could she tell her that would satisfy her?

"You're awfully quiet, Nessa. Is everything okay?"

"I'm good. I just spent a late-night studying and I'm a little fried. Hey, do you want to hear the first chapter of something I'm working on?"

"I'd love to hear it." Lori looked genuinely happy for the first time since she'd arrived.

Nessa went over to her book bag and pulled out a sheet of printouts. "It's called *Lettie* and it's about a girl who travels from rural Ohio to New York City to dance at the Cotton Club in the 1920s." She couldn't help but notice Lori's eyes glaze over, which made her happy because maybe after she read the first chapter she'd leave. Instead, Lori stared at her in horror.

"What's that on your wrist? Nessa, is that a bruise?" Lori got up to get a closer look causing Nessa to stand abruptly.

"If you don't want to hear my story, then get out!"

When Lori continued to stare at the bruise encircling her right wrist, she dropped the printouts she'd been holding and ran out of the room.

“Nessa, come back! Who did that to you?”

But Nessa was gone.

THIRTY-FOUR

TAYLOR

“I want to read what you’ve written.” Valerie was standing over me, waiting for me to stand up.

I must not have been moving fast enough for her because she grabbed my upper left arm impatiently and pulled me out of the chair, then quickly sat down in the vacated seat. I sat on the bed and watched her, more worried about the burner making any noise than her reaction to what I’d written. Valerie finished the first page. She skimmed over a few more pages, sighing and shaking her head. I watched in horror as she pressed Command + A on the keyboard to highlight all the words in the doc and knew exactly what she was going to do next.

“No! Stop!” I lunged off the bed towards her, but it was too late. She hit delete and erased everything I’d written. “Why did you do that?” My voice was thick with anger and tears. It had only been ten pages, but they’d been my ten pages, and I’d worked so hard on them.

“I told you I’d erase it if I didn’t like it? I don’t like it. Start over again.”

“But why?”

“I already told you not to make her a prostitute. Now rewrite it and make her a shop girl or something.” She got up and walked past me towards the door.

“No.” She stopped and turned, and I stared at her defiantly, beyond tired of walking on eggshells around her. I’d lived with a man I’d had to do that with on a daily basis convinced there was something wrong with me, and it had been beyond exhausting. I just couldn’t do it anymore no matter what she did to me.

“What did you say?”

“You heard exactly what I said. I can’t write on command. I can only tell the story that I have in me, and in my story Lottie Mae has been victimized by racism, misogyny, and the patriarchy. She’s not *just* a prostitute. She’s a woman who reclaims her life and her autonomy. She is not just trying to get back home. She’s on a journey to save herself in the process.”

“She can still do all of that as a shop girl. I said rewrite it. If you don’t, I’ll lock you in this room with no food, no water, no meds, and no

bathroom. You can live here in your own filth!”

“You know your precious sister wasn’t a saint!” I spat out at her, stopping her in her tracks.

“What the hell did you just say?”

“You heard me. I don’t deserve what you’ve done to me in her name. If anyone was a victim, it was *me*!” I screamed, the dam finally breaking. This was a story I never intended to tell because if I did, I’d have to admit what I did. Not to Valerie but to myself.

She took a step towards me when suddenly a buzz sounded. Shit! The burner phone must’ve powered back on. I could’ve sworn I’d turned the volume down, but apparently, I hadn’t turned it down low enough or maybe there had been a setting that allowed it to vibrate even with the volume turned down.

“What the hell was that?”

I couldn’t breathe, and my gaze was locked onto hers. The buzz sounded again and I realized it hadn’t been the phone, after all. It was coming from the living room. It was the doorbell. Valerie heard it, too, and rushed out of the room but not before slamming the door shut behind her and locking it.

When she was gone, I pulled the burner out from under the mattress and saw that it had powered on and had two bars on it. I quickly dialed 911.

“Nine one one, what’s your emergency?”

“My name is Taylor Ambrose and I’m being held captive.”

“Do you know the address of where you are, Taylor?”

Before I could respond, the sound of raised voices came from the other side of the locked door. One of them was a man’s voice I’d never heard before. The other was unmistakably Valerie’s. Then I heard what sounded like a slap and Valerie cried out. What was going on out there? There were muffled cries and then a loud thud. Something heavy had hit the floor. Then there was silence.

“Taylor? Are you still there?” The dispatcher’s voice in my ear only made me more frantic to leave. Whoever was out there was done with Valerie, and I was sure I’d be next.

“Please hurry!”

“Do you know the address of where you are?”

“No! Can’t you trace this call? I have no idea where I am.” To my horror, the call started cutting out.

“Stay... line... Taylor?... there?” Then the call dropped. The phone only had one bar.

I started pressing all the buttons and holding the phone up trying to get a signal again when the door flew open and Valerie, battered, bruised, and bloody, was standing in the doorway with a wild look in her eyes. As beat-up as she was, the sheer amount of blood soaking the front of her shirt was too much to have come from her. She looked at the phone in my hand, then to me.

“You bad girl. Where the hell did you get that phone?” Her level of calmness freaked me out more than the blood and I instinctively backed away, the phone slipping out of my trembling fingers.

“Wha... what’s going on? Who did that to you?” I tried to look past her, but the living room was shrouded in darkness.

“There’s been an unexpected change in plans.”

She lunged towards me, but I managed to dodge her and make a run for the door. I almost made it until she tackled me to the ground. I was face down on the floor with her straddling my back. I screamed, only to have a cold, wet and sickly sweet cloth that reeked, pressed over my nose and mouth. I couldn’t move, let alone twist my head away, and slowly lost consciousness.

I was lying on the floor in the darkness. When my eyes adjusted to the dark, everything came flooding back. I listened but could hear nothing. Where was Valerie? And where was I? Was I still in the house? And then I heard it. The sound of distant sirens. They must’ve figured out my location and were coming to save me. Valerie must’ve gone on the run. There was a chair next to me. I grabbed ahold of it and pulled myself to my feet, swaying a bit as I heard footsteps running towards the door. That’s when I felt wet blood on the front of my shirt. Oh my God. Had she cut me? I frantically felt around for any cuts and wounds, but found none. Whose blood was this? I didn’t have to wonder for very long because the front door was suddenly kicked open and police flooded the room with flashlights and guns drawn, screaming at me to get on the floor.

“Help me.” My voice came out in a hoarse whisper, but they weren’t listening to me.

An officer rushed up to me, snatched my arms behind my back and slammed me to the ground. Cold metal cuffs were clasped around my wrists. From my vantage point on the ground, my eyes spotted something

that made me shriek uncontrollably. Lying on the floor in a pool of blood about three feet away from where I was lying, was a dead man.

THIRTY-FIVE

DETECTIVE KING

Taylor Ambrose sat across the table from Detective Laurel King, looking like she'd been through a war. She'd been given a clean pair of neon orange jailhouse scrubs to wear as her bloody clothes had been taken into evidence, but she still had a smear of blood across one cheek, and her eyes were nearly swollen shut from crying. They'd brought her into the interrogation room with her hands cuffed in front of her. King gestured for an officer to uncuff her. She hardly looked like a danger to anyone but herself. Taylor looked up at King with dull, lifeless eyes before rubbing her wrists once after the cuffs were taken off.

"This is a mistake. I shouldn't be here."

Instead of answering, King read Ambrose her Miranda rights as the younger woman stared at her in disbelief.

"I was being held captive in that house."

"Captive by whom? The dead man found in the house with you?"

"I have no idea who that man was. I was held captive there for days by a woman named Valerie Gaines who made me believe she was my late husband's sister. I'm the one who called the police reporting it."

"Ms. Ambrose, we received an anonymous call about screams coming from that house. You were discovered covered in blood next to a dead man who had been stabbed with a knife that has your prints on it. This is the second dead man connected to you in a week. How do you explain this? Because I can't help you unless you tell me the truth."

Ambrose looked like King had just slapped her. She genuinely looked like she had no idea what she was talking about.

"Two men?" She sat up straighter in her chair having clearly snapped out of whatever fog she'd been in when she'd entered the room. "You think I killed *two* men?"

King slid two photographs across the table. Taylor glanced down at them, confusion popping up on her face.

"Do you recognize either of these men?"

Taylor stared at the pictures. Recognition flashed across her face. "I know this man." She pointed to the picture of Marvin Sellers. "I met him when I tried to drive into town one day. My legs were so weak and painful

that I fell out of my car. He helped me and even drove me home. Are you trying to say I killed him?"

King ignored her question. "Did you tell this man to come back to your house later that evening?"

"Yes. I had a lot of things I was giving away since I needed to vacate the house, and I told him to come back after twelve noon that day to get some things because he clearly was in need. That was the day after I checked myself out of rehab. I never should've been driving in the first place, and he was nice enough to take me home. He never showed up to get anything, so I just figured he wasn't interested anymore."

King stared at her, willing her expression to remain neutral. Two men had broken into this woman's house on the same night and only one of them was alive to tell the tale. Clearly something more than a simple burglary gone wrong was going on here, and King was determined to get to the bottom of it. She pushed Marvin Sellers' photo aside and pointed to the remaining photo.

"This man was found dead in the alley four blocks from your home. His name was Jesse Cummings. Are you sure his name and picture don't ring a bell?"

"I told you, no. I have never seen this man before."

"Your address was found amongst his possessions, Ms. Ambrose."

"I already told you. I don't know this man."

King looked over Taylor's head at the one-way mirror window, where she knew they were being watched through. She gestured and the door to the interrogation room opened. A uniformed officer stepped in and handed King a plastic evidence bag. When Taylor Ambrose saw what was inside the bag, all the color drained from her face, leaving her ashen.

King pulled out Troy Bellows' Super Bowl ring. "This was found in the pocket of the dead man found at the house you were hiding out in. My guess is he wanted to buy it from you because you needed the money to get out of town. What happened? Did he refuse to pay you? What happened between the two of you, where he ended up with a knife in his chest?"

Taylor Ambrose closed her eyes as tears slid down her cheeks. She shook her head and mumbled something under her breath.

"What did you say?"

She looked up at me, her red-rimmed eyes looking beyond tired. "I said, she told me she would take everything from me. And now I know exactly

what she meant.”

“Who are you referring to? Because you were the only one found in that house with a dead man.”

Taylor opened her mouth to speak when the door swung open again and Lloyd Rivers walked in.

“Don’t say another word, Mrs. Bellows.”

Taylor and Detective King’s gazes swung in the lawyer’s direction and Taylor’s mouth actually fell open in shock.

“Detective, my client is clearly in no shape to be answering questions. She needs to be checked out by a doctor before you continue your line of questioning. Your lack of providing medical attention to Mrs. Bellows proves a gross oversight in the duty of care my client is entitled to.”

King knew he had her dead to rights. She should’ve had a doctor look over Taylor Ambrose before she brought her to the station. She was just hoping to get some answers out of the woman on the off chance a doctor would deem her unfit for questioning.

“I’ll have a couple of officers transport Ms. Ambrose to the hospital for a physical. You can meet her there and she’ll be under armed guard the entire time. Is that understood?”

Lloyd Rivers did not even bother looking at her, instead waving a hand and holding it out for Taylor to take. She got up from the table. Before she left the room, she turned to look at King, eyes widening like she’d suddenly remembered something.

“There was someone else in the house! A woman, I think. Hiding in the attic. Maybe she saw what really happened.”

“Taylor. Let’s go.” Lloyd Rivers gently took Taylor’s elbow and guided her out of the room.

A woman in the attic? King couldn’t help but wonder about the younger woman’s mental state. More so, she wondered what had happened to her walker and why she was able to walk so much better now.

THIRTY-SIX

VALERIE

Valerie pulled into the motel parking lot and quickly pulled on a sweatshirt over her bloodstained top, before walking to the registration desk to get a room. She'd left the house in such a hurry, grabbing as much of her stuff as she could, she hadn't had time to change. The older female clerk at the desk didn't bat an eye at her bruised and battered face. Although working in a crappy two-star motel, she'd probably seen it all. She stopped Valerie before she could leave with her room key.

"Ma'am." Valerie turned, fully prepared to tell the woman to mind her own business. Instead, the woman barely glanced at her as she held out a blue ticket. "Continental breakfast is served in the building next door from seven to eleven a.m. and you'll need this ticket to eat."

"Thanks." She took the ticket.

"No problem and do yourself a favor. Don't use the coffee maker in your room. People use it to wash their underwear."

Valerie nodded and headed across the parking lot to her car to get her bags. She took them up to her room, which was on the second floor overlooking a small inground pool with leaves and a dead bird floating on top of it. She'd been wondering how to solve the Taylor issue, and the solution had been handed to her on a silver platter by her ex-husband. She couldn't make Taylor pay for what she'd done to Nessa. So, instead, she could pay for what Valerie had done to Jared. Taylor had already told the police she'd whacked that intruder in the head with a golf club. So, her stabbing someone wasn't too far of a stretch for the police to believe. Valerie had used a knife she'd stolen from Taylor's storage unit when she'd been helping her pack and had kept it in her pocket since Jared had turned up again. She'd even put Troy Bellows' Super Bowl ring in his pocket. He'd shown up unexpectedly demanding the ring and attacked her when she wouldn't turn it over. But he had it now. Too bad it wasn't going to do him any good.

After she'd killed him, she'd heard a noise in the attic again and looked up in the grate in the ceiling. For a split second, she thought she'd seen a pair of wide, terrified eyes staring back at her. But she couldn't figure out if

it had been the shock and adrenaline racing through her veins or if someone had really been up there the whole time.

After Valerie put her bags on the other bed in her hotel room, she stripped naked on her way to the bathroom and took the longest, hottest shower she'd ever taken in her life, and watched as Jared's blood swirled down the drain.

THIRTY-SEVEN

TAYLOR

“How did you know I’d been arrested?” I was sitting on an exam table in the emergency room being checked out by a doctor. He left the room when he was done, and up until that point I hadn’t spoken a single word to Lloyd. What was he even doing here? Who had called him?

“It’s all over the news, Taylor. I know you don’t have another lawyer, otherwise they’d be giving me hell over Troy’s estate.”

“That explains how you knew. But it doesn’t explain what you’re doing here. I know I’m your least favorite person in the world.”

“You are my best friend’s widow. He’d want me to do all I can for you.”

“I may not remember a lot of things from before the accident, but I do know you’re no criminal defense attorney.”

“I can help you find a good defense attorney, but until then I’m all you’ve got. So, deal with it, and while we’re on the subject, why don’t you tell me what the hell is going on? How did you end up at a farmhouse with a dead body?”

I was suddenly so tired, and what was the use when no one would believe me. Valerie had screwed me horribly and I couldn’t even prove she was real. I had a history of memory lapses.

Before I could even attempt to explain to Lloyd what had happened to me, a young female nurse drew my blood, and I gave a urine sample after which I was poked, prodded, and probed again. Lloyd had been sent to the waiting room and there were two uniformed officers standing guard outside the door. The exam room was fairly large, but it felt like the walls were closing in on me and panic welled up in my chest. I closed my eyes and took several deep breaths, but nothing was working and soon I was in a full-blown panic attack and started hyperventilating. A nurse rushed in. My heart rate was off the charts. I couldn’t breathe. The next thing I know, a needle was in my arm and within seconds my breathing slowed. I laid back on the exam table feeling relaxed as my limbs grew heavy and my eyes started to flutter.

The next time I woke up I was in a hospital bed. Lloyd was asleep in a chair next to my bed. It reminded me of him sitting next to my bed while I was in rehab, telling me that I’d been left penniless. Had it really been that

long ago? I glanced to my right through the door's window and could see a police officer guarding the door. They must not have deemed me a high risk because I wasn't handcuffed to the bed. Though, even I wasn't crazy enough to go on the run. Where would I go?

THIRTY-EIGHT

DETECTIVE KING

“What do we know about the victim found in the house?” King handed Larson a cup of coffee from the vending machine before looking at what they had on the evidence board.

“His name is Jared Miller,” said Larson. “He’s been in and out of jail for the better part of twenty years. Mostly petty theft, but did five years for identity theft. Matter of fact, he just got out of prison last month.”

“Has his next of kin been notified?”

“His parents are dead, as is a sister who died in a car accident when he was locked up. Looks like he has a wife. We’re trying to track her down.”

Larson shook his head and scratched his neck. King knew from experience that something was bothering him.

“Out with it. What’s bothering you?” King pulled up a chair next to his desk and Larson let out a mirthless chuckle.

“Well, our working theory is that Mr. Miller had gone to the house to purchase a Super Bowl ring from Taylor Ambrose, but I’m hard pressed to figure out where he would’ve gotten the money for it. According to the dealer I spoke to this morning, that ring is worth upwards of one hundred grand, or more since Troy Bellows is dead. Where would Miller have gotten that kind of money as a broke ex-con?”

“He could have been there to steal it from her?” King knew Larson was right but was playing devil’s advocate.

“Even if that were the case, how would he have known where to find her? I can’t find any connection between Taylor Ambrose and Jared Miller.”

“Keep looking because there has to be something connecting the two.”

“Maybe it was a personal connection,” Larson said, shrugging. “I mean the house wasn’t broken into. She must have let Jared Miller in. Maybe he was her boyfriend.”

“Maybe. Anything’s possible. But when would they have met if he just got out of prison last week and she was in rehab until recently?” King remembered what Marissa Chalmers told her about the argument her husband witnessed between Taylor and Troy over a burner phone. Could she have been using that phone to communicate with Jared Miller in prison?

King was baffled. At first glance, everything pointed to Taylor Ambrose having killed two men. But how did a bestselling author, who was married to a famous ex-football player, end up in custody suspected of murdering two men and possibly her husband as well? How had life landed her in this spot? Something felt off. King had even done a search on the name of the woman Taylor had claimed was holding her captive, Valerie Gaines. There was no nurse by that name working at any hospital in the vicinity. In fact, King couldn't find anyone by that name living within one hundred miles of Weatherly. The closest Valerie Gaines was in Cleveland and was eighty-seven years old. King took a last swig of her now cold coffee and stood.

"Where are you off to, partner?" Larson leaned back in his wheelchair and looked up at her, and King realized how much she'd missed working with him in the field. He was one of the few people she actually enjoyed working with.

"To get the interrogation room ready. Taylor Ambrose is being brought back from the hospital this morning."

THIRTY-NINE

TAYLOR

Lloyd finally woke up around seven standing up and stretching before putting on his suit jacket.

“How’d you sleep?”

“Not bad. Looks like you slept pretty well.”

“As well as anyone can sleep in a chair.” He sat down on the chair. “Look, Taylor, they’re going to come in here and take you back to the station in a couple of hours. But before they get here, what happened? And don’t hold anything back.”

“Troy’s sister... Valerie... kidnapped me.”

“Valerie? Taylor, Troy never had a sister.”

“I know that now.” I didn’t realize it was possible for me to feel any more confused than I already felt, but somehow I did. “She was so convincing, and I was alone and confused. And now I might spend the rest of my life in prison for murders I didn’t commit. I feel like the biggest fool.” My voice broke, but I was not about to cry in front of Lloyd Rivers.

“Not if I can help it. I need to know everything you can remember about this woman, down to the smallest detail. I’m going to buy us some time and get them to run X-rays on you.”

“Why delay the inevitable?” I sounded as defeated as I felt. Lloyd got up and stood over me.

“I’m willing to help you any way I can, Taylor. But I can’t do it alone. Where’s the woman who told me to get the hell out of her hospital room the last time I saw her? I need that woman back if we have a hope of proving your innocence.”

“She’s wondering why the man who never seemed to like her is suddenly helping her.”

His face reddened and at first, I thought he wasn’t going to respond. “There is a time and place for that conversation but not here and definitely not now.”

“But...” I began before he quickly cut me off.

“I’ll let you get changed. They won’t let me transport you back to the station. But I’ll be following behind the squad car and be in the room with you when they resume interrogating you. A colleague of mine, a defense

attorney out of Columbus named Monica Rojas has agreed to take your case, but she can't be here until this afternoon. Until then, you're stuck with me."

The enormity of my horrible, hopeless situation hit me all at once and I buried my face in my hands and cried.

Lloyd put his hands on my shoulders. "Go ahead and cry. I know this is a lot, but we'll figure it out. I promise. I'm going to head on over, and I'll see you shortly."

"Okay. Thanks, Lloyd." I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand as I watched him go.

After a series of X-rays and scans, hospital policy required I be wheeled out of the hospital in a wheelchair. We were barely halfway down the hall when a flustered-looking white man in a suit came up to the officer escorting me.

"Officer, I'm sorry about this, but the media is camped outside the hospital entrance. It might be better if you use the emergency exit. Just follow me."

Great. Now the whole world knew I'd been arrested on suspicion of murdering two men, and possibly my husband. I now wished I'd asked Lloyd to stay because he was the only thing I remotely had to a friend right now. We took the elevator to the lower level. When we got to the back entrance, the white man, who turned out to be the hospital administrator, left to tend to another issue, leaving me with a nurse and the cop.

"I'm going to call for an unmarked car to meet us in the back."

I just gave him a blank stare in response because I couldn't care less one way or another. It wasn't like I was in any hurry to get to the station to be interrogated. The cop took a few steps down the hall and got on his radio. The minute his back was turned, I was jerked backwards.

"Hey. Careful." I turned my head to look at the male nurse who had been pushing the wheelchair.

I was greeted with a sight that made me pitch forward in alarm. I was no longer being pushed by the male nurse. In his place stood a black woman with a surgical mask over her face. I knew exactly who it was. I opened my mouth to scream only to have a scalpel pressed against the side of my neck. Valerie shook her head in warning as she quickly wheeled me into a nearby elevator. By the time that cop turned around, we'd be long gone.

We were a good few miles away from the hospital before I finally looked at her. “Where are we going?”

“You mean, where are you going? You’re the escaped fugitive, not me. I’m just a figment of your imagination.”

“You’ve built this whole thing up in your mind to the point where you’re never going to get any kind of satisfaction. You’ve framed me for murder, and you’re still not satisfied.”

“You don’t know me. You don’t know a damn thing about me.”

“I know you said you’ve been planning this for a long time. You probably think you’ve done this amazing job of being invisible, but that kind of arrogance gets people caught. I guarantee you’ve made some mistakes, and someone is going to figure it out.”

“And you’ll be long gone, and so will I if that ever happens.”

“What do you mean I’ll be long gone?” Panic welled up in my chest, and I could feel a panic attack coming on.

“I have decided spending the rest of your life in prison isn’t good enough. I have something better in mind for you.”

The panic that was rolling up in my chest spilled over and I started hyperventilating again, forcing Valerie to pull over on a street. She reached into the backseat, pulled out a brown paper bag, and shoved it over my head.

“Oh no you don’t. I’m not putting up with that BS. You better pull yourself together or I’m going to drive us straight into that crowd of people. Do you understand me?”

I breathed into the bag and nodded.

FORTY

DETECTIVE KING

Detective King was walking back from the vending area in the lobby when she spotted Lloyd Rivers coming through the revolving door.

“Good morning, Mr. Rivers. I take it your client is finally on her way back to the station. I’m guessing you ran out of tests for her to have to stall her return.”

“If you had done your job, Detective, and had her checked out last night, today would be the first day you’d be speaking to her. So, what’s the problem?” He barely glanced at her as he spoke.

“You shouldn’t be here at all.”

“Now why would that be?”

“How long have you been having an affair with Taylor Ambrose?” The shock on this arrogant asshole’s face was worth every word, although she knew she’d probably pay for it with a chewing out from Talbot.

“What did you just say?” His eyes narrowed and he looked around to make sure no one had heard what she’d just asked him.

“You heard exactly what I said. You need to step away from this case because this is a conflict of interest.” King was taking a huge gamble because she had no idea for certain whether the rumors about Taylor Ambrose having an affair were even true.

If they were true, Rivers’ contempt towards his best friend’s wife when she’d spoken to him at the house after the break-in now made a lot more sense. Twenty years ago, King had been married and the marriage ended in divorce when her husband left her for a coworker. His attitude towards his mistress publicly mirrored Rivers. Her ex had acted like he despised the woman, but in reality, he was in love with her. It was a gamble, but one she was willing to take.

“Let me be very clear, Detective King. I am not now or have I ever had an affair with Taylor Ambrose. If this is the level of police work you’re capable of, then Taylor is going to need all the help she can get. Now if you excuse me, I’ll be waiting outside the interrogation room for my client to be brought from the hospital.”

King, feeling rather foolish, nodded as she quickly walked down the hall. Now why did she think Taylor Ambrose would’ve had an affair with

that uptight, bougie, bastard?

Her phone rang and she reluctantly answered it. Whenever she answered her phone, it was never good news, and this time was no exception.

“What in the hell did you just say? What do you mean she’s gone?”

King arrived at the hospital with Lloyd Rivers in tow to find out the male nurse who had wheeled Taylor Ambrose down to the lower level had been found unconscious in a nearby utility closet, and Taylor Ambrose had escaped. The wheelchair Ambrose had been in was found in a lower parking level. King was more than a little confused. Why would Ambrose have attacked a nurse and then wheeled herself down to the lower parking garage to ditch the wheelchair? Why not just walk, take the steps, or the elevator down to the lower level. The wheelchair would’ve only slowed her down.

Fortunately for Taylor, the cameras at this level of the hospital parking lot weren’t working. The only working camera was in the garage and it only caught a black Honda Accord speeding out of the parking garage. The footage was too grainy to even get a license plate. How had Ambrose gotten this car? Had her attorney helped her escape? She looked at Lloyd Rivers who was talking to the hospital administrator; he looked genuinely pissed. No. He may be uptight and arrogant, but this guy was not a rule-breaker and what would he have gained by helping his client escape? Then to make her day even worse, she got a call from Reynolds, the coroner who was at the home in the county where Ambrose had been hiding out in.

“This can’t wait?”

“You’re going to want to get out here, King. Pronto. I promise it’ll be worth it.”

“Shit,” she mumbled, and she headed back out to her car.

There was an ambulance in the driveway of the house where Ambrose had been found with a dead man. Who had it been called for because ambulances don’t transport dead bodies? She was even more surprised to see the person sitting in the back. She quickly got out of her car and headed towards the ambulance, only to be waylaid by Reynolds.

“What is going on?”

“I was here getting the body ready for transport back to the morgue when I heard sounds coming from the attic. I looked up at the ceiling grate and saw a pair of eyes staring back at me. Someone else was in the house.

The officers missed them when they searched it. So, I sent two officers into the attic and they found her in a crawl space under the roof.” He gestured to the elderly woman sitting in the back of the ambulance being checked out by EMTs.

“Damn,” King swore softly. Taylor Ambrose had been telling the truth. If she’d been telling the truth about someone else being in the house, was she telling the truth about being held captive?

“She must’ve been staying up there for a while because there were a bunch of food wrappers and old clothes. God only knows how long she’s been up there. Looks like she has a head wound and is confused, and refusing to tell us her name. Otherwise, she’s not in too bad a shape and is relatively clean. My guess is she’s been sneaking down, eating the food in the fridge and using the bathroom.”

King walked past Reynolds towards the back of the ambulance. The elderly woman looked up at her through long, stringy white hair. Her eyes were glazed and confused, but she smiled a toothless grin at King like she knew her. King knew this woman did not know her although King knew *her*.

“Mrs. Russell. Your daughter has been so worried about you. She’ll be so happy that we’ve found you.”

King couldn’t wait to let Stacy Graham know that her lost mother had been found. But she was even more interested in finding out what this elderly woman had seen while she’d been hiding out in the attic. King knew she might be looking at the only witness to a murder.

A couple of hours later, once the elderly Mrs. Russell had been cleaned up, given a clean bill of health and her daughter had arrived, King sat outside a room in the hospital where Betty Russell was being questioned by a social worker. The elderly woman was in a fragile mental state. Her doctor confirmed she had early-onset dementia. She’d suffered a concussion when she crashed her car and wandered off into the woods, which was about half a mile from the home where Taylor Ambrose had been. Finally, after what seemed like forever the social worker came out to talk to her.

“What did she say? Can I talk to her now?”

“Detective, Mrs. Russell is in a very fragile state. You can certainly try, but I’m not sure you’ll get much sense out of her. Though I do have one piece of information for you.”

“Which is?”

“She used to live in the house she was found in. It was her childhood home, but she hasn’t lived there for sixty years. The best I can figure out, from what little I was able to get out of her, was that after she had her accident, she just wanted to go home. In her current state of mind, home was the house she’d grown up in, which wasn’t far from where she had her accident.”

“Did she say anything about what she saw while she was in the house?”

“All she said and I quote,” she said, consulting her clipboard of notes. “She was in the house and then a bad person came and she had to hide.”

“A bad person? Could she describe this bad person? Was it a man or a woman?”

“Sorry. She never said.”

“Any idea when she might be more lucid?”

“I have no idea. She has dementia and in my experience, with dementia patients they have their moments of lucidity and comprehension that diminishes as the disease progresses. She’s had a shock. Maybe in a couple of days when she gets home and is around familiar surroundings, she’ll be more herself.”

King thanked the social worker and watched her go. As much as she wanted to charge into the room and start grilling the woman, she couldn’t risk traumatizing her further and end up getting nothing from her. She had no choice but to wait. In the meantime, she had a phone call to return from Italy.

“I already know what you’re going to ask me. I have no idea where my client is or how your officers allowed this to happen. How was she able to just walk away?”

King sped up to catch up with Lloyd Rivers who was walking ahead of her at a fast clip into the courthouse. He hadn’t been answering her calls and his secretary told her he was due in court that afternoon on another case.

“Have you even tried contacting her?”

“She told me she lost her phone.” He finally stopped and turned to face her. “And I’m not in the habit of encouraging my clients to evade law enforcement. If I talked to her, I would’ve definitely told her to turn herself in. I have a question for you.”

“I’m listening.”

“What are you doing to find the woman who was holding my client captive in that house? She gained her trust by posing as Troy’s sister, then lured her to that house and held her captive.”

“I’ve looked into Valerie Gaines and can find no evidence this woman exists outside of your client’s very vivid imagination.”

“Why would she lie? As a matter of fact, why would she kill two men?”

“Only she can answer that, but speaking of lying, I had a very enlightening phone call not twenty minutes ago with your cousin, you know the one who was married to your best friend, the late Troy Bellows, who recently emigrated to Italy with her second husband to run his family’s vineyard. The one you lied and said bought Troy Bellows’ house. You bought that house, Mr. Rivers. Why did you lie to Taylor?” King was happy she was finally able to wipe the smirk off this arrogant bastard’s face.

He sat down on a bench in the courthouse lobby. She sat down next to him while he stared moodily into space.

“To help her out. There was an offer on the house that fell through at the last minute, and it needed to sell to cover Troy’s debts or his creditors were coming after her next. I bought it so all of that wouldn’t end up in her lap.”

“Does she know you’re in love with her?”

“I’ve got to get to court. Goodbye, Detective King. I promise, if I hear from Taylor, I will talk her into turning herself in.”

“Not that I’m sure it will mean anything, but I need you to look me in the eye and tell me you have no idea where she is.”

He looked her in the eye without flinching. “You have my word that I have no idea where Taylor Ambrose is.” And with that, he walked away, and she let him.

FORTY-ONE

TAYLOR

“If you’re going to kill me, then just get it over with. I’m tired of whatever game you’re playing. No matter what you do to me, it’s not going to bring Nessa back.”

“I’m not trying to get her back. I’m trying to get justice for what you did.”

Why was I even bothering to try and reason with her? She was a lost cause. What I needed to be doing was figuring out a way to get away from her. “Where are you taking me? And I hope you know there were probably cameras all over that hospital; they must have seen you take me.”

“There were. That’s why I came in here last night dressed as one of the custodial staff and disarmed all the cameras on the path I used to take you out of the hospital.”

“So, who was that guy you killed and planted my husband’s Super Bowl ring on? Did you even know him, or did you lure some unsuspecting stranger out there to kill him and frame me for it?”

Valerie laughed. “See that’s the beauty of all of this. I got to kill two birds with one stone. Getting rid of my worthless ex and framing you for it. I thought I was well rid of that asshole until he got out of prison. Right around the time I showed up at your house, he started calling me, blackmailing me. I told him I’d give him a cut of the sale of your dead husband’s Super Bowl ring. But he showed up last night demanding the ring and attacked me. He has no one to blame but himself for that knife I stuck in him, which came from your kitchen by the way. Plus, he ruined my damn plans because I’d been planning to be at that house for a while longer.”

“Why did you kill the other guy who broke in?”

“What other guy?”

“Someone else broke into my house that night. They found his body four blocks from the house in an alley?”

“I have no clue who you’re talking about. Are you sure it wasn’t you? We both know your memory seems to fade when it’s convenient.”

I merely stared out the side window, hoping she was finished twisting the knife. She had thought of everything, and covered her tracks so well. She may have planned the perfect crime. I was beginning to question my

own sanity at this point. How did I know that Valerie Gaines wasn't just a figment of my imagination? Someone I'd made up to take the blame for all my misdeeds. A reflection of my own very guilty conscience. Because, while I had not stolen Nessa's manuscript, I had most definitely taken something from her. I wondered if admitting this to my captor would save my life.

We drove for what seemed like forever, and you'd think sleeping would've been the last thing on my mind. But it wasn't. I started to nod off when we came to an abrupt stop and I flew forward in my seat, almost smacking my forehead on the dash. By now it was dark, and I had no idea where we were as I looked around. I saw nothing but trees and dense forest. This must be it. This must be the place where she was finally going to kill me for whatever she thought I had done to her sister.

"Where are we?"

Valerie wouldn't look at me. She sat staring straight ahead with her hands gripping the steering wheel so tight, her knuckles were almost bloodless. And then it hit me. She had no plan. She didn't know what to do next because whatever plan she'd been following had fallen apart when that man showed up unexpectedly last night. Who did she say he was? Her ex.

Just when I thought she wasn't going to answer me, she abruptly opened the driver side door and got out, came around to the passenger side, and jerked the door open before grabbing my upper arm and dragging me out of the car. I fell to my knees once I was out of the car.

"Get up!" She grabbed me by the front of my top and pulled me up, but my legs wouldn't cooperate and I fell again.

Only this time, on the ground again, I grabbed a handful of loose dirt and threw it at her face. She cursed and kicked me in the stomach. I curled into the fetal position, realizing how stupid that had been since I couldn't run from her. She grabbed what little hair I had on my head and jerked it back, causing the tears that had formed when she kicked me to stream down my face.

"Do that again and I will gut you like a fish." She pulled the scalpel from her back pocket. I flinched, knowing she was crazy enough to do just that.

"Then why don't you? I've asked you before what your end goal is. What more can you do to me?"

“It’s not what I’m going to do to you. It’s what you’re going to do to yourself. You see, you’re just a guilty woman desperate for a way out after your plan to get away with killing your husband failed. Those other two men just got in your way, and you had to kill them too.”

I was breathing heavily as I just stared at her in disbelief. I had wanted to know what the end goal was and now I knew. She was going to kill me and make it look like suicide, then she’d fade into the woodwork like she had never been there, adding murderess to my title as a bestselling author. I bet sales of *Lottie Mae* would go through the roof once she finally got rid of me.

“Alright! I’ll tell you the truth.” By this point we were both panting heavily while a look of triumph and vindication relaxed her features and she gave me a thin smile.

“You admit to stealing Nessa’s manuscript?”

“I admit. I stole it... back from Nessa. She stole Lettie from *me*!”

“Liar!” Valerie rushed towards me, and I held both hands up this time. “I swear I’m not lying. She was so busy doing all of her boyfriend Kelton’s work, writing all his essays, and papers, and helping him cheat on tests so he wouldn’t lose his basketball scholarship, that she couldn’t keep up with her own work and flunked out of the Honors English program. She stole my novella Lettie and was going to submit it as her own. But then...” I couldn’t continue.

“Then what?”

I looked at her in surprise. “Why are you acting like you don’t know what happened? Kelton Wallace fell over the fifth-floor railing in the student center and has been a paraplegic ever since. And Nessa just...”

“Just what?” Valerie’s voice was soft and tear-filled. Neither one of us could say it out loud.

“I didn’t even get to say goodbye.”

“You? Who the hell cares about you! She was *mine*. She was all I had!”

Valerie kicked me again, this time in my right thigh. Unlike when she kicked me in my stomach, which had caught me off guard and drove all the breath out of me, this kick just really hurt. I screamed so loud she quickly knelt beside me, shoved me onto my back and clamped both hands over my mouth.

She was in such a hurry to get me to shut up, she didn’t notice when I grabbed a large rock that was lying a couple of inches away from me. She

glanced down at me just in time for my hand to swing out, catching her right on the temple. She collapsed unconscious on top of me. I lay there panting for a good thirty seconds before I finally caught my breath enough to shove her off me and onto her back. I felt around in her jeans pocket until I located the car keys and when I tried to stand up, my legs crumbled beneath me and I crashed to the ground. I ended up having to crawl over to the passenger side of the car and pull myself up by the door handle.

A sound came from behind me. Valerie groaned. I looked back as she touched the side of her head, her fingers coming away bloody. I quickly got into the car and locked all the doors as she struggled to her feet. I slid across the center console and into the driver seat and stuck the key into the ignition. I've been driving since I was sixteen, but I was all thumbs trying to stick the key in as Valerie lurched towards the car with blood streaming down the side of her face. With the key finally in, I turned it and the engine flared to life just as she reached the passenger side door, frantically pulling on the handle as I pulled away, partially dragging her behind me before she let go and collapsed on her face into the dirt. I floored it.

I'm not sure how far I got down the road before the calf muscles in my right leg started to spasm and cramp. The sudden pain caused my foot to slip off the gas, and my eyes momentarily left the road. By the time I looked again, there was a car speeding down the opposite side of the road and I had to jerk the car hard to the right and ran over a clump of bushes along the side of the road and coming to a complete stop. Once my leg spasms stopped, I got out to see the front left tire was flat. It was dark now and I knew I couldn't stay with the car. I looked around in the glove box and under the seat, and in all the pockets in the back of the seats for a phone. But realized Valerie must've still had her phone on her.

I was out in the open and exposed. How long would it take Valerie to make her way down to where I was? I guesstimated I was probably a mile away. Looking around, I saw a wooded area beyond the bushes. I slowly made my way off into the brush and into the woods, finding a large stick along the way to use as a cane as my right calf muscle still had weaker spasms. I couldn't put my full weight on it because it was cramping.

I pulled myself along trying to listen, but couldn't hear anything except the blood pounding in my ears. I walked on until I saw a building in the distance illuminated by moonlight streaming through the trees. It was dark now with only moonlight illuminating the path. Soon I found myself in

front of a utility shed. I tried the door and of course it was locked. Something about this area seemed very familiar, even in the dark, but I couldn't for the life of me figure out why. I could now hear movement in the distance behind me and quickly ducked behind the shed in time to see a deer in the woods. I couldn't get into the utility shed, but I knew I needed to hide somewhere.

There was a tarp over some boxes stacked next to the shed. I quickly lifted it, looking underneath to make sure there were no rodents or other critters under there, then put my back against the boxes and slid onto my butt. My stomach hurt, where Valerie had kicked me. Biting my lower lip to keep from screaming from the pain, I slowly crawled under the tarp and then pulled it over me. I lay there not daring to breathe too loud as I listened to the night sounds of the woods. I had lost all sense of time and wasn't quite sure what time it was or how much time had passed when I heard loud, crunching footsteps coming through the woods.

They stopped briefly at the front of the shed, followed by a rattling of the doorknob and then soft swearing when it wouldn't open. Was it Valerie? If so, I was terrified she would come around to the side and yank the tarp off me, exposing my hiding place. Thankfully, I was rewarded with the sound of footsteps walking away from the shed. Once I could hear no other noises besides crickets chirping, I tried to stay awake, but my body gave into the pain and exhaustion and I passed out.

FORTY-TWO

DETECTIVE KING

Thinking about Lloyd Rivers' denial of his feelings for Taylor Ambrose not only brought up triggering memories of King's ex-husband cheating on her with a coworker he claimed he couldn't stand, but it also made her think of something else she'd heard recently. It wasn't until she was lying in bed that night, ready to fall asleep, when it suddenly hit her. Her eyes flew open. She grabbed her phone from the bedside table and pulled up Instagram.

She found the page she was looking for and started scrolling, stopping only momentarily to grab her readers from her nightstand drawer so she could get a closer look. She wasn't quite sure what she was looking for, but she kept scrolling until she was four years back from where she'd started, and finally found what she was looking for in the background of one of the pictures. She grinned in the darkness. She had no idea what this meant for Taylor Ambrose's case. But she'd find out soon enough because this person had a whole lot of explaining to do.

The next morning, she sat in an interrogation room across the table from Ashlyn Connolly, the travel vlogger who had the confrontation with Troy Bellows in the parking lot of the Weatherly Park Overlook.

"Ms. Connolly, I'd like to thank you for coming in. I just have a few more questions for you."

"I don't understand what more I can tell you than I have already told you, but I'm happy to answer any other questions you have."

"I wanted to ask you about this photo." King slid a photo across the table, one she had saved from Ashlyn Connolly's Instagram page and had blown up. Ashlyn looked at the photo and flinched ever so slightly. Anyone else besides the detail-obsessed King probably wouldn't have noticed.

Ashlyn Connolly continued to stare at the photo without speaking.

"Well, let me tell you what I see. That looks like you and from the caption on this picture, you were in Bali, right?"

"Yes." Ashlyn sat back in her chair and crossed her arms, clearly not happy with King's line of questioning.

"And that handsome guy in the background looks an awful lot like Troy Bellows. Now I'm having a hard time believing you didn't know him. A guy like that isn't someone you would forget. Am I right?"

“I meet a lot of people on my travels. Just because we were in the same place at the same time doesn’t mean I knew him.”

“Oh, yes. Your travels. You became a travel vlogger about five years ago, correct?”

She nodded.

“Prior to that you were a...?”

“Grief counselor.”

“That’s right. According to your Instagram, your whole life changed after your divorce. I mean, look at you. That post-divorce glow hit hard I must say, because you look almost nothing like you used to.” King pulled up another picture and slid it across the table. This picture showed Ashlyn Connolly, with short dark hair, no makeup and glasses.

“Last time I checked, being divorced and changing careers wasn’t a crime. And you cannot prove that I knew Troy Bellows prior to our confrontation. All you can prove is that we were both in the same place at the same time.”

“That would be very true, Ms. Connolly. But I’m wondering what we would find if we subpoenaed your old client records. Who and what would we find if we did that?”

For a split second King thought she had her. She looked scared and visibly pale, but after about thirty seconds, she straightened herself up in her chair and looked directly at King.

“Am I under arrest?”

“Not at all. We’re just having a conversation.”

“Great.” She got up from the table. “Next time you want to talk to me, it’ll be through my lawyer.”

King had no choice but to watch her go. She knew her hands were tied. There wasn’t enough evidence to get a warrant for Ashlyn Connolly’s former client files, or even a search warrant for her home. All she had was a hunch from a picture with Troy Bellows in the background. No judge on earth was going to grant her warrants based on that evidence alone. She knew she had to dig deeper.

She also had to find Taylor Ambrose because all the roads led back to her. What happened at Weatherly Park Overlook that day? Were the two women working together? She’d seen the surveillance footage and after the confrontation between Connolly and Bellows, she clearly saw her leave afterwards. Could she have come back? Maybe taking another path up to

the overlook? Was there even another path at the Overlook? And how did Jesse Cummings and Jared Miller fit into all of this? King felt like she was back at square one. The only witness she had was Betty Russell, and she'd been told the woman was confused, and to give her a few days. But King didn't have a few days. The station's printers were offline for maintenance. She had to stop at home and print off pics of Jared Miller, Jesse Cummings, and Taylor Ambrose from her home computer. Then head to Stacy Graham's home hoping for a miracle.

"I really don't think this is a good idea, Detective. My mom has been through a lot." Stacy Graham had stepped out onto her porch and King caught a glance of her mother sitting on the couch watching TV before her daughter closed the door behind her.

"I just need a few minutes of your mother's time, Ms. Graham. It's very important. I just need to show her a few pictures and then I won't bother you again."

"Liar. If you get the answers you want from her, I know you will want to talk to her again, and she may even have to testify, right?"

King knew she shouldn't have lied to the woman, but it was the only thing she could think of to get through the door. So instead of denying it, she merely nodded her head. She and Stacy Graham's staring contest lasted for all of a minute before the younger woman finally let out a sigh.

"Fine. But I don't want you upsetting her. If she starts to get uncomfortable in any way, you're going to have to leave."

"I understand and thank you. I wouldn't be here if this wasn't important."

King followed Stacy into a well-lit living room with walls painted a pale yellow trimmed in white and shiny hardwood floors. Betty Russell sat on a brown leather couch, the cushions of which were so plump that the elderly woman's feet dangled at least two inches off the ground. She was too busy watching a soap opera to notice King. Stacy grabbed the remote sitting on a wooden coffee table in front of the couch and hit the mute button, causing her mother to look up at her in alarm.

"I was watching that." Betty Russell sounded a lot more alert than she had the last time King had seen her, which was mere hours after she had been found. It made King hopeful she'd be able to clarify some things.

"Mom, this is Detective King, remember you saw her yesterday?"

The elderly woman gave King a blank stare before breaking out into a big grin. King could see she was now wearing her dentures. "I saw you at my house."

"That's right, Mrs. Russell. We met yesterday. I was really hoping to talk to you. I was waiting until you felt better."

"Mom, Detective King has some questions to ask you. Do you feel like answering some questions?"

"Okay," she said, shrugging. "What do you want to know?"

King took that as her cue and sat down next to the older woman. She had a manila folder with some pictures.

"Ma'am, I'm going to show you some pictures, and all you have to do is tell me if you recognize any of these people."

Betty Russell nodded and stared at the manila folder now sitting on King's lap. King opened the folder and the first picture she pulled out was of Marvin Sellers, the unfortunate homeless man who had showed up at Taylor Ambrose's house expecting to get some things she was giving away, but instead got hit on the head with a golf club. The picture was his mug shot from when he had been arrested for shoplifting two years prior. She handed the picture to the elderly lady, who took it and stared at it before slowly shaking her head.

"I don't know this man. Am I supposed to know him?"

"No, ma'am. There's no reason why you would know him." King took the picture from her and put it at the back of the other pictures in the folder and then pulled out the next picture. It was a picture of Jesse Cummings, the man found stabbed four blocks from Taylor Ambrose's house in the alley. Betty stared blankly at the picture and once again shook her head.

"Don't know him either. Who are these men?"

"Just people involved in a case I'm investigating." King handed her the third picture, which was of Taylor Ambrose. This time, the minute Betty saw the picture she gasped, and her hands flew to her mouth.

"Is she okay?" Both King and Stacy Graham instantly looked at each other.

"Do you recognize this woman?"

"She was at my house. She was staying there. She brought lots of good food with her and when she was asleep at night, I would sneak out of my hiding place and get some."

"Did you talk to this woman at all while she was there?"

“No. Why would I talk to her? No one was supposed to know I was there.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Graham. Now I just have one more picture for you.” She handed Mrs. Graham the picture of Jared Miller, the man found dead in the house along with Taylor Ambrose.

Her eyes widened and she dropped the picture. “That’s the bad man that came. The one that was hurting that woman.”

“Was the man hurting the woman in this picture?”

But King never got an answer because Betty Russell was becoming very agitated and looking around like she didn’t know where she was.

“Where am I? I want to go back home. Take me home.” Her daughter sat down on the other side of her and put her arm around her. “It’s alright, Mom. You’re home and you’re safe,” she told her mother before mouthing the word “go” to King, who instantly stood up.

“Thank you, Mrs. Russell.” King was headed for the door when Betty Russell called out after her.

“What happened to her?”

King paused to tell her they were looking for Taylor Ambrose because she had assumed that’s who she was talking about. Then she realized Betty still had the picture of Jared Miller in her hand. Confused, she walked over to the couch to see who Betty Russell was referring to and remembered that the printers at the station had been down and she’d gone home to print out the photos. She’d pulled up a photo of Jared Miller from his Facebook page, the clearest one of his face being from his wedding photo. She printed that picture and folded it in half, not bothering to cut his wife out of the picture. Betty Russell was pointing to Jared Miller’s wife, a pretty black woman with a pixie cut.

“You saw this woman at the house, Mrs. Russell?” Her finger was on the picture of Miller’s wife. The caption on the photo read: Me and Lori, together forever. Lori? Could that be a nickname for Valerie?

“Yes, she was there too.”

Lori Miller was a beaming bride in a knee-length strapless lace gown with a crown of flowers on her head. Her new husband wore black jeans and a cream suit jacket with his long dreads hanging around his shoulders. They were standing on the steps of a courthouse. King was stunned. At the very least, Taylor Ambrose had been telling the truth about not being in that house alone. But where was she now? Were the two women together?

“The bad man was hurting her. I wanted to help her, but I was afraid, and I hid just like I used to do when my daddy used to beat my mama when I was little.” The older woman started to cry. King had so many more questions, but Stacy Graham wasn’t having it.

“That’s enough for today, Detective.” The firmness in her voice held a warning.

King knew she could get a court order to make this woman talk to her. But she’d mostly gotten what she’d come for and knew this poor woman had suffered enough.

“Thank you both so much for your time.” She left, pulling out her phone on her way to her car and telling Larson that she needed everything he could dig up on Jared Miller’s wife, Valerie.

King was headed to her office when she was stopped by one of the uniformed officers. It was Officer Willis, the young officer who had been stationed outside of Taylor Ambrose’s house after the break-in.

“Detective King, can I talk to you please, ma’am?”

“You’ve got sixty seconds because I’m in a hurry.” She knew her brisk behavior made her one of the less popular detectives on the Weatherly police force. But she was there to do a job. Not be Miss Congeniality.

“It’s about the night the Bellows’ house got broken into.”

“And?”

“And when we arrived, there was a black lady standing outside at the entrance to the driveway. She told me her name was Susan Parker and that she was the Bellows’ next-door neighbor. She pointed to the house directly next door. I got her statement and told her that there would be a follow-up and she might need to come in. I got busy with other things and forgot to go back. Just remembered this morning. But when I went back to that address where Susan Parker said she lived, an older lady named Vivian Ramos answered the door. She’s the one who actually lives in that house, and she had just gotten home that morning from visiting her family in the Philippines for a month. Nobody named Susan Parker lives in that house.”

King stared at him so long and hard that his ears turned red and he looked like he was going to throw up. Instead of yelling at him, she pulled out the printout of Jared Miller and his wife and handed it to the young man. “Is this the woman you spoke to that night?”

He nodded his head vigorously. “Yeah, that’s her.”

“I need you to go back to the Bellows’ neighborhood and ask all the neighbors if any of them remember seeing this woman or have doorbell camera footage of her. Got it?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m on it.”

King almost made it through the door to the squad room when her phone rang with a number she didn’t recognize but answered it anyway. “King.” She listened to what the caller told her and froze as a smirk lifted one side of her mouth.

“Thank you for meeting with me on such short notice, Mr. Polk. I promise I won’t take up too much of your time. I just need to ask a few questions about your ex-wife, Ashlyn.”

Josh Polk was what most people will call a silver fox with a full head of thick white hair. Ashlyn Connolly hadn’t bothered scrubbing her ex from her Instagram page and he wasn’t hard to track down. King called him for a meeting right after she’d called Ashlyn and was happy he’d returned her call agreeing to talk to her if she could come to the bike shop he owned.

“Ashlyn and I have been divorced for five years. Aside from the fact that I know she’s all about that van life now, I’m not sure what I can tell you about her. We never had kids, and we don’t keep in touch. I’ve been remarried for two years now.”

“I understand that, Mr. Polk. And I know this is a personal question, but I need to know why the two of you divorced.”

“Why? What has she done?”

“Maybe nothing. But I just need some information from you to decide that. Will you help me?”

“Fair enough,” he said, giving her a mildly amused look. “We divorced because she cheated on me.”

“And I’m assuming you knew who this person was that she cheated with?”

“Yes, but it didn’t matter to me who she cheated with. It wouldn’t have made a difference because the trust was gone.”

“Was it Troy Bellows?”

“Troy Bellows? The football player who died? Are you serious?”

King nodded and Josh Polk let out a snort of laughter. “No, Detective, it wasn’t Troy Bellows.”

“Then who?”

The name that came out of Josh Polk's mouth was the last name she'd expected to hear.

FORTY-THREE

TAYLOR

I woke up the next morning in the dark, hot and panicky, and not remembering where I was. Something was crawling down the side of my neck. I instantly sat up, my head hitting something dark and plastic. That's when I remembered I've been hiding all night under a tarp and when I frantically pushed it aside to crawl out from under it, I realized a giant spider was on me. I swiped it off and it scuttled back under the boxes I'd been lying next to. Then I shook out my clothes and even ran a hand over my head a couple of times to make sure nothing else was on me. I at least had the good sense not to scream because I had no idea what was hiding in the woods waiting for me. It wasn't wild animals that I was scared of.

Valerie had to know that I was hiding out in these woods and just waiting for her moment to pounce. What was I going to do? I was starving and thirsty and underneath all of that I was in pain. I had to brace myself against the boxes to even stand up. Everything from my ribs downward was painful. Now that I was back up on my feet, I had to find a way out of these woods. I guesstimated that it must've been six or so in the morning. Pre-dawn hours. I spied another large stick in the grass about ten feet from where I was and I cautiously made my way over to it, hoping I wouldn't fall because I wasn't sure how I'd get myself back up again with nothing around to brace myself against.

I made it to the stick and grabbed it and then took the path I'd been on earlier further into the woods and upwards, stopping momentarily to listen to the sounds around me. There was nothing but bird chirping. I must've walked about a quarter mile before I had to lean against a tree and rest. Once again something about this area seemed so familiar. Once I'd rested and made my way further up the path, I suddenly realized why. I was back at the Weatherly Park Overlook. And I wasn't alone. Further up the path, up on the overlook Troy and I had fallen from, was a woman. It wasn't Valerie. But as I got closer, a heaviness settled into my chest and I was lightheaded. The sight of the overlook, the smell of the moist dirt, and pine needles flooded my senses, triggering memories of my last day with Troy.

FORTY-FOUR

TAYLOR

Before the Accident

I didn't want Troy to know I'd lost my keys. This was the third time I'd lost something this week alone and I was really getting concerned. Every time I lost something, Troy would get this look at his eyes, like here we go again. It wasn't accusatory, it was sad. And it wasn't just me losing things either. I had forgotten to turn our gas stove off a few times. I could've sworn I heard people breaking in a couple of nights and woke Troy up to go check, only for him to find nothing. The good thing was, we were going on a hike that morning and I didn't need my keys right then.

But once we got home and I needed to drive my car, I'd be screwed if I didn't find those keys. I hated hiding things like this from my husband. Last time I remembered having the keys was when I went to the store the night before. I'd put them in my purse on the hall table in the foyer, but when I went to grab them the next morning to get something out of my car, they were gone.

"Hey, babe, I need to move your car, where are your keys?"

Shit. Now there was no way I could hide the fact that I'd lost my keys from him. He saw the look on my face and his face instantly fell.

"What's wrong?" Tears instantly filled my eyes, and he knew. "Where are your keys, Taylor?"

"They were in my purse last night and now they're gone."

"You mean you lost them."

"I mean they're gone. I'm not sure where they are. But I know beyond the shadow of a doubt that I put those keys in my purse. I have no idea what happened to them?"

"Well, they sure as hell didn't walk away by themselves."

Troy usually wasn't so irritated with me when it came to this kind of thing. But I could tell he'd reached the end of his line and had lost his patience.

"I didn't lose them on purpose. I'll go get my spare key."

"Babe, I'm sorry." He reached out and grabbed me and pulled me into a tight embrace. "But this is getting out of hand, don't you think?"

My face was still buried in his chest, and I nodded.

“Let’s just go on our hike and then when we come home, we can tear this house up looking for your keys. Okay?”

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

I headed into our bedroom to change into my hiking gear, wondering what the hell was wrong with me. But also realizing something that I hadn’t realized until just then. I hadn’t been having these problems until Troy redid his old office for me and was pressuring me to write another book. Was that why I was experiencing all these symptoms?

The drive to Weatherly Park Overlook was quiet with us both making polite small talk. When we arrived, the parking lot was empty except for a white passenger van parked two spaces away, which was odd since the overlook was usually crowded with visitors. As we were getting out of the car, we spotted a white woman with a long blonde ponytail wearing hiking gear coming off the main trail to the overlook and walking towards the van. She looked angry when she spotted us.

“You may as well turn around and go back.”

“Why?” I looked over at Troy who was oddly silent looking intensely at this woman.

“I hiked all the way up there and some park maintenance guy told me the overlook is closed. But do you see any closed signs? I made a special trip out here and now I’m going to have to come back.” She was talking so loudly and waving her hands in the air in front of Troy that he held his hands up and took a step back like he was warding off a blow.

“Thanks for letting us know.” Troy grabbed my hand and pulled me in the direction of the trail. “We’re going to go up and see what’s going on.”

“Hey, do I know you? You look familiar.” She did look familiar. I just couldn’t figure out from where.

Her face reddened and she shook her head as she backed away. “No. I’m sure we’ve never met. Have a nice day.”

We watched her go. “What was that all about? She acted like it was our fault the overlook is closed,” I whispered to Troy.

“Maybe she was drunk. Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve run into drunk or high people on the trail. Let’s go see what she’s talking about.”

FORTY-FIVE

DETECTIVE KING

Jesse Cummings's fiancée, Amber Healy, answered the door in a bedraggled brown robe, looking even more pregnant than the last time King had seen her.

"Detective...? Sorry I don't remember your name."

"King. Detective King. I'm sorry to stop by unannounced, Miss Healy, but I need to ask you a question."

Amber stepped back from the door and King walked into the darkened apartment that smelled like garlic and household cleaner. Everything in the apartment was old and tired-looking, but very clean.

"Okay, sure. What do you need to know?"

"Are you alright? You don't look like you feel very well."

"I can't have this baby fast enough. I'm not getting any sleep because the little bastard keeps kicking and I have heartburn that feels like it comes from the pits of hell. So, no, I'm not feeling very well. So, why don't you tell me what you want so I can try and get a few hours of sleep before my shift tonight because I can't afford not to work?"

"I just need you to look at this picture and tell me if you recognize this woman." King handed her the printout from her computer. Amber took one look at it and rolled her eyes, then handed it back to King.

"Yeah, I know her. Jesse used to work on her van all the time. He dated her in high school, and she helped him out by being one of his first customers when he started up his car repair business after he got out. He was always working on that van of hers. Why are you asking?"

"It's in connection to another case that I'm working on."

Amber Healy stared at King, who could see the wheels turning in her brain, putting it together without King having to say a word.

"That son of a bitch! He told me nothing was going on between them anymore and they were just friends, and she was doing him a solid by letting him work on her van. But he was charging her next to nothing! I suspected he was lying to me, but I just couldn't catch him. That lying asshole."

Amber picked up the nearest thing to her, which was the TV's remote control and threw it at the opposite wall with such force that it shattered.

Then she doubled over clutching her belly as water streamed down her legs. Her water had just broken, and King knew whatever plans she had would have to wait as she pulled her cell phone out and called 911.

As they were loading Amber Healy into the ambulance, King did a quick search through the apartment and found what she was looking for stuffed in a duffel bag in the back of the bedroom closet, a Weatherly Park maintenance uniform vest. She got on the phone to Larson and filled him in on the connection between Ashlyn Connolly and Jesse Cummings.

"This should be enough to subpoena Connolly's counseling clients' files." King was excited. Things finally seemed to be coming together, but she wasn't sure yet how all the pieces fit.

"I can call Judge Morris and get the ball rolling because you've got somewhere to be."

"And where would that be?"

"In Westerville, Ohio. I found an address for Valerie Miller's mother."

When King arrived at Constance James's door, she hardly looked surprised. In fact, she looked like she'd been waiting for this visit for a long time.

"Please come in, Detective King, right?" Constance James was an unattractive older black woman in her late sixties with mostly grey hair braided back from her hairline and pulled into a bun in the back of her head. Her face was wrinkle-free and she wore no makeup because she didn't need it; her brown skin was flawless. Her daughter, Valerie, looked nothing like her.

King walked into a surprisingly modern, spotless, and minimally decorated house.

"Why don't we talk in the kitchen? Are you a coffee drinker? Tea? I drink both so just pick your poison."

"Water would be nice. If it's not too much trouble."

"I think I could manage that."

King followed the other woman into the kitchen, and she gestured for her to sit down at a kitchen table while her host grabbed two glasses from a cabinet. She poured water into both of them, then handed one to King, then sat down in the chair next to her.

"Now what's this about Valerie? What has she done?"

"We're not sure what she's done, Ms. James. We just need to talk to your daughter about the murder of her ex-husband, Jared Miller." The

mention of Jared Miller's name made Constance James's glass freeze halfway to her mouth.

"Detective, I don't have a daughter named Valerie. I only had one daughter and her name was Nessa."

King was taken aback. "I don't understand. This address was given for Valerie Miller."

"I'm sorry. I'm not doing a very good job of explaining this."

"Take all the time you need." King was now more curious than ever to find out what exactly was going on.

"Do you have children?"

"No, it was never in the cards for me."

"It wasn't for me either. So, I decided to adopt. What I'd wanted was a healthy newborn, it didn't matter what it was as long as they were healthy. What I got was a traumatized six-year-old girl named Nessa." She stopped talking and looked at King to make sure she was paying attention.

"But I still don't understand who Valerie is." King hadn't realized she was sitting on the edge of her seat.

"She's Nessa's biological mother, Detective King. She had Nessa at sixteen and her mother raised them as siblings. By the time Nessa was five, Valerie's mom was dead, and Valerie was in jail for theft. Nessa went into foster care. It took Valerie years to find her after I adopted her. I made the mistake of letting her into our lives and I've regretted it ever since."

"Did your daughter ever find out who her real mother was?"

"No. Valerie told me she'd rather be the big sister Nessa adored than the mother who let her be taken by CPS."

"What else can you tell me about Valerie?" Constance James let out a shaky breath.

"She's dangerous."

King's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Dangerous enough to kill?"

"Dangerous enough that I'm convinced she pushed Nessa's college boyfriend over a railing five stories up when she found out he hit her."

"And what happened to your daughter, Ms. James?"

Tears filled her eyes and she looked away. It was a minute before she could respond. "She blamed herself for what happened to that boy. She took her own life."

"I'm so..." King began before getting up and crossing the room to where a photo of two young black women hung from a magnet on the

refrigerator.

“Is this Nessa?”

Constance James had come over to stand beside her. “Yes, that’s her and her best friend...”

“Taylor Ambrose,” King said, finishing her sentence.

King had just walked back into the station when she was told by the desk sergeant that Ashlyn Connolly and her lawyer were waiting to speak with her. King was shocked. She honestly thought she’d have to drag the woman kicking and screaming back to the station for another sit-down. Because this woman had a lot of explaining to do. She was glad she’d saved her the trouble. Once they were set up in an interrogation room with Connolly’s lawyer, a young man who looked fresh out of law school and a bit nervous, Connolly seemed hesitant to talk.

“Well, Ms. Connolly, I’m curious to hear what you have to say. So, why don’t we get started?”

She shifted around nervously before replying. “I lied. I’m sorry,” she added when King continued to stare at her, expressionless.

“About what exactly?”

Ashlyn looked over at her lawyer who nodded for her to continue. “I did know Troy Bellows. I met him several years ago on a girls’ trip to Bali right after my divorce.”

King knew she’d been right about Connolly having known Troy Bellows. It took everything in her to keep a neutral expression on her face.

“So, you’re telling me that the two of you had a relationship?”

“It was a fling. Just a few days of fun. I never saw him again after Bali, until I ran into him in the parking lot at the Weatherly Park Overlook.”

“Ms. Connolly, you were extremely angry on that footage from the park and it looked to me like you still had feelings for Mr. Bellows.”

“No! I was angry because of who he was with.” Ashlyn’s hands were shaking and she put them in her lap.

“So, you are admitting to being jealous at seeing Troy Bellows with his wife, is that what you’re saying?”

Ashlyn Connolly slapped the table in frustration, and her lawyer put a hand on her shoulder to calm her down. “You’re not listening to me. I didn’t say I was jealous. I said I was angry.”

“Why?”

“Because I shared something about a former client with him that I never should have, and then I saw that he’d married her, and I was beyond furious.”

“And she didn’t recognize you in the parking lot that day?”

“She did recognize me. But I pretended I didn’t know her.”

“And she was a client of yours?”

“Not specifically. I ran virtual group grief counseling sessions online. Taylor was one of the people in my group. It was only for about four months and then my marriage imploded, and I just didn’t have the bandwidth for that job anymore, and I quit.”

“What was this information about Taylor Ambrose that you shared with Troy Bellows?”

“During our online group sessions, Taylor would usually participate with her camera off. She said her house was a mess because she had all her mom’s stuff in her living room and she was embarrassed by all the clutter. But the few times she did have her camera on, I noticed some paintings she had propped against one of her walls. It was a set of three abstract paintings. I asked her about them, and she said they were her mom’s favorite paintings and they’d hung in her living room for years.”

“What was so important about these paintings?”

“I was an art major in college, and I recognized them as a trio of abstract floral paintings called *Eternal Spring* by abstract expressionist painter Cora Braithwaite. She died in a car accident with her son years ago. She was married to millionaire Randall Braithwaite and never allowed commercial use of her artwork. So, I knew what I was looking at weren’t reproductions. Braithwaite’s work tripled in value after her death.”

“How much are we talking?”

“Upwards of five million or more.”

King let out a low whistle. “Did Ms. Ambrose have any idea she was sitting on a gold mine?”

“No. I could tell she had no clue what those paintings were worth. And I drunkenly ran my mouth to Troy Bellows that I had a woman in my grief counseling group named Taylor Ambrose who was wealthy and didn’t know it. The next time I saw him, he was married to her.”

“You could have told her what those paintings were worth. Why didn’t you?”

“Because, not long afterwards, my marriage imploded and I was fighting for my life trying not to lose everything I had to my asshole ex.”

“And what about your connection to Jesse Cummings, the man who was found dead in an alley four blocks from Taylor Ambrose’s house? Are you trying to tell me you didn’t hire Cummings to break into Ambrose’s home?”

“That is absolutely insane.”

“Why?”

“Jesse was my mechanic. I let him practice on my van when he was trying to establish clients so he could get a job with a car repair shop.”

“According to your ex, your marriage ended because of your affair with Jesse Cummings.”

Ashlyn Connolly let out a loud bark of laughter. “Detective, my ex will tell anyone who’ll listen that our marriage ended because *I* cheated. He doesn’t want his new wife to know that when he met her, he was still sleeping with the woman he cheated on me with. His affair with her is what ended our marriage. I was never unfaithful to him. But if his new wife knew that there was overlap with the woman he was cheating on me with, well, I don’t think that will be very good for him.”

“Do you know any reason why Jesse Cummings would have broken into the Bellows’ home? Did he need money?”

“Jesse always needed money. He had a baby on the way, so he was probably very desperate for money. He was so excited about being a father that he was willing to take on all kinds of odd jobs back to prison because he was still on parole. Beyond that I have no idea why he would’ve done something so stupid; they could’ve sent him right back to prison when he was still on parole.”

“Would you happen to know who else he may have been working for?”

Ashlyn Connolly thought for a moment and then shook her head. “I hadn’t spoken to him since I got back from Vietnam. The last time we spoke he told me he was doing everything from temp jobs at factories, to cleaning office buildings downtown, to handing out flyers for restaurants and a real estate company.”

That last part caught King’s attention. “Would you happen to know which real estate company it was that he was handing out flyers for?”

King arrived at the Chalmers’ residence just as Timothy Chalmers was leaving. “I’m late for an important meeting, Detective. So, whatever you’re here for will have to...”

“Where is your wife, Mr. Chalmers?” King cut him off, impatient to find Marissa Chalmers. After her interview with Ashlyn Connolly, King had pulled up images of her online and spotted something in the background of one of her photos that had King hopping in her car and racing across town. It had been a metallic pink water bottle.

“My wife? She’s at the spa? Why?”

“I need you to call her now. It’s very important.” Chalmers recognized the urgency in King’s voice and instantly pulled out his cell phone.

“That’s odd?” He looked at his phone in confusion.

“What’s odd?” It took everything in King not to snatch the phone out of the man’s hand.

“Well, it’s just that we share locations and it looks like she’s at the Weatherly Park Overlook.”

FORTY-SIX

TAYLOR

The woman on the overlook platform had a bouquet of flowers. The railing was still missing. I wondered why it hadn't been fixed yet. She cautiously walked over to the edge and dropped the bouquet over the side to the spot Troy had fallen to. I couldn't bring myself to get any closer to the place where my life had changed forever. The rock ledge that Troy and I landed on was too high up for me to see, but I felt dread and fear even from where I was standing 20 feet away. I wasn't paying attention to where I was stepping and stepped on a branch that made a loud snapping sound, which made the woman whirl around and looked down.

"Taylor? Is that you?" asked my next-door neighbor Marissa Chalmers. She quickly looked around, and I knew she was checking to see if I was alone.

"Help," I managed to get out before I sagged to my knees against the tree. Marissa ran down the steps at the back of the overlook platform. Once again she looked around for who, I had no idea. Was her husband Tim with her?

"Everyone's been looking for you, Taylor. Where have you been?"

"There's a woman after me. You need to call 911 now."

"Of course." She gently helped me to my feet and up the steps to the platform.

"Why are you here, Marissa? Where's Tim?"

"She left his ass at home while she returned to the scene of the crime." Came a voice from behind us. Valerie had appeared at the top of steps to the platform. Had she been behind us the entire time? Dried blood was caked to the side of her head from where I'd hit her.

"This is the woman I was talking about! You need to call the police now!" I pleaded, but Marissa wouldn't move.

"Who the hell are you?" Marissa put her arm around me.

"Me? You don't need to know about me. But Taylor here needs to know about what was going on between you and her husband. Isn't that right, Taylor?"

I looked from Valerie to Marissa as I struggled to make sense of what was going on. I pulled away from Marissa.

“I don’t understand. What is she talking about?” I’d addressed my question to Valerie, but Marissa was the one who blushed and looked away.

“Or maybe you already knew,” said Valerie, “and that’s why you shoved him over the side, Taylor.”

“That’s a lie!” It came out in a whisper and then a scream. “You’re lying!” But it wasn’t a lie. I fell to the ground, and tears filled my eyes as the whole truth of that horrible day finally came flooding back.

FORTY-SEVEN

TAYLOR

Before the Accident

It took Troy and I roughly half an hour to hike to the top of the Weatherly Park Overlook. Every time we came, I was amazed at how you could see beyond the woods to the entire town of Weatherly from the overlook. It was especially beautiful on a bright sunny day like today.

All the way up the trail we looked around expecting to see the park maintenance guy the blonde woman in the parking lot had talked about, but we'd seen no one. Once we got to the top and out onto the platform of the overlook, Troy stretched his arms and put his backpack down. I went and stood beside him and put my arm around his waist and he leaned down and kissed the top of my head. I left him standing by the railing while I sat on a bench to get a rock out of my shoe. I was thirsty and realized I'd left my water bottle in the car but remembered Troy always kept extra bottles of water in his backpack. So, while he stood admiring the view, I unzipped his backpack to pull out a bottle of water and that's when I saw them. My car keys.

I stared at them in disbelief, not truly grasping what it meant for a few long seconds, before it hit me hard. Troy had my keys. He must've taken them. There was no other way they could've been in his hiking backpack that was always stored on the top shelf of his walk-in closet. How would they have gotten in there unless he had taken my keys? Then everything just washed over me in a wave of a realization. My lost shoe, my lost mug, my missing diamond tennis bracelet. Was he behind all of it? Everything? When I'd supposedly left the gas stove on. Me thinking people were breaking into the house. All of it! I hadn't been crazy. This man had been taking my things and then helping me look for them. I snatched the keys up from the bottom of the backpack and the clinking sound caused Troy to turn around. As soon as he spotted them in my hand, the smile instantly melted off of his face as he looked from the keys to me.

"What the hell are you doing searching through my bag?"

"It was you! You've been taking my things and making me think I was crazy! Why would you do this to me, Troy?"

"You're telling me you don't remember giving me your keys for safekeeping?"

“Stop it, Troy! You know I never gave you these keys. I had no reason to give you these keys. You took them, you’ve been making me feel like I was crazy for months now. Why?”

“Just come over here so we can talk about it, Taylor. I’ll explain everything.” He took a step towards me, but I held up my hands.

“No! You stay the hell away from me. All this time you had me thinking I was crazy. Why would you do it? Why?”

“Taylor, honey.” He took a step back until he was right next to the railing. “I’m going to call someone because you clearly need help. Not only are you losing things and forgetting stuff but now you’re hallucinating and accusing me when all I’ve ever done was love you and try to help you.”

Something in me snapped and adrenaline and white-hot anger raced through my veins as I rushed forward with my hands out and shoved Troy hard against the railing. But then something horrible happened. Loud scraping sounds filled the air and then the railing was gone, falling away. For one horrible second Troy’s arms windmilled as he tried to regain his balance. The shock and horror on his face cut through me like a knife and I watched helplessly as my husband fell over the side, hitting the rock ledge below with a sickening thud as the railing hit the rocks beyond the ledge and clattered to the ground below. A loud gasp followed by a moan came immediately afterwards. But it hadn’t come from me. I turned around just in time to see something pink and shiny come arcing towards my head. The blow sent me tumbling over the side after my husband. As I lay there on the rock ledge semi-conscious, I wondered if I was finally getting what I deserved for what I’d done.

FORTY-EIGHT

TAYLOR

2014

Nessa and I hadn't spoken in weeks, and I made sure to be anywhere else on the rare occasions when she came back to our room to get clean clothes because she'd been staying with Kelton most nights. So, when I walked into our dorm room and saw her sitting at my desk, I was shocked.

"What are you doing?" She hadn't heard me walk in and whirled around guiltily with a black flash drive in one hand while she quickly shut my desk drawer with her other hand.

"Don't sneak up on me like that. You scared me to death." She tried to walk past me, but I blocked her path and held my hand out.

"That's my flash drive. It's got my Honors thesis final project on it."

"You're trippin'. This isn't yours. Now get out of my way."

"Give it to me! It's not my fault you're flunking! I warned you about Kelton." I got a good look at her face for the first time and gasped. A vivid purple bruise was on her right cheek.

"Oh, my God, Nessa. Did he hit you? You need to report this! Come on! I'll go with you."

She shoved past me and opened the door to our room. But I grabbed her by the hood of her grey hoodie and tried to pull her back. She shook me off, whirled around, and slapped me hard across the face. Stunned and with my eyes filled with tears of disbelief, I tried one last time to get through to her.

"He'll do it again. You know that, right? Do you want to end up dead?"

"Liar!" Now she was crying too. "I hate you! If you ever touch me again, I'll kill you." She ran out of the room and by the time the shock wore off and I ran out after her, she was gone.

I looked everywhere for her. I was frantic to get that flash drive back. I hadn't saved my final project novella anywhere else but that flash drive. Nessa had my only copy. I'd worked so hard on that story. Without it I'd fail my Honors English thesis class because it was fifty percent of our grade. I'd lose my scholarship. How could she do this to me? I knew she was somewhere erasing my name from that novella and replacing it with her own. Our professor wasn't opening the online submission portal for our final projects until midnight. It was only 10:30. I still had time. But I had to find her soon.

I had just checked the computer lab at the student center when I spotted Kelton laughing and talking on his phone leaning against the fifth-floor railing. I knew how much Nessa loved him. But she'd taken something important from me. My future. She needed to know what that felt like. Kelton had just been collateral damage.

His back was to me when I walked up to him. His voice was low, and I knew he was talking to some girl who probably wasn't Nessa. I could also tell he'd been drinking. He ended his call and turned to see me. "Hey, Tay. How about a hug?"

I smiled and took a step into his outstretched arms before shoving him hard against his chest, causing him to stumble backwards over the railing and fall to the lobby below. At almost seven feet tall the railing didn't do much to protect him when his center of gravity was higher than the five-foot railing. I slipped away amidst the screaming and the chaos.

I'd gone straight to his dorm to see Nessa rushing out of the building to get to the student center once word of his accident had gotten out. In her rush to leave, she'd forgotten to pull his door shut. I went in and found her backpack. My flash drive was inside. I took it back and submitted *Lettie* to my professor at midnight. In the aftermath of Kelton's accident, Nessa withdrew from school. I never saw her again.

FORTY-NINE

TAYLOR

I sat on the ground heaving, trying to catch my breath as gasping sobs wracked my body.

“I didn’t mean for him to fall. I... loved Troy.” And despite all of his faults, I had loved him. To find out that love had been misplaced and used against me was more than I could stand.

“I loved him too,” said Marissa in a flat voice. “It was supposed to be you.”

I looked up at her in shock. “You were the one sending me those notes?”

“He only married you because he found out you inherited some paintings by Cora Braithwaite from your mother that you had no idea were worth a fortune. He needed that money.”

As soon as I heard the artist’s name, I knew she was telling the truth. My father had given my mom those painting years ago. But the fact they’d been painted by the wife he had betrayed made me ashamed of both of them. How could she look at those paintings every day knowing they were painted by the woman whose husband she was in love with? Was that the reason my mom was so adamant I sell her things after her death? She had to have known what those paintings were worth. And if I had known, I already knew what I would have done.

“Troy... was my... husband. I would have gladly sold those paintings to help him out.”

“Help him out? Girl, they were trying to kill you,” Valerie said. I’d almost forgotten she was there. But Marissa wasn’t finished. She walked towards me as I struggled to my feet.

“Killing you wasn’t *his* plan. He wanted power of attorney over your assets. I told him what to do to make that happen. But then he decided he no longer wanted me and killing you became *my* plan.” Angry tears filled her eyes as she glared at me.

“But... what about Tim?” The sound of her husband’s name made Marissa flinch. But she quickly recovered and shrugged.

“It was Tim’s idea to open up our marriage. Then he got upset when I fell for Troy.”

“Stop! Just stop it. I don’t want to hear anymore.” I put my hands over my ears until I felt someone forcibly pull my hands away. It was Valerie.

“I saw the whole thing, Taylor. It was an accident. It wasn’t your fault that he fell. It was hers.” She put her hand on my arm.

“Get off me!” I shoved Valerie away from me. “Why were you even here?”

“I’ve been following you for a minute. Because you and I had unfinished business. I came up the back way you just came from just in time to see the railing give way and your husband fall, and your neighbor here hit you with her pink water bottle.”

Marissa looked stunned. From the look on her face, she’d had no idea there had been a witness to what she’d done.

“I was going to push *you* against the broken railing. Troy would have had no choice but to back me up and say it was all just a horrible accident. But when I got here, he... was already gone.” She dissolved into a crying fit and something in me snapped.

“You crazy bitch!” I screamed at her, too physically and emotionally spent to grab her by the throat and shake her like a rag doll. My legs buckled and I sank back down to the ground.

“Is that why you killed Jesse Cummings? Was he blackmailing you about paying him to tamper with the railing?” The voice came from behind us where Detective King was now standing. She must have come up the main trail. She had a gun holster strapped on over a T-shirt that was damp with sweat and clinging to her. She was slightly out of breath as she took in the scene before her.

Marissa screamed. “He wanted more and more. He kept threatening to go to the police. When he broke into your house that night,” she said, gesturing to me, “thinking it was *my* house, I knew he wouldn’t stop and I had no choice.”

“Marissa Chalmers, I’m arresting you for the murder of Troy Bellows, the murder of Jesse Cummings, and the attempted murder of Taylor Ambrose.” King pulled a set of cuffs out of her back pocket.

It all happened so fast. One minute I was sitting on the ground, and the next Marissa had grabbed me by the back of my shirt and dragged me over to the edge of the overlook.

“If I’m going to hell, I’m not going alone.”

“No!” I shrieked as I tried to twist out of her grasp. I reached up behind me, grabbed her wrists with both my hands. But I was still weak, and my muscles wouldn’t cooperate.

My top pulled taut against my throat as Marissa went over strangling me as I hung halfway over the edge. She hung on for several long seconds before letting go. The only clue to her fate a sickening thud as she hit the rock ledge below. King and Valerie rushed over to grab me and pull me back over the side, gasping and trying to catch my breath as sound erupted around me. Sirens. Shouting. Chaos.

I struggled to open my eyes but couldn’t. All I heard next was a long drawn out, “Shhhh,” in my ear as I drifted away.

FIFTY

Fourteen Months Later

I finally met Cheri Bellows-Conti for lunch, when she was back in the country on business, expecting things to be strange and awkward. Instead, I was instantly drawn to her warm and effervescent personality and infectious laugh. I could instantly see what made Troy fall in love with her. Halfway through our lunch I pulled out the box of trinkets I'd found in Troy's dresser drawer from my handbag and slid it across the table to her.

"What's this?"

"Just open it and see if there's anything in there you recognize."

She opened the small box and instantly gasped as she plucked the gold locket out of the box and held it up with tears shining in her eyes.

"My daddy gave me this necklace for my 16th birthday. It was my first piece of grown-up jewelry, and I was devastated when it went missing. Where did you find this?"

"When I was cleaning out the house after Troy died, I found it in one of his dresser drawers. He must've taken it."

She sighed and wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. "I always knew he was taking my things. Something of mine would usually go missing when he'd get mad at me. Sometimes without me even knowing he was mad. But I convinced myself it wasn't happening and blamed myself for losing things." She looked through the rest of the box and slowly nodded her head. "All this stuff is mine."

"Let me guess. He helped you look for all the stuff that went missing, didn't he?"

She gave me a sad look. "Troy was a complicated man, Taylor. Deeply troubled. He didn't have it easy growing up. His father was very much an authoritarian and ruled over him and his mom, and their household, with an iron fist. Troy was not allowed to show any kind of emotion growing up because men weren't supposed to cry or be vulnerable. Unfortunately, Troy's emotions manifested in very problematic ways. His need for control ruined our marriage. I thought having a baby would fix things but then I lost the baby, that was the final nail in the coffin of our marriage."

“My therapist told me that just because you know where the behavior comes from doesn’t make it right or any easier to deal with.” It was ironic to me that what had sent me back to therapy hadn’t been my hallucinations and missing memories. It had been to deal with the betrayal of the man who claimed to love me.

“I’ll drink to that.” We clinked our wine glasses together and Cheri took the box and put it in her bag just as our server brought out our dessert.

“So, what’s going on with you and my cousin? Anything going on there?”

I let out a laugh. “I’m not looking for romance anytime soon. But he’s been an amazing friend and that’s really all I need right now.”

I purposefully left out what he told me in the hospital after what happened at the Overlook.

“I met you first, Taylor,” he’d told me. “One night after I was down over losing a case I went out to a club alone. There was this gorgeous woman dancing like nobody was watching in the middle of a dance floor. It was you. I went out there and danced with you, and we had the most amazing night together. I wanted to see you again, but you never returned my phone calls, and I got the hint and moved on. Imagine my shock when two years later my best friend introduces me to you as the woman he’s been seeing. You only had eyes for Troy, and you didn’t even remember me. But I also knew how Troy was and how problematic his marriage to Cheri had been. I tried to warn him away from you, but there was nothing I could do, and you ended up hurt. Not sure I can ever forgive myself.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell him that I met him during the horrible time right after my mom died and I was spiraling. I’d given more than one guy a night to remember and used him and all the others as distractions from my grief.

“And thank *you*, Cheri, for also being an amazing friend. It took me a while to remember I’d reached out to you when things had gotten really bad with Troy. I was desperate. I thought I was going crazy. Thank you for being so gracious.”

“I hope you don’t blame yourself for what happened with Troy. He had everybody fooled, including Marissa.”

“I don’t. I just wish he could’ve lived long enough to get the help he needed.”

“Me too.” We were quiet for a while before she added. “And I think the best relationships come from friendship. That’s what happened with me and my husband, Daniele.” She gave me a wink, and I smiled at her before digging into my tiramisu.

After lunch with Cheri, I headed downtown for my twice monthly therapy appointment. Dr. Vivian Eggers, a tiny black woman in her seventies, smiled when I was shown into her office.

“I guess congratulations are in order,” she said once her receptionist was gone and we were alone. “I saw the property transfer in the news. Can I assume you’re finally taking my advice?”

I nodded. “Well, doc. It’s like you said. It’s time I stopped using what happened to me as an excuse to keep from moving forward. So, yes. I’m starting my own publishing company.”

“And?” She cocked her head to the side and I laughed.

“*And* I’m going to write the sequel to *Lottie Mae*.” Just saying it out loud filled me with so much joy. But Dr. Eggers still wasn’t satisfied.

“Because?”

“Because Lottie Mae and I are kindred spirits who are both on a journey to reclaim our lives.”

“Good! That’s what I want to hear. Now tell me what’s been happening since our last session.”

An hour later, I was walking home thinking about how much my life had changed. I’d sold my mom’s paintings for a cool eight million dollars. I gave most of it away, donating it to various arts programs for kids across the state of Ohio. I put the rest in the bank and was living nicely off the interest. I purchased the top floor of a historical building in downtown Weatherly where my new publishing company, Ambrose Ink, would be located in the near future. I was excited about getting to know Lottie Mae again. I’m not sure how the book would do sales-wise and didn’t care. All I could do was write the story that was in me, and I hoped other people would like it too.

As for my health, turns out my RA wasn’t just affecting my muscles and joints. It also affected my memory which accounted for a lot of things I was experiencing with my husband and his mistress contributing to the rest. But now I was on medication and had gone through physical therapy that helped me regain my strength.

Marissa Chalmers ended up surviving her fall. She was pretty banged up and in the hospital for a month. But she healed and was arrested for the murder of Jesse Cummings, Troy, and the attempted murder of me. She's currently in the Weatherly County jail awaiting trial which is set to start next year. Tim is standing by her side.

Amongst the chaos and confusion at the Weatherly Park Overlook, Valerie managed to slip away unnoticed. Her whereabouts are currently unknown. No charges were filed against her for Jared Miller's death as Betty Russell had witnessed the attack and it had been deemed self-defense. But she was still wanted for kidnapping.

King took me to see Nessa's mom who explained about Valerie being her biological mother and everything she told me suddenly made sense. Valerie's guilt and anger over Nessa's ultimate fate had needed an outlet and she'd decided it was me. I never wanted to see her again. But wherever she is, I hope she's finally at peace.

FIFTY-ONE

DETECTIVE KING

Detective Laurel King wasn't enjoying her retirement party as much as she thought she would. She'd been counting down the days, marking each one off on the calendar on the wall next to her desk. But now her last day was here, and it was bittersweet. She wondered how she was going to fill her days moving forward when her entire life had been about her job. She also knew that none of these people would miss her except Larson who would be retiring himself in a year's time.

She watched as everyone around her filled themselves up on the abundance of food that had been laid out in the station's conference room including a sheet cake half the size of one of the tables with the only decent picture of her they could find where she wasn't scowling or stone-faced decorating the top. But it was department policy to send everybody off with a retirement party whether they wanted it or not. It was actually in the budget. King knew if she didn't accept her party, it would just go back into the fund. So, she grinned and shook hands and gave half-hearted hugs to people she'd never bothered to get to know. She was biding her time until she could respectfully make her getaway when Captain Talbot approached her.

"I know you're chomping at the bit to get out of here, so let's have one final drink in my office. I need to float an idea past you."

"Lead the way."

King followed Talbot into her office and closed the door behind them. She settled herself in the chair in front of Talbot's desk as the other woman opened her bottom desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of bourbon and two glasses.

"The fact that you're breaking out the good stuff for me means you're either going to give me bad news about my pension or tell me that you're dying."

To her surprise, Talbot laughed and it was jarring because she'd never seen the woman do anything but yell and give tight phony smiles to higher-ups and politicians.

"Well, I could understand why you would think that. But I actually have a proposition for you, King. We got a grant to hire someone to go through

our backlog of cold cases and I could really use someone with your experience to be in charge of this initiative. You can work any cases you want with no set hours, and I even found you an assistant.” A soft knock came at the door. “Come in.” Talbot took a swig of her bourbon as a door swung open and in walked officer Willis. When he spotted King, his ears turned red.

“Congratulations on your retirement, ma’am.”

King held up her glass to him in acknowledgment, amused that she made him so nervous.

“Well?” Talbot fixed her with a laser-like stare.

King tried to suppress a grin but failed and sat her glass of bourbon down on top of the desk. “Count me in.”

EPILOGUE

MAUI

Three Years Later

The pretty black woman dressed in a sleeveless pink and gray floral print dress and sandals wheeled her suitcase up to the front desk of the Four Seasons Resort. The clerk looked up at her and smiled.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes. I have a reservation.”

“Your name?”

“Vanessa,” the woman said confidently. “My name is Vanessa James.”

As the clerk checked her in, she looked around the lobby and smiled. The Super Bowl ring she’d stuffed into her late husband Jared Miller’s pocket after she’d stabbed him had been the second corrected ring, which she’d stolen from Troy Bellows’ office when she’d been helping Taylor pack. She’d held on to the ring that had been in the safe in Taylor’s bedroom. She’d laid low for as long as she could. Working jobs that paid under the table, and moving every few months. Once the dust settled, she’d sold the ring to a private collector for five-hundred thousand dollars and took off. And she wasn’t looking back. After Hawaii, who knows where she’d go.

“Welcome to the Four Seasons, Ms. James. We hope you enjoy your stay.” The clerk slid her key card across the desk.

As she headed for the elevator, she passed by the gift shop and froze as a book display caught her eye. The cover showed a pretty young black woman in stylish 1930s clothing holding the hand of a little girl who looked seven. The New York City skyline loomed in the background with a stylized title over the woman’s head: *Lottie Mae: The Journey Home* by Taylor Ambrose. The image of mother and daughter brought tears to her eyes for all the things she’d never get to experience with her one and only daughter. She bought a copy and headed to her room intending to read every word before she checked out of the hotel, hoping Taylor had gotten it right. Because if she didn’t... there’d be hell to pay.

*

If you were gripped by the twists in *The Silent Sister*, discover Angela Henry's bestselling thriller, *The Perfect Affair*, where secrets and betrayal collide in the most devastating way.

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THE PERFECT AFFAIR

PROLOGUE

Whenever Terri Walsh opened an abandoned storage unit, it always made her palms sweat a little. Of course, it was a crap shoot. Often the units she bought were filled with nothing but old newspapers, bags of beanie babies, vintage Playboy magazines, and boxes of royal family memorabilia which, even when combined, didn't come close to covering what she'd paid at auction. But Terri had a good feeling about this unit. At least she did until the rusted lock finally popped open, and she switched on the lights of a nearly empty unit. Tears of disappointment welled up in her eyes. Unemployed and broke, she needed this unit to be profitable. Her last six hundred bucks had gone on a unit that should have been half the price, except that Ken, her asshole ex-husband, had shown up at the auction and purposefully kept bidding against her until the price had doubled. He was the reason she was living in her car while he'd moved into a house with her former best friend. She'd kept bidding because she thought Ken had known something she didn't about this unit. Turns out he'd known there was barely anything in it. She had to find something in here to turn a profit on. She had to get at least some of her money back – and she couldn't let him win again.

Terri angrily swatted cobwebs out of her way as she ventured further inside the musty unit, hoping the dust didn't trigger her asthma. Heavy metal racks lined the walls – at least she could sell them for scrap. Searching the boxes stored on the racks, she found outdated women's clothes, shoes, and purses, torn sheets, moldy blankets, and broken kitchen appliances. On the dirty floor beside were several boxes of old books. Sitting down with a sigh, she took the books out one by one and checked them out, just in case. It wasn't until she reached the bottom of the last box that she pulled out a book with a red and yellow cover. The title didn't register in her brain at first. When it finally did, she froze, quickly, jumping to her feet to hold it under the unit's dim light fixture. Opening the cover, she hoped against hope and... yes! The publication date was April 10, 1939. There was also a signature of Bill Wilson. She was holding a signed first

edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, in pristine condition with the dust jacket still on.

The print run of the first edition was only 5,000 copies, and she'd heard of one going for \$60,000. Letting out a whoop of excitement, she hugged the book tight against her chest and danced around the narrow space, bumping against a rack, sending a box almost crashing down onto her head. Carefully, she wrapped the book in a dust cloth, put it back in the box she'd found it in, and immediately went to lock it in the trunk of her car.

For the next hour, she meticulously examined every box. She came across nothing of value until she reached the very back of the unit, where a large six-foot horizontal freezer chest sat against the wall. It was coated with thick, greasy dust, but even so Terri was pleased. She could easily get a few hundred bucks for it. To her surprise, she found that the freezer was running. Whoever had owned this unit must have been paying a pretty penny for it. Storage units with electricity were rare and didn't come cheap. Without thinking, Terri lifted the lid, expecting to see ancient bags of frozen vegetables or packages of deer meat. Instead, a pair of sightless, clouded human eyes – the long lashes frozen stiff – stared up at her.

With a shriek, she let the freezer door fall shut. The thud echoed through the unit as she stumbled backward, tripping over a box and landing painfully on her ass. Like a startled crab she scuttled across the dirty floor before she could finally stand and run outside. After locking the unit with sweaty, trembling hands, she sat behind the wheel of her car shaking, unable to catch her breath. Pulling her asthma inhaler out of her purse, she put it in her mouth and pressed the plunger twice, sending the medicated mist into her mouth and lungs.

Once she was breathing normally again, she grabbed her cell phone from her purse to call 911. But she stopped. Her unit was now a crime scene. She'd watched enough crime shows on TV to know she wouldn't be able to take anything from the unit. There were cameras all over the place and they'd watch the footage and see she'd taken something from the unit and put it in her trunk. They'd make her give it back. It would be bagged up as evidence.

Terri groaned. She needed the money from the book, like yesterday. She couldn't afford to wait until the end of whatever investigation ensued when she barely had money for food, gas, and her meds. Would the book still be there when the investigation ended? Maybe it would be destroyed or

claimed by some relative. Terri didn't know who'd owned the unit or how long the body had been there, but whoever was in the freezer wasn't going anywhere. Surely, they could wait a little longer to be found, until after she'd sold the book and left town. Once she was gone – long gone – she'd call the police and report it. Terri started her car and sped out of the lot, clipping a trash can near the exit, without turning back.

1

AARON NICHOLS

AFTER

December 5, 2023

Sitting in an interrogation room at the Oakmont, Ohio Police Department, waiting for almost an hour to be interviewed, I had plenty of time to think about the precise moment when mistakes are born. It's that moment you make a bad choice and end up someplace you have no business being – after that it inevitably all goes wrong.

I'm sure it's different for everyone. For some, it happens by degrees, a series of baby steps inching them closer to the edge until the next step sends them tumbling over the side. For others, it's quicker, like a drunk tripping outside a bar. In the end, it's not about right or wrong, it's about consequences. And the bigger question wasn't, why did this happen? It was, could I live with the consequences of what I've done?

"Thank you for coming in, Dr. Nichols. My apologies for the long wait," said Detective Melanie Alonso, entering the room with a notebook and file folder clutched in one hand.

I studied her as she pulled out the chair opposite me on the other side of the table and sat down. She looked to be in her late thirties, olive-skinned, tall and lean with a runner's build and long dark hair pulled into a ponytail. "Is there anything I can get you? Coffee? Bottled water?"

I'd have loved a coffee. I was exhausted from having gotten very little sleep for the past week. But I decided against it. I wasn't here for a social call. "No thanks, I'm good."

I didn't believe for a single second that making me wait for so long in this room wasn't intentional. As a black man, dealing with the police caused a knee-jerk sense of dread and panic and she knew it. I was regretting not bringing a lawyer. But I was already walking a fine line and didn't want to look even more suspicious than I already did.

"Then I'll get right to the point so as not to take up too much more of your time." She pulled a photo from the folder and slid it across the table to me. "Do you know this woman?"

I merely glanced at the photo, taking in the wide beautiful smile and the riot of honey highlighted brown hair and the laughing eyes. I didn't even

need to look at it to know who it was, and my feelings of dread and panic collided violently with fear, loss, and anger. The windowless room was suddenly airless, and I was acutely aware of Detective Alonso's scrutiny. I let out a long breath before answering.

"Dr. Cara Morton. She one's of the English faculty at Roberson University where I work." I slid the picture back across the table. Then I braced myself for the question I'd been dreading ever since the email from the college president arrived in my inbox yesterday afternoon informing all college faculty and staff of Cara's disappearance, asking anyone with any information to contact the authorities, and warning us we might be interviewed by the police.

"When was the last time you saw Dr. Morton?"

"At the last faculty meeting before Thanksgiving."

"And I understand you're the chair of the English Department at Roberson. Is that correct?"

"Yes," I said, although technically it was no longer true. They had put me on paid leave.

"How well do you know Dr. Morton?"

I looked into the detective's eyes. Did she know? Of course, she knew. I came here knowing that. However, I was unprepared for how this question would affect me. How well did I know Dr. Cara Morton? Not as well as I once thought I did. Because had I known the woman I'd recently had an affair with – really known her – maybe I wouldn't be sitting in a police interrogation room being questioned about her disappearance.

*

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HER PRETTY LIES

[You trusted her like a sister. Now they think you killed her...](#)

The paramedics tell me I'm in shock as they load the body bag into the ambulance.

Only days ago, I had everything. A man I wanted to marry. A prestigious fellowship for graduate school. A perfect new apartment. I'm a psychology student. I should have known she was hiding something from the start...

Now I'm shivering under a foil blanket wondering how my life became a nightmare.

And when the paramedics check me over, it's not concern I see on their faces. It's fear.

They think I did this. They think I killed her...

An edge-of-your-seat, gripping and unputdownable psychological thriller for fans of Freida McFadden and Jeneva Rose's *The Perfect Marriage*.

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THE FAMILY LIES

[Every family has secrets. The Dorseys bury theirs.](#)

Sabrina Adams thought her luck had finally turned around when she was hired as a librarian for the wealthy Dorsey family. But as soon as she arrives at their elegant estate, she senses something is off. They have cameras everywhere. She's banned from the third floor, and she spotted someone watching the house from the nearby woods. And why does the housekeeper, Mrs Manning, insist on so many rules?

Then police officers arrive at the door with questions about the disappearance of a local woman. Sabrina is shocked to learn her charming employer, Theo Dorsey, was the last person to see the missing woman alive.

He insists he's innocent. Despite her growing doubts, Sabrina keeps her head down because she desperately needs this job. But then Theo is linked to another woman's death several years before. And after finding out no one has seen the Dorsey's previous librarian in years, she has to ask herself...

Who can I trust in this family? And will I be next?

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NOBODY HEARD A THING

[I was the only one there that day. I saw it all. I heard her cry.](#)

It's been twenty-five years since she vanished. Whoever took Brooke has walked free for all those years, watching the chaos as guilt consumed my life.

Now a documentary maker is digging into the cold case. They want to finally solve the mystery no one else could. But the person behind Brooke's disappearance would do anything—even kill—to keep their secrets hidden.

And they know I'm the only witness...

An utterly compulsive psychological thriller that will delight fans of Karin Slaughter, *The Housemaid* and anything by Lisa Jewell.

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Xavier Knight Series

Knight's Fall

Knight's Shade

Maya Sinclair Thriller

The Paris Secret

Middle-Grade as Angie Kelly

Labyrinth Society: The Versailles Vendetta

A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear reader,

Thank you for reading *The Silent Sister*. I hope you enjoyed Taylor's story. If you'd like to hear about my new and upcoming releases, you can sign up for my author newsletter.

[Sign up here!](#)

If you enjoyed this book and could spare a few moments to leave a review, that would be greatly appreciated. Even a short review can make all the difference in encouraging a reader to discover my books for the first time. Thank you so much!

[Review here!](#)

What if you were injured, in constant pain, grieving, broke, suffering memory loss, and soon to be homeless? Not to mention having no friends or relatives to help you? What would you do? Would you trust a stranger offering help? In the *Silent Sister*, I wanted to explore the themes of dark empathy and the dangers of letting the wrong people into your life, whether it be a total stranger or the person you're sleeping next to every night. This story allowed me to explore what people are capable of when pushed to their limits by those who claim to care for us.

Thanks again for being part of this amazing journey with me, and I hope you'll stay in touch—I have so many more stories and ideas to entertain you with!

Angela



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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